

God in Lockdown

Some insights from Theology & Psychology



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The majority of the world by now is aware of the need to practice so-called “social distancing” due to COVID-19. What’s more, a significant number of people have experience with one or more lockdowns and the related emotional, mental, and spiritual effects.

But, what makes this globally shared experience even more extraordinary is that the reason for keeping your distance is concern for fellow human beings. Or to say this in another word: love. We have been asked to distance ourselves physically from one another out of love. This practice certainly would seem at odds with our normal expressions of love. And so, the question then is how to approach this counterintuitive phenomenon theologically.

I would like to suggest that this unusual expression of love, one that requires distancing, is something that God Himself experiences. The One Who is Love (1 John 4:8,16) at times also keeps His distance from those He loves because of love.

Distancing in the Scriptures

A number of key passages in the Scriptures, in fact, reveal a God who actively distances himself from those He cares for. And that not only because humanity might be sinful.

For example, in the book of Exodus we encounter a relational God (3:6), who nevertheless decrees boundaries to be set up to prevent Israel, his firstborn (4:22), to come near him (19:12, 24:1–2, 26:1–37). He resides in flame, cloud, or behind a veil (19:9, 26:31–33). Likewise, the prophet Isaiah can call out: ‘Truly, You are a god who hides Himself, Oh God of Israel, Saviour!’ (45:15).

This distancing can indeed be a consequence of sin, for ‘our iniquities have made a

¹ Of course, not everyone sees this, and instead fear of the pandemic, or of the authorities is their motive to stay home. Conversely, inordinate self-love might be the reason people do not submit to against lockdown and distancing directives.

separation (...) and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear' (59:2). But this is not the only reason a holy God might hide his face: The Psalms lament the experience of God being far, of hiding his face, of being distant (Psalm 10:1, 13:1, 27:9, 30:7, 44:24, 69:17, 88:14, 89:46, 102:2, 104:29, 143:7). Yet, there this distance is usually not because of sin, rather the prayer often comes from a place of oppression, even righteousness.

In the ultimate "coming near" of God, the incarnation, we find that the Son of God, the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), had to empty Himself in order to be close (Phil 2:7). In other words, God distanced Himself from Himself. And it is in this humble form that the Son experiences the ultimate distancing of the Father, crying out on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt 27:46).

Yet, we need to note that his twofold divine distancing comes from a double love: 'God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son' (John 3:16), whereas the Son in turn obeys the Father's command out of love for Him: 'I am doing just what the Father commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father' (John 14:31). Jesus and the Father distancing themselves from each other are both acts of love and originate in a God who is love.

Distancing and the Nature of Love

The Scriptures, then, reveal a covenant keeping God of love who nevertheless can be distant. If we are serious about the revelation that 'God is love' then his self-distancing

must be evaluated in some measure as an aspect of His love. And this is not so strange as it initially may sound.

When a couple has children, they inevitably reduce their own freedom and yet at the same time make more space in various ways to allow something new to be created. The mother in fact "makes space" in herself for this new being to exist, and equally experiences emotional loss, a kind of distancing, after birth. More so, parents give up time, space, money, nerves, sleep, peace, quiet and a lot of other comforts. They bind the rest of their existence to this new being, which they increasingly have to distance themselves from as they teach it to become a functioning adult. It is strange and irrational — it is love. For love is able to increase by decreasing, to become more and not less when something is abundantly given, including distance.

Moreover, God's distancing himself out of love for humans touches another area of existence. It is paradoxically felt in that God makes Himself appear absent. For God does not force his presence (and power) upon us. He rather suffers to be overheard, overlooked, misinterpreted, doubted, raged against, driven out, send away, even killed. For not only would his unmediated presence vanquish us, God's overt presence would rob us of choice; more so, human responsibility, motivation, or activity would be all but become unnecessary. A key element of love is not imposing oneself on the other. Love waits until it is called for. Love hides, gives space, gives distance to let the other be. Distance makes love possible, and at times,

love demands distance. This then is felt in a seeming absence of God in personal experience and history — although He is not far from us (Acts 17:27–28).

Implications

What are some of the implications of these reflections on the nature of love?

First, we can know that distancing is not unnatural to love. To the contrary, it is intrinsic to love. Love gives space, at its own expense. The emotional agony we experience that come from “social distancing,” therefore, can be thought of as a sacrificial expression of love. This, then, allows us to re-evaluate our experience, perhaps even redeem it.

Second, the agony that comes from “social distancing” and lockdown is not just borne by us. God does it too. This shared experience paradoxically connects us. Humanity and the Godhead both experience distance because of love. At present, God is in lockdown too.

Yet, there is hope. Love in the end seeks union. Ultimately, great distance can be only for a time; true love yearns for re-uniting. And so there will be a wedding feast after all (Rev 19:7–9).

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