

A Positive Perspective for a Flourishing Fellowship Amid a Global Pandemic

By Marc Dean Wilson

Introduction

A human perspective on pandemics is limited and tentative. The Bible provides glimpses into God’s providential prerogative behind plagues, pestilences, and diseases, which may be for punishment or to provoke repentance.¹ Rather than fostering assurance in God’s good sovereignty, examining only the catastrophic events in biblical texts can promote speculative theodicy and leave Christians with more questions than answers. Developing a theological perspective on specific, contemporary events—such as the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020—apart from special revelation is even more elusive. Nevertheless, a perspective providing comfort for Christians is crucial.

Rather than developing an uncertain perspective on pandemics, a positive perspective on God’s promised future of *shalom* can provide a transformational alternative. During the 2020 global coronavirus pandemic, this alternative approach took a biblical and theological perspective of God’s intentions for humanity as a positive focus to foster elements of subjective well-being toward flourishing. Instead of focusing on a limited perspective on pandemics, a small Christian fellowship used a positive, transformational perspective through an appreciative inquiry.² This proven, positive perspective—confidently rooted in Christian practices and doctrines—provides pastoral insights for practically promoting well-being among parishioners during pandemic disruptions.

1. For example, see Genesis 12:17; Exodus 7:14—12:32; Leviticus 26:25; Numbers 11:33, 14:12, 36–38, 16:48–49, 25:7–9; Deuteronomy 28:20–24; 2 Samuel 24:15; Psalm 38:9–11; Zechariah 14:18; Luke 7:21–23; Matthew 24:4–8; Revelation 9:20, 16:21.

2. This essay is based in large part on the insights, observations, and results from Marc Dean Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World: An Appreciative Inquiry into the *Imago Dei* for Congregational Well-Being” (D.Min., Northeastern Seminary, 2021), accessed May 26, 2021, <http://www.proquest.com/pqdtthss/docview/2531602360/abstract/A83491DAC7B4BD1PQ/1>.

Positive Psychology

Focusing on Christian Practices and Doctrines Promotes Flourishing

Loneliness, depression, insignificance, and meaninglessness are endemic in the United States.³ The 2020 coronavirus pandemic, intermingled with economic insecurity, political polarization, and racial tensions, exacerbated these conditions. Rather than focusing on remediating negative experiences, focusing on elements of subjective well-being creates a positive alternative. Understanding life’s meaning and experiencing positive emotions and safe relationships promote flourishing and enhance a sense of personal worth.

While these positive experiences correlate with an individual’s subjective well-being, Christian theology provides an objective, ontological approach to the element of life’s meaning or purpose. Additionally, the Christian community can offer a social context for mediators of subjective well-being, such as forgiveness and gratefulness, that promote positive emotions and safe relationships. Unfortunately, contemporary Christians may under-appreciate these positive mediators, and pandemic precautions limit interpersonal opportunities for their engagement.

Ilhan Yalçın and Asude Malkoç account for two readily available mediators for Christians—hope and forgiveness—and examine their relationship with meaning in life and subjective well-being.⁴ When there is “presence of meaning” in life—rather than one’s search for meaning, which may indicate perceived meaninglessness with an absence of value and worth—forgiveness and hope positively mediate the relationship between meaning in life and well-being.⁵

The presence of meaning in one’s life indicates future goals, or a *telos*, which fosters hope.⁶ As Yalçın and Malkoç surmise, “hope can play a role as a mediator between meaning in life and subjective well-being.”⁷ Like hope, forgiveness has a mediating role in positive relationships.

3. For this and what follows, see Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World,” chapters 1–3.

4. Ilhan Yalçın and Asude Malkoç, “The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being: Forgiveness and Hope as Mediators,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 16, no. 4 (August 2015): 915–929.

5. Yalçın and Malkoç, “The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being,” 916–917.

6. Yalçın and Malkoç, “The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being,” 917, 923.

7. Yalçın and Malkoç, “The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being,” 917.

Forgiveness presumes degrees of suffering and is both an intrapersonal and an interpersonal process for discerning the meaning of life for oneself and others.⁸ Opportunities to experience hope with a purpose in life through reconciled relationships maintain a crucial degree of well-being amid suffering. However, when a pandemic induces despair and restricts relational interactions, well-being becomes compromised.

In a more recent study, Kelly Yu-Hsin Liao and Chih-Yuan Weng researched gratefulness as a contributor to the mediating elements of relationships and the presence of meaning in life for subjective well-being.⁹ Liao's and Weng's results "suggest that gratefulness increases a sense of social connectedness as well as presence of meaning in life, which, in turn, are associated with greater well-being."¹⁰

Hope, forgiveness, and gratefulness are not only positive experiences that enhance safe relationships and provide a purpose in life as elements for subjective well-being; they are fundamental Christian practices. These Christian practices—ideally encountered weekly during a Eucharistic service—are essential mediators for elements of well-being, especially needed during troubling times. While observing physical distancing to limit disease transmission during a pandemic, the Christian community must also find ways to engage in these nourishing practices.

Communities can focus on hope, forgiveness, and gratefulness when threatened by meaninglessness, division, and depression. Along with these practices, the doctrines of creation and *imago Dei* can be objects of contemplation and learning within the congregation as truths that validate human worth. Furthermore, these fundamental Christian doctrines provide an objective means for appreciating meaning in life, a key element in the PERMA evidenced-based approach to enhance well-being within the broader field of positive psychology.¹¹

8. Yalçın and Malkoç, "The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being," 917, 918, 924.

9. Kelly Yu-Hsin Liao and Chih-Yuan Weng, "Gratefulness and Subjective Well-Being: Social Connectedness and Presence of Meaning as Mediators," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 65, no. 3 (April 2018): 383–393.

10. Liao and Weng, "Gratefulness and Subjective Well-Being."

11. Pamela Ebstyn King and William B. Whitney, "What's the 'Positive' in Positive Psychology? Teleological Considerations Based on Creation and Imago Doctrines," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 47–59. See also Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness*

These Christian practices and doctrines as resources for flourishing from a positive psychology framework have biblical-theological merit.¹² In articulating biblical happiness, Brent A. Strawn observes, “The full language of happiness includes the pain with pleasure, the hedonic along with the eudaimonic, the negative with the positive.”¹³ Amid pandemic pain, we can see “the interweaving of life and death, death and life, but it is the latter order that wins out in the end and for the (good of the) many.”¹⁴ Positive psychology acknowledges a paradoxical perspective of joyful sorrow when trusting in God’s providential outcome.

Focusing on enduring strengths is a valuable perspective that positive psychology affords. Together, the biblical narrative and positive psychology help us understand “authentic happiness” as the “flourishing” of the world amid human weaknesses and limitations.¹⁵ Thus, elements of positive psychology can help us see the positive, eternal strength of God’s grace amid a painful pandemic for our flourishing.¹⁶

Along these lines, Pamela King and William Whitney propose a “theology of thriving”¹⁷ based on the Christian doctrine of creation that informs our understanding of human flourishing. Flourishing is “not simply something that increases human well-being but moves us to consider how thriving is a gift given by God through common grace” to all humans created in the image of the Creator God, which is “not only dynamic but directional as well.”¹⁸ These doctrines inform our human vocation and fuel our present hope, forgiveness, and gratefulness.

and Well-Being (New York: Atria Books, 2012) for the PERMA model (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment).

12. Brent A. Strawn, ed., *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life*, 1st Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

13. Brent A. Strawn, “The Triumph of Life,” in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life*, 1st Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). 320.

14. Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 304.

15. Strawn, *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 322.

16. The Apostle Paul provides us with examples of boasting and rejoicing amid suffering, weakness, and imprisonment (i.e., Romans 5:3–5, 2 Corinthians 12:8–10, and Philippians).

17. King and Whitney, “What’s the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology?” 49.

18. King and Whitney, “What’s the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology?” 50.

Understanding the doctrine of *imago Dei* as relational and functional both informs our human and divine relationships and defines our purpose as a transformative “process” into Christlikeness, which is our ultimate goal (*telos*) as humans “becoming.”¹⁹ Thus, King and Whitney envision Christian flourishing as using our spiritual gifts according to our unique vocational identities—which transcend ourselves and operate in relationships with others—for the ultimate purpose of glorifying God.²⁰ Positively focusing on this thriving end-view from God’s perspective during pandemic distress brings the promised future flourishing into the present for our endurance. In this, the “now but not yet” of God’s coming kingdom on earth becomes realized among God’s people.

The Christian doctrines of creation and *imago Dei* provide influential parameters for positive psychology’s well-being construct experienced by a community of God’s people, especially during a painful pandemic. Furthermore, King and Whitney note positive psychology’s corrective on a Christian tendency to focus on negatives rather than on creation’s good and enduring elements.²¹ While Christians have tended to emphasize “what Jesus has saved us *from*,” not what Jesus has saved us *for*,”²² positive psychology has provided a balanced approach—already inherent in the Christian gospel—of appreciating God’s goodness and grace.

King and Whitney affirm that deepening our understanding of the doctrine of *imago Dei* “will greatly enhance theology’s practicality and ability to speak into applied issues whether regarding thriving, disabilities, clinical psychology, etc.”²³ Applying positive psychology’s insights amid the problems of a pandemic to offer a broader, biblical view is the goal here.

Additionally, the *imago Dei* provides an ontological understanding of what it means to be human. As David Entwistle and Stephen Moroney suggest, “Perhaps a biblical concept of the *imago Dei* can create a framework through which Christians can engage positive psychology.”²⁴

19. King and Whitney, “What’s the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology?” 51–55.

20. King and Whitney, “What’s the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology?” 52–56. See also Romans 12.

21. King and Whitney, “What’s the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology?” 56.

22. King and Whitney, “What’s the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology?” 57. Italics in the original.

23. King and Whitney, “What’s the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology?” 57.

24. David N. Entwistle and Stephen K. Moroney, “Integrative Perspectives on Human Flourishing: The *Imago Dei* and Positive Psychology,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 302.

Establishing a biblical-theological framework of the *imago Dei* enables an appreciative focus by acknowledging its value and positively connecting with it.²⁵ To this endeavor, we now turn.

A Congregational Appreciative Inquiry

A Positive Perspective from God's Revelation for Flourishing in a Pandemic

A survey of the ancient culture and biblical canon provides a framework for the *imago Dei*.²⁶ From this analysis, God generously bestows a creatively powerful royal-priestly authority upon humans to faithfully steward creation for communal well-being, not to control and exploit others for personal gain.²⁷ Jesus Christ exemplifies and enables this dignified *imago Dei* calling for humanity.²⁸ In living out this divine vocation faithfully, humans experience well-being through purposeful meaning, positive emotions, and social connectedness, which come through forgiveness and entail gratefulness and hope.

God delights in our positive flourishing because of our preciousness.²⁹ We find our purpose in serving others for their best interests, like Christ.³⁰ Serving others with our power—our agency—also fosters mutual well-being. When we engage in this vocation, we restfully work with God, who works through us toward a peaceful, common end (*telos*).³¹ Resting and reigning

25. Mitchel G. Adler and N. S. Fagley, "Appreciation: Individual Differences in Finding Value and Meaning as a Unique Predictor of Subjective Well-Being," *Journal of Personality* 73, no. 1 (February 2005): 79.

26. For this and what follows, see Wilson, "Appreciating What We're Worth in a Devaluing World," chapter 3.

27. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 235–236.

28. See 2 Corinthians 4:1–18, Philippians 2:1–11, Colossians 1:15–20, Hebrews 1:1–4.

29. Terence E. Fretheim, "God, Creation, and the Pursuit of Happiness," in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life* (ed. Brent A. Strawn, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36.

30. See Philippians 2:1–11.

31. For an understanding of the human vocation as "reigning rest" with God over creation, see Wilson, "Appreciating What We're Worth in a Devaluing World," 37–38. From Genesis 1–2:3, what ceases on the seventh day is God's ordering of the earth for our human habitation. God continues to reign and create, but now it is through humanity called to mediate God's divine presence. By engaging in our God-given work, we participate in God's reign. Our rest is our reign, which involves our work on God's behalf.

with God together enables us to flourish as we creatively and communally subdue various chaotic elements of the earth—such as plagues, pestilences, and pandemics—until realizing our dominion in a transformed global *shalom*. In this common goal for humanity, we experience our significance and purpose.

These biblical and theological insights fueled a 20-hour appreciative inquiry with a small southern New Mexico congregation. At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, 18 congregants met once per week in person Sunday morning or over Zoom in the evening. During this project, from November 8, 2020, through December 13, 2020, participants gathered around specific biblical texts to apply the above positive perspectives from God’s revelation for flourishing. For each of the six weeks, participants engaged in personal *Lectio Divina* using the Scriptures to be read aloud as the foundation for congregational discussions on the upcoming Sunday.

Participants collectively focused on a biblical theology of the *imago Dei* for meaning within an established community of safe relationships during this disorienting and disruptive time in history.³² By seeing their stories’ intersections and sharing their positive experiences within God’s story, participants began discovering a future vision for present flourishing.³³ Evidence was gathered by listening to participants’ experiences in response to carefully constructed questions through a conversational structure with sensitivity toward interpersonal comfort to ensure trust was maintained and deepened.³⁴

The following are participant responses indicating the presence of subjective well-being elements. The “temporary” nature of worldly things—including “hardships in our jars-of-clay-bodies”—was contrasted to “being with God in the future, bodily raised with Christ.” “Hope” was a significant theme for strengthening our lives toward “victory, materialization,” and “recreation.” Overcoming worldly challenges was by “continually seeking God’s wisdom and allowing God to lead us with strength in his word.”³⁵

32. For this and what follows, see Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World,” chapters 4–6.

33. Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World,” 76.

34. Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World,” 68–69.

35. Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World,” 93–94.

As participants struggled with closing their businesses due to pandemic restrictions, a positive focus on God's promises elicited the following statements. "My worth and value used to be found in physical and material things, but I have learned what it means to be an imager that begins with God's light shining in me." "I'm important to God." Another replied, "God makes us for a purpose, not to feel bad. There is worth in us, or God would not have made us."³⁶ Additionally, these comments provided comfort and communal belonging for Zoom participants wrestling between feeling isolated and fear of coronavirus exposure.

Despite divisions within the congregation over mask-wearing mandates to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, several intimately combined their future vision with the congregation. "Fixing our eyes on the unseen, and allowing God to use us as he wills as imagers (personally and corporately)" was described as a means to foster flourishing. Another said flourishing came by "reflecting God's peace and joy amid the world's chaos." "Loving others," "being hopeful," "not losing heart," and "trusting in God, not in the world" were also mentioned. Another added, "We value others. We can help others flourish by valuing them," as God values us.³⁷

Our society labeled workers as "essential" and "non-essential" during pandemic-related economic deterioration. Compounding this devaluing classification was dehumanizing political rhetoric and violent racism. Within this broader cultural purview, one participant praised the shared perspective that people possess a "dignified vocation" as imagers of God. When asked how that description fosters flourishing, another participant responded, "by giving us a purpose and a goal." When asked about a vision or description of our human "goal," a participant answered that it is to "love others as ourselves and put others' needs before ourselves as Jesus did."³⁸

In summary, this appreciative inquiry reinforced participants' purposeful meaning from a positive psychology framework, enabled the positive emotion of gratefulness, facilitated social connectedness amid an isolating pandemic, and emphasized each individual's significance in

36. Wilson, "Appreciating What We're Worth in a Devaluing World," 93–94.

37. Wilson, "Appreciating What We're Worth in a Devaluing World," 94.

38. Wilson, "Appreciating What We're Worth in a Devaluing World," 95.

communal relationships.³⁹ By focusing on a positive core value and sharing how their stories intersected with God’s overarching narrative, this congregation looked beyond the cultural climate to experience well-being by focusing on a positive core of the Christian faith with hope for the future. As promised by God and communally envisioned, this ideal future provided present flourishing amid a devaluing political climate during a decaying pandemic.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Ministry Implications

This study contributes to the Church’s knowledge of how social sciences can enhance practical theology for Christian ministry. One implication is that a Christian perspective can accommodate positive psychology’s subjective well-being elements. Positive psychology provides an alternative to focusing on negative perspectives. Hope, forgiveness, and gratefulness are positive mediators Christians can appreciate. Instead of understanding problems and remediating negative experiences, positive psychology offers a balanced approach—inherent in the gospel—of appreciating God’s goodness and grace.

Appreciating God’s goodness and grace opens people up to the Holy Spirit’s transformative power to live a life in Jesus’ *imago Dei* manner for present flourishing, which is grounded in a future hope of flourishing fulfilled through our reigning rest with Christ as children of God. Furthermore, this study illustrates how ministry leaders can use an appreciative inquiry for transformational growth toward flourishing by positively focusing on God’s revelation rather than problem-solving.

This approach to shaping our perspective around pandemics does not suggest discipleship devoid of suffering. On the contrary, while acknowledging the reality of pain amid pandemics, this approach focuses on life beyond disease and decay with hope in the gospel perspective revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Suffering is not favorable for suffering’s sake. Suffering is only good when it leads to positive transformation, which Christians recall amid trials and tribulations. We remember that the death of Jesus Christ resulted in his glorious

39. Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World,” 107.

40. Wilson, “Appreciating What We’re Worth in a Devaluing World,” 116–117.

resurrection for humanity's well-being. Jesus is risen and reigning, and we have his promise of life beyond suffering and death as our positive perspective for a flourishing fellowship amid a global pandemic.

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