

Covid-19 as *paideia*: reviewing the theological meaning Covid-19 based on concept of the *paideia* in Hebrews 12:4-13

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Abstract: Discussions regarding the Covid-19 pandemic have been carried out by experts in the field of theology. They understood the pandemic as only punishment from God. The question that arises is, is the Covid-19 pandemic, solely a punishment from God? This question arises because, if God is only understood as an angry God, then that view will lead people to understand that God is evil. This article aims to examine the theological meaning of the Covid-19 pandemic based on the idea of *paideia* in Hebrews 12:4-13. My thesis is, Covid-19 is not only a form of punishment but also a manifestation of God's love as well. The research method I use is qualitative research. Through that method, I offer a new perspective on the meaning of Covid-19 and demonstrate the theological meaning of Covid-19 as a form of education from God to shape human character for a better future.

I. Introduction

As the outbreak of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, Covid-19 has spread throughout the world, experts have begun to do research on Covid-19 and its effects. Experts in the United States are trying to find a correlation between climate indicators and Covid-19¹ Meanwhile, in Indonesia, research has been carried out on the impact of the national Covid-19 disaster on the economic recession,² including the efforts of the Indonesian government to try to prevent the Covid-19 disaster.³ To explore the possible mutation of Covid-19, research was also conducted using the application of the Needleman-Wunsch algorithm to identify mutations in the DNA sequences of coronavirus.⁴ In addition, a Covid-19 modeling simulation in Indonesia was also carried out based on early endemic

¹ Muhammad Farhan Bashir, Benjiang Ma, Bilal, Bushra Komal, Muhammad Adnan Bashir, Duojiang Tan, and Madiha Bashir, 'Correlation between climate indicators and COVID-19 pandemic in New York, USA', *Science of the Total Environment* (2020): 1-4.

² Endang Naryono, 'Impact of National Disaster COVID-19, Indonesia Towards Economic Recession', COVID-19 Indonesian Research Repository (2020), <http://sinta.ristekbrin.go.id/covid/penelitian/detail/5>.

³ Mayusef Sukmanal, Muhammad Aminuddin and Dwi Nopriyanto, 'Indonesian Government Response in COVID-19 Disaster Prevention', *East African Scholars Journal of Medical Sciences* 3.3 (Mar 2020): 81-86.

⁴ Mohammad Isa Irawan *et al*, 'Application of Needleman-Wunch Algorithm to identify mutation in DNA sequences of Coronavirus', *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1218 (2019): 1-13.

data.⁵ In the field of Christian theology, research carried out related to Covid-19 has focused on how Christian theology helps in understanding this pandemic, because the sudden emergence of Covid-19 raises questions that focus on human life.⁶ There is even an article questioning where is the church in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁷

In a recent article, Yanto Paulus Hermanto argues that the Covid-19 outbreak has created fear, worry, and uncertainty in human life. The impact has resulted in setbacks in various business fields, so that employers, workers, and the general public experience extreme stress. According to Hermanto, God's people must have the right response to the Covid-19 outbreak, namely being fair and not exaggerating, being introspective about themselves, watching and praying, and in line with regulations form small groups that care for, build and help one another, fully surrender responsibility for the situation to God, and finally perform acts of true love for others.⁸

Furthermore, Hermanto discusses the plague in the Old Testament and notes that, during the act of creation, God created everything very well, but because of sin, everything has changed. God brought plagues on the Egyptians. On the other hand, God protected the Israelites. Likewise, when the Philistines captured the ark from the Israelites, wherever the ark was moved between the cities of the Philistines, God struck them with ulcers (1Sa. 5:5-12). God also punished the Israelites with war and hunger for their disobedience to God (Ezek. 14:21; cf. Deut. 32:24-26). When Israel worshiped other gods, God was angry with them, sending their enemies to take all their belongings and bringing severe intestinal disease to them (2Chron. 21:5-12).⁹ Then Hermanto discusses the plague in the New Testament by pointing to the signs of the end times prophesied by Jesus in the gospels, Matthew 24:7 and Luke 21:11, and reminds readers that these signs were only the beginning of the suffering leading up to Jesus' coming. Hermanto also mentions John's vision in Revelation 6:7-8 regarding horses that symbolize war, famine, and death.¹⁰ In this discussion, Hermanto has provided a valuable analysis in the field of theology, showing that Covid-19 is a punishment that God imposes on humans just like the punishment that God gave to the Egyptians and the Israelites. Then he urges the readers to surrender the suffering that was experienced to God. However, he did not see the other side of Covid-19 as a manifestation of God's love for humans.

A discussion of Covid-19 has also been undertaken by Jibu Matthew George.¹¹ According to George, everything that happens in this world is part of a program established

⁵ Nuning Nuraini, Kamal Khairudin, and Mochamad Apri, 'Modeling Simulation of COVID-19 in Indonesia based on Early Endemic Data', *Communication in Biomathematical Sciences*, 3.1, (2020): 1-8.

⁶ Barney Pityana, 'How Christian theology helps us make sense of the pandemic' *South African Journal of Science* 16.7/8 (2020): 1

⁷ Deguma Jabin J., at al, 'Where is the Church in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic: Preferring the Poor via G. Gutierrez' "Liberation" and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching in the Philippine Setting', *The Journal of Social and Political Studies*, 3.2,(2020): 363-374.

⁸ Yanto Paulus Hermanto, 'True Response To COVID-19 plague Reviewed From The Perspective Of Christian Faith', *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science* 25.5 (May 2020): 33-36.

⁹ Hermanto, 'Response', 34.

¹⁰ Hermanto, 'Response', 35.

¹¹ Jibu Matthew George, 'Stocktaking in the Time of A Pandemic: Atypical Philosophical, Theological, and Other Observations', *Journal of Dharma* 45.2 (April-June 2020): 266.

by God. God punishes everyone, as the plagues in Egypt showed (Ex. 7-12). Before the plague concerning the death of the firstborn (Ex 11:1-12:36), God commanded Moses to tell the Israelites to mark the ‘upper doorposts’¹² of their houses with the blood of the lamb, then God commanded that the angel of death ‘pass over’ them (11:7-13). Yahweh benevolently made a distinction between the group of persecutors and those who were persecuted, in order to carry out the divine plan for emancipation. However, when the bubonic plague hit Eurasia and North Africa in the late Middle Ages and killed a third of Europe's population, even the priests who treat deceased patients contracted the plague and died.¹³ By quoting several texts from the Bible, George said that although God is long-suffering, full of mercy, and forgiving of offenses, God does not release the guilty at all until the third and fourth generations (Numbers 14:18). However, in Deuteronomy 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; Ezekiel 18:17, 19-20, and John 9:2, God reverses the view that human suffering can be part of a divine messianic scheme.¹⁴ George's view that the Covid-19 pandemic is a punishment from God that causes all infected people to die is understandable. However, George ignores another important aspect of the occurrence of a disaster, which is that each disaster is a *paideia* from God who not only punishes but also provides *paideia* for those God loves.

Another expert who has discussed Covid-19 quite thoroughly based on the letter to the Hebrews is Andrew T. Lincoln.¹⁵ In his discussion, Lincoln observes that the Covid-19 disaster had caused fear of death. The fear of avoiding death is evident in the efforts of people to maintain social distancing and wear masks in public places. As for the elderly, they must stay at home and practice washing their hands and using disinfection. The fear of the Covid-19 virus has also brought the economy to a halt, and it is now on the verge of collapse.¹⁶ In the discussion that follows, Lincoln connects fear of Covid-19 transmission with the fear experienced by the community addressed in Hebrews. Lincoln identifies two factors that caused fear in the Hebrew community. First, the Hebrew community faced persecution, suffering, and the possibility of death. Second, there was a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity about the salvation promised to them in the future (2:5; 6:5).¹⁷ Therefore, the author invites his readers to imitate the struggles of the heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11. They have struggled to attain perfection and salvation with eyes fixed on Jesus as a hero. He has diligently carried the cross for the joy that was provided for Him, and He now sits at God's right hand (Heb. 12:2-3).¹⁸ Through His death, He defeated the power of death, saved humankind, and brought them to glory and salvation.¹⁹ However, what humans are experiencing now in dealing with Covid-19 is the way that must be taken to get to that salvation and glory. Thus anxiety and fear of death have prompted people to hope in God and

¹² George, ‘Stocktaking’, 266.

¹³ George, ‘Stocktaking’, 267.

¹⁴ George, ‘Stocktaking’, 267-268

¹⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, ‘Reading Hebrews in a Time of Pandemic: Heroism and Hope in the Face of Fear’, *The Expository Times*, 131.11 (2020): 471.

¹⁶ Lincoln, ‘Hebrews’, 472.

¹⁷ Lincoln, ‘Hebrews’, 472.

¹⁸ Lincoln, ‘Hebrews’, 474.

¹⁹ Lincoln, ‘Hebrews’, 475.

trigger heroic actions to sustain life.²⁰ That hope, states Lincoln, has been provided by Christ through His resurrection from the dead. Therefore, even if they have to die because of the threat of Covid-19, there is the hope of salvation provided by Christ for believers.²¹

Surveying Lincoln's writings, I feel that he has not only contributed deep theological thoughts to the development of the field of theology, but he has also provided strength for readers in facing the threat of Covid-19, which is spreading throughout the world today. Covid-19 is indeed very worrying for everyone, both the poor and the rich, and both ordinary people and health workers. As a result, most people lock themselves inside their homes to avoid unwanted death. In this connection, Lincoln's writing is very useful. However, because of Lincoln's focus on providing encouragement and hope to readers, even though he made use of the letter to the Hebrews in discussing Covid-19, the meaning of Covid-19 as a form of punishment and God's love for humans did not get his attention. It is this void that I would like to address in this article.

In this article, I would like to promote Covid-19 as rod and as a form of God's love for humans especially base on the concept of *paideia* in Hebrew 12:4-13, that will help them live a holy life and produce the fruit of truth. Therefore, in this article, I try to fill that void by to give the other meaning of Covid-19 is also as a manifestation of God's love for humans. My argument is that base on the *paideia*'s concept in Hebrew 12:3-14, Covid-19 should not only be seen as a punishment but also as a form of God's love expressed for humans. People need to understand that God's punishment through Covid-19 is another form of God's love, inviting people to live holy lives before God and bear the fruit of peaceful righteousness.

My arguments, given in succession, follows these points: First, I analyze theological meanings of Covid-19 based on *paideia*'s concept in Hebrews 12:4-13 in order to offer a new perspective on the meaning of Covid-19 and its worldwide impact. Second, I demonstrate that the theological meaning of Covid-19 is also an expression of God's love so that humans can maintain a holy life and produce the fruit of peaceful truth. Finally, I end this article with a conclusion.

II. Research Method

The research method used here is qualitative-descriptive to analyze the meaning of Covid-19 based on the interpretation of the *paideia*'s concept in Hebrews 12: 3-14 with the aim of providing a more comprehensive theological understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, Covid-19 has claimed many victims, causing fear to the world community. These circumstances have prompted many theologians to view Covid-19 as punishment from God. However, if Covid-19 is viewed from the concept of *paideia* in Hebrews 12: 4-13, then Covid-19 should not only be understood as a form of punishment from God but also as a form of education for mankind to be more disciplined in carrying out daily life for the sake of a better future.

²⁰ Lincoln, 'Hebrews', 475.

²¹ Lincoln, 'Hebrews', 477-478.

III. Discussion

***Paideia* in Hebrews 12:4-13 and its theological meaning for the Covid-19 pandemic**

Paideia in Hebrews 12:4-13 describes suffering as a discipline from God that must be undergone by the people who are addressed in Hebrews, just as earthly parents discipline their children for their good.²² Based on this image, the author wisely guides readers through a description of the faith struggles of the heroes of Israel in the past (Heb.11), then he directs the attention of his readers to perseverance in faith (Heb. 12). Before the author discusses *paideia* further, he uses the metaphor of competition in athletics to invite his readers, who have endured many sufferings, to interpret this suffering (10:32-34) as a disciplined athletic competition for pilgrimages of the faithful, with eyes on Jesus as the forerunner of their faith. For He is the one who brought them to perfection, assiduously carrying their crosses (12:2). The author adopts the model of Jesus' persevering suffering on the cross as the prime example, in that Jesus Himself endured the cross and denials of Himself as a process that led Him to the joy that is reserved for Him at the right hand of God's throne.

By giving this understanding, the author uses the idea of *paideia* in Greek culture,²³ which can also have an element of punishment as suggested by the use of the verb *mastigōō*, translated as 'to whip', or 'to punish'.²⁴ This construction emphasizes that the suffering they experience needs to be accepted as a form of *paideia* or discipline for them in their status as children of God.²⁵ To emphasize suffering as a form of *paideia*, the author cites Proverbs 3:11-12²⁶ and makes it a basis for exhorting his readers. In the book of Proverbs, the keyword that stands out in the quote is מוֹסֵר or יָסַר. The Hebrew word is translated into Greek using the word *paideia* or *paideuo*, which means discipline, upbringing, rebuke, and punishment. The word refers to the act of providing guidance and education for children so that they live responsibly.

The problem that arises is, does discipline have only positive or only negative connotations? According to N. Clayton Croy²⁷ and Matthew Thiessen²⁸, discipline is meant to contain only positive meanings. In contrast to those two scholars, Ched Spellman analyzes the words *paideia* or *paideuo* in Hebrews 12:5 and 12:6 and argues that the concept of discipline

²² Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'Paideia', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 679.

²³ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946): v; Jas Elsner, 'Paideia: Ancient Concept and Modern Reception' *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 20.4 (2013): 136-152.

²⁴ Coetsee, A.J., 'Hebrews 12:9 revisited: The background of the phrase "and live"', *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 76.1 (2020): 1-11.

²⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews, A Commentary*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 319.

²⁶ The author advises readers not to reject *paideia*: discipline, upbringing, reproof from God (הַיְהוָה יִמְסֶךְ). The phrase 'God's discipline' (הַיְהוָה יִמְסֶךְ) is followed by the vocative form 'my son' as the object of the discipline. Verse 12 is a form of encouragement for people to obey God's instruction. Thus verse 11 can be seen as advice, while verse 12 is encouragement for the people. The motivation for discipline from God is given as a form of divine 'love'. Granted, discipline or rebuke is unpleasant or even painful, but it is a sign of God's grace (cf., Coetsee, A.J., 'Hebrews 12:9').

²⁷ N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12.1-13 in Its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

²⁸ Matthew Thiessen, 'Hebrews 12.5-13, the Wilderness Period, and Israel's Discipline', *NTS* 55 (2009): 366-79.

in Hebrew includes both negative and positive connotations.²⁹ He bases his view on two OT contexts, namely the Pentateuch and the book of Proverbs, and argues that the authors there applied the concept of discipline both as a means of correcting disobedience and as a means of training in obedience. Furthermore, Spellman argues that the concept of *paideia* in the book of Proverbs does have a corrective and punishing aspect, but also has a positive concept of discipline as a guide. The same concept in the book of Proverbs is broader than that. It can convey the idea of discipline and recognition of disobedience as part of obedience training.³⁰

Comparing and contrasting the views of Croy, Thiessen and Spellman leads me to conclude that Croy and Thiessen's views cannot be completely accepted. Both scholars, indeed, emphasize the positive aspects of the word *paideia*, but they ignore the negative aspects, namely the aspect of education achieved through whipping or other physical punishment that can be found in several passages from the book of Proverbs. Croy argues that the letter to the Hebrews presents an understanding of *paideia* as non-punitive, in which the child goes through a process of education that is entirely positive.³¹ Meanwhile, Thiessen relates such discipline to the period of the Israelites traveling in the wilderness as a forced experience to train the Israelites in obedience to the law. He understands discipline in Hebrews 12:3-13, as a positive force learned from the desert era.³²

To borrow Spellman's view, I argue the word *paideia* in the context of the book of Proverbs can include reproof (5:12; 15:32) and guidance (23:19) but can also be physical punishment or flogging. The author of the book of Proverbs followed the view prevalent in the ancient Near East that corporal punishment was an important part of *paideia* for a child.³³ The author of Proverbs uses the terms מַדְבָּר (Prov. 13:24; 22:8; 22:15; 29:15) and מִדְבָּר (Prov. 14:3; 23:13, 14) to mean rod, staff, club, that is associated with discipline towards children. Discipline in the form of physical punishment can indeed cause discomfort to a loved one, and so there are parents who are tolerant of the wrong behavior and actions of their children. Yet the author of the book of Proverbs points out that much more harm is inflicted on a child if the parent does not discipline the child. When this happens, the reluctance to apply discipline both verbally and physically to children will lead to neglect in his life. Discipline, both verbal and physical, did not only apply in Israel but also in Egypt.³⁴ Thus, according to the book of Proverbs, the form of discipline in the sense of giving advice or reprimand and whipping or punishing can be used according to the level of error or offense committed by the child.

The author of the book of Proverbs asserts that a wise child will receive discipline from the parent who corrects his wrong behavior, while a foolish child rejects reproof (cf. Prov. 9:7-12). This reprimand is often done by the parent as a wise person who exercises discipline towards a beloved child. Likewise, *paideia* from God is done out of divine love. God does not

²⁹ Ched Spellman, 'The Drama of Discipline: Toward an Intertextual Profile of *Paideia* in Hebrew 12', *JETS* 59/3 (2016): 487–506.

³⁰ Ched Spellman, 'Discipline', 487–506.

³¹ N. Clayron Croy, 'Endurance', 490.

³² Thiessen, 'Discipline,' 366-79.

³³ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, David L. Bartlett (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 87.

³⁴ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 290.

want the chosen people to continue with the attitudes and behaviors that ruined their lives. The analogy is presented as the act of a parent disciplining a child wisely. Even though it is very painful, the corrective action in the form of punishment is a sign of grace.³⁵ So the parent needs to encourage the child to accept the discipline, and after accepting it, the child should never deviate from it. Acceptance of education requires trust and dependence on God in all things. If the child does what the parent asks, then the child will get a great reward.³⁶

Therefore, the child is motivated not to become discouraged by the reprimands and punishments (*elenchomenos*) given by the parent. Because if a child thinks the parent's instructions are too light, then the child will find it difficult to get a good education. If discipline must be carried out by using a whip, the child needs to be given an understanding that the education given by the parent is an expression of love from a parent to a child so that the child can live a better life in the future.³⁷ Thus parents are advised to educate their children, even though by beating them with rattan such action saves their lives (Prov. 23:13, 14). Indeed, whipping as a form of education for children is painful but at the end of the rattan there is a reward. Proverbs 3:11-12 is quoted in Heb. 12:5-6 to support the author's argument that discipline from the Lord, though painful, shows that God cares for and loves God's children.

Punishment and love that represent discipline are also seen in God's covenant with David and his descendants. In 2 Samuel 7:14-15, the author uses the metaphor of father and son to describe the intimate relationship between God and David and his descendants. As a father, God disciplined David and his family by punishing him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands (2Sam. 7:14, NIV) when they made a mistake. However, God never abolished the divine covenant and love for David and his descendants. No matter how severe the punishment was, God's loyal love would not be lost to David and his descendants (2Sam. 7:15). God remained faithful to the covenant love for David and his descendants.³⁸

Understanding that God's action of applying *paideia* for a better future for divinely-beloved humankind can be a new perspective in understanding the meaning of the Covid-19 pandemic that is currently spreading around the world³⁹ and causing many people to feel stress about their future. Because with the outbreak of Covid-19, there has been a decline in the economy,⁴⁰ many people have lost jobs, and unemployment rates are getting higher. All these events can certainly be understood as God's whip or punishment for humans as divinely-created.

³⁵ Longman, *Proverbs*, 130.

³⁶ Longman, *Proverbs*, 131.

³⁷ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 320.

³⁸ V, Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 109-111.

³⁹ The number of victims of COVID-19 worldwide. Globally, as of 11:44 am CET, 12 December 2020, there have been 69,143,17 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 1,576,516 deaths reported to WHO. <https://covid19.who.int/?gclid> Accessed 12/12/2020.

⁴⁰ Maria Nicola, et.al., 'The socio-economic implications of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19): A review', *International Journal of Surgery* 78 (Apr 2020):185-193).

However, the whip or punishment has its limits. What limits this punishment is God's love for God's people. That is why not everyone in this world has experienced the same fate as their fellow humans who have died as a result of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The wisdom and knowledge that God gives to the medical professions have been used to find a vaccine as an antidote against Covid-19 infection, so that amidst anxiety about facing the threat of Covid-19, there is hope for the future. All of these are proofs of God's care for humankind and even all of creation because of divine love.

In this regard, I want to offer a new perspective regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, that God who punishes is also a God who loves. God not only condemns but also loves all people. A parent punishes or whips sons and daughters according to what is thought to be good. But God punishes and even scourges creation for our good (*epi to sympheron*).⁴¹ because God wants a better future as a manifestation of divine love. True, for a short time, the punishment causes suffering, but the punishment is done for our good (12:10). A sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux based on the book of the Song of Songs describes God's mercy and punishment as the two feet of God. On the one hand, God loves, but on the other hand, God is angry. Through the sermon, he warned the church not to neglect the two feet of God, so as not to fall into unbalanced perceptions of God's character and actions.⁴²

The problem that arises is, how to understand God's punishment at simultaneously a manifestation of God's love for humans? To answer this question, Jordan Wessling conducted an in-depth study based on the sermon of Bernard of Clairvaux and discussed the views of Emil Brunner, Gregory of Nyssa, and the philosopher R. A. Duff. Wessling argues that God's punishment is an invitation to humans who commit offenses or sins, so that they repent, renew themselves, and seek reconciliation with God, and so that sinful humans turn to God.⁴³ Wessling came to the conclusion that God loves humans very much as wayward children, and that therefore God does not remain silent when they are seen injuring themselves and others. God gives punishments as an expression of divine love, with the intention to make people aware that they have chosen the wrong path. They must return, renew their lives and be reconciled with God. Of course, God's punishment can be severe; but such actions are done because of God's unceasing love for sinful humans. Therefore, human beings need to see and experience and appreciate God's unending love, even in anger and punishment.⁴⁴

Expanding on Wessling's view, I argue that sin is indeed the cause of God's punishment of humans, because God hates sin. Therefore, God punishes humans who commit transgressions and sins. But we must not ignore God's love behind the punishment, because the punishment proves that we are legitimate children (12:7).⁴⁵ So, as legitimate children, God gave *paideia* for us as children whom He loves so that they can live (12:9).⁴⁶ In this connection, I borrow from Jordan Wessling's view, which says that human sin becomes an

⁴¹ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 322.

⁴² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Songs of Songs I, sermon 6.6-9*, trans. Kilian J. Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 35-37.

⁴³ Jordan Wessling, 'How Does a Loving God Punish? On the Unification of God's Love and Punitive Wrath', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19.4 (Oct 2017), 421-423 .

⁴⁴ Jordan Wessling, 'Punish', 423.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 321.

⁴⁶ James W. Thomson, *Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008)*, 255.

obstacle between God and humans and is even an attack on God's honor and holiness. God does not want divine holiness to be attacked.⁴⁷ Therefore, God imposes punishment on humans so that they will be converted and maintain a holy life before God.

The Theological Meaning of Covid-19 as *paideia* for God's People

We have previously discussed that *paideia* imposed by God on humans is not merely a punishment but also a manifestation of God's love for to educate humans. In that regard, I believe that even though Covid-19 causes anxiety, suffering and death for humans, Covid-19 has a theological meaning that needs to be considered. The first is that through Covid-19 as *paideia* for humans, God invites people to live holy lives so that they can take part in God's holiness (12:10). The term 'holy' as used in this verse refers to the very nature of God who is most holy,⁴⁸ such that humans cannot get close to the center of God's holiness. Because God's holiness is very powerful while humans are imperfect, therefore no one can approach the center of God's holiness. When approaching the center of holiness, one has to be careful because God's power can be deadly.⁴⁹ However, Christ as high priest has offered Himself as a sacrifice once for all (Heb. 10:10) to sanctify us as His people. Through Christ's sacrifice, He has entered that most holy place to enable us to share in God's holiness. Therefore, holiness needs to be sought or pursued (12:14) so that we are enabled to come into His presence. This effort is done through *paideia* or discipline from God as a preparation to share in divine holiness. Discipline is exercised through the path of suffering, which we now experience. Through that path, we are enabled to strive for that holiness so that we can share in it.

Second, Covid-19 as a form of *paideia* to discipline humans can produce the fruit of truth, which results in peace. In Hebrews 12:11, the author uses the word *gegumnasménois*, which means trained, to remind the reader of the training undertaken by an athlete who prepares himself for a competition (12:1). Athletes who train diligently to stretch their muscles and strengthen their mentality, certainly experience pain but the pain will bear fruit (*καρπὸν*). The word 'fruit' is a metaphor taken from the world of agriculture⁵⁰ to describe the result of *paideia* that comes to the person experiencing it. Fruit in the letter to the Hebrews means truth (*eírenikòn*). The fruit of truth brings *kharas*, which means pleasure, joy, and peace, just like Christ brings. He endured suffering by diligently carrying the cross until He was crucified and died, but then that suffering was replaced with joy when He rose from the dead and now sits at the right hand of God's throne (12:2). The Covid-19 pandemic, which is now being experienced by all humankind, is indeed very worrying, frightening and sad, because many people experience suffering and even death. But suffering and death can be understood as a form of *paideia* from God to produce the fruit of truth and provide peace to those who are trained.

⁴⁷ Jordan Wessling, "Punish", 424.

⁴⁸ According to Epictetus, one of the reasons we need discipline (*paideia*) is so that we can distinguish what is useful and what is not useful. Meanwhile, according to Stoicism, the purpose of discipline is to produce wise persons who are free and independent. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 452.

⁴⁹ Carol Meyers, *Exodus, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 152-3.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 453.

IV. Conclusion

The threat of Covid-19 has caused anxiety and even death to humanity. Various studies both from the medical field and from the theological field have been carried out to reveal the causes and consequences of Covid-19. One of the studies from the theological field suggests that Covid-19 is a punishment from God.⁵¹ Of course, no one can deny that the Covid-19 pandemic is a punishment from God. However, we have analyze more deeply the meaning of God's punishment, then actually behind that punishment there is God's infinite love for humans as God's creatures. Like a parent who sees children doing wrong, that parent is responsible for giving *paideia* to the children so that they can return to the right path.

In this regard, the concept of *paideia* in Hebrews 12:4-13 can serve as a basis for shedding light on theological discussions that are currently developing among theologians regarding the worldwide threat of Covid-19, so that Covid-19 is not only seen as a punishment from God but also as a form of God's love for humans. Punishment and God's love are like two sides of a coin that cannot be separated from one another. The two sides complement each other as one unified whole. With this understanding, Covid-19 can be seen as a form of *paideia* from God for humans to provide a better future for humans. That means that Covid-19 is a form of *paideia* from God. The *paideia* given by God are indeed disturbing and painful for a while, but they are not given without purpose. The point is that humankind, as God's creation, not only turns to God, but also strives to live a holy life before God. Because, by striving to live holy lives, we share in God's holiness and we produce the fruits of truth that bring joy.

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⁵¹ George, 'Stocktaking', 266.

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