

The Plague in Our Hearts

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38 "whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, *or* by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple:

39 "then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men),

40 "that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers. (1 Ki. 8:37-40)

One of the words we've heard a lot in the last few weeks, and I've used it myself a few times, is the word *unprecedented*. If something is without precedent, it has never happened before. It is completely new, and we have no idea what this is or how to act.

In some respects, that's true. Most of us have never experienced a complete lockdown, or a government order to cease trading or travelling. Most of us have never experienced panic buying, widespread suspicion and caution of everyone. Few except the most germ-conscious among us have been cautious to touch anything used by the general public, or cautious to stay outside of 1.8 metres of others. This is new. It is certainly new in my lifetime that churches cannot meet for corporate worship.

But some of you have experienced some of this. Those old enough to have lived through war, or through the polio outbreaks of the 40s might have experienced some of this. Some of you in the medical field have been closer to the frontlines of disease outbreaks than the rest of us.

But for the church itself, considered across time, pandemics, or plagues are not new. The most famous of them was the Black Plague, the Bubonic Plague, which ravaged Europe in the 1300s. In 1347, there were weather changes that some call "a little ice age". Reduced farm yields, increased famines, and people more vulnerable to disease, were some of the effects. Bubonic plague is carried by fleas, and rats acts as hosts. Trade in the Mediterranean seems to have brought it into the Black Sea, and then to Italy and northern Europe.

The plague would begin with symptoms of fever, loss of balance, swollen glands, and by the fifth day, the person was dead. Between 1348 and 1350, it had swept the entire continent, and a third of the population of Europe died. Estimates vary, but between 75 to 200 million people died.

Economically there were massive effects. Entire markets disappeared. Unemployment increased. There were riots and turmoil. Tragically, anti-semitism and persecution of Jewish people took place. Christians could not understand why the plague did not affect Jewish neighbourhoods as much. Some think it had to do with there being more cats in Jewish neighbourhoods, because cats had been associated with witchcraft and there were fewer cats in Christian neighbourhoods to kill off the plague-carrying rats. This led to more massacre and violence upon the Jews.

There were others. During the years 165 to 180, Roman soldiers returning from campaigns in the near East spread a disease that had a mortality rate of 25%. Estimates are that 5 million people died, at a rate of 2000 people a day.

About a hundred years later, the Plague of Cyprian ravaged the Roman Empire, from 249-262. About 5000 people died every day. It led to spells of drought, famine, and floods which devastated the population. It was named after the Bishop of Carthage, Saint Cyprian, who said it was possibly a sign that the world was coming to an end. The plague even claimed the life of Emperor Claudius

II Gothicus in 270 AD.

The Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 killed 50 million people around the world. During that time, many parts of the world faced lockdowns, with public gatherings and churches closed.

In fact, pandemics and plagues have reared their heads from time to time, and place to place. So much so, Jesus told us that pestilences are not a necessary sign that we have reached the end:

6 "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet. 7 "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. 8 "All these *are* the beginning of sorrows. (Matt. 24:6-8)

The beginning of sorrows was a Hebrew idiom for labour pains. In other words, plagues, epidemics, pestilences are like the labour pains of the end of the world. The baby is not yet ready to come, but the pains tell us that it could be soon. We could be in the last period, but the labour pains for the end of the world might begin month, years, decades, or even centuries before the end comes.

God has providentially made sure that in every century since Christ ascended that there has been the presence of war, famine, pestilence and earthquakes. This keeps us watching, sober, ready, and aware that the day of the Lord could come soon. Since God does not reveal the day or the hour of His Son's return, Satan no doubt makes sure his pieces are always ready and situated for the end to begin. God also makes sure that no one can set the date. Instead of trying to recognise whether this time is truly the beginning of the end, we should submit to God's methods: it could be, but it also might not be. God simply wants His children to always be ready.

Because of the panic and obsessiveness around us, Christians can easily be swept up into all this. Instead of allowing a time like this to search us inwardly, we can waste this time by being only concerned outwardly. Instead of seeing God as the ultimate cause and controller of Coronavirus, we think only about our health, our jobs, our families, our business. As much as those are real concerns, what if we stopped to consider that God has those things under control, and has allowed this to come to pass.

Why would He do that? Well, trust no man who tells you that he knows the complete answer to that. No one has inner knowledge of God's ultimate purposes. When you hear people say that this is God's judgement on rebellious nations, or this is how God wakes the world up, or this is a test of the church, there is a grain of truth in all that, but no one should venture to be a spokesman for the plans of the Trinity when it comes to Coronavirus.

The secret *things belong* to the LORD our God, but those *things which are* revealed *belong* to us and to our children forever, that *we* may do all the words of this law. (Deut. 29:29)

But what we do know from Scripture is that God works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph 1:11). We also know that God uses the same events for very different purposes in the lives of His children from those for those outside His family. For example, God used attacking Babylonians to take Judah into exile. That event meant something very different for those unbelieving Babylonians than it did for the Israelites. For the Babylonians, it meant war, power, plunder. For the Israelites it meant chastisement, judgement, repentance.

For those outside Christ, Coronavirus means all kinds of things. It means the terror of their secure life being overturned. It means the decimation of their finances and stored up wealth. It means a

fight to hoard and protect what they have. It means an instant dislike and distrust of neighbour. It means fears of sickness, suffering, and death.

But for the believer, Coronavirus should mean something very different. For the believer, it is a moment of exposure. It exposes what has been in our hearts, and reveals to us what is there. When the plague broke out in his time, Cyprian said this: How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the mind of the human race” In other words, Cyprian was saying that the plague revealed what was inside people: bravery or cowardice, selfishness or generosity, kindness or cruelty.

While I do not know what God's ultimate purposes are, I know it is always God's purpose to conform His children to the image of Christ. It is always His purpose to use trials to purge us, mature us, develop us, and fit us for glory. It takes some maturing to turn a toddler into a soldier, and it takes some sanctification to bring many children to glory.

And so in my own reading, I was stuck by a phrase prayed by Solomon when the Temple was dedicated.

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In dedicating the Temple, Solomon kept using a simple formula: when your people experience some kind of trouble, whether self-inflicted or not, and they humble themselves, and pray with the hearts towards the place of atonement, then please forgive and deliver and be gracious. Here in verse 37, Solomon says when the problem is pestilence or plague or war, if your people come knowing the plague of their own heart and repents, then hear and forgive.

The plague of his own heart. What if Christians used this time to consider what plague, what pandemic, what virus might be infesting their hearts, which the outward circumstances of Coronavirus are revealing? What if we then turned and repented and looked to Christ for change and renewal, maybe even revival and re-awakening?

What plagues, what diseases do we see coming out of hearts at this time? Let me suggest the top three, which we must fight, repent of, and replace.

I. The Plague of Fear

The first plague that comes out of hearts in a time like this is fear. Many fears. Fears of getting sick. Fears of dying. Fears of losing a loved one. Fears of losing a business, or a job, or income. Fears of social unrest. Fears of governmental control. Fears of anarchy and lawlessness. And perhaps the worst fear of all: fear of the unknown. Fears of what if, what then.

There is nothing like meditating on what might happen to us to leave us in a constant state of anxiety. C. S. Lewis picks this up in his book the Screwtape Letters. There he imagines an older, more experienced demon is sending letters to a younger, less experienced demon, helping him to

understand how to tempt humans and defeat God's work in their lives. In one of the letters, the human is now swept up in World War 2, and the older demon, Screwtape, tells the younger demon about fear. He writes:

[God] wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them. It is your business to see that the patient never thinks of the present fear as his appointed cross but only of the things he is afraid of.

God wants us to be concerned with our actions, and our duties. Satan would have us meditate on what might happen to us. God wants us to accept the situation as our present cross and bear it. Satan wants us to think of the cross as referring to something faraway and fret and worry about what is happening now.

In fact, obsessing about what will happen next, and what will happen to me, and where is this all going, is exactly how Christians should not think. For a Christian to spend most of his time thinking about uncertainties, which his thinking does nothing to make more certain, while thinking very little on those certainties which God has revealed from which he gains peace and productivity, is the path to anxiety.

That's the nature of the fear which God condemns. You know that God does not condemn all fear. We are supposed to have a reverent awe of God Himself. We are supposed to have deep respect for authority, for human life. But what God forbids in his children is a selfish, unbelieving fear, that only thinks about what might happen to me in light of other uncertainties. That leads to all kinds of other sins: cowardice, anger, irrational thinking. In fact, Revelation 21 lists out those who will be cast into hell, and guess what is at the top of the list: 8 "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Rev. 21:8)

Let me be quick to add: it is not a sin to feel the threat, to feel the danger, to feel the burden of the problem. Courage is not the absence of fear, but choosing by faith to act in spite of it. Fear becomes a sin when we see nothing else but the danger, and care for nothing else except self-preservation.

But a Christian has been released from the greatest of fears: the fear of death. Listen to what Hebrews tells us about the fear of death:

14 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,
15 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Heb. 2:14-15)

If you are a Christian, then you may not want death, but you don't fear it. Christ's resurrection has guaranteed that if you live, you have Christ, and if you die, it is gain. But when you look at your neighbour, you should see that he or she is in bondage to fear. What Coronavirus might do to them holds them captive. They are chained to circumstances, at the mercy of whether this invisible virus strikes them or not. For them, the Angel of Death is passing through the land, and they have no Passover.

By the way, what an opportunity, during this time, and after it. People are awakened to death and mortality. During the 1850s, a cholera outbreak swept through London. Spurgeon later wrote of that time. "If there ever be a time when the mind is sensitive, it is when death is abroad. I recollect, when first I came to London, how anxiously people listened to the gospel, for the cholera was raging terribly. There was little scoffing then."

If Christ is your Passover, if Christ is Your Shepherd, then self-protective fear is unbelief. It is a sheep ignoring the shepherd and staring at the cliffs and the winds and the wolves. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. (Ps. 23:4)

This is the plague in our heart we must confess and repent of. 7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. (2 Tim. 1:7)

Christians can display strength, sound and calm thinking, and love for neighbour. Confess, admit, repent of unbelieving fear. Look to the Temple that is Jesus Christ, and pray towards God through Him. Look for cleansing and ask for power, a sound mind, and love.

That leads to the second plague of the heart we see so much of.

II. The Plague of Selfishness

If you want to know the depths of human depravity, you will see it in times of famine or plague.

During the siege of Samaria, a woman asked king Jehoram for help.

28 Then the king said to her, "What is troubling you?" And she answered, "This woman said to me, 'Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.' 29 "So we boiled my son, and ate him. And I said to her on the next day, 'Give your son, that we may eat him'; but she has hidden her son." (2 Ki. 6:28-29)

When you think that panic buying toilet paper for the next twenty years is selfish, it's just the beginning. The human being in Adam, has a nearly infinite and voracious love for self: self-protection, self-preservation, self-promotion. People believe that other people are good and nice when those people have more or less every need met. But start taking those away, and you will see the raw material of Adam's family.

During the plague of Cyprian, Pontius of Carthage, wrote of the plague at Carthage:

Afterwards there broke out a dreadful plague,...[which] invaded every house in succession of the trembling populace, carrying off day by day with abrupt attack numberless people, every one from his own house. All were shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion, impiously exposing their own friends, as if with the exclusion of the person who was sure to die of the plague, one could exclude death itself also. There lay about the meanwhile, over the whole city, no longer bodies, but the carcasses of many... No one regarded anything besides his cruel gains. No one trembled at the remembrance of a similar event. No one did to another what he himself wished to experience.

If you are chained to this life, and care only for yourself, your children, your family, then you will be among those elbowing people in the face to get into the lifeboats first. You will be that monstrous person you never thought you'd be: every man for himself, abandoning and stepping on and over the weak, the aged, the helpless.

You will care only that you do not get sick, that your life and security is protected. And if the idols of wellness, and the idols of security, and the idols of prosperity get assaulted, you will lash out.

But this is another way that the cross of Christ has set us free. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14:

14 For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died;
15 and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2 Cor. 5:14-15)

Put simply, are you living for yourself? That's a plague of the heart. The cross and the resurrection

mean you are set free from such a narrow life, and live for others: for family, yes, but for the body of Christ, for the evangelisation of the world.

Is this time tempting you to hoard, or to help others? Is it tempting you to stockpile, or to share? Is it tempting you to pray for your own protection, or intercede for others? Is it tempting you to come up with plans to survive, or to come up with plans to serve?

During that plague I just mentioned, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, reported how the Christians behaved:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.

Dionysius continues: But with the heathen everything was quite otherwise. They deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. They shunned any participation or fellowship with death; which yet, with all their precautions, it was not easy for them to escape. (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 7.22.7–10)

Now I'm not saying the direct application is to expose ourselves to disease. Back then, the germ theory of disease was not understood. We might be willing to risk being exposed, but then we also become a risk to others. But the point is, Christians embrace acceptable risk trying to defend others, help other, assist others. As Paul puts it in Philippians 2:4 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

But the plague of the heart that Christ has set us free from is an obnoxious self-focus, caring only for self or our own family. Let's turn to the true Temple, Jesus Christ, face Him, and repent of selfishness, and ask for love, ask for opportunities to serve and be a blessing.

The third plague is perhaps the one that hides the most, and blends in so well that we have trouble spotting it.

III. The Plague of Pride

An epidemic like this very quickly reveals the temperaments of people. We see those who believe caution and distance is the better part of wisdom, and advocate for more social distancing and quarantining, since the danger to life is there. . We see those who believe that continuance and going forward is the better part of wisdom, since the damage to the economy may be greater than any loss of life.

But it is one kind of pride to have a sort of smugness toward your neighbour about what you know. To feel that you read the right articles on the web, not the wrong ones; that your sources are the really reliable ones, that you don't get taken in like he does, that you know the real story. To feel that your position of caution or of continuance is the obviously wise position, and your neighbour who disagrees with you is obviously a coward, or obviously reckless is what the Bible calls despising one another. The root of it is pride, an overweening sense that we see more than others, that we see better, that we are better interpreters of facts, that we can know more with less. Bur Proverbs tells us that a bloated self-confidence in our pre-reading of a situation is foolishness.

13 He who answers a matter before he hears *it*, It is folly and shame to him. (Prov. 18:13)

We have a long way to go before we'll know what this was, and in the meantime, we need humility. Humility that sees the arguments for caution. Humility that also sees the devastating economic effects that governments are proposing. Humility will not despise my neighbour for his caution, or for his urging against overkill. It is very hard to reserve judgement, especially in a time of information glut, where everyone is under pressure to get behind a microphone or a camera and give a weekly Coronavirus update, and explain to all their followers exactly what it all means. Sometimes it is quite okay to say, "I don't know enough yet. I am going to trust the authorities God has put in place, and do what I think is most prudent."

The last kind of pride I want to mention is the pride that thinks you are exempt from getting sick or even dying of this virus. This can either be the false pride of thinking you are too young and fit for it to affect you, or some false religious pride that quotes Psalm 91 out of context, saying, 6 *Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday.* 7 *A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand; But it shall not come near you.* (Ps. 91:6-7)

That Psalm does not teach we cannot or will not get sick or die of disease.

Jesus made sure we did not think that death by unnatural causes was a sign of special sin. **Luke 13:1** There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered such things? 3 "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. 4 "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all *other* men who dwelt in Jerusalem? 5 "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." (Lk. 13:1-5)

Put simply, Jesus was teaching, death comes to all, righteous and unrighteous. It can come in sudden calamitous ways, or in steady, calm ways. It can come through disease, through accident, through murder, through war, and through disease. There is no biblical reason why God should exempt me from one kind of death over another. I am a sinner, having earned death. In Christ, I now have life as my inheritance. But my body of death remains unredeemed. How God chooses to relieve me of my decaying tent, and clothe me with the eternal one, is up to Him.

So we look to the Great Tabernacle that is Jesus, we face Him, and repent of our pride: our smugness, our despising of others, our false bravado, our sense of exemption. We ask for cleansing by His blood on the Cross, and ask for the grace of humility: to listen better and reserve judgement, to understand others, to accept our common lot with the race of man.