



The Curse of Plague: The Blessing of Faith Moderator's Comments 19 March 2020

By Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes

Dr Samuel Johnson is supposed to have written to a hopeful would-be author: 'Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good.' One can sympathise with the sentiment. Everyone has written on the coronavirus, and the main points that need to be said from the Christian perspective have already been made. Nevertheless, they will be made again.

ALL AFFLICTIONS COME FROM GOD

All disasters come from God (Amos 3:6; Isa.45:7; Lam.3:38). This is a startling truth, especially in today's age of soft gods, but it is the truth nevertheless. God warned Israel that if the people set their face against Him, He would set His face against them. 'I will visit you with panic,' He declares (Lev.26:16).

The terrible Bubonic Plague of the late 1340s wiped out about one-third of Europe. Writing to his brother (who was a monk), the poet, Petrarch, lamented:

Alas! My beloved brother, what shall I say? ... On all sides is sorrow; everywhere is fear. I would, my brother, that I had never been born, or, at least, had died before these times ... When has any such thing been even heard or seen; in what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth?

Petrarch, who fathered two children without the benefits of marriage, had no doubt that 'We have, indeed, deserved these [punishments] and even greater'. Philip Daileader has commented that Petrarch could make receiving a parking ticket sound tragic, but the Black Death remains the most devastating

plague in human history. And God sent it.

AFFLICTIONS ARE DESIGNED TO WAKE US UP SPIRITUALLY

In the aftermath of the Great Plague of London in 1665, Ralph Venning referred to sin as 'the plague of plagues'. As Solomon prayed the prayer of dedication at the opening of the first temple in Jerusalem, he saw that plague could well strike a disobedient people, and prayed that the Hebrews would know the affliction in their own hearts, and pray that God in heaven - His dwelling place - would hear and forgive, and that the people would fear Him (1 Kings 8:37-40). In God's eyes, the plague of sin is worse than the plague of sickness - though both belong to the Fall.

Is there yet much evidence of that today? Or is there so much that passes for grace that any talk of chastening is regarded as unchristian? Yet it is the New Testament which tells us that God chastens His people to promote their holiness (Heb.12:3-11), and He pours out His bowls of wrath upon sinners who nevertheless refuse to repent of their deeds (Rev.16:9, 11). Finally, they curse God (Rev.16:20). To many modern minds, God, if He exists, can only exist for our benefit, as we see it.

RESPOND IN A GODLY WAY

Whereas the unbeliever is under God's curse, the humblest believer is under His blessing. Albert Camus' *The Plague* goes no further than enjoining a Stoic soldiering on in the midst of adversity, not knowing who would be struck down next. The Christian can go further than that. We have been here before. During World War II, Martyn Lloyd-Jones prayed and preached and struggled to keep the congregation of Westminster Chapel functioning even as German bombs fell on London during the Blitz.

In times of plague or pandemics, the Christian has the obligation to continue to love God and neighbour. The emperor, Julian the Apostate (who was given that nickname after his death!) lamented as he neared death in 363 that the pagans readily abandoned the sick, while the Christians looked after them, even those who were pagans. In 1527 Martin Luther stayed behind in Wittenberg as plague threatened the town. He took all sensible precautions to protect his own life and not to spread the plague, but added: 'If my neighbour needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely.'

Panic is the enemy of faith. Many have pointed – rightly so – to C. S. Lewis' essay 'On Living in an Atomic Age' where he pointed out that we are all going to die, so we must pull ourselves together. That may lack a certain sentimentality, but it is a helpful reminder to us all.

Psalm 91 tells us: 'For He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge; His

faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday' (Ps.91:3-6). This can be misused, and, indeed, the devil cited this Psalm in seeking to tempt Christ in the wilderness (Matt.4:1-11). It is a Psalm that is fulfilled first in Christ, then for those in Christ. If it is not fulfilled in its entirety in time, it will be in eternity. Those who trust in the Lord are safe forever.

If this coronavirus reminds us of our weakness, and humbles us, and drives us to God, it will be because God has taken a curse and turned it into a blessing. As Calvin put it: 'But what we must constantly keep in mind is that all afflictions are God's rod, and therefore there is no remedy for them other than God's grace.' Yes, Lord, 'in wrath remember mercy' (Hab.3:2).

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