

LITTLE HILL CHURCH

‘THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN PLAGUES’

The world has always suffered plagues. Some archaeologists say there was a plague in north east China in 3000 BC. There was, what seemed to be an outbreak of either smallpox or typhus in Athens in 430 BC, which claimed one hundred thousand lives. In the Roman Empire from 165-180AD five million died from plague, attributed to returning soldiers. In 541/2 it is estimated that up to half the population of Europe died from Bubonic plague in the Byzantine Empire. The ‘Black-Death’ struck down fifty million in Asia and Europe between 1346-53. The ‘Great-Bubonic’ plague of London in 1665/6 resulted in the death of 15% of the city’s population. In 1889/90 Russian Flu struck Europe and other parts of the world and one million died. The H1N1 flu virus spread across the world in 1919/20 and caused fifty million deaths. 1957/8 was the year of the Asian Flu when from one to two million died. Swine Flu killed up to half million in 2009/10. During 2014-16 it was reported that Ebola resulted in the deaths of eleven thousand in West Africa; including my next door neighbour, who was in Sierra Leone on business! Today we are struggling with Covid-19 and according to the worldwide statistic gathering organisation - ‘Worldometer’ - there are to date over one million recorded deaths.

So that begs the obvious question - ‘If we have a loving God why do we suffer such devastating plagues? The answer is because God - *“cursed the ground”* and the rest of nature and natural laws with it. God did this because Adam had - *“eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it”*; God told Adam, in no uncertain terms, that the curse came on the world - *“because of you”* (Gen 3v17). We suffer plagues, as with every other disaster, because of the deliberate rebellion of the human race represented in Adam and Eve. It was as a judgement from God because of rebellion against God’s clear and expressed will. The result being that - *“creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in... bondage to decay”* (Rom 8v20-22). So the decaying marks of that curse have been in evidence ever since.

The ultimate result of that humanities rebellion against God is the plague of death - *“sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”* (Rom 5v12). That is why it seems to me there is always an element of judgement or punishment in every disaster. If mankind had not rebelled against God there would be no disasters, disease, plagues or even death!

BIBLE PLAGUES

Since plagues have always been a feature of earthly life it would be very surprising if there were no records of them in the Bible. In fact we find over one hundred plagues of various sorts reported in Scripture. Probably the most well-known being the ten plagues on Egypt, recorded in Exodus (chs 7-12); the Nile turned into blood; followed by frogs, gnats, flies, livestock deaths, sores and boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally the death of the firstborn born of families and animals.

In our modern English language we would not describe all these happenings as - ‘plagues’ - but we will often say that we were - ‘plagued by’ - gnats, flies and other of them!

We then come across plagues right through to the end of the New Testament, where we read of the - *“seven angels with seven last plagues”* (Rev 15v6). In the next chapter (16) they are described as - *“the seven bowls of the wrath of God”*; and told what they are - *“painful sores; the sea became like the blood of a corpse; springs of water became blood; the sun scorched people with fire; the throne of the beast plunged into darkness, the Euphrates river dried up; flashes of lightning, rumblings, thunder and a great earthquake”*. It is a plainly true that plagues and disasters are a fact of life on earth.

GOD SENDS PLAGUES

It is also a clear fact of Scripture that God deliberately sends plagues! If we go back to the ten plagues on Egypt, we read - *"Thus says the Lord, By this you shall know that I am the Lord...I will strike the water that is in the Nile and it shall turn into blood"* (Ex 7v17). When the Israelites were in the wilderness they complained about the miraculous God given manna and lack of variety of food, such as they had while in slavery. So God sent them an amazing abundance of quail, but - *"While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague"* (Num 11v4-6; 33). When David sinfully tried to number Israel's fighting men - *"the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel, and 70,000 men fell"* (1Chr 21v14).

We cannot read Scripture and avoid the evidence that God did deliberately send some devastating plagues on the earth. However, praise his name that that is not the end of the story!

GOD ENDS PLAGUES

When - *"The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, so that many died"* - because the Israelites spoke against God and Moses; it was the Lord who gave Moses the instruction to put the brass snake on a pole so that the people could look and live. (Num 21v6-9). After God had sent the plague because of David's sin, we then read that as the angel was about to destroy Jerusalem - *"the Lord relented from the calamity & he said to angel, It is enough; now stay your hand."* (1 Chr 21v15).

The greatest demonstration that God ends plagues is to be found in the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus. He ended the plagues of leprosy, paralysis, blindness and even death for people. He went even further in giving his life at Calvary so that - *"with his wounds we are healed"* (Isa 53v5). That will ultimately be fulfilled in glory when - *"death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more"* (Rev 21v4); and certainly no more plagues! We ought to praise God that he brings plagues to an end and that there are not far more of them!

GOD WARNS OF PLAGUES

Thinking of the plagues on Egypt again, God sent Moses to give notice before he acted - *"Go to Pharaoh and say to him, The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, Let my people go...But so far you have not obeyed. Thus says the Lord, By this you shall know that I am the Lord; I will strike the water that is in the Nile and it shall turn into blood"* (Ex 7v15-17). Likewise, after giving the Israelites the Ten Commandments, the Lord warned them - *"If you will not listen to me and not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules...but break my covenant, then...I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever"* (Lev 26v14-16).

The Lord Jesus himself promised that plagues would continue to occur on earth right up to the very end - *"There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences"* (Luke 21v11). So there ought to be no surprise at plagues regularly arising. The kind of plague that occurs may be new, as is Covid-19, and therefore come as a surprise, but the fact that another plague has arrived ought not to surprise us at all! So that bring us to the crunch question:-

IS COVID-19 A GOD SENT PLAGUE?

My answer has to be - YES! As we have seen in the above Bible references, there is no reason why the Covid-19 'plague' could not be a direct and specific punishment from God on the human race's continuing, and even deepening, rebellion and defiance of him and his law.

On the other hand, the pandemic could simply be the outcome of the curse affected laws of nature. God works through the natural laws of the universe, which are his creation and under his sovereign hand. So it is the - *"Father in heaven, makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"* (Matt 5v45). The same is true with every disaster that occurs. Jesus referred to the then well-known disaster of eighteen being killed when a tower in Siloam collapsed (Luke 13v4). The collapse could have occurred through human failure in design, construction or natural causes, such as flood and gales. Whatever the cause, the occurrence acted as a vivid reminder of the need for repentance because the ultimate judgement is coming! (v5). Insurance companies used to include an exemption in their policies for -'Acts Of God'! A recognition that God sends disasters or certainly allows them; and that is because he deliberately subjected the whole of creation to futility (Rom 8v20); and that is because of human rebellion and sin.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

So what are the responsibilities of Christians when plagues and disasters occur? The first thing we ought to do is turn to God in prayer. In Solomon's Holy Spirit inspired prayer of dedication at the opening of the temple in Jerusalem, he included the following petition - *"If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence...whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made...then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive & act"* (1Kgs 8v37-39). Plagues should urge us to pray; for ourselves and loved ones; for our nation and world; especially for the lost. *"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."* (2 Chr 7v14).

Secondly, we have the responsibility to serve. When - *"Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, Moses said to Aaron, take your censer and put fire on it and incense and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them for the plague has begun...and he stood between the dead and the living"* (Num 16v46-48). The service of Moses and Aaron to God and the people was crucial in the survival of the people. Soon after George Müller moved to Bristol in 1832, a plague of cholera broke out. He and his colleague Henry Craik visited the sick and dying throughout; helping, encouraging, praying with, and supporting, many people and families. C.H.Spurgeon did the same in the Cholera outbreaks in London in 1854 and 1866. Many people were helped through their service in those crises. So our nation's, and world's crisis times afford valuable opportunities for us to serve the Lord and the people of our communities and neighbourhoods. One of the outstanding features of our Lord's earthly ministry was that - *"he healed many people of diseases and plagues"* (Luke 7v21). We cannot do that as he did, but we certainly ought to follow his example and do what we can.

The third responsibility we have is to try to turn people to the Saviour. The jailor in Philippi was about to commit suicide, convinced that utter disaster had befallen him; but Paul intervened and answered his question - *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved"* - probably meaning from execution by the Roman governor. Paul's answer was to turn him to Christ - *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household"* (Acts 16v25-34). This Covid-19 crisis has brought a multitude face to face with death and caused many others to reassess their lives. As a result there have been numerous opportunities for gospel witness; so let us be ready to seize them as they are presented to us.

We have a wonderful and reassuring message from God for all people at all times, and especially in periods of crisis, such as the Covid-19 plague. We can tell them of - *"the Lord, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy."* (Psl 103v1-4). He is the only Saviour and can save from plague, sin and death. Make sure he is your Saviour.

Mike Stringer; October 2020.