

## PLAGUES, PESTILENCE AND PROMISES

For almost a year, people around the world have been suffering a plague. Newspapers and the Internet refer to our present disease as a pandemic, meaning that—whatever it is called—it is prevalent everywhere.

We have probably all heard of the Bubonic plague. It is one of three types of plagues, along with septicemic plague, and pneumonic plague, that were caused by the plague bacterium. The most common symptoms include fever, headaches, and vomiting. It is mainly spread by infected fleas from small animals and diagnosis is made by finding the bacteria in the blood, sputum, or fluid from lymph nodes. It is not Covid-19 but has similarities.

Bubonic plague wiped out 30-50% of Europe's population in the 14th century. Today, it's much less common and in recent decades, between 1,000 and 2,000 cases are identified each year. By comparison, there are more than 2.27 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 around the world (January 26, 2021), according to data from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. We probably all have friends and family who have had Covid-19, or who have died from it.

The first two major plague pandemics began with the Plague of Justinian and the Black Death. The most recent, the so-called "Third Pandemic," erupted in 1855 in the Chinese province of Yunnan. The disease traversed the globe over the next several decades, and by the beginning of the 20th century, infected rats traveling on steamships had carried it to all six inhabited continents. The worldwide outbreak would eventually claim some 15 million lives before petering out in the 1950s. Most of the devastation took place in China and India, but there were also scattered cases from South Africa to San Francisco.

The history.com website outlines many outstanding plagues, such as the Justinian plague (541 A.D), and the Black Death, which finished around 1353, but not before it killed as many as 50 million people—more than half the population of Europe. There are other kinds of "plagues," for example, influenza is not uncommon. It is caused by an influenza virus that spreads and infects a large proportion of the population and there have been five in the last 140 years. The 1918 pandemic was the most severe, killing an estimated 50–100 million people. The most recent, the 2009 swine flu pandemic, resulted in almost a million deaths globally, but was considered relatively mild. Such pandemics are said to occur irregularly.

The problem of plagues is mentioned in the Bible, particularly those that affected the king, Herod, the of Egypt (Exodus 7-12) as a result of his refusal to listen to Moses and allow the people to worship the Lord. Imagine frogs in your bed, flies in your food, gnats in your hair, dead animals, boils on humans and animals, hail, locusts, darkness and blood and you get the picture. There are also a number of plagues referred to in the book of Revelation—and all of them are very bad indeed.

In Exodus 5:3 we read a warning about plagues and Deuteronomy 28: 59 makes it clear that their coming plagues were related to disobedience: *“the Lord will send fearful **plagues** on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. [At] this time I will send the full force of my **plagues** against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.”*

In Amos 4:10 one reason for plagues is given: *“I sent **plagues** among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps, yet you have not returned to me,”* declares the Lord.

Nevertheless, there is also a promise in Hosea 13:14 that is encouraging: *“I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your **plagues**? Where, O grave, is your destruction?”*

Some people—often sitting in armchairs—consider plagues and especially Covid-19 as punishment from God for our (apply narrowly or broadly) sins. This may be true but it is difficult to prove. God certainly may use diseases to get our attention (pain is “God’s megaphone,” C.S. Lewis), so that we repent, but He is also patient, loving and merciful. He disciplines us through all sorts of things, but He is not a capricious God. He can of course, send plagues upon us for our sins—but remember that our sins were, in total, paid for by Jesus on the Cross.

Covid-19 is devastating—but how thankful we are to God for vaccines and the medical research that has gone into their discovery and production. God can (and will) speak to us individually through this disease, but He also wants to speak to us in many other ways.

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Thankful for Covid-19 vaccination #1