

Pestilences: In Diverse Places

“Great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences.”
—*Luke 21:11*

IN THIS SCRIPTURE AND

its accompanying context, Luke provides an account of one of the prophetic signs that Jesus gave to his disciples foretelling the dramatic events that would transpire during the present Gospel Age. The prophecy thus includes further indication of what may be expected to take place at the end of the age and concurrent with his return. He says that ‘pestilences’ (as well as ‘famines’ and convulsions of nature) would be part of the trouble that would come upon the world and its people during the age, and its closing climactic scenes. These prophetic words are powerful evidence to those living during the closing years of this age that his promised millennial kingdom is near at hand.

We are all witnesses to the increasing number, and frequency, of pestilences of all kinds throughout the world, that Jesus foretold would mark the end of the age. This would coincide with man’s selfishness, pride, and often total disregard for the

natural laws of God. The fulfillment of these predictions has caused catastrophic changes to mankind and his environment.

PESTILENCE

Standard English dictionaries verify that pestilences are very contagious and widespread diseases. They are associated with highly virulent epidemics, with rapid and devastating effects. The Greek word, from which pestilence has been translated in the New Testament, is defined as any deadly infectious malady. In our featured text (Luke 21:11), it is used in its plural form [*Vine's Amplified Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*].

The word pestilence (singular form) is also found in many Old Testament scriptures. The Prophet Habakkuk writes, "Before him went the pestilence, and burning coals [diseases—*Marginal Translation*] went forth at his feet." (chap. 3:5) He associates the severity of pestilences and burning diseases with the carrying out of God's judgments.

In Psalm 91, "pestilence" has been used twice in its figurative sense. The psalmist writes, "It is He who delivers you from the snare of the 'trapper,' and from the deadly pestilence." (vs.3, *New American Standard Version*) The word 'pestilence' is associated with Satan, the symbolic trapper. God's watch care over his people will keep them from the trapper's snares. Further, we read, "Of the pestilence that stalks [walks—*Marginal Translation*] in darkness, or of the destruction that lays waste at noon" (vs. 6, NASV). Here, the word 'pestilence' suggests symbolic stumbling stones of darkness that the Adversary places in the pathway of the New Creature in Christ.

BLACK DEATH

Instances of pestilence have been prevalent in many parts of the world since Jesus spoke the words of this prophecy, and they have been responsible for the infection and death of countless numbers of people. Several infectious diseases were called 'plague' or 'pest,' but, during the Middle Ages, these calamities became known as the Black Death. During the Dark Ages, these pestilences were primarily confined to rodents, and disease epidemics affected humans by contact with infected rodents—most commonly rats—and their fleas. Plague was spread rapidly from rats to people who often lived in overcrowded and very unsanitary conditions.

This highly infectious disease had three major clinical forms: a) bubonic, which was characterized by swelling of the lymph nodes (buboes); b) pneumonic, in which the lungs were infected; and c) septicemic, when the blood stream became invaded by vigorous fast-growing infection. Death usually occurred quickly before either the bubonic or pneumonic forms had time to develop.

What became known as the Bubonic Plague (although other forms of the disease were prevalent) spread over large areas of Europe during the 6th, 14th, and 17th centuries with catastrophic consequences. During these epidemics, the number of deaths reached one-fourth of the entire population of Europe. There is also evidence that outbreaks of plague existed in China, India, and other parts of Asia before ravaging Europe.

GREAT PLAGUE OF LONDON

England was isolated from the European continent, but the plague slowly made its way there by

way of sea travel. It came to a climax in the Great Plague of London which occurred in 1664-65. Records indicate that the mortality rate from the epidemic during that time reached 68,596 deaths in London alone, out of a population of approximately 460,000. It is further estimated that thousands of other people also died during this same time from spotted fever, which is believed to have been attributable to the plague, but was not included in the plague's statistics. From London, the plague spread throughout the nation affecting large numbers of people. The great fire of London, in September 1666, is believed to have been largely responsible for the rapid decline of the epidemic during that year.

THE 1918 PANDEMIC

Some living today may recall the plague that spread over the world during the closing year of World War I in 1918. More people died as a result of the pandemic than had lost their lives during the entire four-year period of the war. For comparison, it is also noted that more people died during that single year than had fallen victim to pestilence during the four years of the Black Death plague that ravished Europe between the years 1347 and 1351. The 1918 pestilence has been cited as the single most devastating pandemic in recorded history.

During World War I, men fought 'trench warfare' and lived through some of the most brutal and unsanitary conditions imaginable. When it rained, trenches became seas of mud, and men, dead or dying from horrible wounds, were surrounded with filth, and the smoke and fumes of war. Lungs were seared from mustard and other poisonous gas attacks.

The Great War of 1914-1918 created tremendous mass movements of men and materials that were brought to the front lines of Europe from all parts of the globe. These conditions helped contribute to an environment for the pestilential plague which soon followed.

SPANISH INFLUENZA IN AMERICA

In the spring of 1918, while the world was still occupied with the devastating war, a mysterious bug suddenly appeared that infected soldiers who were stationed in the state of Kansas, and then spread to other United States military camps. Amid the global confusion and commotion, the virus propagated quickly, affecting healthy adults as well as children, and elderly people, all over the country. By the time the pestilence declined the following year, more than half a million Americans had died from the disease, and communities all over America had been affected. Millions of people are estimated to have died throughout the world as a result of the virus. The pandemic earned its name, Spanish Influenza, from the eight million people who died in Spain during the month of May 1918 alone, although the disease did not originate in that country.

THE BIRD FLU

People around the world have recently become aware of a potential health crisis that is slowly migrating across the globe. The Bird Flu virus that is now being feared by researchers could become a global pandemic if the disease is not promptly contained. If an outbreak of the disease did occur, it could cause tremendous loss of life in the United States and in other countries. The health systems that are now in

place would be overwhelmed by such a calamity, and the monetary cost would be very high.

A recent news report, “New Avian Flu Warning Targets Economic Health,” appeared in *The News* (December 9, 2005), and was submitted by Tony Pugh. He writes, “A severe avian flu outbreak would cost the United States economy \$625 billion—about 5 percent of the gross domestic product—as employers struggled with absenteeism, lost production, and a sharp decline in consumer spending, a new government report has found. The economic impact, driven in part by fear and confusion, would be equivalent to a recession, according to the Congressional Budget Office report. The estimates are based on a pandemic that would sicken 90 million people in the United States, and kill about 2 million.”

Avian influenza is a modern-day infection that is caused by bird influenza viruses. These viruses can occur naturally among birds. Wild birds may carry the viruses without getting sick from them, but it can affect domesticated birds such as chickens, ducks, and turkeys. These birds may become infected by the virus through direct contact with infected poultry, or through contact with cage and other surface materials that have been infected with the disease.

There are two main forms of the avian type influenza virus. The ‘low pathogenic’ form may go relatively undetected and usually causes only mild symptoms, such as a drop in egg production. The ‘high pathogenic’ form may cause disease that affects multiple internal organs in birds, and the death rate can reach 90-100 % often within a period of only 48 hours.

Most cases of avian influenza that have affected humans have resulted from contact with infected domesticated poultry such as chickens, ducks and turkeys, or the surfaces that have been contaminated with infected bird secretions. The spread of the disease from one person to another is rare, but is presently under observation to prevent a possible outbreak of the infection. This particular type of influenza has, at the time of this writing, caused infections in poultry in Asia and Europe, and humans in Asia.

SOONER OR LATER

A news article, “A Flu Pandemic is Expected to Happen Sooner or Later,” appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* (November 2, 2005) written by Charles Piller. He points out that “No one knows whether the bird flu now migrating across the globe will cause a human pandemic, but researchers say it is inevitable that some flu virus eventually will. ‘It’s like predicting the Big One in California,’ said a respected epidemiologist. ‘We are overdue for another pandemic. But we don’t know when it will hit.’

“Unlike seasonal flu or more serious epidemics that can move through large regions, pandemics leap across the world, spreading through populations with little or no immunity. In the last century, there have been three major flu pandemics, each of which originated with birds. In 1918, the Spanish flu spread, killing 500,000 people in the United States and as many as 50 million worldwide—more than all the battlefield deaths of World War I. In 1957, the Asian flu traveled across the world, killing 2 million people, including about 70,000 in the United

States. The 1968 Hong Kong flu killed 1 million people, with 34,000 deaths in the United States. Recent research has shown that the H5N1 virus bears genetic similarities to the 1918 flu; and unlike many other flu viruses originating in birds, H5N1 can spread directly from poultry to people without passing through another species, such as pigs, increasing the risks.”

SIN AND SICKNESS

The Scriptures frequently refer to various diseases that have affected mankind throughout the ages. This calamity has occurred because of sin by Adam and Eve. Pestilences are the natural consequences of sin, and the death sentence. It has accompanied the degeneration and downward spiral of Adam’s race as it has been passed down to his progeny. Physical sickness and illness has caused untold distress to mind and body as the sentence of death has been carried out.

CLEANSING THE LEPER

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases to affect the poor groaning creation. Leprosy is a symbol of sin and uncleanness, and Jesus performed one of his most dramatic miracles on behalf of a man who was afflicted with the disease, as an indication of his powers over sin and death. “There came a leper to him, beseeching him, . . . and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean. And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was

cleansed. And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away; And saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man: but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them. But he went out, and began to publish it much, and to blaze abroad the matter, insomuch that Jesus could no more openly enter into the city, but was without in desert places: and they came to him from every quarter.”—Mark 1:40-45

In this remarkable account, Jesus pointed back to the “law of the leper,” as it is recorded in the third book of Moses. “The LORD spake unto Moses, saying, This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing: He shall be brought unto the priest: And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper.” (Lev. 14:1-3) In performing the miracle, Jesus made known that God had provided him with the power to cleanse the man afflicted with leprosy, the very symbol of sin. But Jesus performed this miracle as an illustration of the power of healing that will be used to cleanse the whole world from leprosy and the curse of death during his kingdom.

ASTONISHED DOCTORS OF THE LAW

On another occasion, Jesus astonished the Pharisees and the doctors of the law as they witnessed his power over sin and sickness. “It came to pass on a certain day, as he was teaching, that there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by, which were come out of every town of Galilee, and Judea, and Jerusalem: and the power of the Lord was

present to heal them. And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before him. And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the housetop, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone? But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts? Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house. And immediately he rose up before them, and took up that whereon he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. And they were all amazed, and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying, We have seen strange things to day.”—Luke 5:17-26

Jesus had thus demonstrated to the religious leaders of Israel, as well as those who witnessed this miracle, that if he were able to heal diseases, he surely had the power to also forgive sin. They had truly seen a remarkable demonstration of Jesus’ power on that memorable day.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus performed many wonderful miracles during his ministry as opportunities to illustrate the

greater powers of healing that will be more grandly manifested during his future millennial kingdom. When John the Baptist was put into prison, he became discouraged and began to doubt whether or not our Lord was the Messiah. This gave Jesus opportunity to defend his God-given powers. When John asked the two disciples who had gone to see him, he said, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." (Matt. 11:3-5) John had also been a witness to these marvelous powers that were exercised in behalf of sin-sick mankind.

NO MORE PESTILENCES

When selecting his twelve apostles, Jesus sent them on their way with a most blessed commission. He told them, "As ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give." (Matt. 10:7,8) Mark verifies the apostles' works, "And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them."—Mark 6:13

There is also the wonderful account when Apostle Peter raised Tabitha from death. "There was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did. And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in

an upper chamber. And forasmuch as Lydda was nigh to Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent unto him two men, desiring him that he would not delay to come to them. Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them. But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up. And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive.”—Acts 9:36-41

The apostles were given exclusive privilege to share in Jesus’ work. They participated as further illustration of the grander blessings in which the faithful bride will share in Christ’s kingdom, extending blessing to all the families of the earth. At that time all pestilences will be removed, and there will be no more death. “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father.”—John 14:12, NASV ■