

PLAGUES AND PANDEMICS

by WRS Prof. Christopher Lensch

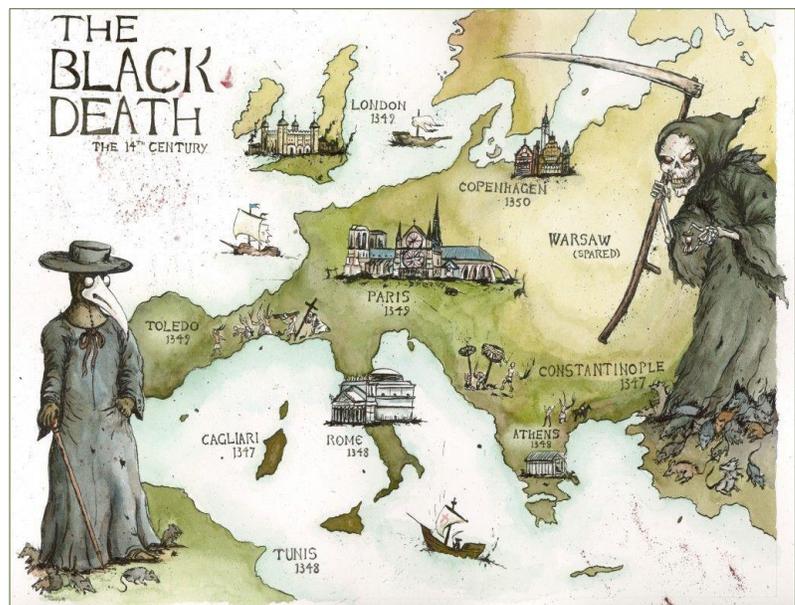
“For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation.
All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing;
He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.
No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Dan 4:34,35)

The Big Plague

The most fatal pandemic known in history is the “Black Death.” Thanks to Marco Polo’s trip in the late 13th Century to the Far East, popular interest in exotic goods of the region grew and helped open the “Silk Road.” Caravans began plying the ancient trail between Asia and eastern Europe. But stealthy hitchhikers came along to Europe—rats! And the rats carried fleas, and the fleas carried the plague.

Within 50 years of Marco Polo’s return to Venice, a million people in Eurasia and North Africa died from the plague. So many died in Italy that there were none to bury the dead; a chronicler from Sienna recorded that everyone thought they would be the next victim at what appeared to all as “the end of the world!”

The plague cast a long shadow over Europe, ebbing and returning in deadly cycles. In the 1600s millions more died in France and Spain. Britain had a natural moat to help keep out rats, but the bubonic plague re-entered the island nation’s ports. Death took thousands of lives every week in London and surrounding towns. Funeral services were cancelled as the dead were simply carted away for mass burials. John Donne had already admonished, “...never send for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” Everything was shut down, including the universities at Oxford and Cambridge—students were sent home for safety.



Young Isaac Newton

One particular mathematics student at Cambridge returned to his mother’s farm. There the 22-year-old Isaac Newton used his prescribed quarantine to read, think, and apply his prodigious math skills to the questions pressing upon his mind concerning motion and light. From his contemplation of the apple falling (rather, “being attracted”) to the earth, he extrapolated from that smaller model the moon’s attraction to earth and calculated the force necessary to hold the moon in orbit against its centrifugal motion.

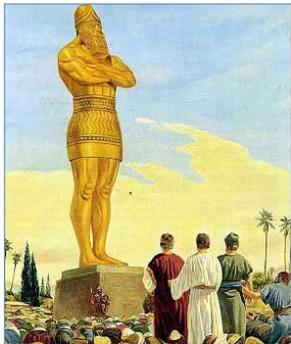


Solitude for Isaac Newton helped advance the “frontiers of knowledge” of God’s creation. Newton did believe that there was an orderly, divine design behind the cosmos, because he believed that God in His perfections was the single, unifying mind that created all things in harmony. Therefore, he reasoned, one should be able to discover patterns and connections in the visible world; the unbreakable logic of mathematics would be the reliable tool in measuring and explaining the designs of the divine mind.

While Newton’s theology was unorthodox, his theistic worldview is sometimes referenced to illustrate why western civilization made faster advances in scientific knowledge than did older world cultures that were long steeped in pantheism or materialism.

God Alone Is Sovereign

Christians recognize that we are not the masters of our own fate. Despite some politicians' claims to the contrary, we also believe that powerful leaders cannot control the future because God alone is sovereign in determining all things (Shorter Catechism #7).



Consider Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man in the world of his generation. He could snap his fingers and launch armies of conquest. To celebrate his dominion, he made his subjects bow to a gleaming golden image of himself in the Euphrates River valley (Dan 3). In his capital, he engineered the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

But only God is God, and Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that truth the hard way. God warned the mighty emperor about his sin of pride through disturbing dreams and through the prophet Daniel (Dan 4:27). Finally, in one stroke God took away Nebuchadnezzar's mind and his rule—the king began to behave like a beast and was driven from among men (Dan 4:31-32).

God in His mercy can exalt the humbled. After “seven seasons” of feeding upon grass, God gave back Nebuchadnezzar's mind. The abased ruler returned to his throne and, through the counsel of Daniel, quickly published the declaration at the top of this article recognizing that the invisible God of Daniel was the true Sovereign of all things created.

Lessons Out of a Pandemic

1. The powerful Nebuchadnezzar had wise men, engineers, and unlimited wealth. Yet he could not control his own destiny. God humbled him until he confessed that God controls heaven and earth. When God gets the world's attention through a threatening disease like Covid-19, God calls people to put away pride and to recognize Him as the Author of life.
2. The current quarantine of all, even the healthy, has never been seen in our lifetime. This measure, along with extra hand-washings, is all that can be done to ward off the present plague. It is time to “...make your calling and election sure” in order to keep from stumbling and to ensure an entrance “...into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:10).
3. Christians will use reason and will respect the scientific method, but we will not worship science, nor believe that science holds the answers to all of humanity's ills. King Asa served the Lord well, but when personally tried by disease, he fell short by consulting only doctors without seeking God in the matter (2 Chron 16:2).
4. Christians believe in God's design of creation (Psa 19), in God's eternal plan for His chosen image bearers (Eph 1), and in redeeming every hour as God's stewards who must give an account for how we spend our hours, whether times of trial or of solitude (Luke 11:12-26).
5. Christians know how to be content (Phil 4:11-13), even if they must re-learn patience and re-learn unconditional trust in God through unusual times of universal disruption. After all, God is in charge of our plans as well as our days (James 4:13-14), so that every day we preface our personal expectations with the words, “If the Lord wills....”
6. Ultimately, Christians know that a universal scourge, as old as the Garden of Eden and with more far-reaching consequences than the current pandemic, is humanity's greatest threat. The big picture is that every person enters the world with the mortal defect of a sin nature leading to eternal death (Rom 5:12,18-19; 6:23).



But there is hope! God in His Son has satisfied divine justice in our behalf, bringing healing to our plague-ridden souls and delivering us from the curse of death. The cure is from God in this simple command: “Look ...and live” (Num 21:28; John 3:14-17).