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We are called to love, worship and obey God; to put His love into practice in the power of the Holy Spirit through our witness and service, that all may know Christ our King

Coronavirus:

A Biblical, Historical Perspective

As COVID-19 suspends public life around the world, Austrian Rev Dr Christian Hofreiter reminds us of "the many times in history where the light of Christian charity has shone with dazzling brightness amidst dark times of infectious disease and societal upheaval."

Coronavirus, Loving Our Neighbour, and Quarantine in the Bible

In the Old Testament we find very strict quarantine regulations for those suffering of infectious diseases (see Leviticus 13). So, when Christians follow government and medical advice to, say, drastically reduce all social contacts, this is not an expression of unbelief (as though God did not have the power to protect or heal us). Rather, it is a demand for wisdom and, especially, for neighbourly love. The equation is simple and sobering: the slower the rate viral infection progresses, the smaller the number of vulnerable people who will die. Wherever we can contribute to that outcome, we should!

Christians, Epidemics, and Revival

While wisdom, solidarity, and love of neighbour lead us to participate in containing the current epidemic as far as possible, I am reminded of the many times in history where the light of Christian charity has shone with dazzling brightness amidst dark times of infectious disease and societal upheaval. In fact, Christians overcame the impulse to flee to safety and isolate themselves from the suffering of others:

"In 165 a plague swept through the mighty Roman Empire, wiping out one in three of the population. It happened again in 251 when 5,000 people per day were dying in the city of Rome alone. Those infected were abandoned by their families to die in the streets. The government was helpless and the Emperor himself succumbed to the plague. Pagan priests fled their temples where people had flocked for comfort and explanation. People were too weak to help themselves. If the smallpox did not kill you, hunger, thirst and loneliness would. The effect on wider society was catastrophic. Yet following the plagues the good reputation of Christianity was confirmed, and its population grew exponentially. Why is this? Christians did not come

armed with intellectual answers to the problem of evil. They did not enjoy a supernatural ability to avoid pain and suffering. What they did have was water and food and their presence. In short, if you knew a Christian you were statistically more likely to survive, and if you survived it was the church that offered you the most loving, stable and social environment. It was not clever apologetics, strategic political organisation or the witness of martyrdom which converted an Empire, so much as it was the simple conviction of normal women and men that what they did for the least of their neighbours they did for Christ."¹

Now, of course, we know that thoughtful apologetics did in fact play a very important role in the conversion of the Roman Empire, so it's not an either or. Ravi Zacharias has said it beautifully, "Love is the greatest apologetic. It is the essential component in reaching the whole person in a fragmented world. The need is vast, but it is also imperative that we be willing to follow the example of Jesus and meet the need."

Wouldn't it be wonderful, if in our time, too, we Christians would primarily become known for the generous, selfless love of our neighbours, rather than the many things we oppose and judge?

On Dealing with Fear

Uncertain times, societal upheaval, the threat of poverty, sickness and death—all this naturally leads to fear. In situations like these, one of the best things we can do is remember just how great, how good, how strong and mighty, how faithful our God truly is. Through Jesus Christ, each one of us can know Him as *our* heavenly Father. Personally, I find it most helpful in such situations to meditate on verses of Scripture that I know by heart, that I think through, pray through, feel through, chew through, carry in my heart, and digest inwardly. For example, the 23rd Psalm. Do you know it by heart yet?

- ¹ Stephen Backhouse quoted in Simon Ponsonby's *Loving Mercy: How to Serve a Tender-Hearted Saviour* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2012), 155.

[Source: <https://www.rzim.org/read/rzim-global/the-coronavirus-choosing-love-in-a-time-of-fear>]

Diseases of the Bible

A disease is a definite entity of sickness of part or all of the body, with a characteristic group of symptoms. It is likely that the Hebrews were subject to the same diseases that are prevalent in the semitropical climate of the mid-East today. However, in many cases the Bible only mentions symptoms, such as fever, haemorrhage, discharge or itch, and one can only surmise what the disease entity was.

In this series on the diseases of the Bible and their symptoms they will appear in alphabetical order: this month A, B and C.

Alcoholism. Wine was a very common drink in Biblical days, much as coffee is today. This was good in a country like Israel. Dysentery of several kinds was endemic and drinking water easily contaminated. Wine was a safe drink because of its alcoholic content. The Bible speaks favourably of wine in several places. When Isaac gave Jacob his blessing (Gen 27:28), he said "May God give you plenty of grain and wine." Then, of course, we have the classical record of Jesus miraculously changing a huge volume of water into wine.

Some scholars seek to show that the wine was really only grape juice. This is improbable, since grape juice would quickly spoil with temperature and living conditions as they were in

Biblical days. Wine was definitely wine as we know it today, and it was a good thing for the people of that day.

However, it is also true that some Hebrews used wine to excess and got themselves and others in trouble. The Bible repeatedly speaks favourably of wine but warns frequently and emphatically against its excessive use.

In modern times alcoholism is looked upon as a disease and is treated as such. In Biblical days it was considered a moral problem. Chronic alcoholism is an amazingly stubborn ailment. Persons who seem to have recovered from it show relapses after months or years in seventy-five percent of such cases. Christian faith is of enormous help. Several chronic alcoholics have been instantaneously cured of alcoholism by simply accepting Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. Undoubtedly there were cases like that in the old days when alcoholics returned to sincere Jehovah worship. Medication, counselling, institutional training, and Alcoholics Anonymous are valuable, but none are as effective as that mysterious experience known as "rebirth."

Atrophy. Job speaks of one of his afflictions with the words, "He has shrivelled me up" (Job 16:8). The impression received of Job's physical troubles is that he was assailed with several ailments, one of which was atrophy. If we were to think of a disease most likely to make Job "shriveled up," we might think of muscular dystrophy. This is a condition in which the muscles refuse to absorb the food brought to them by the blood. Food intake may be adequate, with digestion and absorption from the gastro-intestinal tract normal, but when the food gets to the muscles it is not adequately absorbed by them. As a result, the muscles grow increasingly thinner and weaker. As an example, we may think of a child with muscular dystrophy being picked up by a parent. In a normal child, the muscles in its shoulders, chest, back and hips give it some solidity; but when a youngster with muscular dystrophy is picked up, he may unexpectedly slide through a parent's arms like a slippery eel, because there is so little muscular structure left. The brain is not involved, but the body in an advanced case would be much as Job described himself.

Another reference to atrophy is found in Luke 6:6. Jesus healed a right hand that was withered. This time the atrophy could have been due to injured nerves paralyzing the hand and allowing it to wither. Another likely cause is polio meningitis.

Polio is caused by a virus—an organism so small that it is not even visible with an ordinary high-power microscope. The tiny virus is found primarily in the mouth and pharynx, and in the lower bowel. Food contaminated by faecal material may contain the polio virus, and this is the principal method by which it is spread. The germ is picked up by the small bowel and travels to the central nervous system. Sometimes the disease is so mild that it is not even diagnosed excepting during an epidemic. At other times paralysis of almost every degree may occur and be permanent.

Polio is more frequent in tropical climates and it must have been a common ailment in Biblical days. The man with the withered hand may very well have had polio years earlier, with just the single hand permanently affected by it. When paralyzed muscles are not used, withering, or atrophy, inevitably occurs.

Thanks to devoted scientists—and the goodness of God—vaccines have been developed which are amazingly effective in protecting people against polio. As with smallpox, polio is now almost eliminated.

Baldness. Jews usually had a luxuriant growth of hair on head and chin. It was a source of pride to them. Foreign neighbours of Israel sometimes shaved their scalps and chins as a sign of mourning (Isa 15:2), but the Israelites were strictly forbidden to follow this practice (Deut 14:1). Unavoidable baldness was considered regrettable, and sometimes disgraceful.

There were, and still are, many reasons for baldness. Perhaps the greatest is an inherited tendency. Wearing a heavy or tight hat can interfere with the flow of blood to the scalp. Advanced and debilitating diseases can be the causative factor in baldness, as also simple old age. However, the two most common causes were seborrheic dermatitis, a fungus infection with a dirty mess of greasy, yellowish crusts, and tinea capitis (ringworm of the scalp).

Blindness was common in Egypt, Israel and the Arabian countries. Poverty, unsanitary conditions, brilliant sunlight, excessive heat, blowing sand, accidents, and war injuries were some of the factors involved, but the main cause was ignorance of infectious organisms.

The blindness from birth spoken of in the Bible was probably *ophthalmia neonatorum* (gonorrhoea of the eyes). This has been the prime cause of infantile blindness for centuries. Women often harbour gonorrhoeal diplococci in their vaginas, even though they may be totally unaware of the infection. Then, when a baby is born, and it makes its passage down from the uterus, it may get some of the germs in its eyes. The conjunctiva of a baby is an ideal breeding place for gonococci, and in about three days the baby's eyes run with pus. In many cases permanent blindness results. In modern practice, antiseptic drops are placed in the infant's eyes immediately after birth, and the infective organisms that may be present are destroyed.

The other frequent cause of blindness was trachoma. The infecting organism is a virus. I have treated scores of Navajo Indians with this disease, and it was a pitiful sight to see them come in with their bleary, itching, painful eyes. Some of them had an apron of tissue, called a pannus, growing down over the cornea. Many older people had badly deformed eyelids, and some were blind. Today's sulpha drugs provide an easy and complete cure, but in former days it was a devastating illness.

Boils. It is likely that the word "boil" as used in the Bible covered many types of skin diseases, such as pustules, simple boils, carbuncles, abscesses and infected glands.

Boils, as we know them today, are usually caused by staphylococci. These germs are normally present on the surface of the skin and do no harm unless there is some kind of injury to the skin, allowing the germs to get inside and proliferate. The body reacts with its defense of leucocytes, and in the battle that ensues germs, leucocytes and debris may form a painful pocket of pus that we call a boil. If the boil is single and comes to a head, it ruptures, and recovery follows.

A carbuncle is much like a collection of boils in a limited area. The infection runs deeper than an ordinary boil and has several openings. It is commonly located in the back of the neck. It usually covers an area several inches in diameter, and sometimes is fatal.

An abscess may be minor, but frequently is deep, involving important structures of the body, such as muscles, lungs, brain, liver, spleen, kidney, bowel and appendix.

Hezekiah's boil must have been a carbuncle or deep abscess, as his life hung in the balance when he was afflicted with it. Job's boils were superficial, or they would have resulted in his death. The boils of the sixth Egyptian plague were probably extremely painful superficial boils.

Consumption. This word appears only twice in the Bible. In both instances it is included in a list of disasters that would befall the people of Israel if they rejected their God. Efforts have been made to limit its meaning to tuberculosis or malaria, but it is likely to refer to the whole group of wasting diseases, including dysentery in its several forms.

There is abundant archaeological evidence that tuberculosis was prevalent in predynastic Egypt as early as 5500 years ago. Probable or definite tuberculosis has been identified in mummies from the Nile River Valley dating between ~5500 and 3500 years ago. The ancient

Israelites lived among the Egyptians from ~3700 to ~3300 years ago. The Old Testament of the Bible tells of their life there.

In both Leviticus 26:16 and Deuteronomy 28:22, the Lord threatened his people with a plague. This plague was called "consumption" in both the King James and the Revised Standard Versions of the Bible. These translations, which date to 1611 and 1901, respectively, were made at times when consumption was a word commonly used to refer to tuberculosis. Consumption derives from the Latin *consumptio*, a noun that means "wasting" and is in turn derived from *consumo*, *consumere*, one meaning of which is "to use up." Both Ovid and Cicero used *consumption* to refer to wasting from disease.

The ancient Hebrew word used in these two passages is *schachepheth*, which meant a wasting disease; it remains in use in modern Hebrew as *schachefet*, the word for tuberculosis. Although early Egyptian medical papyri do make some reference to organ-specific diseases, the concept that tuberculosis is a disease of the lungs or other specific organs did not arise until the eighteenth-century work of Corvisart, Bayle, and Laennec, and neither the authors of Leviticus or Deuteronomy nor their later translators could reliably distinguish tuberculosis from other wasting diseases. However, these two references are probably to tuberculosis, since this disease was among the most common wasting illnesses of that time, and the ancient Israelites were almost certainly exposed to it during their stay in Egypt. These 2 passages are the only 2 Old Testament uses of *schachepheth*.

[Sources: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/diseases-bible> and <https://doi.org/10.1086/313562>]

Background to the hymn Now thank we all our God

We seldom pause to reflect that the hymn Now thank we all our God was written in a time of great hardship.

Knowing something of it's author's life puts this Martin Rinkart hymn into proper perspective.

Born to a poor coppersmith on April 23, 1586 in Eilenburg, Germany, Rinkart was determined to be a minister. He managed to scrape up enough money to put himself through the University of Leipzig, where he studied theology. After years of hard work, Rinkart was asked to return to his hometown as a Lutheran clergyman, where he soon became an archdeacon.

One year later, ignited by a religious conflict-turned-political feud, the Thirty Years' War exploded across Europe. [This war was initially between German Protestants and German Catholics but engulfed much of Europe when Sweden and France entered the conflict to support the Protestant cause.]

A walled city, Eilenburg quickly became a place of refuge for thousands of frightened and displaced Germans fleeing the devastating conflict. The sudden overcrowding caused widespread food shortages, and starving residents soon began fighting in the streets for dead cats and birds.

On top of the famine, densely packed humanity and filth soon led to an outbreak of plague. Rinkart and the three other town pastors each officiating ten or more funerals a day. One overwhelmed pastor eventually fled and two others died, leaving Rinkart the sole minister in the desperate and overpopulated city.

Alone, Rinkart was tasked with burying up to 50 people a day, including his own wife. By the end of the ordeal, he'd conducted nearly 4,500 funerals. The dead eventually became so numerous they had to be buried in mass trenches without services.

In the face of overwhelming pressure, constant risk and horrendous conditions, Rinkart never stopped ministering to the people of his city. He gave away nearly everything he owned to the poor and needy, though he could barely clothe and feed his own children. He mortgaged his own future income to provide for his family and his community.

Toward the end of the war, the Swedish army surrounded the city and demanded an enormous ransom from the impoverished and starving citizens. Knowing his people didn't have the money, Rinkart pleaded with the Swedes to lower the amount, only to be rejected.

It is reported that Rinkart returned to the city, fell on his knees and said, "Come, my children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God." He then began to pray so fervently that the Swedish general was moved to lower his price to less than five percent of the original sum.

After nearly thirty years of ceaseless struggles, it began to look like peace was within grasp. Wanting to give his children a song to sing to God in thanks at the dinner table, Rinkart sat down and composed what would become one of the most well-known hymns of thanks of all time -- "Now Thank We All Our God." In fact, it's been said that apart from Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," no other song is sung more often in Lutheran churches than Rinkart's simple hymn.

Tired and worn, Rinkart died in 1649, only a year after the war's end, leaving behind some of the simplest and sincere lyrics still being sung by choirs and congregations across the world:

*Now thank we all our God
With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom this world rejoices.
Who, from our mother's arms,
Hath led us on our way,
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us,
to keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
of this world in the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son and Spirit blest,
who reign in highest heaven
the one eternal God,
whom heaven and earth adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.*

[Source: Brittany Hughes. <https://www.mrctv.org/blog/amazing-story-behind-one-our-greatest-thanksgiving-hymns>]

January Bible Quiz

Healing

Match the method with the person healed

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. Jesus' fingers in ears and spit | a. Centurion's servant |
| 2. Lump of figs. | b. Publius' father |
| 3. Dip in Jordan River | c. Man with palsy |
| 4. Touch by Jesus | d. Israelites' snake bites |
| 5. Look at brass serpent | e. Deaf man with speech impediment |
| 6. Spoken word of Jesus | f. Peter's mother in law |
| 7. Touch of Jesus' garment | g. Naaman |
| 8. Dip in troubled waters of pool of Bethesda | h. Woman sick for 12 years |
| 9. Prayer and laying on of hands | i. People around pool |
| 10. Faith of his friends | j. Hezekiah's boils |

Answers to December Bible Quiz

Shepherds

Fill in the blank space with the name of the person involved

1. **Joseph** said "shepherds are regarded as unclean by Egyptians". (Genesis 46:34)
2. **Abimelech** was a shepherd before he became king. (1 Samuel 16:11-13)
3. Paul taught a lesson about God using a shepherd as an illustration. (John 10:14)
4. **David** wrote about God being his shepherd. (Psalms 23:1)
5. **Isaiah** wrote about the Lord feeding his flock like a shepherd. (Isaiah 40:11)
6. **Jeremiah** predicted that Nebuchadnezzar would "scour the land of Egypt, as a shepherd scours his garment for lice". (Jeremiah 43:12)
7. **Moses** served as a shepherd of the flock of his father-in-law. (Exodus 3:1)
8. **An Angel** told shepherds about the birth of Jesus. (Luke 2:8-10)
9. **Abel** was the first known shepherd. (Genesis 4:2)
10. **Rachel** was a shepherdess. (Genesis 29:9)
11. **Jesus** told a story about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to search for one that was lost. (Matthew 18:12)

A Concluding Thought

The fact that you can do so little is no excuse for doing nothing.

- John Le Carré

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