

## Even Pandemics Testify

By Marissa Burt

The day after our community went into lockdown, I went to the hospital to welcome our sixth child into a world I could not have previously imagined. You likely remember the moment you realized SARS-CoV-2 wasn't another passing headline, the way our initial precautions morphed into the truly novel experience of a pandemic unfolding globally in real time. At first glance, it may seem terribly out of touch to suggest that the Bible, rooted in ancient history and culture, can offer a useful perspective on such a complex and chaotic modern moment. If we expect to open the gold-edged pages and find a crisp description of our current situation and specific instructions for how to live in it, we will come up short. God's Word isn't an exhaustive dictionary or rulebook. Instead Scripture crosses boundaries of time and place with stories of lived-out truths that teach, reprove, correct, train, and equip God's people.<sup>1</sup> The timeless principles found in the Bible model endurance and offer hope in the midst of difficulty.<sup>2</sup>

Let's turn there now, looking for life-giving wisdom to inform our current understanding of *pandemic*: when disease strikes all (*Greek: pan*) the people (*Greek: demos*) in a land. In the Bible such an outbreak is typically translated as *pestilence* or *plague*,<sup>3</sup> which we will here consider synonymous with the relatively recent word *pandemic*.<sup>4</sup> The original Greek and Hebrew roots—striking and smiting—imply intentionality, reminding us that the ancient world did not separate natural events from supernatural forces.<sup>5</sup> Disasters and other beyond-human-control calamities evidenced divine activity, and human response stemmed from religious belief.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Tm 3:16-17 NET

<sup>2</sup> Rom 15:4

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified (e.g., plague of locusts), the biblical text assumes plague to mean a sudden widespread illness.

<sup>4</sup> The term *pandemic* originates “in the 1660s from Late Latin *pandemus*, from Greek *pandemos*, meaning ‘pertaining to all people; public, common’...the noun ‘a pandemic disease,’ is recorded by 1853, from the adjective.” Source: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/pandemic>

<sup>5</sup> See: 1. Strong's Hebrew 1698 translated *pestilence and plague* from the Hebrew **deber**, root found in 1696 translated *to speak against* from the Hebrew prim. root **dabar**. 2. Strong's Hebrew 4046 translated *blow, slaughter, plague, pestilence* from the Hebrew **maggephah**, root found in 5062 translated *to strike or smite* from the Hebrew prim. root **nagaph**. 3. Strong's Hebrew 4347 translated *a blow, wound, slaughter* from the Hebrew **makkah or makkeh**, root found in 5221 translated *to smite* from the Hebrew prim. root **nakah**. 4. Strong's Greek 2288 translated *death, danger, or pestilence* from the Greek **thanatos**, root found in 2348 translated *to die* from the Greek prim. root **than**. 5. Strong's Greek 4127 translated *a blow or wound* from the Greek **plege**, root found in 4141 translated *to strike* from the Greek root of unclear derivation **plesso**.

Biblically speaking, God’s sovereignty over times of prosperity and adversity means that the question is never *whether* God is involved in a pandemic, but *why* and *how*.<sup>6</sup>

Our sensibilities bristle at this. We inherited the philosophy of materialism, a perspective that eliminates unseen supernatural forces from our empirical scientific explanations.<sup>7</sup> We’ve also heard fellow Christians claim to know the mind of God as they blame devastating disasters on cherry-picked sins. To presume that illness must be a result of bad behavior is to join company with Job’s friends and Jesus’s disciples who had not yet learned that God has many purposes behind His permissive will.<sup>8</sup> We rightly question simplistic dichotomies that too swiftly equivocate suffering with sin and blessing with obedience, but we also struggle with questions of theodicy. Our worldview makes our discomfort understandable, but it does not permit us to ignore the fact that there is not a single biblical account of pestilence striking an entire land that is not connected with God’s judgment against wickedness and His subsequent provision of atonement.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Scripture repeatedly shows how a pandemic’s disruption reveals the one true God and provides opportunity for people to turn toward Him in repentance and humility.

We begin with a brief survey of five pandemics that struck the nation of Israel. The book of Numbers recounts the Israelites sojourn in the desert, where they repeatedly complained about their circumstances and scorned God’s provision. One day the people stood outside their tents and wept for the meat of Egypt, thus despising the daily manna God provided from heaven. In response, the Lord sent them abundant quail, piled three feet deep for miles around, but, while the meat was still in the people’s mouths, the Lord struck them with plague, killing “those that craved different food.”<sup>10</sup>

Not long after this, an Israelite named Korah stirred up rebellion against Moses and Aaron, God’s chosen leaders. The standoff ultimately resulted in the earth swallowing up Korah, his followers, and all their families because of their sins. The Israelites blamed Moses and Aaron for these deaths, provoking an immediate plague that killed 14,700 people before Aaron could make atonement amidst the dying.

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<sup>6</sup> Ecc1 7:14

<sup>7</sup> <https://philosophyterms.com/materialism/>

<sup>8</sup> Jb 42:7; Luke 13:1-5; Jn 9:1-3

<sup>9</sup> A possible exception would be instances of famine that are simply described without commentary (see Gn 41:55 and Ru 1:1). Presumably, famine may have been accompanied by outbreaks of illness as famines are today. Regardless, the weight of the biblical emphasis given to plague and pestilence as call to repentance should be given priority.

<sup>10</sup> Nm 11:34

Soon thereafter the Israelites challenged God and Moses, saying, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, for there is no bread or water, and we detest this worthless food.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, God sent poisonous snakes that bit the people. The Israelites confessed their sin and asked for Moses to intercede on their behalf. After Moses did so, the Lord instructed him to make a bronze snake on a pole such that any who looked upon it would live.

Later the Lord thwarted the King of Moab’s attempts to curse Israel, instead bestowing multiple blessings upon them. Meanwhile the Israelites were worshipping Moab’s false gods and committing sexual immorality with the Moabite women in front of the congregation. The resulting punishment included a plague that killed 24,000 before swift action on the part of Aaron’s grandson stopped it.

Generations later King David decided to take a census, thus offending God. David confessed his sin, but the subsequent judgment resulted in three days of plague. 70,000 men died before David built an altar to sacrifice burnt offerings at the future location of the temple.

These five pandemics resulted from specific sins, and, with the exception of the quail, necessitated clear action to make atonement for the people and stop the plague. Such moments illustrate the promises found elsewhere in the Levitical and Deuteronomic Law. Obedience would lead to life, but abandoning the covenant brought curses that would “stack [their] corpses on the corpses of [their] idols.”<sup>12</sup> These consequences reached beyond deadly diseases, weakness, fever, inflammation, infection, and blight to a familiar psychological state:

. . . you will have no rest . . . for there the Lord will give you an anxious heart, failing eyesight, and a spirit of despair. Your life will hang in doubt before you; you will be terrified by night and day and will have no certainty of surviving from one day to the next. In the morning you will say, “If only it were evening!” And in the evening you will say, “I wish it were morning!” because of the things you will fear and the things you will see.<sup>13</sup>

David’s son Solomon prayed that, when these afflictions came, the people would ask for God’s help, acknowledge their pain, and seek the Lord in His temple.<sup>14</sup> Israel’s history and law both

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<sup>11</sup> Nm 21:5

<sup>12</sup> Lv 26:25, 30; Dt 29:26-27

<sup>13</sup> Dt 28:65-67

<sup>14</sup> 1 Kgs 8:37-40; 2 Chr 6:28-31

taught that the only antidote for such curses was repentance and the Lord's provision of atonement.

Other nations also discovered this to be true. During the time of the judges, Israel's Philistine enemies captured the holy ark of God and brought it home where their people immediately suffered sores, terror, and death. They moved the ark from city to city, but outbreaks of pestilence accompanied it until the Philistine priests suggested sending the ark away with a guilt offering. "Perhaps [Israel's God] will release his grip on you, your gods, and your land," they advised. "Why harden your hearts like the Egyptians and Pharaoh did?"<sup>15</sup>

These pagan priests correctly recommended repentance and atonement. They remembered Egypt's history, including the devastating sixth plague that left boils so terrible that Pharaoh's magicians couldn't stand before him. Both the Egyptians and the Philistines learned firsthand that Israel's God was the Lord and that there was no one like Him in all the earth.<sup>16</sup> The Lord Himself sings of His incomparable supremacy:

"Where are their gods, the rock in whom they sought security . . . Let them rise and help you; let them be your refuge! See now that I, indeed I, am he!" says the Lord, "and there is no other god besides me. I kill and give life, I smash and I heal, and none can resist my power."<sup>17</sup>

A pandemic disrupts people's lives with the reality of God's omnipotence and offers the soft-hearted an unparalleled opportunity to humbly seek Him. It also reveals things people truly worship, exposing the ways humans exchange the truth of God for lies.<sup>18</sup> Since "those who worship worthless idols forfeit the mercy that could be theirs," turning to God begins with an acknowledgment of His existence and uncontested authority.<sup>19</sup> The prophetic books overflow with invitations for many nations to abandon their evil deeds and repent lest they suffer judgment, including pestilence. *What* people worship affects *how* they live, and the prophets repeatedly warned against the grievous wrongdoing born of idolatry. Skimming these collective sins should stop us short with familiarity: idolatry<sup>20</sup>, arrogance,<sup>21</sup> unfaithfulness,<sup>22</sup> deception,<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Sm 6:5-6

<sup>16</sup> Ex 5:2, 7:17, 9:14, 11:9

<sup>17</sup> Dt 31:19; 32:37-39

<sup>18</sup> Rom 1:18-25

<sup>19</sup> Jon 2:8

<sup>20</sup> Jer 50:38; Ez 5-7; Rv 9:20

<sup>21</sup> Ex 10:3; Is 13:11, 47:7-15; Ez 16:30; Ob 1:3; Rv 18:7-8

<sup>22</sup> Ezekiel 16

<sup>23</sup> Is 28:15

cultivation of evil,<sup>24</sup> deciding for oneself what is right,<sup>25</sup> rejecting God’s guidance,<sup>26</sup> taking God’s grace for granted,<sup>27</sup> making light of God’s name,<sup>28</sup> saying God’s ways are tiresome,<sup>29</sup> and claiming that “everyone who does evil is good in the Lord’s opinion, and He delights in them.”<sup>30</sup> Judgment also looms for those who have become experts at doing evil,<sup>31</sup> including nations who indulge in sexual immorality and adultery,<sup>32</sup> economic oppression of the poor,<sup>33</sup> unchecked greed,<sup>34</sup> human trafficking,<sup>35</sup> abortion,<sup>36</sup> bribery and sycophantism,<sup>37</sup> promise breaking,<sup>38</sup> divination and magic,<sup>39</sup> exploitation of the vulnerable—workers, widows, orphans, and immigrants—,<sup>40</sup> stealing,<sup>41</sup> dishonor in family relationships,<sup>42</sup> destruction of wild animals,<sup>43</sup> murder,<sup>44</sup> and violent acts against lands, cities, and those who live in them.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun.<sup>46</sup>

Even if we congratulate ourselves that we are not like those wicked old nations, we cannot claim to be without sin or untouched by its devastation.<sup>47</sup> True repentance turns from sin and toward God for the hope of salvation.<sup>48</sup> We know at least one ancient city responded in kind. When the King of Nineveh heard Jonah’s prophecies, he decreed that “Every person and animal must put on sackcloth and . . . cry earnestly to God . . . and turn from their evil way of living and from the violence that they do,” and God did not destroy Nineveh.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jer 23:14-17

<sup>25</sup> Hb 1:7

<sup>26</sup> Zep 1:6

<sup>27</sup> Zec 1:15

<sup>28</sup> Mal 1:6

<sup>29</sup> Mal 1:13

<sup>30</sup> Mal 2:17

<sup>31</sup> Mi 7:3

<sup>32</sup> Mal 3:5 Rv 2:20-23, 9:21, 18:8

<sup>33</sup> Am 2:6, 4:1; Rv 18

<sup>34</sup> Ez 16; Am 6; Rv 18

<sup>35</sup> Jl 3:3; Rv 18

<sup>36</sup> Ez 16:20-21

<sup>37</sup> Mi 7:3

<sup>38</sup> Mal 3:5

<sup>39</sup> Mal 3:5; Rv 9:20-21

<sup>40</sup> Mal 3:5

<sup>41</sup> Rv 9:20

<sup>42</sup> Mi 7:6

<sup>43</sup> Hb 2:17

<sup>44</sup> Hb 2:17-18; Rv 9:20-21

<sup>45</sup> Hb 2:18; Am 6:3

<sup>46</sup> Eccl 3:14-18

<sup>47</sup> 1 Jn 1:8

<sup>48</sup> Hos 6:1-3; Jl 2:12ff; Hg 1:5ff; Zec 7:8ff, 8:16-17

<sup>49</sup> Jon 3:8-10

We have no modern-day Jonah traversing our global streets. The Bible’s words cannot pigeonhole our current worldwide pandemic. Ultimately, we do not know the mind of God in every situation.<sup>50</sup> The prophetic warnings, however, identify a host of terribly familiar sins as worthy of devastating judgment. What fools any people would be if, in the face of such suffering, they traded the humble repentance of Nineveh—or even the pragmatic calculations of the Philistine priests—for the arrogance of apocalyptic Babylon who “blasphemed the God of heaven because of their sufferings and because of their sores, but nevertheless they still refused to repent of their deeds.”<sup>51</sup>

Here’s the plain truth: even if a pandemic is merely incidental—a natural phenomenon permitted by a sovereign God—we still live in a world where all (*pan*) people (*demos*) are plagued with sin, and there is only one antidote.<sup>52</sup> We find it echoed throughout the pages of Scripture, and, as we turn to the New Testament, we discover John the Baptist, the final prophet, and then Jesus Christ Himself declaring it: “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**”<sup>53</sup>

Jesus, the light of the world, shines on those who live in a land of deep darkness—a world rife with distress and anxiety, gloom and shadow, evil and sin and death—and inaugurates His kingdom.<sup>54</sup> He announces that just as Moses lifted up the serpent to save the Israelites from poisonous snakebites, Christ will be lifted up to save the world.<sup>55</sup> Thus a pandemic not only confronts us with the dire straits of our situation but also provides a theological prism that refracts the brilliance of Christ’s atonement. We all, afflicted with the universal pandemic of sin and death, must turn from our false idols and look to Jesus alone for our only hope of healing and wholeness.<sup>56</sup> The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin and atones for the sin of the whole world.<sup>57</sup> This is the Gospel that the Church has boldly proclaimed since its infancy: repent and trust Jesus to save you.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to a theological type, the writers of the New Testament understood the biblical accounts of pandemics to be relevant to Christian conduct. Paul wrote that the specific

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<sup>50</sup> Is 45:9-12; Is 55:6ff; Mal 3:13-15; Romans 11:33-36

<sup>51</sup> Rv 16:10-11

<sup>52</sup> Is 53:6; Rom 3:23

<sup>53</sup> Mt 3:2, 4:17; Mk 1:15; Lk 3:3

<sup>54</sup> Is 8:22-9:2

<sup>55</sup> Jn 3:14-17

<sup>56</sup> 1 Jn 1:9

<sup>57</sup> 1 Jn 1:5-10; 1 Jn 2:1-2; Rv 5:9-10

<sup>58</sup> Mt 28:19-20; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 2:38-41, 3:19ff, 4:13, 29-31, 10:34-43, 13:38-39, 14:15, 15:15-17, 16:22-40, 17:30-31, 26:19-23

Old Testament pandemics “happened to them as examples and were written for our instruction on whom the end of the ages have come” so that we would learn to pursue holiness, a theme echoed throughout every epistle.<sup>59</sup> Peter also explained that the messages of the prophets should stir believers up to godliness.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of their circumstances, Christians are called to tirelessly walk in a manner worthy of the Gospel, living sanctified lives that bear kingdom fruit in keeping with repentance.<sup>61</sup>

If we have been lulled by worldly comforts and fallen asleep on the job, a pandemic jolts us awake, reminding us that God has ordained each of us to be on this planet at this very moment to complete the good works He has prepared for us to do.<sup>62</sup> This requires razor sharp focus: we are to ready our minds for action,<sup>63</sup> concern ourselves with the will of God,<sup>64</sup> guard against self-deception,<sup>65</sup> and make the most of our time, because the days are evil.<sup>66</sup> Any difficulties we experience produce the endurance required to keep us in the Word of God and about the work of God.<sup>67</sup>

This steadfast commitment to live faithfully does not minimize the pain, loss, and suffering of a pandemic. But even if such tribulations grieve us, they should not surprise us.<sup>68</sup> Christians who know the inevitability of death and have an anthropology of sin and suffering must reject the world’s suffocating fear-mongering.<sup>69</sup> Instead of ruminating over dangers, conspiracies, persecution, suffering, and death, we must instead fear God alone,<sup>70</sup> anchoring our hope in Christ’s resurrection.<sup>71</sup> If we are to continue in His peace, *His* voice must be loudest.<sup>72</sup> Jesus taught us that the hairs of our head and days of our lives are numbered, so we can stop trying to preserve our lives by worrying.<sup>73</sup> We can throw off compulsive self-protection and

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<sup>59</sup> 1 Cor 10:1-14

<sup>60</sup> 2 Pt 3:2-18

<sup>61</sup> Lk 6:27ff; Gal 6:7-10; Phil 1:27-30; Col 1:9-14; 1 Thes 4:1-12; 2 Thes 3:13

<sup>62</sup> Acts 17:22-31; Rom 13:11-14; Eph 2:10

<sup>63</sup> 1 Pt 1:13

<sup>64</sup> Col 3:1ff; 1 Pt 4:2ff

<sup>65</sup> 1 Cor 3:18

<sup>66</sup> Eph 5:15-16

<sup>67</sup> 2 Tm 3; Heb 10:35ff; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pt 1:6-9; Jude 17ff

<sup>68</sup> Lam 3:1-27; 1 Pt 4:12-19, 5:8-11

<sup>69</sup> Eccl 7:2,14, 9:1-3, 7-10; 2 Cor 5:1-10; Phil 1:21-23; 1 Thes 4:13ff; Heb 9:27-28

<sup>70</sup> Is 8:11-13

<sup>71</sup> 1 Cor 15:12-58; 1 Thes 4:13-18; Heb 6:19

<sup>72</sup> Jn 8:47, 10:27; 14:27

<sup>73</sup> Mt 6:27, 33-34; 10:26-39; Lk 12:4-12, 25, 31

instead follow Jesus’s example to lay down our lives to serve others.<sup>74</sup> We can freely rest in the Lord’s will and, when we face our hour of suffering, entrust our souls to a faithful Creator as we do good.<sup>75</sup>

In the meantime, what if we boldly welcomed the uncertainties of daily life in a global pandemic as continual reminders of Jesus’s imminent return?<sup>76</sup> Our Lord warned us not to be alarmed at the signs of His coming—wars, famines, earthquakes, plagues, persecution, deception, lawlessness, and love gone cold.<sup>77</sup> Do we not daily wake up to headlines announcing such events? Have we forgotten that these things indicate that our redemption is drawing near?<sup>78</sup>

So, get to your feet, Christian. Lift up your sin-sick, pandemic-weary, heavy-laden head, and fix your gaze on Jesus.<sup>79</sup> Turn from worthless idols that do not satisfy.<sup>80</sup> Strengthen your listless hands and weak knees.<sup>81</sup> Join all (*pan*) the crowds (*demas*) pressing in close to Jesus for healing and wholeness,<sup>82</sup> because with Him God’s tender mercy gives “light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”<sup>83</sup> Proclaim the Good News of the kingdom boldly.<sup>84</sup> Tell those who panic, “Be strong! Do not fear! Look, your God comes to deliver you!”<sup>85</sup> For the one who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon!”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Mt 16:24-27; Lk 9:23-27

<sup>75</sup> Ps 23:4; Jas 4:13-15; 1 Pt 4:19

<sup>76</sup> Lk 12:35-56, 21:34-36; Rom 13:11-14

<sup>77</sup> Mt 24:3-14; Lk 21:10-18

<sup>78</sup> Lk 21:28

<sup>79</sup> Mt 11:28-30; Heb 12:1-13

<sup>80</sup> Jer 51:58; 1 Cor 10:14

<sup>81</sup> Is 35:3; Heb 12:12

<sup>82</sup> Mt 4:23-25, 15:29-31; Mk 1:32-39, 2:2-4, 3:9-10, 5:25-31, 6:56; Lk 4:40-41, 5:15, 19, 8:40-45

<sup>83</sup> Lk 1:78-79

<sup>84</sup> Mt 28:19-20; Lk 12:35ff; Eph 6:19

<sup>85</sup> Is 35:4ff

<sup>86</sup> Rev 22:20