

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us,
 so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures
 and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.
Romans 15:4

- ANTONINE (165-180 A.D.) & CYPRIAN PLAGUES (247-271) A.D.) -

DEATH TOLLS-

ANTONINE PLAGUE- 5 MILLION
CYPRIAN PLAGUE- 50 MILLION

IN THE YEAR 165, DURING THE REIGN OF MARCUS AURELIUS, A DEVASTATING EPIDEMIC SWEEPED THROUGH THE ROMAN EMPIRE. SOME MEDICAL HISTORIANS SUSPECT THIS WAS THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF SMALLPOX IN THE WEST. DURING THE FIFTEEN-YEAR DURATION OF THE EPIDEMIC, A QUARTER TO A THIRD OF THE POPULATION PROBABLY DIED OF IT.

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE EPIDEMIC, MORTALITY WAS SO GREAT IN MANY CITIES THAT THE EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS (WHO SUBSEQUENTLY DIED OF THE DISEASE) WROTE OF CARAVANS OF CARTS AND WAGONS HAULING OUT THE DEAD.

THEN, A CENTURY LATER CAME ANOTHER GREAT PLAGUE. THE FAMOUS CLASSICAL PHYSICIAN GALEN FLED ROME FOR HIS COUNTRY ESTATE WHERE HE STAYED UNTIL THE DANGER SUBSIDED.

BUT FOR THOSE WHO COULD NOT FLEE, THE TYPICAL RESPONSE WAS TO TRY TO AVOID ANY CONTACT WITH THE AFFLICTED, SINCE IT WAS UNDERSTOOD THAT THE DISEASE WAS CONTAGIOUS.

WHEN THEIR FIRST SYMPTOM APPEARED, VICTIMS OFTEN WERE THROWN INTO THE STREETS, WHERE THE DEAD AND DYING LAY IN PILES.

"AT THE FIRST ONSET OF THE DISEASE, THEY [PAGANS] PUSHED THE SUFFERERS AWAY AND FLED FROM THEIR DEAREST, THROWING THEM INTO THE ROADS BEFORE THEY WERE DEAD AND TREATED UNBURIED CORPSES AS DIRT, HOPING THEREBY TO AVERT THE SPREAD AND CONTAGION OF THE FATAL DISEASE; BUT DO WHAT THEY MIGHT, THEY FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO ESCAPE"....

BISHOP DIONYSIUS (ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT)

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN 2ND & 3RD CENTURIES

ALREADY EXPERIENCED OF CONTINUAL PERSECUTION AND HOW TO RESPOND TO SUFFERING; EARLY CHRISTIANS (WHILE STILL CONSIDERED "BARBARIAN" AND "MYSTERIOUS") BECAME THE FEW PEOPLE WILLING TO INTERACT WITH THE SICK (NO MATTER THEIR FAITH OR AFFILIATION) AND CARING FOR THEM.

EVEN "QUITE ELEMENTARY NURSING WILL GREATLY REDUCE MORTALITY. SIMPLE PROVISION OF FOOD AND WATER, FOR INSTANCE, WILL ALLOW PERSONS WHO ARE TEMPORARILY TOO WEAK TO COPE FOR THEMSELVES TO RECOVER INSTEAD OF PERISHING MISERABLY." (WILLIAM H. MCNEILL PLAGUES AND PEOPLES)

BISHOP DIONYSIUS (ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT):

"MOST OF OUR BROTHER CHRISTIANS SHOWED UNBOUNDED LOVE AND LOYALTY, NEVER SPARING THEMSELVES AND THINKING ONLY OF ONE ANOTHER. HEEDLESS OF DANGER, THEY TOOK CHARGE OF THE SICK, ATTENDING TO THEIR EVERY NEED AND MINISTERING TO THEM IN CHRIST, AND WITH THEM DEPARTED THIS LIFE SERENELY HAPPY; FOR THEY WERE INFECTED BY OTHERS WITH THE DISEASE, DRAWING ON THEMSELVES THE SICKNESS OF THEIR NEIGHBORS AND CHEERFULLY ACCEPTING THEIR PAINS. MANY, IN NURSING AND CURING OTHERS, TRANSFERRED THEIR DEATH TO THEMSELVES AND DIED IN THEIR STEAD."

EMPEROR JULIAN WRITES WHILE ATTEMPTED TO RESTORE PAGANISM:

HE EXHORTED THE PAGAN PRIESTHOOD TO COMPETE WITH THE CHRISTIAN CHARITIES. IN A LETTER TO THE HIGH PRIEST OF GALATIA, JULIAN URGED THE DISTRIBUTION OF GRAIN AND WINE TO THE POOR, NOTING THAT

"THE IMPIOUS GALILEANS [CHRISTIANS], IN ADDITION TO THEIR OWN, SUPPORT OURS, [AND] IT IS SHAMEFUL THAT OUR POOR SHOULD BE WANTING OUR AID."

THREE THINGS OCCURRED TO GROW THE CHURCH:

1) ELEVATION OF THE PERCEPTION OF CHRISTIANS:

THE FACT THAT MANY STRICKEN CHRISTIANS SURVIVED (DUE TO CARE) DID NOT GO UNNOTICED, LENDING IMMENSE CREDIBILITY TO CHRISTIAN "MIRACLE WORKING."

2) PROXIMITY OF THE POPULATION TO CHRISTIANS:

INDEED, THE "MIRACLES" OFTEN INCLUDED PAGAN NEIGHBORS AND RELATIVES, PRODUCING STRONGER CONNECTIONS, ESPECIALLY BY THOSE WHO WERE NURSED BACK TO HEALTH WITH THIS CHRISTIAN MINORITY.

3) STATISTICAL / SURVIVAL RATE:

CHRISTIANS AS A GROUP WOULD HAVE ENJOYED A MORE POSITIVE SUPERIOR SURVIVAL RATE IN A WORLD WITH MINIMAL HEALTH CARE, AND, ON THESE GROUNDS ALONE WOULD INCREASE THEIR PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION BY SIMPLY CARING FOR THE SICK.

OPENING THOUGHTS

USING A NUMBER BETWEEN 1 (LOW/NEVER/ETC) - 10 (HIGH/ALWAYS./ETC), OVER THE THE PAST 6 MONTHS...

- HOW MUCH HAVE YOU TRIED TO LIMIT YOUR OWN RISK OF GETTING SICK? _____ WHY?
- DID FIND YOURSELF "SHUTTING OTHERS OUT" TO KEEP YOURSELF SAFE? _____ WHY?
- HOW OFTEN WERE YOU CALLED TO CARE FOR THOSE WHO WERE SICK? _____ WHY?
- HOW OFTEN DID YOU RISK YOUR HEALTH FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS? _____ WHY?
- HOW OFTEN DID YOU INTERACT TO OTHERS WHO BELIEVE DIFFERENTLY? _____ WHY?
- HOW SURE WERE YOU THAT YOU WOULD SURVIVE THIS PANDEMIC? _____ WHY?

Discussion Part I

I Need a Hero... (elevation of status)

Live such good lives among the pagans that,
though they accuse you of doing wrong,
they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

1 Peter 2:12

My thoughts...

Discussion Part II

That's close enough... (proximity)

Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him,

"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Acts 10:14-15

My thoughts...

Discussion Part III

We're all that's left... (survival)

"Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,
but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."

Matthew 24:12

My thoughts...

CLOSING THOUGHTS

FROM DISCUSSION 1- I NEED A HERO

OVER THE LAST 6 MONTHS, WHAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEROIC SERVICE DID I MISS?
HOW DID THAT DECREASE OR INCREASE MY CHANCE TO INFLUENCE OTHERS FOR GOD?

FROM DISCUSSION 2- THAT'S CLOSE ENOUGH

OVER THE LAST 6 MONTHS, WHAT CHANGES MY DID I MAKE IN MY LIFE - TO AVOID INTERACTIONS
WITH PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE DIFFERENTLY THAN ME?
HOW DID THAT DECREASE OR INCREASE MY CHANCE TO INFLUENCE OTHERS FOR GOD?

FROM DISCUSSION 3- WE'RE ALL THAT'S LEFT

OVER THE LAST 6 MONTHS, WHERE DID I FEEL ISOLATED
OR LIKE I WAS LEFT STANDING APART FROM THOSE AROUND ME?
HOW DID THAT DECREASE OR INCREASE MY CHANCE TO INFLUENCE OTHERS FOR GOD?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, give me hope. Show me the strength of early believers in Christ.
Inspire me with their unbiased kindness, heroic service and constant faith in You.
Amen.