



Plagues and Prayer in the Old Testament

Mass outbreaks of diseases that result in thousands of deaths are, thankfully, not a common modern experience. But this is unusual: they have been a common experience for most of human history. They were definitely a part of Israel's experience, and these plagues occur throughout the Old Testament. Their understanding of mass outbreaks of diseases can seem far removed from our experience today, where we know about viruses and mutations, vaccines and immunity, R-0 factors, epidemiological models, and the like. But even if we have much more advanced knowledge about what these diseases are and how they spread, people in the ancient world were fully aware of the devastating effects of these plagues: in the Old Testament they are, with warfare and famine, consistently mentioned as something that could threaten an entire nation. The New Testament (outside Revelation) does not mention plagues specifically but would encourage us to see them as part of creation continuing to groan, part of the present sufferings that are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us, part of the hardship and danger that are a constant feature of life but that cannot separate us from the love of God (see Romans 8:18–39).

Still, I find myself looking to the Old Testament, with its specific references to plagues, in order to guide my prayers during this particular hardship. There are two passages that stuck out to me. The first is Isaiah 19:22. This comes at the end of a prophecy about Egypt that warns them to expect foreign invaders and famine as a consequence of their idolatry. But then we read that Egypt will turn to Israel's God. This verse shows how: "The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the Lord, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them." It is a plague that causes them to cry out to God and to experience God's healing and blessing.

The second passage is 1 Kings 8:37–39. During Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple, he prays, "When famine or plague comes to the land, ... whatever disaster or disease may come, and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people Israel, ... then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act." Again, people suffer under a plague or other disaster, they cry out to God, and God hears and acts. This particular passage is directed towards Israel, but the very next section expands this prayer to all the other nations (1 Kings 8:41–43).

In both of these passages, we see plagues particularly used by God to prompt people, even those outside the people of God, to cry out to him. My brief experience with the coronavirus outbreak fits with this. I don't know if the overall risk of dying in China has increased at all—I wonder how the increased risk from the coronavirus compares to the *dramatically decreased* risk of traffic deaths, seasonal flu deaths, and other dangers that we are not exposed to now that this nation of 1.4 billion people is responding to this situation. But the coronavirus is a new



risk, one that I have not yet put comfortably into the back of my mind and that therefore makes me keenly aware of my own mortality. I don't know if it is rational to suddenly be more concerned for my own safety and the safety of those around me, but it is causing me to pray more urgently and to cry out to God more consistently as the one who alone sustains life.

I doubt I am the only one. I can't help but wonder how many people, shut up in their homes for yet another week, are feeling a new urgency to cry out to the only one who can keep them safe through this ordeal. Let's pray with them and for them, crying out to the Father who hears those who call out to him, to Jesus who bore our diseases, and to the Holy Spirit who is the Lord and giver of life. We are called to be a holy priesthood, which means (among other things) being called to represent our communities before God in prayer. I am praying for a swift end to this outbreak, for wisdom for all the authorities and medical professionals, and for protection for individuals and communities that might not be as strong as we are. But I am also praying for many to join me in these prayers, for many hearts to cry out to God, and for many to find the one they did not even know they were seeking.

Plagues in the Old Testament cause untold sorrow and devastation. But they also cause many people to cry out and turn to God. This helps us know both what to pray against and what to pray for during this season.

Matt Monkemeier

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS:

No service this Sunday – in order to comply with the current health and safety regulations, all Sunday services are postponed until further notice. Please continue to worship at home, and visit www.oasisbeijing.org for future updates and online resources including sermons, devotionals, and worship music.

BICF online services – Many of the BICF churches are offering online services at different times on Sundays. For further details, please visit www.bicf.org.

BICF Corona Virus Relief Response efforts – All BICF churches are partnering together to offer help to those in need during this challenging time. For those who would like to be actively involved in this response, a variety of opportunities are available, including donations, support hotlines, and a 24/7 prayer chain. For further details on how to participate, please visit www.bicf.org/nCOVRelief.