

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

- WEEK FIVE: THE PLAGUE OF JUSTINIAN (541-542 A.D.) -

DEATH TOLL: 25 MILLION
CAUSE: BUBONIC PLAGUE
(YERSINIA PESTIS)

LENGTH: 3 YEARS

THOUGHT TO HAVE KILLED PERHAPS HALF THE POPULATION OF EUROPE, THE PLAGUE OF JUSTINIAN WAS AN OUTBREAK OF THE BUBONIC PLAGUE THAT AFFLICTED THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND MEDITERRANEAN PORT CITIES, KILLING UP TO A QUARTER OF THE POPULATION OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND DEVASTATING THE CITY OF CONSTANTINOPLE.

GENERALLY REGARDED AS THE FIRST RECORDED INCIDENT OF THE BUBONIC PLAGUE. AT ITS HEIGHT IT WAS KILLING AN ESTIMATED 5,000 PEOPLE PER DAY AND EVENTUALLY RESULTING IN THE DEATHS OF 40% OF THE CITY'S POPULATION.

AS ONE OF THE EARLY WESTERN "CHRISTIAN" EMPERORS - JUSTINIAN HAD EXPENDED HUGE AMOUNTS OF MONEY FOR WARS AGAINST INVADERS (IN AN ATTEMPT TO MERGE THE EASTERN AND WESTERN EMPIRES) AND CONSTRUCTION OF NEW CHURCHES.

THE PLAGUE CAUSED TAX REVENUES TO DECLINE THROUGH THE MASSIVE NUMBER OF DEATHS. THE DISRUPTION OF AGRICULTURE AND TRADE - AS THE PRICE OF GRAIN ROSE IN CONSTANTINOPLE - CAUSED THE COLLAPSE OF ANY ATTEMPT AT UNITY.

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN 500 AD

THE PLAGUE'S LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON EUROPEAN AND CHRISTIAN HISTORY WERE ENORMOUS.

AT THIS POINT IN HISTORY, CHRISTIANITY HAD MOVED FROM A MINORITY CULT INTO THE OFFICIAL RELIGION OF THE ROMAN AND BYZANTINE EMPIRES THROUGH THE WORK OF EMPEROR CONSTANTINE.

FAITH WAS BEGINNING TO BE DEPENDENT ON THE GOVERNMENT- WITH FULL SPONSORSHIP OF BUILDING CHURCHES AND CHURCH OFFICIALS. BY THIS POINT HOWEVER, THEIR WORLD WAS ALREADY DIVIDED INTO TWO HALVES: LATIN (ROMAN EMPIRE - ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH) AND GREEK (BYZANTINE - EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH).

1 DEVASTATING ECONOMIC IMPACT

AS THE DISEASE SPREAD TO PORT CITIES AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN, THE CITY OF CONSTANTINOPLE (NAMED AFTER THE EMPEROR WHO HAD FINALLY DECLARED HIMSELF AS A CHRISTIAN, AND CHRISTIANITY AS NOT ONLY LEGAL, BUT THE OFFICIAL FAITH OF THE GOVERNMENT) WAS DEVASTATED. THIS, IN TURN, AFFECTED EVERY OTHER CITY IN THE EMPIRE.

2 POTENTIAL FOR UNITY OF THE CHURCH DESTROYED

JUSTINIAN'S GRAND DREAM OF REUNITING THE TWO HALVES OF THE EMPIRE, EAST AND WEST, WAS DESTROYED BY THE PRACTICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE PLAGUE. CONSEQUENTLY, THE GREEK AND LATIN CHURCHES REMAIN SEPARATED TO THIS DAY.

THE PLAGUE WEAKENED THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AT A CRITICAL POINT, WHEN JUSTINIAN'S ARMIES HAD NEARLY RETAKEN ALL OF THE WESTERN PORTION OF THE POLITICAL WORLD. BRIEFLY IN 554, THE REUNIFICATION OCCURRED, BUT FOURTEEN YEARS LATER, THE INVADERS EASILY OVER TOOK THE POORLY FINANCED CHRISTIAN ARMY FROM THE EAST.

3 OFFICIAL RESPONSE OF THE WESTERN CHURCH

THE PLAGUE CLAIMED THE LIFE OF POPE PELAGIUS II AND EXTENDED BEYOND IT'S MOST IMPACTFUL THREE YEARS OF TRAGEDY.

IN 590 AD, HIS SUCCESSOR, GREGORY THE GREAT, WAS ELECTED POPE. HE CALLED ON GOD'S MERCY FOR THE END OF THE PLAGUE BY ORGANIZING A MASSIVE PROCESSION AROUND ROME (CARRYING AN IMAGE OF MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS, AND CHANTING THE LITANIES).

WHEN THE PROCESSION REACHED THE MAUSOLEUM OF THE ROMAN EMPEROR HADRIAN, GREGORY SAID THAT HE SAW AN ANGEL OF THE LORD STANDING ATOP THE CASTLE, WIPING A BLOODY SWORD AND SHEATHING IT. THE NEW POPE DECLARED THAT THIS WAS A SIGN OF THE AN END TO THE PLAGUE AND HAD A STATUE OF MICHAEL, THE ARCH-ANGEL, PLACED ATOP THE CASTLE.

OPENING THOUGHTS

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

- HOW MUCH HAVE YOU BEEN AFFECTED BY THE ECONOMIC DECLINE? _____ WHY?
- HOW DID THE IMPACT OF THE DISEASE IN MAJOR CITIES AFFECT YOUR LIFE? _____ WHY?
- HOW OFTEN WERE ANY RELATIONSHIPS AROUND YOU BROKEN OR STRAINED? _____ WHY?
- HOW MUCH WAS YOUR COMMUNITY OF FAITH'S UNITY STRAINED OR DIVIDED? _____ WHY?
- HOW OFTEN DID "OFFICIAL" PROCLAMATIONS (SECULAR OR CHURCH) AFFECT YOU? _____ WHY?
- HOW OFTEN DID YOU HEAR THE PANDEMIC WAS "OVER" OR "DIMINISHING"? _____ WHY?

Discussion Part I

You're the God of this city (economic impact)...

"A ruined city lies desolate; the entrance to every house is barred.
In the streets they cry out for wine, all joy turns to gloom,
all joyful sounds are banished..."
Isaiah 24:10-11

My thoughts...

Discussion Part II

Blessed be the tie that binds (unity destroyed)...

"Patiently put up with each other and love each other.
Try your best to let God's Spirit keep your hearts united.
Do this by living at peace..."
Ephesians 4:2-4 (CEV)

My thoughts...

Discussion Part III

Any golden calf will do (western church's response)...

"Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me?
Who asked you to do all this tramping around?
It's useless...I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn.
I cannot stand your Festivals...and your religious gatherings;
they are all corrupted by your sins...
they are a burden that I am tired of bearing."
Isaiah 1:12-14

My thoughts...

CLOSING THOUGHTS

FROM DISCUSSION 1- YOU'RE THE GOD OF THIS CITY

OVER THE LAST 6 MONTHS, WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THIS DISEASE ON MAJOR CITIES?
HOW HAS THAT AFFECTED ME AND MY FAITH?

FROM DISCUSSION 2- BLESSED BE THE TIES THAT BIND

OVER THE LAST 6 MONTHS, WHAT UNIFYING ACTS/EVENTS/OPPORTUNITIES
HAVE BEEN MISSED IN OUR WORLD DUE TO THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC?
HOW HAS THAT AFFECTED ME AND MY FAITH?

FROM DISCUSSION 3- ANY GOLDEN CALF WILL DO

OVER THE LAST 6 MONTHS, WHERE DID PRESENTATIONS BY OFFICIALS (LOCAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL;
INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE CHURCH) FEEL LIKE "POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE"
RATHER THAN AN AUTHENTIC PROCESS THAT ACTUALLY AFFECTED CHANGE?
HOW DID THAT AFFECT ME AND MY FAITH?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, give me discernment. Move me past trusting in finances, cities, government or performances that I've put in place of You.
Help me to seek those things that keep me unified with other believers so that, together, we can place our full faith in You.
Amen.