



## **“Plagues and Punishment”**

**Kevin Presley**

We take up a timely question today: Are diseases sent from God as punishment? I imagine this question is on the minds of a lot of people today as we behold what’s going on in our world. As a global pandemic continues to claim more victims, the question arises: Where does God fit into all this? Is what we’re seeing an outpouring of His judgment on the world because of its evil and its sin? It’s very tempting for many to think so, but what does the Bible teach concerning plagues and punishment? Let’s look to the scriptures for answers.

There is an Old Testament story that takes place in **II Chronicles 21** during the reign of king Jehoram who ruled over the southern kingdom after the division of Israel into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Times were not good in Judah. Jehoram followed after the ways of the northern kings, which were very rebellious as a whole. He had led the people of Judah into sin just as those in the northern kingdom had been guilty of. There came a very unusual and rare condemnation from the prophet Elijah. Rare because Elijah prophesied to the northern kingdom. But he sent a written message to the king of Judah, Jehoram in this case. It was quite a stinging message.

**II Chronicles 21:12-15 “And there came a writing to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, Thus saith the LORD God of David thy father, Because thou hast not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat thy father, nor in the ways of Asa king of Judah, But hast walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and hast made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to go a whoring, like to the whoredoms of the house of Ahab, and also hast slain thy brethren of thy father's house, which were better than thyself: Behold, with a great plague will the LORD smite thy people, and thy children, and thy wives, and all thy goods: And thou shalt have great sickness by disease of thy bowels, until thy bowels fall out by reason of the sickness day by day.”**

This obviously was an awful pronouncement of judgment and punishment upon Jehoram and the people he was leading at this particular time. So does God still do this today? No doubt our world is full of sin and this angers the Lord and is contrary to Him. There is no doubt that God will one day judge the sins of

the world and He is very concerned about its sinful state. So, can we conclude from that that plagues and pestilences, or in this case a global pandemic are acts of judgment from God?

The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, tells of various times when God sent disease and sickness on human beings as punishment for sin. Our text describes a dark time in Judah when Jehoram reigned as king. Under his leadership, the people were far from God and in apostasy and rebellion to the Lord. About this time, the kingdom had divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Typically, the northern kingdom had been led by a string of evil and wicked kings and the people became so wicked that they were destroyed not too many generations later. But Judah was where the remnant was, and what good there was among the people of God was generally found in Judah.

But here is the exception. When Jehoram came to the throne, he led the people away from God. For example, he refurbished the high places of idolatry and led the people to spiritually prostitute themselves. He was the son of Jehoshaphat who was a good king. But when Jehoram took over, it became a different story. He married the daughter of the wicked king Ahab and followed in Ahab's footsteps, as well as the other northern kings in leading his own people in Judah into sin.

**II Chronicles 21:6 “And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, like as did the house of Ahab: for he had the daughter of Ahab to wife: and he wrought that which was evil in the eyes of the LORD.”**

That's pretty well all the history that you need to know about the reign of Jehoram. It was so bad that he elicited a rare message from the prophet Elijah. Rare on three counts. You may remember that Elijah was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel. For example, he prophesied to wicked King Ahab. This is the only time I am aware of that Elijah ever sent a message to a king in the southern kingdom. Not only that, but it's also the only message that he ever wrote that I am aware of. We have Old Testament books written by other prophets, but we have no Old Testament writings by Elijah. Some have called him *the non-writing prophet*. Here is a rare message in that it was sent in writing. Thirdly, Elijah did so before he was translated to heaven before Jehoram ever became king. I take that to mean that God caused Elijah to look into the future well before the fact through prophecy and see the wicked actions that Jehoram would later take and where he would lead Judah, and write a scorching message to him. As one commentator said, when Jehoram came to the throne, he found a message on the front steps of the palace, thrown there by God's paperboy. And it was a serious message, a chilling message. Look at it again in our text.

**II Chronicles 21:12-15 “And there came a writing to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, Thus saith the LORD God of David thy father, Because thou hast not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat thy father, nor in the ways of Asa king of Judah, But hast walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and hast made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to go a whoring, like to the whoredoms of the house of Ahab, and also hast slain thy brethren of thy father's house, which were better than thyself: Behold, with a great plague will the LORD smite thy people, and thy children, and thy wives, and all thy goods: And thou shalt have great sickness by disease of thy bowels, until thy bowels fall out by reason of the sickness day by day.”**

A lot of people have speculated as to what this disease was, and I don't suppose we can know for sure, but it was certainly a dreadful thing. Indeed, the word of the Lord proved true. Jehoram died a terrible, painful, and lonely death. In fact, he died in such dishonor that the Bible says no one regretted his

death. Obviously, his sickness was a form of punishment. God was judging Jehoram for his wickedness and the way he had ruled the people and conducted himself.

We also remember how God sent various punishments on Pharaoh and the ancient Egyptians long before this when they held the Hebrews as slaves. While God protected His people from those disasters at the time, He later warned them of what would happen if they forsook His law. **Deuteronomy 28** contains the pre-written history of the nation of Israel and the things God warned about happened just like He said because Israel was not faithful to keep the law. Look at Moses' warning.

**Deuteronomy 28:58-61** "If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD; Then the LORD will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance. Moreover he will bring upon thee all the diseases of Egypt, which thou wast afraid of; and they shall cleave unto thee. Also every sickness, and every plague, which is not written in the book of this law, them will the LORD bring upon thee, until thou be destroyed."

Well, such things did indeed take place in the generations that followed and throughout the history of Israel. Hundreds of years later, the prophet Amos cried out against the sins of the people. Amos said that God had sent famine, draughts, natural disasters and *pestilence after the manner of Egypt (Amos 4:10)*. *Pestilence is a rapidly spreading disease that claims the lives of many as it spreads*. In this case, God had sent this or allowed this to happen as an effort to get the people to turn back to Him and repent. Even in the New Testament in the book of **Revelation**, God employs apocalyptic and symbolic language to picture God's wrath being poured out in the form of various plagues and disasters, after which the people that John was referring to would still not repent.

All of these and perhaps other references cause us to wonder if God yet sends plagues, diseases, or disasters as forms of warning or punishment today. Are pandemics, such as we're facing this very hour, sent from God as a wake-up call or punishment? Does the Bible teach that? Is God pouring out His judgment on the world as we speak? My answer in short is perhaps yes and no. I hope you'll bear with me while I explain.

Let me hasten to make this point. I know of nothing in the Bible that prophesies of this particular pandemic or any other modern pandemic for that matter. Interestingly, when we read of God sending disease as punishment upon people, it was always accompanied by divine revelation. In other words, God warned them that such was about to take place. In all of the instances we read, the people were warned specifically beforetime what was coming and why it was coming. God never did cause things like this to occur and leave people guessing and wondering what was taking place and whether or not God had sent it and if He had then why. Rather, God plainly and specifically revealed what was taking place and what the source and cause of it was. Through prophecy, He indicated what would happen and that it was a specific punishment that He was meting out for a specific sin, just like in the cases of Jehoram, Pharaoh, and the Israelites. There is nothing in the word of God, however, that indicates that the COVID-19 crisis or the AIDS pandemic or any other pestilence or outbreak of disease today is actually sent from God. To say that such is the case would be pure speculation without any direct support from the scriptures. While we can certainly identify sin by what the scripture says (sin is still sin) and while we rightly observe that we are living in times of evil, and while we rightly conclude that God is not pleased with the evil of our day and has promised one day to judge sin, the fact is that we have to be very careful ascribing things to God that the Bible does not say God is doing.

With that said, it is true that all disease and sickness and in fact everything that brings suffering and death into the world is the result of sin's existence in the world. Such things spring from the curse that God placed upon mankind and the earth in the beginning of time when Adam and Eve sinned. All sickness, all disease, everything pertaining to death has to do with the result of the fall of mankind into sin.

**Genesis 3:19** *“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”*

So, physical death was pronounced upon the human race because of Adam's sin. It is that physical death of which Paul also speaks.

**Romans 5:12** *“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:”*

Suffering and death exist because sin was introduced into this world a long time ago.

**Romans 8:22** *“For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”*

All throughout time, the creation has been corrupted and in a state of suffering because of the existence of sin. When we look at the creation and the result of sin's curse upon it, there are three causes behind everything that happens. Everything can be traced back to one or more of these causes. First, there is the cause of God. It certainly is true that God is sovereign and in control of everything in His universe. Nothing escapes His control. Nothing happens that God does not allow or permit to happen. God has power over all of His creation. That is absolutely true beyond doubt to those who believe in the Lord. But the fact that God allows something to happen doesn't mean that He actively causes it to occur, especially as a punishment for sin.

That's because of the second cause, which is that God, in His sovereignty, ordained laws that govern the universe in which we live. They govern nature. The universe is subject to those laws and if we attempt to violate those laws, there is trouble. If I go jump off a mountain and die, did God reach down and strike me dead or cause me to die as a punishment for some sin I committed? Of course not. Rather, we understand that the universe is governed by the law of gravity. If I am either foolish enough or unfortunate enough to jump or fall off a mountain, that law is in effect and I am going to suffer because of the existence of that law and my going against that law.

Sometimes people get sick because they don't take care of their health or because they make daring and foolish choices. They engage in behaviors that lead to terrible consequences. Drinking and drug abuse are sins in the eyes of God, but when someone dies due to liver disease, overdose, or otherwise destroys their mind or body through such conduct, that person is simply reaping according to what they have sown in the natural realm. It doesn't mean God strikes people dead because they have committed this sin. They have simply faced the consequences of the life they've chosen to live. Sexual immorality is a sin, but that doesn't mean that every time a person dies from a venereal disease that they're being directly punished by God. It usually means they faced the natural consequences of doing things that God warns us to stay away from. So, yes, sometimes God causes things to happen. And sometimes things happen because of natural laws that God set into being and thus, He permits them to happen as His universe continues being operated according to those immutable laws.

But thirdly, sometimes things happen because of the free will or choice of man. The Calvinistic concept of *divine sovereignty* alleges that everything that happens is ordered and preordained by God to happen. We're just sort of acting out this divine drama that God minutely planned from the beginning of time. But the fact of the matter is, God gave to man the freedom to choose between right and wrong. Hundreds of times in the Bible, the little word *IF* appears, which implies that something is conditional. IF you do this or IF you do not do that, then such and so forth will happen. That literally occurs hundreds of times within the scripture. That implies that man has a choice before him and that choices have consequences. One of my preaching friends has long said it this way: You're free to choose, but your choice is not free. Not only do our choices inevitably lead to a consequence of one kind or another in our own lives, but our choices often bring consequences to others, too.

Some have claimed that the current form of coronavirus that we're dealing with originated in a market where someone ate a bat or another kind of animal that had become infected by a bat and hence the virus was transferred to humans and has spread from there. If that is the case, then one person's choice led to a chain of events that has us where we are today. Take the morality out of it. I'm not saying whether that choice was morally right or wrong, but it was a choice, nonetheless. Some choices and actions have much greater effects than others, but you can see that awful outbreaks and pandemics can certainly be biblically and logically explained in other ways besides assuming that they were punishments or judgments of God. So, again, we need to be very, very careful about ascribing things to God that God has not ascribed to Himself.

Some claim that such things must be signs that the end of time is near. Several weeks ago, we studied Jesus' Olivet discourse recorded in **Matthew 24** where the Savior said there would be famines, pestilences, earthquakes in divers places, and that all these are the beginning of sorrows. Many claim that these are signs that Jesus is getting ready to return. But a closer look at the surrounding text shows that Jesus was NOT saying that such was a sign that He was about to come. In fact, He says the opposite—that those things occurring would cause some to think that the end was near. But Jesus said such would NOT be the case and that they were not to be deceived. Besides that, the things He mentioned were things that took place in the first century in the years before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which is what He was predicting in much of that chapter anyhow.

So, it is a mistake to interpret the crisis we are facing today as necessarily being a particular judgment sent from God or a sign that the world is about to end. However, that does not mean that it shouldn't get our attention spiritually speaking. We're going through a very difficult period all around the world. One thing the Bible does teach us is that trials, sorrows, and suffering—no matter what their source or cause—should make us look upward and realize our dependence upon God. It should remind us that we're living in a fallen and broken world. It should awaken us from spiritual slumber. I hope and pray that good will come from this awful time of turmoil and uncertainty in that people will at least pause from their busy lives long enough to realize the spiritual state our world is in and turn to God.

We said last week that crises often reveal things about us that we are blissfully ignorant of in better times. The stress, anxiety, and suffering of the past several weeks have shown that many do not have an anchor to get through the storm. These things need to turn us to the Lord and cause us to reach out to Him for His mercy and to praise Him. Maybe this is a wakeup call for YOU. Maybe you now realize that you need the Lord more than you thought you did. Maybe you're looking for peace, assurance, and hope that the world is not presently providing and in reality, can never really provide. I hope you'll turn to Christ and make your life right with Him. Set your spiritual house in order and turn your heart to the Lord and start serving Him.

If you haven't obeyed the Lord in baptism, now is a very good time to be thinking about doing that. If you've drifted away from Christ and are living in sin, this is a good reminder of what a foolish and hopeless decision you made and what a hopeless world you've turned back to. Decide to turn back to the shepherd and bishop of your soul. I'll leave you with this thought: When terrible times come, they should make the Christian even more place his hope in heaven. A virus or disease may have resulted from the combination of nature which has been corrupted through sin and our free will to foolishly use...whatever it may be. As Paul said, *the whole creation groans and travails in pain (Romans 8:22)*. But as he said just a verse earlier, *it will one day be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8:21)*. I long for a time and place that God has promised and that Christ has gone to prepare where there will never be any kind of sickness, disease, suffering, pain, difficulties, heartaches, death, or sorrow, and no sin. Sometimes, God allows trouble to come to point us to such a place far better than this. Perhaps our present circumstance is causing you to stop and think about your soul and where you stand in the eyes of God. Perhaps it will be the beginning of a much-needed spiritual revival for you, a time in your life when you will now seek the Lord. If we can help you in that, we would love to do so.

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