

Is Ebola a Sign of Judgment or a Prophetic Warning?

Estimates of the spread of the Ebola epidemic change daily, but the death toll is already in the thousands, and there are warnings that we may be seeing 10,000 people die a week in the near future. Although at the moment almost all the cases are confined to Africa, there is a real nervousness globally about the epidemic.

Indeed, it's not hard to feel uneasy about a contagious virus for which there is no vaccine and especially one that delivers death in such a nasty way. The unease brings with it some obvious questions: "Is it spreading?" and "Am I safe if I travel?" Yet there are also deeper, more profound questions such as "What does it mean?" and "How should we react?"

I think there are four possible meanings we can see in the outbreak.

Could it be that this disease is a *sign*? Already I am hearing murmurings, from those who like to match world events with their own interpretation of biblical passages, that this could be an "End Time" plague, some sort of appalling event preceding the Second Coming of Christ. Certainly, if we read about the nightmarish way in which Ebola kills people it's not hard to be reminded of some parts of the Book of Revelation. Well, I suppose the epidemic *might* be a sign. But I'd prefer to be cautious.

For one thing, nothing we have seen so far is remotely on the scale of either the Black Death (which killed as many as 50% of the population of Europe in the 14th century) or even the Spanish Influenza outbreak at the end of the First World War, which estimates have suggested may have claimed over 30 million lives. For another, we are specifically told that

Christ's return will occur without warning. And, finally, I am troubled by a response to an appalling human calamity that sees it primarily as some marker on "the prophetic timetable." Our reaction to the Ebola tragedy must be heartfelt compassion. If you or I had lost a loved one to Ebola I think we would find little comfort in being told that their loss was an indicator that we are in the last days.

If I am cautious about this disease being a sign I am far more certain that it could be seen as a *warning*. All the evidence suggests that this is an outbreak that should not have happened. The medical scientists tell us that it started among the poorest of the poor because they had been reduced to eating wild animals that naturally carry the virus. They tell us that it spread because the health services in these African countries were too stretched to be able to identify and contain the infection. So at one level this is a warning that there is a price to pay for global poverty. We have survived HIV/AIDS, we may survive Ebola, but the next new virus may not be curable or containable.

I think too that we can see this epidemic as a *reminder*. In our complacent world, preoccupied with progress and personal satisfaction, Ebola has walked in like the proverbial ghost at the feast. Modern Western society does not think about death. We distance ourselves from mortality to the point that it is possible to live to sixty and never see a dead body. We frequently shun using the word "death" as if by avoiding the word we can avoid the event. But death remains compulsory for rich and poor alike: there is no opportunity to opt out of it. The Ebola crisis is an unwelcome reminder that death can occur suddenly and without warning to any of us. Therefore, getting right with God while we can is as urgent a matter as it ever was.

Finally, I think we can see this epidemic as an *opportunity*. We live at a time when religion in general has a poor reputation. That is hardly surprising: there's a lot of bad

religion about today. I have no doubt, for example, that the average atheist has found their own particular faith (and it is a faith) greatly strengthened by the appalling things done in the name of God in the Middle East.

Nearer to home, Christianity has been mocked as a weak and ineffectual faith whose followers differ from other people only in that they have less fun. This outbreak presents tremendous opportunities for Christians to stand out by demonstrating that we have two qualities our world respects—even if it lacks them—courage and compassion.

In an age of fear we need to show courage. If you are fearful, I recommend the first six verses of Psalm 91 (NLT)?

*Those who live in the shelter of the Most High
will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

This I declare about the Lord:

*He alone is my refuge, my place of safety;
he is my God, and I trust him.*

*For he will rescue you from every trap
and protect you from deadly disease.*

He will cover you with his feathers.

He will shelter you with his wings.

His faithful promises are your armor and protection.

*Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night,
nor the arrow that flies in the day.*

*Do not dread the disease that stalks in darkness,
nor the disaster that strikes at midday.*

We don't just need to stand firm against fear, good though that is; we need to go further and reach out in compassion. The Ebola crisis brings to mind two inspiring parallels in history with regard to leprosy: in the 19th century, Father Damian gave his life to work among lepers in the Philippines; and in the 20th century, the missionary doctor Paul Brand devoted his life to helping reduce the savage effects of this dreadful and poorly understood disease. Ebola is bad news. But

if, in it, we can show courage and compassion, then God can turn bad news into good news.

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