

What Scripture Can Teach Us About Germ Warfare

“That which goes into the mouth does not defile a man, but that which comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man” (Matt. 15:11).

How’s that again, Lord?

It would be easy here to say the Lord Jesus did not understand microscopic things like bacteria, viruses and germ warfare. Louis Pasteur was still eighteen centuries in the future.

Surely what we put into our mouths matters.

If Jesus were who He claimed to be, and the one Scripture declares Him to have been, He knew the importance of cleanliness and purity.

It’s little things like this that trip up some modern readers. Reading the Bible, they get hung up on terms like “the four corners of the world,” “the sun rising,” and heaven being “up there somewhere”—all colloquialisms which we understand and use every day, but which cause problems for those looking for some reason to disbelieve the Holy Word.

But that’s not the entire story.

You want to see germ warfare in Scripture? It’s there. In the Old Testament, where God gave the Law to Israel through Moses, He made provisions for their health. All they had to do was to obey Him.

There are several texts—some clear in their application to germ warfare and some merely implied—so stay with me.

– “And he placed the laver between the tent of meeting and the altar and put water in it for washing. And from it Moses and

Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet. When they entered the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed, just as the Lord had commanded Moses" (Ex. 40:30-32).

- The bodies of sacrificial beasts were often burned "outside the camp." See Lev. 4:12,21 and 8:17 for starters. (Also, in reference to that, see Heb. 13:10-14.)

- Leviticus 11 lists foods which were unclean (and thus forbidden) to God's people. We know now that those animals were most susceptible to disease and thus food from them would pose the biggest threat to Israel.

- Leviticus 12 has laws for the purification of the mother after childbirth. Blood issues were a major concern, and for good reason.

- Leviticus 13 has tests for leprosy and provisions for quarantining those with communicable diseases. Some consisted of a mere seven days, but in the case of all-out leprosy, "all the days that he has the disease, he shall be defiled. He is unclean. He shall dwell alone, and he shall live outside the camp" (Lev. 13:46). The book referenced below—*None of These Diseases* by S. I. McMillen—says it was the discovery of the quarantine from Scripture that stopped the Black Plague in its tracks.

- Leviticus 14-15 contain provisions for cleansing unhealthy places. It might involve tearing down a house altogether, burning one's contaminated clothing or simply waiting a period of time.

Other Texts

- "The Lord will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you know ... (Deut. 7:15). This reminds us of Exodus 15:26, "If you diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do

what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will not afflict you with any of the diseases with which I have afflicted the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you.” (*None of These Diseases* is the title of the best-seller from missionary physician S. I. McMillen, which first introduced many of us to the amazing provisions of God to the Israelites for their health, far in advance of the discoveries of modern medical science.)

– And this most practical text: “You must also have a place outside the camp where one may go outside. You must have a spade among your equipment, and it must be, when you relieve yourself outside, you must dig there and turn and cover up your excrement” (Deut. 23:12-13). God even provided for the sanitary disposal of human sewage.

How I Came to Question God—And Got an Answer That Stunned Me

During college, I was reading Sinclair Lewis’ *Elmer Gantry*, his prize-winning novel of a renegade preacher who would be played by Burt Lancaster on the big screen. In the story, two preachers are chatting. One is leaving the ministry. He is tired of making excuses and alibis for God, he says. “All those contradictions in the Bible. I know we can come up with arguments and explanations for them, but I’m tired of it.”

Then he said, “And another thing. If Jesus was who He claimed to be, instead of doing all those healing miracles, which had such a temporary effect, why didn’t He do something of lasting benefit to mankind, like give us a sanitation code?” (These are not exact quotes. Going from memory here.)

I read that and was stopped short. Great question, I thought. Wonder why the Lord didn’t? I had no answer. Nor did Sinclair Lewis propose one.

Amazing how egotistical doubt can be. You come up with a question for which you are convinced there is no answer, so you don’t even look for one. In most cases, even if you are a

believer, you walk around with this parasite sucking the life out of you, this doubt sapping your strength and joy in the Lord.

I was a believer, called to the ministry, and preparing to head to seminary. With a nagging doubt troubling me.

I went forward, believing that this could be a fatal flaw in the Scripture story. But not knowing what to do. Not wanting this to be the end of the story.

And then, I read something else. Somehow, four or five years later while in seminary, I came across McMillen's book. It was like a lightning bolt to my fears and doubts, burning them to a crisp, leaving me forever changed.

In one chapter, McMillen tells the story of Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis, a maternity doctor in Europe in the early to mid-1800s. (His story is available on Wikipedia; books have been written on the man.) Concerned that too many women were coming down with infections and dying after giving birth, he began studying procedures of his hospital. One disturbing thing he noticed was that the medical staff went straight from performing autopsies in the morning to examining women patients in adjoining rooms—without so much as washing their hands! The mortality rate was horrendous.

So, on nothing more than a hunch, Semmelweis put a basin of water in the examination room and required all doctors to wash their hands after the autopsies. They griped—doctors do not like change—but the rate of infection and death dropped drastically. Semmelweis could not explain why washing worked, only that it did. But his staff protested that this was contrary to accepted medical science of the time,

Then, after a particularly bad experience in which 11 of 12 women in a ward died, Semmelweis put a basin of water at the foot of each bed. Doctors would wash their hands after each examination. They did this—reluctantly; the griping was

nonstop—and the death rate dropped to almost nothing. However, the medical staff raised such a ruckus that Semmelweis was fired. They threw out the basins and went back to the old ways, and women began dying just as before.

Semmelweis moved to another country, became head of another maternity hospital, and installed the same procedures. As expected, the mortality rate dropped significantly, but once again the doctors made life so miserable for him, he lost his mind. He died at age 47.

Today, a statue of Semmelweis along with a mother and baby stands at the University of Chicago Medical School.

Dr. McMillen, in *None of These Diseases*, pointed out that 1500 years B.C., God had told Israel that after touching a dead body, they were to be unclean for a period of time, were to burn their clothing, and to wash themselves, but not in a basin of stagnant water. Scripture called for *running* water.

Some might insist, said McMillen, that Moses had learned all these things from growing up living in Egypt. McMillen dismisses this. The current practice in Egypt at that time called for dung to be applied to wounds and holes to be drilled in skulls to cure headaches.

Moses said he got this wisdom from God on Sinai. It was such a remarkable advance in medical science that we should believe him.

Too bad Sinclair Lewis didn't know this. His book might have helped some people. This should forever bolster our confidence in the Scriptures as the very word of God.

Sometime in the late 1940s, a large group of college students was polled. "Does God understand radar?" (Students of World War II will recall how this recent development made such a difference in the Allied victory.)

The majority of the college students were convinced that God did not understand radar. Imagine that. Radar! These days, elementary school children understand radar.

Just so easily do people turn away from believing in an omniscient, all-present, ever-loving God.

We leave this subject with the triumphant benediction of Jude 24: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with rejoicing, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25). {eoa}

*After five years as director of missions for the 100 Southern Baptist churches of metro New Orleans, **Joe McKeever** retired on June 1, 2009. These days, he has an office at the First Baptist Church of Kenner, where he's working on three books and trying to accept every speaking/preaching invitation that comes his way.*

This article originally appeared at .