



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

This is the Finger of God



An article from the pen of J C Ryle, the first Protestant Bishop of Liverpool, at the time of an outbreak of a cattle plague in England in 1865. It makes timely and interesting reading and provides us with much godly counsel.

Look at the words which form the title of this article, and consider them well. They were spoken by heathen men more than three thousand years ago. They fell from the lips of Egyptian magicians when one of the famous plagues came on the land of Egypt. *Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, This is the finger of God: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said, Exodus 8:19.*

It would be well if Englishmen were as wise as these Egyptians. There is an evil amongst us that demands our serious attention. It forces itself on our notice, whether we like it or not. It has seized the nation by the throat, and will have a hearing. That evil is the cattle plague.

It is a heavy calamity. Myriads of cattle have already died. Myriads more seem likely to die. The loss of national wealth, and the injury to private interests are something fearful to contemplate. It is as bad as if gold and silver were snatched from us and thrown into the sea. A vast amount of property is clean gone and cannot be restored.

It is a widespread calamity. There is hardly a county in England which is not suffering. There is not a family which will not sooner or later suffer. The meat on the rich man's table, and the cheese in the cottage, the milk and butter which form so large a portion of our food, all will be affected by it. It will reach every home, and come home to all.

It is a perplexing calamity. No medicines, or remedies, or modes of treatment, appear to have any effect on the disease. After all the discoveries of science, after all has been written by learned doctors, the skill of man is completely baffled. Even our statesmen and rulers seem at their wits' end. With all the accumulated wisdom of the nineteenth century, we have found a foe that entirely beats us. The curse of helplessness seems upon the land. Now I wish to speak of the cattle plague as a minister of Christ. I wish to draw attention to one or two things which, amidst the anxieties of the crisis now upon us, appear likely to be forgotten. Let members of Parliament view the cattle plague from the political side. Let physicians and men of science propound their theories of prevention and cure. I find no fault with either one or the other. I only ask leave to offer a few thoughts on the whole subject as a believer of the Bible, and as a Christian.

I. Let us consider, in the first place, whence does the cattle plague come?

I answer, unhesitatingly, that it comes from God. He who orders all things in heaven and earth,—He by whose wise providence everything is directed, and without whom nothing can happen,—He it is who has sent this scourge upon us. It is the finger of God.



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I shall not spend time in proving this point. I refer any one who asks for proof to the whole tenor of God's Word. I ask him to mark how God is always spoken of as the governor and manager of all things here below, from the very least to the greatest. Who sent the flood on the world in the days of Noah? It was God. (Gen. 6:17). Who sent the famine in the days of Joseph? It was God. (Gen. 41:25). Who sent the plague on Egypt, and specially the murrain on the cattle? It was God. (Ex. 7:5; 9:3). Who sent disease on the Philistines, when the ark was among them? It was God. (1 Sam. 5:7; 6:3—7). Who sent the pestilence in the days of David? It was God. (2 Sam. 24:15). Who sent the famine in the days of Elisha? It was God. (2 Kings 8:1). Who sent the stormy wind and tempest in the days of Jonah? It was God. (Jonah 1:4).

I count it mere waste of time to dwell much on this point. I cannot understand how any one can be called a believer of the Bible who denies God's providence over this world. For my own part, I believe thoroughly that God is not changed. I believe that He is governing all things on earth as much now as He was in the Old Testament days. I believe that wars, famines, pestilences, cattle plagues, are all His instruments for carrying on the government of this world. And therefore when I see a scourge like the cattle plague I have no doubt whatever as to the hand that sends it. *Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?* (Amos 3:9). It is the finger of God.

Can any one give a better account of the cattle plague? If he can, let him speak out like a man, and tell us why it has come. To say that it originated in another land, that it is not a new but an old disease, that it has done great harm in days gone by, —all this is evading the question. I ask to be told why it has come upon us now? How and in what way can the outbreak be accounted for at this particular period? What possible causes can be assigned for it that have not existed for hundreds of years? I believe these questions cannot be answered. I believe that the only cause that we must come to at last is, the finger of God.

Does any one regard my assertion as absurd and unreasonable? I have no doubt that many do so. Many, I suspect, think that God never interferes with the affairs of this world, and that pestilences and cattle plagues are only the result of certain natural laws which are always producing certain effects. I pity the man who thinks so. Is he an atheist? Does he believe that this wonderfully designed world came together by chance, and had no Creator? If so, he is a very credulous person. But if he does believe that God made the world, where, I ask, is the absurdity of believing that God governs the world. If he allows that God framed the universe, why not allow that God manages it? Away with this modern scepticism! It is offensive and revolting to common sense. They are not to be heard who would shut out the Creator from His own creation. He who made the world at the beginning by the finger of creating wisdom, will never cease to govern the world by the finger of His providence, until Christ comes again. This cattle plague is the finger of God.

Does any one pretend to say that God is too loving to send us such a scourge as this, and that it is wrong to suppose that anything evil can come from Elim? I pity the man who can argue in that way.—Has he children? Does he never correct them? If a wise and sensible man, I have no doubt that he does.—But does he hate them because he chastises them? Does he not show the highest love by checking them when they do wrong? And shall not our Father in heaven do the same? Yes: indeed! God does not hate us: He is a God of mercy and love, and therefore He keeps up His providential government of mankind. There



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is love even in this fell scourge which is now upon us. The cattle plague is the finger of a wise and loving God.

II. Let us consider, in the second place, why has the cattle plague come upon us?

I answer that question without hesitation. It has come upon us because of our national sins. God has a controversy with England, because of many things among us which are displeasing in His sight. He would fain awaken us to a sense of our iniquities. This cattle plague is a message from heaven.

The sins of individual men and women are often not reckoned for while they live; but this is because there is a judgment day yet to come. In that day every one of us shall give account of himself to God. (Rom. 14:12). For nations there can be no future judgment day. The sins of nations are reckoned for in time. Special sins and corruptions in a nation call for special chastisements. I believe that this cattle plague is a special national chastisement on England, because of our special national sins.

The teaching of the Bible on this point is to my mind plain, distinct, and unmistakable. Let any one who doubts it; read what God says about Babylon, Tyre, Egypt, Damascus, Moab, Edom, Ammon, and Nineveh. (Isaiah 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; Jerem. 46:2; 48:1; 49:1, 7; 50:1; Nahum 3:1). Let him read such texts as these,—*The eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful nation, and I will destroy it from off the face of the earth.* (Amos. 9:8). *He increaseth the nations, and destroyeth them: He enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth them again.* (Job. 12:23, and 34:29). Let them study such chapters as Daniel 4 and 5. Surely, if a man believes the Bible, these passages should set him thinking. The God of the Bible is still the same.—He never changes.

Does any one ask what the special national sins of England are? I will mention some which appear to my eyes to stand out prominently in this country at the present time. I may be quite wrong. I only give my judgment as one who looks on attentively, and marks the signs of the times.

(1) COVETOUSNESS

The first national sin I will name is covetousness. The excessive love of money and the desire to be rich in this world, are what I mean. Never, surely, was there such a race for riches as at the present day. To make money and die rich seems to be thought the highest virtue, and the greatest wisdom. Yet God has said *Covetousness is idolatry, and The love of money is the root of all evil.* (Col. 3:5 :1 Tim. 6:10).

(2) PLEASURE

The second national sin I will name is luxury and love of pleasure. Never, surely, was there a time when people ran so greedily after excitement, amusement, and gratification of their senses. The many are *lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.* (2 Tim. 3:4).

(3) LORD'S DAY

The third national sin I will name is neglect of the Lord's Day. That blessed day is rapidly becoming in many quarters the day for visiting and pleasure, and not the day of God. Yet Sabbath-desecration was specially one of the sins which brought down God's judgment on the Jews: *My sabbaths they greatly polluted.* (Ezek. 20:13; Nehem. 13:18).



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(4) DRUNKENNESS

The fourth national sin I will name is drunkenness. The quantity of intoxicating drink needlessly consumed every year in England is something frightful. The number of public-houses, gin-palaces and beer-shops in our large towns, is a standing proof that we are an intemperate people. There are more people, every Sunday night, in some London parishes, in gin-shops, than there are in churches and chapels. We are worse in this respect than either France or Italy. Yet God has said, *No drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of God.* (1 Cor. 6:10).

(5) IMPURITY

The fifth national sin I will name is contempt of the seventh commandment. In town and in country among rich and among poor, the tone of feeling about purity among the young is at the lowest ebb. Yet God has said, *Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God.* (Ephes. 6:6).

(6) ROMANISM

The sixth national sin I will name is a growing tendency to look favourably on the Roman Catholic Church. The very Church which burned our martyrs three hundred years ago, withheld the Bible from our people, trampled on our liberties, and to this very day puts the Virgin Mary practically in the place of Christ, is favoured and trifled with by thousands! A judicial blindness seems coming over us. The line between toleration and favour appears clean blotted out. The great desire of many is to "go back to Egypt."

(7) INFIDELITY

The last national sin I will name is the growing disposition to scepticism and infidelity. Little by little, men in high places are ceasing to honour God. Year after year the Bible is more openly impugned, and its authority impaired. To believe the Bible was once a mark of a Christian. In the present day an English divine dares to call himself a Christian, and yet boasts that he thinks much of the Bible is not true. Nothing, I am thoroughly persuaded, is so offensive to God as to dishonour His written Word. I believe firmly that these things are crying to God against England. They are an offence against the King of kings, for which He is punishing us at this very day. And the rod He is using is the cattle plague. The finger of God, I believe, is pointing at our seven great national sins. To say that we are not so bad as some nations, and that the sins I have named are far more abundant in other countries than in England, is no argument at all. We have had more privileges than other countries, and therefore God may justly expect more at our hands. *To whomsoever much is given, of them shall much be required. You only have I known of all the inhabitants of the earth, therefore will I punish you for your iniquities.* (Luke 12:48; Amos 3:2). I might easily enlarge on the points that I have mentioned. I purposely abstain from doing so. I am anxious to make this article as short as possible. To effect this, I content myself with supplying little more than seeds of thought, which I hope may spring up and bear fruit in many minds. It only remains to offer a few practical conclusions.

III. What does the cattle plague summon every one to do?

In answering that question, the reader will distinctly understand that I only write as a Christian minister. Let politicians make the best laws they can to meet the present emer-



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gency. Let medical men use every possible means to arrest the disease, and patiently try every remedy. Let practical agriculturists neglect nothing that may be available to prevent contagion, to diminish liability to infection, and to “stamp out” the plague when it arises. But my stand-point is that of the Bible. In the light of that book I raise my concluding question. What shall we all do?

1. For one thing, let us all consider our ways. It is an age of hurry, bustle, restlessness, and fast living. Railways and telegraphs keep everyone in a state of unhealthy excitement. Now surely it would be well, when the hand of God is stretched out against us, if we were all to sit down and think a little. Are we not all over England living too fast? Would it not be well if there was more Bible-reading, more Sunday-keeping, more calm and quiet effort to serve God and honour Him? Happy is that man, and happy is that nation, that begins to think! For another thing, let us all humble ourselves before God, and acknowledge His hand. Alas, we are a proud, self-conceited nation! We are too apt to think that we English people are the wisest, and greatest, and richest, and bravest people in the world. We are sadly blind to our many faults and sins. Surely when God's hand is so plainly stretched out against us, it is high time to give up this boastful spirit. If there is anything that God hates, it is pride. It is written,—*Pride do I hate.—Pride goeth before destruction.—I am against thee, O thou most proud.—This was the iniquity of Sodom, pride and fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness. — Those that walk in pride He is able to abase.—He that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*—(Prov. 8:13; 16:18; Jer. 50:31; Ezek. 16:49; Daniel 4:37; Matt. 23:12).

2. For another thing, let us each individually endeavour to break off our own besetting sins, and to amend our ways. It is easy work to find fault with Government, and to blame others when we are in trouble. The better course is to look within at ourselves, and try to do our own part to make things better. The sins of a nation are made up of the sins of a great number of individuals. Now, if every individual tries to amend his own life, and to do better, the whole nation will soon improve. The city is soon clean when every man sweeps opposite his own door. For another thing, let us each use any influence we have to check sin in others. The power that parents, masters, mistresses, and employers have in this respect is very great. If all such would exert themselves to check Sabbath-breaking, excess of dress, idleness, drunkenness, and breaches of the seventh commandment, it would be an immense gain to the general condition of the nation. Influence over others, we must never forget, is a talent for which we must one day give account. There are thousands of parents and employers, I fear, who completely bury this talent in the ground. They allow those under them to run into sin, and, like Eli, never reprove them. It is written, *His sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not,* (1 Sam. 3:13).

3. For another thing, let us each lay ourselves out more heartily to do some good in the world. It is a melancholy fact, that the increase of alms-giving in England of late bears no proportion whatever to the increase of wealth. The trade and commerce of the country have probably doubled within the last twenty-five years. Yet the incomes of most of our large religious societies are almost at a stand still. If English people will not remember that their gold and silver is only a loan from God, and intended to be used for Him, they cannot be surprised if God reminds them of it, by such visitations as the cattle plague. The hand that gives a nation wealth is the hand that can take it away.



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4. Last of all, but not least, let us each resolve to offer special prayer to God for the removal of the judgment now upon us. Whatever else we do, let us pray. The Word of God encourages us to it. *In everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God. — Is any afflicted let him pray. — If I send pestilence among my people; if my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.* (Phil. 4:6; James 5:13; 2 Chron. 7:13-14). The presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven at God's right hand invites us to it. He that died for sinners on the cross is sitting there to be the sinners' Advocate and Friend. He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and knows the trials of our earthly condition. The examples of Scripture warrant us. *The men of Nineveh humbled themselves, and cried mightily to God, and God heard their cry. Shall I not spare Nineveh that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left; and also MUCH CATTLE.* (Jonah 4:11). The character of God Himself makes it folly not to pray. *He does not afflict willingly. He is the Lord God, merciful and gracious, shewing mercy unto thousands. Call upon Me, He says, in the time of trouble, and I will deliver thee.* (Lam. 3:33; Ex. 34:6; Psalm 50:15).