

This Plague

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[0 : 00] good evening and a warm welcome to the service this evening it's good to have you with us as we seek to worship god whether you're watching online or whether you're listening on the telephone it's good for us to come together in worship and we're going to begin this time of worship by singing to god's praise we sing from psalm 103 and we sing from verse 8 to verse 13 to god's praise the lord our god is merciful and he is gracious long suffering and slow to wrath and mercy plenteous he will not try continually nor keep his anger still with us he dealt not as we sinned nor did the quite our own for as the heaven and its height the earth surmounted far so great to those that do him fear his tender mercies are we sing down to the end of verse 13 of the psalm to god's praise the lord of god is merciful and he is gracious long suffering and slow to wrath in mercy plenteous he will not chide continually nor keep his anger still with us he dealt not as we sinned nor did we quite a little for as the heaven the earth's tender mercies are in its height the earth surmounted far so great to those that do him fear his tender mercies are as far as he is distant from the west so far have he from us removed in his love the earth such pity as a father a father a father a father a father a father a father a father

He shows the Lord to such as worship him in fear.

Let's unite our hearts in prayer together. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you once more that you've given us this desire and you've given us this opportunity. You've given people the technical skills to be able to allow us to come together in this way with that desire in our hearts to worship you.

And we acknowledge, Lord, once more that you are the one who is worthy of our worship. You are the God who is gracious. You're the God who is compassionate, slow to anger and abiding in love. We thank you that you're the one who does not treat us as our sin deserves. And yet, Lord, we know that we are not treated as our sin deserves because Christ was treated as our sins deserve.

[4 : 29] We thank you that in Christ we are able to find forgiveness. We are able to find grace. We're able to find mercy as we call upon his name and as we look to his cross.

And so help us, we pray, to keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus. Hear us, Lord, we pray as we confess our sin once more. And as we ask that you would cleanse us in the blood of Christ, that you would empty us of all that is of self, and that you would fill us with the Holy Spirit, that we may see and that we may hear and that we may point others to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We thank you that the call of Jesus is a call which is universal. It goes out to the whole world. Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

And we pray, Lord, that in this time, as we come together, that we would know that rest and that peace, that we would know the blessing of being in your presence.

And we ask, Lord, that you would hear us as we continue to pray for others. We pray for those who are going through difficult times in this period of crisis. As we hear in the news of people far from us, even those in the health service who have lost their lives as they've sought to care for others.

[5 : 49] And as we read of names and see faces that we have never met, those who have passed from time into eternity, we pray for families that we have never met.

And yet we thank you as we unite their hearts in prayer. We are able to bring them to you. And Lord, we pray for those who are grieving. We pray for those who are struggling, for those who are anxious, for those who are in hospital beds and who need your help and who may not even have the strength to cry out for your help.

And we ask that you would hear our prayers for so many, Lord, that they would be a turning to the God who is able to hear our prayers and the God who helps us, as we call upon you, in that spirit of humility.

We pray for your protection over those whom you love. We think, again, especially of those who are most vulnerable. We pray for Harrah's house. We pray for Leibaba a care home. And as we think of those in our island here who, if they were subjected to the virus presently, would be so devastated by it, we pray for your protection, Lord, that you would hold back this virus from those who are in these places.

[7 : 07] And Lord, that you would give all those who seek to care for the vulnerable the strength and the protection that they need to be able to minister at this time.

We pray, Lord, also that you would be at work in this time. We see news of so many conferences and camps and events that have had to be cancelled because of the current restrictions. And yet we thank you, Lord, that you're not bound by these restrictions. And we pray that although young people may not be able to come together at camps over the summer period, although your people may not be able to gather in conferences and conventions in these coming times, we ask, Lord, that your word would continue to go forth in power.

And Lord, that you would add your blessing and that many people would look in faith to Jesus. So hear our prayers. Take away all of our sin and lead us and guide us by your spirit as we seek to worship you in spirit and in truth.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. We'll turn now to the book of Zechariah, which we've been studying now for some time.

[8 : 20] And we'll read from verse 12 to the end of the chapter this evening. This is God's word. This is the plague with which the Lord will strength all the nations that fought against Jerusalem.

Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet. Their eyes will rot in their sockets and their tongues will rot in their mouths. On that day, men will be stricken by the Lord with great panic. Each man will seize the hand of another and they will attack each other. Judah too will fight at Jerusalem. The wealth of all the surrounding nations will be collected. Great quantities of gold and silver and clothing.

A similar plague will strike the horses and mules, the camels and donkeys, and all the animals in those camps. Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, they will have no reign. If the Egyptian people do not go up and take part, they will have no reign.

[9 : 31] The Lord will bring on them the plague he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. This will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

On that day, holy to the Lord will be inscribed on the bells of the horses and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar.

Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord Almighty and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day, there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord Almighty.

Amen. And may God bless that reading of his word to us and give us understanding as we turn to it. Again, we'll pray for a moment. Our Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that this is your word and thank you for it and we pray for understanding the help of the Holy Spirit.

The same Holy Spirit who inspired the prophet Zechariah to write. We ask that he would be at work in our hearts and in our minds as we think about these verses and as we seek to understand what you are saying to us.

[10 : 47] So help us, Lord, we pray. We need you every hour and we ask that we would know that you are with us as we meditate upon your word.

And we ask, Lord, not just for ourselves but for every congregation that comes together in this way. We pray that where the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, where Christ crucified and risen is proclaimed, we pray that you would be adding your blessing, Lord, that you would be building your church and that there would be a sense of your glory more and more felt within this land at this time. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. If you can have your Bibles open, please, at Zechariah chapter 14, we come to this chapter and we've read and we'll focus our minds on the second half of this chapter from verse 12 through to the end, which brings this prophecy, this book to a close.

And you'll note in verse 12 that it begins with a reference to the plague. This is the plague is how that verse begins. And that word, plague, would likely have passed us by largely without too much of an impact even a few weeks ago.

But today, that's a word which calls us to attention. You know, we can look back over history and we can read about various plagues. There's the Spanish flu of 1918.

[12:19] 500 million people were infected. About a quarter of the world's population it was known as a plague. We can read about the bubonic plague of 1665 known as the Black Death that killed an estimated 50 million people.

And these are things that we heard about in history but we all never read about them. We could never conceive of them and yet today with coronavirus, COVID-19, I can't help but noticing that it's commonly been described as a plague.

Even amongst world leaders, those in the highest position of politics, they're referring to this as a plague. So right from the beginning of verse 12, the Lord as he brings us to this point in Zechariah, at this time in our history, I think it's fair to say he has our attention.

And there's four points I want to look at this evening in relation to this plague that Zechariah writes of. We'll consider first of all the strike of this plague that's impending here.

The second thing we look at is the symptoms of the plague which are described in the verses. The third thing we'll look at in the time that we have is the survivors of the plague and how one can survive this impending plague.

[13:43] And the final thing we'll look at is the solace that is promised from the plague for those who are turning to God. So first of all, there's the strike of this plague.

Verse 12, this is the plague with which the Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem. And the first question that we would tend to ask here is what is this plague?

We have a reference to the plague but what is this plague that Zechariah writes about? Was there a strand of COVID-19 sweeping through the nations in 480 BC?

Well, no, there wasn't. Because this plague that Zechariah wrote of, it wasn't a plague that he's reporting in a historical way. He's not talking about a historical record of something that was presently sweeping or had recently swept through the nations.

This plague that Zechariah writes about, it's a prophetic word that he's sharing. He's writing about something that was still to happen, something that has not yet struck, but something, verse 12, that will strike all the nations that fought against God and his people, which is what is meant in the word Jerusalem.

[15:02] And so we have the news here of the strike of this plague that was coming. It's an unsettling word that we begin with this evening. It's a word that would have unsettled the hearers when they first heard it around about 480 BC.

And it unsettles us as we give our attention to it this evening. And yet it's a word that we must accept. It's a word that we must not ignore, but must take heed of.

Now we consider this in the context of the whole of the book of Zechariah. We've gone through this in the past months and just happened to come to this point at this time.

But if we were to scan back through the whole book and look at it from a great height, we see in this book that there's such warmth in this book, that there's such patience on the part of God as he calls his people to come to him or as he calls his people who have strayed from him to come back to him. We have picture after picture. We have many visions. We have plain speaking words and oracles. And through them, God is saying repeatedly to his people, come to me, trust me, and I'll bless you.

[16:13] I'll restore you. And that's the overwhelming theme of the book. And it's a book where we see Jesus come into focus time after time.

And as we begin to apply this to ourselves, for many of us, if you think about God's word that comes to us, for many of us, we come to God in response to a warm, welcoming word, such as is the dominant word in Zechariah.

For most of us, we hear the call of God. We hear the warm, welcoming words of Jesus. Come unto me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

And we feel the weight of our sin. We feel the burden of our sin. We hear the call of Christ and we come. It's a testimony of so many. But we know also that there are some who don't respond to that. There's some and it seems that warm invitations don't seem to connect. We flick them off the top of the screen of our lives. We're too busy. We have other things that we're given attention to.

[17:19] So the call of God that comes with warmth, we dismiss it. And so for such, God comes sometimes in a different way with a different approach.

And he comes on occasions with words of warning. And for some of us even, as we may watch this, it may even take a plague to get us to sit up and pay attention to what God has said.

It may take a global pandemic to get us to stop what we're doing and put down our devices and take out our headphones and listen to what God has said.

That's the reality of this. Now, am I saying that God sent COVID-19 into the world because we stopped listening to him? No, I'm not saying that because I don't get to know that. We're not the judge of these things.

And if we think about this in terms of a virus, in terms of a sickness, these are things that did not exist until sin came into the world. And because God is not the creator of sin, God is not the creator of COVID-19.

[18:19] And yet God in his sovereign power can use things like this to turn us around. What the devil designs for evil, God can take even these things and turn them around and use them for good.

Turn them around and use them in such a way that our ears will be open to his word before they were closed. And our eyes will be open to see Christ when before.

Our eyes were full of nothing but this world. And our eyes may be opened to see the reality of the fact that we have no continuing city here. And if we're to have hope, we need to come or we need to come back to Jesus.

So we think first of all about the strike of this plague that's reported here. We'll move from that now to consider the symptoms of this plague. And I almost feel like these next few verses in this chapter should come with a warning.

You know, like sometimes we see warnings flash up on the news before a report is given. This report may contain images or reports that some find distressing.

[19:27] I almost feel like we need something like that before we approach these verses. But the reality is sometimes we need to approach these verses. I've seen footage on news recently from inside hospitals in Italy and Spain.

I didn't enjoy watching that. It was disturbing but the producers obviously thought we needed to have that information and be aware of it. I've seen social media posts and warning posters with disturbing images in past days of what this virus can do if we don't take things seriously.

And to be honest, I'd rather not see these things in some ways. They're distressing to look at. They're distressing to consider but we understand the need for us to see that.

And we understand that when we're given strong warnings like this, they're not motivated by cruelty but they're motivated by care and compassion. And we need to remember as we come to these verses that the God who's speaking is the God of Psalm 103 which we say in the God who is compassionate and who is gracious and who is slow to anger and abiding in love.

He's the God of Psalm 116 the psalm we looked at this morning the God who hears our prayers and who helps us and who went to such expense on the cross to help us. He's the God of John 3 16 who so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but shall have everlasting life.

[20:56] So it's that God that's speaking to us. But what we have in these next few verses are the symptoms of this plague which does lead to people perishing.

And let me be up front here. What we're being given here is a window into hell. We are being given a graphic warning of what it looks like to reject God and his grace and to choose perishing over salvation.

And the three dimensions to this plague there's a personal perishing that's within these symptoms. There's a social perishing and there's a material perishing. So we see first of all here under this heading of symptoms we see that the personal perishing that is warned of here.

Sometimes you know we hear people by way of insult saying to somebody else you can rot in hell. And actually that's the literal picture here. Verse 12 says their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet.

Their eyes will rot in their sockets and their tongues will rot in their mouths. It's the most awful language. It's hard for us to read. One of the commentators speaking of those who reject God said this.

[22 : 08] He said they stood on their feet to oppose God but now their flesh rots as they stand against God. They looked and scorn upon God but now their eyes rot in their sockets.

Their tongues sneered and mocked and cursed God but now their tongues rot in their mouths. And it's a picture of judgment. It's the reversal of what we see and hear in our world today.

We don't have to look far for people who oppose God. We don't have to listen long for those who sneer and mock and curse God. We don't have to look long for those who look and scorn upon God.

And yet as we consider the symptoms of the plague that will hit we see that all those who have stood against God will feel the personal strike of God's wrath against them.

So there's a personal perishing that's described here. And the second thing under the symptoms is there's a social perishing. Verse 13 On that day men will be stricken by the Lord with great panic.

[23 : 12] Each man will seize the hand of another and they will attack each other. I think probably today more than any other time we have a better grasp on the suffering of aloneness of being alone.

this social isolation that we're living through our present it's a painful thing. We long for each other. It's not good for us to be alone and yet that is the eternal reality for those who fall under this plague. There is that social perishing there is that aloneness there is that breakdown of all relationships. At the cultural level we have a false impression of what hell looks like.

We are so often led to believe that it's some dark everlasting debauched party. And that's an attractive prospect to Sam. But even that it's untrue.

Hell is a place of complete social relational breakdown and isolation. One minister a Scottish minister now in America he says this hell is alienation first from God but also from all other human personal contact.

[24 : 22] Hell is aloneness hell is antipathy hell may be populated by a vast company but every one of hell's residents could not be more alone.

Sobering words there's the personal perishing there is the social perishing and finally under this section we see the symptoms here of material perishing verse 14 Judah too will fight at Jerusalem the wealth of all the surrounding nations will be collected great quantities of gold and silver and clothing a similar plague will strike the horses and mules the camels and donkeys and all the animals in those camps and so here we have this picture all the valuable things of Zechariah's they are listed in these verses the things that would be used to measure wealth gold and silver and clothing and horses and mules and camels and donkeys all the animals we have this picture of it all being collected up and taken away and that's what will happen on the day when Jesus returns all the things as the hymn puts it all the things that we wore to own all the things that we sometimes worship and put in the place that

Christ should have all the things that we have invested so much of our lives and when we should actually have been investing in eternity it's all stripped away when the plague strikes these are the symptoms of this plague that Zechariah warns us of so what plague is this well it's not COVID-19 this is a hellish plague this is the reality of what sin will take us to and the symptoms are gruesome and they are never ending and they are hard to look at but we must look some might say well this is very old testament isn't it it's very dark Jesus would never say this but if we look at the gospels Jesus used similarly disturbing language to warn us about hell in Matthew 8-12 he describes it as a place of darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing our teeth in Mark 9 Jesus gives the strongest possible warning about hell he says if your hand causes you to sin cut it off it's better to enter life name than with two hands to go into hell where the fire never goes out and if your foot causes you to sin cut it off it's better for you to enter life triple than to have two feet and be thrown into hell and if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out it's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched not my words these are Jesus words he's saying if there's anything that we put our hand to that is going to take us down the sin's path and on the road to hell cut it out anything that we look at anything that our feet takes us a direction our feet take us to we have to turn from that if we want to avoid the reality of hell and we don't want to read this we often don't want to look at this but we need to look at this so that we will flee from it and be saved and the good news as we go on from this is that we can be saved so we see the strike of this plague that's warned of we see the gruesome symptoms of this plague that is warned of and three thirdly we see the survivors of this plague and we see that from verses 16 to verse 19 then the survivors from all nations that have

attacked

Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the king the lord almighty and to celebrate the feast of tabernacles if any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to jerusalem to worship the king the lord almighty they will have no rain if the egyptian people do not go up and take part they will have no rain the lord will bring on them the plague that he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to celebrate the feast of tabernacles so we ask the question how do we escape how do we survive this plague what is the defining factor what is the key that unlocks the door for our survival and the key the answer to that question is worship there's two categories of people in these verses there are those who worship the king the lord almighty and who survive and there are those who will not worship and who will have to suffer this plague this punishment that's what's been put before us plainly here that was something that was true in zechariah's day it's something that's true in our day and it's something that will be true on the day that jesus the king the lord almighty returns there will be two categories of people those who worship him and who are safe and those who do not and who have to face in zechariah's words this plague and the question that we must bring to ourselves is what group are we in now this is the most important question that we can ever be asked because this is the question that will determine how we spend eternity and even as we consider it there may be some who listen in and who realise as god works by his spirit that we're in the wrong group you might be listening in and you realise in these moments that you're amongst those who do not worship jesus you're not bending the knee to jesus you're not confessing jesus as lord and that is the most dangerous place in the world to be but the good news is that today there is opportunity to do something about that there is opportunity there is an urgency there is a need to repent to turn from sin and to turn in faith to jesus and that comes through in these verses we read in verse 16 about those who once attacked god's people and yet they've changed direction they're now amongst those who worship the king they've now escaped the plague they're survivors of this plague and my mind goes to

[30 : 38] Saul of Tarsus who became Paul the apostle and that's chapter 9 we start that chapter with Paul and Saul and he's holding the coats of those who have just thrown Stephen to death Stephen the martyr and Saul is breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciple that's what it says in that chapter 9 verse 1 but if we go forward just a few verses in that chapter to verse 18 we find that having met with jesus having heard the call of jesus having seen something of the power and the glory of christ by verse 18 he has bowed the knee to jesus he has confessed faith in jesus he is saved he's a survivor of this plague and so can we be if we bow the knee to jesus if we confess him as lord if we turn from our sin and if we look in faith to him so we see the survivors of the plague we see how we can survive this plague and finally we read here about solace from the plague verse 20 to the end on that day holy to the lord will be inscribed on the bells of the horses and the cooking pots in the lord's house will be like sacred bowls in front of the altar every pot in jerusalem and judah will be holy to the lord almighty and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them and on that day there will no longer be a canaanite in the house of the lord almighty you see a footnote in your bible probably had the word canaanite canaanite is a word that's used to represent anyone who is against god those who are morally who are spiritually unclean and determinedly so in rebellion against god and so here we have this picture and the picture is made all the more powerful and beautiful because of the contrast of all that's gone before it we've seen the horrors in these verses of a place of eternal perishing and now we see the solace of a place of eternal peace we've in a sense as we've looked at these symptoms of the plague been given a window into the horrors of hell and now we're given a window into the peace and the beauty of heaven and we see here a place of holiness everything is holy even the thoughts and the planets the most mundane things it's a place of purity it's a place where there is no sin no wrestle within us and around us with the sin that we struggle with that we are daily repenting of there's no satanic attacks there's no sickness there's no death in this place there's no division in this place but there's perfect unity and peace and all eyes are on

Christ all hearts are tuned to worship King Jesus so as we finish this portion of scripture which begins with the bad news about this plague it finishes with the good news of how we can escape this plague through faith in Jesus and you know the only way that we could escape the plague that our sin deserves was because Jesus did not escape the plague every gruesome dimension of the plague and the symptoms of it that we saw the physical pain the spiritual pain the isolation the stripped down poverty Christ suffered and he suffered it for us on the cross that place where he the

man of sorrows experienced the most excruciating suffering that place where he tried out in that moment of isolation and desolation my God my God why have you forsaken that place where he the king of kings was humbled to the point of coming under the curse of God stripped down made sin for us he suffered it all on the cross and so our salvation it's not about us and what we are doing it's a mistake we so often make it's not about us and what we are doing in terms of our religious activities and our good works our salvation our solace from the plague our surviving the plague our salvation from sin it's about Christ and what he has done on our behalf it's about whether or not we are trusting in his finished work it's about whether or not we will bow in worship before him our heavenly father we pray that you would enable us to understand that you would enable us to take this in help us we pray to see the urgency and the seriousness of being without christ and on the track where this plague that Zechariah writes of will hit thank you that we live today in a day of grace and a day of opportunity thank you for the words that we so often remember today is the day of salvation so help us we pray today if we hear your voice not to harden our hearts but to bow before king jesus and to ask for the forgiveness for the grace that he is so willing to give and we pray these things in jesus name amen we'll conclude by saying the final hymn and i want to just highlight the final verse of this hymn which gives us again a window into heaven i long to be where the praise is never ending yearn to dwell where the glory never fades where countless worshippers will share one song and cries of worthy will honour the land beautiful saviour wonderful counsellor and we'll sing these verses to god's praise all my days i will sing this song of gladness give my praise to the fountain of delights for in my helplessness you heard my cry and waves of mercy poured down on my life i will trust in the cross of my redeemer i will sing of the blood that never fails of sins forgiven of conscience cleansed of death defeated and life without end beautiful saviour wonderful counsellor clothed in majesty lord of history you're the way the truth the life star of the morning glorious in holiness you're the risen one heaven's champion and you reign you reign all the whole i long to be where the praise is never ending ring yearn to dwell where the glory never fades where countless worshippers who share one song and cries of worthy will honour the Lamb beautiful saviour wonderful counsellor clothed in majesty lord of history you're the way the truth the life star of the morning glorious in holiness you're the risen one heaven's champion and you reign you reign over all and you may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit be with us all both now and forever open the and all and we