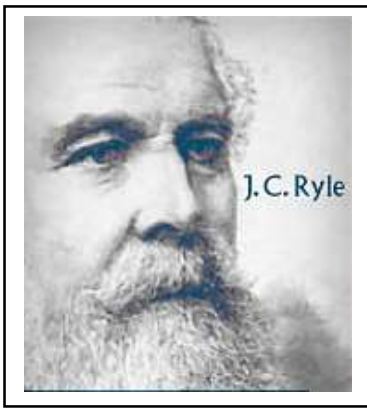


THE FINGER OF GOD.

Introduction: Ancient and thought provoking.



When England experienced a major outbreak of cattle plague in 1865 J.C. Ryle, (1816-1900) later Bishop of Liverpool, drew attention to a factor which most of his contemporaries overlooked. Ryle called people to consider their national disaster as the Egyptians had in the time of Moses as *'the finger of God'*. Ryle called England to consider their national disaster in the same light.

Although the church has often struggled to find its prophetic voice and sometimes makes the comforting love of God a focus at the expense of the holiness or chastening of God, Ryle's address reprinted by Banner of Truth Trust 1967 establishes the principle that calamities have sometimes historically been understood as the judgments of God.

Although Ryle describes a different, yet a strikingly similar world to that of our own where rapid and radical social change is occurring, he humbly admits that he writes as a Christian minister and that his interpretation of the times may be wrong.

While we may prefer to mount a sceptical argument that the current world Covid-19 pandemic reaches beyond Ryle's world and that literal applications of the Old Testament text and references to a *'plague judgement'* are largely irrelevant because we have made scholarly advances in textual interpretation, it is difficult to quickly dismiss the description of sweeping-universal calamities in the gospels listed as signs of the end times. Readers may judge for themselves how far Ryle's words and amazing similarities apply to circumstances of 2020.

Only minor alterations to Ryle's text have been made here beyond the old English context to provide current application. References to 'cattle plague' have been bracketed with 'Covid-19 virus', or 'global pandemic'. Rev E.A. (Ted) Curnow August 2020

"This is the Finger of God"---- J.C. Ryle, *M.A.*

Look at the title of this article and consider it well. These words were spoken by *heathen men* more than 3,000 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."*** (Ex 8:19) It would be well if all people were as wise as these Egyptians!

There is an evil among us that demands our serious attention. It focuses 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 Foot and Mouth Epidemic (Corvid-19 virus). It is a heavy calamity. Myriads of have already died. Myriads more seem likely to die. The loss of national wealth, and the injury of 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 wide-spread calamity. There is hardly a country 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 medications or remedies, or modes of treatment, appear to have any effect on the disease. After all the discoveries of science, after all that has been written by learned doctors, the skill of man is completely baffled. Even our statesmen and rulers seem at

their wit's 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 plague (virus) 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 plague (Covid-19 virus) from the political side. Let physicians and people 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..

1. Let us consider, in the first place, *whence does the plague (Covid-19 virus) come ?*

I answer, unhesitatingly, that it comes from God. He who orders all things in heaven and earth,--He, by whose wise providences 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.* 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, (Sam 24:15) 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 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 anyone give a better account of the plague (pandemic virus)? 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 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 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 Him? I pity the person who can argue in that way.—Do they have children? Do they never correct them? If a wise and sensible person, I have no doubt that they do.—But do they hate them because they are chastised? Do not parents 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 is love even in this fell scourge which is now upon us. The plague (virus) *is the finger of a wise and loving God*.

2. Let us consider in the second place, why has the the cattle plague (pandemic virus) come upon us ?

I answer that question without hesitation. It has come upon us because of our national sins. God has controversy with us because of many things among us which are displeasing in his sight. He would fain awaken us to a sense of our iniquities. This plague (virus) 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 judgement 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 plague (Covid-19 virus) is a special (global) chastisement because of our special sins.

The teaching of the Bible on this point to my mind is 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; 17:1, 19:1, Jeremiah 46:2, 48:1, 49:1, 7:1 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 (global) sins 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.

(At this point, before reading the national sins that J.C Ryle identified, the reader may like to take time to reflect on specific areas where the world community has failed to recognise the justice and love of God.)

(Ryle identifies and lists the national sins of his time in this way, (1) Covetousness (2) Luxury and love of pleasure (3) Neglect of the Lord’s Day (4) Drunkenness (5) Contempt of the seventh commandment (6) Support of Catholicism)

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 us. 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 plague (global virus). The finger of God, I believe is pointing at our national/international 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 here 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 writing 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.

3.What does the plague (Covid-19 virus) 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 emergency. Let medical men use every possible means to arrest the disease, and patiently try every remedy. Let practical (researchers) 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?

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 living too fast? Would it not be well if there was more Bible-reading, more Sunday-keeping. more calm 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 people (of the Western World) 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 fullness 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. 103:13; 16:18; Jer. 1:31, Ezek. 14:49, Daniel. 4:37, Matt. 23:12.)

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)

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 income of most of our large religious societies are almost at a stand still. If 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 plague (virus). The hand that gives a nation wealth is the hand that can take it away.

Last of all, but not least, let us each resolve to offer special prayer to God for the removal of the judgement 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, showing 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)

Prayer.

Almighty God, who orders all things in heaven and earth, and in whose hand is the life of every person and beast, have pity on us miserable sinners, who are now visited with great sickness and mortality--- We have nothing to say for ourselves. We humbly confess that we deserve Thy chastisement, because of our many national sins.---but spare us, good Lord, according to Thy many mercies.

Deal not with us according to our sins. Withdraw from us this grievous plague (virus), and restore us to health. Above all, stir up amongst us true repentance, and increase true religion in the land. We ask all in the name and through the mediation of Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with Thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory. Amen.

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