

"The Great Contagion"

Romans 3:11-18

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April 26, 2020

In this age of the coronavirus pandemic, when the world is facing its greatest crisis since World War II, I have a confession to make. A while back, I suffered from a killer virus SO destructive that it caused me to lose a large chunk of my memory. Now before anyone becomes too concerned, you need to know that it was not me but rather my COMPUTER that was infected- I picked it up off the internet and it silently and quickly spread throughout my hard drive, eventually contaminating files, many software applications, and even the memory that boots the computer up, making it impossible for me to access my records. I was thus forced to take the most drastic act one can think of- I had to format or completely erase the contents of my hard disk and start all over again. That would mean having to reinstall each piece of software, bit by bit, costing me a lot of additional time and work. Only then could I be confident that the killer virus, coursing through my computer's system, had been fully eradicated. A radical event required a radical remedy!

But contending with a computer virus is MINOR when compared to ANOTHER contagion, one even MORE insidious and destructive than the Spanish Flu, AIDS, and the coronavirus COMBINED. It's a disease that NONE of us can EVER escape- one that the Bible calls "sin." As Paul says in v.23 of our chapter, "For ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." We completely misunderstand and mischaracterize sin when we shrug it off as a small mistake or minor indiscretion or some ethical failure; sin is so much more serious than violating some conventional law or code- legal or moral. To say, as the Bible maintains, that the world is "under sin" is to affirm that the cosmos and everything in it is BROKEN and that it does not work as originally intended, that chaos and anarchy exist not only ABOVE us and ALL AROUND us but especially WITHIN us. We inhabit a world filled with disorder and destruction but that same disorder and destruction also inhabits US. As Ted Peters, my professor in seminary and the author of *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society*, has described it:

*At the root of all this speculation about original sin is the pervasive sense that things are not the way they ought to be. The world is not the way it ought to be. My family and perhaps even my own soul, my psyche, my inner life are not the way they ought to be. Reality as we confront it from day to day misses the mark. It falls short. It is not all it can be, not all it should be. We feel so estranged from the way things ought to be that we find ourselves tempted toward either despair or aggression or both.*

In the third chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul is attempting to demonstrate just how universal and all-pervasive sin is, that the Jew could not say he was better off than the Gentile as both Jew AND Gentile are under sin. Firstly, he declares the UNGODLINESS of sin. In v.11, he says the sinful individual neither understands nor seeks after God, and in v.18, that the same person demonstrates no fear of God. God's complaint is that we do not really seek him at all, that there is no room for him in our thoughts nor do we love him with our God-given powers.

Secondly, Paul declares the PERVASIVENESS of sin. Sin affects every part of our human constitution, every faculty and function, including our mind, emotions, sexuality, conscience and will. In vv.13-17, he says that their throats are open graves, full of corruption and infection; their tongues practice deceit instead of being dedicated to the truth; their lips spread poison like snakes; their mouths are filled with bitter curses; their feet are swift in the pursuit of violence, and scatter ruin and misery in their path, instead of walking in the way of peace; and their eyes are looking in the wrong direction; they do not reverence God. And thirdly, he declares the UNIVERSALITY of sin: there is no one righteous, no one who understands, no one who seeks God, no one who does good- not even ONE.

According to the Bible, the universality of sin shows itself on several levels. First, sin manifests itself in the world at-large through all the natural and physical forces that surrounds us- in tornadoes and hurricanes, in famines and droughts. Natural disasters are a consequence of a broken world, of a world under sin. Sir David Attenborough, who has become famous for his wonderful nature documentaries, was interviewed some years ago on PBS. He was asked by Charlie Rose what it was that surprised or amazed him most about the natural world. Surprisingly, his response was not how beautiful or how organized it appears but just how VIOLENT it is, that it is filled with all kinds of unconstrained brutality on every level which we tend to deny or overlook with all our rhapsodizing about all the beauty and order we find in it. Savagery for survival's sake is basic to almost every form of life- animal and even plant. For instance, he pointed out how many different kinds of flowers, utilizing their various colors and scents, lure insects to their deaths which they in turn devour. ALL of nature is, as Darwin described it, "red in tooth and claw," filled with deadly predators and unsuspecting prey.

But if sin manifests itself through the chaos and violence of the natural and physical world, it shows itself in yet ANOTHER way- in the PHYSICAL illnesses which afflict us, in the cancers and heart disease that waste our bodies as well as the dementias that waste our minds. In a perfect world--a world without sin--there would be no leukemia or spina bifida, no schizophrenia or Alzheimer's Disease to contend with. To say the world is under sin is to recognize that even our physical and mental disorders stem from the same brokenness that afflicts the rest of creation.

This brokenness, this chaos and corruption penetrates even FURTHER than our bodies and our minds. It lays siege to our INNER NATURES where dangerous forces are in a permanent state of war with each other. The human heart really forms a battleground where evil frequently wins over the good, and where wrong takes precedence over the right. The persistent violence and chaos that extends from North Korea to the Middle East to the murder and drug abuse that tear apart many inner cities clearly testify to that fact. But to declare that sin is in the world is to also confess that sin is in each of US as well, that the twin impulses of pride and self-love infect every one of our thoughts, tinge every one of our motives, and reside in every one of our deeds- even the HIGHEST GOOD you or I are capable of achieving.

More specifically, sin is a state or condition in which we find ourselves estranged from GOD. That the world and everything in it, including ourselves, is broken can be traced back to the fact that our relationship with GOD is broken, and this fundamental break causes OTHER breaks, such as alienation from other people and even from our selves. Those individual and

often subtle acts we call “sins” are nothing less than the manifestation or expression of that estrangement. When we lie, cheat, steal, or kill, these are sins in the sense that they spring from a sinful heart, from desires that are inordinately proud and selfish and at odds with our own best interests. Our sinful actions reflect nothing more than the brokenness that lies at the very core of our being.

The story of the Fall in the book of Genesis is a profound allegory that tries to show how when the first two humans moved out of a relationship of love and trust with God, the rupture it led to ultimately extended to their OWN relationship and to the rest of creation as well. Like some deadly viral epidemic, it spread throughout the whole earth, producing all forms of chaos and anarchy both within us and without. This sin or brokenness is not only personal but is ESPECIALLY manifested in our relations with one another- in our striving for dominance and superiority over each other, in our insatiable hunger for honor and applause, in our need to aggrandize ourselves at the cost of those weaker or who have no voice. It is EQUALLY reflected in our politics as when we continue to keep certain segments of our society down rather than enjoy the same rights and opportunities the rest of society enjoys. IT IS SIN when we intentionally discriminate against persons on the basis of sex or race or ethnicity or religion or even sexual orientation because it make us feel superior or aggrandizes us at their expense; IT IS SIN when we refuse to extend the poor a hand because it might demand a little more from those who HAVE more; IT IS SIN when our government preaches democracy and yet supports fascist governments when it serves our own interests; IT IS SIN when we decry the ever-increasing spread of weapons throughout the world while we remain the world’s largest exporter of them. Hypocrisy, greed, and arrogance- these are the very symptoms of this plague; they metastasize and spread like a deadly cancer, corrupting and destroying everything in its wake- and it all began as a result of our broken relationship with God. What started as an infection eventually spawned a contagion that coursed through our personal lives, spilled over into our social institutions, and has become full-blown in our economic and political system until the words of St. Paul becomes wholly self-evident, “There is none righteous, no, NOT ONE!”

Albert Camus was a French philosopher and author who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957; he was only 44, the second youngest individual to ever win the award. One of his most important works—*The Plague*--was begun in January of 1941. It is a story about a virus that spreads uncontrollably from animals to humans and ends up destroying half the population of an ordinary town on the Algerian coast called Oran. Published in 1947, it is frequently hailed as the greatest European novel of the post-war period. Seventy-three years after its initial publication, it has become a bestseller once again, flying so quickly off the shelves that bookstores are unable to restock the shelves fast enough. People are reading it to find some guidance for withstanding our current “plague” as Camus’s description of the virus and its effects eerily mirrors much of what we see today.

The book opens with the description of normal life in a normal everyday community. But as the novel progresses, the horror begins. The narrator—Dr. Rieux—discovers a dead rat, followed by another, and then more. Soon, an epidemic seizes Oran with the disease now being transmitted from one person to another, spreading terror and suspicion in the process. However, the people refuse to accept that a plague has stricken them, even when a quarter of the

city is dying; they keep imagining reasons why it won't happen to them. "It's impossible it should be the plague, everyone knows it has vanished from the West," one character says. "Yes, everyone knew that," Camus adds, "except the dead." Eventually, everyone is forced to quarantine themselves and this is followed by overcrowded hospitals, profiteering by plutocrats, shortages of food and medical supplies and, of course, an increasing number of deaths. Eventually half the town succumbs from its effects.

More than a year goes by and the plague gradually disappears. The townspeople celebrate that the suffering is now over with the expectation that normality can once again return to their small populace. But Dr. Rieux knows better, that relief is only temporary; he has little doubt that it would recur again someday, perhaps sooner than later. Camus concluded his book with this word of caution:

*Indeed, as he heard the cries of delight rising from the city, Rieux remembered that this delight was always threatened. For he knew what this joyous crowd did not, and what you can read in books - that the germ of the plague never dies or disappears, that it can lie dormant for decades in furniture and linens, that it waits patiently in rooms, in basements, in trunks, among handkerchiefs and paperwork, and that perhaps the day would come when, for the sorrow and education of men, the plague would revive its rats and dispatch them to die in a happy city.*

Of course, the "plague" that strikes Oran is a metaphor of something much more SINISTER. Vaccines may be created to eventually deal with a contagion's deadly effects but Camus understood the heart well enough to know that there are some vaccines that CAN'T fix what ails humankind in general. He knew that EVERYONE suffers from a "plague" deep down inside themselves and from THIS, there is no serum, no antibodies, no inoculation strong enough to eradicate or protect us from it, that can eliminate all the fascism and evil and injustice in the world. In a speech he delivered at Columbia University in 1946, the author pushed for a post-war healing of humanity, calling hatred and indifference "symptoms" of this crisis. He said, "And it's too easy, on this point, simply to accuse Hitler and say that the snake has been destroyed, the venom gone. Because we know perfectly well that the venom is not gone, that each of us carries it in our OWN hearts."

Camus was an atheist who believed that the finality of death rendered the human condition meaningless and absurd. Because the universe is silent and there is no hope beyond ourselves, he asserted we need to bond together and create whatever meaning and values we can. That must include directing our efforts towards the reduction of human misery through love and respect for each other. As CHRISTIANS, however, we understand how Camus's prescription is NOT ENOUGH, that this spiritual plague requires a far GREATER remedy than human beings can devise or accomplish. As brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, as those who were once dead but are now alive, blind but now can see, the world has become anything BUT absurd and meaningless. To quote Romans again, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Once one has discovered and experienced the love and grace of God, everything is immediately transformed. We now enter into a love relationship with One who could have given up on us, but didn't; who might have abandoned us to our own broken condition, but refused. Instead, God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten son into the world to demonstrate how much he loved us, to show to what lengths he

would go to save us. By receiving our sins into his own body and receiving our judgment upon that cross, Christ delivered us from that fatal infection by taking it upon himself instead. He bore our sin, our guilt, our judgment, and our death, and THROUGH his death, the plague was broken and WE now have life.

You see, when we REFUSE to trust God, when we fail to make him the foundation of our lives and the source of our hope, we then direct our trust towards OURSELVES instead. It is to live life on OUR terms and not on the terms of the One who created us, who loves us, and who has our own best interests at heart. The great German theologian Emil Brunner once defined sin as “defiance, arrogance, the desire to be equal with God...the assertion of human independence over against God...the constitution of the autonomous reason, morality and culture.” At its core, he saw it as nothing less than RADICAL REBELLION AGAINST GOD, for who needs God when we can create and sustain our lives through our OWN efforts- in the end, God becomes superfluous and unnecessary. Who needs God when we now have the capacity to construct skyscrapers- so high that they pierce the clouds? Who needs God when we can blast astronauts far out into the heavens and bring them safely home again? Who needs God when we can split the atom and generate tremendous forces which can contribute to either peace or war? Who needs God when we can engineer the human gene and clone perfect copies of animals or even ourselves? Who needs God when computers take over more of the workplace and are entrusted with making more of the decisions over our lives? Who needs God when we can create new drugs like Prozac and Halcyon to impart a chemically-induced peace of mind? Pride causes us to believe that there is now NOTHING that seems beyond our own, inestimable powers. We’ve pushed God out of the center and off to the margins of the cosmos, installing our OWN selves in his place.

God’s response to all our sin was to send his son to redeem us from its power and overturn its effects. Jesus didn’t die due to our penchant to tell little white lies or for taking improper deductions on our tax returns or for sneaking a glance at the latest copy of *Playboy*. He died because his creation is infected with a dangerous plague that poisons every one of our thoughts and impulses, a deadly contagion at continuous war with God’s own purposes and desires. Like my computer virus, radical sin required a radical remedy and NOTHING LESS than the shed blood of the Lamb of God could possibly save us. Only through that cross could the rebellion be quelled, the insurrection be put down. Consequently, there can never be any doubt as to how much God loves us for it meant sacrificing his only-begotten son that our sinful natures might be transformed and our fellowship with him restored. We now walk through life- no longer ruled by anger or hatred or fear or guilt but with abject humility and a profound sense of gratitude, with an enduring peace and a new-found joy. Our impediments and insecurities continue to fade before the increasing knowledge that we are loved with an everlasting love and that no infection, no epidemic will ever be able to separate us from either his presence or his love again. Amen and amen.