

What Does the Bible Say about Pandemics?

A Summary of Biblical Words for Infectious Outbreaks

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease called COVID-19 has surprised many of us. Yet infectious outbreaks and pandemics are nothing new. They've occurred throughout history and the Bible mentions them a lot, especially in the Old Testament (OT). So, what does the Bible say about pandemics?

Pestilence

English Bible translations frequently translate a related Hebrew word, *dever* (דֶּבֶר), as “pestilence” or “plague.” This word occurs in the OT forty-six times, including these instances: Exo 5:3; 9:3, 15; Lev 26:25; Num 14:12; Deut 28:21; 2 Sam 24:13, 15; 1 Kings 8:37; 1 Chron 21:12, 14; 2 Chron 6:28; 7:13; 20:9; Psa 78:50; 91:3, 6; Jer 14:12; 21:6, 7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 28:8; 29:17, 18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; 42:17, 22; 44:13; Eze 5:12, 17; 6:11, 12; 7:15(2x); 12:16; 14:19, 21; 28:23; 33:27; 38:22; Hos 13:14; Amos 4:10; Hab 3:5.

The New Testament (NT) Greek equivalent of this word is *loimos* (λοιμός). It appears only twice, both in the teaching ministry of Jesus and both referring to pandemic outbreaks that will occur before his second coming (Matt 24:7; Luke 21:11).

Plague

Another more general Hebrew word, *negang* (נֶגַע), also occurs most frequently translated as “plague.” A similar word appears forty-nine times in a verbal form, *nagaph* (נָגַף), and seven times in a noun form, *negeph* (נֶגֶף), meaning to be “struck” or “defeated.” This word sometimes means to be “plagued” or “afflicted” with a disease, though it often means to be struck or defeated through violence or combat (as when God struck Egypt with ten plagues, of which only some were medical in nature). When this word refers to illness, it describes being struck with “a deadly pandemic disease.”¹

The New Testament (NT) Greek equivalent of this word is *plēgē* (πληγή). Like its OT counterpart, it is also a more general word that may refer to hitting or being struck in other ways, including with a pandemic disease – as in Rev 11:6.

Widespread Destruction

Technically, these two words – pestilence and plague – are not the same thing, though they often overlap. Pestilence often refers to conditions like cholera, dysentery, and typhoid, but plague often refers to things like the bubonic plague, smallpox, and measles.² Regardless of these different nuances, both words emphasize the widespread, destructive nature of the disease at hand.

¹ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

² Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Pestilence,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1651.

Why Did Infectious Outbreaks Occur in the Old Testament?

Scripture never portrays pandemic outbreaks as natural or capricious occurrences due to fate or chance. They always correspond somehow to a judgment or punishment from God.³

Pandemics as Judgment for the Nation of Israel

God warned Israel that if they neglected their covenant obligations to him as a nation, he would send pandemic outbreaks their way (Lev 26:25; Deut 28:21, 58-59). For this reason, later prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel mentioned infectious outbreaks frequently.

These men served as “covenant lawyers” for God, prosecuting the defendant (the nation of Israel) for her crimes (violating her covenant with God) and announcing her sentence. Part of her sentence would be widespread infectious diseases, which were intended not only to punish Israel’s sins but to encourage her (the nation) to return to the Lord – which they will finally do in the end (see the upcoming point “Pandemics in the Future”).

Pandemics as Judgment for Israel’s Enemies

God also unleashed pandemic outbreaks on Israel’s adversaries (e.g., Psa 78:50; Ezek 28:23; 38:22). In such cases, he did not judge these nations for breaking a covenant relationship with him because he had no covenants with them – only Israel (Amos 3:2). Instead, he did so to protect Israel, provide justice for the mistreatment of Israel, expunge wickedness, and reveal that he alone is Lord.

What about Pandemics Today and in the Future?

Only once do the gospels record Jesus mentioning pandemics (Matt 24:7 and Luke 21:11 refer to the same discourse). In this case, he referred to the pandemics we experience today.

Pandemics Today

Jesus mentioned pandemics in conjunction with a proliferation of self-declared messiahs, wars, rumors of wars, national and international skirmishes, famines, earthquakes, persecution, lawlessness, and a scarcity of love (Matt 24:4-14).

As believers, we easily mistake these kinds of events and developments as “signs of the end,” becoming anxious or sensational in our outlook. Jesus jettisons this perspective, though, saying the opposite – that when these things happen, “the end is not yet” (Matt 24:6).

Instead, events like this will be (and have been) the regular, recurring pattern for centuries. They are the commonplace experience of Christians from Pentecost until now. Christ calls these events “the beginning of sorrows,” which was “a common Jewish metaphor to refer to an indeterminate period of distress leading up to the end of this age,”

³ Elwell and Beitzel, “Pestilence,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1651.

just as birth pangs eventually lead to the delivery of a child, but with no discernable timetable in mind.⁴

Interestingly enough, Jesus mentions pandemics as a simple matter of fact, but he doesn't give a reason for why they will happen. Since he mentions "the abomination of desolation" immediately afterward (Matt 24:19), perhaps we should view our pandemics as part of God's overarching plan to judge sin and prepare the hearts of all people for his ultimate return, final judgment, and everlasting kingdom before the "abomination of desolation occurs" (see Dan 9:24; cf. 9:25-27; 11:31; 12:11).

This reference to the "abomination of desolation" also indicates that these things will occur not only today, but into the first half of the Tribulation period, which will begin after the church has been raptured from the Earth.

With no clear guidance from Christ, we cannot say for sure why any pandemic occurs. Why? Because neither Christ nor any biblical prophet or apostle gives us an answer. We can guess and we can surmise, but we cannot know for sure.

We are not the nation of Israel, the NT never teaches that God will judge either the church or individual churches through pandemics (the epistles never speak about this), and the pandemics we face are worldwide in nature. Furthermore, we are not at liberty to pick and choose OT promises and curses to Israel from God as being fulfilled either upon the church, the United States, another nation, or any combination thereof.

For these reasons, and maybe more, we should not speculate about the underlying "spiritual" cause for a modern pandemic, neither should we pretend to know the answer when one occurs. By extension, we should also dismiss anyone – a preacher or otherwise – who claims to have the "inside scoop" on why a pandemic has occurred.

We know that pandemics happen because of sin, but who's sin and where? We simply do not know. Instead, we should defer to Moses when he said, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut 29:29). He made this statement in the context of describing the ways that God would bless or judge both Israel and the nations of the world.

Pandemics in the Future

Besides Jesus' reference to pandemics, the only other clear mention occurs in Revelation (Rev 11:6). This case features two men who will be prophetic witnesses for God for three and a half years in the Tribulation period (Matt 24:21), seven years of intense, climactic judgment and purging before the millennial (one-thousand-year) reign of Christ.

In various ways, these two men will resemble pre-church-age figures like Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist. God will give them unusual supernatural abilities, including the ability to invoke pandemics on the world whenever they choose (Rev 11:3-6).

⁴ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 354.

The occurrence of pandemics – in such a dramatic, heightened way – at this point in history (or the future, that is) once again correlates them to God’s overarching plan for Israel and the nations. Those who believe in a pretribulational rapture (like me) believe that the church does not exist on earth during the tribulation but will be transferred to the presence of Christ in heaven before the Tribulation occurs. So once again, pandemics are not directed at the church – they are national epidemics that correspond with God’s sovereign plan for the nations of the world.

In any case, these heightened pandemics (and other cataclysmic events) do signal the end (Matt 24:14-15), unlike the commonplace pandemics that Jesus described, which we encounter in history today.

How Should We Respond to Pandemics as Christians Today?

Thankfully, when Christ taught about the pandemics we would face today, he also explained how to respond.

Don’t Panic

With pandemics and other newsworthy events in mind, Christ said, “See that you are not troubled” (Matt 24:6), and Luke records him as saying, “Do not be terrified” (Luke 21:9).

To be “troubled” means to be “alarmed, disturbed.” It depicts a “state of fear associated with surprise.”⁵ To be “terrified” means to be “terrified, frightened, scared, and in a panic.”

By definition, these words portray something that happens to you as the result of hearing bad news, whether or not it turns out to be as bad as it sounded at first – and especially if it does. Since fear and panic is our natural response, we must watch ourselves carefully to avoid this response. If we aren’t deliberate about it, then we will certainly be afraid.

I like what F. D. Bruner said about the way that Christians should respond to a crisis. He said, “In times of crisis, Christians should be the calmest people on the block because they have a dominical *pax*.”⁶ (*Dominical* means “Jesus is the Lord” and *pax* means “peace,” so he is referring to the peace that comes from having Jesus who is the Lord of all as your Lord. See Psalms 27:3 and John 14:1)

Trust God

Though pandemics and other large-scale threats seem ominous and feel chaotic, we should rest assured that they occur within the sovereign plan of God. The words “troubled” (Matt 24:6) and “terrified” (Luke 21:9) refer not only to fear but to surprise.

When pandemics, natural disasters, unrest, and wars occur (and even stock market uncertainty), they often catch us off guard; but they never catch God off guard. For this reason, we should not be surprised when things like this happen.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 316.

⁶ F. D. Bruner, *The Churchbook* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990). 847.

Christ told us they would happen a lot and he was not alarmed. He taught these things in a matter-of-fact manner, so we should respond in a matter-of-fact way as well. When things like this happen, we know that God is working out his plan.

Increase in Love

When things like pandemics occur, Christ teaches that another phenomenon will be that “the love of many will grow cold” (Matt 24:15). This describes a broad decrease in genuine love not only for God but for one another as human beings. The general trend, literally speaking, will be for brotherly love to diminish greatly – it will cool down. As believers, we should not shrink back into a self-preserving, callous lifestyle with the “many.” We should demonstrate the love of Christ instead and be the few who’s love for God, for one another, and for others in the world (Phil 1:9-11). In times like these, our worship and service to God should increase. Our words of kindness and acts of compassion to others should increase as well.

Persevere

In his teaching about how to respond to pandemics and other newsworthy events, Jesus said, “He who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:13). We call this doctrine the “perseverance of the saints.” It describes the way that true believers don’t bail out because the grace of God is genuinely at work in their lives.

Excruciating, widespread problems like pandemics, famines, persecution, uprisings, etc. have a purging effect. Professing believers who have not truly believed on Christ as God and Savior will slip away (or run away!) from Christ when trials come, but true believers will remain. They may stumble and struggle at times, but they don’t quit.

So, when pandemics occur, persevere in your faith – in following Christ and obeying his commands in private and in public. Don’t quit and even be prepared to die. There’s nothing like a good pandemic to get your heart in tune with God.

Be a Witness

Finally, when we experience widespread difficulties in the world (like pandemics), we should look for ways to be a courageous and compassionate witness for Christ. Christ hinted at this (it was a big hint!) when he said that in the middle of the many tragic events going on in the world throughout church history, the gospel would be spreading throughout the world at the same time.

He said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations” (Matt 24:14). Not long after, he also assured us of his perpetual presence as we witness for him. He said, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ... and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (Matt 28:18-20).

No matter what we face, even if it's a pandemic, let's be calm and persistent in the face of difficulty. Let us continue to represent and present the gospel in a faithful, sensible, and Christ-honoring way.

Some Bonus Wisdom from C. S. Lewis

When speaking about the threat of an atomic bomb, he said this to followers of Christ like himself and even mentioned the possibility of a pandemic as well:

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

— “On Living in an Atomic Age” (1948) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*