

## Lessons from Spurgeon on Coronavirus

**Tim Dieppe takes a close look at how Charles Spurgeon preached during a cholera epidemic and what we can learn about how to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.**

Charles Spurgeon was one of the greatest preachers of the Victorian era. Known as the 'Prince of Preachers', it is estimated that he preached the gospel to over a million people,<sup>1</sup> and personally baptised 15,000 new believers converted under his ministry. He was called to pastor New Park Street Chapel in Southwark, London in April 1854 when just 19 years old. Later that summer there was a cholera epidemic.

### Lessons from the cholera epidemic

This resulted in over 600 deaths,<sup>2</sup> a mortality rate of 12.8% in some parts of the city. Three quarters of the residents of Soho fled the area in one week. I think there is much to learn from how Spurgeon responded to cholera that is relevant to how we should respond to coronavirus today. Geoff Chang has helpfully written<sup>3</sup> about Spurgeon's pastoral response, drawing largely on his autobiography. In this article, I want to look at what Spurgeon said in his sermons at the time to see what lessons can be drawn from them.

### Fear of death

In a sermon preached on 18 February 1855<sup>4</sup> he spoke of the fear of death:

Who is the man that does not fear to die? I will tell you. The man that is a believer. Fear to die! Thank God, I do not. The cholera may come again next summer – I pray God it may not; but if it does, it matters not to me: I will toil and visit the sick by night and by day, until I drop; and if it takes me, sudden death is sudden glory.

On 14 October 1855,<sup>5</sup> in a sermon on Psalm 90:1 he spoke of experiencing God's protection:

Hast thou known what it is to dwell securely in God, to enter into the Most High, and laugh to scorn the anger, the frowns, the sneers, the contempt, the slander and calumny of men; to ascend into the sacred place of the pavilion of the Most High, and to abide under the shadow of the Almighty, and to feel thyself secure? And mark thee, thou mayest do this. In times of pestilence it is possible to walk in the midst of cholera and death, singing *'Plagues and deaths around me fly, Till he please, I cannot die.'*

It is possible to stand exposed to the utmost degree of danger, and yet to feel such a holy serenity that we can laugh at fear; too great, too mighty, too powerful through God to stoop for one moment to the cowardice of trembling.

### Assurance of salvation

On 15 April 1855,<sup>6</sup> he used cholera to illustrate how one can experience assurance of salvation:

You cannot say, can you, that you have all your salvation? But a Christian can. He can walk through the cholera and the pestilence, and feel that should the arrow smite him, death would be to him the entrance of life; he can lie down and grieve but little at the approach of dissolution, for he has all his salvation; his jewels are in his breast, gems which shall shine in heaven.

### Conviction of sin

On 18 January 1857<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon spoke of the conviction that the cholera epidemic brought, but then how

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/who-is-charles-haddon-spurgeon/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1854\\_Broad\\_Street\\_cholera\\_outbreak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1854_Broad_Street_cholera_outbreak)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/spurgeon-and-the-cholera-outbreak-of-1854/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/spiritual-liberty/#flipbook/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/spiritual-liberty/#flipbook/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/davids-dying-song/#flipbook/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/confession-of-sin-a-sermon-with-seven-texts/-flipbook/>

many had subsequently turned away from God:

How many of the same sort of confessions, too, have we seen in times of cholera, and fever, and pestilence! Then our churches have been crammed with hearers, who, because so many funerals have passed their doors, or so many have died in the street, could not refrain from going up to God's house to confess their sins. And under that visitation, when one, two, and three have been lying dead in the house, or next door, how many have thought they would really turn to God! But, alas! when the pestilence had done its work, conviction ceased; and when the bell had tolled the last time for a death caused by cholera, then their hearts ceased to beat with penitence, and their tears did flow no more.

### **'The Voice of Cholera' Sermon**

On 12 August 1866,<sup>8</sup> Spurgeon preached a sermon on Amos 3:3-6 titled 'The Voice of Cholera'. A new epidemic of cholera had broken out in the East End which claimed 5,596 lives.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cleanliness is valuable**

Spurgeon praises advances in cleanliness, better dwellings for the poor, and scientific research which had successfully mitigated the spread of cholera. He criticises those who thought that the disease should be left to its own devices. In a representative section, he says:

It seems to me that this disease is to a great extent in our own hands, and that if all men would take scrupulous care as to cleanliness, and if better dwellings were provided for the poor, and if overcrowding were effectually prevented, and if the water-supply could be larger, and other sanitary improvements could be carried out, the disease, most probably, would not occur; or, if it did visit us occasionally, as the result of filth in other countries, it would be in a very mitigated form.

The gospel has no quarrel with ventilation, and the doctrines of grace have no dispute with chloride of lime. We preach repentance and faith, but we do not denounce whitewash; and much as we advocate holiness, we always have a good word for cleanliness and sobriety.

### **Judgment of God**

But then he goes on to say:

On the other hand, it is even more common for those who look to natural causes alone to sneer at believers who view the disease as a mysterious scourge from the hand of God. It is admitted that it would be most foolish to neglect the appointed means of averting sickness; but sneer who may, we believe it to be equally an act of folly to forget that the hand of the Lord is in all this.

He sees the cholera epidemic as a judgment of God and therefore calls for prayer and repentance for the people of London and the nation as a whole. He highlights four sins in particular that the people of London should repent of: drunkenness, licentiousness, neglect of worship, and Popery in the church – by which he means neglect of the gospel in the Established Church:

In our Established Church the gospel is no longer dominant, albeit that a little band of good and faithful men still linger in it, and are like a handful of salt amid general putrefaction.

And so, making use of his text from Amos:

Can two walk together, then, except they be agreed? And as these things cannot be supposed to be agreeable to the mind and will of God, we cannot wonder if there should be a plague upon our cattle, and then a plague upon men, and if these should come sevenfold as heavy as they have ever come as yet.

Then, interpreting the next phrase of his text to mean that God never speaks without reason, he argues:

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-voice-of-the-cholera/#flipbook/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholera\\_outbreaks\\_and\\_pandemics#Fourth,\\_1863-1875](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholera_outbreaks_and_pandemics#Fourth,_1863-1875)

My brethren, our God is too gracious to send us this cholera without a motive; and he is moreover too wise, for we all know that judgments frequently repeated lose their force... Think you the Lord does this for nothing? The great Lion of vengeance has not roared unless sin has provoked him.

He then challenges the Christians as to how far they have been complicit in the sins he has listed:

Since I have already indicated our great public sins, I should like to ask Christians present how far they have been concerned in them... And so with the other sins which we have indicated. Have we all borne our earnest, fervent protest against them?

Spurgeon uses his text to argue that nothing happens by chance:

God ruleth and overruleth all things, and he doeth nothing without a motive... Let us conclude most surely that a purpose, consistent with the love and justice of God, lies hidden in the present harvest of death.

### **For the spread of the gospel**

And what is this purpose?

If you ask me what I think to be the design, I believe it to be this – to waken up our indifferent population, to make them remember that there is a God, to render them susceptible of the influences of the gospel, to drive them to the house of prayer, to influence their minds to receive the Word, and moreover to startle Christians into energy and earnestness, that they may work while it is called to-day... Already I have been told by Christian brethren labouring in the east of London, that there is a greater willingness to listen to gospel truth, and that if there be a religious service it is more acceptable to the people now than it was; for which I thank God as an indication that affliction is answering its purpose.

### **God has done it**

The final clause of his text is: *'Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?'* Spurgeon argues:

Here is not intended moral evil — that rests with man — but physical evil, the evil of pestilence or famine! Shall there be cholera in the city, and God hath not done it? My soul cowered down under the majesty of that question, as I read it; it seemed to stretch its black wings over my head, and had I not known them to be the wings of God, I should have been afraid. The text talked with me in this fashion: It is not the cholera which has slain these hundreds, the cholera was but the sword; the hand which scattered death is the hand of a greater than mere disease. God himself is, traversing London.

Spurgeon concludes by exhorting his hearers to submit to God in repentance and prayer.

### **Lessons from Spurgeon**

Spurgeon did not face coronavirus, but he did face the deadly cholera. He boldly preached that God was ruling over it and using it for his purposes. He struck a helpful balance between the extent to which we can take responsibility through cleanliness and the use of science, and the fact that God is nevertheless very much involved and using it for his purposes. Spurgeon called the nation and the city to repentance. He urged Christians to be vigilant in protesting about the sins of the nation. He called individuals to repent of their sins and get right with God. These are all helpful guides for how the UK church can respond to coronavirus today.

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