

Dear Friend,

The flu pandemic of 1918-19, in a very short period of time, killed between 20 and 40 million people worldwide. “In the two years that this scourge ravaged the earth, a fifth of the world’s population was infected. The flu was most deadly for people ages 20 to 40. This pattern of morbidity was unusual for influenza, which is usually a killer of the elderly and young children. It infected 28% of all Americans (Tice). An estimated 675,000 Americans died of influenza during the pandemic, ten times as many as in the world war (WWI). The virus killed almost 200,000 in October of 1918 alone in the U.S.”¹

The reason I bring up the flu pandemic of 1918 is because, according to public health officials in the U.S. and around the world, there is going to be another flu pandemic. It is not a question of “if” but only of “when.” The news media is now regularly reporting on outbreaks of avian flu in birds around the world. A couple of weeks ago, Oprah Winfrey joined the fray by interviewing a leading infectious disease specialist who described a nightmarish scenario of hundreds of thousands dead in the U.S. and the disruption of the U.S. economy. There is a growing sense of fear and panic as people are stockpiling food and water and antiviral medicines. (It is important to note that not all infectious disease experts are in agreement about the certainty of an influenza pandemic. Dr. Mark Siegel wrote a book, *Bird Flu: Everything You Need to Know About the Next Pandemic*, in which he argues that the only thing we should be afraid of is people fearing a pandemic and acting irrationally.²)

My aim in this article is not to decide whether or not we are going to face another flu pandemic. You can do the research yourself. What I am concerned about is how you and I as Christians are going to respond to the threat of any sort of disaster. I want to set before us as a church the foundation for how we can respond as Christians to this and all threats to the peace and stability of our country or the world.

Recently, in my reading the Bible with my family we have been working our way through the prophet Jeremiah. The story of Jeremiah is not a particularly happy story. He spent his entire life warning the people of Israel and their successive kings that God was angry with them for their idolatry, unbelief and disregard of him and his law. He told them that God was determined to destroy them as a nation. The descriptions of God’s judgment were fierce and unrelenting. Every other religious leader in Israel opposed Jeremiah throughout his life. The people refused to listen to him. In the whole history of Jeremiah’s ministry to his people there are only two people that we know of who responded positively to Jeremiah’s preaching. His assistant and secretary Baruch and then a Cushite named, Ebed-Melech. It is God’s promise to Ebed-Melech, whose name in Hebrew means, “slave of the king” that I want us to consider. The promise is recorded in Jeremiah 39:15-18.

¹ “The 1918 Influenza Pandemic”, website from Stanford University, www.stanford.edu/group/virus/uda/

² “The Next Pandemic: Bird Flu or Fear?” by Terry Gross, hostess of “Fresh Air”, an NPR news program. Reported on website: www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5183999

Let me describe the situation in which God made this promise. The last king of Israel was named Zedekiah. Zedekiah was appointed king by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, as his vassal. In the ninth year of his kingship Zedekiah stopped paying tribute to Babylon and made a treaty with Egypt. The Babylonian response was immediate. They came to Israel and besieged Jerusalem for 18 months. The famine became so severe in the city that the people began to resort to cannibalism.

During the siege, God told Jeremiah to tell the people that everyone who surrendered to the Babylonians would preserve their life but all who refused to surrender would suffer and die. Needless to say, Jeremiah's call to surrender was not greeted with enthusiasm from the king and his officials. He was accused of being a traitor and was arrested and imprisoned, first in a dungeon, then in the courtyard of the palace. He continued to preach while imprisoned and finally several of his enemies persuaded the king to have Jeremiah thrown into a cistern to die. The only person to come to Jeremiah's aid was Ebed-Melech. He went to the king, his master, and pled for Jeremiah's life. The king finally gave him permission to rescue Jeremiah.

Shortly after this and just before the fall of Jerusalem this is what God said to Ebed-Melech, "I am about to fulfill my words against this city through disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes. But I will rescue you on that day, declares the Lord; you will not be handed over to those you fear. I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in me, declares the Lord."

There are several things to observe. First, you cannot imagine a more disastrous situation to be living in than what was going to happen when the Babylonians entered the city. Jerusalem was about to experience a very real catastrophe. Second, Ebed-Melech was going to have to live through this catastrophe. He would witness it with his own eyes. He would not be immune to all the hardships involved in being conquered. Third, God was going to preserve his life through the disaster. He would not be harmed, even while being among a conquered people. Fourth, the reason that he would not be harmed is because of his personal trust in God. Fifth, out of all the people living in Jerusalem, the only person to receive this promise was a non-Jewish slave. In fact, the Cushites were traditional enemies of God's people. The only person, apart from Jeremiah himself and Baruch, his assistant, God specifically promised to help was a Gentile from the enemies of God who trusted in the promise of God.

Ebed-Melech is a picture of the church. We used to be members of God's mortal enemy, the world. Through our personal faith in Christ we have been united to Christ and are now heirs of the promise. According to 1 Thessalonians 1:9 Jesus has come to "rescue us from the coming wrath." Then in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 we are told, "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Just as God promised this believing Gentile that he would rescue him out of the wrath so he promises all who trust in Christ that he will rescue us from the coming wrath. Therefore, when we hear of threats, whether they be the threats of terrorists or of microbes, we should not fear but be courageous because whether or not the threat materializes and

whether or not we might physically perish in the threat, we know that God will rescue us from that final wrath he is bringing on the whole world. As a result we can be courageous and loving towards our neighbors rather than hoarding food and making plans for how we will protect ourselves from our neighbors.

We live in a day that is full of threats to the peace and stability the world. I pray that we will not respond with the fearful behaviors of people who are only hoping in this world but that we will respond with courage and compassion, as Ebed-Melech did when rescuing Jeremiah, because we are trusting in the one who has promised to keep the plague from harming us (Psalm 91:5-6). May we be a people who persist in love for others even while the world crumbles around us because we have heard the promise, “I will rescue you on that day...”

Fighting for courage and compassion with you,