

**Disease, Scarcity,
and Famine**

Disease, Scarcity, and Famine

A Reformation Perspective on God and Plagues

Ludwig Lavater

Translated and Edited by
Michael Hunter



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Disease, Scarcity, and Famine

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To Cornerstone Presbyterian Church
in Ambler, Pennsylvania

*O LORD God, turn not away the face of thine anointed:
remember the mercies of David thy servant.*

—2 CHRONICLES 6:42

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Foreword

As Christians, we too often fall into the trap of believing that no age is as challenging as our own. We look around and see social upheaval, moral confusion, and the ongoing specter of disease, and we think that we are the first to face such things. In our darker moments, we wonder about the future of the church as we consider the threats coming from within and without. Perhaps we even begin to despair. Like Elijah, we wonder if we alone are left.

In light of this common condition, a new translation and publication of these sermons from Ludwig Lavater could hardly be more timely. Our day is one of significant social and political upheaval. So was his. Our time is marked by theological confusion, as was his own. We are confronted almost daily with concerns about sickness and health as we contemplate the risks of pandemic. This was a reality of his day as well. We are presented with deep questions about God's sovereignty and providence, and about the relationship of this to medical expertise and the role of the civil government. There is renewed appreciation—often tinged with dread—of the grim reality of death. These realities are inescapable, and they are ones which Lavater's preaching particularly addressed.

In the midst of this, the volume you hold in your hands reminds us of two key truths. It reminds us first of the perennial nature of the questions facing our society. Questions of sickness, poverty, and death are not new. Questions about the purposes of God in suffering, about the way in which believers should view God's discipline, about how to pray in the midst of a pandemic—none of these are new. Reading through the headings might surprise you. You will see that we are not the first Christians

to ask hard practical questions about life in a pandemic. We are not the first called on to provide spiritual counsel and godly wisdom in the midst of large-scale suffering and uncertainty.

Forgetting this can lead to discouragement. But more than that, it can lead to an embrace of novel, half-baked, impromptu ideas, some barely distinguishable from the commentary that the world provides at any given moment. These Lavater sermons will encourage you by widening your historical horizons. His preaching of sound doctrine provides ballast in the midst of our crisis. We see that nothing we are facing is genuinely new; novelty is not required: “But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of” (2 Tim. 3:14 NKJV).

There is a second and more important truth that these sermons remind us of. To put it simply, these sermons show us the perennial and inestimable value of sound doctrine. Lavater possessed the rare gift of clarity—clarity of mind that leads to clarity of expression. Lavater’s sermons are organized expositions of Scripture and organized expressions of sound theology. There is a logic to everything he writes, and his sermons express what D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, writing nearly four hundred years later, would call “Logic on Fire.” Lavater’s preaching comes from a mind saturated with Scripture and fine-tuned by logical distinctions. This is what clear doctrinal preaching consists of. And while it is impossible today to know what his method was in preparing these sermons, the outcome is a model of theological reflection. These are sermons that were tuned to the needs of the day, but since their structure consists of the framework of sound doctrine, they still speak today.

And this is where the real value of these sermons can be found. These sermons are not only historical artifacts that lend perspective, they are the clearly reasoned proclamation of Bible truths. Consider, for instance, how Lavater applied the lessons of disease to his own day by reading a sampling of headings from one part of just one of his sermons, this one dealing with pestilence (disease). His main points are God-centered and thoughtful. They include: “God Invites Us to Repentance by Disease,” “God Tests Us by Disease,” “God Teaches Us to Despise the World by Disease,” “God Rouses Us to Greater Ardor by Disease,” and “God Wants Us to See the Truth of His Predictions by Disease.”

Compare these headings with the kind of preaching normally found in our churches today. Each of Lavater's main points is theocentric, recognizing and acknowledging that God is the one who must be kept in view in all circumstances. Each is sober and serious, in some sense implicitly acknowledging both the gravity of the situation and the enormity of the privilege of knowing God in the midst of it. And each of these headings is intensely practical. Even without reading his exposition on these themes, we cannot miss the fact that Lavater is proclaiming a great and sovereign God, and he is preaching to real men and women seeking the spiritual help that rich doctrine provides.

As you read these sermons preached and published hundreds of years ago, reflect in your own day on the rich doctrine of God's Word. Stop and consider again how the doctrines that Ludwig Lavater proclaimed faithfully in the midst of his challenging times might be similarly applied in the sometimes vexing days in which we live.

—Rev. Jonathan Master
President, Greenville Presbyterian
Theological Seminary
July 1, 2020

Translator's Preface

The book you hold contains English translations of four sermons by Ludwig Lavater (1527–1586), a Swiss Reformed pastor and theologian who in the final two years of his life served as the Antistes, or chief minister, of the church in Zürich, following Huldrych Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger (Lavater's father-in-law), and Rudolf Gwalther in the position. The first of these sermons was originally produced in German in the 1560s, and in 1586 Johannes Pontisella translated the sermon into Latin.¹ The three sermons on scarcity and famine were also originally produced in German in the early 1570s and translated (probably by Pontisella, though the text does not identify the translator) from German into Latin in 1587.² This English translation is based on the Latin translations. Apart from a book published in 1596 titled *Three Christian Sermons made by Lodovike Lavatere, Minister of Zuricke in Helvetia, of Famine and Dearth of Victuals*,³

1. Ludovicus Lavaterus, *De Pestilentia Concio* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1586). The original German version is Ludovicus Lavaterus, *Von der Pestilentz: zwo Predginen: die ein vom Ursprung der Pestilentz, wohar die sye, item warumb sy regiere unnd wie man sich darinnen halten solle: die ander dess säligen Bischoffs und Martyrers Cypriani von jm zuo Carthago, als auch ein grosser sterbend was, gethan, zuo unser Zyt gantz notwändig und trostlich zeläsen / beschriben durch Ludwigen Lafater, Dienern der Kilchen zuo Zürich* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1564).

2. Ludovicus Lavaterus, *De Caritate Annonae ac Fame Conciones Tres* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1587). The original German version is Ludovicus Lavaterus, *Von Thüwre und Hunger dry Predigen / uss dem 6. Cap. dess anderen Buochs Paralipom oder der Chronick geprediget und volgendts zur Leer und zum Trost beschriben durch Ludwig Lavater, Diener der Kyrchen zuo Zürich* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1571).

3. Ludovicus Lavaterus, *Three Christian Sermons Made by Lodovike Lavatere*,

which is a very loose translation of the sermons on famine that omits significant portions of material from the 1587 Latin edition, this is the only translation of these sermons published in English. I expect that this book will be useful both to students of church history and to Christians, especially pastors, who are trying to think biblically about disease and economic hardship.

It is difficult to describe one's approach to translation without oversimplifying. I have sought to remain reasonably close to the vocabulary and syntax of the original text, though where I believe clarity and accuracy demand I have been more flexible. I have translated some frequently occurring words in the same way throughout, but, again, only as far as clarity of expression allowed.

Regarding Scripture citations, the King James Version informed my translation, though I did not strictly follow any Bible version, especially where Lavater's citations depart from any other version of which I am aware.

Greek and Hebrew text appears occasionally in the sermons. I have translated the Greek text wherever it appears in the original, but I have kept the Greek word or phrase in parentheses following the translation. If Lavater translates the Greek, then I have not placed the Greek text in parentheses. Wherever the original text contains Hebrew, Lavater translates it. The Hebrew text of the original does not contain vowel points, and I have not included vowel points in the reproduction of the Hebrew here. On rare occasions I have left the Latin, when the text indicates a common expression or refers to an ancient Roman office or to a legal concept. I have translated these Latin terms or phrases in footnotes and have provided some explanation.

Not all the paragraph divisions are original. Nearly all the subheadings are original, and where they are not, I have indicated this in a footnote. Wherever the original text includes a subheading in the margins that is a Bible reference, I have merely included the reference in parentheses in the body of the text, not as a separate subheading.

The editor(s) of the Latin editions of these sermons inserted material that was not original to the sermons. For example, he (or they) will occasionally cite one of Lavater's commentaries to demonstrate or confirm a point in the sermon. Where the editorial comments introducing and concluding these citations are clear, I have italicized them.

All footnotes are mine. In the footnotes, I have noted wherever I emended the text, and I have occasionally noted some typographical errors or citation errors in the original text. But this is not a critical translation and so does not contain comprehensive critical notes. Other footnotes are explanatory. Yet others are references to extrabiblical books. If the reference occurs in the original text, I have added a footnote if the original text does not contain a reference to the chapter (or some smaller division) being cited. My citations of classical sources accord with modern citation conventions, typically those provided in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. The footnotes also contain Scripture references wherever the text contains a direct quotation, reference, or obvious allusion to Scripture. Again, these footnote references are only included if there is no reference to the chapter (or some smaller division) from the which the quote or allusion is taken in the body of the text. All textual references except those in the footnotes are original.

I have also provided a bibliography, Scripture index, and an index of ancient sources at the end of the volume. The bibliography of early modern sources (and the early modern works cited in the footnotes) are not necessarily the versions of these texts that Lavater used, though they are all from the period in which he was writing. I have modernized the place names in the publication information for the early modern sources. The index of ancient sources provides Latin titles and English titles, though I have translated all titles into English in the body of the work. For works written in Greek, I have provided the Latin title if the work is commonly identified by the Latin title; otherwise, I have included the Greek title alongside the English. For those works that are almost exclusively identified by one title, I have not provided an English equivalent. Throughout the work, I have tried to identify the sources to which Lavater refers. Where I have been unable to do so, I have included what information was available in the index.

I hope that Lavater's sermons will lift the reader's eyes to heavenly things and that the aids provided here may open to the reader a window into the world of Reformation Zürich.

—Michael Hunter
Kernersville, North Carolina
July 9, 2020

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I am immensely grateful to all those who supported this project in various ways. First, the people of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church in Ambler, Pennsylvania, to whom this book is dedicated, have been a constant source of encouragement, not only in my translation work, but in every area of life. It appears circumstances will prevent us from seeing each other at least in the near future, but I look forward to seeing you all again, in this life or the next. Rev. Jonathan Master not only faithfully served as our ministerial adviser for almost two years, but also regularly expressed interest in my translation work, helped to find a publisher for the book, graciously wrote the foreword, and patiently endured my many emails. Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary will be blessed to have him as its new president. I want to thank Thomas Roof, Jesse Light, and Shawn Ghazanfari for their steadfast friendship and prayers, including for this translation; life and labor are more pleasant because of them. Several faculty members at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia have encouraged my Latin projects. Especially notable is Dr. Jonathan Gibson, who introduced me to the writings of Ludwig Lavater during our work on *Reformation Worship* (New Growth, 2018). Many thanks also to the people at Reformation Heritage Books, particularly Dr. Joel Beeke, Dr. Jay Collier, and Dr. Drew McGinnis. It was a delight to work with them. Drew was especially invaluable in editing the manuscript. Finally, I cannot adequately express the thanks due to my parents. They have helped me more than anyone else could, other than the Lord. Now may this translation kindle in all of you a desire for the future life, when “we will enjoy all the fullness of good things in the presence of the One and Triune God.”

A Sermon on Pestilence

Dedicatory Epistle

To his very honorable lord and neighbor,
Lord Johannes Niger Minutius, of truly noble birth and virtue,
descended from the ancient race of the Castelmurs

So far several books written by different authors have come out which carefully discuss remedies that they can apply either to prevent or even to drive out disease. And although some handle these things more accurately than others, nevertheless, all deserve their own praise, because they have made every effort, according to each one's ability, to preserve and extend men's health. But to be sure one might wonder, not without good reason, that very few commentaries have been published (though this was especially necessary) in which it is shown from the sacred books of the Old and New Testaments what our responsibility and duty is when disease arises. When the reverend man, Ludwig Lavater, a man born to strengthen the souls of the weaker, saw this, he wrote a homily twenty years ago, in which he quite briefly but judiciously taught how each and every person should conduct himself when God sends disease against us because of our sins. And he saw to it that this was afterward published with a very grave and very brilliant sermon adjoined, which that blessed martyr of Christ, Cyprian, delivered on mortality in a time of famine at Alexandria.

When I perceived that because this homily was so highly approved, even by the more learned, it had been excerpted¹ from copies that were divided in two, I, without the author's knowledge, and after the sermon had been altered and inserted into his very learned commentary on Ezekiel, undertook to translate the sermon from German into Latin last November, when the disease had begun slowly spreading among us, for

1. I have emended *exceptum* to *exceptam*.

the sake of strengthening myself. And certainly, I openly and candidly confess that by this work, and especially by the last part of this homily, I was greatly revived, and indeed, only as much as I was inflamed and kindled with a desire for the more blessed life. And when, with the author's permission, I had decided to publish it, the very subject (ὑπόθεσις) of the pamphlet invited me to dedicate it to you, most excellent man. Indeed, two years ago that plague had invaded the main village of Bregaglia, my other fatherland, and most of the more delicate, who believe that they were born for themselves alone, fled according to those familiar, but not at all Christian adverbs of the physicians: "quickly," "far away," and "slowly."² When that happened, you, as though alone of the ruling class, were unwilling to walk out. But burning with that divine fire of charity, as you overcame every danger, there was no duty so vile, so disgusting or nauseating, that you refused to discharge it for the health of your neighbors. Therefore, it seemed to me that I would be doing the right thing if I were to inscribe this translation with your name, and in the same way to commend your rare piety to posterity and to set it forth as an example to the whole of our Rhaetia. It belongs to you to interpret favorably and fairly this dedication (προσφώνησις), received candidly with this mind with which it is made. "As we can, they say, when we cannot as we would."³ But perhaps I will learn that this dedication happened not to be unwelcome to you, and greater things will appear in your name in their own time. Farewell, most brilliant man, and assure yourself that I am properly yours. I desire the safety of Angelica of Stampa, your wife, the most excellent woman, together with the whole little church that is at your home.

At Chur of the Rhaetians, February 24, in the Year of the End Time 1586
 To Your Excellence,
 Most Respectfully,
 Johannes Pontisella

2. See pp. 38–39. The reference is to a popular slogan given as advice by physicians. The slogan "Quickly, Far Away, Slowly" (*Cito, Longe, Tarde*) meant that when plague broke out, residents of the impacted area were to move as quickly and as far away as possible, and they were to delay returning to the impacted area as long as possible.

3. Ter. An. 4.5.10.

A Sermon on Pestilence

by Ludwig Lavater, Minister of the Zürich Church,
in Which He Shows from Where It Comes and Why It Is Sent,
and Likewise, How Those Who Are Attacked by This Disease
Should Conduct Themselves, Translated from German into Latin
by the Zeal and Labor of Johannes Pontisella of Chur

Since indeed God, the most righteous punisher of wicked deeds, scourged very many regions everywhere with disease several years ago and now seems to be threatening us with the same punishment, it seemed to me to be worth the effort, if, since the dispute about whether the disease is contagious certainly must be relegated to the schools of the physicians, I were to adduce a few things drawn from sacred literature (on which we all can solidly stand and in which we all can safely rest both in life and in death) to strengthen the souls of the weaker. For although you may perhaps find several who are supported by their hope in the resurrection and so approach death with great courage and a noble soul, nevertheless, you find that most by nature are terrified of death and tremble at the mention of it. But indeed, so that all our views will be plainer and more perspicuous, first, I will teach from where disease comes (namely, from God). Next, I will recite the reasons why it is sent. Finally, I will briefly indicate what our duty is when disease arises. Christ is the true Physician of souls and bodies. May He direct our pen to the glory of the divine name and to strengthen the faith of the weaker.

From Where Disease Comes

Disease Does Not Rage at Random

As far as it concerns the first part, there is no reason we should listen to those “atheists” (ἄθεοι) who erroneously think that pestilence rages at random and by chance. Indeed, they say that this is long known and confirmed by the whole memory of men, that just as long-lasting war follows peace and calm in affairs, and as a high price of grain follows a low price of the same, so a healthful breeze immediately follows infected air and disease.

God’s Providence Even Extends to Brute Beasts

Indeed, sacred literature teaches that even the smallest things that are done on the earth are ruled and governed by God the Best and Greatest; yes, brute animals too are under His care and protection. David certainly says, “Thou wilt preserve men and beasts” (Ps. 36).¹ And God Himself says in Jonah, “Should I not be moved on account of Nineveh that great city in which there are more than 120,000 men who do not know how to distinguish their right hand from their left, and so many cattle?” (Jonah 4). The pious persistently ask the Lord to protect and preserve their herds and flocks. For they recognize that divine providence extends to brute animals. In Matthew, Christ says, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father. But even your hairs are all numbered. Fear not, therefore. Truly, you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10). But if brute beasts do not perish and are not destroyed apart from the divine will, if not even sparrows, a hated race of birds, are captured or pierced without God’s decree intervening, how would man, for whose sake heaven and earth were created, who was made in God’s image, for whom the only begotten Son of God suffered the bitterest death on the cross, who possesses the sweetest promises of eternal life, how, I say, would he lose his life by pestilence or some other disease, or by some kind of misfortune, without God willing or ordaining it?

1. The text, following the LXX and Vulgate, cites Ps. 35.