

Chapter 55: The Black Death ± 1350

We see a large farmhouse along a lonely country road. Around it, the fields are full of grain, rippling in the breeze.

However, that precious food stands rotting in the field. Among the overripe stalks, we discover new green shoots. The ears show the beginnings of new life sprouting as well.

What a *waste!* Why hasn't that grain been harvested?

Behind the farmhouse is an orchard. The branches of the fruit trees are hanging low, laden with fruit. Apples and pears lie rotting on the ground beneath the trees.

What a *waste!* Why hasn't that precious fruit been picked?



Where are the farmer and his workers? Where are the busy hands to gather the harvest?

We enter the farmyard. A flock of chickens scatter at our approach, cackling indignantly. Beyond that, it is deathly quiet: too quiet.

Where are the people who live here?

Oh, look, over there, by the tool shed! A body lies there, stretched full length on the ground.

Brrr... how gruesome! It looks as if that body has been there for quite some time already.

Why hasn't it been buried? The skin of his face and his hands is black.

Another body lies in the barn, also completely black. Oh dear ... it is the corpse of a young child.

We enter the house. Involuntarily we hesitate a moment. In the kitchen lies the body of a woman,



A body lies there...

also all black! She was the mother. An infant lies in the cradle, dead and ... black.

Awful! We do not meet one *living*, human being on this farm. But how did this happen?

Now we understand why the grain in the fields has not been harvested. Now we understand why the fruit in the orchard has not been picked and lies rotting on the ground. There is no one here anymore to do the work. They are all dead! Quickly we leave this terrible place. We shudder!

A bit further down the road, we see another farmhouse. There too it is deathly quiet. Is everybody there dead as well?

No, look, someone is walking here. It is a man. Sadly and aimlessly, he roams around the farmyard. Nobody else can be seen. This man looks very sick. His eyes are dull. His back is bent.



This man looks very sick

"Sir, where is your wife?"

The sad answer is: "Dead!"

"Where are your children?"

"Dead!"

"Don't you have men to serve you?"

"Dead!"

"Where is the maid?"

"Dead!"

Wearily he points to the vegetable garden. Our eyes follow the direction he indicates, and we discover several freshly dug graves which have been covered again. Hastily, head down, the lonely sick man disappears into his house. We walk further. We pass many farmsteads, and everywhere we find the same oppressive, eerie and deathly silence. Occasionally we see someone wandering around apprehensively.

A bit further is a village. Now things will improve. No, not at all! Here too we find an ominous, quiet atmosphere.

No children playing happily.
It's quiet!
No farmer's cart rattling by, creaking under a heavy load.
It's quiet!

Many houses are locked. The wooden blinds are closed. We still find a few people in some houses, but only very few...

Then we see a woman. Fearfully, with a nervous and terrified look in her eyes, she tries to sneak past us. However, we stop her.

"Madam, where are all the other inhabitants of this village?"
"Dead," she whispers.
"Are there any more people besides the few we can see?"
"No!"
"How did that happen?"
"They all died!"
"What from?" we ask softly.
"The Black Death!"
Her eyes fill with tears; she quickly moves on.

THE FLAGELLANTS¹

We are on a country lane between the peaceful fields. Here and there we see a farmer working silently.

In the distance, we hear a large group of people coming along the dusty track. The work in the field stops for a moment. Weary backs are

stretched. Silently we all watch the procession approach. The workers start to look worried.

Slowly the procession walks past us; they look weird. Naked from the waist up, some men carry a whip in their hands, others a stick. The men at the front carry crosses or wave banners.



Men flagellating themselves. They carry crosses or wave banners

Listen! They are singing! However, it is not a cheerful song which carries across the fields. On the contrary, it sounds sad and depressed. There is nothing joyful about it; it sounds almost menacing.

When they come close, we can understand the words. They are singing 'penitential songs.' The procession moves away slowly and finally disappears in the distance. Sombrely, the listening country people get back to work.

The towers of a city appear in the distance. The procession approaches the open gates. The town bells start ringing. For a while, the flagellants walk silently through the quiet streets. Then they start singing those sad songs again, predicting doom and gloom.

Occasionally they hit themselves on their bare backs with their whips or sticks. Their eyes are full of fear.

¹A flagellate is a cell or organism with one or more whip-like appendages called flagella. Flagellants are also people who flog themselves to move the gods to action.

"What does all this mean?" we ask the onlookers.
"It is a flagellant procession!"
"But why is everyone looking so afraid?"
"They are afraid of the Black Death!"

Maybe you will ask, "But what is that mysterious Black Death?"

The Black Death was a terrible pandemic which hit Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century, around 1350.

The disease originated in China. From there it spread throughout Asia and then to Europe. This terrible disease spread slowly, but it was unstoppable: like a tidal wave.

In the middle East, such as Palestine, the pandemic had raged for some time already. In Europe, the plague first appeared in Genoa (Italy), and Constantinople (Turkey). That is understandable because they were popular trading cities. The merchants there did business with all the countries around the Mediterranean Sea. Consequently, they travelled to places where the pandemic had already left its deadly trail and carried the virus with them back to Europe.

The Black Death went all over Italy, crossed the Alps into Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands and even went as far as Denmark, Sweden and Norway! Yes, a few years later, even England was ravaged by it. The victims numbered hundreds of thousands, even millions.

The plague attacked the lungs. The victims brought up blood and ... died. Soon after their bodies would turn black. That's why they call this terrible plague, 'The Black Death!' Nobody was spared. Young and old, babies and adults, men and women were all casualties. No place was safe. The Black Death invaded the hovels of the poor as well as the palaces of the kings. It killed the heathens but also entered the monasteries and churches.

The fear of death took possession of everybody. Entire villages died out. Often the people just dropped dead on the street. The dead bodies were carted away by the wagon loads. It was



Dead bodies were carted away by the wagon load.

impossible to give them all a proper burial. At times they threw thousands of black bodies into the rivers, where the current would take them to the ocean. In places far from any river, they dug mass graves to bury the thousands of black bodies.

In the Italian city of Florence, a hundred thousand people died. London, the capital of England, also counted more than one hundred thousand casualties. In some regions, more than half the population died.

The pope had all the windows of his palace bricked up, hoping that the plague would stay outside the walls. It didn't help at all. Most of the servants in the palace died.

Hundreds of scattered farmhouses stood empty and deserted. All the inhabitants had died. More than a third of the farms were declared to be 'Wild farms!' That meant that no one lived there anymore.



Deserted Farms

A paralysing fear took hold of all the nations in Europe. They had no idea how to contain the pandemic. The danger of infection threatened everywhere. The drinking water was contaminated. If only the people had boiled the

water before they used it, the virus would have been killed. But they did not know that. The food was often contaminated. The clothes were contaminated. They didn't have the knowledge to be able to combat this virus effectively. In one province of Sweden, only thirty-four out of five hundred priests survived. These numbers of casualties were common across Europe.

In great distress, many fell on their knees to pray to God for deliverance. It didn't seem to help. The pandemic continued unchecked. They tried everything to get God to show compassion. They wanted the misery to end, but they did not truly humble themselves.

They organised large flagellate processions wherever the Black Death raged. They carried crosses and banners. They whipped their bare backs till they bled. They sang songs of remorse. Those flagellants travelled from city to city and from village to village. They were joined not only by the poor people, but also nobles, counts and dukes. The flagellants marched through different countries; they were seen in France, Belgium and Holland.

In their ignorance, these flagellants helped *spread* the plague and made the situation worse instead of better. It often happened that, soon after they had come through, a previously unaffected city counted thousands of casualties. Poor, poor people: they didn't know any better.

In many regions, the grain stood rotting in the field because there was no one left to harvest the crops and pick the fruit in the orchards.

Terrible conditions reigned everywhere. The survivors plundered the 'wild farm-houses.' They looted and robbed freely and unchecked, as there were hardly any authorities left to punish the culprits. Sometimes entire families, bar one or two, died out. The survivors instantly became wealthy as they inherited all the family properties. If no-one survived, everything would go to the church. Life was chaotic! There was hardly any law and order.

Sometimes it happened that ships were stranded on the coast because everyone on board had died.



It happened at times that ships stranded because all the crew and passengers had died.

Without captain or crew, the ship drifted, out of control, at the mercy of wind and the waves. Once beached, nobody dared to board the ship. How terrible!

WHO IS TO BLAME?

The people were at their wits' end. According to them, praying did not help. The flagellants did not help either. On the contrary, unwittingly, they made things worse! The people began to ask what the cause of this plague could be. It had to come from somewhere!

When the Black Death raged in the Middle East (where the Muslims lived) they believed it was the LORD's punishment on the wicked, infidel Muslims. They secretly rejoiced in the misery of these people.

But when the sickness also spread into the Christian countries of Europe, yes, then they quickly changed their mind! Then it was not God's punishment anymore, but the work of the devil, who was trying to destroy Christianity!

And ... for that, the devil used ... the Jews!

The people blamed those poor, wretched *Jews* for all that misery. The story was quickly spread that the *Jews* had poisoned the wells and springs. That's why people got sick. The *Jews* were the cause of the plague, and its disastrous consequences. The people readily believed those vicious, nasty stories.

They began to take vengeance on the Jews. Persecution of Jews raged everywhere; they suffered terribly during those troubled days. In the German city of Strasbourg, two thousand Jews were burned alive by the furious people. In the German city of Mainz, six thousand Jews were burned alive. I could keep going like that. They killed the Jews by the hundreds and thousands.



They tortured them relentlessly on the rack

They tortured them relentlessly on the rack, till they finally admitted that it was true. To escape this horrific torture, they confessed to anything. "Yes, they had poisoned the water, they were the culprits."

Then the foolish people said:

"Don't you see, don't you see that the Jews are guilty? They admit to it themselves!" Then, driven by fear, the persecutions really erupted.

Wherever the flagellants went, they preached death to the Jews. In almost every city and village, horrific massacres of the innocent Jews began. How awful!!! Many people thought that the world was coming to an end! They believed this was the prelude to the last judgment.

Finally, the plague ended. The estimates are that no less than 25,000,000 people died from the Black Death in Europe alone! A quarter of the population had succumbed to it. In some areas, half, or more than half, of the people died.

And... Had the people learned righteousness? Did they humble themselves before Almighty God?

Oh, no! The Word of Scripture, 'And they repented not' was also fulfilled here. They had become indifferent. Shortly after those dark and deadly days of the plague, the people engaged in drunkenness, fornication, and an unbridled passion for dancing.

Isn't the same attitude revealed today? How does the world respond to a pandemic? Do they turn to God and repent from their wicked ways? No, instead of the nations humbling themselves under the all-powerful hand of God, they resist the Almighty One!

But, what about us?

QUESTIONS

1. What was "The Black Death"? List two ways in which this plague was spread.
2. Define the term 'penitential song.'
3. What is a flagellate procession? Why was this done?
4. Why did the people have one answer for the reason for the plague when it entered Muslim countries and another for when it occurred to them? What were their conclusions in each case?
5. Why did the persecution of Jews commence at this time?
6. Did the plague lead to spiritual humility? What was their reaction?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See if you can locate additional information on the spread of the plague. What other things aided in the spread of this disease?
2. Find two Biblical examples to show that man often hardens his heart after divine judgments end.
3. Read Revelation 16. Notice the various judgments which the angels poured out of the bowls. What was the result of these judgments? Was repentance a fruit? Explain.