

A Lesson from Yellow Fever

Written by Steve Marr
Friday, 20 March 2020 17:19

History is a great teacher if we listen.

During the summer of 1878, yellow fever broke out in New Orleans. At the time people didn't know how the disease was transmitted, but everyone knew the disease was deadly. During the initial outbreak 25,000 people departed the city, and 17,000 stayed. Eighty percent of those who remained became infected; 5000 died. Many departed the city because there had been four previous yellow fever epidemics with devastating results.

The fever marched up the Mississippi River toward Memphis. Daily reports came by telegraph. The disease was reported in Grenada, Mississippi on August 9, only 100 miles south of Memphis. However, the Memphis newspaper simply reported:

Keep cool. Avoid patent medicines and bad whiskey! Go about your business as usual; be cheerful and laugh as much as possible.

The people of Memphis, Tennessee experienced the relentless onslaught of yellow fever moving up the Mississippi River between 1855 and 1867 all the way to 1873. Each of these years witnessed the disease as it started in New Orleans and moved upstream. When yellow fever hit New Orleans in 1878, this was only another experience of the same disease pattern. Logic and experience should have forewarned them that the dreaded disease would make another march up the river.

The American Heritage magazine ran an article written by Bernard Weisberger documenting the events leading up to the disease that marched its way to Memphis. On August 13 when the first cases were reported in Memphis and 25,000 people tried to flee the city, Bernard Weisberger wrote:

"On any road leading out of Memphis," one survivor recalled, "could be seen a procession of wagons, piled high with beds, trunks, and small furniture, carrying, also, the women and children." The male refugees walked alongside, either despondent or excitedly shouting to each other. Boats and trains were jammed. People forced open windows and doors and fought their way aboard.

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"The ordinary courtesies of life were ignored," recalled John M. Keating, editor of the *Daily Appeal* and one of several who would write books about that appalling summer and autumn. "There was only one thought uppermost ... an inexpressible terror."

Inside of ten days, some 25,000 people poured out of the city--anyone who had kinfolk or could afford to rent accommodations in places as far off as St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati. Passage was neither easy nor unobstructed. Nearby towns set up quarantines, backed by gun-toting enforcement committees. Many who fled were turned back or forced to camp in the woods. A few unlucky steamboat passengers spent the whole epidemic trapped on board, refused permission to land anywhere. [\[1\]](#)

The coronavirus is different, but we can learn lessons. When the fever started in Memphis, many did not leave the city when the disease was confirmed in New Orleans.

However, as the disease progressed up the river and people remembered their experience from multiple yellow fever epidemics, wouldn't a wise resident want to leave if possible? Those leaving early were able to easily exit and had many choices about where to travel. Those who waited until later, had little or no choice. Those who acted early were in control of their circumstances to a large degree. Those who waited to the end to act either by staying in town or waiting too late to evacuate, were forced to allow circumstances to dictate their fate.

As we deal with the coronavirus, we don't have a roadmap like those struck by the yellow fever would have had from their past experiences. However, we can learn from other locations where the disease has already taken hold. We need to ask ourselves if the disease came to my town, what steps would I have wanted to be already in place? Those who prepare carefully in advance will not have to elbow their way to the front of any line to battle for critical supplies. They will already have put supplies aside when they were plentiful and available.

As Christians take reasonable precautions to be prepared, whether for a pandemic or another disaster. Christians need to be ready to minister and share the love of Christ with others suffering through the disaster.

King Solomon wrote, "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and

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pay the penalty.” (Proverbs 22:3, NIV) King Solomon also wrote, “A sluggard says, ‘There’s a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!’” (Proverbs 26:3, NIV) As Christians we need to maintain an effective balance. While we shouldn’t see danger everywhere and be afraid to leave our homes because of what *might* happen; we need to be alert for all danger, including pandemics.

Coronavirus Business Owner Survival Report

Starting next week I’m doing a 6-week Coronavirus Business Owner Survival Report, more information is available at:

<https://mailchi.mp/christianemergencynetwork/bosr>

With the Lord's help we will get through this together.

[1] “Epidemic,” *The American Heritage*, 1984, Volume 35, Issue 6, <https://www.americanheritage.com/epidemic>