



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 12, Issue 7

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

May 2011

THE GUINEA WORM

Due to the graphic nature of some of the language, the following may not be suitable for all audiences.

The Guinea Worm. Most people have never heard of it. It is also called Dracunculiasis. Some believe it to be the “fiery serpents” of Numbers 21. It is a parasite that has devastated many parts of Africa. Children miss school because of Guinea worm infestation. Farmers are unable to work their fields, bringing about starvation for their families and even whole villages. And yet the Guinea worm is on the brink of being the first parasite to be eradicated, and the first disease to be eliminated without vaccines or medicines (because none work on the disease).

In many parts of Africa, drinking water is contaminated with sand fleas. The sand flea is tiny, and can barely be seen when you hold up a glass of contaminated water. This flea is, in itself, virtually harmless to people. It is what is inside the sand flea that is dangerous. Sand fleas eat the larvae of the Guinea worm. People drink the water from rivers and lakes which house the sand fleas. Once inside the human stomach the sand flea is digested, but the Guinea worm larva goes into the intestines where it hatches. The male and female worms mate and the male is absorbed into the body. As it grows into a Guinea worm the female moves into the joints, usually in the legs. About a year after the person first swallows the host sand flea, the Guinea worm begins its damage. A sore pops up on the leg or foot of the host person. Soon the worm begins to stick out of the sore. As the tail end of the worm begins to emerge, the person begins feeling excruciating pain, like the leg is on fire. (This is how it gets its less common name, which means “little dragon affliction.”) Normally the person goes to the nearest body of water to soak the afflicted part. As soon as the worm is in the water, she lays her eggs, and can do so for several days. The pain goes on for weeks unless one extracts the worm, now like a three-foot piece of spaghetti, which is almost as painful as leaving it in the body. Once the eggs are in the water they are eaten by sand fleas, and the cycle continues. The bad thing for the Guinea worm, though, is that this life cycle requires a human host. Without the human, the larvae never hatch. Without the human seeking relief in the water, the reproductive cycle is broken. And therein lies the cure.

The Carter Foundation has been teaching people in Africa how to eliminate the scourge of the Guinea worm. It does not take medication. It takes retraining. President Carter and his teams of educators have created an essential shift in culture that has eliminated Guinea Worm Disease in almost every country in Africa, beginning with Niger and Nigeria. Not doctors, educators. They teach people to filter their drinking water using a fine cloth. They teach people not to bathe in the source of drinking water, especially when suffering the pain of the Guinea worm, thus preventing reproduction. Convincing people to change behavior, and convincing them of the need to do so, have eliminated Guinea worm infestations in those countries that have allowed the Carter Foundation to do their work.

Sin is like the Guinea worm. It requires a human host. It may lay dormant for long periods of time before coming out of hiding. It causes immense pain, loss of life, and loss of earnings. And it is treatable without medication. It can be ended with education. The results of sin required the death of a perfect savior, but sin itself can be eliminated just by teaching people about what it is and how to prevent its spread. It worked almost two millennia ago, when a group of men taught, and those afflicted asked “What must we do?” (Acts 2:37) A man named Paul taught, and people learned the shift in thinking.

Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:1-4)

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KNEE-MAIL

The United States Postal Service is considering eliminating Saturday delivery of residential mail. They are also raising postage rates. Both of these measures are a direct result of a serious drop in the number of pieces of mail being sent in the United States. Perhaps the biggest reason the USPS is hurting right now is the increase in communication by tweets, Facebook posts, and especially e-mail. We have less to say and are saying it more often and cheaper.

God wants us to communicate with him, and doesn't care that it is not delivered by a postal carrier. God likes to get knee-mail. While e-mail has become ubiquitous, knee-mail should be equally so. There are some reasons people have taken to e-mail over snail-mail. Some of these same reasons may apply to prayer as well.

Short

Before the twentieth century it was popular to publish the correspondence of a celebrity, often after the person had died. Some of the collected correspondence encompasses several volumes. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, letter writing was apparently not considered the chore that it was when I was growing up. The collected letters of John and Abigail Adams, for instance, reveals a couple who communicated with each other frequently and in depth. Of course, this was before the telephone. What would later become a nightly call was

Sometimes prayer is truly knee-mail. While driving, it might not be appropriate to kneel.

carried on through the written word. One reason that such correspondence is valuable to historians is the length of the letters. Much of what we know about the deliberations of the Continental Congresses comes from men like John Adams writing the details of the events of the day to their spouses. We know the personalities of the Founding Fathers of the United States from what they wrote in letters, or what was written about them. It seems that when a man sat down at night to write to his wife it was wrong to write a short note. If he was going to take the time to write, he was going to make it worth the time by writing a long letter.

It is a good thing we don't have to do that with God. Thanks to e-mail we can shoot off a short note several times a day, or an even shorter tweet. Some people

think their prayers have to be long. They wait for the end of the day, and then unburden themselves on God. Maybe they just don't take the time until their set prayer time. Maybe they think he won't notice them if they toss off a one-liner. Jesus talked about this latter attitude. "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him." (Matt 6:7-8) He says we don't have to use long prayers for God to hear us.

When I played Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, I was struck by the man's prayers. Sometimes they were long and rambling (making memorization hard), and sometimes they were spur-of-the-moment comments. Sholom Aleichem's character knew about prayer. Like John Adams writing Abigail, he carried on a conversation. But it was more like an e-mail (or a knee-mail) conversation. When something came up, it became a matter for prayer, whether it were the injury to his poor horse or the nagging of his wife. Maybe that is how we should be with God. Prayer can be a quick comment. You see something beautiful, like the way the sun shines on the mountains through the clouds, a quick "thank you" or "that was nice" might be appropriate. You are running late for an important appointment, maybe a short "find me a close parking spot" is sufficient. There are times for long prayers, just as there are times for long conversations with a significant person in your life. There are times when prayer might be truly knee-mail. On the other hand, there are times when you can't kneel and pour out your life story. After you narrowly escape an accident on the freeway, it might not be appropriate to close your eyes, kneel on the floorboard, and neglect control of the steering wheel. God listens even to your shortest tweet.

Immediate

I was in the U.S. Navy long before e-mail became popular, or even available. (Yes, young people, there was a time BE—before e-mail.) On a six-month deployment, like John Adams, I would write long letters to my wife. Actually, they were long because I would add a little every day until the day we knew mail was leaving the ship (sometimes once a week, or even less often). I would send a letter, and then get two or three from home. Some people numbered the envelopes before sending them, so the spouse could know in what order to read them. It might take a couple of months to get a response to a question raised in a letter. Sometimes I would get an answer to a question I forgot I asked. Sometimes I would get something in the mail the day I sent off a letter that

made comments in the outgoing letter unnecessary. Communication was spotty, at best.

Prayer is not like that. God gets the message immediately. As Jesus said in the passage from Matthew quoted above, he got the message before we even sent it. Nor do we often have to wait for an answer. Yes, some people question whether God even answers prayer, but that may be because they are not checking their knee-mail inbox. It is amazing how often God answers prayer by showing you something in your Bible reading that you had not seen before. But if you don't open God's communication to you, you can't find his reply. That's not to say he only answers by showing us appropriate scriptures. Sometimes the answer comes in a more direct way, either as an immediate yes or no. Sometimes he even slaps us upside the head to get our attention. But he generally answers right away. Maybe sometimes the answer is not immediate, but then we need the patience of a sailor. If the answer is urgent, we will get it right away. But sometimes it is like those letters that crossed in the mail; if we wait long enough, he will have answered by not answering right away. God doesn't use the excuse that "the check is in the mail" because his mail always comes on time.

Not Misunderstood

There is a problem with any written mail, and sometimes even with a telephone conversation. It even comes up, more rarely, in face-to-face communication. That is that communication is not pure. Even in person, what is intended by the speaker is received through the filters of the experience of the listener. The choice of words, even, may not have the same meanings or emotional content to both parties of the conversation. Early in my Navy career it was common for the inspecting officer in a uniform inspection to identify "Irish pennants." (These were strings hanging loose on a uniform, such as the untrimmed ends of a seam.) To most people this was simply Navy slang; to an O'Hearn it was an implication that all Irishmen were sloppy. I quickly expressed my concern, and now the term is rarely used.

When the conversation does not have the advantage of visual cues to the intent of the speaker, misunderstandings happen. What may be intended as a joke may come across in writing as bitter or insulting. That is why the new language of Text includes LOL. That is why e-mail may include emoticons. People want to be sure that they are not misunderstood. (Today some people use LOL so often that it has become meaningless; what used to take an LOL now requires ROFL.)

God always understands our knee-mail perfectly. He has the perfect filter between us and him.

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that

searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to God. (Romans 8:26-27)

God does not need emoticons in our knee-mail, because he sees our emotions. He understands not only what we say, but what we don't say. Sometimes what we say is what we think he wants to hear, but what he hears is what we don't want him to hear. The danger of prayer is that God understands. We can lie to other people, even to their faces. We cannot lie to God. Maybe we don't intend to do so, but sometimes we even lie to ourselves. Our communications to God are not subject to misinterpretation, except by us.

This can be good as well as bad. When we don't know what we want, God answers with what we need. He could even operate without receiving active

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communication from us. Perhaps the communication is more for our own benefit than for his. When we try to communicate we get better at understanding our own needs and desires.

Free and Secure

A few years ago a company called NetZero began with the concept that e-mail, indeed the internet, should be free. Juno offered free e-mail that did not require connection to a costly Internet Service Provider. Before long Juno limited the free e-mail to late-night hours, and then eliminated it altogether. The company that thought the internet should be free now charges for most of their services. (They do offer an extremely limited free package.) When we were deployed overseas into a combat zone one of the perks was sending letters postage-free. While you could say that while we are in this world we are always in a combat zone, communication with God is always free and unlimited. In fact, Paul tells us to take advantage of that benefit of prayer (1 Thes 5:17).

Have you ever received an e-mail from yourself, which you never sent? Have you had your e-mail account hacked? Then you know another advantage of knee-mail. It is absolutely secure. It uses an unbreakable encryption key, known as the Holy Spirit. You can be sure that God does not interpret your prayers as coming from someone else, or that someone else is not praying for something harmful to you in your name.

Much of what we get in our e-mail inboxes is unwanted spam. Some people dread opening their inbox, knowing they have to weed through a lot of unwanted junk. In addition to all the other advantages over e-mail, we are assured that God wants our knee-mail.

ROCK BOTTOM

Have you ever watched an old-fashioned construction site? You know, the kind you see in the movies. They put up a big wooden fence around it, but leave knot holes or even set up viewing holes. People love to watch the progress of construction. The company I work for is putting up a new hospital, and they posted construction updates on Facebook and their corporate web site. Some places now even put up a constant web-feed camera, so you can sit at your computer and watch the construction. For some people the most fascinating part of the job is the beginning. You start out with an empty lot of land, or better yet get to see them tear down an older building. Then they start digging. It can be fascinating watching the hole get bigger and deeper until you wonder how they will even get the equipment out of the hole. A lot of dirt gets removed, and for a very good reason. They have to dig down until they hit bedrock. The bigger the building, the more important that the foundation is on rock. (Well, at least that is what I am told.) For some houses they might be able to dig a trench, lay a concrete footer, and get away with building on that. A skyscraper requires more of a solid footing.

Jesus was not a builder, but he knew the construction business. He knew where the foundation had to be laid.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth

these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Notice that he did not say “if the rains came.” He said they came. It is not a question of whether we will face adversity, but of when. Hardships, trials, and temptations will come. That is part of life. Nor is it what we do when they come that matters. It is what we have done before they come.

Some people have a hard time facing hard times. Having no foundation, they turn to whatever strikes them as a solution. Sometimes it is drugs and alcohol. It may be suicide. These are the people who are sought out by various cults. Sometimes they simply go through a major funk. When the trials come they fall apart, like the foolish man’s house.

It may be significant that after quoting Jesus about construction, Matthew adds, “the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority.” (Verses 28-29) Why would this teaching astonish the people? Maybe it was that their own teachers did not speak about a solid foundation. Perhaps, in the common man’s mind, doctrine had become a matter of situation ethics. Jesus taught that there it was possible to have a solid, invariable doctrine, and that he was that doctrine.

Hard times would come. Like David, we sometimes think we are sinking in the mud. Jesus says, when you hit rock bottom, build your house upon the rock.

Timothy J. O’Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123