

WASHING DEATH FROM HIS HANDS | By Kyle Welch

In 1846, at the Vienna General Hospital, there was a mystery: Women were dying. And not just any women, but specifically, women who were giving birth. Within the birth wards of that hospital, women were dying from an illness known as bedside fever, and the doctors who were supervising them had no clue why this was happening.

Now for the leading physicians at the Vienna General Hospital, solving this mystery wasn't a priority because the women who were dying weren't their main concern. Those women who were dying in their free clinics were often poor undesirables or prostitutes. Their best workers didn't care to discover why these women were dying. And not only that, but the leading physicians of the hospital simply accepted that there was nothing they could do to save the lives of these mothers.

That's why a doctor named Ignaz Semmelweis was selected to oversee the clinic. In the medical community, he was not a well-regarded man. As a Hungarian Jew, he was not respected in Austrian society and could not find a position as a doctor even in internal medicine. The only place where he could find a job was as the overseer of their clinics, serving these poor mothers who were dying at horrifying rates.

But Ignaz Semmelweis was no ordinary doctor. Semmelweis was the kind of person who wouldn't let a mystery go unsolved. He took it as a personal mission to discover why this was happening and to end it.

Now, at the Vienna General Hospital, there were two clinics for mothers giving birth. In the first clinic, mothers were dying of childbed fever at terrifying rates. But in the second clinic, Semmelweis discovered that mothers were doing just fine. This was baffling because the medical practices between both clinics were exactly the same. The materials and tools and techniques of both clinics were exactly the same. Even the religious practices in both clinics were the same.

The only difference was the people who worked in the clinics. The first clinic was run by medical students, and the second clinic was run by midwives. So, Dr. Semmelweis followed the students to figure out what they were doing that was causing these mothers to die. And he noticed something very concerning:

As part of their classwork, the students were performing autopsies on deceased patients and *then* checking on mothers who were in the middle of giving birth. Now, you have to understand that at this time, the world still didn't understand the concept of germs. And so, these student doctors had no problems touching cadavers and then helping mothers give birth directly after that because they had no clue that they were transporting disease and germs on their hands.

But Dr. Semmelweis connected the dots and discovered that the two were somehow linked. So he came up with a solution: He had the student doctors wash their hands. Before working with any mothers in the clinic, the students had to wash their hands in a solution of chlorinated lime. He asked the students to wash the disease of death from their hands before helping women bring life into the world.

You can probably guess what happened: The incidents of childbed fever completely disappeared. This was the moment when the world discovered the practice of washing your hands to prevent spreading illness.

Now, you might think that the medical community immediately adopted this new practice. But actually, the exact opposite happened! Dr. Semmelweis was rejected and mocked for teaching this simple technique. He actually lost his job at the Vienna General Hospital because he insisted that all doctors should wash their hands before working with patients. What's more, he was harassed throughout Vienna for his belief and was forced to move to Budapest to continue his medical practice. He published his findings in 1861, but his views were not adopted quickly.

In 1865, Dr. Semmelweis was actually committed to insane asylum, having been rejected by his medical peers, his friends, and even his family. And while in the asylum, he received a wound on his right hand. That wound was later infected by a doctor in the asylum who hadn't washed his hands, and he died from blood poisoning two weeks later. He died because the medical community rejected the very simple practice he taught.

Twenty years after his death, the teachings of Dr. Semmelweis were adopted by a French biologist named Louis Pasteur who discovered the existence of germs. And after that, the practice of washing hands became the norm in the medical community and throughout the world today. In fact, the reason we wash our hands today is because of the work of Dr. Semmelweis. Due to his care and persistence, the lives of millions of people have been saved throughout history.

It is heartbreaking to think how this one man was rejected by society simply because he wanted to save lives. And yet, this is a story we find so often in history.

In fact, this is the story of Jesus. I am reminded of the story when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate in Matthew 27. Keep in mind, Jesus had performed many miracles in Judea and Galilee. He had healed the sick, fed the hungry, and shown love and compassion to the sinners and outcasts of society. He had come to show others the way to salvation and the road to the heart of God.

And yet, when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, he was surrounded by his fellow countrymen who now wanted to crucify him. Jesus had come to save the world, and now, the world had rejected him. The Bible says in Matthew 27:15...

¹⁵ Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner,

called Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸ For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

If you read about Barabbas, you'll discover that he was truly a violent man. He was a terrorist who tried to lead a revolt against Rome. And while he very likely killed Romans, he also was probably responsible for killing many Jewish men and women as well. This was a terrifying man and someone that you should not release into society.

But look at what happens in verse 21:

²¹ "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

²² "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

²³ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

This scene has always struck me so coldly. On the one hand, the people can choose to save the life of a man who has come to bring salvation and life. On the other hand, the people could choose to pardon a man who has brought death and would likely continue to bring death once he was released.

The choice should be simple. You should choose to free Jesus. But the crowd that day made the same decision the people of Vienna made

when it came to Ignaz Semmelweis: They rejected the one who was trying to save them.

The Bible says this in Matthew 27:24...

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

On that day, Pontius Pilate washed death from his hands. He didn't do it to save anyone, of course. And he certainly didn't do it to remove the germs. He washed his hands because he wanted to show that it was not his choice to execute Jesus. Instead, it was the choice of the people Jesus had come to save.

Jesus indeed was executed. He was crucified on a cross. And after he breathed his last, he was sealed into a tomb.

But three days later, Jesus rose from the dead because death could not keep its hold on him. And because Jesus defeated death in this way, He has opened the way of salvation for all of us. If we place our faith in Him, He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us.

He will make us clean. Through the waters of baptism, He will wash the death from our hands and from every part of our lives and will give us eternal life.

Here is the truth: The world rejected Jesus, and the world will continue to reject Jesus and the message of the Gospel. Because throughout history, the world has always turned away from its salvation. The world turned away from Ignaz Semmelweis. And today, the world turns away from Jesus.

But we bring a message of eternal life, and we must continue no matter the cost. No matter how much the world turns away, we must keep preaching the good news because just like those prostitutes and poor women dying in that hospital, people are dying and desperate to know the truth and life that we have—which is Jesus Christ. Because there is no other way by which we can truly be clean.