

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA

#279

Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with a Hungarian doctor named Ignaz Phillip Semelweis (1818-1865). The following information comes from his biography, "*The Cry and the Covenant*", by Morton Thompson. Dr. Semmelweis was said to have accomplished more for the mothers of this world than any man since Jesus Christ. Sadly, however, his medical discoveries were rejected by his peers.

In his day the finest hospitals lost one out of every six mothers to the scourge of childbed fever. This was an era of unbelievable ignorance. The hospitals were filled with filth but no one associated this with deadly infections. The doctors began their daily routine in the dissecting room performing autopsies on those who had died during the preceding 24 hours. Then, without even washing their hands, they would proceed to the maternity ward and make pelvic examinations on expectant mothers. Dr. Semmelweis made an association between these examinations and the fatal infections which followed. As a result he required all doctors to wash in a chlorine solution when they entered the hospital. Things improved, but when the infections were not completely eliminated he then required doctors to wash after every examination. The doctors rebelled and Dr. Semelweis was fired!

So he left Vienna and moved to a hospital in Budapest. Again he brought in his chlorine basins, and again he was fired. Next he opened his own clinic and kept careful records. In eleven years he supervised the delivery of 8,537 babies. Only 184 mothers died. This mortality rate is comparable to our own. He published his findings in a book titled: "*The Etiology, the Concept, and the Prophylaxis of Childbed Fever*". Again, his evidence was ridiculed and he was rejected.

On June 15, 1848 Dr. Semmelweis spoke to a medical society and said: "*I have now shown on three occasions before this body, that puerperal fever is caused by decomposed material conveyed to a wound. I have shown that it is a pyemia, a pus in the blood. I have shown that a man can infect a woman with this pyemia, and that man can infect another man with it - for so Koletschka died. I have shown that it can arise after surgery as well as after childbirth, and in the non-pregnant as well as the pregnant. I have shown that it can be prevented. I have shown how it can be prevented. I have proved all that I have said with facts, with records, with laboratory experiments and with human beings. I have talked a great deal, but while we talk and talk, gentlemen, women are dying and doctors are killing them. There is no lying-in hospital where women are not dying of childbed fever, and their children with them. And we talk gentlemen. We talk, and talk, and talk. And it is not necessary to talk. I am not asking anything world shaking. I am asking you only to wash. In the name of pity - stop the murder of mothers gentlemen. Wash your hands. Wash everything that contacts a patient. Stop this murder! For God's sake wash your hands!*" Again he was ridiculed and his research was rejected.

He later said: "*When I with my present conviction look back upon the past, I can only dispel the sadness which falls upon me by gazing into the happy future when wherein the lying-in hospitals, and also outside of them, throughout the whole world, childbed fever will be no more . . . but, if it is not vouchsafed me to look upon that happy time with my own eyes, from which misfortune may God preserve me, the conviction that such a time must inevitably sooner or later arrive, will cheer my dying hour.*"

In despair Dr. Semmelweis went to the streets and passed out his literature proving the importance of cleanliness. In a final act of desperation he went into the dissecting room and slashed his own finger and thrust it into a contamination of a cadaver. That's when they led him away to an insane asylum. He died there a short time later with his hand rotting off and the death rattle of a thousand women ringing in his ears. He was only 47. His son Bela was also a casualty of his rejection. Bela committed suicide at the age of 25 despairing that his father's evidence would never be accepted.

Sir William Joppa Sinclair, professor of Gynecology and Obstetrics from the University of Manchester, wrote: *"The great revolution of modern times in obstetrics as well as in surgery is the result of the one idea that, complete and clear, first arose in the mind of Semmelweis and was embodied in the practice of which he was the pioneer . . ."*

This story is not meant to depress you. It is merely a sincere reminder that the "whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 Jn. 5:19). This means, among other things, that we must face the harsh reality that prejudice exists in all walks of life and all levels of education.

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce