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DEVASTATING EPIDEMICS OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE: LEPROSY, THE BLACK DEATH

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The Middle Ages in Europe were an era when devastating epidemics not only claimed millions of lives but fundamentally reshaped society, economy, culture, and the very perception of power and human endurance. Leprosy and the Black Death stand out as the most terrifying medical and social catastrophes of the period, evoking profound fear, stigmatization, and lasting transformations.

Leprosy, caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*, was a chronic infection leading to nerve damage, ulcers, and progressive deformities. It reached its zenith in Europe between the 11th and 14th centuries, prompting the construction of leprosaria (isolation houses). Sufferers faced ritualistic «living funerals,» mandatory bells or distinctive clothing, and complete social exclusion, reflecting deep-seated stigma and fear of contagion.

The Black Death, caused by *Yersinia pestis* and transmitted by fleas on rats, arrived in Europe in 1347 and swept across the continent until 1351. Its bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic forms claimed an estimated 25 million lives — roughly one-third of the continent's population. The pandemic triggered a socio-economic catastrophe, labour shortages that drove unprecedented wage increases, the erosion of feudalism, and social upheaval, including the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Scapegoating also fuelled violent antisemitic pogroms across Europe.

Against this backdrop of widespread suffering, the personal stories of prominent people reveal remarkable human resilience. King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem (1161–1185), known as the «Leper King,» was diagnosed with leprosy in childhood. Despite progressive deformity, blindness, and the stigma of the era, he ascended the throne at age 13 and achieved a stunning victory over Saladin at the Battle of Montgisard in 1177. His courageous rule delayed the fall of the Crusader Kingdom until his death at 23 in 1185. Other notable sufferers included Alfonso XI of Castile, who perished from the plague in 1350, and people whose illnesses shaped royal succession and warfare.

Though centuries removed, these medieval epidemics remain striking relevance today. The Black Death gave birth to systematic quarantine practices in the 14th century. Leprosy continues to affect approximately 200 000 people annually worldwide, and its persistent stigma echoes contemporary discrimination against those with HIV or chronic illnesses. Moreover, the resilience demonstrated by leaders like Baldwin IV offers valuable lessons on the intersection of health, leadership, and empathy in times of crisis.

In conclusion, the devastating epidemics of medieval Europe were not merely medical disasters but powerful catalysts for societal transformation. The enduring stories of King Baldwin IV and other prominent sufferers remind us of human fortitude amid adversity and underscore the timeless importance of public health measures and compassion in overcoming disease.