

SICKNESS

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While on vacation, our child became ill so we had to take our little daughter to a hospital emergency room one evening. As we were being interviewed by a woman to fill out the necessary paperwork, a young man was talking loudly to another man in the waiting room. Everyone could hear as he boldly announced, “You can rebuke that sickness! It’s from the devil! You can cast it out! You can cast the devil out!” Many of the people in the waiting room would glance at the man periodically as he continued his tirade against sickness. The patients and their families pretended to ignore him, but it was plain to see their annoyance and uneasiness.

Many do not have a proper view of sickness nor do they have an understanding of how God uses sickness. If someone is sick, what do we want to do? We want to see them healed, right? We want to see them made comfortable, right? This is human compassion. Yet, believers and unbelievers are alike in this. As Christians, the place to start is not with healing, but with an understanding of sickness. To simply dismiss sickness as being a work of the devil which must be rebuked, as some teach, or to believe

that God desires for all to be healed, as some teach, makes it impossible to effectively minister to the sick.

The Bible presents a very different view of suffering and sickness than those expressed by the “emergency room preacher”. There are lessons to be learned and life evaluations to be made when sickness comes to an individual. We know God is sovereign and has His purposes to accomplish even in sickness. Also, with a biblical understanding of sickness, opportunities abound for the Christian community. Why? Because “everyone” gets sick.

We read of much sickness in Scripture and are taught by the holy words penned therein. We find such remarkable statements as: “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes.”¹ and “Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has struck me!”²

It is important to have a “theology of sickness”.

Job – The Sick & Suffering Saint

The amazing account of Job is the story of one man’s horrible suffering brought on by surprising sickness. By looking at this ancient story we learn much about sickness (and many other matters). Job’s “friends” were certain he was sick because he had sinned – they were wrong. Job was just as certain his sickness was not due to his sinfulness, but he did not know why he had gotten so miserably sick. God had much to teach Job, his “friends”, and us as we consider sickness in the life of the honorable Job.

Job was an extremely wealthy man with a wife and ten children. He was well-known and highly respected by everyone. He was also a devoutly religious man who worshipped God. In fact, he is referred to as being “blameless and upright” three times and was the most godly man on the face of the earth.³ The most godly man on the planet became terribly diseased (and was reduced to abject poverty and privation)! God gave Satan “permission” to inflict Job with a most loathsome disease. Many believe, from the description of Job’s ailments, that he became infected with the worst form of leprosy (or to be more exact, elephantiasis). Job was probably a leper!

Job had “painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head”.⁴ He used pieces of broken pottery to scratch himself.⁵ Job had likely been expelled from the city and lived in a place of refuse (trash). He was so hideous his friends did not recognize him at first.⁶ He had difficulty eating,⁷ his skin was cracked and infested with worms,⁸ he had difficulty breathing,⁹ his breath was highly offensive,¹⁰ he was nothing but skin and bones,¹¹ his skin was blackened and falling from his body,¹² and he ran a high fever.¹³ Job’s horrid disease lasted for many months.¹⁴ By all accounts, Job indeed presents a most extreme picture of human suffering and sickness for our consideration.

Job’s nameless wife advised her husband to “curse God and die.”¹⁵ This godly man refused to dishonor his God even in the midst of such a horrendous testing of his faith. [Note, there is no mention or consideration

of suicide either.]

Job's three "friends"- Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, hearing of his distressful state, traveled to be by his side. Instead of being a comfort to him, they entered into a lengthy debate with the wretchedly sick man. All three argued that Job had committed sin and was inflicted with disease as a punishment. Job, on the other hand, was firm in his belief that he had done no such thing, although he could not explain why such harsh sickness had befallen him. Finally, an arrogant, boastful young man named Elihu entered in argument against Job. He confronted Job and was in agreement with the other three's views, but he made an additional charge against Job. Elihu saw Job's sickness as a chastisement from God because Job had questioned God's justice.¹⁶ Job was not moved by their arguments.

The debate was over. Now God Himself answered Job out of a whirlwind. The "answer" God gives is totally unexpected. In fact, if read carelessly, it seems to have absolutely nothing to do with Job's plight. The Almighty, as Creator, directed Job to consider His creation. He asked Job difficult scientific questions about the formation of the Earth, about the planet's rotation, about the water currents in the seas, about the width of the earth, about light and darkness, about climate (snow, hail, rain, frost, and thunderbolts), about constellations in the night sky, and about rain forming in clouds.¹⁷ God asked rhetorical questions of Job about the mountain goats, the deer, the wild donkey, the wild ox, the ostrich and stork, the horse, the locust,

and the hawk and eagle.¹⁸ God further questioned Job with pointed queries about two other animals. The first is a massive land animal referred to as the behemoth, and the second is a huge sea creature referred to as the leviathan (these are believed to be now-extinct dinosaurs which lived during Job's time).¹⁹ Job had absolutely no comprehension of these things.

What?? How is this an answer to suffering? How does this help Job and help us get God's perspective on suffering and sickness? God had spoken. We are told He is not only Creator but Caretaker over what He has made. The answer to suffering is God's *providence*. He controls and cares for His creatures as He wills. Everything works in creation just as He causes it to work to sustain life and order under His absolute control.

Here are some broad answers we draw from this story about sickness (and it's accompanying suffering). His purposes, which are higher and sometimes unknown to man, are accurately accomplished in sickness. Job had not gone unnoticed or forgotten by Him as he languished in pain. As Creator, it was God's right to do what he chose with Job's life. When confronted by the Creator and His marvelous creation, Job's serious health problems, in comparison, became insignificant and his complaints frivolous. We can draw these same general conclusions about sickness in our own lives and in the world today.

As Job was subjected to this time of intense suffering, there are also some particular benefits to

him and instruction which became evident as a result.

A close reading of the arguments used by the four men against Job indicate they had a humanistic (man-centered) view of things. Their focus was more on themselves and their own comforts than on God and His ways. Like many today, they associated health and prosperity with spirituality. The “friends” thought only in temporal, earthly terms; not in eternal, spiritual terms. To these four, only earthly benefits, like good health, indicated a person was in good standing with their God. Conversely, suffering/sickness was a sure indication that a person was no longer in favor with God. The truth is health and prosperity are gracious gifts from our Creator, not a reward for spirituality. God, in anger, told them they were completely wrong.²⁰

Job, by contrast, had repeatedly honored the Almighty by His discourse. He longed to know God and His ways more deeply. Job made this very clear when he said in the midst of his suffering: “For He is not a man as I am , that I may answer Him, and that we should go to court together. Nor is there any mediator between us, who may lay his hand on us both.”²¹ Where could Job find someone who could bridge the gap between God and man? Job had faith and believed in eternal life. Job made this clear by affirming: “And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”²² He had faith but where was the Book to tell him of the future?²³ God would

honor Job's sincerity.

As a consequence of Job's horrible suffering, it made him long for God in ways he'd never desired before. It made his search for God intensify. This is how God used sickness to personally benefit Job! Finally, near the end of his sickness, Job met his Redeemer. He no longer prayed to understand his sufferings or even to seek healing. In comparison to his glorious Lord, whom he saw and heard, he could only show disgust for himself and his questions. He said: "I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself..."²⁴ He had met his Saviour.

Job had faith before and during his sickness. He had said: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth."²⁵ How did God use earthly sickness in the life of Job to his eternal benefit? Job's faith was confirmed and strengthened and instructed by God through his personal experience of actually meeting and seeing his Mediator!

The Many Benefits of Sickness

I would suggest several ways in which God may use sickness for good as a consequence of someone going through a time of suffering. This is not meant to be a complete listing, but only a short directory of those purposes which seem evident as life is observed and the Bible is read. These are listed in no certain order:

- (1) To humble us and take away pride.
Job is told by God, in the midst of his suffering, that if Job were as God, he could also humble the proud and bring them low.²⁶ We are called to be humble before God and man.²⁷ Sickness may be used to soften us and remove harshness and arrogance in our lives.
- (2) To teach us patience and endurance.
Job is referred to as an example of patience.²⁸ The expression is even used to characterize one who exhibits much longsuffering as having “the patience of Job.” The testing of one’s faith is meant to produce patience.²⁹
- (3) To remind us of death and eternity.
Job’s intense suffering reminded him that he might soon die and that death is the end for all.³⁰ Anytime we become sick we should understand that our sickness may lead to death.³¹ Thus we are forced to think upon our mortality.
- (4) To show us we cannot depend upon ourselves. Job experienced, in his time of sickness, a helplessness where he knew he could do nothing in his own strength.³² Sickness may bring us to the end of ourselves and cause us to be more endeared to others and more dependent on God.

- (5) To draw us close to God.
Job's sickness was so repulsive and debilitating that he had lost all his friends (and even the comfort of his wife).³³ Although earthly relations are meaningful in our lives, we must grope for God and seek Him in a supernatural relationship.³⁴ We may find that our "friends" are fickle when we are no longer fun because we are sick!
- (6) To teach us to sympathize with others.
Job's "friends" who fancied themselves as comforters, proved themselves to not know how to sympathize with the sick.³⁵ When we have become sick ourselves, we have more appreciation and compassion for the sufferings of others.
- (7) To benefit others and expose sin.
Job recognized his friends to be ungodly, and as a result of their long discourse with Job, their wickedness was exposed and they made amends with God.³⁶ Although this was not true of Job, sickness is sometimes the result of sin or God's judgement of sin.³⁷
- (8) To highlight the tainted nature of life.
Job was quick to remind his wife, early in his suffering, that life is not all good. It is a mixture of pleasure and pain.³⁸ The wisest and the wealthiest learn that this life can

often prove to be empty and unsatisfying.³⁹
This becomes especially poignant when health is lost.

(9) To cause us to long for something better. Job clearly expressed, as he suffered, his confidence of a blissful eternity with God.⁴⁰ Through any sickness and afflictions we can have hope which enables us to endure the present and anticipate the future.

(10) To stir us to prayer. Job was restored when he repented and prayed, not for himself, but for his friends!⁴¹ When sickness comes, this is a call to prayer. We are to pray ourselves; we are to seek the prayers of others.⁴² We do not pray as we should so God may use sickness to call us to it.

Some Brief Thoughts On Sickness

God, in His great love, uses periods of sickness, and the declining health and suffering of the elderly, to refine us and remind us of the afterlife. Although sickness is certainly not something to be sought as desirable, it is not simply an evil to be endured until things return to normal. Illness and pain are a normal part of life; sickness does have its benefits. People succumb to sickness all the time and this strikes no one as odd.

Having said all this, questions still remain. Why are not all people benefited by sickness? Why do many

even become resentful and bitter and hateful? Why do many chafe and curse under the heavy hand of God's judgment of their sin? Why do not all grow in humility and patience, and in loving repentance embrace Christ and take comfort in their hope of heaven? Why? Many become sick for a short time, many endure illnesses and pain which nearly kills them, but exhibit no good change or advantage from their ordeal. Why? It is plain to see this is happening often.

I have observed sickness having different effects on people. Many of the sick whom I regularly visit through the ministry I head, who are "laid aside" by poor health, use it as a time of reflection and self evaluation, of prayer and meditation, of godly adoration and communion, etc. They have a sick body but a healthy spirit about them. They are a blessing to others and a pleasure to be around. On the other hand, many others I've visited are cross and complaining, depressed and despondent, easily annoyed and irritated, etc. by their circumstances. I've even visited a few in their homes who rant and curse against their troubles. They are miserable and let everyone know it. Why such a difference in their response to their ailments?

The short answer is — many will not submit themselves to God. The stubborn unbeliever will not acknowledge Him and receives no advantage from his or her unpleasant condition. The untaught believer may not see sickness as a means of maturation, nor even

be aware there is good to be drawn from illness.

Further, the world sees sickness as exclusively a problem to be eradicated by scientific advances. This man-centered thinking (humanism) finds no benefit to man in sickness and has no understanding of it's cause and purposes. The Christian understands sickness to be a consequence of a fallen, sinful world. Thus we have germs and contaminants present in our world. We get sick. In such an environment, Christians are called to show compassion toward the sick and tenderly care for them. Christians are not against medical research and cures for disease, but we see no real problem with the existence of sickness either. Christianity and the Bible give us a clear understanding as to why people suffer pain and get sick, and how a loving God uses sickness for our good.

My dear widowed grandmother spent her last months on this earth in debilitating sickness accompanied by much pain. The pain was so severe she moaned and often cried out from the deep hurt. She was an earnest Christian woman who evidenced a love for the Lord and never questioned Him as she suffered terribly. The question was tersely asked, "Why would God let her suffer like that!?"

I do not know how, or if, this intense suffering, for months, was of benefit to her personally or not. I do know it caused me to be thankful for my good health. I know it caused some family members to evaluate their priorities (and at least for a time, change their priorities) and to consider the importance of

familial relationships. Much loving compassion and concern were clearly evidenced as my grandmother lingered in pain. I know my grandmother's distressful ailments caused us to pray more than we normally would have done. Relatives were uncomfortably confronted with the stark reality of mortality and death; one, in fact, told me how troubling it was to "be so close to death". In answer to my secret prayer, I was asked to eulogize my grandmother by her pastor, who I did not know, when he called me from my late grandmother's hometown. I was afforded the opportunity to share some of the things I've written here with a church peopled with my grandmother's relatives and friends! The pastor and a close family friend clearly expressed the gospel⁴³ at this funeral service as well.

Was my grandmother's suffering a bad thing? Although it was a very trying time for those close to my grandmother, much good came from her suffering and sickness. There may also be other benefits of which I am not aware.

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*All quotations cited in the text are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

EXPLANATION

The purpose of this booklet is two-fold. The first is to express that sickness is sometimes used of God to bring people to Jesus Christ. Job was a pious, godly man but he had received only incomplete knowledge of salvation. Job's sickness and suffering was used of God to bring him to his Saviour. When people are reduced by sickness, and can no longer be self-sufficient, it may cause them to depend upon Christ. When people become seriously sick, and they are concerned about dying, it may cause them to think upon their mortality and heaven. When people become painfully sick, and the pleasures of life are gone, it may cause them to recognize the emptiness of this world and its allurements. Thus, sickness is used to convert the ungodly and move them to embrace Jesus as their hope.

The second purpose is to show that God is a loving Father who uses sickness to refine His people. As Christians, we know from Scripture that, for us, sickness is not a punishment from God but a *proof* of His love for us. This is such an important teaching that we find this principle recorded twice in Scripture. We read in Proverbs 3:11-12, and find it cited again in Hebrews 12:5-6: “My son do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.”

If we were to hear of a man who had lived out his entire life without experiencing a single day of sickness or suffering, and then at an advanced age, had died suddenly from a heart attack, we would be amazed. If we knew nothing else about the man save for this report, it would capture our attention because it would be so remarkable. We would probably catch ourselves saying something like, “That’s wonderful! He certainly was blessed!” But was it wonderful? Was he blessed? He was left without the benefits sickness can afford.

– Robert Smith

SELECTED QUOTATIONS

The Christian doctrine of suffering explains, I believe, a very curious fact about the world we live in. The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to

rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.

—C. S. Lewis from *The Problem Of Pain*

The godly do suffer and complain about it at times. But the Bible teaches plainly that their suffering, even after their conversion and reconciliation to God, is not punishment any longer, but chastening. It is not the punishment of God who is angry with them, but the chastening of a God who is reconciled to them. Who God loves, the Scripture says, He chastens. He makes all things, including pain, “work together for good to them that love God, and are called according to His purpose.” This should be the consolation and strength of saints. They are far from perfect, so they lapse into complaining at times. They forget the divine purpose, momentarily, under the smarting of their grief.

—John Gerstner from *The Problem Of Pleasure*

I do not pray that you will be delivered from your pains, but I do pray sincerely that God will give you strength and patience to bear them as long as He pleases. The world, of course, cannot understand this. They see no good at all in sickness and pain. But those who understand that sickness can be used by God to advance His purposes can find in it great sweetness and true consolation. In fact, we can go so far as to say that God is sometimes nearer to us in sickness than in health. He can use diseases of the body to bring healing to the soul. God knows what we need, and all that He does is for our good. If we really knew how much He loves us, we would be ready to receive anything from His hand, the good and the bad, the sweet and the bitter, as if it didn't make any difference. So be satisfied with your condition even if it is one of sickness and distress. Take courage. Offer your pain to God. Pray for strength to endure; adore Him even in your infirmities.

—Brother Lawrence (17th century French monk)