

The Benefits of Sickness

Most of us at some time or another have been sick. Perhaps you have attended church services on a regular basis over the years; you have tried to be obedient to the teachings of the Bible; you have given faithfully to support the Lord's work. Yet now (or at some time in the past) you have experienced sicknesses which seemed to be unexplainable.

We sometimes wonder about the deeper issues of life. Can God be a God of love when He allows pain to come upon us? Can God be a God of mercy when He permits disease to overwhelm us? How can these things be? We say that God is a God of love and mercy, and yet we are troubled with disease and sickness!

I am convinced that God allows pain and sickness and disease, not because He wants to vex us, but because He desires to benefit our lives. We want to look at the causes of sickness, some cures for sickness, and most of all, the benefits of sickness.

1. The Causes of Sickness

Did you ever sit down and think, and wonder why we have been troubled with a variety of aches and pains? Did you ever say, "I wonder why disease and physical ailments come our way?" Why is it that, in every congregation, time after time, announcements are made about somebody who is sick? What's it all about? What are the basic causes of sickness?

a) Some sickness is the result of not taking care.

Sometimes we are involved in too much activity, too much work, not enough rest, violation of the laws of hygiene, etc. God has given us an amazing body—and while it is built to last many years, it must not be abused—or we get into trouble. There is a lot of truth in Ben Franklin's old adage: "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

It is also true that a well-balanced diet is essential to good health. Deuteronomy 14 gives a list of many kinds of foods which were prohibited to the people of Israel—and while we are not duty-bound to observe the ceremonial laws given in the Old Testament—the principles found there are still valid. God expects us to take proper care of our bodies.

b) Some sickness is the result of sin in our lives.

From earliest times, God has permitted sickness to be a judgment on sin. God sometimes uses physical infirmity as an instrument to punish sin and to chasten His children. King Uzziah of Judah was punished with sickness for his sin of failing to destroy the idols in Israel. 2 Kings 15:5 says, "Then the Lord smote the king, so that he was a leper unto the day of his death."

In other cases, the sin may not have been as evident outwardly. It may be a sin hidden in the heart that leads to sickness. 1 Corinthians 11 describes folks who were sickly because they failed to examine

themselves at the time of the Lord's Supper. Numbers 12 tells about Miriam (the sister of Moses) who was stricken with leprosy because she was jealous of Moses' success.

God is not a dark, cruel, vicious being who delights in afflicting people for His own pleasure. He has a plan for our welfare and often He chooses to keep us from straying into paths that are dangerous, and so He allows sickness to come.

c) Some sickness is the result of direct attacks of Satan.

From the life-experience of Job (in Old Testament times), we learn that Satan is sometimes permitted to attack the children of God. Job's painful experience is not an allegory, but rather, an actual example of the kind of affliction which may come to those who love the Lord.

God removed the protecting hedge from around Job, and allowed Satan to rob Job of his property, his family, and his health. Job endured almost unbelievable suffering, and his question about **why** all this was happening to him, was never really answered. God said, in essence, "You just trust Me, and rest upon the assurance that I am in full control." You see—when we trust the Lord—we won't push the panic-button as soon as illness comes. We know that our Lord is in control, and so we will not be devastated when sickness comes, or accident strikes, or death approaches.

There are, of course, some sicknesses that are not related to any of the above named causes. There is, for example, the remarkable case of the man born blind (recorded in John 9). The boy was allowed to live in blindness so that his eyes could be opened by Jesus, and in this way God could get additional glory for himself.

2. The Cures For Sickness

There is not one single promise in the Bible which says it is the will of God for Christians to be free from sickness. (Even the words of Psalm 103:3, "who healeth all thy diseases," refer to spiritual afflictions. The phrase would more accurately be translated, "who healeth all thine iniquities"). Yet, even though many of the Lord's most devoted followers have experienced suffering and sickness, there are a number of cures for sickness.

a) Healing by the use of medication and the doctor's skills.

It is a serious mistake for anyone to suggest that the use of doctors and medicine displays a lack of faith. In Old Testament times, King Hezekiah of Judah was told to take a lump of figs and apply it to the sore, so that he might recover (Isaiah 38:21). In New Testament times, the Good Samaritan (in the parable Jesus told in Luke 10), used medication. (He poured oil on the injuries and bound up the wounds of the man who was left for dead, and he took him to the inn.) The oil acted as a soothing ointment to help heal the wounds, and Jesus commended the Good Samaritan for his use of medication. Also, in the New Testament, Luke was a beloved doctor. Every one of us should praise God for trained and dedicated doctors.

b) Healing through rest and a change of pace.

Our bodies are amazing machines. They are fearfully and wonderfully made. They respond well to change and rest. A good night's sleep works a miracle in our physical bodies.

When the disciples on one occasion returned from a strenuous campaign, and began to review all that they had done and what they had taught, Jesus said to them, "Come apart into a desert place, and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Many of us may have heard the little quip about the need for rest: "If you don't 'come apart,' you'll go to pieces!!" Getting plenty of rest is a valuable means which can help cure a number of sicknesses.

c) Healing by the direct intervention of God.

Illness and sickness and the matter of healing touches every one of us. All of us know something about the pain of sickness. In James 5:14-16 we are told what to do when serious illness comes. We are to call for the elders of the church; they anoint with oil, lay hands on the one who is sick, and prayerfully appeal to God for healing. There are special blessings which accompany the anointing service, even though God does not promise to heal **every** sickness.

Jesus, during His earthly ministry, did not always heal every sick person. The account in John 5 tells how He passed by a great multitude of people who were gathered around the Pool of Bethesda, and selected only one person for healing. He healed that one man and left all the others sick. In other words, healing is not always God's will for each person who is sick. But when sickness comes, here are some steps which we ought to take:

- 1) Take a careful and private look at our hearts.
- 2) Ask others to pray for us.
- 3) Call for the elders of the church (anointing).
- 4) Consult doctors and use medication.
- 5) Trust God to do His will with our lives.

God's will may involve healing of the body; it may involve promotion to a better land.

3. The Benefits of Sickness

There are a number of general benefits of sickness. It may seem impossible, but sickness is intended to be a blessing; it can be a door to spiritual success.

a) Sickness reminds people of death and life hereafter.

The majority of people live as if they were never going to die. They follow business and pleasure and politics and science—as if this earth were their eternal home. All of us at times tend to plan and scheme for the future—like the rich fool in the parable which Jesus told—as if we had a long lease on life. We

tend to be like the worldly persons described in James 4:13, who said, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city and continue there a year, and buy and sell and get gain.” The Apostle James reminds us that life is like a mist; it appears for a little while and then quickly vanishes away.

A siege of illness often helps to remind us that the words of James are indeed true, and that we have to die as well as to live—and that we should not make plans for the future without at least thinking about the will of God, and what He might have planned for our life-span. This is one of the tremendous benefits of sickness. It reminds us that death is a door through which all of us must pass, and that surely it is wise to prepare to meet God!

b) Sickness makes us think seriously about God and His power.

Most people, in their days of good health, don’t give much thought to who God is, and to what He has done for all of us. Most of us are amazed at what doctors can do today: They can ream the fat out of arteries so that the blood flows more freely. They can replace a kidney with a similar organ taken from the body of another person. They can sew a severed finger back on to the injured hand. They can even make a dwarf become a taller person (by stretching the bones and muscles). And yet we must acknowledge that doctors, with all their medical skills, can operate and cut and sew and diagnose and prescribe—but only God can do the healing.

A period of sickness often has the wonderful affect of mustering our thoughts and making us think seriously about the power of God. In the book of Jonah, even heathen sailors—when death was in sight—were afraid. Jonah 1:5 says that “every man cried to his god.” In times of sickness (or extreme danger), people tend to turn to some power outside themselves. Human nature has not changed. In times of illness, we begin to fear, to make promises, to set new goals—and we see that we are helpless unless the Lord comes to our aid. This then, is another benefit of pain and sickness.

c) Sickness helps soften the hearts of individuals.

The human heart is inclined to be rebellious and hard. It is easy to criticize other people and to imagine that we are being slighted—and to think that some of our fellow Christians don’t really care about our welfare. We tend to get calloused and to think that we alone are standing for the truth in these last days. And then we get sick! And when death stares us in the face, it is pretty hard to be proud and self-centered. And we get some cards, and some notes of appreciation—and we come to realize that many others do care—and that our feelings of disappointment were not really justified.

One time during a period of sickness, I received cards from groups of Christians in many places. One “Get Well Card” came from a church nearly two thousand miles from our home, and it was signed by virtually every able-bodied member of the congregation. I believe tears were choked back for nearly an hour. I had never done that before! God uses sickness to soften and melt human hearts.

d) Sickness prepares us to sympathize with others who are ill.

This world is filled with people who have aches and pains and sicknesses of various kinds. One of the greatest needs such people have, is for someone who can comfort them and sympathize with them in

their trouble. And the only way we can really learn to comfort others and to truly sympathize with them, is if we ourselves experience sickness. We are told in 2 Corinthians 1:4 that the Lord “comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.”

Nearly every congregation week after week lifts up concerns about someone who is sick. Whenever there is sickness, this becomes a call of duty for the rest of us. We should offer to help with the chores, or make a visit to the sick-room; or give an expression of support to the family; or send financial aid to help with the extra expenses at the time of the illness. These are the kinds of things which build trust and friendship, and bring people together, and promote good feelings. These are ways by which people sometimes are led to faith in Christ and are saved for eternity. Our God is a “God of comfort” who comforts us—and in this way—prepares us for the task of sympathizing with others.

A king once placed a heavy stone in the roadway. Then he hid and waited to see who would remove it. Many who came by loudly blamed the government for not keeping the roadways clear, but they didn’t push the stone out of the way. At last, a poor peasant stopped and pushed the stone into the gutter alongside the road. To his surprise, he found a purse full of gold coins embedded in the road under the spot where the huge rock had been. A note with the bag of gold informed him that this was the king’s reward for the person who performed the needed service. Thus the peasant was richly repaid for his trouble and inconvenience. So too, under every sickness, our King has a hidden blessing. We have just looked at four of those blessings.

Sickness does not always confer **all** the benefits on **every** person. Some people are laid low by illness, and are later restored to health—and evidently do not learn any lessons from their sick-bed experiences. But indeed, as we have seen, there are valuable benefits that result from sickness—and it is wrong for us to murmur because of illness. God often digs wells of joy with the spade of sickness! The Psalmist says, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray: but now have I kept thy word” (Psalm 119:67).

When sickness comes, we should judge ourselves carefully before the Lord, and confess our sins to be sure that the sickness has not come as chastisement for unforsaken sin. We should place ourselves into the loving hands of our Heavenly Father, and ask Him for recovery, if that is at all within the framework of His will. (For chronic and serious illnesses, we should call for the anointing service). We should pray for healing until (or unless) it becomes evident that it is not God’s will to heal the particular infirmity—and then pray for grace to say with Jesus, “Not my will, but Thine be done.” We should constantly try to keep in mind that we can honor God as much by patient suffering as we can by active work. (It often shows more grace to sit still than it does to perform great deeds).

Trials are intended to make us think, to wean us from the world, to send us to the Bible, and to drive us to our knees. Health is a good thing, but sickness is far better, if it leads us to God. Prosperity is an evidence of God’s mercy, but adversity is of more benefit, if it brings us into a closer walk with Jesus.

One of the beauties of the eternal world is the fact that over in Heaven sickness will be completely eliminated. There will be no need for aspirin tablets and cold pills and band aids and crutches and Vitamin-C tablets. Aches and pains (and other forms of distress) will be gone forever. The words “heart

disease” and “cancer” will not be in the vocabulary of Heaven. There won’t be any crippled people. Blind eyes will see again. Every person will be healthy and well and strong. According to Revelation 21:4, over in Heaven, pain and sickness and tears will be described as “former things.” Here in this life pain and sickness and tears will exist; over in Heaven they will be viewed as former things!

Time is short. The things of this world will pass away. A few more joys, and a few more sicknesses—and all will be over. A few more storms, and a few more trials, and we will be traveling to a place where there is no more sickness, nor more parting, and no more pain. Jesus will wipe away all tears from our eyes. A little poem says: “For every hill I’ve had to climb; for every stone that bruised my feet; for all the blood and sweat and grime; for blinding storms and burning heat—my heart sings a grateful song—these were the things that made me strong!”

-Harold S. Martin

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America