



The great Healer

Everybody has a story to tell about a relative or friend who is suffering from a serious illness. Who has not been affected by one disease or another? Every now and then, this raises provocative questions. Some will ask: is illness a direct punishment from God because of a specific sin or a lack of faith? Moreover, is it possible that a stronger faith would cause a miracle to take away illness? It is common to hear the notion that an illness such as cancer is directly caused by a lack of faith or a particular sin. In fact, faithful members of the church who are struck by illness or tragedy often wonder aloud whether this thing happened to them because they are less deserving than others. To say such a thing, or to teach this to others, is a blow which causes untold emotional and spiritual agony. Imagine living with cancer, or to have a loved one dying of cancer, and to be told: this is what you deserve. Imagine hearing the comment: I wonder what you did to deserve this?

Even the faithful suffer

It is of course undeniable that certain actions can result in devastating consequences. Someone who smokes for years has nothing to be surprised about when he comes down with lung cancer; someone who abuses alcohol can damage his liver; someone who drives recklessly on slippery roads has no one to blame but himself when he gets into an accident and hurts himself. However, to link every disease or affliction to a specific sin or a lack of faith is unbiblical. We may think of a dialogue between Jesus Christ and his disciples in John 9:1-3: *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."*

If there was ever a time that Jesus Christ wanted to affirm that there is a direct link between a specific sin and disease, then this was that moment. However, Jesus Christ wants no part in that kind of thinking. The man's blindness was not about the result of specific sin, but would be used for the glory of God. This illness had a reason, but it was not punishment for sin.

We may also think of other examples in Scripture. Job suffered horrendously. However, we are well informed that behind this suffering was Satan's attempt to make Job curse God, while God was testing him. Think also of the great heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. How these men and women suffered! And yet, they are not counted as men and women who are weak in faith who deserved to be punished. They are heroes of faith! Furthermore, how are we to understand the amazing words of James 1:2, 3 which say:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."

The point is not that people suffer trials and tribulations because of a sin that they committed. It is a matter of testing and strengthening faith. As difficult as this may seem, we should rejoice – we should consider it *pure joy* – when God brings trials into our lives!

The effects of the fall

Besides the clear reason that God uses diseases and afflictions to strengthen faith, the question still needs to be asked: how did such things come into our world? The answer to that is very clear: from the fall into sin in Paradise. We read in Genesis 3 that after the fall, all manner of hardships entered into the world; there was pain; there was also death. This is confirmed by the Book of

Ecclesiastes where the Preacher speaks about the vanity or meaninglessness of life under the sun. This is also confirmed by the apostle Paul in the words of Romans 8:22:

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

What is this creation writhing in agony but a creation which has its disasters, its violence, men of hatred, cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, and death itself? While we should not say that each and every disease and affliction is the direct result of personal sin, it is true that in a more general way we can speak of all hardships resulting from the fall into sin. We all bear responsibility for that.

Pool of Bethesda

When our Lord Jesus Christ came into this world, he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, cast out demons, and he even raised the dead. He had great compassion for those who suffered all kinds of diseases and afflictions. One example in John 5 concerns a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. He lay at the Pool of Bethesda where people were known to be healed in a miraculous fashion. How he longed to be healed! The Lord Jesus told him to get up and walk, and instantly the man was healed. What a miraculous healer Jesus Christ was! Clearly he was reversing the effects of the fall into sin. But what was he really doing? Had he come only or primarily to remove our bodily ailments? The primary reason for Christ's coming was to deal with man's real disease which is his sin and misery. His healing of the sick was a signal which was meant to draw everyone's attention to the deeper meaning of his ministry. What has really hurt man and threatens him eternally is his alienation from God. Jesus Christ came to take away our sins through his precious blood and to restore our fellowship with God.

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