



## Sick – Why?

Recently, reading John's Gospel, I was struck with the words, *'He whom thou lovest is sick'* (John 11:3). Surely if God loves someone He will not allow them to suffer? Yet the reality is that we all know fine Christians who are suffering great pain and weakness. Perhaps you today are struggling through a serious illness and the devil is whispering in your ear that this is proof that God does not love you. Remember Satan is the father of lies. Here is a verse full of comfort. If Christ loved Lazarus and allowed him to suffer, the same could be true about you.

### Why is someone God loves Sick?

Some argue that God cannot help it. He feels sorry for us and weeps with us in our pain. That would mean that God is not almighty and evil is just as powerful as God. Alternatively both God and man are subject to fate. Chance comes the way of all of us and God can only sympathise. We must totally reject all such ideas. God, to be God, must be all-powerful. Satan is only a creature. All that exists is the Creator and His creatures. Nothing happens by chance. There is no such thing as bad luck or fate. Rather all things are planned and *'predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will'* (Eph. 1:11).

Others think that God is so great that He does not care about the little troubles which happen to insignificant man. He is a holy and distant God. The god of the Muslims seems to be like that — transcendent and not immanent. Actually the God of the Bible is a loving, caring God who is intimately concerned in all the details of our lives. God loves Lazarus and yet Lazarus is sick, and actually it is because God loves him that he is sick. This is shocking, yet true. If you are a Christian and a true believer, you are one whom God has loved from all eternity, one of His elect of whom it is true that all things work together for their good. Nothing happens to the child of God but that which their loving, almighty Father plans for them.

### What is the purpose of Sickness?

#### **1. To Convert Us**

When we are healthy and wealthy it is easy for us to forget God, but when illness and weakness comes it can, with God's blessing, make us think seriously of death, the Judgment Day and eternity. I have heard many testimonies of those who were convicted of their need in times of illness and were truly converted. As one of the old Puritans put it, *'God whispers in health and roars in sickness'*. Is God making you stop and think about your soul through the pain and disability you are suffering? I have known others who suffered with cancer and, during the prolonged period of treatment, became very concerned about their souls, but sadly, when they became better, all was forgotten. Could you be left to perish because you hardened your heart? Are you saying to God that He will have to send you a more painful illness to get you to really turn and be converted? Those who find God in illness thank God for His saving mercies revealed in suffering.

#### **2. To Correct us**

All, who are Christians, sin and at times can backslide badly, either through open and scandalous sin, or through drifting away from God into worldly ways. The Psalmist said: *'Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word ... It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes'* (Ps. 119:67, 71). David suffered painful chastisement

following his sin with Bathsheba. He learned something of the holiness of God and the wickedness of sin. To the lame man, who for 38 years lay helpless at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus said, following his healing: *'Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee'* (Jn. 5:14). Hebrews 12:6 explains: *'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth'*. Yet we learn from the case of Job that trouble does not always come to the child of God because of specific sins and backsliding.

### **3. To Deepen our Faith**

Gold and silver are melted in the fire to purify them. Job surmises: *'When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold'* (Job 23:10). Abraham was asked to offer up Isaac: *'Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of'* (Gen. 22:2). It is hard to imagine a more painful command. Having survived the trial, Abraham's faith became proverbial. Martha and Mary must have found Christ's delay in coming to Bethany, following the news of Lazarus' illness, very testing but, again, how deepening it was to their faith!

### **4. To Stir up Prayer**

How easy it is for us to become lazy in prayer! When we have no great sense of need we are seldom earnest in supplication. In our anguish we sigh and groan and plead with the Almighty for deliverance. God loves to hear His children pray from the heart. He sends troubles to us so that we will *'come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need'* (Heb. 4:16).

### **5. To Keep us Humble**

There is nothing so offensive to God as human pride. It keeps many a blessing from us. Paul had wonderful visions, seeing and hearing what no one else saw and heard. But he tells us, *'Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness'* (2 Cor. 12:7-9). The thorn in the flesh was very likely an illness or disability. We are not told what it was so that it will be easier for us to identify with the Apostle. Troubles keep us humble.

### **6. To Make us a Witness to Others**

Think of Naomi who wished to be called Mara. She said: *'Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?'* (Ruth 1:20-21). Yet she did not return empty, she had Ruth with her. Ruth had seen something in Naomi in the midst of all her afflictions which drew her not just to Naomi but to her God. The beauty of a Christian's faith often shines like a jewel against the black cloth of suffering.

### **7. To Make us Heavenly Minded**

Sickness weakens our attachment to this world. We see the emptiness of money, success and pleasure. *'Vanity of vanities'* is written over all this world has to offer (Eccles. 1:2). In pain and weakness Christians long for heaven, that place where *'God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away'* (Rev. 21:4).

### **8. To Enable us to Comfort Others**

Paul suffered many trials and tribulations but none of them was without point. He tells the Corinthians about Him *'Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God'* (2 Cor. 1:4). What a wonderful privilege to be a sympathetic encourager and supporter of God's beloved people.

## **9. To the glory of God**

Sometimes it is very hard to answer the question, Why am I suffering? There may be different reasons and these reasons can sometimes be hidden from us, but we can always be sure that it is for the glory of God and for our good. *'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose'* (Rom. 8:28). Lazarus was raised from the dead and many believed in Jesus because of that miracle and so in this way Lazarus' illness and death was for the glory of God. James advises the sick person, *'Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him'* (Jas. 5:14-15). God is glorified in prayers answered.

## **Is Sickness always an Expression of God's Love?**

### **1. Beginnings of Sickness**

Initially sickness entered the world as punishment for sin and not as an expression of God's love. Our first parents were happy and healthy in the garden of Eden until they sinned, but then God's wrath and curse descended. Ageing, sickness and death became the common experience of man. *'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return'* (Gen. 3:19).

### **2. Punishment of the Wicked on Earth**

God does not punish His own people for their sins. Christ suffered the full punishment in our place. However *'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness'* (Rom. 1:18). Already, even in this life, God's judgment begins and He shows His anger. The sufferings of some are clearly related to their sinful lifestyle — eg alcoholics, drug addicts, and immoral people.

### **3. Punishment of the Wicked in Hell**

Hell is sickness unlimited. It amazed the Psalmist how healthy wicked people can be in this life. He felt his feet slipping and doubted the goodness of God till he went into the house of God and reflected on their latter end (Psalm 73). However painful an illness may be here, there are painkillers and there is the comfort of knowing that death will release us, but in Hell there are no painkillers, not even a drop of water to cool the tongue. The agony goes on forever and only gets worse. Here it is an expression of God's hatred for sin and for the sinner who will not repent.

## **What should the Christian's Response be to Sickness?**

The Christian should rejoice when sickness comes. That is shocking and yet it is what the Bible says. James writes: *'My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience'* (Jas. 1:2-3). Paul states: *'Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice'* (Phil. 4:4). Rejoice always, and always means even in times of illness. In another place the Apostle says: *'We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us'* (Rom. 5:3-5). We are not to seek sickness but if it is God's will to send it we are duty-bound to receive it patiently and even joyfully. Remember, as one of the Puritans said, that the greatest Christians suffer the most. Think of Paul and of Calvin. *'Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed'* (Heb. 12:11-13). Jesus Himself encourages us: *'In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world'* (Jn. 16:33).

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