

Sickness and Sin

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In the gospel of John, the disciples ask what seems like a stupid question, *“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* (John 9:2) After all, how could it have been his own sin if he was born blind?

Sickness as a Consequence of Sin

In actual fact, this question reflected a theology of sin and sickness that was prevalent at the time and had been throughout the history of Israel. Indeed, this same theology prevails today among some Christians in some quarters – the belief that sickness is a result of sin and that failure to receive healing is also a consequence of sin or unbelief (which, of course, in itself, is sin). According to the argument, blessings, prosperity and health are our right and are signs that we are God’s children. God desires to heal everyone. Therefore, if someone is not healed there must be a reason and it cannot be God’s ‘fault’.

It is worth noting the progress of such a belief system throughout Scripture and then to evaluate it, also by using Scripture.

In Genesis 2:17, God tells Adam regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, *‘...in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.’* The phrase *‘you shall surely die’* can be literally translated from the Hebrew biblical text as *‘dying you shall die.’* In Genesis 3 we see Adam and Eve died spiritually instantly — they were separated from God. But we see, especially in light of Romans 5:8-14 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, that physical death was also a consequence of their sin. They began to die — sickness and death entered the world as a consequence of sin.

Sickness as a Judgement

We further see that God, in making covenant with Israel (e.g. Deuteronomy 5, Deuteronomy 30), promises that obedience will result in a life of blessing whilst disobedience (sin) will result in death and cursing. We also read numerous accounts where sickness breaks out as a result of God’s judgement.

The Israelites then developed a theology that held that sickness was a sign of God’s judgement.

This was certainly the belief system of Job's friends, who could not comprehend that such disasters and sickness could befall a righteous man. Naomi believed God had turned against her (Ruth 1:13). Later Isaiah prophesies regarding the Messiah, in chapter 53, reflecting that he will be rejected by men, at least in part, because His suffering would prove to men that He was 'cursed':

'Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.' (Isaiah 53:4)

It is hardly surprising, then, that we see the disciples displaying this attitude towards the blind man. Yet the response of Jesus is a strong correction to this line of reasoning, *'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,'* said Jesus, *'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'* (John 9:3). Jesus' reply, in fact, perfectly reflected an accurate portrayal of both Old and New Testament theology regarding sickness and sin. For example:

- God vindicated Job (Job 42:7-9)
- Isaiah actually shows us that Jesus was innocent, yet suffered (Isaiah 53)
- Jesus vindicated the blind man (John 9)
- Paul had a 'thorn in the flesh'
- Timothy had stomach problems and others became ill with no hint of judgement over sin (e.g. Trophimus in 2 Timothy 4:20)

So how do we develop a healthy and balanced view of sickness and its connection with sin? Problems arise when we fail to acknowledge that whilst all sickness is caused by sin (in the sense that Adam's fall allowed sin to enter the world) *not all sickness is caused by a sin!*

So Why Do We Get Sick?

We need to consider each of the following points:

1. Sickness entered the world at the fall. At this point, the world and our bodies became corrupted (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).
2. This means we are all corrupted in our flesh and are all dying. Even if we are healed of a disease, we will still grow old and eventually die as a result of the fall.
3. Part of the fall of creation means we live in a world where man's genetic make up is impure and where there are viruses and bacteria. Sickness can happen because it is a part of the natural order of the world in which we live. In such cases, sickness is not a sign of God's displeasure or judgement and is not a consequence of our own sinful acts.
4. My own sin can, sometimes, lead to sickness – either because there is a natural physical consequence (e.g. lung cancer from smoking, STD's, liver failure from alcohol abuse etc.) or a direct spiritual consequence through the following:
 - o Opening the door to demonic activity which can manifest in physical ailments
 - o God removing His protection to discipline us and bring us to repentance (1 Corinthians 5:5)
 - o Coming under the judgement of God (Acts 5; Acts 13:11; 1 Corinthians 11:29-30)
5. Other people's sin may cause a person to be ill (e.g. passive smoking, STD's, etc.)
6. God may allow Satan access to our lives, and not always because we have sinned. This is the lesson of Job and Paul. We often learn more from suffering than from blessing (Romans 5:3). Whilst such sickness does not come from God, He does allow it.
7. Unbelief can be a barrier to healing, but it is not always the reason a person is not healed.

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Many people have difficulty believing that a loving God could send sickness. It has been argued that an earthly father would be considered evil and prosecuted if he poisoned his child, so it is inconceivable that a good God would 'poison' His children with sickness. To this I reply that many loving fathers around the world poison their children and are commended for it: for example, when a child has cancer and needs chemotherapy! The father consents to administering a harmful substance in order to remove something that could kill. I would suggest that, given an eternal perspective, a loving God could (and probably should) sometimes bring suffering into our temporal existence if it results in a greater eternal existence.

Continue to Pray Faithfully for The Sick

We need to be people of faith, but even more so, people of love! Praying for healing is an act of love and an act of service. If we reduce our theology of healing to an over-simplistic formula, then we can easily end up leaving people in a place of condemnation and confusion if they do not receive healing. For example, when I was younger I knew a young girl who died of leukemia. Her parents were told that she was not healed because there was either sin or unbelief in her life. This is neither loving nor helpful!

Yet pray for the sick we must. Notice that in James 5 we read first about perseverance in affliction (vv 10-11), then we read about the prayer of faith, with the implication that sickness may have been caused by sin requiring repentance.

'Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.' (James 5:13-16)

So let us be a people of love and compassion, faith and prayer. Let us pray for the sick and trust for their healing! But let us also be mature in our thinking.