

Practical Theology

Sickness

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) - Edited & Abridged

"He whom thou lovest is sick."

– John 11:3

Introduction

The words I especially dwell upon in this chapter are singularly affecting and instructive. They record the message that Martha and Mary sent to Jesus when their brother Lazarus was sick: "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick." That message was short and simple.

Mark first the *childlike faith* of these holy women. They turned to the Lord Jesus in their hour of need, as the frightened infant turns to its mother. They turned to Him as their Shepherd, their almighty Friend.

Mark second the *simple humility* of their language about Lazarus. They call him "He whom thou lovest." They do not say, "He who loves you, believes in you, serves you," but "He whom Thou lovest." Martha and Mary were deeply taught of God. They had learned that Christ's love towards us, not our love towards Christ, is the true ground of expectation and the true foundation

of hope. To look inward at our love for Christ is painfully unsatisfying; to look outward at Christ's love for us is peace.

Mark, lastly, the *touching circumstance* that the message of Martha and Mary reveals: "He whom thou lovest is sick." Lazarus was a good man, converted, believing, renewed, sanctified, a friend of Christ, and an heir of glory. And yet Lazarus was sick! We learn from this that sickness is not a sign of God's displeasure. Sickness is intended to be a blessing to us, and not a curse.

This subject of sickness is one that we ought to look in the face. We cannot avoid it. In the midst of life, we are in death (Romans 8:10-16). Let us consider sickness in the life of the Christian, and by God's blessing may teach us wisdom.

Sickness is Universal

Sickness is everywhere. In Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in America; in hot countries and in cold, in developed countries and developing countries. Men, women, and children all get sick and die. Sickness is among all classes. The gospel does not lift a believer beyond its reach. Riches will not buy exemption from it. Rank cannot prevent it. Kings and their subjects, masters and servants, rich men and poor, learned and unlearned, teachers and students, doctors and patients, ministers and hearers, all fall sick. "The rich man's wealth is his strong city" (Proverbs 18:11), but there are no doors and bars that can keep out disease and death.

Sickness is in every part of us. From the crown of our head to the sole of our foot, we are liable to disease. Our capacity of

suffering is something fearful to contemplate. Who can count up the ailments by which our bodily frame may be affected? Given that the body is so vulnerable to sickness, it is not a wonder that men should die so soon, but that they live so long.

We cannot prevent sickness. The average lifespan may be slightly lengthened. The skill of doctors may continually discover new remedies and effect surprising cures. Wise sanitary regulations may greatly lower the death rate. But, after all, whether in healthy or unhealthy localities, whether in mild climates or in cold, all will get sick and die.

So, why is sickness universal?

What can we make of this great fact, that sickness is universal? How can we account for it? What explanation can we give of it? These are serious questions.

Did God create sickness and disease at the beginning? Did He who formed our world in such perfect order create it with suffering and pain? Can we think that He who made all things "very good" made Adam's race to get sick and to die?

We must say no! The only satisfactory explanation is that which the Bible gives. There we read that something has come into the world that has taken man from his original position and stripped him of his original privileges. Something has come in that, like a handful of gravel thrown into a machine, has marred the perfect order of God's creation. And what is that something? I answer in one word: It is sin. "Sin entered into the world, and death by sin" (Romans 5:12). Sin is the cause of all the sickness, disease, pain, and suffering that prevail on the earth. They are all a part of that

curse which came into the world when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and fell (Genesis 3:6, 17-19). There would have been no sickness if there had been no Fall. There would have been no disease if there had been no sin.

The General Benefits of Sickness

Can Sickness Bring Good?

Now, many will ask, "Can God be a God of love when He allows pain? Can God be a God of mercy when He permits disease? He might prevent pain and disease; but He does not. God has subjected us to the vanity of this world against our will that we might learn to live by faith (Romans 8:20). What are the benefits, then, that sickness confers on mankind?

Cast your eyes on the world around you and mark what is going on. Observe how often we submit to present loss for the sake of future gain, present sorrow for the sake of future joy, present pain for the sake of future health. **The child** is sent to school in tears, but we do so in the hope that he or she will gain wisdom in the future. **The father** of a family undergoes some fearful surgical operation, but he bears it in the hope of future health.

Apply this same principle to God's government of the world. Jesus speaks of the seed being thrown into the ground and dying in the hope of a future harvest (John 12:24). God permits pain, sickness, and disease, not because He loves to hurt men and women, but because He desires to turn their heart, mind, conscience, and to benefit their soul to all eternity.

Once more, I repeat that I speak of the “benefits” of sickness on purpose and advisedly. I know the suffering and pain that sickness entails. I admit the misery and wretchedness that it brings. But the evil is mixed with benefit, and it is a wise provision of God. Sickness is useful to check the effects of sin and the work of the devil among men’s souls.

If man had never sinned, it would be hard to see the benefit of sickness. But since sin is in the world, we see that sickness is a good to instruct us in the midst of sin. It is a blessing quite as much as a curse. It is a rough schoolmaster, and hard on the body, but it is a real friend to man’s soul.

Ways God Uses Sickness for Good

1) Sickness helps to remind men of death.

Most men live as if they were never going to die. They follow business, pleasure, politics, or science as if earth were their eternal home. They plan and scheme for the future like the rich fool in the parable, as if they had a long lease of life, and were not tenants on the earth. A serious illness sometimes goes far to dispel these delusions. It awakens men from their daydreams and reminds them that they have to die as well as to live. Now, this, I say emphatically, is a good thing.

2) Sickness helps to make men think seriously of God, their souls, and the world to come.

Most people in health can find little time for thoughts of God. They put them away. Now, a severe disease or some sickness sometimes has a wonderful power to muster and rally thoughts of God, and bring them before the eyes of the soul. Even a

wicked king like Benhadad, when sick, could think of Elisha (2 Kings 8:8). Even heathen sailors, when death was in sight, were afraid and cried “every man unto his god” (Jonah 1:5). Surely, anything that helps to make men think is good.

3) Sickness helps to soften men’s hearts and teach them wisdom.

The natural heart is as hard as a stone. It can see no good in anything beyond this life, and no happiness except in this world. A long illness sometimes goes far to correct these ideas. It exposes the emptiness and hollowness of what the world calls “good” things, and teaches us to hold them lightly. The man of business finds that money alone is not everything the heart requires. Surely, anything that obliges us to alter our weights and measures of earthly things is a real good.

4) Sickness helps to level and humble us.

We are all naturally proud and high-minded. Few, even among the poorest, are free from this infection. Few can be found who do not look down on somebody else and secretly flatter themselves that they are “not as other men” (Luke 18:11). A sick bed is a powerful tamer of such thoughts. It forces on us the mighty truth that we are all poor worms, that we “dwell in houses of clay” and are “crushed before the moth” (Job 4:19); and that kings and subjects, masters and servants, rich and poor, are all dying creatures and will soon stand side by side at the bar of God. In the sight of the coffin and the grave, it is not easy to be proud. Surely anything that teaches that lesson is good.

5) Finally, sickness helps to try men’s religion, of what sort it is.

There are not many on earth who have no religion at all. Yet few have a religion that will bear inspection. Most are content with traditions received from their fathers and can render no reason for the hope that is in them. Disease is sometimes most useful to a man in exposing the utter worthlessness of his soul's foundation. Sickness often shows us that we have nothing solid under our feet and nothing firm in our hands. It makes him realise that although he may have had a form of religion, he has been worshipping an "unknown God" all his life (Acts 17:23; John 3:3).

Many a creed looks well on the smooth waters of health, but turns out utterly unsound and useless on the rough waves of the sick bed. The storms of winter often bring out the defects in a man's dwelling, and sickness often exposes the gracelessness of a man's soul. Surely, anything that helps us discover the true character of our faith is good.

Teaching Module

Learning Through Sickness

Developing theme: *Sickness reminds us of human weakness, turns our thoughts toward God, tests our faith, and teaches us to trust Christ and care for others.*

1. Facing the Reality of Sickness

Scriptures: *Psalm 90:10, 12; Psalm 103:14-16; James 4:14*

Discussion: Why does Ryle say that sickness is universal? How does sickness remind us that wealth, position, and strength cannot protect us from every trial?

Exercise: List three things people commonly trust for security. Discuss why each one is limited.

2. Understanding Why Sickness Exists

Scriptures: *Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 5:12; Romans 8:20-23; John 9:1-3*

Discussion: How does the Bible explain the presence of sickness, suffering, and death in the world? Why must we avoid assuming that every illness is caused by a particular personal sin?

Exercise: Read Romans 5:12 and John 9:1-3. In one or two sentences, explain what these passages teach about sickness and sin.

3. Seeing How Sickness May Do Good

Scriptures: *Romans 8:28; Psalm 119:67, 71; Hebrews 12:10-11; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10*

Discussion: Ryle calls sickness “a rough schoolmaster” and “a real friend to man’s soul.” What lessons can sickness teach that health sometimes cannot?

Exercise: Choose one lesson sickness may teach: humility, dependence, compassion, seriousness, or wisdom. Give a practical example.

4. Examining and Strengthening Our Faith

Scriptures: *Job 13:15; Habakkuk 3:17-18; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7*

Discussion: Why does Ryle say that sickness tests the true character of a person’s faith? What is the difference between knowing about Christ and trusting Christ?

Exercise: When life becomes uncertain, what do we tend to trust in? Discuss Ryle’s words: “Sickness often shows us that we have nothing solid under our feet and nothing firm in our hands.”

5. Responding with Faith, Hope, and Love

Scriptures: *John 11:3-5, 25-26, 35; James 5:14-16; Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 4:15-16; Revelation 21:4*

Discussion: How should Christians respond when they or someone they love becomes sick? How can we take sickness seriously without losing hope?

Exercise: Discuss how suffering can develop and cultivate faith, hope, and love, and how you could apply this to a member of your congregation.

Conclusion

"In sickness and in health, in life and in death, let us lean confidently on Him."

John 11:25-26; Hebrews 4:15-16; Revelation 21:4