Sickness and Suffering: a New Testament View

In the Arab World wherever there is a demonstration of the power of God in the context of evangelism it usually comes in one of three forms:

- vision/dreams
- physical healing
- the expulsion of demons

Few Christians have any problem with visions and liberating those who have been demonised, but they do wonder about physical healing. Is physical healing God's will? If only sometimes, how do you know when to pray? Perhaps the illness is sent by God and therefore it is wrong to pray for healing!

Perhaps, although the illness may not directly be God's will, the experience of suffering through the illness may bring about a godly result – repentance, a leaning on God's grace etc. and therefore we should not pray for healing!

Oddly many who are wary of praying for healing rarely ask the same questions about the medical treatment of the illness. They often refuse prayer, but turn to medical science. At least there should be consistency!

In encouraging people to pray for the sick – especially in the context of evangelism – I have met an attitude problem. Many have questions about God's attitude to sickness and suffering. Here is my basic premise:

God wills to heal the sick and He desires wholeness rather than sickness in people.

Does the New Testament support this premise? Clearly we need to examine what Scripture really says about sickness and suffering. Strangely little is written on the subject except in the most general way – i.e. articles pro and anti 'healing meetings'.

Please be like the Bereans – don't be convinced by me. Search the Scriptures.

Sickness in the New Testament

There are 5 general terms for sickness in the New Testament. They are used a total of 104 times. There are 16 specific diseases mentioned – used a total of 140 times.

The diseases in descending order of frequency in Greek are:

blindness

lameness/crippled

dumbness and/or deafness (perhaps deaf mutism)

paralysis

leprosy (indicating a variety of skin diseases not just Hansen's disease)

withered (stiff) limbs

fever

mania

deformity

dumbness (speechless)

moon-struck (perhaps epilepsy)

haemorrhage

speech impediment

dropsy

worm infestation

dysentery

It is interesting to note that most of the diseases fall into three categories:

- sensory impairment
- mobility impairment
- skin diseases (making people ritually impure)

Those not mentioned are:

- behavioural disorders
- infections

This is probably for two reasons:

1. The Gospel writers remembered and recorded only the most memorable cures – i.e. the physically obvious ones.
2. Without modern medical diagnostic technology medical diagnosis focused only on diseases that showed themselves outwardly.

The Causes of Sickness

Before praying for healing of the disease, it is helpful to know what caused it. Removing symptoms without removing the cause might lead to recurrence of the same disease or an even worse one. This is one of the prime reasons for accurate diagnosis.

In general in the New Testament there are three causes of disease:

- **Sin**: a person's own sin can be the cause of disease according to Scripture:

1 Cor. 11:30: Some in Corinth were weak and sick because of their abuse of the communion.

James 5:14-16: The confession of sins will lead to healing. **But note** this passage doesn't say that all sickness is due to sin. The word **if** is important: ***"If he has committed any sins he will be forgiven."***

Jn. 9: Jesus rejects a direct correlation between sickness and disease: ***"As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Him saying, 'Rabbi who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned nor his parents'."***

But in Jn. 5:14 He says, ***"Behold, you have become well do not sin any more so that nothing worse may befall you"*** – something worse than 38 years in bed!

Mk. 2:5: Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic before going on to heal the paralysis. This suggests that in this case He did see a connection. So in the New Testament personal sin is one of the causes of sickness.

- **God!**

In the Old Testament God causes sickness – i.e. 2 Kings 15:5, ***"The Lord smote the king so that he was a leper to the day of his death."***

But the Old Testament, with its semetic thinking, always goes to the prime cause. This causation is often differentiated in the New Testament. Here are 4 possible cases where God is the cause of sickness and death:

Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11): When Ananias and his wife lie to the Holy Spirit, they die. There is no indication as to the cause of death. Death is linked to a specific sin.

Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:20-23): After a speech, he was acclaimed by his audience with the words, ***"The voice of a god and not a man"***. ***"The angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give glory to God."***

Again, disease and death are due to a specific sin. He committed other sins – i.e. the murder of James mentioned earlier in the chapter. The angel of the Lord is the ultimate cause of death. The form of death was worm infestation.

Elymas (Acts 13:6-12): While Paul preaches to the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, a Jewish sorcerer, Elymas Bar-Jesus, tries to discredit the Gospel. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul

denounces him and prophesies his temporary blindness that begins immediately. Again there is a clear connection between sickness and sin. Does the prophetic word just **announce** the event or does it **cause** the event? We don't know. The implication is that "the hand of the Lord" caused the blindness.

The Corinthians (1 Cor. 11): This is the same passage quoted above under 'sin'. Paul says, ***"If we examined ourselves we would not be judged. For the one who is judged by the Lord is disciplined."***

1 Cor. 10 – the implication in Paul's argument (5-11) is a warning to Christians who have sinned that God might discipline them through sickness, ***"So they may not be condemned with the world"***. The reason for God's action is to turn His people from their sin and to prevent their damnation.

A Summary of the New Testament where God is seen as the cause for sickness

1. There are only a few instances. It is rare. In each case a specific sin is involved.
2. The purpose of the sickness is to stop further sin or to warn others away from sin. So God sending disease is a subdivision of sin causing disease.
3. Note there is no example of God sending sickness for our character growth and development. Disease is never said to develop virtues like patience, endurance, trust or faith. It is only used in extreme cases by God to stop our descent into further sin.

So from a New Testament perspective, if someone asks you, "Why did God send this disease to me?" The answer is to ask if he/she is suppressing an awareness of sin – i.e. conscience. If he/she is a Christian and is walking in the light, then God did not send it!

Discipline only makes sense if those being disciplined know of their fault – i.e. a sin to repent of. Any other form of discipline is child abuse and is senseless. Also in the New Testament God never sends sickness to a family member for someone else's sin.

- **Demonic forces**

This cause is frequently referred to in the New Testament. 1 Cor. 5:5 – Paul commands the church to turn a flagrant sinner over to Satan for the purpose of ***"the destruction of the flesh"***.

Look at 1 Tim. 1:20. What happens in this case? The expectation is that a person put outside the church is put outside the umbrella of the protection of Christ and a likely consequence of this is that Satan will make him/her ill.

Lk. 13:10-17 describes a woman bent over for 18 years. It says this is caused by ***"a spirit of sickness"*** and describes her as ***"one whom Satan has bound"***.

In a number of cases – such as Mk. 9 – dysfunctions like mutism and diseases like epilepsy are attributed to a demon.

But we must be careful! For although the New Testament says **some** disease is caused by demons, it doesn't say **all** disease is caused by demons. Most illness in the New Testament was attributed to 'natural causes' such as accidents, bacterial/viral infections, diet, lack of hygiene etc.

In the New Testament causation is only important if the cause has to be removed before healing takes place. The concern is cure not cause.

The Cure of Sickness

The treatment of illness and its outcome are also often reported in Scripture.

- **Human care of the sick**
  - The fact of divine healing of sick people doesn't negate human care for health or for the sick.
  - There are two types of such care:
    - ✓ Paul advises Timothy to drink a little wine for his stomach and his frequent sicknesses. (1 Tim. 5:23) Paul traces Timothy's frequent sicknesses to a poor diet – perhaps an abstinence of wine due to ascetic teaching in Ephesus. Normally in the first century A.D. ordinary people drank 2/3 wine to 1/3 water – either alone was considered unhealthy. Probably it was too easy to get drunk if you had pure wine. But wine was also safer to drink than polluted water. Note that whatever the reason for Timothy's sickness, Paul

advises a correction in diet rather than some other cure such as pray harder, have more faith, live a more righteous life, cast out the demon that is harassing you!

- ✓ The second type of caring for the sick is seen in Paul's advice in 1 Thess. 5:14, ***"Care for the 'asthenon' "*** – often translated "weak". We know people were dying in Thessalonica. (1 Thess. 4:13-18) Perhaps Christians were withdrawing from the sick feeling that perhaps they were being judged. Paul says this is the wrong attitude. We should care for the sick even if they are about to die and while we care for them we should encourage them with the hope of the resurrection.

- So the possible link of divine healing or sickness with sin doesn't mean sympathetic care of the sick can be neglected. The word *'asthenon'* – illness/sick – is used 84 times in the New Testament. Nearly all are for physical illness in the Gospels or by other writers such as John and Peter. Only Paul uses the word metaphorically – i.e. moral or personality weakness.

➢ **Divine healing of the sick**

- Most references to sickness in the New Testament have to do with healing – i.e. the healing ministry of Jesus and in Acts many were healed from sicknesses. In fact sickness is mentioned because someone is about to be healed by some form of divine intervention.
- In Mt. 10:8 healing is part of the commission to the 12.
- Healing was also part of the commission to the 70. (Lk. 9:1 and 10:9)

James 5:14-18 focuses on prayer for the sick. In typical letters in the first century towards the end of the letter there would be a 'health wish'. In other words you don't introduce material that is new or of substance at the end of the letter. James raises the issue of praying for the sick in the 'health section' instead of a pagan 'health wish' as a reminder that it is the standard activity of the church. Pagans wish for health or pray for it to their gods but Christians pray in faith and Christ really heals.

Note again: sin is only a possible cause for sickness and not the only cause. Also note that God appears interested only in healing. If there is sin, confess it so it may be forgiven and then healing can take place. If there is no sin then pray for immediate healing.

There is no implication that God would wish anything other than health for a Christian. Also in the Gospel there is no case of Jesus refusing to extend healing to those who approached Him nor do we read in Acts any deliberation as to whether or not it is God's will to heal.

➢ **Uncured illness**

Although there is no indication that God wills people to be sick in the New Testament, there are people in the New Testament who are not made well (Christians).

2 Tim. 4:20: Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus. Presumably Paul had prayed for him, yet he remains sick so Paul has to leave him behind.

Phil. 2:25-30: Epaphroditus was so sick he nearly died! It is obvious that healing was not immediate, for Paul knew the Philippians had heard he was sick (a couple of months?) and yet had not heard of his healing. Paul attributes Epaphroditus' health to God's mercy towards him and towards Paul.

So the implication is that God healed him, but slowly. God didn't intervene until Epaphroditus was nearly dead and Paul was in deep sorrow. **Paul takes the restoration of Epaphroditus as a mercy from God not something God had to do. Paul seems to have a casual attitude to disease!** He is unapologetic about leaving a colleague ill. His concern for Epaphroditus doesn't contain any element of a sense of failure that Paul's prayers had failed to heal him immediately.

When people are healed, Paul is thankful for God's mercy. If they are not healed, Paul doesn't feel guilty. He is sad, but he leaves the results to God.

Two problem passages

1. Paul's "sickness" in Galatia (Gal. 4:13-15)

- Did Paul get a disease or was he using 'weakness of the flesh' in a metaphorical sense?

- Was it an eye disease (v. 15) or was it a phrase like, *"I would give my right arm to have you well again"?* Why was it such a trial to the Galatians? Did it make him hard to understand? Did it make him repulsive?
- Perhaps he just needed rest and sleep – 'tentmakers' sometimes need financial support.
- If he was sick, how was he healed?

All we can say is, if it was sickness, again Paul is unapologetic about it and it doesn't seem a major issue to him how God takes care of the problem.

2. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7)

- In the context, the "thorn" is less likely to be a disease and more likely to be human opposition.
- The idiom in the Old Testament is used of human opposition (Num. 33:55; Josh. 23:13; Ezek. 2:6, 28:24; Judges 2:3).
- In 2 Cor. 10-13 Paul uses "weakness" 14 times. In each case it isn't **disease** but **powerlessness** in a metaphorical sense.
- In this section there is plenty of opposition from men. So Paul's thorn was on-going persecution.

Conclusion

* If Paul is sick, he is not overly concerned with it.
* He prays for healing.
* God is not responsible for sickness. There are external causes.

Suffering in the New Testament

In English 'suffering' includes all causes of physical and emotional pain. So sickness is a sub-section of suffering – physical pain. In Greek the overlap is not so blurred. Look up *'pascho'* in a theological dictionary of the New Testament.

Note: There isn't a complete semantic overlap between the Greek and English. *'pascho'* is never used for physical illness. In Mk. 5:26 the woman doesn't suffer from the disease but from the doctors! – i.e. one may **be sick** due to a disease, but you only **suffer** from an external agency.

There are three causes for suffering in the New Testament.

- **Evil people**
  - Jesus suffered at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the scribes. (Mt. 16:21)
  - Thessalonian Christians suffered at the hands of their fellow citizens. (1 Thess. 2:14)
  - Galileans suffered under the hands of Pilate – i.e. non-Christians suffer. (Lk. 13:2)
- **Demonic forces and Satan**
  - Behind human forces are the forces of Satan. Mt. 17:15: a man's son suffered at the hands of a demon that caused physical symptoms.
  - Satan is seen as the ultimate cause of human suffering, oppression, injustice, deprivation etc.
  - Rev. 2:10: the church is about to suffer because the devil will throw some into prison.
  - The context of this is warfare between the Kingdom of God and that of the evil one and the great eschatological tension of the end of the age until Christ reigns supreme.
- **God?**
  - God does bring suffering to people in the New Testament, but all references are to His judgement at the end of the age.
  - The word used is not *'pashco'* but tribulation/affliction. (Rom. 2:9; 2 Thess. 1:6; Rev. 2:22)

The Purpose of Suffering

God does not cause suffering but He does have a purpose for it.

Note the contrast with sickness. What makes sickness so difficult is that it comes without any apparent reason and serves no clear purpose.

The purpose of suffering can be described as:

a) Education – Heb. 5:8
b) Testing – Heb. 2:18
} Both passages refer to Jesus

James 1:13 says that God doesn't test anyone, but the results of such testing develop character, **especially patient endurance**. So suffering isn't pleasant but it has its reward – 1 Pet. 2:19-20.

Question: do the various tests (James 1:2 and 1 Pet. 1:6) **include sickness?**

- In the New Testament the answer is 'No'.
- Tests in the New Testament come from:
  - ✓ desires from within (James 1:14)
  - ✓ Satan and his agents (demonic or human) Lk. 22:31
- Tests come with the challenge to obey God even when it seems that obedience will mean death.
- No test is said to come from sickness and explicitly they do not come from God.

Also part of the reason for suffering in the New Testament is because it is part of the imitation of Christ – as Christ suffered, all Christians suffer. (1 Pet. 2:21, 3:17-18, 4:1)

The rewards for suffering for the sake of Christ and its development explain why God **"allows"** us to suffer. **I don't think it is God's will**. The thrust of 1 Pet. 2-4 is to minimise the causes of suffering in the Christian life. So Christians pray, ***"Do not lead us to the test, but deliver us from the evil one".***

We do sometimes suffer, but even then the test is properly controlled. (1 Cor. 10:13 and 1 Pet. 4:19) So suffering produces good in us. If God removed all suffering it would not be good for us. This is also part of the explanation! Jn. 16:33 implies we are identified with Christ and so we are caught up in the eschatological conflict between Christ and Satan for the world until Christ returns and His victory is finally demonstrated.

Four New Testament responses to suffering

1. Recognise that it is a privilege to suffer

Phil. 1:29: ***"It is a privilege not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for Him."***

It is never said that you can 'be sick' for Christ, but you can 'suffer' for Christ. Sickness is part of the curse of the Fall. We haven't yet been saved by the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8) but we will be!

2. Realise that godly suffering is the door to blessing

Phil. 3:10: identification with Christ

2 Cor. 1:5-7: experiencing the comfort of God

1 Pet. 2:20; 3:14: brings favour with God

But not all suffering is blessed!

If you suffer for wrongdoing (1 Pet. 4:15)
If you fail (1 Pet. 2:20)
} you won't be blessed

3. You should meet suffering with patient endurance. (James 5:7-11)

4. Rejoice in suffering.

This is not pleasure in pain, but an eschatological joy in anticipation of the eventual reward. (Rom. 5:3, 8:18; 1 Pet. 1:6-7, 4:13; James 1:2-4)

Conclusion

Some general conclusions

- There is a distinction between sickness and suffering. The vocabulary of suffering is not applied to sickness and the sickness vocabulary is not applied to suffering.

- There is a difference in the valuation of suffering and sickness.

  Sickness is always negative.

  - It is not sent by God except as a punishment for sin and that is rare.
  - Like death, it is viewed as an enemy.
  - It is part of the 'Fall' and the 'Curse'.
  - It is not the mark of a pious life.

  Suffering is negative but it is not all black as it is part of our identification with Christ and leads to positive benefits. God does not send suffering but He allows it.

- The response to 'suffering' in the New Testament differs from the response to 'sickness'.

  Sickness is to be healed. It is never welcomed but always prayed against (medicine). Full redemption means the removal of all sickness. (Rom. 8:23) It is due to sin and is occasionally a discipline from God. If this is so, confession can take place so that healing can take place. (James 5:14-16) There is no hint of guilt in the New Testament when a person is not healed. **Healing is not automatic, but is a gift from God and is at God's disposal, not at that of the Christian**. When people are not healed no apologetic is needed, every healing is viewed as a mercy.

  Suffering is to be endured. It is not to be sought. Sickness is not to be accepted, but suffering is.

- **Both suffering and sickness can be attributed to evil**

  Sickness is due to human and demonic evil. It is part of the Fall and comes to all people. Suffering is also due to human or demonic evil.

- **God is the source of healing**

  God finds no good in sickness itself. God is presented as healing illnesses. Jesus, the full revelation of God, heals all He meets. The disciples, the trained representatives of Jesus, also heal. Paul teaches that the gift of healing is a gift of the Holy Spirit. There is no indication that sickness is good for a person or that God takes any pleasure in it.

  The church is to demonstrate the power of God in a world in rebellion against God. Often this is through healing the sick and accepting suffering.

- **God is sovereign over suffering**

  God protects the Christian from the evil one. He is Sovereign over suffering. But He does allow Christians to suffer because it produces character development and future blessedness.

  How should we pray when we suffer?

  - James 5:13: pray for deliverance (v. 11 Job)
  - 2 Cor. 1:8-11: pray for endurance

So learn to separate sickness from suffering and then we can announce the proper comfort of God to both the sick and suffering without confusing the categories and applying comfort to the wrong situation.