

Part 6 – Medicine, suffering and death

In this section we look at some of the wider aspects of living in the Kingdom of God in this broken world. We consider why Jesus healed the sick but did not teach basic hygiene and we consider the issues of medicine, pain and suffering, and death.

Jesus and Community Development

Jesus did not get involved in community development – public health, sanitation, clean water, agriculture, soil erosion and the like. Neither did he get involved in political reform over issues of slavery, political oppression, unjust land distribution, judicial corruption and the like. Was this because, as He said, “my kingdom is not of this world”? Is God only concerned with “spiritual” matters and not political and social issues?

The Old Testament, especially the prophets, show us that God is deeply concerned with community and political issues. Injustice at the market stalls brought condemnation and judgement from God.

“Are there yet the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the short measure that is an abomination? Shall I count pure those with the wicked scales, and with the bag of deceitful weights? For her rich men are full of violence, her inhabitants have spoken lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth. Therefore I will also make you sick by striking you, by making you desolate because of your sins.” (**Micah 6:10**)

Slavery, land distribution and good agricultural practices were all addressed in the Law. Jesus did not make a point of these issues because the good practices promoted in the Law were undermined by the brokenness of people’s spiritual relationship with God. Until their hearts were changed through being restored to God, the wider community issues would remain untouched.

In the letters of the New Testament, the main focus for the working out of the gospel is in interpersonal relationships. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is evidenced in loving and forgiving relationships. The wider issues of community and political engagement are hardly touched upon. Nevertheless, the strong presence of these issues in the Old Testament shows us clearly that they are matters of great importance to God and to the establishment of His Kingdom. Christians should engage strongly and persistently with community and political development, but with the very clear understanding that all such efforts are undermined where people are alienated from God. A person’s spirit must be restored before lasting social development can take place. But it must progress from there to touch the whole of creation. The Gospel is good news for everyone and everything.

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” (**Rom 8:19-22**)

Healing, both medical and miraculous, is part of the liberation that the sons of God should be revealing to the world.

Healing and Medicine

If God wants us to heal the sick in Jesus name, what is the place of medicine and surgery?

God has built healing into nature. We have natural resistance to disease and we mend when we cut our selves or break our bones. Nature has an amazing capacity to restore itself. Even in the face of such unnatural events such as massive oil spills in the oceans. The most effective remedy for oil spills is the naturally occurring bacteria that digest it. God has already provided our chief resource for health in our own amazing bodies and in the natural remedies provided in many plants. Health has been massively enhanced through our growing understanding of community health factors, such

as sanitation and clean water and has been further supplemented by the God given skill and ingenuity of man which has brought us modern medicine and surgery.

All of this flows from God's desire for us to enjoy good health. So what is the place of healing miracles in our modern world?

- Can we ask for healing when we are responsible for our own sickness or injury?
- Should we expect miraculous healing where modern medicine would suffice?

Many would answer no to these two questions. But if we were asking instead about forgiveness, what would our answer be? Yes, we can obtain forgiveness for things we are deliberately responsible for – indeed, that is mostly what we need forgiveness for. Can we expect God to deliver us from the weight of shame and guilt that oppress us, or should we rely on anti-depressants? Of course we should expect God to deliver us. The same, I suggest is true of healing. We can turn expectantly to God for healing even where we are responsible for our sickness and there are medical solutions available.

BUT – with both forgiveness and healing there are conditions. Repentance is required for forgiveness – the acknowledgement of personal guilt and the genuine desire to change. Forgiveness is not the means to sustaining a sinful lifestyle and neither is healing a means to sustaining an unhealthy lifestyle. We should acknowledge our unhealthy lifestyle and endeavour to improve it.

Since God has provided natural and human-devised means of healing, we should not be ashamed to use them and neither should we ignore the understanding that has been gained about the causes and remedies for sickness. The degree to which we rely on God rather than available medicine for protection and healing is a matter of faith and obedience for each Christian. I think we should encourage the practice of turning first to God in faith and expectation and then be unashamed in gratefully accepting medical help if it is still required. We should not try to deny we are sick or view medicine as second best. Medicine is part of the means provided by God for the overcoming of the evil of sickness - the goal is the overcoming of evil with good.

Is there a good purpose to pain and suffering?

Although we can confidently say that sickness and disease are symptoms of the fall and expressions of evil, it would be quite wrong to say that pain and suffering are evil.

Pain is an acute and unpleasant sensation. Suffering is the emotional response we have to pain. Indeed it is the purpose of pain to inflict suffering. If pain did not cause suffering, we would call it pleasure rather than pain.

Pain is essential to health. Leprosy is sufficient proof of this statement. Leprosy is a nerve disease that prevents a person feeling pain. If pain were evil, then Leprosy would be good. But in fact, the loss of pain results in terrible damage to the Leprosy sufferer. They do not suffer pain but they suffer disfigurement and loss of body parts simply because they do not feel the pain which would otherwise warn them of injury and allow them to protect themselves.

It is clear then, that God has given pain and its resultant suffering as a good gift to warn us of injury or sickness and to motivate us to act to alleviate the problem. This is true at a social level as well. Pain and suffering in relationships warns us of injury or sickness. The frustration and anger we feel in trying to obtain justice from a corrupt person is a God given pain to warn us and motivate us to seek change in our communities. Consequently when we face sickness or suffering we should seek to understand the underlying cause and try to make appropriate changes in our habits, relationships or priorities.

We must not confuse the God-given good of pain and suffering with the evil that causes it. Sickness is an expression of evil, suffering is an expression of Godliness. Our calling in the Gospel is not just to pray for the alleviation of pain but to act with persistence and hope to remove the causes of pain

and suffering from our bodies, our families and our communities. Pain and suffering are God given motivators.

Suffering with Christ

Jesus said it was necessary for Him to suffer: “it is written concerning the Son of Man, that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt” (**Mk 9:12**).

Jesus promised suffering to His disciples. “they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues” (**Mt 10:17**). “You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (**Joh 15:19-20**). “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (**Joh 16:33**).

The Apostles “rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (**Ac 5:41**). Jesus told Paul “how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (**Ac 9:16**). Paul said that we are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (**Ro 8:17**) and “to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (**Php 1:29**). Peter said “If when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God’s approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (**1Pet 2:20**).

Christ’s suffering abuse from the religious leaders and death on the cross was a consequence of His righteousness confronting the evil of the world. Likewise, the suffering that Jesus and the apostles wrote about was as a consequence of Christian witness in an ungodly world. Suffering because of a godly stand against evil is glorifying to God and is a sharing in Christ’s suffering.

However, simply suffering because of evil is not glorifying to God. The suffering of a starving child or a raped girl is not glorifying to God, it is a terrible evil. Likewise, suffering sickness is not glorifying to God. Nowhere does scripture present sickness as God’s will or glorifying to Him. Sickness is an affront to God and His kingdom. Nevertheless, patience, love and forgiveness in the face of evil and unjust suffering is glorifying to God. That is what Peter is writing about. There are subtleties here which take a bit of time to get clear in one’s mind.

Evil confronts us with a choice, the choice to succumb or overcome. This is a moral and spiritual choice: do I succumb to this power seeking to lead me into despair and death; or do I, with God’s help and all the resources He has made available to me, seek to overcome it and bring good out of it. Even if we suffer the destruction of health, relationships or property we can still, like Job, cling on to God and see the victory of His grace and our faith.

Simply to accept injustice, for instance, is not glorifying to God, it is giving way to evil. But to graciously suffer injustice, whilst opposing the evil and working for its transformation is glorifying to God. This is what Jesus did on the cross. He was patient and gracious in His suffering at the hands of the evil religious leaders, whilst at the same time He was working with God to overthrow the evil behind these men. Likewise with sickness. We should be gracious and patient whilst suffering its pain but at the same time stand firm in faith with God for its defeat.

Our suffering should always be turned against Satan who is behind all suffering. This is vividly portrayed in the prophecy about the two witnesses in **Revelation 11:3-12**.

Facing Death

A comic once said that life is a terminal disease. We will all die and death itself is described in the scriptures as an evil, the fear of which holds many captive:

“so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (**Heb 2:14-15**)

Death is the last enemy (**1Co 15:26**) which has been overcome by Christ “who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (**2Ti 1:10**).

Part of the gospel Jesus preached was “if any one keeps my word, he will never see death” (**Jn 8:51**). John reiterates this saying, “we know that we have passed out of death into life” (**1Jo 3:14**). This “passing out of death” is possible because “God raised Jesus up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (**Ac 2:24**). “Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (**Ro 6:9**). We share in His victory over death by being raised with Him in our baptism into Christ. Nevertheless, we know we still have to face the last act of Satan in our lives, our physical death. But even death will be overcome in our resurrection “when the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘death is swallowed up in victory’” (**1Co 15:54**).

So a Christian is not to fear death but to see it as a door to the full revelation of God and His glorious Kingdom. Death is our graduation. We hope for a peaceful death in ripe old age after a full and effective life but many face death following illness, accident or blatant evil. However we face death we should do so with the grace of God, looking forward to receiving the goal of our faith: uninhibited fellowship with Him.

When faced with life-threatening situations there should be a certain ambivalence, as we see in Paul. “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (**Phil 2:21ff**). So how should we respond to a life-threatening disease? I offer the following guidelines:

1. We should seek to find freedom from fear and the settled determination to glorify God in our patience and grace in facing whatever suffering may come.
2. We should determine to be truthful and open about our faith and fears and ensure that all our relationships are in good shape and our responsibilities discharged.
3. We should examine our priorities and ensure that we live true to them.
4. We should come to a place of peace and faith about either accepting the situation as our door to life, or to make a strong stand against it and confidently seek deliverance, knowing that whatever the outcome, “death is swallowed up in victory”.
5. Christians should not automatically accept treatment offered by doctors. We have a different view of death than unbelievers. Doctors have a duty to preserve life, but a Christian may choose to embrace glory.

I think we need to exercise caution when asking many people to pray for any situation, especially terminal sickness. Jesus said “According to your faith you will be healed” (**Mt 9:27**). Before recruiting prayer we must settle in our hearts that God is not moved and healing does not come by *many* prayers. A mustard seed of faith and a single prayer is all that is required. If we recruit others to pray, it must be on this understanding. Asking many to pray because we think the situation is too difficult for us is to invite failure. See “Part 2 - Ministering Divine Healing” for a fuller discussion of this.