

# SICKNESS

A detailed 3D rendering of several spherical virus particles. The particles are primarily orange and yellow, with a textured surface. They are covered in numerous small, protruding structures that resemble receptors or spikes. The background is a dark, gradient purple and blue, making the brightly colored viruses stand out.

**J. C. RYLE (1816-1900)**

# SICKNESS

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# SICKNESS

*“He whom thou lovest is sick.”*

— John 11:3

## Introduction

The chapter from which this text is taken is well known to all Bible readers. In life-like description, in touching interest, in sublime simplicity, there is no writing in existence that will bear comparison with [the Gospel of] John chapter 11. A narrative like this is to my own mind one of the great proofs of the inspiration of Scripture. When I read the story of Bethany, I feel there is something here that the infidel<sup>1</sup> can never account for. “This is nothing else but the finger of God” (see Exo 8:19).

The words that I specially 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. Yet almost every word is deeply suggestive.

Mark the child-like *faith* of these holy women. They turned to the Lord Jesus in their hour of need, as the frightened infant turns to its mother, or the compass-needle turns to the Pole. They turned to Him as their

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<sup>1</sup> **infidel** – person who does not believe in the God of the Bible.

Shepherd, their almighty Friend, their Brother born for adversity. Different as they were in natural temperament, the two sisters in this matter were entirely agreed. Christ's help was their first thought in the day of trouble. Christ was the refuge to which they fled in the hour of need. Blessed are all they that do likewise!

Mark the simple *humility* of their language about Lazarus. They call him "He whom thou lovest." They do not say, "He who loves Thee, believes in Thee, serves Thee," but "He whom *Thou* lovest." Martha and Mary were deeply taught of God. They had learned that Christ's love towards us, and not our love towards Christ, is the true ground of expectation and true foundation of hope. Blessed, again, are all they that are taught likewise! To look inward to our love towards Christ is painfully unsatisfying; to look outward to Christ's love towards 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! Then sickness is no sign that God is displeased. Sickness is intended to be a blessing to us, and not a curse.

All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

[All things are yours:] life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; [for] ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's (1Co 3:22-23).

Blessed, I say again, are they that have learned this! Happy are they who can say when they are ill, "This is my Father's doing. It must be well."

I invite the attention of my readers to the subject of sickness. The subject is one that we ought frequently to

look in the face. We cannot avoid it. It needs no prophet's eye to see sickness coming to each of us in turn one day. "In the midst of life we are in death."<sup>2</sup> Let us turn aside for a few moments and consider sickness as Christians. The consideration will not hasten its coming, and by God's blessing may teach us wisdom.

In considering the subject of sickness, three points appear to me to demand attention: the universal prevalence of sickness, the general benefits that sickness confers on mankind, and the special duties that the prevalence of sickness entails. On each I shall say a few words.

## 1. The Universal Prevalence of Sickness

### a. *Universal*

Sickness is universal. I need not dwell long on this point. To elaborate the proof of it would only be multiplying truisms, and heaping up common-places that all allow.

Sickness is everywhere. In Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in America; in hot countries and in cold, in civilized nations and in savage tribes; men, women, and children sicken and die.

Sickness is among all classes. Grace does not lift a believer above the reach of it. Riches will not buy exemption from it. Rank cannot prevent its assaults. Kings and their subjects, masters and servants, rich men and poor, learned and unlearned, teachers and [students], doctors and patients, ministers and hearers, all alike go down before this great foe. "The rich man's wealth is his strong city" (Pro 18:11). The Englishman's house is called his

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary*, Romans 8:10-16. Matthew Henry was a Puritan Bible expositor who penned one of the most helpful commentaries on the entire Bible.

castle; but there are no doors and bars that can keep out disease and death.

Sickness is of every sort and description. 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 assailed? Who ever visited a museum of morbid<sup>3</sup> anatomy without a shudder? “Strange that a harp of [a] thousand strings should keep in tune so long.” It is not, to my mind, so wonderful<sup>4</sup> that men should die so soon, as it is that they should live so long.

Sickness is often one of the most humbling and distressing trials that can come upon man. It can turn the strongest into a little child, and make him feel “the grasshopper shall be a burden” (Ecc 12:5). It can unnerve the boldest and make him tremble at the fall of a pin. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psa 139:14). The connection between body and mind is curiously close. The influence that some diseases can exercise upon the temper and spirit is immensely great. There are ailments of brain, liver, and nerves that can bring down a Solomon in mind to a state little better than that of a babe. He that would know to what depths of humiliation poor man can fall, has only to attend for a short time on sick-beds.

Sickness is not preventable by anything that man can do. The average duration of life may doubtless be somewhat lengthened. The skill of doctors may continually discover new remedies and effect surprising cures. The enforcement of wise sanitary regulations may greatly lower the death rate in a land. But, after all, whether in healthy or unhealthy localities, whether in mild cli-

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<sup>3</sup> **morbid** – relating to disease.

<sup>4</sup> **wonderful** – filled with wonder; surprising.

mates or in cold, whether treated by homeopathy or allopathy,<sup>5</sup> men will sicken and die.

The days of our years are three score years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be four score years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away (Psa 90:10).

That witness is indeed true. It was true 3,300 years ago. It is true still.

### ***b. Why universal?***

Why is sickness universal? What can we make of this great fact, the universal prevalence of sickness? How shall we account for it? What explanation can we give of it? What answer shall we give to our inquiring children when they ask us, “Father, why do people get ill and die?” These are grave questions. A few words upon them will not be out of place.

Can we suppose for a moment that God created sickness and disease at the beginning? Can we imagine that He Who formed our world in such perfect order was the Former of needless suffering and pain? Can we think that He Who made all things “very good,” made Adam’s race to sicken and to die?

The idea is, to my mind, revolting. It introduces a grand imperfection into the midst of God’s perfect works. I must find another solution to satisfy my mind. The only explanation that satisfies me is that which the Bible gives. Something has come into the world that has dethroned man from his original position and stripped him of his original privileges. Something has come in that, like a handful of gravel thrown into the midst of machinery, has marred the perfect order of God’s creation. And what is that something? I answer in one word:

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<sup>5</sup> **homeopathy and allopathy** – differing treatments with medicines producing effects similar or dissimilar to the disease treated.



It is sin. “Sin entered into the world, and death by sin” (Rom 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 (Gen 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.

I pause for a moment at this point, and yet in pausing I do not depart from my subject. I pause to remind my readers that there is no ground so untenable as that which is occupied by the atheist, the deist,<sup>6</sup> or the unbeliever in the Bible. I advise every young reader of this paper who is puzzled by the bold and specious<sup>7</sup> arguments of the infidel, to study well that most important subject: the difficulties of infidelity.<sup>8</sup> I say boldly that it requires far more credulity to be an infidel than to be a Christian. I say boldly that there are great broad patent<sup>9</sup> facts in the condition of mankind which nothing but the Bible can explain; and that one of the most striking of these facts is the universal prevalence of pain, sickness, and disease. In short, one of the mightiest difficulties in the way of atheists and deists is the body of man.

You have doubtless heard of atheists. An atheist is one who professes to believe that there is no God, no Creator, no First Cause, and that all things came together in this world by mere chance. Now, shall we listen to such a doctrine as this? Go, take an atheist to one of the excellent surgical schools of our land, and ask him to

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<sup>6</sup> **deist** – one who believes that God is distant, i.e., He created the universe but then left it to run its course on its own, following certain “laws of nature” that He had built into the universe—yet He does not intervene in human affairs.

<sup>7</sup> **specious** – appearing to be true but actually false.

<sup>8</sup> **infidelity** – unbelief; lack of faith.

<sup>9</sup> **patent** – open to view or knowledge; manifest; evident; plain.

study the wonderful structure of the human body. Show him the matchless skill with which every joint, vein, valve, muscle, sinew, nerve, bone, and limb have been formed. Show him the perfect adaptation of every part of the human frame to the purpose that it serves. Show him the thousand delicate contrivances for meeting wear and tear, and supplying daily waste of vigour. And then ask this man who denies the being of a God, and a great First Cause, if all this wonderful mechanism is the result of chance? Ask him if it came together at first by luck and accident? Ask him if he so thinks about the watch he looks at, the bread he eats, or the coat he wears? Oh, no! Design is an insuperable<sup>10</sup> difficulty in the atheist's way. There *is* a God.

You have doubtless heard of deists. A deist is one who professes to believe that there is a God, Who made the world and all things therein. But he does not believe the Bible. "A God, but no Bible! A Creator, but no Christianity!" This is the deist's creed. Now, shall we listen to this doctrine? Go again, I say, and take a deist to a hospital, and show him some of the awful handiwork of disease. Take him to the bed where lies some tender child, scarce knowing good from evil, with an incurable cancer. Send him to the ward where there is a loving mother of a large family in the last stage of some excruciating disease. Show him some of the racking pains and agonies to which flesh is heir, and ask him to account for them. Ask this man, who believes there is a great and wise God Who made the world, but cannot believe the Bible—ask him how he accounts for these traces of disorder and imperfection in his God's creation. Ask this man who sneers at Christian theology and is too wise to believe the fall of Adam, ask him upon his theory to explain the universal prevalence of pain and disease in the world.

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<sup>10</sup> **insuperable** – impossible to overcome.

You may ask in vain! You will get no satisfactory answer. Sickness and suffering are insuperable difficulties in the deist's way. Man has sinned, and therefore man suffers. Adam fell from his first estate, and therefore Adam's children sicken and die.

**c. *Proof of the Bible's truthfulness***

Universal sickness is one of the proofs of the Bible's truthfulness, one of its indirect evidences. [This is because] the Bible explains sickness. The Bible answers the questions about it that will arise in every inquiring mind. No other systems of religion can do this. They all fail here. They are silent. They are confounded. The Bible alone looks the subject in the face. It boldly proclaims the fact that man is a fallen creature, and with equal boldness proclaims a vast remedial system to meet his needs (Rom 5:6).<sup>11</sup> I feel shut up to the conclusion that the Bible is from God. Christianity is a revelation from heaven. "Thy word is truth" (Joh 17:17).

Let us stand fast on the old ground that the Bible, and the Bible only, is God's revelation of Himself to man. Be not moved by the many new assaults that modern skepticism is making on the inspired volume. Heed not the hard questions that the enemies of the faith are fond of putting about Bible difficulties, and to which, perhaps, you often feel unable to give an answer. Anchor your soul firmly on this safe principle: that the whole book is God's truth. Tell the enemies of the Bible that, in spite of all their arguments, there is no book in the world which will bear comparison with the Bible, none that so thoroughly meets man's needs, none that explains so much of the state of mankind. As to the hard things in the Bible, tell them you are content to wait. You find enough

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<sup>11</sup> God's redemption is the deliverance of His children from sin through the ransom paid on their behalf by Christ at the cross.

plain truth in the book to satisfy your conscience and save your soul. The hard things will be cleared up in one day. What you know not now, you will know hereafter.

## 2. The General Benefits of Sickness

### a. *Good?*

Now, what are the benefits that sickness confers on mankind? I use that word “benefits” advisedly. I feel it of deep importance to see this part of our subject clearly. I know well that sickness is one of the supposed weak points in God’s government of the world on which skeptical minds love to dwell. “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. How can these things be?” Such is the reasoning that often comes across the heart of man.

I reply to all such reasoners that their doubts and questionings are most unreasonable. They might as well doubt the existence of a Creator because the order of the universe is disturbed by earthquakes, hurricanes, and storms. They might as well doubt the providence of God because of the horrible massacres of Delhi and Cawnpore.<sup>12</sup> All this would be just as reasonable as to doubt the mercy of God because of the presence of sickness in the world.

I ask all who find it hard to reconcile the prevalence of disease and pain with the love of God, to cast their eyes on the world around them and to mark what is go-

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<sup>12</sup> **Delhi** – decisive conflict during the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

After rebel soldiers gained control of Delhi in May, the British besieged the city—regaining control in September. More than 1,200 British and 5,000 Indians were killed in the fighting.

**Cawnpore** – During the Indian Rebellion of 1857, 900 British men, women, and children were besieged in Cawnpore for 22 days by rebels, ending in most being killed after their surrender.

ing on. I ask them to observe the extent to which men constantly 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.<sup>13</sup> The seed is thrown into the ground and rots, but we sow in the hope of a future harvest. The boy is sent to school amidst many tears, but we send him in the hope of his getting future wisdom. The father of a family undergoes some fearful surgical operation, but he bears it in the hope of future health. I ask men to apply this great principle to God's government of the world. I ask them to believe that God allows pain, sickness, and disease, not because He loves to vex man, but because He desires to benefit man's heart, mind, conscience, and 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 often brings in its train. But I cannot regard it as an unmixed evil. I see in it a wise permission of God. I see in it a useful provision to check the ravages of sin and the devil among men's souls. If man had never sinned, I should have been at a loss to discern the benefit of sickness. But since sin is in the world, I can see that sickness is a good.

It is a blessing quite as much as a curse. It is a rough schoolmaster, I grant. But it is a real friend to man's soul.

### ***b. Ways God uses sickness used for good***

What are the ways that God uses sickness for the good of mankind?

1) Sickness helps *to remind men of death*. Most [men] live as if they were never going to die. They follow

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<sup>13</sup> Examples: loss/gain – starting a business; sorrow/joy – disciplining a child; pain/health – strenuous exercise.

business, pleasure, politics, or science as if earth was 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 at will.<sup>14</sup> A heavy 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 mighty good.

2) Sickness helps *to make men think seriously of God*, their souls, and the world to come. Most in their days of health can find no time for such thoughts. They dislike them. They put them away. They count them troublesome and disagreeable. Now, a severe disease has sometimes a wonderful power of mustering and rallying these thoughts, and bringing them up before the eyes of a man's soul. Even a wicked king like Benhadad, when sick, could think of Elisha (2Ki 8:8). Even heathen sailors, when death was in sight, were afraid and cried "every man unto his god" (Jon 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 that is not of this life, and no happiness excepting 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 with a loose hand. The man of business finds that money alone is not everything the heart requires. The woman of the world finds that costly apparel, novel-reading, and the reports of balls and operas are miserable comforters in a sick room. Surely, anything that obliges us to alter our weights and measures of earthly things is a real good.

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<sup>14</sup> **tenants at will** – renters who can be turned out whenever the owner chooses.

4) Sickness helps *to level and humble us*. We are all naturally proud and high-minded. Few, even of the poorest, are free from the infection. Few are to be found who do not look down on somebody else, and secretly flatter themselves that they are “not as other men” (Luk 18:11). A sick bed is a mighty tamer of such thoughts as these. 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 of the hope that is in them. Disease is sometimes most useful to a man in exposing the utter worthlessness of his soul’s foundation. It often shows him that he has nothing solid under his feet and nothing firm under his hand. It makes him find out that, although he may have had a form of religion, he has been all his life worshipping an “unknown God” (Act 17:23; Joh 3:3). Many a creed looks well on the smooth waters of health, which 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 makes us find out the real character of our faith is a good.

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<sup>15</sup> **bar of God** – court of God’s justice on Judgment Day.

### c. *Who receives these benefits?*

I do not say that sickness confers these benefits on all to whom it comes. Alas, I can say nothing of the kind! Myriads are yearly laid low by illness and restored to health, who evidently learn no lesson from their sick beds and return again to the world. Myriads are yearly passing through sickness to the grave, and yet receiving no more spiritual impression from it than the beasts that perish. While they live they have no feeling, and when they die there are “no bands in their death”<sup>16</sup> (Psa 73:4). These are awful things to say, but they are true. The degree of deadness to which man’s heart and conscience may attain is a depth that I cannot pretend to fathom.

But does sickness confer the benefits of which I have been speaking on only a few? I will allow nothing of the kind. I believe that in very many cases sickness produces impressions more or less akin to those of which I have just been speaking. I believe that in many minds sickness is God’s “day of visitation” (Isa 10:3; 1Pe 2:12), and that feelings are continually aroused on a sick bed which, if improved,<sup>17</sup> might (by God’s grace) result in salvation. I believe that in heathen lands sickness often paves the way for the missionary, by making the poor idolater lend a willing ear to the glad tidings of the gospel. I believe that in our own land sickness is one of the greatest aids to the minister of the gospel: sermons and counsels that we have neglected in the day of health, are often brought home in the day of disease. I believe that sickness is one of God’s most important subordinate instruments in the saving of men; and that though the feelings it calls forth are often temporary, it is also often a means whereby the Spirit works effectually on the heart. In short, I believe firmly that the sickness of men’s bodies has often led, in

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<sup>16</sup> **no bands in their death** – nothing that binds or afflicts.

<sup>17</sup> **improved** – considered in order to gain useful insight.



God's wonderful providence, to the salvation of men's souls.

I leave this branch of my subject here. It needs no further remark. If sickness can do the things of which I have been speaking (and who will [deny] it?), if sickness in a wicked world can help to make men think of God and their souls, then sickness confers benefits on mankind.

We have no right to murmur at sickness and repine at its presence in the world. We ought rather to thank God for it. It is God's witness.<sup>18</sup> It is the soul's adviser. It is an awakener to the conscience. It is a purifier to the heart. Surely I have a right to tell you that sickness is a blessing and not a curse, a help and not an injury, a gain and not a loss, a friend and not a foe to mankind. So long as we have a world wherein there is sin, it is a mercy that it is a world wherein there is sickness.

### 3. The Special Duties Sickness Entails

I should be sorry to leave the subject of sickness without saying something on this point. I hold it to be of cardinal importance not to be content with generalities in delivering God's message to souls. I am anxious to impress on each one (into whose hands this paper may fall) his own personal responsibility in connection with the subject. I would fain<sup>19</sup> have no one lay down this paper unable to answer the questions:

- What practical lesson have I learned?
- What, in a world of disease and death, ought I to do?

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<sup>18</sup> Sickness testifies to the truth that God is in control and far mightier than man.

<sup>19</sup> **fain** – eagerly.

### ***Duty 1: Live prepared to meet God***

One paramount duty that the prevalence of sickness entails on man is that of living habitually prepared to meet God. Sickness is a remembrancer of death. Death is the door through which we must all pass to judgment. Judgment is the time when we must at last see God face to face. Surely the first lesson that the inhabitant of a sick and dying world should learn would be to prepare to meet his God.

When are you prepared to meet God? Never, till your iniquities are forgiven and your sin covered! Never till your heart is renewed and your will taught to delight in the will of God! You have many sins. If you go to church, your own mouth is taught to confess this every Sunday. The blood of Jesus Christ alone can cleanse those sins away. The righteousness of Christ alone can make you acceptable in the sight of God. Faith, simple childlike faith, alone can give you an interest in Christ and His benefits.

Would you know whether you are prepared to meet God? Then where is your faith? Your heart is naturally unfit for God's company. You have no real pleasure in doing His will. The Holy Ghost must transform you after the image of Christ. Old things must pass away; all things must become new (2Co 5:17). Would you know whether you are prepared to meet God? Then where is your grace? Where are the evidences of your conversion and sanctification?

I believe that this, and nothing less than this, is preparedness to meet God. Pardon of sin and fitness for God's presence, justification by faith and sanctification of the heart, the blood of Christ sprinkled on us and the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us—these are the grand essentials of the Christian religion. These are no mere words and names to furnish bones of contention for

wrangling theologians. These are sober, solid, substantial realities. To live in the actual possession of these things, in a world full of sickness and death, is the first duty that I press home upon your soul.

***Duty 2: Live ready to bear sickness patiently***

Another paramount duty that the prevalence of sickness entails on you is that of living habitually ready to bear it patiently. Sickness is no doubt a trying thing to flesh and blood. To feel our nerves unstrung and our natural force abated,<sup>20</sup>

- to be obliged to sit still and be cut off from all our usual avocations<sup>21</sup>
- to see our plans broken off and our purposes disappointed
- to endure long hours (and days and nights) of weariness and pain

—all this is a severe strain on poor sinful human nature. What wonder if peevishness and impatience are brought out by disease! Surely in such a dying world as this, we should study patience.

How shall we learn to bear sickness patiently when sickness comes to our turn? We must lay up stores of grace in the time of health. We must seek for the sanctifying influence of the Holy Ghost over our unruly tempers and dispositions. We must make a real business of our prayers, and regularly ask for strength to endure God's will as well as to do it. Such strength is to be had for the asking: "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it" (Joh 14:14).

I cannot think it needless to dwell on this point. I believe the passive graces of Christianity receive far less notice than they deserve. Meekness, gentleness, longsuf-

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<sup>20</sup> **abated** – diminished; lessened.

<sup>21</sup> **avocations** – distractions; diversions.

fering, faith, patience, are all mentioned in the Word of God as fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). They are passive graces that specially glorify God. They often make men think, who despise the active side of the Christian character.

Never do these graces shine so brightly as they do in the sick room. They enable many a sick person to preach a silent sermon, which those around him never forget. Would you adorn the doctrine you profess? Would you make your Christianity beautiful in the eyes of others? Then take the hint I give you this day. Lay up a store of patience against the time of illness. Then, though your sickness be not to death, it shall be for the “glory of God” (Joh 11:4).

### ***Duty 3: Live ready to help others***

One more paramount duty that the prevalence of sickness entails on you is that of habitual readiness to feel with and help your fellow-men. Sickness is never very far from us. Few are the families who have not some sick relative. Few are the parishes where you will not find someone ill. But wherever there is sickness, there is a call to duty. A little timely assistance in some cases, a kindly visit in others, a friendly inquiry, a mere expression of sympathy, may do a vast good. These are the sort of things that soften asperities,<sup>22</sup> bring men together, and promote good feeling. These are ways by which you may ultimately lead men to Christ and save their souls. These are good works to which every professing Christian should be ready. In a world full of sickness and disease, we ought to “bear one another’s burdens” and be “kind one to another” (Gal 6:2; Eph 4:32).

These things, I dare say, may appear to some [as] little and trifling. They must needs be doing something

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<sup>22</sup> **asperities** – harsh, embittered feelings.

great, grand, striking, and heroic! I take leave to say that conscientious attention to these little acts of brotherly-kindness is one of the clearest evidences of having “the mind of Christ” (1Co 2:16). They are acts in which our blessed Master Himself was abundant. He was ever going about “doing good” to the sick and sorrowful (Act 10:38). They are acts to which He attaches great importance in that most solemn passage of Scripture, the description of the Last Judgment. He says there, “I was sick, and ye visited me” (Mat 25:36).

Have you any desire to prove the reality of your charity, that blessed grace which so many talk of and so few practice? If you have, beware of unfeeling selfishness and neglect of your sick brethren. Search them out. Assist them if they need aid. Show your sympathy with them. Try to lighten their burdens. Above all, strive to do good to their souls. It will do you good, [even] if it does no good to them. It will keep your heart from murmuring. It may prove a blessing to your own soul. I firmly believe that God is testing and proving us by every case of sickness within our reach. By permitting suffering, He tries whether Christians have any feeling. Beware, lest you be “weighed in the balances and...found wanting” (Dan 5:27). If you can live in a sick and dying world and not feel for others, you have yet much to learn.

I leave this branch of my subject here. I throw out the points I have named as suggestions, and I pray [to] God that they may work in many minds. I repeat: habitual preparedness to meet God, habitual readiness to suffer patiently, habitual willingness to sympathize heartily, are plain duties that sickness entails on all. They are duties within the reach of everyone. In naming them I ask nothing extravagant or unreasonable. I bid no man retire into a monastery and ignore the duties of his station. I only want men to realize that they live in a sick and dy-

ing world—and to live accordingly. I say boldly: the man who lives the life of faith, holiness, patience, and charity, is not only the most true Christian, but the most wise and reasonable man.

#### 4. Practical Applications

And now I conclude all with four words of practical application. I want this subject to be turned to some spiritual use. My heart's desire and prayer to God in placing it in this volume is to do good to souls.

##### *a. What will you do when you are ill?*

In the first place, I offer a question to all who read this paper—to which, as God's ambassador, I entreat their serious attention. It is a question that grows naturally out of the subject on which I have been writing. It is a question that concerns all, of every rank, class, and condition. I ask you, "What will you do when you are ill?" The time must come when you, as well as others, must go down the dark valley of the shadow of death. The hour must come when you, like all your forefathers, must sicken and die. The time may be near or far off; God only knows. But whenever the time may be, I ask again, What are you going to do? Where do you mean to turn for comfort? On what do you mean to rest your soul? On what do you mean to build your hope? From whence will you fetch your consolations?

I do entreat you not to put these questions away. Suffer them to work on your conscience, and rest not till you can give them a satisfactory answer. Trifle not with that precious gift, an immortal soul. Defer not the consideration of the matter to a more convenient season. Pre-

sume not on a death-bed repentance;<sup>23</sup> the greatest business ought surely not to be left to the last. One dying thief was saved that men might not despair, but only one that none might presume. I repeat the question. I am sure it deserves an answer. “What will you do when you are ill?”

If you were going to live forever in this world, I would not address you as I do. But it cannot be. There is no escaping the common lot of all mankind. Nobody can die in our stead. The day must come when we must each go to our long home.<sup>24</sup> Against that day I want you to be prepared. The body that now takes up so much of your attention—the body that you now clothe, feed, and warm with so much care—that body must return again to the dust. Oh, think what an awful thing it would prove at last: to have provided for everything except the one thing needful, to have provided for the body but to have neglected the soul—to die, in fact, like Cardinal Beaufort and “give no sign” of being saved!<sup>25</sup> Once more I press my question on your conscience: “What will you do when you are ill?”

### ***b. Acquaint yourself with Christ***

In the next place, I offer counsel to all who feel they need it and are willing to take it, to all who feel they are not yet prepared to meet God. That counsel is short and simple: Acquaint yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ without delay. Flee to Christ and be saved; repent and be converted.

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<sup>23</sup> **repentance** – turning from sin to God by grace through faith in Christ (Mar 1:15). See Free Grace Broadcaster 203, *Repentance*.

<sup>24</sup> **long home** – grave.

<sup>25</sup> **Cardinal Beaufort** (1374-1447) – English religious leader who three times served the King of England as Lord Chancellor. Legend has it that on his death bed, he offered Death the whole treasury of England in return for living longer.

Either you have a soul or you have not. You will surely never deny that you have. Then if you have a soul, seek that soul's salvation. Of all gambling in the world, there is none so reckless as that of the man who lives unprepared to meet God. Either you need a saviour or you do not. If you do, flee to the only Saviour this very day, and cry mightily to Him to save your soul. Apply to Christ at once. Seek Him by faith. Commit your soul into His keeping. Cry mightily to Him for pardon and peace with God. Ask Him to pour down the Holy Spirit upon you, and make you a thorough Christian. He will hear you. No matter what you have been, He will not refuse your prayer. He has said, "him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (Joh 6:37). Put off repentance no longer. Either you have sins or you have not. If you have (and who will dare to deny it?), seek the grace of God in Christ to break off from those sins, to cast away your transgressions, and turn away from them without delay.

Beware, I beseech you, of a vague and indefinite Christianity. Be not content with a general hope that all is right because you belong to a church, and that all will be well at last because God is merciful. Rest not, rest not without personal union with Christ Himself. Rest not, rest not till you have the witness of the Spirit in your heart that you are washed, sanctified, justified, and one with Christ—and [have] Christ in you. Rest not till you can say with the apostle, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2Ti 1:12).

Vague, indefinite, and indistinct religion may do very well in time of health; [but] it will never do in the day of sickness. A mere formal, perfunctory church membership may carry a man through the sunshine of youth and prosperity. It will break down entirely when death is in sight. Nothing will do then but real heart-



union with Christ. Christ interceding for us at God's right hand; Christ known and believed as our Priest, our Physician, our Friend—Christ alone can rob death of its sting and enable us to face sickness without fear. He alone can deliver those who through fear of death are in bondage. I say to everyone who wants advice: Be acquainted with Christ. As ever you would have hope and comfort on the bed of sickness, be acquainted with Christ. Seek Christ. Apply to Christ.

Take every care and trouble to Him when you are acquainted with Him. He will keep you and carry you through all. Pour out your heart before Him when your conscience is burdened. He is the true Confessor. He alone can absolve you and take the burden away. Turn to Him first in the day of sickness, like Martha and Mary (Joh 11:3). Keep on looking to Him to the last breath of your life. Christ is worth knowing. The more you know Him, the better you will love Him. Then, be acquainted with Jesus Christ.

### ***c. Glorify God when you are ill***

In the third place, I exhort all true Christians who read this paper to remember how much they may glorify God in the time of sickness, and to lie quiet in God's hand when they are ill.

I feel it very important to touch on this point. I know how ready the heart of a believer is to faint, and how busy Satan is in suggesting doubts and questionings when the body of a Christian is weak. I have seen something of the depression and melancholy that sometimes comes upon the children of God when they are suddenly laid aside by disease and obliged to sit still. I have marked how prone some good people are to torment themselves with morbid thoughts at such seasons, and to say in their hearts, "God has forsaken me: I am cast out of His sight."

I earnestly entreat all sick believers to remember that they may honour God as much by patient suffering as they can by active work. It often shows more grace to sit still than it does to go to and fro and perform great exploits. I entreat them to remember that Christ cares for them as much when they are sick as He does when they are well, and that the very chastisement they feel so acutely is sent in love, and not in anger.

Above all, I entreat them to recollect the sympathy of Jesus for all His weak members. They are always tenderly cared for by Him, but never so much as in their time of need. Christ has had great experience of sickness. He knows the heart of a sick man. He used to see “all manner of sickness, and all manner of disease” when He was upon earth (Mat 4:23). He felt specially for the sick in the days of His flesh. He feels for them specially still. Sickness and suffering, I often think, make believers more like their Lord in experience than [does] health. “Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses” (Mat 8:17). The Lord Jesus was a “man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3). None have such an opportunity of learning the mind of a suffering Saviour as suffering disciples.

***d. Maintain close communion with Christ***

I conclude with a word of exhortation to all believers, which I heartily pray God to impress upon their souls. I exhort you to keep up a habit of close communion with Christ, and never to be afraid of “going too far” in your religion. Remember this if you wish to have “great peace” in your times of sickness. I observe with regret a tendency in some quarters to lower the standard of practical Christianity, and to denounce what are called “extreme views” about a Christian’s daily walk in life. I remark with pain that even religious people will sometimes look coldly on those who withdraw from worldly society, and will cen-

sure them as “exclusive, narrow-minded, illiberal, uncharitable, sour spirited,” and the like. I warn every believer in Christ who reads this paper to beware of being influenced by such censures. I entreat him, if he wants light in the valley of death, to “keep himself unspotted from the world” (Jam 1:27), to follow the Lord very fully, and to walk very closely with God (Num 14:24).

I believe that the [lack] of “thoroughness” about many people’s Christianity is one secret of their little comfort, both in health and sickness. I believe that the “half-and-half,” “keep-in-with-everybody” religion, which satisfies many in the present day, is offensive to God. [It] sows thorns in dying pillows, which hundreds never discover till too late. I believe that the weakness and feebleness of such a religion never comes out so much as it does upon a sick bed.

If you and I want “strong consolation” in our time of need (Heb 6:18), we must not be content with a bare union with Christ. We must seek to know something of heart-felt, experimental communion with Him. Never, never let us forget that “union” is one thing, and “communion” another. Thousands, I fear, who know what union with Christ is, know nothing of communion.

The day may come when, after a long fight with disease, we shall feel that medicine can do no more, and that nothing remains but to die. Friends will be standing by, unable to help us. Hearing, eyesight, even the power of praying, will be fast failing us. The world and its shadows will be melting beneath our feet. Eternity, with its realities, will be looming large before our minds. What shall support us in that trying hour? What shall enable us to feel, “I will fear no evil” (Psa 23:4)? Nothing, nothing can do it but close communion with Christ. Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith, Christ putting His right arm under our heads, Christ felt to be sitting by our

side—Christ alone can give us the complete victory in the last struggle.

Let us cleave to Christ more closely, love Him more heartily, live to Him more thoroughly, copy Him more exactly, confess Him more boldly, follow Him more fully. Religion like this will always bring its own reward. Worldly people may laugh at it. Weak brethren may think it extreme. But it will wear well. At even-time it will bring us light. In sickness it will bring us peace. In the world to come it will give us “a crown of glory that fadeth not away” (1Pe 5:4).

## 5. Conclusion

The time is short. The fashion of this world passeth away. A few more sicknesses and all will be over. A few more funerals and our own funeral will take place. A few more storms and tossings, and we shall be safe in harbour. We travel towards a world where there is no more sickness, where parting, pain, crying, and mourning are done with for evermore. Heaven is becoming every year more full, and earth more empty. The friends ahead are becoming more numerous than the friends astern. “Yet a little time, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry” (Heb 10:37). In His presence shall be fullness of joy (Psa 16:11). Christ shall wipe away all tears from His people’s eyes (Rev 21:4). “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (1Co 15:26); but he *shall* be destroyed. Death himself shall one day die (Rev 20:14).

In the meantime, let us live the life of faith in the Son of God. Let us lean all our weight on Christ and rejoice in the thought that He lives for evermore. Yes: blessed be God! Christ lives, though we may die. Christ lives, though friends and families are carried to the grave. He lives Who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light by the gospel. He lives Who said, “O death, I

will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction” (Hos 13:14). He lives who will one day change our vile body and make it like unto His glorious body (Phi 3:21).

In sickness and in health, in life and in death, let us lean confidently on Him. Surely we ought to say daily with one of old, “Blessed be God for Jesus Christ!”<sup>26</sup> ❧

## Prayer Answered by Crosses

John Newton (1725-1807)

*Psalm 65:5; Acts 14:22*

*I asked the Lord that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know,  
And seek more earnestly His face.*

*'Twas He Who taught me thus to pray,  
And He, I trust, has answered prayer;  
But it has been in such a way  
As almost drove me to despair.*

*I hoped that in some favoured hour,  
At once He'd answer my request;  
And by His love's constraining power,  
Subdue my sins and give me rest.*

*Instead of this, He made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart,  
And let the angry powers of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.*

*Yea, more with His own hand He seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my gourds and laid me low.*

*“Lord, why is this?” I trembling cried;  
“Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?”  
“’Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,  
“I answer prayer for grace and faith.”*

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew Henry (1662-1714) *Commentary*, Genesis 2:4.