

was preaching the message of salvation: Every one of us is sick and disabled. Only Jesus can heal us. The disposition of sick and disabled persons leads us to the divine Physician. The miracles of healing the sick, therefore, are much more than manifestations of power, much more even than the revelation of a compassionate God; these wonders provide the setting and the message of salvation for everyone.

Read again chapters 4 to 10 of Matthew's Gospel to see how sickness and disability lead us toward salvation. Look into the ways by which Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics can work together, not only caring for sick and disabled persons but also, in this common work of mercy, discovering new insights into the way of faith and salvation.

Study Question:

How do sick and disabled persons in our families and neighborhood teach all of us the way to Jesus, the divine Physician?

My answer: _____

IV. Paul, Disabled Apostle of a Disabled Messiah

The Gospels, we have seen, concentrate upon healing and upon the way in which the healing acts of Jesus help us to understand the message of Jesus. In the ministry of Paul, the gift of healing gradually slips into the background. This gift is one among many in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and is not mentioned at all among the gifts of ministry in Ephesians 4:11-13.

Paul focuses upon the crucified, disabled Messiah, weak and foolish in the eyes of the world (1 Cor. 1:18-25; Gal. 6:14). Jesus "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a *curse* for us" (Gal. 3:13). Paul writes this other enigmatic statement: "God

made him who had no sin to be *sin* for us" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Paul himself shows up, especially in the two most autobiographical of his epistles, Galatians and 2 Corinthians, as sick and handicapped. The references are too frequent to be explained away: "As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. . . . You did not treat me with contempt or scorn" (Gal. 4:13-14).

"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry about in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body" (2 Cor. 4:7-11).

The Corinthians are ridiculing Paul by saying: "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive" (2 Cor. 10:10-11). This passage refers to "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-10). After repeated intercession, God refuses to remove it but states: "My power is made perfect in weakness." "Weakness," we should remember, is one of the most common words for sickness in the Hebrew Bible.

Once again, after reading over the larger context of Paul's words, especially in Galatians and 2 Corinthians, seek to appreciate how Paul turned his physical weakness, unimpressiveness and disability into a way of understanding the gospel of Jesus Crucified. Because of his own weakness, Paul was led to stress that we are justified not by our own strength and wisdom but by our faith in Jesus. Can you say the same of yourself?

Study Questions:

Can these points of weakness become an area of strength, uniting us as we look to each

other for strength and insights into the mystery of Jesus? Can Paul's ministry from weakness lead you to find a new form of reaching out to others in your weakness? Can you appreciate why sick and disabled persons normally do not desire to be waited on but rather to be given access to life and to ways of ministering to others?

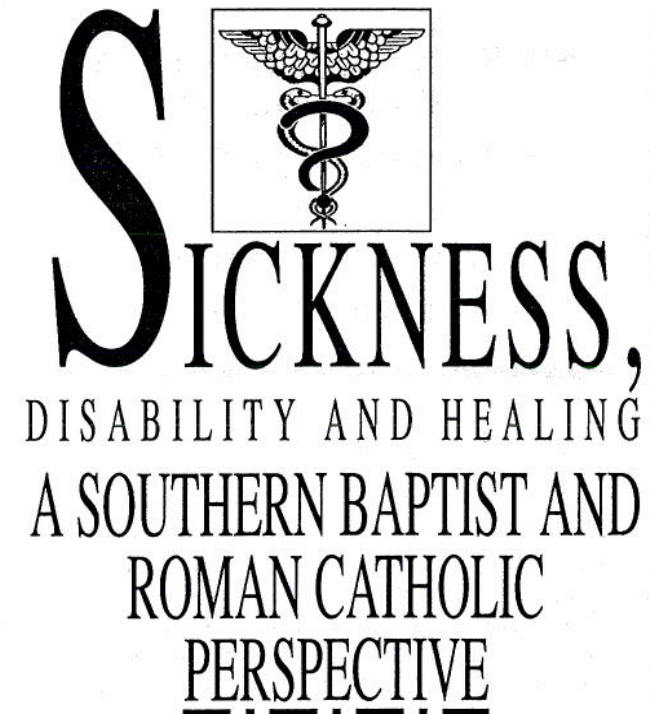
My answer: _____

Suggested Reading

- Bailey, Lloyd R., Sr., *Biblical Perspectives on Death*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979.
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I. The Bible Calls Us

In its opening pages, the Bible calls us to recognize how God created the first man and woman in the divine image and likeness. They reflected a divine ideal of peace with themselves and their environment, as well as of fruitfulness in sharing life and its joys with their future family and friends (Gen. 1:26-31).

But they sinned. God removed all access to the tree of life. Jealousy, greed and sensuality, suffering and the painful experience of death began to stalk their steps (Gen. 3-4).

Because of this background, sickness, disability and death bring us to ultimate, radical questions. Sickness and disability haunt us with guilt: What did I or the family do wrong? We are tempted to think that only a well-shaped, completely healthy person reflects the image of God. The divine image turns into the body beautiful! Sick and disabled, we feel less sacred and less godly.

The Bible calls us to rethink some of these suppositions. Already in the first book of the Old Testament, Jacob's death becomes an enviable model for the "death of the righteous" (Num. 23:10, NIV). (All verses hereinafter are taken from the New International Version.) The death of Moses becomes a triumphant moment. He is acclaimed "servant of the Lord" and the most renowned of prophets.

Moses dies, overlooking the promised land, like one of the saints ready to enter paradise (Deut. 34).

Each stage of Moses' journey with the children of Israel toward the promised land becomes an important moment of instruction. There were stages of complaint, revolt and doubt, stages of hunger and thirst, stages of sickness and death. All of these experiences enabled Moses to become "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3).

The image of God that begins to appear in prophets like Moses is an image of a loving, faithful, compassionate and forgiving God (Ex. 34).

Read again the biblical passages as cited above, especially in their larger context.

Study Questions:

Does the punishment for sin in the early chapters of Genesis turn into a positive way of divine grace, enabling us to be conformed to God's image as faithful and compassionate? Can sickness and disability become a blessing? Do these conditions enable a family or society to be more caring and loving toward each other? Do these conditions remove all distinctions, whether of race or social status, so that we are *all* children of God, called to form one family of faith?

My answer: _____

II. Against Calling People Unclean

Already we have recognized a disposition in all of us to draw false conclusions about sickness and disability. Does it always mean personal sin and guilt? Another incorrect and harmful deduction can arise from being named God's elect people, a privilege once held exclusively by Israel, now shared with those called to faith in Jesus as Savior. As an introduction

to God's magnificent revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God says to Israel: "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6).

Holiness on the part of God's elect people seemed to require *physical* as well as moral integrity. We recall our earlier discussion about the divine image in us. Barred from functioning as priests was any Levite "who has any defect, . . . who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed." The text of Leviticus 21:16-23 goes into further detail. These rules tended to carry over among non-Levites and all the people. Even to *touch* one of these unclean persons rendered the other person unclean. The Book of Leviticus then drew this conclusion: "Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them . . . , I am the Lord, your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:43-44).

Prophecy acted against such artificial restrictions. The prophet Elijah embraced the dead boy. Rather than become unclean himself, he restored life to the dead child (1 Kings 17:17-24). The bones of the dead Elisha did not spread uncleanness but rather brought new life to the corpse of a man hurriedly buried in his grave (2 Kings 13:20-21). Prophets Isaiah and Micah even declare that the messianic remnant, those "few" faithful ones to be called into the reign of God, consisted of these unclean ones: "I will gather the lame; I will assemble the exiles. . . . The Lord will rule over them on Mount Zion" (Micah 4:6-7). It is important to note that this prophecy of Micah occurs immediately after his electrifying vision of peace where swords will be beaten into ploughshares (Micah 4:1-5). See also: Isa. 2:1-5; 35:4-6; 41:17-20; or Zeph. 3:12, 19.

Study Questions:

Do we tend to restrict the ability of disabled people, leaving the impression that they do not belong in the temple of God, our churches and places of worship? What can they tell us about faith in God, the supremely

compassionate One, faith in Jesus as Savior?

My answer: _____

III. Faith in Jesus, Divine Physician

At the beginning of His public ministry, while addressing the congregation in His hometown synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus calls himself "Physician" (Luke 4:23). He repeats it in the next chapter, defending His choice of an unclean, despised tax collector as one of the twelve: "It is not the healthy who need a *doctor*, but the sick" (Luke 5:31).

It may even seem that a disproportionate emphasis is placed upon healing in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. In fact, sick and disabled people form the setting for Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and the narrative which follows and exemplifies the sermon (Matt. 8-9). The Gospel refers to Jesus going about Galilee, "preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35). The Gospel makes the scene still more dramatic. People are streaming toward Jesus from all over Israel and beyond, carrying or leading "all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, the epileptics and the paralytics" (Matt. 4:24).

These families and care-providers of the sick are the blessed ones of Jesus' beatitudes. With them, even the smallest letter of the law and the prophets will come true. With them, our language must be unequivocally "Yes!" or "No!" They, in particular, are the salt and light of the earth. They are truly the ones with their treasure in heaven. Matthew quotes the fourth servant song of the prophet Isaiah, to say how Jesus "took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matt. 8:17; Isa. 53:4).

In healing sick and disabled persons, Jesus