

To What Intent Does God Afflict Us With Sickness?

By Rev. Dr. W. Sihler.

There are two kinds of men whom God afflicts with disease: believers and unbelievers. With each of these parties God aims at something different, though their sickness be the same. What is His design in afflicting unbelievers? Answer: Disease is intended, in their case, to be a salutary means of discipline in the sick person to prepare the way for, and to assist the divine law in its demands, threats, curses, killing and condemnation, that the patient awake from his deep sleep of sin, acknowledge his sins, feel them in his conscience and confess them before God with a contrite heart.

For this proximate end God often causes the sickness to continue, administering to the patient an increase of beneficial discipline; for on the one hand He gives the patient in his extreme pains a moderate foretaste of the eternal pains of hell; on the other hand He restrains him from progressing on the road of sin, from indulging, as in the days of health, in covetousness and debauchery; again He gets him more into silence and solitude and grants him leisure, in painless hours, to meditate upon his sinful corruption and lost life, and to search himself according to God's commandments. Moreover God aims at making his continued ungratefulness for the high favor of health bear heavily upon his conscience, and at showing him how health exceeds ever so great temporal wealth. Though the patient were ever so rich and possessed ever so many millions of dollars, what can all his money and property avail him now? Likewise, what relish do gluttons and drunkards or dainty mouths now get from their costly meats and drinks, as they both now loath all meats and strong drinks?

In short, God's gracious design in afflicting unbelievers with disease aims at making them come to thoroughly, by the demands and curses of His law and the disciplinary punishment of sickness, that they might experience the burden and curse of their sins greatly and attain with a broken spirit and a contrite heart to true repentance.

Furthermore, God graciously purposes that the Holy Spirit kindle through the Gospel, true faith in Christ in the heart of the contrite patient, so that he, through remission of his sins, may become healed first as to his soul, as the man sick with the palsy (Matthew 9:2); for to heal the

sin-stricken soul, did God especially afflict the body of the formerly unconverted patient.

Now first the patient has become a believer, and now first he also possesses the spirit of grace and prayer, and is enabled, as the leper was (Matthew 8), to call upon the Lord in an acceptable manner, "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me whole also in my body, as Thou didst unto so many in the days of Thine earthly walk, and bless the means of cure." Yet he will meetly close his prayer with the third petition. For though God should not restore the craved bodily health, He grants him something immensely better, when his soul effects its entrance into life eternal by the death of his body.

Now, it is a mournful fact, God does not attain this blessed end likely with most of the impenitent sinners whom He visits with sickness. They oppose, as to His law, so also to His well-meant discipline of punishment only an increased obstinacy of maliciousness. They must suffer, indeed; but it is not their will to suffer: and in place of becoming broken for their own good by the wounds made by the divine law and bodily sickness, their heart rather becomes more and more hardened like an anvil. And instead of permitting their hearts to be made tender by both unto "repentance toward God," they inwardly increase in hardness, bitterness, hatred and enmity against God. In extreme pains they oftentimes indulge in blasphemous utterances against God, or resign themselves, when their disease continues, like Mohammedans, in silent and stern defiance against the Lord to their unavoidable fate, as though they never had been made Christians by baptism. Sometimes they will also chide God, especially if they be self-important and self-righteous children of unbelief: that He afflicted just them and so long, too, whilst so many grossly wicked fellows enjoy lasting health; and these they hate therefore the more, and yet at the same time envy them.

But with believers, with His dear children in Christ, God aims at a different object by visiting them with sickness. For them it is not a punishment, but a wholesome chastisement, a means of paternal training for the purpose of maintaining them also thereby, in connection with His Word, in repentance, faith and new obedience. For Christians are not as yet wholly spirit, but have, besides the new man, still the old man; besides the new spiritual life of heart, mind and will, also yet the flesh, the sinful, corrupted nature with its fruits, the actual sins in desires and thoughts, words and deeds cleaving to them. Therefore they must engage in a continual struggle against the lusts of the flesh, so that by the grace of the Holy Spirit and by the power of the divine Word

the new man subject the old man more and more, and the dominion of the spirit over the flesh abound daily more and more.

Now it happens that the Christian relaxes in this struggle for a time. He becomes, for instance, more slothful and cold in offering praise and thanks for the great gift of health also and other favors of God. He is no longer possessed of the same earnestness and zeal to hear and learn, to read, and meditate upon, the Word of God and thereby to increase in the blessed knowledge of God and himself and to obtain clearer conceptions of divine things; yea, according to the old man, he sometimes feels a disgust of, and an aversion towards the Word of God. Occasionally also that sin stealthily and gradually creeps to his heart again, which before his conversion was his darling and besetting sin, be it love of money and covetousness, or the thirst for strong drink, or worldly cares, or the love of the world, the fear of the world; or if one that is married and the head of a family, exercise no longer his former diligence in governing his house according to God's Word, to rear his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Or if he prosper in all his enterprises and be in danger of nestling again in the earth and of feeling quite at home and at ease here below, so as to feel very little like a stranger and pilgrim, *etc.*

In brief, the Christian is in a dangerous state. What, then, does God, his heavenly Father in Christ, do – God, who has His eyes fixed upon him incessantly and looks toward his welfare with more than motherly care? He visits him perhaps with a protracted and partly painful sickness. But to what purpose?

In the first place that he abound more and more in “repentance toward God”; that he increase in the knowledge of this world's vanity, of the fleetness and nothingness of temporal goods, joys and pleasures; that he experience a profounder hatred and abhorrence of his former besetting sins; that he feel more keenly his light-mindedness and slothfulness in offering praises and thanks to God, his want of earnestness and steadfastness in the use of the divine Word – as sins against the love of God, and contritely confess the same before God; that he acknowledge his unfaithfulness or weakness in governing his house and bringing up his children, with deeper compunction; that instead of having put on bowels of Christian compassion towards the sins, evils, distresses, wretchedness and misery of his fellowman – so often hardness and unfeelingness had been in his heart, and that for this reason he often neglected the opportunity of serving and assisting his fellowman according to his temporal or spiritual wants by acts of

charity; that he also, contrary to charity, had submitted to the sinful perverseness of his temperament, especially to his proneness to anger.

In the second place, God sends sickness upon His children to keep them from holding on to any repentance worked by the law, and to induce them again and again to approach in childlike faith the throne of grace, their Lord and Savior, and from the fulness of His merit receive in virtue of His absolution grace for grace, remission for remission, comfort for comfort. By such continued appropriation of God's grace through Christ in the Gospel they are strengthened gradually in the sound faith in Christ, in the faith which readily clings to, and abides in, the Word of grace without, yea, sometimes contrary to feeling.

In the third place, God sends sickness upon His faithful also for this purpose, that their faith being tried might work in them from day to day patience, that makes them willing to be sick as long as it pleaseth God, and that their heart rest quietly and meekly in the third petition, and they resign without any will of their own their recovery or departure to God's will.

In the fourth place, God lets them become ill and keeps them sometimes in a long school of affliction, that, as their repentance, faith and patience increase, their old man be killed more and more and their new man live more and more.

Finally, their godly behavior shall not only edify the weak in the faith, but, also, be a loud and earnest voice unto repentance for unbelievers who flee and hate sickness and are slaves of the fear of death.

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