

## From Discouragement to Growth Illness

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

When you are making a gem – art picture do you enjoy sorting the gems into their colours before starting or do you find that a frustration and just want to get the picture completed? If you are doing a jigsaw, do you enjoy the arranging of the pieces into their colours and shapes, or do you just want to get the edges made up and complete the jigsaw? When you go on holiday is the airport experience a part of the holiday or do you just want to arrive at where you are staying?

Psychologists talk about two different sorts of people – those for whom the journey is an enjoyable part of the experience and those who are focus driven, and just want to concentrate on the results. There are benefits to both – and it is probably best not to be an extreme of either personality, for there are dangers in both too. One might so enjoy the journey that they never accomplish anything. Or one might so focus on the goal that people get hurt in the achieving of that goal. Today's talk in our series "From discouragement to growth", is very much focused on those, like me, who tend to focus on the goal and don't particularly relish the steps necessary to achieving that.

In this talk, we will consider the subject of illness and how we are to view this from a Biblical perspective. In part I feel like a bit of a fraud dealing with this subject as I have never really suffered from serious illness, and those health issues I do have tend not to be life restricting in any great degree. One just gets on with life as best as one is able. It is also important to recognise that there are those whose illness is terribly distressing and when we witness this in our nearest and dearest, we wonder why God allows them to suffer in this way. We should not diminish the real suffering that some are given to endure, and this side of eternity there may not be answers as to why. We simply cannot know why some suffer in quite awful ways, but, as Christians, we do know the One who does know. It is very much this aspect of seeing God, even through tears, which will enable us to move from the discouragement of seeing ill health as a barrier to achieving our goals to an opportunity to learn more of our great Saviour God.

Ill health often raises questions in our minds and today we are going to consider five of these and see how they related to individuals in the Bible, and the lessons they learnt from suffering.

### 1. Why?

How often does ill health lead us to ask the questions: "Why?" "Why me?" "Why this disease?" In answering these questions we will think of the blind man that Jesus healed, and we read about him in John chapter 9:1-5.

"Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man

nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.””

The basic premise behind the disciples' question was why was this blind man blind? He had been so from birth so to their minds it followed that either he was a dreadful sinner or one of his ancestors had been particularly bad. This way of thinking would have been widespread among the Jews in those days. God had promised that if the people lived lives of obedience then He would prosper them. So material blessing would be seen as a direct result of God's favour. Therefore, it followed that, as this man was seemingly lacking in God's favour, he must be at fault in some way. No doubt Numbers 14:18 would have given them reason to think in this way:

“The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.”

So, were the disciples correct in their analysis of the situation? Was the man born blind, or his parents indeed terrible sinners? The miracles in John's Gospel are referred to as signs. They point us to important truth that is there for our learning. Is disease then the sign of God's judgement upon the individual? Well in one sense all disease is a result of sin entering the world at the Fall. Before Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and before the curse of God on His perfect creation was made, there was no disease. It is also true to say that some diseases, even death, are a direct consequence of sin. A biblical example of this is found in Acts chapter 5. There we read about Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the disciples and were swiftly judged by God as they died in front of the shocked congregation.

Generally however, illness and disease are not to be linked specifically to sin – they are part and parcel of being human. That was very much the case with the blind man in John 9. The Lord answered His disciples' question with a clear rebuttal that neither the man, nor his parents, had sinned in a way that had caused his blindness. However, what Jesus then goes on to say is most instructive, and should be an encouragement to those who are struggling with suffering caused by illness. Jesus told His disciples that the man's blindness was given to him so that the “works of God should be revealed in him.” This man was blind so that Jesus could heal him and accomplish a dramatic change for the better in his life. One of the problems with disease is that it seems so random, so purposeless. If only I was well, I could serve so much better! Well, God had a purpose for this blind man, and He has a purpose for us too. We might think that to be born blind was a heavy cost to bear, but I am sure that were we to ask the man born blind would he trade being made well and knowing Jesus for those “lost” years of sight, he would very definitely answer “No, never!” It is probable that had he been born with a fully functioning sense of sight, he may never have felt the need to meet Jesus and so missed out on so much more. This miracle was performed so that all might see that Jesus was the light of the world (verse 5). Jesus had come to not only bring physical sight to this blind man, but also, and more importantly, spiritual sight to him – and indeed to the whole world. It is those things that are eternal that have lasting value, and this blind man was going to understand this most fully.

I love the way that, after the religious rulers are unable to explain these events, and how the man now had his sight restored, they threw him out of the synagogue, and thus out of civil society. However, they threw him out straight into the arms of Jesus who was waiting to reveal Himself more fully to the man. This fuller revelation brought the blind man to worship Jesus. It is as we see Jesus with spiritual sight that we too are brought to the point where we worship Him. So if you are struggling with the question “Why?” then at least know that it is not for nothing – God does have a purpose and a lesson for us.

## 2. Who?

It is sad that too often we define others, and sometimes ourselves, by some outward manifestation of disease. So for example, in the story we read from John 9 we speak of the blind man. He had so many other attributes and abilities, and yet we tend to focus on the visible. But as the saying goes, we ought not to judge a book by the cover! When we face disease we must not succumb to the worldly view of thinking that this illness defines who I am – that is simply not true. There was a time in Paul's life when three times he pleaded with God to take away an illness that he had. God answered Paul's prayer but maybe not in the way that we would have expected. This godly Apostle that was so busy preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. Surely God would heal him and get him firing on all cylinders straight away. No! In 2 Corinthians 12:9 we read,

“And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

We don't even know for sure what was wrong with Paul. What we do know is that it did not define him, nor his ministry. He would boast in the fact that he had had the grace of God lavished upon him, and he would let that define him. That really is a great way of looking at adversity and ill health. It is in our physical weaknesses that the grace of God is able to shine forth most clearly. No wonder Paul boasted in this!

The prophet Isaiah likened us to reeds! In Isaiah 42:3 we read,

“A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth.”

Those of us who are fit and healthy all of the time will view ourselves as a sturdy reed, strong and tall. However, Isaiah was picturing a bruised reed, one that had nearly snapped and the slightest pressure might break it in two. It would take the tenderest touch, the gentlest hands to be able to pick such a reed and weave it into something useful. Those who are 'bruised reeds' will know the touch of the Master's hand in a way that those who are healthy never shall.

I remember reading about Corrie Ten Boom who was faced with a request for forgiveness from one of her concentration camp guards. She could not do it at first, but as she considered her God, she found herself saying the words “I forgive you” mechanically. But as she did so, she found the strength of God flooding into her soul, and what had been mechanical became warm reality. She really experienced the forgiveness of God in a way I never shall because she had suffered so awfully. In just the same way, those who are physically bruised can know the gentleness of God in a far greater way than I ever shall.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:6,

“...To the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”

This really is the key to understanding who we are. If we are Christians, then we are accepted in Christ. Others may look at us and recoil or sympathise. We should view ourselves as fully accepted by God, with all the dignity that that involves. He has made us the way we are, and allowed what He has into our lives. But let us always realise that we are accepted by God because of His Son.

As a results driven person, I might be tempted to view infirmity as a loss of ability to serve and achieve. This really ought not to be. The commendation given to Mary in Mark 14:8 was:

“She has done what she could.”

That is the highest commendation that can ever be given. Jesus does not expect us to do what we can't, but if only we all did what we can! So if age or illness, or a whole host of other infirmities have contracted our ability to serve, then in that smaller sphere, do what you can!

### 3. When?

How often when we are ill do we ask the question, “When am I going to feel better?” As days turn into weeks or months or even years the risk is that our mental health will also start to suffer. There was a time in Elijah's life when he was utterly broken, exhausted by the strain of years of faithful service. We read about this in 1 Kings 19:4 – 10:

“But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!” Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.” So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God. And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” So he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.””

Elijah was ready to die. He could see no point in carrying on – no pathway to a better life. His strength, physical and mental was spent. It is important to realise that Elijah was in no way unusual or abnormal in having this kind of experience. There is not something sinful or unique in finding oneself in this position. However, there are important lessons to learn from how God dealt with Elijah when he was in this situation. First, God took care of him physically – “Arise and eat.” There was no stern lecture about the life of faith and learning to fully trust. God sent an angel who twice gave him the instruction to eat in readiness for when God recommissioned him. Looking after oneself is vital if we are to be effective servants for the Lord. Second, God allowed Elijah to sleep. However this is achieved, sleep and bodily rest are also vital parts of the recovery process. It can do so much harm when we try to get up and about when we still should be resting. Third, Elijah had to spend time with his God, and it was only after he had done this that he was ready to take on the mantle of the servant again. Making time for God and spending time in His presence will help us to understand the when of our recovery.

We might want to rush our recovery, to get back to how things were, but perhaps this is not what God wants. He may have allowed illness into our lives as a means of slowing us down enough so that we can hear when He speaks to us. There are times when my wife has to tell me to stand still and stop when she has something to say to me. She has learnt that otherwise the message may well go in one ear and straight out the other. In all the noise and business of life, God may similarly allow ill health into our lives to teach us important lessons about Himself that we would be too busy otherwise to learn. But it is important to understand that God had not finished with Elijah. Broken he most certainly was, but he was not finished. So, we read in verses 15 – 16:

“Then the LORD said to him: “Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place.””

It is always God who decides when His servants will serve and when they will rest. We do not need to worry about making that call!

#### **4. Where?**

Where is this illness going to lead to? Am I going to be able to look after myself or will I need to go into care? Is this terminal or is there hope of recovery? These are all valid questions and point to the fact that we do not know the future so far as this life only is concerned. However, for Christians, there is a high degree of certainty as to our ultimate goal – our glorious future. We may not know how that will be achieved but we do know it’s destination and in this there is comfort. I have visited both my parents shortly before they died on separate occasions and both had an absolute certainty that all was well, for they knew where they were going. Whatever this life had left for them was nothing in comparison to what awaited them. There is no clearer differentiation between the believer and the unbeliever than at the graveside!

Jesus spoke about this certainty to His disciples in John 14: 1 - 3:

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

Naturally speaking, I may dread the path that will take me home but what a comfort to know that I am going home – to be with Him who loved me enough to give Himself for me.

Later, in the book of Revelation John also tells us that:

“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

No matter how grievous the suffering now, and sometimes it is beyond our ability to understand, we know that better times lie ahead. I find it remarkably comforting to know that it will be God Himself who wipes away the tears. There was always something special about having Mum about when knees were scraped or ears ached. Busy as God is in sustaining the Universe, the suffering of His children means so much to Him, that He Himself is the One who brings comfort and healing to body and soul.

#### **5. What?**

We finish with a question that perhaps we should ask ourselves; I am sure that Nebuchadnezzar did. What is God trying to teach me in this situation? Nebuchadnezzar was the outright ruler of the world’s first great superpower. Yet he was troubled. He had had a dream that he could not understand and yet knew had an important meaning concerning himself. Daniel was the man appointed by God to interpret the dream. Though Nebuchadnezzar was great, he was going to suffer a catastrophic downfall that would lead to him becoming like an animal. The fulfilment of this dream was delayed for about a year. Meanwhile, Nebuchadnezzar’s heart swelled with pride as he surveyed

all that he had achieved. Finally, the judgement fell and this proud king was driven from his palace to live like a beast of the field – probably suffering from a form of temporary insanity.

Happily, the story has a good ending as Nebuchadnezzar realised what a fool he had been. All that he had, and all that we have comes from God. God was using Nebuchadnezzar's suffering to reveal just how much greater He was than even this mighty monarch. We read in Daniel 4: 34 – 37:

“And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?” At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honour and splendour returned to me. My counsellors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down.”

There was a lesson that the king needed to learn – one that he would have learnt no other way. Perhaps, when we are facing ill health, a poor prognosis, and a period of suffering, we too need to ask the question: “What is God wanting me to learn in this particular situation?” We then need to be ready to listen to His answer.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk in the series ‘From discouragement to growth – illness’ talk number T1351.

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