

CHAPTER 3

WHY DO WE GET SICK AND DIE?

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

3. WHY DO WE GET SICK AND DIE?

Before reading this chapter, how would you answer the question,
Why do we get sick and die?

The problem of sickness and death

Can anyone handle sickness and death? If there are any areas in life where we need help, then surely these two areas must qualify. Although we do our best to fight sickness and put off death, we know we are not ultimately in control, and we wrestle with things too hard for us. We cannot handle sickness and death alone, yet if we call out to God it seems He is not interested in helping us. How can God expect us to love and serve Him when He allows us to go through so much pain and suffering?

Sickness is an enormous problem. The Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 affected the whole world in some way or another. When we look around we can see almost no one has perfect health. Probably everyone of a reasonable age has suffered from an infectious disease of some sort, even if it is just the common cold and most will have suffered a physical injury. Cancer, heart disease, and diabetes are common complaints in developed countries while those living in developing countries will face hunger, malnutrition, malaria, TB, dysentery, and many other serious diseases. Sickness is not just a physical matter, but it will affect our mental well-being as well. Many people suffer from dementia, depression, phobias, and addictions. Sickness affects everyone.

It is not just the wide variety of sicknesses which trouble us, but the intensity in which it comes can cause us great distress. Sickness can sometimes be unbelievably harsh and painful, with relief only being obtained at death.

Man's efforts at dealing with sickness

In response to the problem of sickness, mankind has invested much time and energy seeking ways to prevent, treat and eradicate it. The World Health Organization estimates that about 10% of the world's income is spent on health.¹ In the UK over one billion prescription items are dispensed annually.² In spite of all this effort, the problem of sickness remains just as formidable as it always has been.

Seeking to understand

Although sickness and death are difficult subjects to think about, it is still worth our while seeking out a better understanding of them. There are several reasons for doing this. A greater understanding may remove a hindrance to our having a relationship with God. It may also help us to handle these subjects better. We may even come to the place where we can benefit from suffering and perhaps help and comfort others. Also we may avoid unnecessary suffering in the future.

Because we will look to God to increase our understanding, we can be encouraged that we will find answers. He already knows the reasons for sickness and death, and He is willing to teach us what we do not know (James 1:5).

Acts 15:18 Known to God from eternity are all His works.
(NKJV)

God created man to die

Hebrews 9:27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment (NKJV)

Man, unlike angels, must die. God created angels as spirits, which is His nature (John 4:23), so they cannot die (Luke 20:34–36). In contrast to them, He created man as a combination of spirit and flesh so that he could potentially die.

Genesis 2:7 And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (NKJV)

Because we sin, we die (Romans 6:23), but although our bodies decay, our spirits will continue to live (Acts 7:59). Sometime after our death we will be resurrected and given new bodies (Acts 24:15) and some of us will inherit everlasting life while others everlasting shame (Daniel 12:2).

Why God made us mortal

In summary, there are two reasons why we must die; firstly, because God made us mortal, and secondly, because we inherit a sinful nature from Adam (Romans 5:12).

This raises the question, why did God make us mortal? Could He not have made us all like the angels? The answer we suggest at this point in our study is that it is a necessary part of God's plan of salvation that He has a class of individuals who cannot directly see Him and who will eventually die. As we will see later, this will enable God to provide an atonement so we can have our sins forgiven.

Death starts earlier than we think

It is interesting to consider the process of life and death. For the first eighteen or so years of our life we grow taller and stronger. Once we reach adulthood we stop growing, and we reach a time when we are at our peak physical strength. We can guess this age to be somewhere in the twenties or possibly early thirties because this is the time when top athletes give their best performances. (Consider, for example, that the average age of the winners of the Men's 100m race for the last ten Olympic Games is twenty-six years, with the youngest being twenty-two and the eldest thirty-two.³⁾

After we pass our peak, we can say that the death process has begun, and we start to look older in our appearance and our strength and stamina gradually decreases. As time progresses further, our vision and hearing are likely to become defective, we become more prone to accidents, we become less able to resist sickness and disease, and our bodies take more time to heal. Our minds are affected with age as well. Eventually we die, and our spirit leaves our body (Ecclesiastes 12:7), and our bodies rapidly decay. We could view death as a long process rather than a sudden event.

Why Jesus was crucified at an early age

If we accept the process of death begins in the prime of our life, this might explain why Jesus was crucified aged around 33 years. He was born of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:27ff; Matthew 1:18–25) and did not inherit Adam's sinful nature. He grew to adulthood as normal (Luke 2:40–52), although unlike everyone else, He remained righteous throughout His life (1 Peter 2:21–24; 3:18). Because of this, the process of dying could not take hold of Him. We know Jesus was about thirty years old when He was baptised (Luke 3:23) so He could not be much older when He was crucified. If He had continued to live into middle age, it is likely that He would not have aged anymore and so would have drawn attention that He was different from everyone else.

Tragic death

Before we leave the subject of dying, we need to acknowledge there are two types of death. The first type is where we live a full life (Psalm 90:10) and die peaceably in old age. The second type is when we die tragically and unexpectedly. This second type of death brings additional questions which we will consider along with sickness and accidents.

Why we get sick

Doctors, in general, treat sickness on an empirical basis, using physical and observable data, rather than using philosophical or religious beliefs. We are informed that infectious diseases occur when the body is invaded by such things as bacteria and viruses. Our body fights these diseases naturally using antibodies, anti-toxins and white blood cells, and doctors can assist in this fight by prescribing drugs such as antibiotics. The reasons they give for getting sick are restricted to what they can observe. An infection, for example, may be traced to its source, but then the conclusion is made that the person who caught the infection was unlucky in being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Bible, in contrast, gives explanations which go beyond those offered by the doctors. One major reason given is the link between sin and sickness. We will look at this important reason first and follow it by considering whether it is inevitable we will get sick. Later on in chapter four, we will look at whether God or the devil is responsible for sickness, and in chapter five, we will consider whether there are such things as accidents.

The relationship between sin and sickness

If we sin, do we automatically get sick? And if we get sick, does this mean we have sinned? The Bible shows in many places that there is indeed a relationship between sin and sickness. One time, Jesus healed a man who had an infirmity for thirty-eight years. After healing the man, Jesus gave him the following advice:

John 5:14 ... “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.” (NKJV)

It is clear from what Jesus said that if the man continued to sin, He would suffer a worse disease. This shows conclusively that at least some sicknesses are a result of sin.

In another place, Jesus shows us that sometimes sickness is not the result of sin.

John 9:1–3 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...” (NKJV)

We should not automatically assume a particular sickness or death is due to sin. People thought that Jesus was being punished by God when He was crucified (Isaiah 53:4), yet we are told that He did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). Clearly they were wrong. It is also wrong to assume people who die in horrific accidents are worse than anyone else.

Luke 13:1–5 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (NIV)

Ancestral sin may be the cause of sickness

The Bible also shows us that sickness may result from the sins of our immediate ancestors.

Deuteronomy 5:9...for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me (NIV)

We can see this principle demonstrated with Joab’s descendants suffering because of his sin (2 Samuel 3:28–29) and David’s sin with Bathsheba causing his son to die (2 Samuel 11–12, note 12:14).

National sin

Not only can ancestral sin affect us but also national sin can too (2 Samuel 24:10–25; 2 Chronicles 34:21). The whole nation of Israel had their relationship with God adversely affected when one of their people, Achan, displeased God (Joshua 7).

Other passages in the Bible show us that any adversity can be caused by sin. (See for example Acts 5:1–10; 1 Kings 8:33–39; 2 Kings 17:25; 2 Chronicles 7:12–14; 21:12–15.)

On a more positive note, we can see that not only are sin and sickness related, but there is also a relationship between righteousness and health.

Proverbs 3:7–8 Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the Lord and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, And strength to your bones. (NKJV)

(See also Exodus 15:26.)

The relationship between death and sickness

Sickness can lead to death, and we know that everyone has to die (Hebrews 9:27), so is it logical to assume that at some point we must get sick? Should we accept sickness as inevitable in the same way we accept death is inevitable?

As we grow older we will indeed get weaker and sometimes get ill. Eli became blind (1 Samuel 4:15), David was constantly cold (1 Kings 1:1), Israel became bedridden and blind when he was old (Genesis 47:28–48:10), and Elisha died because of a sickness (2 Kings 13:14).

Not everyone dies of sickness

Some people were different though. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet he retained his sight and his strength. He was strong enough to climb a mountain shortly before dying (Deuteronomy 34:1–8). However, he said he could no longer go out and come in (Deuteronomy 31:2). Caleb maintained he was just as strong at eighty-five years of age as he was at forty years (Joshua 14:10–11). Enoch walked with God and so did not die but God took him away instead (Genesis 5:21–24; Hebrews 11:5), and Elijah was caught up to God (2 Kings 2:11).

Death does not have to result from sickness. It is possible to live a full life and die in peace. Job died after living a full life (Job 42:7) and so did Abraham (Genesis 25:7–8). When Jesus healed people He did not exclude those who were old, but He healed all that were sick (Matthew 8:16). This indicates God is interested in our health even in old age. A little earlier we saw that Jesus healed a man who

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had an infirmity for thirty-eight years (John 5:14). He knew that man would die at some point, yet He still chose to heal him.

Although sickness can often result in death, we conclude that it is not inevitable in the same way as death is inevitable.

Questions to consider

1. Does the Bible place the same importance on physical health as we do?
 2. How much emphasis do we place on pursuing righteousness and avoiding sin, as a means to keeping healthy and living a long life?
 3. In order to get the most out of our life, should we plan in advance for our death or only face it when we have to?
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References:

- 1 World Health Organization website. See <https://www.who.int/> and search for current health expenditure.
- 2 Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom Health Statistics 2010, pp 86, 110
- 3 Data originally taken from: <http://www.databaseolympics.com>, but this website has subsequently changed. Search instead for 'average age of 100m olympic champion'.

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