

## CHAPTER 4

### WHO CAUSES SICKNESS AND SUFFERING?

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

#### 4. WHO CAUSES SICKNESS AND SUFFERING?

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Before reading this chapter, how would you answer the questions, Why do we get sick? and who causes suffering?

## Can anyone make us sick or cause us to suffer?

Who makes us sick? In the previous chapter, we looked at why we get sick and die, and we focused on the relationship between sin and sickness. In this chapter, we will look at who (or what) is behind sickness and suffering and the reasons why they do it.

The possibilities we will consider are God, Satan, angels, man, and our own selves. We will look at each of these in turn, and in chapter five we will consider whether there are such things as accidents, when no one is to blame.

## God can cause sickness and suffering

We might assume that as God loves us so much He would never cause us harm so therefore only the devil is responsible for the negative things that happen to us. However, the Bible very clearly shows us that God can be responsible for sickness and suffering.

Several passages show that God actually puts diseases on people. He specifically brought diseases upon the Egyptians (Exodus 15:26) and upon the Philistines (1 Samuel 5:9ff), and He warned Israel that if she departed from following Him, He would bring diseases upon her as well (Leviticus 26:14ff). He put leprosy upon King Uzziah when he sinned (2 Chronicles 26:16–21).

God causes all kinds of suffering. He throws down rocks (Nahum 1:6) and hailstones (Joshua 10:11) and creates thunders, earthquakes, storms and fires (Isaiah 29:6). When He judges a nation, He commands the clouds not to rain (Isaiah 5:6), dries up seas and rivers (Nahum 1:4), sends plagues of insects (Exodus 10:12–15) and kills even the infants, babies, and animals (Numbers 16:23–34). He raises up enemies (1 Kings 11:14; Isaiah 42:24), creates peace (Proverbs 16:7) and brings wars, famines and diseases. He can make His enemies sleep (1 Samuel 26:12), blind (Acts 13:11), fall into a trap (2 Kings 6:18ff), have fire poured upon them (2 Kings 1:10), be drowned (Exodus 14:26–28), be attacked with dangerous animals (Ezekiel 14:21) and even have a snake bite them (Amos 9:3). He

also afflicts people with delusions and irrational fears (Isaiah 66:4; 2Thessalonians 2:11) and He accepts responsibility for making people dumb, deaf, blind (Exodus 4:11), poor or rich (1 Samuel 2:6–7).

Deuteronomy 32:39...(the Lord speaking) I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand. (NKJV)

## Why God afflicts us

These passages tell us that God initiates at least some sicknesses as well as a lot of suffering. Since God is good, why would He do this? The basic answer to this is because God loves righteousness and hates wickedness (Psalm 45:7), then He helps those who serve Him (Psalm 29:11; 68:35) and fights against those who pursue wickedness (Psalm 54:4–5; Proverbs 3:33; Nahum 1:2; Ezra 8:22).

Micah 6:13 “Therefore I will also make you sick by striking you, By making you desolate because of your sins...” (NKJV)

When God brings suffering, He does not delight in it.

Lamentations 3:32–36 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. To crush underfoot all prisoners in the land, to deny people their rights before the Most High, to deprive them of justice—would not the Lord see such things? (NIV)

God has reasons for afflicting people. This fact should comfort us. He had a purpose in destroying Jerusalem (Ezekiel 14:22–23). He corrects those who follow Him if they go astray (Psalm 89:30–33; 90:3) so if we believe God is correcting us in some way, we should seek Him for the reason why (2 Samuel 21:1ff).

God often uses affliction. Many people in the Corinthian church became sick and many died because they did not take the communion in a worthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:27–30).

God sometimes afflicts severely. Ananias and Sapphira dropped down dead when confronted with their sin of lying (Acts 5:4).

If God causes someone to suffer, there will be a righteous reason why He does this. However, we need to add that there are other reasons apart from judgment or correction, and sometimes these reasons can be hard for us to see (Job 2:3).

## Satan can cause sickness and suffering

Satan is a created being like us and therefore he is limited in what he can do (Luke 22:31–32). Although he is a powerful spiritual being with an army, there is still absolutely no comparison of his power to God's. He is called the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4), but he has not lawfully been given this designation as there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4) and we are told that there can only ever be one God (Exodus 20:3).

The devil and his armies are very active in this world and are responsible for a lot of sickness and suffering.

The following passage shows the devil made someone infirm for a very long time:

Luke 13:11–16 and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God... '...Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?' (NIV)

Satan causes blindness and dumbness (Matthew 12:22), sore boils (Job 2:7) and fevers. Jesus rebuked a fever one time which indicates that the devil must have been behind it (Luke 4:39). Satan must be responsible for a lot of sickness and suffering because Jesus went about healing those who were being oppressed by him.

Acts 10:38...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. (NKJV)

Additionally, Satan causes wars and fighting (Job 1:6–17), tornados (Job 1:18–19) and storms (Luke 8:23–24). He can be behind the killing of a herd of pigs (Luke 8:32) and cows, sheep and camels (Job 1:13–17). Through demons, he makes people act madly (Mark 5:1–19) and try to kill themselves (Matthew 17:15). Satan casts Christians into prison (Revelation 2:10), and he kills people (1 Corinthians 5:5). The devil is a murderer (John 8:44), and he has the power of death (Hebrews 2:14).

## Satan influences people to do wrong to others

Satan influences people through evil thoughts and gets them to say and do things which are wrong (Genesis 3:1–5; 1 Kings 22:19–23). He keeps people from being saved by causing them to forget the Word of God (Luke 8:12). He accuses Christians (Revelation 12:10), he resists those who try to serve the true God (Zechariah 3:1) and he tries to discourage and mislead (Matthew 16:21–23). He influences people to betray their friends (Luke 22:3–4), and he affects our thoughts if we let him (2 Corinthians 10:3–5). He deceives, seduces and promotes false doctrine (1 Timothy 4:1–2).

## We can resist Satan

The very fact Satan lies confirms his power is limited. He cannot force humans and spiritual beings to follow him because they are independent and have minds of their own. We can choose not to obey God, so it follows that we can also choose not to obey Satan. In order to get people to follow him he has to deceive them in some way (cf 2 Thessalonians 2:3–9) and in this respect he is very successful.

Revelation 12:9 So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole

world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (NKJV)

Satan's motives as he interacts with the human race are entirely selfish. He is only concerned with exalting his kingdom (Luke 11:18).

## Angels are either good or bad

Angels are either good (1 Timothy 5:21) or bad (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). They either serve Jesus (Matthew 16:27; 2 Thessalonians 1:7) or the devil (Matthew 25:41). All angels were originally created good, but as soon as any sinned their nature irrevocably changed from good to evil. There are many angels indeed. John guessed he could see over one hundred million angels around the throne of God (Revelation 5:11).

Angels are more powerful than men and have a higher place in God's kingdom (Psalm 8:4–5). Occasionally, men have greater wisdom than they have (1 Peter 1:12), and it is possible that men could be temporarily stronger than them (Hosea 12:4). Angels are created beings and so are limited in ability (Romans 8:38–39).

## Good angels help us

Angels protect us from evil (Psalm 91:11; 34:7), strengthen us when we are weak (Matthew 4:11), rescue us (Acts 12:6–11) and warn us of danger (Matthew 2:13). They also intercede for us on our behalf (Zechariah 1:12). They advise us of the right action to take (Matthew 1:20) and show us things to come (Luke 1:30–38). They intervene in situations where man is unable to (Matthew 28:2) and they heal (John 5:4).

Sometimes Satan will attack them and they will be unable to help us (Daniel 10:12–13), and sometimes our own actions may grieve them and hinder them from fulfilling their mission (Luke 12:8–9).

## Good and evil angels can be behind suffering

Good angels can cause suffering, but when they do so it will always be for a good reason. We can see this happening when the angel Gabriel made Zecharias dumb for a time because he did not believe his message (Luke 1:19–20).

Not only do good angels kill (Genesis 19:12–13; 2 Kings 19:35), but evil angels kill as well (see Psalm 78:49, translated by several versions as ‘destroying angels’). Presumably they do so with different motives. It is not that easy to distinguish between good and bad angels. Satan and his evil angels impersonate good angels in order to try to deceive us (2 Corinthians 11:14).

## Man can cause sickness and suffering

It is pretty obvious the suffering man inflicts on each other as we hear it on the news every day. However, for the sake of completeness we list below some examples of suffering seen in the Bible.

Men mock, torture, kill and imprison (Matthew 27:26; 2 Corinthians 11:20). They betray their own family and close friends (Luke 21:16), and they kill people thinking that they are serving God (John 16:2). Men inflict persecution and suffering while under authority (Luke 21:12) and also in ways not approved by authority (Proverbs 1:10–19). They help or ignore someone in need (Proverbs 29:7), and they also deceive his fellow man (Matthew 16:6–12).

## Our own role in sickness and suffering

Proverbs 17:22 A merry heart does good, like medicine, But a broken spirit dries the bones. (NKJV)

Our attitude to life plays an important part in our health. If we become sick, maintaining a good attitude will help carry us through our illness.

Proverbs 18:14 The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, But who can bear a broken spirit? (NKJV)

Learning and doing good will help us stay healthy.

Proverbs 4:20–22 My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body. (NIV)

Wrong thinking such as hatred, unforgiveness and bitterness will affect our relationship with God and could harm our health in the process. Wrong attitudes, for instance, can result in our getting involved in unnecessary arguments, which in turn can lead to negative consequences (Proverbs 26:17).

Other things which obviously harm our health can include taking on stressful roles at work, exceeding our physical limitations, and not getting enough rest or physical exercise. We can get sick if we overwork and do not get enough rest (such as Ephaphroditus in Philippians 2:25–30).

Our health can suffer if we give into fleshly desires such as smoking, drinking to excess, taking recreational drugs, and eating a lot of comfort or convenience foods. not maintaining a balanced and nutritious diet. Sickness can arise simply because we do not keep a good diet (note Melzar's concern for Daniel in Daniel 1:8–16).

## Shared responsibility for sickness and suffering

By now we should see it is quite complicated to work out who is making us sick. God, the devil, his demons, angels, men and our own selves can all be responsible in one way or another. What we want to look at next is the idea of shared responsibility—God, Satan and men all playing a part together in someone's suffering. To illustrate this point we will consider the death of Jesus.

## Different motives behind Jesus' crucifixion

Firstly, from God's side, He wanted Jesus to suffer and die as this was necessary for our salvation (Matthew 26:39). The scriptures show this was indeed planned beforehand (Luke 18:31–33; Isaiah 53). From Satan's side, he saw Jesus as a threat to his kingdom, and he sought to kill him. He could not directly kill Him, so he planned to kill him using men, and part of his strategy was to influence Judas to betray Jesus (John 13:2). Judas, for his part, was practically possessed by Satan at the time he betrayed Jesus (John 13:26–27) although he was still responsible for his actions. Jesus said it would be better if he had never been born (Matthew 26:24).

The chief priests and scribes sought to kill Jesus as well (Luke 22:2), and they encouraged the people and Pilate to crucify Him (Mark 15:11–15). Overall, there were quite a few people involved in Jesus' death, but some shared greater responsibility for their actions than others (John 19:11).

Looking at things from Jesus' side, we see that He did not want to die, but He put His Father's wishes above His own (Matthew 26:39; John 10:17–18). Even at His arrest, Jesus could have avoided being crucified (Matthew 26:53–54), but He chose to obey God, and because of this God has rewarded Him greatly (Philippians 2:5–11).

We can see how these things fit together in the following passage.

Acts 4:27–28 “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done...” (NKJV)

Although God determined that Jesus should die, it was men, (encouraged by Satan), who actually killed Him. Therefore, men are responsible for His death (Acts 3:12–19).

If God desires something to happen, it will come to pass even if He needs Satan and man to work out His purposes.

Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (NKJV)

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes. (NKJV)

### Another example of shared responsibility

We can give another example to show that God, Satan and men can all share some responsibility for the same sickness. David made a decision which resulted in seventy thousand Israelites losing their lives through a plague. He greatly sinned in doing this (2Samuel 24:10). Satan tempted him to make that fateful decision (1Chronicles 21:1), yet we learn that God was behind his choice all the time because He was angry with Israel (2Samuel 24:1). To further complicate things, an angel was responsible for spreading the plague (2Samuel 24:15–17). It can get quite involved when we look at who is responsible for sickness. (See also 1 Samuel 26:19.)

### Is God ultimately responsible?

As we have just seen, God, Satan and men can all share responsibility for someone's distress. Satan and the people of Israel wanted Christ to die for negative reasons, but God allowed them to have their way because He had a positive reason for Christ to die.

What we want to look at now is whether Satan or man can bring about suffering without God wanting it. Is there a possibility that God does not want someone to suffer but allows Satan to afflict anyway?

### Satan can be responsible for suffering

Although God can direct Satan to oppress someone for a particular purpose (Job 1:6–8), Satan does not need to wait for God's permission first in order to try. He has a will of his own which is contrary

to God's will, and he can use his own initiative. He seeks to pull people away from God, and we are warned to be wary of him.

1 Peter 5:8–9 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. (NKJV)

Satan planned to pull Peter away from the faith, but when Jesus became aware of this, He prayed that it should not happen (Luke 22:31–32). We should take the initiative to resist Satan and not assume God will resist him automatically for us.

As an aside, we should note that Satan cannot be the author of all suffering. One type of suffering he cannot possibly be the cause of is hell because he will suffer that torment himself (Revelation 20:10).

### Man can be responsible for suffering

Men, too, may bring suffering without God wanting it. Paul asked for prayer to protect him from wicked and unreasonable men (2 Thessalonians 3:1–2). He recognised they could oppose the gospel—something God clearly wants to promote (Matthew 28:19–20). God has given men the ability to think and act for themselves and therefore they have the ability to bless or hurt others. Another point to note is that when God does use men to punish others, they may go further than He intended (Ezekiel 35:1–5), and also they may punish less than He wanted (1 Samuel 15:1–35).

### We can be responsible for our own suffering

Additionally, our own poor choices may bring suffering on us that God would rather not happen. God does not want anyone to go to hell (2 Peter 3:9) but since most will go (Matthew 7:13–14) then clearly this is a situation where God unwillingly allows people to suffer. Another situation we can give where our own actions lead to suffering is regarding Jerusalem. God sent many prophets to her

warning of danger, but she chose not to take heed of the warnings. Jesus laments over their rejection of the warnings knowing of their suffering to come (Matthew 23:33–37).

In summary, although God is completely in control of all situations, we should avoid concluding that He is responsible for all sickness and suffering. It is an involved area and one where we can easily misjudge.

*Questions to consider*

1. Why does God allow things to happen which He would rather not happen?
  2. If God initiated our suffering and not the devil, how would we pray? If we knew Satan initiated our suffering, would our prayer be any different?
  3. If a stranger recklessly harmed us in some way, are we right to blame the devil? Also, is it right to feel God let us down in some way?
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