Almost everyone gets sick sooner or later; many suffer constantly from disease. Sickness has been a fact of life since Adam and Eve were driven from the garden.

The Old Testament gives evidence of the universality of sickness. The Egyptians experienced boils as one of the plagues (Exodus 9:8–12). The law of Moses specified how the Israelites were to deal with skin diseases (Leviticus 13; 14). Hezekiah “became mortally ill. . . . Then he turned his face to the wall and prayed . . .” (2 Kings 20:1, 2). In the New Testament, Jesus proved His divinity by healing the sick (Matthew 9:35). The apostles also healed people (Mark 16:18; see Acts 3:1–8). We know that early Christians experienced sickness and weakness (Galatians 4:13; 2 Corinthians 12:7–9; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20).

Sickness can lead to additional problems. Disease brings with it pain, the inability to experience pleasure, and the disruption of normal life. Frequently, illness results in isolation. The consequences of sickness may include loss of income. In addition, medical treatment can be expensive. Therefore, serious illness can lead to financial hardship.

What if we become disabled (disability is a kind of extended sickness)—what can we do then? Does the Bible offer guidelines concerning Christian attitudes and actions in situations involving disease or disability?

WHAT ABOUT DISEASE OR SICKNESS?

The Cause of Sickness

While sickness sometimes results from sin, not all disease or disability is directly related to sin (see Job 1:1; 22; 2:7, 10). When asked regarding a man born blind, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents . . . ?” Jesus replied that it was “neither” (John 9:1–3). When we experience sickness, it is not necessarily because we have sinned.

Why, then, do we get sick? One answer is that what we experience as illness is the body’s attempt to fight off invaders and repair damage caused by physical forces that would otherwise destroy us. A high fever is usually evidence that the body is fighting an infection, caused perhaps by an invasion of dangerous germs. Sickness and pain are natural in the human body and are to be expected occasionally. In fact, pain should be appreciated. Pain is a signal that something is wrong and needs to be corrected.

Other answers to the question “Why?” are possible: (1) We live in a fallen world which fosters disease and suffering. (2) We live around others who can transmit diseases. (3) Sometimes God may allow us to get sick so that He can bring good out of it!

THE PREVENTION OF SICKNESS

Can sickness be prevented? Sometimes sickness is unavoidable, caused by circumstances—environmental or hereditary—beyond our control. Certain diseases tend to recur in different members of the same family. If the parents had
heart problems, for example, their children are likely to be prone to heart problems also.

Nevertheless, many illnesses are preventable by making sure we are immunized and maintain a healthy lifestyle. We should try to eat right, exercise regularly, and avoid anxiety. We can quit unhealthy habits (such as smoking) and make an effort to avoid accidents. By practicing basic rules of cleanliness and personal hygiene and avoiding risky behavior such as sexual promiscuity and drinking alcohol, we can improve our health and avoid many physical problems.

Why would a Christian be concerned about preventing sickness? One gospel preacher used to say that he wanted to live and preach productively until he was fifty; then he would be satisfied to die. (In fact, he lived into his eighties.) While there is something to be said for that attitude (compare Paul’s attitude in Philippians 1:21–24), there is more to be said in favor of a Christian’s doing his or her best to stay healthy and live as long as possible. Why? Here are two reasons: (1) The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20), and each Christian ought to take care of God’s temple. (2) The longer we live, the longer we can serve the Lord on the earth.

THE CHRISTIAN REACTION TO SICKNESS

How should we, as Christians, react when we experience disease? We can start by keeping in mind the same suggestions that were made in the lesson “When the Innocent Are Wronged.”

(1) We must remain faithful to God. While we are sick we may not be able to do all that we would like to do, but we should do all we can for the Lord even while we are ill. (Again, Job is a good example). (2) We should try to keep the problem in perspective. Almost anyone can say, concerning a physical problem, “It could be worse.” (3) To the greatest extent possible, we should rid ourselves of negative emotions. If we are anxious about physical problems, the anxiety may make them worse. Even in negative circumstances, we should try to cultivate positive emotions. There is evidence that laughter has a healing quality. If we try to enjoy life, in spite of sickness, it may help the condition to improve. (4) We can look to the future with hope. The Christian always has hope. In some cases, we can trust that we will be restored to health. However, the faithful Christian knows that, even if the worst earthly scenario happens—if he dies—an even greater hope remains! After death, he will enter that place where there is no more “crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

In addition, the following suggestions are appropriate, even though they may be difficult.

Be grateful (Philippians 4:6). We can always be thankful that our problems are no worse than they are and that we have family and friends who love us. We should be grateful for whatever access we have to medical care. Above all, we should thank God that we can improve spiritually even if we are decaying physically (2 Corinthians 4:16–18).

Pray. For those who are sick, the Bible prescribes prayer (James 5:14, 15). The Christian should not expect miraculous cures today (such as the one described in Acts 3); nevertheless, it is appropriate to pray for healing. All healing is divine, in that God is responsible for it. We need to believe that God still intervenes (providentially, not miraculously) in the affairs of His people. As He once did in the case of Hezekiah, God may answer our prayers to be healed. At the same time, we need to pray for God’s will to be done (Matthew 26:39). We must realize that sometimes God’s answer to our prayers may not be to make us well, but to give us grace sufficient for our needs (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Consider the benefits of sickness. When we view sickness through the eyes of faith, we can conclude with the psalmist, “It is good for me that I was afflicted” (Psalm 119:71). What benefits can possibly come from sickness? (1) Suffering may be spiritually beneficial. Batsell Barrett Baxter wrote that suffering may cause us to turn to God, improve our character, and force us to look to heaven for our reward rather than desiring only earthly treasures. Additional benefits of illness were suggested by Jane McWhorter: (2) The soli-
tude that sickness often brings can be beneficial. It can give a person an opportunity to reflect or to complete unfinished projects. (3) “Illness induces humility.” We may be forced to recognize our own limitations and rely on others for assistance. (4) “Illness teaches us how much thoughtfulness can mean” when others remember us in prayer, help with meals, or visit. (5) “Sickness makes us more understanding of the tribulations of others”; therefore, we will be better prepared to help others when they are sick.

Believe in God’s providence. “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). By allowing us to get sick, God may be preparing us for greater service. When we face illness, we must continue to believe that everything God does (or allows) will somehow work out for good.

WHAT ABOUT DISABILITY?

Physical disability may be thought of as a disease that continues indefinitely. An individual may be disabled by becoming blind or deaf or crippled. One who is disabled experiences all the emotional duress that accompanies sickness, except that the disabled person realizes that he will never get better. The disabled person is likely to feel isolated, useless, and discouraged. He may have to battle feelings of bitterness, anger, and self-pity. How can the Christian deal with such a problem? Most of the suggestions for reacting to sickness also apply to being disabled. In addition, the person who is disabled should try to do the following:

Recognize his (or her) own worth. Every human being is made in the image of God and is worth more than all the world. Losing an arm, a leg, the sense of hearing, or sight does not diminish a person’s worth at all!

Ask for help, but guard against self-pity. Perhaps the worst thing about being disabled is having to depend on others. However, the handicapped person must recognize that only ungodly pride will prevent him from accepting help. Government and charitable agencies exist to help the disabled. The Christian who is truly in need should take fair advantage of whatever assistance is available. At the same time, he must guard himself from self-pity* and from trying to get pity from others. He must avoid thinking that others should show him favoritism because of his problem.

Work on developing good attitudes. No doubt, it is difficult for one who is disabled to be grateful, loving, kind, cheerful, and optimistic—but with effort and with God’s help, it is possible. The desire of others to help and their willingness to be around the one who faces disability depends largely on the attitude of the one in need.

Focus on helping others. We all do better when we get our minds off ourselves and begin to think of others. Those who are disabled can still find ways to serve. McWhorter told of a woman who had been confined to a wheel chair in a nursing home as the result of rheumatoid arthritis. Instead of dwelling upon her own misfortunes, she spent her days trying to bring cheer to others. One year she sent more than nine hundred cards to brighten the days of the sick or grieving.

Use each talent to the greatest extent possible. People with disabilities have enjoyed great achievements. Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, became famous worldwide for her accomplishments. John Milton wrote Paradise Lost after he was blind. The great music composer Ludwig van Beethoven was deaf.

CONCLUSION

Christians sometimes get the idea that life should be a totally pleasant experience, with no sickness or pain. However, life does not turn out that way. Further, it may be better for us that life is not always easy.

Henri Nouwen (1932–1996) spent the last ten years of his life ministering to the people at Daybreak, a community for the disabled in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. His writings were compiled in a book called Turn My Mourning into Dancing (see Psalm 30:11). The thesis of his

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*“Asking for the sympathy of others only intensifies the effect of the physical abnormality” (McWhorter, 134).

†Ibid., 135.

*We like “easy victories: growth without crisis, healing without pains, the resurrection without the cross.” Henri Nouwen, Turn My Mourning Into Dancing: Through Hard Times with Hope, comp. and ed. Timothy Jones (Nashville: W. Publishing Group, 2001), 9.
book is that we should accept suffering—not just as a part of life, but also as God’s way of helping us become what He wants us to be. To resist or deny or forget suffering is like trying to go from the triumphal entry to the resurrection without experiencing the cross. God calls us to suffer and even to be grateful for the trying times which lead to suffering. Nouwen wrote,

Our glory is hidden in our pain, if we allow God to bring the gift of himself in our experience of it. If we turn to God, not rebelling against our hurt, we let God transform it into greater good. We let others join us and discover it with us. 

If we can see disease and disability as a means to “greater good,” then we will have taken a giant step toward learning to live with our problems.

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11Ibid., 15.