

Christ and Cancer

by John Piper

God allows suffering and sickness in the lives of His children to increase their holiness and to cause them to rely more on Him, and He always does what is best for them.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:39, Romans 8:18, Romans 8:26, 2 Corinthians 4:16, Hebrews 11:33, Hebrews 12:5

Topics: "Suffering And Hope", "Divine Healing"

Description

John Piper preaches on the theology of sickness, emphasizing that in this fallen age, all creation, including our bodies, is subjected to futility and corruption, awaiting a future redemption. He highlights that Jesus Christ purchased our redemption, demonstrating its spiritual and physical aspects, and that God controls who gets sick and who gets well for the good of His children. Piper encourages believers to pray for healing and faith, trusting in God's love and power even in the darkest hours of suffering.

Transcript

Romans 8:18-28

Before I entered college I hardly gave a thought to cancer and terminal illness. But ever since those college days death by disease has walked beside me all the way. Two of my college acquaintances died of leukemia and cancer of the lymph glands before they were 22. At seminary I watched Jim Morgan, my teacher of systematic theology, shrivel up and die in less than a year of intestinal cancer. He was 36. In my graduate program in Germany my own "doctor-father," Professor Goppelt, died suddenly just before I was finished. He was 62 - a massive coronary. Then I came to Bethel, the house of God! And I taught for six years and watched students, teachers, and administrators die of cancer: Sue Port, Paul Greely, Bob Bergerud, Ruth Ludeman, Graydon Held, Chet Lindsay, Mary Ellen Carlson--all Christians, all dead before their three score and ten were up. And now I've come to Bethlehem and Harvey Ring is gone. And you could multiply the list ten-fold.

What shall we say to these things? Something must be said because sickness and death is a threat to faith in the love and power of God. And I regard it as my primary responsibility as a pastor to nourish and strengthen faith in the love and power of God. There is no weapon like the word of God for warding off threats to faith. And so I want us to listen carefully today to the teaching of Scripture regarding Christ and cancer, the power and love of God over against the sickness of our bodies.

I regard this message today as a crucial pastoral message, because you need to know where your pastor stands on the issues of sickness, healing, and death. If you thought it was my conception that every sickness is a divine judgment on some particular sin, or that the failure to be healed after a few days of prayer was a clear sign of inauthentic faith, or that Satan is really the ruler in this world and God can only stand helplessly by while His enemy wreak havoc with His children--if you thought any of those were my notions, you would relate to me very differently in sickness than you would if you knew what I really think. Therefore, I want to tell you what I really think and try to show you from Scripture that these thoughts are not just mine but also, I trust, God's thoughts.

So I would like everyone who has a Bible to turn with me to Romans 8:18-28. There are six affirmations which sum up my theology of sickness, and at least the seed for each of these affirmations is here. Let's read the text:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. (RSV)

My first affirmation is this: the age in which we live, which extends from the fall of man into sin until the second coming of Christ, is an age in which the creation, including our bodies, has been "subjected to futility" and "enslaved to corruption." Verse 20: "The creation was subjected to futility." Verse 21: "The creation will be freed from slavery to corruption." And the reason we know this includes our bodies is given in verse 23: not only the wider creation but "we ourselves (i.e. Christians) groan in ourselves awaiting sonship, the redemption of our bodies." Our bodies are part of creation and participate in all the futility and corruption to which creation has been subjected.

Who is this in verse 20 that subjected creation to futility and enslaved it to corruption? It is God. The only other possible candidates to consider would be Satan or man himself. Perhaps Paul meant that Satan, in bringing man into sin, or man, in choosing to disobey God--perhaps one of them is referred to as the one who subjected creation to futility. But neither Satan nor man can be meant because of the words "in hope" at the end of verse 20. This little phrase, subjected "in hope," gives the design or purpose of the One who subjected creation to futility. But it was neither man's nor Satan's intention to bring corruption upon the world in order that the hope of redemption might be kindled in men's hearts and that someday the "freedom of the glory of the children of God" might shine more brightly. Only one person could subject the creation to futility with that design and purpose, namely, the just and loving creator.

Therefore, I conclude that this world stands under the judicial sentence of God upon a rebellious and sinful mankind - a sentence of universal futility and corruption. And no one is excluded, not even the precious children of God.

Probably the futility and corruption Paul speaks of refers to both spiritual and physical ruination. On the one hand man in his fallen state is enslaved to flawed perception, misconceived goals, foolish blunders and spiritual numbness. On the other hand, there are floods, famines, volcanoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, plagues, snake bites, car accidents, plane crashes, asthma, allergies, and the common cold and cancer, all rending and wracking the human body with pain and bringing men - all men - to the dust.

As long as we are in the body we are slaves to corruption. Paul said this same thing in another place. In 2 Corinthians 4:16 he said, "We do not lose heart, but though our outer man (i.e., the body) is decaying (i.e., being corrupted) yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." The word Paul uses for decay or corrupt here is the same one used in Luke 12:33 where Jesus said, Make sure your treasure is in heaven "where thief does not come near and moth does not corrupt." Just like a coat in a warm dark closet will get moth eaten and ruined, so our bodies in this fallen world are going to be ruined one way or the other. For all creation has been subjected to futility and enslaved to corruption while this age lasts. That is my first affirmation.

My second affirmation is this: there is an age coming when all the children of God, who have endured to the end in faith, will be delivered from all futility and corruption, spiritually and physically. According to verse 21, the hope in which God subjected creation was that some day "The creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." And verse 23 says that "We ourselves groan within ourselves waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." It has not happened yet. We wait. But it will happen. "Our citizenship is in heaven from which we await a savior, the Lord, Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our lowliness to be like the body of His glory" (Philippians 3:20,21). "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:52). "He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there shall be no longer any death; and there shall be no longer any mourning or crying or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

There is coming a day when every crutch will be carved up and every wheelchair melted down into medallions of redemption. And Merlin and Reuben and Jim and Hazel and Ruth and all the others among us will do cartwheels through the Kingdom of Heaven. But not yet. Not yet. We groan waiting the redemption of our bodies. But the day is coming and that is my second affirmation.

Third, Jesus Christ came and died to purchase our redemption, to demonstrate the character of that redemption as both spiritual and physical, and to give us a foretaste of it. He purchased our redemption, demonstrated its character, and gave us a foretaste of it. Please listen carefully, for this is a truth badly distorted by many healers of our day.

The prophet Isaiah foretold the work of Christ like this in 53:5-6 (a text which Peter applied to Christians in 1 Peter 2:24):

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (RSV)

The blessing of forgiveness and the blessing of physical healing were purchased by Christ when he died for us on the cross. And all those who give their lives to Him shall have both of these benefits. But when? That is the question of today. When will we be healed? When will our bodies no longer be enslaved to corruption?

The ministry of Jesus was a ministry of healing and forgiveness. He said to the disciples of John the Baptist. "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Matthew 11:4-6). Offense? Why would anyone take offense at one who raises the dead and brings in the long expected Kingdom? Easy - he only raised about three people. He left hundreds in the tombs all around him. Why? Because not enough relatives had faith? O no! When Jesus raised the widow's son in Luke 7:13,14 she didn't know Him from Adam. It was not because of her faith. All it says is, "He had compassion on her." What then? Didn't he pity all the other bereaved in Israel?

The answer to why Jesus did not raise all the dead is that, contrary to the Jewish expectation, the first coming of the Messiah was not the consummation and full redemption of this fallen age. The first coming was rather to purchase that consummation, illustrate its character and bring a foretaste of it to His people. Therefore, Jesus raised some of the dead to illustrate that He has that power and one day will come again and exercise it for all His people. And He healed the sick to illustrate that in His final kingdom this is how it will be. There will be no more crying nor pain any more.

But we do have a foretaste of our redemption now in this age. The benefits purchased by the cross can be enjoyed in measure even now including healing. God can and does heal the sick now in answer to our prayers. But not always. The miracle mongers of our day who guarantee that Jesus wants you well now and heap guilt after guilt on the back of God's people asserting that the only thing between them and health is unbelief have failed to understand the nature of God's purposes in this fallen age. They have minimized the depth of sin and the cruciality of God's purifying chastening and the value of faith through suffering and they are guilty of trying to force into this age what God has reserved for the next.

Notice the flow of thought in Romans 8:23,24. "We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan in ourselves waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies, for in hope we have been saved..." Because of Christ's purchased redemption, believers already have received the Holy Spirit. This is like a down payment of our full redemption, but it is only the first-fruits, a foretaste. And when Paul stresses that we, even we ourselves, who have this Spirit groan awaiting the redemption of our bodies, you can tell that he is warning against the false inference that because we've been saved, therefore our groaning with decaying bodies is over. So he goes on to say in verse 24, "For we have been saved in hope." Our salvation is not finished, it is only begun. We are saved only in hope. This is true morally; Paul says in Galatians 5:5, "We through the Spirit by faith are waiting for the hope of righteousness." And it is true physically; we wait for the redemption of our bodies. Christ has purchased that redemption demonstrated its physical reality in his healing ministry and given us a foretaste of it by healing many people in our day, but some very slowly, some only partly and some not at all. That is my third affirmation.

Fourth, God controls who gets sick and who gets well, and all his decisions are for the good of his children, even if they be very painful and long-lasting. It was God who subjected creation to futility and corruption and He is the One who can liberate it again. In Exodus 4:11, when Moses refused to go speak

to Pharaoh, God said to him, "Who made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I the Lord?" Behind all sickness is finally the sovereign hand of God. God speaks in Deuteronomy 32:39, "See now that I, I am He, and there is no God besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal; and there is no one who can deliver from my hand."

But what about Satan? Isn't he the great enemy of our wholeness? Doesn't he attack us morally and physically? Wasn't it Satan who tormented Job? Yes, it was. But Satan has no power but what is allotted to him by God. He is an enemy on a chain. In fact for the writer of the book of Job it was not wrong to say that the sores afflicted by Satan were sent from God. For example, in Job 2:7 we read, "So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord, and afflicted Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." Then after Job's wife urges him to curse God and die, Job says, "Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord and not receive evil?" And lest we think that Job erred in attributing to God his sores afflicted by Satan, the writer adds in verse 10, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips." In other words, it is no sin to recognize the sovereign hand of God even behind a disease of which Satan may be the more immediate cause.

Satan may be sly but on some things he is stupid, because he fails to see that all his attempts to despoil the godly are simply turned by God's providence into occasions for the purifying and strengthening of faith. God's goal for His people in this age is not primarily to rid them of sickness and pain but to purge us of all the remnants of sin and cause us in our weakness to cleave to Him as our only hope.

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives . . . He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:5,6,10,11)

All the affliction that comes to the children of God whether through persecution or sickness, is intended by God to increase our holiness by causing us to rely more on the God who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:9). If we get angry at God in our sickness we are rejecting His love. For it is always in love that He disciplines His children. It is for our good and we must seek to learn some rich lesson of faith from it. Then we will say with the Psalmist, "It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn thy statutes . . . I know, O Lord, that Thy judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me" (Psalm 119:71,75). That is my fourth affirmation: ultimately God controls who gets sick and who gets well and all His decisions are for the good of His children, even if the pain is great and the sickness long. For as the last verse of our text, Romans 8:28 says, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose."

The fifth affirmation is that we should therefore pray for God's help both to heal and to strengthen faith while we are unhealed. It is fitting that a child ask his father for relief in trouble. And it is fitting that a loving Father give His child only what is best. And that He always does: sometimes healing now, sometimes not. But always, always what is best for us.

But if sometimes it is best for us not to be healed now, how shall we know what to pray? How shall we know when to stop asking for healing and only ask for grace to trust His goodness? Paul had faced this problem in his own experience. You recall from 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 that Paul, not unlike Job, was given a thorn in the flesh which he called a "messenger of Satan." We don't know what sort of pain or malady it

was but he says that he prayed three times for its removal, but then God gave him the assurance that though He would not heal him, yet His grace would be sufficient and His power would be manifest not in healing but in the faithful service of Paul through suffering.

In our text at Romans 8:26,27 Paul addresses the same problem, I think: While we are waiting for the redemption of our bodies "the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words and He (God) who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Sometimes all we can do is cry out for help because we do not know in what form the help should come. The Spirit of God takes our stumbling, uncertain expressions of need and brings them before God in a form that accords with God's intentions. And God responds graciously and meets our needs. Not always as we at first hoped, but always for our good.

So let us not be proud and stand aloof from God stoically bearing what fate has brought. Rather let us run to our Father in prayer and plead for help in time of need. That is my fifth affirmation.

Sixth, and finally, we should always trust in the love and power of God even in the darkest hour of suffering. The thing that distresses me most about those who say Christians should always be miraculously healed, is that they give the impression that the quality of faith can only be measured by whether a miracle of physical healing takes place, whereas in much of the New Testament you get the impression that the quality of our faith is reflected in the joy and confidence we maintain in God through suffering.

The great chapter on faith in the Bible is Hebrews, chapter 11. It begins, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." What is often overlooked in this chapter, though, is the final eight verses where we get the balanced picture of faith as that which lays hold on God for rescue from suffering and as that which lays hold on God for peace and hope in suffering. Verse 33: "By faith they conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection..." Now if we stopped reading here our conception of how the quality of faith manifests itself would be very distorted, because here it sounds as if faith always wins in this life. But here a shift occurs and we find that faith is also the power to lose our life: "By faith ... others were tortured, not accepting release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheep skins, in goat skins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy) wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground . . . And all these gained approval through their faith. . . "

The glory of God is manifested when He heals and when he gives a sweet spirit of hope and peace to the person that He does not heal, for that, too, is a miracle of grace! O, that we might be a people among whom God is often healing our sicknesses, but is always causing us to be full of joy and peace while our sickness remains. If we are a humble and childlike people who cry out to God in our need and trust in His promises, the Holy Spirit will help us and God will bless our church with every possible blessing. He will, as the text says, work everything together for our good."

That is my theology of sickness in a nutshell. First, in this age all creation, including our bodies, has been subjected to futility and enslaved to corruption. Second, there is a new age coming when all those who endure to the end in faith will be set free from all pain and sickness. Third, Jesus Christ came and died to purchase our redemption, demonstrate its character as both spiritual and physical and give us a foretaste of it now. Fourth, God controls who gets sick and who gets well, and all His decisions are for the good of His children even if they are painful. Fifth, we should pray for God's help both to heal and to strengthen faith while we are unhealed, and should depend on the Holy Spirit's intercession when we don't know which to pray for. Finally, we should always trust in the power and love of God even in the darkest hour of suffering.

O, that we might be an assembly of saints who echo from the bottom of our hearts the faith of Joni Eareckson after a long struggle with paralysis and depression. She wrote at the end of her book: "The girl who became emotionally distraught, and wavered at each new set of circumstances is now grown up, a woman who has learned to rely on God's sovereignty" (Joni, p. 190).

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