Teaching on sickness

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[0:00] Let us turn now to Luke's Gospel, Chapter 4. The Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 4, reading from verse 38.

Verse 38. And he arose out of the synagogue and entered into Simon's house. Simon's wife's mother was taken with a great fever, and they besought him for her.
And he stood over her and rebuked the fever and it's sister. And immediately she arose and ministered unto them. Now when the sun was setting, all they that had any sick with fever's diseases brought them unto him.
And he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And devils also came out of many, crying out and saying, Thou art Christ, the Son of God. And he rebuking them, suffered them not to speak, for they knew that he was Christ.
And when it was day, he departed and went into a desert place. And the people sought him and came unto him and stayed him, that he should not depart from them.
[1:10] And he said unto them, I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also, for therefore am I sent. And he preached in his synagogues of Galilee.

In these verses we have the first case of healing recorded by Luke in his gospel. Now in our previous study here in Luke's gospel, we noticed two weeks ago the first case of the exorcism of a demon.
A demon-possessed man was likewise healed by the Lord Jesus Christ. And it may as be that, as we consider together, this case of a demon being cast out by Jesus Christ.
But some felt that it wasn't really of great relevance. We're certainly prepared to accept that there were demons cast out by our Lord.
We are prepared to accept, as is indeed the case, that the power of Satan is a mighty power and active in the world today. But it may just be that some felt that in the part of the world where we live, in our own circumstances, that this was somewhat outwit our normal experience.
[2:26] Well, certainly, when we come to this section, dealing with the first healing that is recorded by our Lord, there is not one of us that can say that this is irrelevant, or that it does not touch our personal experience.

It may be that some of you have gone through much sickness. It may be that some here today have been more than once at the point of death through sickness and through pain.
And even if that is not the case, even if some of us can say that, thanks be to God, we've never lost a day or hardly a day off work in all our lives, still, sickness and suffering do touch us also.
For in our families, amongst our friends, we see that there is sickness, there is suffering, and there is pain. And therefore, this portion of the Word of God is a vitally relevant portion to us, as we read of his gracious raising up of Peter's mother-in-law, who was taken, we're told, with a great fever.
But what I would like to do this morning is not merely to consider this one instance, this particular case, but rather to use it as the basis, since it is the first one that we find in our studies in Luke's Gospel, to use it as the basis for a consideration of the biblical teaching on sickness.
[3:58] The why, the how of sickness, why it is that God permits that these things come upon us. Now, it's obvious that there are certain aspects of sickness and of healing that cannot be dealt with by a preacher who is a mere layman, where medical science is concerned.

But there are principles in the Word of God that teach us how to consider and how to face up to illness, either in our own lives or in the lives of members of our family or of our friends.
And so, let us begin considering the cause of sickness. According to the Word of God, why is it that in this world that was created good and perfect by our loving Heavenly Father, why is it that sickness with all the suffering and the pain associated with it should ever arise?

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And of course, as with all the troubles that overtake us, as with all the ills that flesh is heir to, the answer is not far to seek.
Sickness is caused by sin. When Adam fell, we are told that the symptoms of death that God had pronounced upon him if he sinned was put into effect, the death of the body and the death of the soul.
[5:22] Had he not sinned, we would assume from what the Scripture teaches us that he would have been confirmed in eternal life. But it was not to be.

And so the degenerative processes that led eventually to death were set in motion and sickness and infirmity. The old age with its process of senility, all these began because of sin.
And the Bible teaches us very clearly that God's best wish for his creatures is that of wholeness. Wholeness of body, of mind, and of spirit.
We're told that in the resurrection there will be, believers will be raised up, and that there will be the union of the spirit with the new resurrection body.
And it is the desire of God for all his people that this mortal shall put off immortality, not merely God's desire, but God's purpose that will be fulfilled.
[6:26] This mortal shall put on immortality. This earthly house, as the Apostle Paul says elsewhere, shall give way to the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

And he is there speaking of the human body. And we are told that in that great kingdom of our Lord and Savior there will be no more sorrow, no more pain, no more of what is associated with sickness and with suffering.
Some of you may have come across these two books that have been written in recent years. One has just come out by Johnny Erickson, a young American girl who, as a result of a diving accident, became a total paralytic and from the neck downwards is totally paralyzed.
The books I heartily recommend for what they are dealing with the problem of suffering and of pain. But what drew my attention, leafing through the second volume, which is entitled A Step Further, was the last chapter where the author deals with the biblical teaching on heaven and where she, totally paralyzed, looks forward to that glorious day when she will be in the presence of God and when that new resurrection body will be given to her.
And at the end, the very last page, there is a drawing done by herself. She has learned to draw holding the pencil in her mouth. There is a drawing of her wheelchair, but the wheelchair is empty and there is a little ticket on it saying, for sale.
[8:08] Because no longer will she in the presence of the Lord need what that represents. And this is indeed the wish of God for all his people, this full harmony of body, soul, and spirit.

And this has been disrupted by sin. But we cannot leave it there, of course, because the Bible never teaches that specific sickness is caused by specific sin.
Sickness is the result of sin. That is true. But specific sickness, your particular sickness or suffering, it is not necessarily the case that it is the result of some particular sin.
This, of course, is what Job's friends said. They said, you must be a great sinner. You must have sinned in secret to be such a sufferer. That's the problem. And Job, in that chapter that we read, proclaims that this cannot be and is not the case.
We may notice in passing that there is a biblical teaching that specific sickness can be the result of specific sin. Read through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.
[9:26] You'll find at least two indications that this is so. I refer merely to one of them. In that great chapter on the Lord's Supper, Paul says, speaking of the Corinthian Christians and of their lack of true understanding of the holiness of God and of the purposes of God as set forth in the supper and elsewhere, he says, because of the kind of lives you're living as Christians that are not pleasing to God, many among you are weak and sickly and many sleek.

There were those in the Corinthian fellowship who were suffering various ailments and sicknesses and in their case it was indeed a chastisement from God, a direct result of sin in their lives.
But the problem for us today is that while this is true, God has not given us the criteria for recognizing when it is true. God has not so taught us that we can say looking at somebody here or somebody there who is sick or suffering that it is the result of their sin.
But we should bear in mind as believers, those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that if we wander away from the path that God has set before us, it may be that our Heavenly Father will thus chastise us that he might bring us back.

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No, God has not given us the criteria for deciding as in those apostolic times when specific sickness in the lives of others is the result of specific sin.
[11:03] But of course there is a general sense in which we can say that some sicknesses are caused by sin. Indeed, you can find some cases where you can view it on two levels.

The doctor can examine a certain illness and can pronounce medically what is the cause. and a Christian, if the doctor is a Christian he can give both verdicts.
The Christian can view it and while not rejecting, indeed while accepting all the medical evidence, can say that there is sin. Let me explain with an example.
A doctor can find an advanced case of cirrhosis of the liver and he can say in a purely objective medical way this has been caused by the excessive intake of alcohol into this bodily organism.
And a Christian heeding the word of God can say that is true. And that was sin because God condemns drunkenness and excessive intake of alcohol.
[12:09] And so where there is a medical explanation there is also a moral or a spiritual explanation. And this sickness is also caused by specific sin.

sin. But then let us return to what I said just a moment ago. But while it is true that some sicknesses may be the result of specific sin, the general biblical teaching is indeed, and this we must underline, that sickness, specific sickness, is not to be associated normally with specific sin.
The book of Job cries out loud that this is so. Job was a man who merited the favor of God. Hast thou seen my servant Job that there is none like him in the earth?
And then Job's friends, wiser than God as they thought, turned around and said, that is God's verdict but it's not ours. You're a sinner Job. You're guilty. And of course this teaching of the book of Job demonstrates to us the error of certain groups that may well be found within the Christian church who would declare that God always wants his people to enjoy perfect health.
Now I'm sure you've come across such people often with the very best of intentions, often taking certain portions of God's word and sincerely seeking to apply them. They will turn around and say well if you're sick that's not God's will for you.
[13:37] God wants you to be healed. God wants you to enjoy perfect health. May I recommend this second book by Johnny Erickson a step further where she deals very wisely and biblically with this whole point.

She's still in her wheelchair in spite of the well-intentioned desires of many to conduct services of healing on her behalf. No, scriptures don't teach this.
If this were so, why did Paul, as we're told in one of the pastoral epistles, why did Paul leave Trophimus in Miletus sick? Couldn't we say to Paul, but Paul, why don't you lay hands upon him? Why don't you heal him? He would be of much greater service in the kingdom of God if he enjoyed perfect health. But Paul writes, Trophimus, I have left in Miletus sick.
Paul, with apostolic power, Paul with gifts that God had given him, and yet these were not exercised. Or why again did Paul write to his colleague Timothy, and say, Timothy, drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your many infirmities.
[14:47] Why did he not lay hands in him and heal him? Well, Paul knew full well that though there is power in God to heal, that God has other purposes for his children.

And so we pass on to the second point. First of all, we've seen the cause of sickness. Secondly, let us notice the purpose of sickness. sickness. And this, of course, in the case of Simon's wife's mother here before us, as in every other case, must be seen in the light of the sovereignty of God. The fact that the judge of all the earth does right, and that he knows what is best for all his children.
We're told in this passage that the Lord Jesus Christ laid his hands on every one of them.
These were the sick with many diseases who were brought to him. He laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And yet, even there in Palestine, during the lifetime of our Lord, there were many who were not brought to him.
There were many who perhaps would have liked to go, but there was no one to take them. And our Lord himself, as we saw in our previous readings in this chapter, he refers to the history of Israel.
[16:00] He goes back to the case of Naaman the Syrian, there at verse 27. It says, many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.

God had a purpose in healing Naaman the Syrian, and God had a purpose in not healing those many others who, according to our Lord's testimony, did live there as lepers and with different

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illnesses in the days of Elisha.
sin. Let me quote here very briefly from a great theologian from the United States, Benjamin Warfield, who in one of his books dealing with precisely this matter, he says this, all sickness and suffering are spoken of by some as if they were from the evil one alone, as if they were sheerly the mark of displeasure of God, and as if they were a fruit of particular sin.
But scripture says, Behold, whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. Sickness is often the proof of special favor from God.
It always comes to his children from his fatherly hand, and always in his loving works, together with all other things which befall God's children for good. And there is indeed a great purpose in the sicknesses that God permits in our lives.
[17:32] But let us try, and it must be very brief, let's try just to mention some of the specific purposes that God can fulfill, the lessons that he can teach us in our sicknesses and in our sufferings.

For example, through permitting sickness to come upon us, God can teach us to appreciate health.
love. Now perhaps a very good quotation here is from Psalm 42.
David is not dealing there with sickness, with that problem. He's dealing with a different problem. You remember how he's out in the desert, he's away from fellowship, doubtless being persecuted, perhaps by Saul, we're not told the details.
But David there in Psalm 42, he looks back in his loneliness and his isolation and his suffering. He looks back to the days when he went with the people of God to the house of God.
You remember the verses that we sing, how yea with the multitude that kept the solemn holy days, with them into God's house I went with voice of joy and praise.
[18:37] He looks back to these days and they're all gone. He's been deprived of them. They're good blessings. They're from God as heavenly father. They're God's will for his people, that they should worship him.

But he's been deprived of it all. He's in a lonely, difficult, persecuted situation. And as David considers his situation, he says, well I thank God for the privileges that were mine.
And we can be sure of this, that when the days of suffering and of isolation passed, and when David was able once again to go into the house of God with the people of God, he would have a new appreciation and a deeper gratitude to God for the privileges that had been taken from him for a time, but were now restored.
And is it not the case that, as you and I think of days when we were laid aside in sickness, and we perhaps thought of how ungrateful we often were for the health we enjoyed, that God we saw in his mercy permitted this, that we might restore to health if it's his will, that we might every new day praise him afresh for our health and strength, praise him afresh for our liberty, praise him afresh for all the material blessings that formerly it may be.
We just took for granted. Well, there's a first lesson, a first purpose that we can see, and here's another that you find in scripture. God permits these sicknesses to come upon us in order that we might learn to sympathize with others.
[20:12] Paul puts this very well in his first letter, second letter to the Corinthians, speaking of troubles and tribulations through which he was passing, he says this, God who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

And however hard, however bitter, may be the pain and the suffering and the sorrow through which we are called to pass, can we not thank God that having passed through it, we are able as never before to be messengers of hope and of comfort to those in multitudes in need all around us.
And although we would never choose such experiences, the loving hand of God sends them to us that we might thus, as I say, minister to those in need as we experience, have experienced ourselves, that through which they pass.
I'm sure that you can amplify in your own experience and in your own thoughts how true this is. But we must move on quickly and mention another possible service or purpose of God in these sicknesses that befall us.
and it's this, that we can thereby serve as witnesses to those around us. And here I'm thinking particularly not of restoration to health, when we can praise God for his goodness and can sympathize with others, but I'm thinking of the kind of illness that God never takes away.

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[21:58] And by means of which Christian people can be a blessing to those around them. Again, let me refer you to the books I have mentioned.

Read those two books. Read especially, well you'll have to read them both, by Johnny Erickson. But in the second one, she tells of all the experiences she went through, of how she felt convinced that she would be healed, that God would raise her up again, of how, as with Job, there were times of arguing with God.
Why should she, at 17 years of age, an attractive athletic young girl, why should she be confined for the rest of her life to a wheelchair? Surely God would raise her up, but God didn't raise her up.
And she tells, in that second book, she quotes many of the letters that she received, as she began to write, as she began to speak at meetings under great difficulties, and tell of God's gracious dealings with her.
She received an avalanche of letters, telling her of how God had blessed other people through the way that she faced this tragedy, or apparent tragedy, in her life.
[23:11] And I'm quite sure that there are those of us here today, and I certainly can bear this testimony, going around hospitals and visiting so many sick people, that there are times when I've visited Christian people, in great suffering and pain, obviously with the intention of being a comfort to them.

And I have left, where they have known how to accept their sickness from the hand of God, I have left myself comforted and challenged through the testimony that they bore.
One goes in to encourage and to comfort, and one finds that the process is in reverse, because God, in his gracious mercy, uses these cases and the suffering and the pain of others to be a blessing to Christians and to other people who are not.
Surely that must have been so in Job's case. Can't you think? There in that land where Job lived, the people all around, it would have been the talk of the country, this great man Job, everything that happened to him.
He lost all his possessions, the tremendous bereavement, all his sons and daughters killed, the hostility of his wife, and then the sickness, the terrible pain that came upon him.
[24:23] The whole world would have been talking of it, but I tell you they would have been talking of something else too. They would have been talking of this. You see, Job, do you know what he said to his wife? Shall we not receive good from the hand of the Lord and also receive evil?

In all this, Job sinned not with his tongue. And Job, in spite of his agony, in spite of his problems and his failure to understand many things, Job was a bright and shining light to the world around him.
And I wonder how many people were brought to God through the testimony of Job in his suffering, which they would never have considered or been brought to God by in his health and in his prosperity.
And so there is one other purpose I'd like to mention briefly in God's manifold purposes and sickness, and it is this, to draw men and women nearer to God.
We send this in Psalm 119. It is good for me, says David, that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes.
[25:29] For Christian people, that they might be drawn into a closer fellowship with God. As Paul himself found, with his thorn in the flesh, three times he asked God to take it away.

He couldn't bear it, the pain, the suffering. And God said, no, Paul, it's staying. And Paul tells us that he learned as never before to glory in his infirmities and to know that God's strength is made perfect in our human weakness.
But not only in the lives of believers. Could it be that there's somebody here today and you've gone through severe illness and pain and God has, at least in part, he's restored you?
And can't you think back, maybe some time ago, when you lay there wracked with pain and you longed to recover, can you think back, perhaps, to some prayer that you offered to God, to some promise that you made, that if God would restore you again to health, well, you would not live your life without him.
You would not just be nominally a follower of his, but that you would come in true repentance and faith to Jesus Christ and that you would be a true child of God, but somehow with renewed health, there has been a diminishing of the sincerity and the force of the promises and the prayers made.

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[26:54] And God in his wisdom permitting this illness that seemed so severe, God was desiring to draw you to himself. Well, there are those who through such experiences have been drawn to him.

But God forbid that we should go through them and that we should not learn what he has for us, that we should not be drawn to him as he desires.
Well, there's only five minutes left, so the last two points will have to be very brief. I want to say just a word about the healing of sickness and then just in a word at the end about the purpose of health. The healing of sickness, I'll give you the headings. Here's this case of Peter's wife's mother, and this was one of many. looking at our Lord Jesus Christ while he was on earth, what do we learn as he healed sick men and women?
Well, first of all, these healings tell us of his deity. In John's gospel, it's very significant that the healings and the other miracles are called signs, pointing to God.
[28:03] When John the Baptist was in prison, he came and said in his suffering and anguish, he said, are you really the Messiah? Or he sent his messengers? Are you really the Messiah? And Jesus said, go and tell John, the blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb speak.

These are signs to tell him that the kingdom of God has come. The healing speaks of Christ's deity. It speaks of his compassion. In his love and mercy, he healed them.
And surely this is a call to us. We continue this ministry of compassion. As Christians, we have to have concern for the healing for men's bodies, for men's minds, as well as for their souls.
And surely, one of the greatest ministries in the world today, as at any time, is the ministry of missionary medicine. And it's very moving.
And I'm sure you'll allow me just a little bit longer, two or three minutes longer this morning, to say what I have found very moving on many occasions, to go, and of course Peru is the scene of which I speak, to go there into the mountains or the jungle, to go to a little missionary clinic, and to find there a doctor, well qualified, a doctor who's been through very advanced medical schools, who has titles and degrees, and who's serving there in just a couple of rooms, with the poorest of facilities, who's serving people who can't read or write, when he could be earning great salaries back in the homeland.
[29:40] And he is doing it, as the nurses along with them, they're doing it in the name of Christ. They are showing the compassion of Christ, a personal sacrifice that they might follow in the steps of the master.

We have a missionary doctor friend, now we know that we have a missionary doctor, ex- missionary doctor in our congregation here. I speak of the kind of work that Dr. Lindsay used to do. We have another missionary doctor friend, and they left their children in this country for a few years, for one term of service, that they might go back, deprived of their children, that they might go back and serve the needy people where they were.
And they applied for a grant, an education authority grant, to put their children into school here. And you know how it is, when you apply for grants, you have to fill in a form giving your own income. They were on a missionary income, an ordinary, fairly low missionary income. And they got the form back, from the education authority down in England, saying, this can't be true.
You're a Cambridge graduate. You're a doctor with years of experience. And yet you've put down here that you're earning just a mere pittance. And they sent the form to the headquarters of the mission, asking for official confirmation that this was so.
[31:03] But it was so, because this man and his wife, a doctor and a nurse, they were healing the sick with the compassion of Christ. It's a testimony to his deity, his compassion and to his power.

I haven't said anything about healing today. But I would like to say this before we close, that the same God who healed miraculously then, can heal today. And that God causes people to pray. And there are times when God gives a deep conviction to a group of Christians that as and if they pray, that God will raise up, and he has done it, even those who are completely rejected by medical science.
They're told that they will never be healed. And if it is the good will and purpose of God, and if he through his Holy Spirit inspires his people to pray and they lay hold on the promises of God, in his sovereignty, there can be and there are cases where God will raise up.
We do not know which these will be. Sometimes God gives this conviction. And I know that there are those of us here today who can point to certain individuals.

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[32:13] I think of a doctor who was at the point of death. And God inspired her family to pray, to pray night after night. And she was raised up to a life of service for the master.

Let us bring our sick and suffering ones in prayer to God. The purpose of health, you have it in one word. Verse 39. She was healed.
And immediately she arose and ministered unto them. God gives health, not so that we will simply take it for granted, but that we might serve.
But with the health and strength and faculties he gives us, that we would not use our members as servants of unrighteousness, but use them for the glory of God.
To close with the words of Francis Ridley Haberdale, let them be our prayer. Take my life and let it be. consecrated Lord for thee.
[33:15] Take my moments and my days. Let them flow in ceaseless praise. And she goes on to say, speaking of the health of body and mind, take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love.

Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee. Good God. All the truth.

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