

“Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.” John 11:3

The Chapter, from which this text is taken, is well known to all Bible readers. In life-like description, in touching interest, in powerful simplicity — there is no writing in existence that will bear comparison with that chapter. A narrative like this is one of the great proofs of the inspiration of Scripture. When I read the story of Bethany, I feel there is something here which the unbeliever can never account for. This is nothing else but the finger of God.

These words which I have set out as my title from this chapter, I believe, make a remarkable impression on the mind and are very instructive. They record the message which Martha and Mary sent to Jesus when their brother Lazarus was sick: "*Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.*" That message was short and simple. Yet almost every word is deeply suggestive.

Mark the child-like faith of these holy women. (Matthew 18:3). They turned to the Lord Jesus in their hour of need, as the frightened infant turns to its mother. They turned to Him as their Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20), their almighty Friend (Job 33:4), their Brother born for adversity (Proverbs 17:17). Christ's help was their first thought in the day of trouble (Nahum 1:7.) Christ was the *refuge* to which they fled in the hour of need (Psalm 9:9.) Blessed are all those who do likewise.

Mark the simple humility of their language about Lazarus. They call him "He whom Thou lovest." They do not say, "He who *lovest Thee, believeth in Thee, serveth Thee*" — but "He whom Thou lovest." Martha and Mary were deeply taught of God. They had learned that Christ's love towards us and not our love towards Christ— is the true ground of expectation, and true foundation of hope. Blessed, again, are all those who are taught likewise. To look inward to our love towards Christ — is painfully unsatisfying. To look outward to Christ's love towards us — is peace. 1 John 4:19: "We love him, because he first loved us."

Mark, lastly, the touching circumstance which the message of Martha and Mary reveals: "He whom Thou lovest is sick." Lazarus was a godly man, converted, believing, renewed, sanctified, a friend of Christ, and an heir of glory. And yet Lazarus was sick. Then *sickness is no sign that God is displeased*. Sickness is intended to be a blessing to us — and not a curse. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." "For all things are yours; the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 3:22-23). Blessed, I say again, are those who have learned this. Happy are they who can say, when they are ill, "This is my Father's doing. It must be well."

I invite to your attention the subject of sickness. The subject is one which we ought frequently to look in the face. We cannot avoid it. It needs no prophet's eye to see sickness coming to each of us in turn one day. "In the midst of life we are in death." (Matthew Henry's commentary on 2 Kings 20). Let us turn aside for a few moments, and consider sickness as Christians. By God's blessing the consideration of the topic of sickness may teach us wisdom and edify.

Sickness is everywhere and among all classes of people. Grace does not lift a believer above the reach of it. Riches will not buy exemption from it. Rank cannot prevent its assaults. In hot countries and in cold; in so-called civilized nations and in savage tribes--men, women, and children sicken and die. Presidents and the citizenry, masters and servants, rich men and poor, learned and unlearned, teachers and scholars, doctors and patients, ministers and hearers — all alike go down before this great foe. There are no door and bars which can keep out disease and death.

Sickness is of every sort and description. From the crown of our head, to the sole of our foot — we are liable to disease. Our capacity for suffering is something fearful to contemplate. Who can count up the ailments by which our bodies may be assailed? Anatomy was one of my favorite classes in college, but in studying it, I was provoked with fear in all the things that can and do dysfunction in the human body. Isaac Watts writes in one of his many songs: "Strange that a harp of thousand strings should keep in tune so long." It is not so astonishing that men should die so soon — as it is that they should live so long.

Sickness is often one of the most humbling and distressing trials that can come upon man. It can turn the strongest into a little child, and make him feel "the grasshopper a burden." (Ecclesiastes 12:5.) We are "fearfully and wonderfully made." (Psalm 139:14.) The connection between body and mind is amazingly close. The influence that some diseases can exercise upon the temper and spirits is immensely great. There are ailments of brain, and liver, and nerves, which can bring down a genius to a state little better than that of a babe. He who would know to what depths of humiliation poor man can fall has only to attend for a short time on sick-beds. We have daily eye-witnesses to this reality in our congregation today.

Sickness is not preventable by anything that man can do. The average duration of life may doubtless be somewhat lengthened. The skill of doctors may continually discover new remedies, and effect surprising cures. The enforcement of wise sanitary regulations may greatly lower the death rate in a land. But, after all — whether in healthy or unhealthy localities — whether in mild climates, or in cold — whether treated by homeopathy, or allopathy — men will sicken and die. "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow;

for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." (Psalm 90:10.) That witness is indeed true. It was true thousands of years ago. It is true still.

Now what can we make of this great fact — the universal prevalence of sickness? How shall we account for it? What explanation can we give of it? What answer shall we give to our inquiring children when they ask us, "Father, why do people get ill and die?" These are grave questions. A few words upon them will not be out of place.

Can we suppose for a moment that God created sickness and disease at the beginning? Can we imagine that He who formed our world in such perfect order was the creator of needless suffering and pain? Can we think that He who made all things "very good," (Genesis 1:31) made Adam's race to sicken and to die? The idea is revolting. It introduces a grand imperfection into the midst of God's perfect works.

The only explanation that satisfies me is that which the Bible gives. Something has come into the world which has dethroned man from his original position, and stripped him of his original privileges. Something has come in, which, like a handful of gravel thrown into the midst of the motor of a fine automobile, say a Mercedes Benz, weakens it. That something has marred the perfect order of God's creation. And what is that something? In one word, it is SIN. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Romans 5:12.) Sin is the cause of all the sickness, and disease, and pain, and suffering which prevail on the earth. They are all a part of that curse which came into the world when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and fell. There would have been no sickness — if there had been no fall. There would have been no disease — if there had been no sin.

There are great broad obvious facts in the condition of mankind, which nothing but the Bible can explain, and that one of the most striking of these facts is the universal prevalence of pain, sickness, and disease. Man has sinned — and therefore man suffers. Adam fell from his first estate — and therefore Adam's children sicken and die.

The universal prevalence of sickness is one of the indirect evidences that the Bible is true. The Bible explains it. The Bible answers the questions about it which will arise in every inquiring mind. No other systems of religion can do this. They all fail here. They are silent. They are confounded. The Bible alone looks the subject square in the face. It boldly proclaims the fact that man is a fallen creature, and with equal boldness proclaims a vast remedial system to meet his needs. I feel shut up to the conclusion that the Bible is from God. Christianity is a revelation from Heaven. "Thy word is truth." (John 17:17.) Let us stand fast on that old ground (Jeremiah 6:16) — that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is God's revelation of Himself to man.

Sickness has great benefit to men. It is unreasonable to even raise these types of questions: "Can God be a God of love, when He allows pain? Can God be a God of mercy, when He permits disease? He might prevent pain and disease — but He does not. How can these things be?" Such is the reasoning which often comes across the heart of man. They might as well doubt the existence of a Creator, because the order of the universe is disturbed by earthquakes, hurricanes, and storms. They might as well doubt the providence of God, because of the horrible massacres such as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, which killed hundreds of thousands. All this would be just as reasonable as to doubt the mercy of God, because of the presence of sickness in the world.

I ask all who find it hard to reconcile the prevalence of disease and pain with the love of God, to cast their eyes on the world around them, and to mark what is going on. I ask them to observe the extent to which men constantly submit to . . . present loss for the sake of future gain; present sorrow for the sake of future joy; present pain for the sake of future health.

Sickness is a real friend to man's soul.

Sickness helps to remind men of death. Most people live as if they were never going to die. They follow business, or pleasure, or politics, or science — as if earth was their eternal home. They plan and scheme for the future, like the rich fool in the parable in Luke Chapter 12, as if they had a long lease of life, and were not tenants whose length of stay is brief. A heavy illness sometimes goes far to dispel these delusions. It awakens men from their day-dreams, and reminds them that they have to die, as well as to live. Now this I say emphatically is a mighty good.

Sickness helps to make men think seriously of God, and their souls, and the world to come. Most people, in their days of health, can find no time for such thoughts. They dislike them. They put them away. They count them troublesome and disagreeable. Now a severe disease has sometimes a wonderful power of mustering and rallying these thoughts, and bringing them up before the eyes of a man's soul. Even a wicked king like Benhadad, when sick, could think of Elisha (2 Kings 8:8.) Even heathen sailors, when death was in sight, were afraid, and "cried every man to his god." (Jonah 1:5.) Surely anything that helps to make men think is a good.

Sickness helps to soften men's hearts, and teach them wisdom. The natural heart is as hard as a stone. (Ezekiel 36:26). It can see no good in anything which is not of this life, and no happiness excepting in this world. A long illness sometimes goes far to correct these ideas. It exposes the emptiness and hollowness of what the world calls "good" things, and teaches us to hold them with a loose hand. Surely anything that obliges us to alter how we measure earthly things is a real good.

Sickness helps to humble us. We are all naturally proud and high-minded. Few, even of the poorest, are free from the infection. Few are to be found who do not look down on somebody else, and secretly flatter themselves that they are "not as other men." (Luke 18:11.) A sick bed tamps down such thoughts as these. It forces on us the mighty truth that we are all poor worms, and "that we dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth" (Job 4:19), and that those of every classification — are all dying creatures, and will soon stand side by side at the judgment bar of God. In the sight of the coffin and the grave — it is not easy to be proud. Surely anything that teaches that lesson is good. Nebuchadnezzar was about as sick as a human could be, and when he was released from that he had a proper perspective: "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase." Daniel 4:37.

Finally sickness helps to try men's religion, of what sort it is. There are not many on earth that have no religion at all. Yet few have religion which will bear inspection. Most are content with traditions received from their fathers (Galatians 1:14), and can render no reason of the hope that is in them (1 Peter 3:15). Now disease is sometimes most useful to a man in exposing the utter worthlessness of his soul's foundation (Luke 6:48-49). It often shows him that he has nothing solid under his feet. It makes him find out that, although he may have had a form of religion, he has been all his life worshiping "an unknown god." (Acts 17:23.) The storms of winter often bring out the defects in a man's dwelling — and sickness often exposes the gracelessness of a man's soul. Surely anything that makes us find out the real character of our faith is a good.

I do not say that sickness confers these benefits on all to whom it comes. Myriads are yearly laid low by illness, and restored to health — that evidently learn no lesson from their sick beds, and return again to the world. Myriads are yearly passing through sickness to the grave — and yet receiving no more spiritual impressions from it than the beasts which perish (Psalm 49:20.) While they live, they have no feeling; and when they die, there are "no bands in their death." (Psalm 73:4.)

I believe that in many minds sickness is God's "day of visitation," and that sermons, counsels, and exhortations are often brought home in the day of disease, which we have neglected in the day of health. I believe that sickness is one of God's most important subordinate instruments in the saving of men, and that though the feelings it calls forth are often temporary — it is also often a means whereby the Spirit works effectually on the heart.

If sickness in a wicked world can help to make men think of God and their souls — then sickness confers benefits on mankind.

We have no right to murmur at sickness, and complain at its presence in the world. We ought rather to thank God for it. It is God's witness. It is the soul's adviser. It is an awakener

to the conscience. It is a purifier to the heart. Surely I have a right to tell you that sickness is a blessing, and not a curse — a help, and not an injury — a gain, and not a loss — a friend, and not a foe to mankind. So long as we have a world wherein there is sin, it is a mercy that it is a world where there is sickness.

What practical lesson does the prevalence of sickness teach us? What, in a world of disease and death, ought we to do?

Above all is that we should live habitually prepared to meet our God. Sickness is a constant reminder of death, which all but very few must pass to judgment. Judgment is the time when we must at last see God face to face. (Hebrews 9:27.) Surely the first lesson which the inhabitant of a sick and dying world should learn — should be to *prepare to meet his God*. We have a sign for that in our street ministry: “Prepare to Meet Thy God, Amos 4:12”

When are you prepared to meet God? Never until your iniquities are forgiven, and your sin covered. Never until your heart is renewed, and your will taught to delight in the will of God. You have many sins. The blood of Jesus Christ, can alone cleanse those sins away. The righteousness of Christ can alone make you acceptable in the sight of God. Faith, simple childlike faith, can alone give you a saving interest in Christ and His benefits.

I believe that this, and nothing less than this, is preparedness to meet God. Forgiveness of sin; justification by faith; sanctification of the heart; the blood of Christ sprinkled on us; and the Spirit of Christ living in us — these are the grand essentials of the Christian faith. These are not mere words and names to furnish bones of contention for disputing theologians. These are sober, solid, substantial realities. To live in the actual possession of these things, in a world full of sickness and death, is the first duty to get to the heart of the matter.

Another very important duty which the prevalence of sickness presses upon you is that of living habitually ready to bear it patiently. Sickness is no doubt a trying thing to flesh and blood. To feel our nerves unstrung, and our natural force abated — to be obliged to sit still and be cut off from all our usual activities — to see our plans broken off and our purposes disappointed — to endure long hours, and days, and nights of weariness and pain — all this is a severe strain on poor sinful human nature. Surely in such a dying world as this, we should study patience.

How will we learn to bear sickness patiently, when it is our turn to suffer sickness? We must lay up stores of grace in the time of health. We must seek for the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit over our unruly tempers and dispositions. We must make a real business of our prayers, and regularly ask for strength to endure God's will — as well as to do it. Such strength is to be had for the asking: “If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.” (John 14:14.)

I believe that these graces shine the brightest in the sick room: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. These are mentioned in the Word of God as fruits of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23. They enable many a sick person to preach a silent sermon, which those around him never forget. Adorn the doctrine we profess to make that doctrine beautiful in the eyes of others. Lay up a store of patience against the time of illness. Then, though your sickness is not unto death, it shall be for the "glory of God." (John 11:4.)

One more paramount duty which the prevalence of sickness requires of us is that of habitual readiness to feel with and help our fellow-man. Sickness is never very far from us. These are good works to which every professing Christian should be ready. In a world full of sickness and disease, we ought to "bear one another's burdens," and be "kind one to another." (Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:32.) Our blessed Master Himself was abundant in these works toward the sick. He was ever "going about doing good" to the sick and sorrowful. (Acts 10:38.) They are acts to which He attaches great importance in that most solemn passage of Scripture, the description of the last judgment. He says there: "I was sick and ye visited Me." (Matthew 25:36.)

Have you any desire to prove the reality of your love—search your sick brethren out, assist them if they need aid, show your sympathy with them, try to lighten their burdens, and above all strive to do good to their souls. It will do you good if it does no good to them. It will keep your heart from murmuring. I believe that God is testing and proving us by every case of sickness within our reach.

The question that necessarily must be asked today, what will you do when you are ill? It is a question which concerns all, of every rank, and class, and condition. The time must come when you must go down the dark valley of the shadow of death. (Psalm 23:4.) The hour must come when you, like all those before you, must sicken and die. The time may be near or far off. God only knows. But whenever the time may be, I ask again: What are you going to do? Where do you mean to turn for comfort? On what do you mean to rest your soul? On what do you mean to build your hope? From where will you get your consolations?

I suggest that you don't rest not until you can give these questions a satisfactory answer. Don't deal lightly with that precious gift — your immortal soul. Don't put off consideration of that question to a more convenient season. Do not presume on death-bed repentance. The greatest business ought surely not to be left to the last. One dying thief was saved that men might not despair, but only one that none might presume.

There is no escaping the common lot of all mankind. Nobody can die in our stead. The day must come when we must each go to our long home. (Ecclesiastes 12:5.) Against that day I want you to be prepared. The body which now takes up so much of your attention — the body which you now clothe, and feed, and warm with so much care — that body must return

again to the dust. Oh, think what a solemn thing it would prove at last to have provided for everything, except the one thing needful — to have provided for the body — but to have neglected the soul! Once more I press my question on your conscience: "What will you do when you are ill?"

To all who feel they need it and are willing to take it, to all who feel they are not yet prepared to meet God my counsel is short and simple. Acquaint yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ without delay. Repent, be converted, flee to Christ, and be saved. Of all gambling in the world, there is none as reckless as that of the man who lives unprepared to meet God — and yet puts off repentance. Break off from those sins, cast away your transgressions, and turn away from them without delay. Flee to the only Savior this very day, and cry mightily to Him to save your soul. Apply to Christ at once. Seek Him by faith. Commit your soul into His keeping. Cry mightily to Him for pardon and peace with God. Ask Him to pour down the Holy Spirit upon you, and make you a thorough Christian. He will hear you. No matter what you have been, He will not refuse your prayer. He has said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." (John 6:37.) Do not rest until you can say with the apostle, "I know *whom* I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day." (2 Tim. 1:12.)

Vague, and indefinite, and indistinct religion may do very well in time of health. It will never do in the day of sickness. It will break down entirely when death is in sight. Nothing will do then but real heart-union with Christ. Christ interceding for us at God's right hand (Hebrews 7:24), Christ known and believed as our Priest (Hebrews 9:11), our Physician (Matthew 9:12), our Friend (John 15:15). Christ alone can rob death of its sting, and enable us to face sickness without fear. (1 Corinthians 15:55.) He alone can deliver those who through fear of death are in bondage (Hebrews 2:15.) I say to everyone who needs advice: Be acquainted with Christ. As ever you would have hope and comfort on the bed of sickness — be acquainted with Christ. Seek Christ. Apply to Christ.

Take every care and trouble to Him when you are acquainted with Him. (Psalm 20:1) He will keep you and carry you through all (Isaiah 40:11). Pour out your heart before Him (Psalm 62:8), when your conscience is burdened (Psalm 38:4). He is the only true Confessor (Psalm 51:4). He alone can absolve you and take the burden away (Psalm 55:22). Turn to Him first in the day of sickness (Joel 2:12), like Martha and Mary. Keep on looking to Him until the last breath of your life (Isaiah 45:22).

I exhort all true Christians to remember how much they may glorify God in the time of sickness, and to lie quiet in God's hand when they are ill. I earnestly entreat all sick believers to remember that they may honor God as much by patient suffering — as they can by active work. Remember that Christ cares for them as much when they are sick — as He does when they are well; and that the very chastisement they feel so acutely — is sent in love, and not

in anger. “My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. . . . Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” (Hebrews 12:5-11.) “Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.” (James 5:10-11.) Above all, I urge them to recollect the sympathy of Jesus for all His weak members. (1 Corinthians 12) They are always tenderly cared for by Him — but never so much as in their time of need. (1 Peter 5:7.) Christ has had great experience of sickness. He knows the heart of a sick man. He used to see "all manner of sickness, and all manner of disease" when He was upon earth. He felt especially for the sick in the days of His flesh. He feels for them specially still. Sickness and suffering, I often think, make believers more like their Lord in experience, than health. "Himself took our infirmities, and bore our sicknesses." (Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 8:17.) The Lord Jesus was a "Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." (Isaiah 53:3.) None have such an opportunity of learning the mind of a suffering Savior — as suffering disciples.

The day may come when after a long fight with disease we shall feel that medicine can do no more, and that nothing remains but to die. Friends will be standing by, unable to help us. Hearing, eyesight, even the power of praying, will be fast failing us. The world and its shadows will be melting beneath our feet. Eternity, with its realities, will be looming large before our minds. What shall support us in that trying hour? What shall enable us to feel, "I fear no evil"? (Psalm 23:4.) Nothing, nothing can do it but close communion with Christ. Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith — Christ putting His right arm under our heads (Deuteronomy 33:27: “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms”): — Christ can alone give us the complete victory in the last struggle.

Let us cleave to Christ more closely, love Him more heartily, live to Him more thoroughly, copy Him more exactly, confess Him more boldly, and follow Him more fully.

The time is short. The fashion of this world passes away (1 Corinthians 7:31.) A few more sicknesses — and all will be over. We travel towards a world where there is no more sickness — where parting, and pain, and crying, and mourning, are done with for evermore. "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry." (Hebrews 10:37.) In His presence shall be fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11.) Christ shall wipe away all tears from His people's eyes. (Revelation 21:4) The last enemy that shall be destroyed is Death. But He shall be destroyed. Death himself shall one day die. (Rev. 20:14.) In the

meantime, let us live a life of faith in the Son of God. Let us lean all our weight on Christ, and rejoice in the thought that He lives for evermore (Revelation 1:18.)

Yes, blessed be God! Christ lives — though we may die. Christ lives — though friends and families are carried to the grave. He lives, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel. (2 Timothy 1:10.) He lives, who said, "O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction." (Hosea 13:14.) He lives, who shall one day "change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself." (Philippians 3:21). In sickness and in health, in life and in death, let us lean confidently on Him. Surely we ought to say daily: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3.) I love you. Amen.