

## Part 2: Is God Sovereign Over Sickness?

We're looking into the Word of God to underline the wonderful truth that God is sovereign. Sovereign means God is the Supreme King, and totally in control. It means that everything ultimately works out exactly as He wants it to.

There are many today who pay lip-service to the truth that God is sovereign, but clearly do not believe it. We looked in Part 1 at the fact that God is sovereign over Satan. Many today blame Satan for all that is negative in their lives, and go so far as to say that God is not in any way involved with negative events in a believer's life.

However, we saw from Job that while Satan may be the god of this world, he must give an account to the king of the Universe. We saw God places limits on Satan, and his rebellion does not mean he is autonomous. We saw that ultimately, God was responsible for what happened on earth, since He has the final say, even if He doesn't author each of the events.

If God were not sovereign over Satan, then why did Paul bother praying to God to remove the messenger of Satan in his flesh? If God were not sovereign over Satan, then why did our Lord teach us to pray "Deliver us from the evil one" in the Disciples' Prayer? If God were not sovereign over Satan, how can He so confidently predict his doom in the book of Revelation?

And if Satan could do whatever he wanted, why did Jesus tell Peter that Satan had requested to sift through the disciples? No, God is clearly sovereign over Satan. But God is more than sovereign over Satan – He is also sovereign over sickness.

Now it is sad that a totally unbiblical theology of sickness has developed in recent years. We dealt with this before in a program on the prosperity gospel. But here we want to deal with the truth of God's sovereignty over sickness. The biggest mistake people make about sickness is to equate it with moral evil. The logic is simple, and maybe even fair, but nevertheless unscriptural.

They suggest, 'Sickness and disease entered the world when sin entered the world. It's part of the curse. It's part of the results of our sin. Therefore, when Christ redeems us from our sin, we should expect all the curses of sin to be removed. I mean, if the first Adam caused sin, and the second Adam came to undo the penalty of sin, then we should expect Christ to undo the presence of sickness in our lives.'

But this logic is not biblical. We must always submit even our logic to the explicit statements of Scripture. And nowhere in Scripture does God suggest that our spiritual salvation will include total physical healing from sickness. Nowhere in Scripture does God say that being saved will reverse all the results of the fall in this life.

Otherwise, we should expect that Christian women would not have increased pain in childbirth, as Eve was told would happen; we should expect that Christian men should not have frustration and toilsome work by the sweat of their brow, as Adam was told; we should expect

that the ground be no longer cursed. Indeed, we could become absurd, and expect that Christians could have pet lions that will lie down with lambs. It's obvious that God is only going to finally remove the curse of sin in the future.

Salvation from sin removes in this life the just penalty of death – it changes our status as children of wrath into children of God. It begins to transform us into the image of Christ progressively. But it does not mean that a believer in Christ returns to paradise in this life. Scripture is clear that our citizenship is in heaven.

Peter and the writer of Hebrews call us strangers and pilgrims in this world. We're passing through, seeking to glorify our King before we go home. But theology which denies that God is sovereign over sickness makes sickness something that God has no control over, something as morally evil as sin itself, and something that a redeemed believer is not supposed to experience. Its theology that insists our time to reign is now, and that our glorification is now.

Jesus healed physical ailment till his own human frame was close to exhaustion. One of God's names is *Yahweh Ropecta* – the Lord who heals. But understand, the only way God *could* heal sickness is if He is sovereign over the sickness. He cannot be both able to dispel it, and unable to control it at the same time. Healing to God is not like fire-extinguishing. Healing to God is, the controller of the curse of sin choosing to lift or alleviate it, as He pleases.

If sickness is beyond Him, if it is outside His power, or if He is battling it like a fire-fighter, then how could He ever touch it and heal it so consistently and effortlessly? Some build this crazy theology where God is able to heal the diseases, but seemingly unable to prevent us from getting them in the first place. But Scripture teaches us that all that happens to us passes through the hands of a powerful God.

God's power over sickness comes from the fact that He sovereignly included it as part of the curse. How sad that some people think God is so small that He did not purposefully bring about the consequences of Adam's sin. Of course He did – He announced them one by one – upon Adam, Eve and the serpent. It was He Who was sinned against, and He decided on and announced the punishment for the sin.

If it was all the Devil's doing, why does God include Satan as one of the recipients of a curse in **Genesis 3:15**? God is always the author and finisher. Whatever happens in His created universe has passed through His hands. And just as He permitted sin to occur, so He planned and permitted the curse that would go with sin. And realise that much of God's curse on the world because of Adam's sin was, in fact, merciful.

For instance, one curse was that Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden. Why? Because had they stayed and continued to eat of the tree of life, they would have continued to live indefinitely, in a state of rebellion to God. Imagine if God had not brought physical death into the world. We would have humans born with the sinful nature of Adam, living forever. Earth would truly be the same as hell.

If God had not cursed the ground, you would have sinful, selfish men indulging their laziness, with the uncursed, productive earth still indulging their lusts; they would be pursuing their self-destructive ways with no motivation ever to submit themselves to the law of work for food. Chaos would be worse than it is. If God had not announced a curse on Eve, marriage would be even harder than it is – with two selfish people demanding autonomy and no God-given order on how there is to be peace and harmony in the home.

And consider that if there were not sickness – you would have a race of selfish humans with no physical limitations to humble them, to remind them of their frailty and dependence on God – you'd have the worst possible combination: perfectly healthy, permanently strong and unfailingly vibrant rebels.

The reality of death, the reality of sin, the reality of needing reconciliation with God, would be far from the minds of people never afflicted. So God is sovereign over sickness, it was God who allowed it into the world. If God is sovereign over sickness, then it has a plan in His purposes, and He will use it accordingly. Hear God's words as He speaks to Moses:

*Who hath made man's mouth? Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind?  
Have not I, the Lord?*

**Exodus 4:11**

Now that's a Scripture few want to tackle if they believe sickness is sin. God explicitly claims responsibility for the physical difficulties and disabilities people are born with. God is sovereign over it. He does not say, 'The blind are that way because of Satan!' He does not attribute physical disabilities to the people's sin, or their lack of faith. He says, "*Have not I, the Lord?*" I'm sovereign over it, says the Lord, I use it as I will.

Consider that Job's three 'friends' held the simplistic theology that many hold today. They basically reasoned: 'God is good, God rewards the good and punishes the evil. What has happened to you, Job, is evil, therefore you must be evil.' But they were way off base.

God Himself said of Job when challenging Satan that Job was "*a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil*" (**Job 1:8**). When all the debates and dialogues were over, God stated what He thought of the three friends' theology: "*My wrath is kindled against thee and against thy two friends, for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath*" (**Job 42:7**).

See, it might sound wonderfully cut and dried to say, 'Sickness is bad, God is good, God rewards the good, and therefore sickness is either your sin, or Satan's attack on you.' But in fact, we find Scripture giving a much deeper insight into God's sovereign purposes for sickness. Let's look at some of them.

## **1. Firstly, God uses sickness to limit and restrain sinful humans.**

As we have noted, sickness reminds us that we are mortal, that we are eternal beings inside a decaying body. **Ecclesiastes 3:11** tells us that God has put eternity into our hearts. He has given every human a sense of the truth of the eternal – that the physical world is passing away. Paul said that the decaying nature of our bodies as believers actually causes a greater anticipation for the future:

*For the creation was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope... For we know the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves waiting for the adoption, that is, the redemption of our bodies.*

**Romans 8:20-23**

Paul does not see the frailty of the human body as a sinful thing to be rebuked. Rather, he accepts it as part of the general curse on Adam's race and world. Though he is a believer, and is addressing believers, he says that the decay makes us long for the future resurrection, where we will be clothed with immortality. So God often uses sickness to point us to eternity – both believers and unbelievers.

Sickness truly does have that alien, unnatural feel about it – like death. When we encounter it, it should lift our eyes to the heavens as we exclaim, 'It was not meant to be this way!' We long for God's renewal of all things, but the New Testament is clear – that is something we look forward to in the resurrection – it is not something we command as our own right now.

## **2. Secondly, God uses sickness to glorify Himself.**

In **John 9**, the disciples have that same simplistic theology of sickness when encountering a man born blind:

*And as Jesus passed by, He saw a man which was blind from his birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."*

**John 9:2-3**

The disciples' choices for the cause of this man's sickness were not exactly profound in their depth of thought. 'Master who sinned – this man, or his parents?' Jesus says, 'Neither.' God sovereignly chose to entrust this man with blindness so as to use him as a vessel to display His glory. God knew there would be a day that Jesus would walk past the man while in human flesh – heal him, and draw attention to Himself, and His Word.

In the book of John, Christ's seven miracles are all signs that begin discussions over His true nature as the Son of God. Indeed, you'll find the majority of healings in the New Testament were crowd gatherers and attention-getters to draw people to hear the Word. The main goal of Jesus and the apostles was not to try uplift the general health of the population in Palestine. It

was to reveal God's glory through His power, compassion and mercy, and to give the preaching of the Word at that time a wide audience.

The point is that here, God gave the blind man a physical ailment to give Himself glory. Sickness is sometimes a platform for God to display His power – sometimes in healing, and sometimes in the grace He gives to endure it.

### **3. Thirdly, God uses sickness to mature believers.**

Paul endured some kind of physical discomfort. Listen to his own testimony of it:

*And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.*

**2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

Paul says that to make sure he remained humble in light of the amazing revelation he had received, he was given a physical disability. In this case, Satan was the direct agent. But notice that the Lord was in charge, and Paul asked God to remove it. He didn't rebuke Satan or rebuke the disease – He prayed.

God's answer was: 'My empowerment will be more than enough for you – because it is when you are weakened, that you turn to Me and experience My strength.' Paul saw the wisdom of that, and says he chose then to take pleasure in weakness, in insults, in suffering lack, in troubles, in persecutions. Why? Because Paul understood that the weaker he was, the more he could experience God's strength. As John the Baptist put it, *"I must decrease, but He must increase"* (**John 3:30**).

That is a profoundly important principle for Christian living: the more you humble yourself, the more God will exalt you. What goes down must come up, in God's order. The emptier you are of Self, the more room there is for the fullness of Christ. And Paul says that God sovereignly chose to use sickness in his life to teach him this. It had a maturing, strengthening effect on Paul, when he submitted himself to God's sovereign will to allow the problem. He chose to rejoice in it, and became wiser and stronger for Christ.

### **4. Fourthly, God sometimes uses sickness to discipline sin in a believer's life.**

Now, this is not always the case, as we have seen. But it is *sometimes* the case. It was not true of Job, though his friends thought it was. Sickness is not always a result of sin. But sometimes, God uses sickness to discipline believers. Paul says of the Corinthian believers who were

sinning with by profaning the Lord's Supper: "*For this cause, many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep*" (**1 Corinthians 11:30**).

In this case, some Corinthians were sick, and some were even dying, as God's chastening hand set upon them for their gluttony and greed during the solemn time of remembering Calvary. God can use sickness to discipline us. But once again, we have a logical problem if we believe that God is not sovereign over sickness. If so, then He can't be the cause of the sickness, our sin is, and He cannot then be the one who uses sickness to discipline us. If it is a morally evil thing, God cannot use it as an instrument.

**James 1** tells us that God tempts no man with evil. The Biblical truth is that God chooses to bring sickness upon some as a disciplining force for their unrepentant sin. **James 5:14-15** suggests that someone who knows they are sick because of their sin should call for the church leadership, and ask them to pray. Their prayer cannot absolve the person's sin, but it shows they are repentant, and God can then heal. So sickness is not always the result of sin, but God can use sickness to discipline unrepentant sin.

Scripture is filled with people who were sick. When the apostles write about these people, they do not regard them as being in sin, they regard them as being sick. Epaphroditus is one example. In Philippians, Paul says that he was almost fatally ill: "*For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him*" (**Philippians 2:27**).

Now, if Epaphroditus was simply supposed to rebuke the sickness, why didn't he do it? Was he lacking in faith? Was he unsaved? Hardly – he was sick because he lived in a sin-cursed world, in a sin-cursed mortal body. Paul maintains the sovereignty of God over sickness by observing that God had mercy on him. Not Satan. God – for God is sovereign over it all.

Likewise, Timothy had frequent health troubles and problems with his stomach according to **1 Timothy 5:23**. If Timothy's problem was his lack of faith, or his sin, why on earth is Paul telling him to drink a little wine instead of water to help his stomach problem?

Paul here really epitomizes how we should approach sickness as Christians: be a good steward of your body by living healthily, when you do fall sick, pray for healing, and ask others to pray for you, and then see a doctor, or apply medicine. 'Timothy, take care of your body, ask God to heal you, and take some medicine.'

Why should God instantly zap away your headache when He gave you the money to buy aspirin? Listen, this is not faith-destroying. It is childish to exclusively expect the miraculous in place of a common-sense solution. Ask God for healing, since He is sovereign, and then apply what medicinal benefits are available to you. For Timothy, it was a little wine. Today, we have much more.

See, the epistles maintain the truth of God's sovereignty over sickness. God is not a god-in-the-box. He is not a character whose lines we write, whose motives we describe, and whose actions we predict and control. He is the Great I AM, and we breathe in the very air we are breathing right now due to His sovereign permission. As God says of Himself in Deuteronomy:

*See now that I, even I, am HE, and there is no god with Me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand."*

**Deuteronomy 32:39**

Indeed, the power of life and death are truly in the hands of God, not in the spoken word, as some suggest. God is sovereign over sickness. He included it as part of the curse on man. He uses it sovereignly to remind man of eternity, to glorify Himself, to mature His children, and to discipline unrepentant sin. We must avoid theologies that use human logic and speculations to describe sickness, and instead read the precious Word of God, and allow it to shape our thinking.

Though our bodies ache and groan, though we are often sick and tired of being sick and tired, isn't it a glorious thought that God is sovereign over sickness, over our very bodies? He does not give up His throne, His power, His sovereignty to anyone – least of all to us and our supposed powerful words.

God chooses to heal when He wants to, how He wants to. God chooses to afflict when He wants to, how He wants to. In the end, we trust what **Romans 8:28** simply tells us – that He is working all things (even sickness) together for the good of those who love God, to those who called according to His purpose.