

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Christian Family Today: The Family - Illness and Death

That Saturday morning, just over thirty years ago, began like any other. My wife, Margaret, and I set off in the car with our three children, aged 7, 6, and 4, for the swimming pool. After an enjoyable swim, there was just time to pop into town to get some new shoes for the children and get back for lunch. On the way home, I had to stop the car and hand over the driving to my wife. Shortly after arriving home, I was haemorrhaging badly. The doctor was called and I was quickly in hospital. I remember little of the next few days. Suffice it to say that after two emergency operations and more than fifty pints of blood, the source of the bleeding was located and dealt with. In the goodness of God, and through the prayers of many Christian friends up and down the country, I made a complete recovery. During that first operation when things were very much touch and go, I remember being vividly aware of floating up to the bright light of heaven. There was no fear in that but only a perfect sense of peace in being with the Lord. But then I thought about Margaret and the children and felt a strong pull towards them, which finally won. Such near death experiences are not uncommon, but to the Christian, they are the reminder that even if illness has to end in death, it is, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, "to depart and be with Christ, which is far better (1:23). Of course, I am very much aware that for me to be talking to you this morning while I am feeling well and all is going well is a very different situation from that which faces some of you, struggling to cope with illness and death. These are circumstances which affect all of us at some time in our lives and very often there are no easy answers. For the Christian, however, there is the assurance, as Paul wrote to the Romans, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God" (8:28). Sometimes, we struggle through our tears to remind ourselves of it, but we cling to it. So Job, in the depths of all his afflictions - chronic illness, the loss of his children - could say of God, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him", (13:15).

While I was recovering in hospital, I was very much struck by the story of the Lord Jesus with His disciples in the boat on the lake when a violent storm blew up (see Mark 4:36-41). Those seasoned fishermen were in fear of their lives. But where was Jesus? Asleep on a pillow! So they woke Him, crying, "Do You not care that we are perishing?" His word, "Peace, be still!" quietened not only the wind and the wave, but also the fear in their hearts. The Lord Jesus could sleep even in those difficult circumstances because He knew that He was totally safe in His heavenly Father's keeping. I come back to that story time and time again when things are difficult. The Lord Jesus can still come into our circumstances, however difficult and impossible they may seem, and whisper His own, "Peace, be still".

This morning, I want to look at two Bible families and see how they coped with illness and disease. First of all, we should just remind ourselves that, in the beginning, when God made the world, it was totally free of illness and disease: "Then God saw everything that He had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). But Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience changed all that! Pain, toil and death were the result (see Genesis 3). The Christian family is no more exempt from illness and death than all the families in creation, all alike suffering the consequences of sin in God's perfect creation. It has been aptly remarked that there is no situation through which the man of the world passes but God has a child of His in those same circumstances, but with this big difference - with the help of God, the child of God can go through those circumstances to the glory of God! That's worth thinking about. I'll say it again: there is no situation through which the man of the world passes but God has a child of His in those same circumstances, but with this big difference - with the help of God, the child of God can go through those circumstances to the glory of God!

In John 9, Jesus "saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that He was born blind?" The disciples shared the common Jewish belief that illness and death were the judgment of God upon the individual for some specific sin. It is true that sometimes in the Bible, God judged individuals in this way for their sin. Think of Miriam and Aaron, smitten by God with leprosy, for jealously presuming that they were equally mouthpieces of God as was Moses (see Numbers 12). Or Ananias and Sapphira carried out dead from the early church for their sin of pretending to have given their all to the Lord (see Acts 5). But all of us fall under the general consequences of that original sin of Adam and Eve. Illness and death are but part of those consequences. The question for the Christian, then, is not, "Why is God punishing me in this way?", but rather, "What is God, in love, wanting to say to me in this way?"

The Lord Jesus highlights the wrong thinking of His disciples when He answers them, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (verse 3). There were many sighted people in Jerusalem that day, but their eyes were blind to the glories of the Son of God. But from the day of this man's birth,

when his parents first gazed upon their blind son, God had special blessings in view for this man. There is not time here to go into all the details of the story. Please read them for yourselves later. But we must note that, after Jesus had given him his sight, the man was urged by the Jews to say that Jesus was a sinner. His celebrated reply was, "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see" (verse 25). Gradually this once blind man was to learn that this Man, whose face was the first face he'd gazed upon, was none other than the Son of God Himself. The story triumphantly ends, "Then he said, "Lord, I believe!" And he worshipped Him" (verse 38). Of all the people in Jerusalem that day, this man, not despite his physical ability, but rather because of his physical disability, was brought to saving faith in the Son of God.

We meet our second family in John's Gospel also, this time in chapter 11. We'll read the first few verses. "Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. Therefore the sisters sent to [Jesus], saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was" (verses 1-6).

That home in Bethany was a very special place of retreat for the Lord Jesus. Martha had welcomed Him there and busied herself in preparing Him a lovely meal (see Luke 10). That welcome was all the more precious to the Lord Jesus since He had only just earlier said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Luke 9:58). In that home, Mary had sat at the feet of Jesus and lovingly listened to all that He had to say. Yet trouble struck even that home - their brother, Lazarus, fell seriously ill. As we have already noticed, the Christian family is not exempt from the troubles which are the common lot of humanity.

But this family and the Christian family today, had one very special resource in trouble. Notice again verse 3: "Therefore the sisters sent to [Jesus], saying, 'Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.'" When confronted by trouble of whatever kind, do we, like these sisters, instinctively turn to the Lord Jesus? The message of the old hymn is still true:

*What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

It's worth remarking, in passing, that the writer of that hymn, Joseph Scriven, had known very real sorrow in his life. His bride-to-be was tragically drowned on the eve of their wedding day. He emigrated from Ireland to Canada where he was once again engaged to be married. But this second fiancée died after a brief but fatal illness. He later wrote the hymn as a message of comfort to his mother when she was going through a particularly distressing time.

But to come back to Martha and Mary. It is important to notice how much this story is anchored in the love of Jesus. Not only are the sisters able to speak of Jesus' love for their brother, Lazarus, but John himself, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, goes on to add, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (verse 5). Have you ever noticed that there are very few people in the Bible of whom we are specifically told that Jesus loved them. Of course, His love went out to all, men and women, boys and girls. Many of us were glad to sing in childhood:

*Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.*

Incidentally, we can still sing it, and enjoy the words even more, as we grow older! There has to be a special reason, then, why Martha and Mary are singled out in this particular fashion.

Jesus did not go to them straight away. That delay must have seemed inexplicable to those sisters in their sorrow. They were to learn that that delay was not because Jesus was angry with them, or that He didn't care about them, but rather that He loved them! So their brother, Lazarus, died. Yet they were now to experience the love of Jesus, and see His power, in a way that they would have missed if Jesus had gone to them straight away.

As Jesus went with them to the place where Lazarus was buried, we read, "Jesus wept" (verse 35). This is the shortest verse in the Bible, these two marvellous words. Those sisters saw the real tears which Jesus shed in contrast to the superficial loud wailing which was practiced at that time. Those real tears were occasioned by the very deep

sympathy which He had for Martha and Mary and by His deep sorrow for the havoc which sin, and its consequence, death, had brought into His once perfect world.

How true are those words of the chorus:

*No one ever cared for me like Jesus,
There's no other Friend so kind as He;
No one else could take the sin and darkness from me.
Oh, how much He cares for me!*

Some of you this morning may be facing illness, bereavement, or possibly the fact that your life on this earth is coming to an end. Christian friend, never for one moment doubt the love of God! That love was shown unmistakably on the cross of Calvary, and stands for all time, whatever the circumstances of life. The Lord Jesus is still ready to enter into, and to share, your sorrow as He did that of Martha and Mary. His promise is still true, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:6). Verse 6 goes on to add, "So we may boldly say, 'The LORD IS my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'"

What are the lessons, then, from these two families for us today? One lesson has to be that, whatever our circumstances, the Lord Jesus is ready to come into them and meet us in all our need in the way which He knows will be best for us.

I mentioned at the beginning the very deep sense of peace I had when in hospital in thinking about the Lord Jesus in the storm on the lake. Those of you who have been seriously ill will know that, however regularly you may have read your Bible in the past, the effort of reading it then is just too much. That makes it all the more important that, when we are well, we fill our hearts and minds with the word of God. "Your word I have hidden in my heart", the psalmist could write, It is a good habit, from as early an age as possible, to commit the words of Scripture to memory. Then in moments of special need, the Spirit of God is able to bring those words back to us, with their own particular blessing and comfort.

But we may be feeling well just now. Illness and death are subjects which may seem far removed from us. All of us, however, at some time or other, will come across those who are going through times of deep sorrow and need. What is to be our attitude towards them? How can we be of help to them? There may be someone who is ill and not able to get out and about who would just love a visit from you. Some people, it has to be said, seem to have a special gift of visiting housebound folk and patients in hospital. Yet all of us can try to show Christian compassion and care in this way. The words of Jesus still challenge us: "I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." Then the righteous will answer Him saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me'" (Matthew 25:35-40).

Then what of the bereaved? James' statement on the nature of religion is both striking and searching: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (1:27).

Many of us feel a sense of embarrassment when we meet someone who has been recently bereaved. What can we say to them that will help? We skirt around mentioning the name of the one who has died lest it bring fresh pain. Yet to the person who has been bereaved the one they have lost is still a real person, not a non-person. Their memories of that person are very real and they want those memories to be preserved. They want to hear their loved one being remembered and appreciated. Those who have been bereaved for some time tell me that the pain is still very real. They still need to hear of their loved one; they still need to feel the warmth of human contact in a warm embrace or an affectionate hug. The Lord still loves them and wants to show that love through you and me.

We close with the familiar words of the shepherd psalm: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

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