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What Do You Do When You Are Ill?

God's people are subject to illness just like the rest of mankind.

So what should you do if you become ill?

by James McBride

Few Christian families escape illness - from minor childhood complaints to the most serious of life-threatening afflictions. This is nothing new, for God's people throughout all ages (including Bible times!) have suffered - and died - from sickness.

When illness strikes, then, what should the Christian do? This may seem a strange question. For the immediate reaction - especially of a new Christian - is likely to be: "It's obvious: take a potion, or go see the quack!" In fact, generally speaking this is the only weapon in the health armory of most people. Either suffer (preferably quietly!) - or seek medical attention.

One of the advantages of being a Christian, however, is that God has provided us with a unique tool for health which is available only to those who believe!

A Healing God

God is ever aware of the health needs of His children, and reveals Himself in the Scriptures as "Jahveh-Ropheka" - *God our Healer*. He can and does heal us according to His will. And He wants us to come to Him in loving trust, claiming the healing that was purchased for us by Jesus Christ "by whose stripes you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24). Moreover, He has all the power that's needed, and the wisdom, to heal any and every affliction. When we are healed it is the power of God that does it (Psalm 103:3).

Our healing may result through the divinely in-built recovery mechanism of our body. It may result from the forgiveness of the sin that has caused that particular illness (e.g. envy or addiction or anger or sexual sin). It may result from the rebuking of evil spirits which, rarely, cause illness. It may result from a direct miraculous intervention by our all-powerful Father in Heaven.

How does God do this? Has He a "method"? Or do we simply get on our knees and ask?

We are left in no doubt! The Scriptures clearly tell us that God does indeed have a method by which His children

should ordinarily approach Him in our illnesses.

Be Anointed

It is described for us in the book of James: "Is any sick among you? Let him *call for the elders of the church* and let them pray over him, *anointing him with oil* in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up..." (James 5:14-15).

In practice, it means that the sick person (or the family) will send for the local church leadership. They will come and pray with you, and anoint your head with a little olive oil - symbolic of the power to heal exercised by the Spirit of God. Such personal contact with the sick person allows the elders to comfort and counsel and give any practical help that's needed in the spirit of Psalm 23. (Note that the general implication of "call for" the elders is that the illness is so serious that you can't be expected to go to them!)

Cause of Sickness

Much of our illness stems from our own actions and our lifestyle. If for example, we smoke or use other drugs, or have inadequate housing, or are not disciplined to cleanliness, or are over or under-weight or have a deficient diet - then illness surely lurks around the corner! Hence the value of wise counsel from an experienced elder. In the *Church of God* (UK), of course, the leadership do not prescribe medical treatment! However, experience enables us to point the brethren in the direction of sound health advice.

Our bodies are "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (I Cor 6:19) and as such we ought to "glorify God in your body" (v.20). It is a trust from God in the same way as the other resources He gives us! It's important, then, that you *assess your present life-style* - diet, exercise, emotional reactions, drug abuse (e.g. smoking, alcohol, "pot" etc.), environment, your relationship with and submission to our Father, etc. - all of which can hinder health and healing.

Indeed, our neglect of known health laws may *prevent*

divine healing!

Is Sin Involved?

Further, not uncommonly our illnesses stem directly from *sin*! “Envy is rottenness to the bones” says Solomon, for example. We therefore cannot expect lasting healing if we don’t stop the sin that’s causing the illness! You may be miraculously healed of osteoporosis (rottenness of the bones) - but if you are unrepentant of the envy, can’t you expect a recurrence? Notice, too, that seething resentment towards others is a major factor in disease of the colon. Indeed such “spiritual” factors have been estimated to be major factors in 80% or more of illness!

If our spiritual house is disorderly, for example through resisting some point of God’s Law, or failing to be “filled with the Spirit” (Paul’s remedy for anger!), or through covetousness etc. - then we can bring illness on ourselves.

James went on to say that after anointing “the Lord will raise him to health, and *if he has committed sins* he will be forgiven” (James 5:15). In the context, therefore, of being anointed for sickness James adds, “so practice confessing your sins to one another, and praying for one another, that you may be healed” (v.16). Such an unburdening to the church leaders - and certainly to others whom you have sinned against - unblocks God’s healing power. Isaiah warned that *our sin can prevent God hearing our prayer* (Is 59:1,2)!

It is therefore an important part of the healing process that we “call in the elders of the church” when afflicted by illness or other overwhelming situations. They are in a position of being able to mobilize the resources an ill member needs - both material and spiritual.

Anointed Cloths

But what if it’s not possible for the elders to visit for the purpose of anointing?

If distance or other circumstance makes such contact impossible, the Church follows a practice based on an incident recorded in Acts 19:12. The elders personally *pray for the sick person* and his needs, anointing a small piece of cloth with olive oil. This is then sent to the sick who, in prayer, applies it to his or her person asking for God’s healing in Christ. (Or a parent can place it on a sick child, or other family member, etc.).

There is nothing “magical” about this action or about the cloth - which should then be disposed of and not re-used. It is merely a symbol of God’s power and willingness to heal. And an expression of our readiness to submit to Him in all matters.

God has many times blessed this simple act, this “special miracle”, and you can in this way go boldly and energetically with perseverance to the throne of grace to ask for His healing touch (Heb 4:16).

Medical Counsel

God can and does heal in our day. However, it’s an observed fact that He rarely does for us *what we can do from our own resources*. You are urged to take serious health problems to God (by calling for the church elders or by requesting an anointed cloth). But at the same time *you should wisely consider the best medical advice available to you*.

[Some Christians, however, will refuse the latter option and want to “leave it to God” to heal if He chooses. If this is how you feel I urge you to write for a copy of our free article titled **Healing**. It is a thorough discussion of the concept of “divine healing”.]

By the way - do remember that the medical profession is *paid to serve* you, and encompasses a variety of competence - and incompetence. It is unwise to have a *blind* faith in any man or institution! In serious illness, if you have the option obtain a “second opinion” before committing yourself to drastic or potentially dangerous treatment. And do apply the same judgment to “alternative” treatments!

Acts of Mercy

Let’s not hesitate to approach God should we become seriously ill. But do remember that divine healing is an act of mercy in response to our child-like faith. Sometimes God’s answer to our prayer for healing may be “no” or “not yet”! His overall plan is always for our good, and He may well permit (but not inflict - James 1:13) illness to further our personal growth. The apostle Paul approached God “three times” for healing before coming to understand that - for him on that occasion - the answer was “No”! And Job was ill for we don’t know how long (maybe years) before being fully restored. He had patience (James 5:11)!

It’s my prayer that you may joyously accept whatever may be the will of our loving and merciful heavenly Father - who rejoices to hear our prayer and bless His children. As the aging apostle John wrote: “Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in health” (3 John 2).

Published by:
The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
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