

Sufficient Grace: Praying with the Calling of Sickness

By Sean R. Glenn

“Even sickness can be transfigured and become the means by which we experience personally the reality of the Lord’s assurance, ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’”

“We should trust that the offering of sickness and weakness contributes powerfully to our total life in Christ.”

— “The Challenges of Sickness,” *Rule of Life*, SSJE

A Peculiar Call

Sickness is a mark of the “fragility of human life,” a fragility that “makes sickness inevitable.”¹ Unless we have been lucky, we have all run into the shadow of sickness over the course of our lives:

For some of us, sickness only asks us its hard questions on those rare occasions when we come down with a cold or flu.

For some of us, sickness only occupies our thoughts because we know or love someone who is sick.

Some of us may have grown up chronically sick, in and out of hospitals or regularly out from school.

Some of us may not remember a time when we were not sick, or when sickness didn’t make so many demands of our conscious energies.

Some of us may have had an otherwise stable experience of health for years, only to now greet sickness as a life-long, incurable companion.

¹ “The Challenges of Sickness,” *Rule of Life*, The Society of Saint John the Evangelist (Cambridge, MA)

Whether we find ourselves bearing the marks of sickness or not, historically or now in this moment, our culture routinely teaches us certain ways of viewing sickness and health—some of which can cause even more distress than illness itself. Consider how you have reacted to your own times of sickness. Think about how the world around you often responds to the reality of sickness. *It is a liability; it reduces my productivity; it is to be pitied; it is a sign of judgment.* These reactions reveal our fundamental assumptions about health and sickness.

They also reveal the way the world generally makes moral pronouncements or value judgments about people who experience illness or health, judgments which can limit the ways we understand how we relate to God. Indeed, they can limit the ways we experience the fullness of God’s reality. Scripture witnesses to this tendency.

Consider this passage from the apocryphal book of Sirach (also called “Ecclesiasticus”):

Health and fitness are better than any gold,
and a robust body than countless riches.

There is no wealth better than health of body,
and no gladness above joy of heart.

Death is better than a life of misery,
and eternal sleep than chronic sickness. (*Sirach* 30:15–17)

For the author of Sirach, health is very clearly valued as a kind of wealth, while sickness, by contrast, implies a kind of poverty. Unfortunately, these assumptions about health and illness—whether intentional or not—can often work to reinforce the idea that health is somehow a sign of God’s favor; illness, therefore, a sign of God’s rejection or anger.

Scripture also attests this. In its iconic meditation on human suffering, the book *Job* presents this viewpoint rather starkly. Three characters insist that God does not cause wicked things to happen to innocent people, while Job objects, maintaining that he has done nothing to warrant the “punishment” he now endures (of which sickness is but one part). Job’s friend, Eliphaz, speaks a paradigmatic admonition:

“You are doing away with the fear of God,
and hindering meditation before God.

For your iniquity teaches your mouth,
and you choose the tongue of the crafty.

Your own mouth condemns you.” (Job 15:4–6a)

To Eliphaz’s cultural and religious formation, Job must be guilty of some sin. Otherwise, he reasons, Job would not be experiencing the suffering into which he has been plunged.

But God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ tells us this black-and-white way of conceiving health and sickness is too simple. Our experiences of the pain, weakness, or deferred desire that arise from sickness can often challenge some of our deepest moral certainties, rupture the fabric of our faith, or set our own sense of justice and righteousness ablaze at what God has permitted.

Sickness need not come to us with the moralizing baggage of figures like Eliphaz. Indeed, sickness may even come as a form of rescue for some, or a source of deep inner healing for others. For others still, it can even breathe a renewed intimacy with God into a stagnant life of prayer. It may be difficult to imagine the idea that sickness could be a call from a God of love. At the very beginning of this exploration, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of “redemptive suffering” can easily be corrupted to cruel, abusive, even demonic ends. And still, my own experience of chronic illness tells me that an “either/or” approach to this topic simply will not hold the kinds of water (existential, theological, psychological, experiential) for which we come to the well of faith. Life just isn’t that cut and dried.

If we hold these phenomena in trust of God’s absolute and irrevocable love for us, I believe the Spirit can invite us away from the cruder, crueler readings of sickness as “affliction,” “punishment,” or an indication of God’s “withdrawal” and “disdain.” It is worth opening ourselves to an unexpected possibility. Could it be the case that, in the end, God permits the suffering of sickness to mark our creaturely lives not a sign of any ill-favor or rejection; but rather as a sign—as are all things—of God’s great mercy and charity? Consider how you have

reacted to your own times of sickness. Has your walk with sickness ever come with a sense of providence—dare I say, even “call”?

A Call to Pray What Is

The deep and distressing challenges that sickness can bring should not be underestimated. My goal is not to paper over our experiences of sickness and pain with platitudes. These experiences are real. Rather, with faithful trust in God, my hope is to encourage you to let the reality of these experiences be truly felt, named, and known, and to consider how God might be calling to you through the very challenges you experience.

The things we might have to give up, the mobility we may have to live without, and the companionship of pain we may have to reconcile ourselves to, all of these can cause crises of meaning, crises of faith. It is worth remembering that most crises can also bring with them the seeds of a fresh intimacy with God. A crisis of faith does not have to be the enemy of faith; rather, it can serve as a prelude to deeper awareness of God’s loving action in our lives and in the lives of others.

This takes some work on our part, to be sure; a kind of work that has the potential to draw us out of hiding. God wants to hear from us—but not as groveling servants. God would have us engage with our Creator as we are, not as we think we ought to be. As we make this journey of self-disclosure and awareness, we might have to be willing to let God see some things in our reaction to sickness that we would rather God not see. This is what the character Job does in the book bearing his name.

While Job endures many incredible sufferings (the sudden loss of his children, his wife, his land, and his slaves), his good health is among the kinds of wealth lost to him. Radically impoverished in every way, Job comes quite close to cursing God. Despairing of his own life, he speaks a litany of remorse and dejection. It is a hymn of uncreation.

“God damn the day I was born
and the night that forced me from the womb.”²

Have you ever felt this cry in your heart when particularly struck by pain or weakness? I know I have. Often. Yet just as often, I’ve brushed it over with a little fake piety and tainted humility. It can end up sounding quite nice, respectable, and churchy. But my covering-over of the actual roughness of my lived experience fails me in two ways: first, by denying my poverty, and second, by keeping God’s love at arm’s length. By refusing to deny the suffering with which his condition has burdened him, Job leaves nothing hidden as he gives up his predicament to God.

When we are moved to pray with the calling of sickness, all of our experience should be offered to God—not simply our stoic resolve and self-assurances of confidence and faith (when we have those moments), but our dark and awful doubts, dreads, all the agonies of unknowing prompted by pain and weakness. Even our anger at God for permitting such calamity can be offered as the stuff of our prayer. We are not to hide any of this from God. God can handle it. In fact, only God can handle it. Only God can receive these parts of ourselves in any kind of salutary way. When sickness of whatever sort thrusts us down into a place of alienation, we do well to remember the faithfulness of Jesus, who in his humanity prayed in Gethsemane that this cup of suffering would pass. The humanity that cried out from the cross, in the depths of a pain he could not pass over, “eli, eli, lama sabachtani?” *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Psalm 22:1).

With some courage, we can join Job and Jesus in trusting God enough to pray the true condition of our hearts as they are in this moment. If we find such courage lacking, then we shall neither despair nor hide our fear. For, if that is the true condition of our heart, that is what we share with God. Pray as you can, not as you can’t. “For,” in the words of Carl P. Daw, Jr.’s paraphrase of Psalm 84, “[God] shall bless all those who live the words they pray.”³ We can live the words we pray when we begin to pray with words true to our living.

² This evocative translation of Job 3:3 comes to us from Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1979) 13.

³ Carl P. Daw, Jr., para. Psalm 84, from *The Hymnal 1982*, #517.

Jesus, Salvator Mundi

Adjacent to the bombed-out ruins of Coventry Cathedral's fourteenth-century footprint stands the twentieth-century Cathedral, consecrated in 1969. The previous building met its end during the Second World War, as the Nazi war machine littered England with bombs. As a part of Bishop Walter Hussey's aim to renew the arts in the Church of England, the new nave features exquisitely colored abstract stained-glass windows. Yet as one enters the new Cathedral, this glorious sea of color is not immediately apparent. Indeed, if one simply stands at the west, facing the high altar, but advances no further, there is almost no indication that the building has any stained glass in the nave at all. We must shift our perspective in order to detect this particular beauty. If we make the journey to the high altar and turn around, only then does the building seem to fall into place—for this beatific vision in glass is only visible from the east end, looking west. I think this same principle is at work in the process of healing that the church calls "salvation."

About Jesus Christ, we say he comes to bring God's salvation, for the church names him our *Savior*. *Salvation*, *savior*, *save*: these words all derive their meaning from a Latin root: *salve*, or, "to heal." This semantic lineage is not limited to the word salvation. "Healing" carries a similar lineage, coming as it does from the Old English *haelen*, "to restore to sound health." *Haelen* is related to a German word, *heilen*, which means "to make whole" or "to heal." It is where the German language derives its word for what Jesus is: *Unser Heiland*, or "our savior, healer, the one who makes us whole." That the church uses this kind of language is significant. For before anything else, we confess a Lord who is Savior. When we say Christ has come to save us, we are (whether we realize it or not) principally saying that he has come to salve or heal us; to make the fractured human whole.

Why is this important? How is this more than a simple diversion into semantics? I believe that it is of great significance, particularly if we pray with the reality of sickness or chronic illness in our lives. Most especially if we find our life or vocation marked by incurable sickness. I used to think salvation principally meant rescue from something. It was a concept that only existed in the negative. As my own life became marked by the vocational texture of incurable disease, I found that this negative rescue did little to help me through the personal and

social aspects of such textures. Personal, because there was no amount of prayer I could undertake that would cure me of my autoimmune condition. Social, because I could not bear the ways society interpreted my life in light of that condition. If God was not going to “intervene” and “cure” me, then why had I let Jesus into my life at all?

Salvation cannot merely mean, in the end, a kind of rescue or protection from pain or suffering. Yet, salvation as a more positive concept—that is, an enabling for something—came to me as a way of deepening my intimacy with God as rescue never could. This meant reorienting my understanding of healing altogether. The healing my Creator seeks in me is less about my body and its poverty, and more about my soul and its response to such poverty—a response that must be open to the outpouring of God’s love even in (or especially in) the midst of what might feel unbearable or deadly.

In order to receive such healing rightly, I need to shift my perspective about some of the very basic terms of life. “He will transform the body of our humiliation,” writes St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, “that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Philippians 3:21 NRSV). To have a share of Christ’s glory—of the salutary renewal of life, of *resurrection itself*—I had to come to see my humble body (in all its poverty) as the very seed from which God would accomplish his healing in me. In the end, I believe our bodily wealth (our good health or strength) will not be what conforms us to the body of Christ’s glory.

Rather, it will be all the ways our bodies seem to fail us. In Christ, all those things I label in my embodiment as liabilities—scandals even—are now the sites where God will perfect his power; a power made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV). But first, I had to change my perspective. I had to turn. I had to turn and look at the Risen Lord Jesus, who says to each of us, “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.”

I had seen him alright. I had seen him reigning from a Cross.

The Poverty of Jesus: Salve of Our Souls

God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ discloses a Love that simply asks us to call upon divinity with, as the psalmist puts it, "the sacrifice of thanksgiving."

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, *
and make good your vows to the Most High.

Call upon me in the day of trouble, *
I will deliver you, and you shall honor me. (Psalm 50:14, 15)

It is almost as if the act of delivering us from our troubles ends up being what ultimately honors God. Here is a God who delights in showing mercy and pity. The Creator said, first through the pen of the prophet Hosea, and then again on the lips of the Incarnate Son, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13). Yet what are we to make of it when our prayers for healing go, it seems, unanswered? What could it mean that God would deny us such an understandable request? Why withhold the gift of sound health, if not to demonstrate divine disfavor?

Having turned from our habitual perspective, it is possible to move from experiencing our suffering as a sign of God's dissatisfaction or our failure. God shows us in Jesus Christ his Son the truest reality of our experiences of sickness and illness as beloved children made in his image. Here more than ever, Jesus must become the key to understanding who God is and how God uses God's power. This power confounds so many of the ways we collectively understand power. This is what St. Paul learned through his own journey of suffering with Jesus. "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV).

In Jesus Christ, God elects to reveal himself concretely in the poverty of human life. Jesus sought out the sick and chronically ill, refusing to reject or erase their bodies, their experiences, or their inheritance as God's beloved children. In this, Jesus discloses the priorities at stake in the heart of God. We should not be surprised if these priorities contradict conventional wisdom or confound our capacity to reason. They have confounded many of the saints.

Our lives bear the marks of this particular shape of suffering because, if we turn and change our perspective, these marks promise a closeness and intimacy with our Creator and our Redeemer which we could have never imagined if we had gone on seeing illness as yet another obstacle to wholeness. “We must be careful to think of man’s salvation,” writes Fr. Richard Meux Benson, “as being not an act of mere pity on God’s part, but as being for the *manifestation of God’s glory*.”

When God self-emptied to dwell among us, God necessarily filled the poverty of our humanity with the dignity of God’s divinity. In showing our creaturely poverty to be the object of God’s love and self-identification, God hallowed for redemption the ill health that occupies all of human life. Not just the kind of sickness that shows itself in the bodies of individual creatures, but the very poverty and weakness of humanity in total. Through this poverty, God becomes our intimate friend and lover.

The poverty that God took on in becoming human, God recognized and refigured in those humans among whom he lived as Jesus Christ. Before Jesus heals a blind man in chapter 9 of John’s gospel, his disciples ask him about the source of the man’s blindness. “As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”(John 9:1–2) But Jesus resists a pattern of thought that would vilify the ill or blame their condition on a particular sin or moral failure. The blind man about whom they make presumptuous speculation is not in fact blind because somebody sinned.

Jesus breaks open the content of such creaturely poverty by insisting something else—something that might bring each of us hope if we begin to offer these experiences to God in a serious way. “Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him’”(John 9:3–4). Theologian Martin Smith identifies a similar counter-cultural direction in the teaching of Fr. Richard Meux Benson, founder of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist:

The Fall then consisted in yielding to the persuasion of Satan “to seize upon these higher gifts at once” by man’s own initiative and strength,

rebellling against the necessity of receiving them as the progressive gift of God.⁴

Fr. Benson's insight means that we must step back from our experience of suffering and sickness. We, like our first parents, will likely not understand how to bear it if we limit our interpretation to our own strengths or desires. God will heal us, we might infer from Fr. Benson, but we need to realize it as a gift. Our own initiative refuses to receive this gift. This refusal is the source of our frequent temptation to pity or judge ourselves or others who walk with the companion of chronic or incurable sickness. Even St. Paul affirms this shift in our relationship to the suffering we endure. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Philippians 3: 10–14).

The poverty of Jesus upends and inverts everything we think we know about what it is to be alive, what it is to be human—even what it means to be close to God. "We cannot know what salvation means except in so far as we know what it is to be thus one with Christ," writes Fr. Benson. This oneness with Christ can only be sought as a gift, and it is a gift that I believe has the power to transform and transfigure the suffering of our lives. Thomas à Kempis witnesses to this reality when he writes:

There will always be many who love Christ's heavenly kingdom but few who will bear his cross. Jesus has many who desire consolation, but few who care for adversity. He finds many to share his table, but few who will join him in fasting. Many eager to be happy with him; few wish to suffer anything for him. Many will follow him as far as the breaking of bread, but few will remain to drink from his passion. Many are awed by his miracles, few accept the shame of his cross.

There is an unexpected invitation in our sufferings. This invitation is to know ourselves as participants in Christ's life and love; to know in the midst of pain

⁴ Martin L. Smith, "The Theological Vision of Richard Meux Benson," in *Benson of Cowley*, 35.

that God has not withdrawn from us but has perhaps instead come closer than we could ever imagine. My own life with chronic illness is frequently illuminated by the brightness of this invitation. For its light banishes the cultural voices that would plunge me into darkness, lifting me instead to a place where Jesus invites me to the supreme honor of being like him in his suffering, a place where I discern an intimacy with him so tender that it scandalizes my sense of self-reliance. It is within this tender intimacy with him—this oneness with Christ—that we begin to consider how we are called to consecrate even sickness and pain to our total life in Christ.

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