

ILLNESS and DEATH

There is probably no one in the world who doesn't experience illness at some time in their life. Some will live apparently healthy lives but still have the occasional ailments such as coughs and colds. Others have to live for many years with crippling disabilities or poor health. Across the world vast sums of money are spent providing medical facilities and massive

amounts of drugs and medicines to combat disease.

Although modern healthcare is helping many people in the western world to live longer or more comfortable lives, there is the one certainty that we all face; we all know that one day we will die. Whatever the standard of healthcare in a country it cannot

ultimately prevent death. But where do these things fit into the teaching of the Bible?

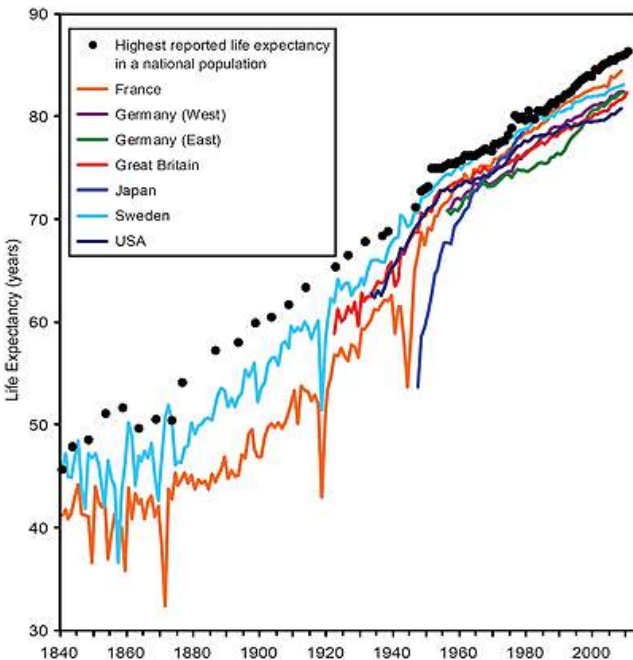


Chart showing the astonishing increase in human lifespan (nearly a doubling) over the last two centuries in the western world. This is largely due to advances in modern medicine and health care. It has brought with it huge problems in supporting aging populations.

(chart: www.nih.gov)

Naaman the Syrian

No one is exempt from illness and death. It does not matter whether we are old or young, rich or poor, or what our status in life is. We read in the Bible the account of Naaman who was a commander of the army of the king of Syria. He is described as *'a great and honourable man in the eyes of his master'* and *'a mighty man of valour'*. He was a leader of the army who had achieved, with God's help, a victory for Syria. (2 Kings 5.1). Then we read the simple comment that *'he was a leper'*. This great man faced an ongoing and disfiguring illness that must have caused him much distress. Despite his high rank, he was unable to find any way of relieving his illness until a servant girl from Israel encouraged him to visit one of God's prophets. She was sure that the Prophet Elisha would be able to cure him. The rest of the chapter contains the account of his journey and his miraculous cure.

King Hezekiah

Later on we read the account of King Hezekiah, another very important man, who *'In those days...was sick and near death'* (2 Kings 20.1). It seems likely that he

was suffering from some sort of ulcerated sore that may have become infected. God instructed the prophet Isaiah to tell Hezekiah that he would not die but would live for another fifteen years. Isaiah told Hezekiah's carers to *"Take a lump of figs"*. So they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered' (2 Kings 20.7). God's hand was clearly at work in these events but we know that such rudimentary means of dealing with ailments were available at that time.

Even God's prophets could experience poor health. We read in the book of Daniel: *'... I, Daniel, fainted and was sick for days; afterwards I arose and went about the king's business...'* (Daniel 8.27).

Jesus the healer

In the time of Jesus, illness was a significant problem but he was able to help many by healing them. We read in the gospel record:

'Now Jesus went about all Galilee...preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people...and they brought to him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments,

and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and he healed them'

Matthew 4.23, 24

What a wonderful thing this must have been for those people who were cured! Just imagine meeting someone today who could genuinely cure any illness or disease. We would say it was miraculous and that is just what Jesus did - he performed miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps this raises a question in our minds – why does God allow illness and suffering to exist and why has He done nothing to eliminate it? The answer to this question is found in the book of Genesis. It concerns events that happened after the creation of the world. Many people find it easy to dismiss the early chapters of Genesis as mere fables. Closer study shows that they form the foundation of God's plan with the earth and of the better future that we can look forward to if we have faith. However, if we dismiss the Genesis record, where can we find a valid explanation of the origin of illness and death?

the beginning of God's plan

Genesis is a Greek word that means 'origin' or 'beginning'. Genesis chapter one tells us that in the beginning God provided the ideal conditions for life on this planet. When His work was completed we read that '*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good*' (Genesis 1.31). There was nothing in His creation that would mar His work, but sadly this was to change.

We are then told how the first man was created: '*And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being*' (Genesis 2.7). This is a simple yet significant account. God took some of the dust and fashioned it into the first man. To begin with the man (called Adam) was alone. God said that he should have a helper that was suited to him. God brought all living creatures to Adam to be named but none of them was found suitable as a companion. Instead, God took a rib from Adam and from it created a woman (Genesis 2.18-25).



events in Eden

God put Adam and the woman (Eve) into the garden He had planted, called the Garden of Eden' (Genesis 2.8,15). In the middle of the garden were two particular trees; one called the tree of life and the other the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God gave just one instruction in relation to these trees. He said:

'From every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat the fruit of it you shall surely die' Genesis 2.16,17

One would have thought this was a simple enough instruction to follow and that the warning of death as a punishment for disobeying would be an adequate discouragement. One of the creatures that God had made was a serpent, described as being *'more cunning than any beast of the field that God had made'* (Genesis 3.1). The cunning serpent thought differently. It had been given the power of speech and said to Eve:

'You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat it

your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' (Genesis 3.4,5).

Eve was deceived and looking at the tree, she saw that the fruit was very enticing. Ignoring God's commandment she picked the fruit and ate it. She also gave some to Adam and he ate. Having eaten the fruit something immediately happened. The record simply says *'the eyes of both of them were opened'*. They now had the knowledge of good and evil as the serpent had said. They also realised that they were naked and that they should cover themselves (Genesis 3.6,7).

God knew exactly what had happened and said: *'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?'* (Genesis 3.11).

Then follows what might be called the first instance of 'passing the buck' in the history of the human

race. Adam blamed Eve for giving him the fruit. Eve blamed the serpent for deceiving her. Neither of them accepted that they were at fault but in God's eyes they had sinned against a very specific command and consequently they were punished.

Adam's punishment

That punishment from God brought illness and death into the world. He told Adam:

'Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, "You shall not eat from it": Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat from it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.

Genesis 3.17-19

Throughout history, farmers have wrestled with the *'thorns and thistles'* of God's curse on the ground in Eden.

Those words *'to dust you shall return'* meant that Adam would die and return to the dust of the ground from which he was created. That is what happens when someone dies – the body decays until eventually nothing but dust is left. Meanwhile, Adam was to suffer the *'thorns and thistles'* – in other words, the earth would no longer be as fertile as it had been when God created it. All man's efforts would be a struggle for survival and eventually result in his death.

Eve's punishment

Eve was also punished, for God said to her:

'I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' Genesis 3.16



Eve would have children yet her joy in doing so would be tempered by the pain that she would suffer through child-bearing. It is because of the sin of Adam and Eve in disobeying God's simple command that all their descendants became sinners, suffering pain and illness in life followed by death. Paul explained to the Christians at Rome that *'just as through one man (Adam) sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned'* (Romans 5.12).

will illness and death continue for ever?

How dreadful it would be if that was the end of the story. But despite the failure of our first parents to obey Him, God also

Huge advances in modern pre-natal care have done much to ensure the safety of mother and child, but childbirth remains a painful and even traumatic experience.

provided a way of escape – a way for us to be reconciled to Him.

You may be surprised to learn that the way of escape was contained in some words addressed to the serpent who was cursed by God (Genesis 3.14,15). This curse also contained a promise that one day sin and death would be defeated by the saving work of a descendant of Eve.

The Prophet Isaiah foretold the way in which God would bring about this reconciliation through the work of Jesus:

'...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was

upon him, and by his stripes we are healed' Isaiah 53.5

This chapter is a detailed prophecy of the work of Jesus Christ as the Saviour. Through his death and resurrection, there is hope for the future – of finding true peace and healing. This healing process begins with recognition of our natural state as sinners and belief in the saving work of Jesus. We can then become related to God's promise of eternal life.

The Prophet Daniel wrote these words: *'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt'* (Daniel 12.2). Daniel is saying there will be a resurrection of the dead and those who are raised will be judged. Some will then be given everlasting life while others will suffer shame and contempt.

The New Testament has a similar message. The Apostle Paul confirms that there will be a resurrection. He could do so because he was confident that Jesus Christ rose from the dead after his crucifixion. Read his convincing arguments in his first

letter to the Corinthians chapter 15. Here are some of the apostle's words:

'But now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive'.

1 Corinthians 15.20-23

Paul knew that Jesus had died as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Those sins had come into the world because of Adam's disobedience. All men and women are sinners and die because of sin. By contrast Jesus lived a sinless life and so was able to offer himself as an acceptable sacrifice for our sins.

the end of illness and death

As we have seen, the first book of the Bible (Genesis) tells us how sin, disease and death came into the world. The last book of the Bible tells us about a time when the earth will be renewed; a time when the evil and suffering of this world will cease:



These children in Rayong, Thailand are victims of the worst epidemic of the modern world, the HIV/AIDS virus. They have everything to look forward to when Jesus returns.

‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away’ Revelation 21.4

Although we all suffer the problems of illness and death, we can have hope. The Bible shows that God provided Jesus (his name means Saviour), so that we can obtain forgiveness of our sins and be related to the hope of life. If we put our faith and trust in Jesus we can share the same hope that

Daniel had – a hope of resurrection from the dead and everlasting life in the kingdom of God on earth. We each have a choice, as Paul reminded the Christians at Rome:

‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

Romans 6.23

What will your choice be?

John Hitches
Norfolk, UK

www.lightmagazine.org

For further information about the promise in Eden, the need for sacrifice and the work of Jesus as the Saviour, send for the free special issue of Light entitled ‘Light on Jesus Christ’.