was preaching the message of salvation:
Every one of us is sick and disabled. Only Jesus can heal us. The disposition of sick and
disabled persons leads us to the divine Physician. The miracles of healing the sick, there-
fore, are much more than manifestations of
power, much more even than the revelation of a
compassionate God; these wonders provide
the setting and the message of salvation for
everyone.

Read again chapters 4 to 10 of Matthew's
Gospel to see how sickness and disability lead
us toward salvation. Look into the ways by
which Southern Baptists and Roman
Catholics can work together, not only caring
for sick and disabled persons but also, in this
common work of mercy, discovering new
insights into the way of faith and salvation.

Study Question:
How do sick and disabled persons in our
families and neighborhood teach all of us the
way to Jesus, the divine Physician?
My answer: ______________________________________

IV. Paul, Disabled Apostle of a Disabled Messiah

The Gospels, we have seen, concentrate
upon healing and upon the way in which the
healing acts of Jesus help us to understand
the message of Jesus. In the ministry of Paul,
the gift of healing gradually slips into the
background. This gift is one among many in
1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and is not mentioned at
all among the gifts of ministry in Ephesians

Paul focuses upon the crucified, disabled
Messiah, weak and foolish in the eyes of the
world (1 Cor. 1:18-25; Gal. 6:14). Jesus
redeemed us from the curse of the law by
becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). Paul
writes this other enigmatic statement: "God
made him who had no sin to be sin for us"
(2 Cor. 5:21).

Paul himself shows up, especially in the
two most autobiographical of his epistles,
Galatians and 2 Corinthians, as sick and
handicapped. The references are too frequent
to be explained away: "As you now, it was
because of an illness that I first preached the
gospel to you. . . . You did not treat me with
temptation or scorn" (Gal. 4:13-14).

We have this treasure in jars of clay to
show that this all-surpassing power is from
God and not from us. We are hard pressed on
every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not
desperate; persecuted, but not abandoned;
striking down, but not destroyed. We always
carry about our body the death of Jesus, so
that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in
our body. For we who are alive are always
being made over to death for Jesus' sake, so
that his life may be revealed in our mortal
body" (2 Cor. 4:7-11).

The Corinthians are ridiculing Paul by
saying: "His letters are weighty and forceful,
but in person he is unimpressive" (2 Cor. 10:10-11). This passage refers to "a thorn in
the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-10). After repeated
intercession, God refuses to remove it but
states: "My power is made perfect in weak-
ness." "Weakness," we should remember, is
one of the most common words for sickness in
the Hebrew Bible.

Once again, after reading over the larger
context of Paul's words, especially in Gal-
ations and 2 Corinthians, seek to appreciate
how Paul turned his physical weakness, unim-
pressiveness and disability into a way of
understanding the gospel of Jesus Crucified.
Because of his own weakness, Paul was led to
stress that we are justified not by our own
strength and wisdom but by our faith in Jesus.
Can you say the same of yourself?

Study Questions:
Can these points of weakness become an
area of strength, uniting us as we look to each
other for strength and insights into the mys-
tery of Jesus? Can Paul's ministry from weak-
ness lead you to find a new form of reaching
out to others in your weakness? Can you
appreciate why sick and disabled persons nor-
manly do not have to be waited on but rather
to be given access to life and to ways of min-
istering to others?

My answer: ______________________________________

Suggested Reading
Bailey, Lloyd R., Sr., Biblical Perspectives on
Boadt, Lawrence, Dombeck, Mary and Eber-
ford, Richard, Rites of Death and Dying.
Harper, George Lee, Jr., Living with Dying:
Finding Meaning in Chronic Illness.
Tiso, Francis V., editor, Aging: Spiritual Per-
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SICKNESS, DISABILITY AND HEALING
A SOUTHERN BAPTIST AND ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

I. The Bible Calls Us
In its opening pages, the Bible calls us to recognize how God created the first man and woman in the divine image and likeness. They reflected a divine ideal of peace with themselves and their environment, as well as of fruitfulness in sharing life and its joys with their future family and friends (Gen. 1:26-31). But they sinned. God removed all access to the tree of life. Jealousy, greed and sensuality, suffering and the painful experience of death began to stalk their steps (Gen. 3:4). Because of this background, sickness, disability and death bring us to ultimate, radical questions. Sickness and disability haunt us with guilt: What did I or the family do wrong? We are tempted to think that only a well-shaped, completely healthy person reflects the image of God. The divine image turns into the body beautiful! Sick and disabled, we feel less sacred and less godly.

The Bible calls us to rethink some of these suppositions. Already in the first book of the Old Testament, Jacob’s death becomes an enviable model for the “death of the righteous” (Num. 23:10, NIV). (All verses hereinafter are taken from the New International Version.) The death of Moses becomes a triumphant moment. He is acclaimed “servant of the Lord” and the most renowned of prophets.

Moses dies, overlooking the promised land, like one of the saints ready to enter paradise (Deut. 34). Each stage of Moses’ journey with the children of Israel toward the promised land becomes an important moment of instruction. There were stages of complaint, revolt and doubt, stages of hunger and thirst, stages of sickness and death. All these experiences enabled Moses to become “more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3).

The image of God that begins to appear in prophets like Moses is an image of a loving, faithful, compassionate and forgiving God (Ex. 34).

Read again the biblical passages as cited above, especially in their larger context.

Study Questions:
Do the punishments for sin in the early chapters of Genesis turn into a positive way of divine grace, enabling us to be conformed to God’s image as faithful and compassionate? Can sickness and disability become a blessing? Do these conditions enable a family or society to be more caring and loving toward each other? Do these conditions remove all distinctions, whether of race or social status, so that we are all children of God, called to form one family of faith?

My answer:

II. Against Calling People Unclean
Already we have recognized a disposition in all of us to draw false conclusions about sickness and disability. Does it always mean personal sin and guilt? Another incorrect and harmful deduction can arise from being named God’s elect people, a privilege once held exclusively by Israel, now shared with those called to faith in Jesus as Savior. As an introduction to God’s magnificent revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God says to Israel: “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6).

Holiness on the part of God’s elect people seemed to require physical as well as moral integration. We recall our earlier discussion about the divine image in us. Barred from functioning as priests was any Levite “who has any defect, ... who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed.” The text of Leviticus 21:16-23 goes into further detail. These rules tended to carry over among non-Levites and all the people. Even to touch one of these unclean persons rendered the other person unclean. The Book of Leviticus then drew this conclusion: “Do not make yourselves unclean by the things that are defiled ... I am the Lord, your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:43-44).

Prophecy acted against such artificial restrictions. The prophet Elijah embraced the dead boy. Rather than become unclean himself, he restored life to the dead child (1 Kings 17:17-24). The bones of the dead Elisha did not spread uncleanliness but rather brought new life to the corpse of a man hurt and buried in his grave (2 Kings 13:20-21). Prophets Isaiah and Micah even declare that the messianic remnant, those “few” faithful ones to be called into the reign of God, consisted of these unclean ones. “I will gather the lame, I will assemble the exiles ... The Lord will rule over them on Mount Zion” (Micah 4:6-7). It is important to note that this prophecy of Micah occurs immediately after his electrifying vision of peace where words will be beaten into plowshares (Micah 4:1-5). See also: Isa. 2:2-5; 35:4-6; 41:17-20; or Zeph. 3:12, 19.

Study Questions:
Do we tend to restrict the ability of disabled people, leaving the impression that they do not belong in the temple of God, our churches and places of worship? What can they tell us about faith in God, the supremely compassionate One, faith in Jesus as Savior?

My answer:

III. Faith in Jesus, Divine Physician
At the beginning of His public ministry, while addressing the congregation in His hometown synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus calls himself “Physician” (Luke 4:23). He repeats it in the next chapter, defending His choice of an unclean, despised tax collector as one of the twelve: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Luke 5:31).

It may even seem that a disproportionate emphasis is placed upon healing in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. In fact, sick and disabled people form the setting for Jesus’ great Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and the narrative which follows exemplifies the sermon (Matt. 8-9). The Gospel refers to Jesus going about Galilee, “preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35). The Gospel makes the scene still more dramatic. People are streaming toward Jesus from all over Israel and beyond, carrying or leading “all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, the epileptics and the paralyzed” (Mark 2:5).

These families and care-providers of the sick are the blessed ones of Jesus’ beatitudes. With them, even the smallest letter of the law and the prophets will come true. With them, our language must be unequivocally “Yes” or “No.” They, in particular, are the salt and light of the earth. They are truly the ones with their treasure in heaven. Matthew quotes the fourth servant song of the prophet Isaiah, to say how Jesus “took up our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Matt. 8:17; Isa. 53:4).

In healing sick and disabled persons, Jesus

1 2 3 4