

SPIRITUAL SICKNESS AND HEALTH

Preached at Providence Chapel, Oakham on Lord's Day Morning, June 22nd, 1845

"Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth" 3 John 2

This epistle differs from most of the other epistles of the New Testament, in being written to an individual, to "the well-beloved Gaius," of whom we read elsewhere, "Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, saluteth thee" (Rom.16:23). This Gaius appears to have been a man of a very enlarged heart towards the children of God; for he was not satisfied with being the host of Paul, and entertaining him kindly, but his house and heart were both large enough to entertain the whole church of God at Corinth.

To this open-hearted and affectionate Gaius, John the apostle addresses his third epistle: "The elder unto the well-beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth." There was a difference in the form of the letters among the ancients compared with that observed by ourselves. Their custom was, not as ours, to put the name of the writer at the end of the epistle, but they placed their name at the beginning; and, next in order, the name of the person to whom it was addressed. We have an instance of this in the Acts of the Apostles, where we have an original letter preserved, which Claudius Lysias sent to Felix. He commences thus: "Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting" (Acts 23:26). This was the form of letter customary among the ancients. Claudius Lysias was the writer; he therefore puts his own name first. "The most excellent governor Felix" was the person to whom the letter was sent; his name comes next. But, besides this, it was the usual custom to add at the

beginning a friendly greeting, the writer wishing his correspondent "health," what we should call something complimentary. We find the apostle Paul following this prevailing custom in all his epistles. He first puts his own name, and next that of the church or persons to whom he wrote; and then offers prayers to God that he would bless them with mercy, grace, and truth. It was the custom then, at the beginning of the letter, to offer some short desire for the health of the correspondent, that being the greatest temporal blessing the writer could wish for his friend. We find the apostle John following this custom; and being a spiritual man, and writing a spiritual letter to a spiritual friend, he gives the usual salutation a spiritual turn. He does not write as a carnal writer would do, for example as, "The elder unto beloved Gaius, health," which was the usual form; but he gives this desire for his health a spiritual turn: "Beloved I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." It is as though he should say, "I wish thee temporal health, if it be the Lord's will; but, far more, I wish thee spiritual health. I wish thy circumstances to prosper, and thy body to be in health, as far as God sees fit to bestow; but only so far as is consistent with the health of thy soul. I wish it even as thy soul prospereth." As though again he should say, "I cannot wish thee temporal prosperity, if it be not good for thy spiritual welfare. But, if thy soul prospers and be in health, with this, then, I can wish thee temporal prosperity and bodily health."

In looking then at the text, I shall endeavour to show what soulprosperity is. But, as we often see things more plainly by viewing their opposites, I shall, with God's blessing,

I. Show *what soul-sickness is*; and, in showing soul-sickness, endeavour to show the symptoms, the causes, and the cure of that sickness.

II. If the Lord enable, show *what spiritual health is*, and what are its symptoms and causes. Then, if the Lord apply the word with power, and bring it into our consciences, we may be enabled to see who are in a state of sickness and who are in a state of health.

But, before I enter into the subject, it will be right to premise a remark that my meaning may not be misunderstood. There are always persons glad to fix upon everything that may feed mere criticism. I shall, therefore, endeavour to lay down a few points by way of explanation, and to obviate all misconception of my meaning in speaking of soul-sickness and soul-health.

1. Then we must bear in mind that man is a fallen sinner, in a state of sickness and disease. The Holy Ghost has given us a picture of this, where he says that "the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores" (Isa.1:5-6).

2. When the Lord would make a man whole, he does not do so by restoring the soul to its original state of health. Adam had a healthy soul in paradise; but it was a health of nature, not of grace. Soul and body were alike perfectly healthy, because free from all defect; healthy, as having come pure and innocent out of the Creator's hands. But when Adam fell, disease entered into his soul, at the same moment that sickness entered into his body. Death spiritual seized his soul; and the seeds of death temporal were planted in his body. Thus soul and body became alike subject to, and under the power of, disease. 3. When the Lord would communicate health to the soul, he does it by breathing into it a new nature, thereby implanting a divine principle, which is pure and spiritual, heavenly and holy; and which, therefore, is

perfectly healthy and entirely free from the least taint of disease. And yet the old nature continues as corrupt as before. 4. I would observe that the soul, in our experience, is sickly or healthy, just in proportion as the corruptions of our fallen nature prevail over grace; or as the grace that is in the new nature prevails over corruption. When corruption prevails in the soul, it is sickly; when grace prevails, it is healthy.

I have given you these explanations that you may not misunderstand my meaning.

I. But I will go on to show some of the *causes* and *symptoms* of soul-sickness, and its cure. When the Lord begins a work of grace in the heart, and thus implants a principle of divine health, he teaches us painfully to feel that we are, by nature, corrupt before him. The very health which the Lord communicates to the soul, by implanting in it a new and divine principle, makes us feel that we are sick; yet perhaps the soul is never so lively, so active, so vigorous, as when life is first communicated. What zeal! What earnestness! What prayerfulness! What deadness to the world! What strong cries! What longing desires! What vehement hungerings! What ardent thirstings there are in a new-born soul, the principle of life within being so vigorous and active! But usually, after a time, in the experience of God's people, they find that this vigour, this activity, and this zeal, sensibly decline. They lose their zeal, their earnestness, their comforts, and their enjoyments; and the old corrupt nature seems once more to exert its power. Then the soul becomes feelingly sick. It is not that it becomes more diseased than before; but the revival of sin seems to cast its sickly shadow over all a man's spirit.

But what are the *symptoms* of soul-sickness?

1. One is *coldness, deadness, hardness, a want of life and feeling* in the soul, so different from the zeal and activity that it once experienced. What a prevailing complaint, among the people of God, is their deadness, coldness, hardness, want of feeling in the things of God! And this attended with a sense of complete inability to raise themselves out of this dead unfeeling state! They seem as if they had been struck with palsy, a withering, paralysing stroke, which prevents them from lifting up their hands in prayer, from looking unto Jesus, from walking and talking with him as in times past.

2. *Carnality and worldly mindedness* is another symptom of the soul's being sick. It is a strange thing, but so it is, that when the soul is sick in the things of God, then is the time for the carnal mind, so to speak, to be in health. The more weak and enfeebled that the new nature is, the more active and vigorous is the old; and the more weak and enfeebled the old man is, the more active and vigorous is the new. It is a symptom, then, of soul-sickness, when the carnal heart is grasping after the things of time and sense. When covetousness and pride, worldly-mindedness, levity, frivolity, and thoughtlessness take such strong possession of a man's heart that he seems to have scarcely any desire whatever after the things of God, he may indeed be said to be sick.

3. Another symptom is *prayerlessness*. When the Lord begins a work of grace on the soul, he usually communicates a spirit of grace and of supplications. How prayerful a new-born soul is! What desires are then felt! What longings after manifested mercy! What hungerings and thirstings after righteousness! What power is felt in the heart to pour out its wants before the mercy-seat! Then the soul is healthy. But when prayer becomes a burden, and the heart is utterly unable to raise itself up from earth to heaven; when all spiritual desires seem to languish and fade away; when no hungerings and

thirstings, no ardent desires, no pantings after the sweet manifestations of mercy are felt within, then indeed it is a symptom that sickness is spreading over the soul.

4. To find the Word of God *without savour, sweetness, or power* is another symptom of the soul being sickly. When, instead of taking down the Bible, and reading it with sweetness and pleasure, we let the dust gather on it, and allow the spider to spin its web over the cover, O, that is a sad symptom of the soul being in a sickly state! So when, in coming to chapel, the body is rather dragged there as a custom than from any real longing that the Lord would bless the Word with power to the soul, that is a symptom of the soul's being in a sickly state. When, instead of crying to the Lord that he would bless the Word, there is nothing within but sleepiness and indifference, so that we can sit asleep under the Word, and have no more care whether it come into our heart with power or whether it passes us by altogether, that is indeed a symptom of a sickly state of soul.

5. When *we feel no affection to the people of God*; when we do not desire their company; when we would rather go out of their way than meet them; when our hearts are not knit to them in the bonds of tenderness and love; when we spy out their faults, instead of covering their infirmities with a mantle of love; that is another symptom of a sickly state of soul. When backbiting and slander prevail, and we feel a devilish pleasure in feasting on the infirmities and failings of God's dear children, O, that is a sad sign of the soul having backslidden from God, and being in a sickly state.

6. When *we can substitute the letter for the power, and the form for the spirit*, being satisfied with a name to live, that is another symptom of the soul being in a sickly state.

7. When *we can be satisfied whether we have the Lord's presence or not*; when we can go for days, and weeks, and months, without craving one smile, one intimation, one word, one whisper, one token of love; when we can be as easy in the Lord's absence as if he had never made his presence known; this is another symptom of the soul being in a sickly state.

8. When *the ordinances of God's house are despised*, and we see no beauty or sweetness in them; when we are glad to shun them; and get away from them, and even dislike the company of God's people because we see them spiritual and heavenly-minded; that is another symptom of the soul being in a sickly state.

9. When, instead of loving the more spiritual part of God's family, and those most who have most of God's fear in their heart, *we rather cleave to professors*, and to those who have not a clear and gracious experience, that is another symptom of the soul being in a sickly state.

10. When *earthly things are pursued and heavenly things neglected*; when the world rises in the estimation and Jesus and his blood and righteousness sink; when we can be comfortable with carnal people and take an interest in all the carnality of children and relations, and really feel more happy with them than with the broken, contrite people of God; when we can talk more about the business, the shop, the farm, and the railway than the real teachings of God in the soul; that is another symptom of the soul being in a sickly state. Are there no such sickly ones here, no such diseased souls who feel certain in their minds they are not what they used to be? Now, if you are in the state I have been describing, you are in a sickly, diseased state; and you know it, too, if you are a child of God. Your conscience bears

witness to it, and you sometimes cry out, "O that it were with me as in months past, when his candle shone upon my head, and when, by his light, I walked through darkness" (cf. Job 29:2,3). "I would rather," say you, "be in trouble than in this dead, lukewarm state. I read of the Laodicean church, of which the Lord said, 'So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth' (Rev.3:16). Am I a Laodicean, a deceived character, an empty professor? I, who have been slaying and backbiting at professors? What! Am I come to the same spot, as careless, as dead, and as stupid as they? O! What is the matter with my soul? Put forth thy hand, and work in me, Lord. Let me rather go through a thousand hells than be deceived at last. Let me have stripe upon stripe, rod upon rod, affliction upon affliction, though my coward heart shrinks from them, rather than be at ease in Zion."

These are a few of the symptoms of the soul's being in a sickly state. But what are the *causes*?

1. One cause is *things in providence going well*. Temporal prosperity and ease in worldly circumstances are one grand source of the soul being in a sickly state. When things are against us in providence, when the body is afflicted, when worldly circumstances are straitened, and the mind is troubled and exercised about it, the soul then is often in its most flourishing state. It resembles the two buckets of a well. When the bucket of temporal prosperity is sinking, then the bucket of spiritual prosperity is rising; and when the bucket of temporal prosperity is rising then, too often, the bucket of spiritual prosperity is sinking. Therefore, we need not wish to have health and strength or great success in temporal things, or the world to smile upon us, and to have everything that our carnal heart could wish. What does the Scripture say of such characters? "Their eyes stand out with

fatness; they have more than heart could wish" (Psa.73:7).

2. Another cause is the Lord's *withholding his rod*. It is strange to say, but most true, that we cannot do without stripes. The Lord is obliged, so to speak, to drive us on by blow upon blow, stripe upon stripe, and stroke upon stroke; for, without these continual goads, we should not move a single step, but, like the sluggish ass, would rather turn aside to the hedges and ditches to crop the thistles, than trudge along the rough and narrow way. Therefore the Lord is obliged to give us blows and stripes to make us move forward in the path that leads to glory. Now, when the Lord withholds his stripes and does not rebuke as sharply with internal or external troubles, then the world, and the things of time and sense catch our eye and attract our wandering heart, and we crave something to feed our lusts with.

3. The *withholding of the dew and rain from heaven* makes the soul become barren before God. The soul can no more do without the dew and rain, the sacred operations and divine teachings of God the Spirit, upon the heart and conscience, than the natural soil can do without the dew and rain of heaven. We get parched, dried up, barren, withered, and unfruitful, when the dew and rain of the blessed Spirit do not descend into the heart.

4. Nay, more, *sickness generates sickness*. It is the same with health; health begets health. When part of our body is diseased, it affects the whole. So, as a person gets sickly in his soul, he gradually becomes worse and worse, unless that sickness be relieved. Thus, if the Lord spares his rod, and withholds his dew and rain, soul-sickness spreads and increases like the leprosy of old. And if the Lord did not, at last, put forth his hand, this sickness would terminate altogether in the death of the soul. In all sickness, whether

natural or spiritual, there is a tendency to mortality and death. And if the Lord did not, in mercy, put forth his hand, and, by renewing the work, bring health into the soul, it would go on languishing and pining away.

But now let us take a short glimpse at the *cure*. We have looked at the symptoms, and we have seen some of the causes; now let us glance at the cure. The Lord cures us in two ways, though, after all, we may say, it is but one way. Yet, as far as our feelings are concerned, it is in two ways: *afflictions* and the other is by his *consolations*. One is by the secret woundings and cuttings of the Spirit, and the other by the secret balm which he drops into the bleeding wound.

1. The first thing we must experience, if we have got sickly in the way I have described, is to have the *wound cut into*, before it can be effectually healed. We must have the affliction before the smile, and the rod before the kiss. The Lord has various ways of bringing this about. Sometimes he sends sharp convictions into a man's conscience, and thus awakes him out of sleep. He has been sleeping on the top of a mast, unmindful of the rolling billows beneath; and, but for God's preservation, one roll of the ship would have hurled him headlong into the sea. But the Lord brings sharp convictions into his conscience, wakes him up, and makes him wonder what he has been about. He is now astonished and ashamed at his folly; how he could so have backslidden from God; how he could have gone on so long with so little prayerfulness and so little spirituality; how everything holy and heavenly had become a burden, and yet, all the time, professing to be a child of God.

2. The Lord sometimes lays sickness on a man that he may *show him his transgressions*, that they have exceeded. He thus dealt with Hezekiah; and Elihu speaks of it as a usual

mode of the Lord's dealing: "He is chastened also with pain upon his bed, and the multitude of his bones with strong pain: so that his life abhorreth bread, and his soul dainty meat. His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen; and his bones that were not seen stick out" (Job 33:19- 21). The Lord afflicts the body with disease, and brings before the eyes judgment and eternity, that he may awake him out of sleep, and show him how awfully he has backslidden from him.

3. Sometimes by *cutting dispensations in providence*, by taking away a child, cutting off a husband or wife, bringing down to poverty and distress in circumstances, the Lord cures sickness of soul, the black blood of prosperity let out by the sharp lancet of adversity.

4. Sometimes the Lord drives away soul-sickness *by sending a whole troop of fears into his heart*, whether he is a hypocrite or not; sometimes by bringing cutting convictions under the preached Word, or through conversation with God's people; sometimes in reading, by bringing a sentence with convicting power into his heart to show him how little he is like a Christian. Sometimes he cures sickness by a frown on his countenance; so that when the poor soul would get near to the Lord he withdraws himself and veils his face. Darkness covers the face of God, and nothing but darkness is felt in the soul.

Now, by these and various other modes, the backslider in heart is filled with his own ways. The rod of affliction drives out sickness from the soul; as the wise man declares: "The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil: so do stripes the inward parts of the belly" (Prov.20:30). But after these bitter purges have had a wholesome effect, in due time the Lord will manifest himself and restore to him the joy of his

salvation, and will overrule this very sickness for his spiritual good. There is no throwing stones at people then. No; not at the greatest backslider. Humility and self-loathing prevail in the soul, and he walks softly before the Lord all his days upon earth.

II. But I pass on, with God's blessing, to consider what are the *symptoms* and, what are the *causes of spiritual health*: "Even as thy soul prospereth." The greatest blessing that God can bestow upon a man is to give him soul-prosperity. We cannot always believe this. We want to prosper in our bodies, in our families, in our circumstances, in that which feeds and gratifies its lusts. To obtain this we would, in our carnal mind, sacrifice all soul-prosperity. So base is our heart, so depraved is our fallen nature, that we would sacrifice the greatest spiritual benefits for a little ease and fleshly indulgence. But the Lord will not let his people rest there. He will, of his own free mercy and grace, cause their souls, in due time, to prosper. Now when the Lord, by afflicting us, cures us, and thus revives us out of a state of sickness, he strengthens that principle of health which he at first communicated; and, as he strengthens that principle of health, the soul manifestively prospers and is healthy in the things of God. But, just in proportion as the soul prospers and is in health, the old man becomes weakened, the health of the one being mutually the disease of the other; nature decaying as grace prospers, and grace decaying as nature prospers. 1. One symptom of health is to *feel the heart alive to the things of God*. There is a being very cold, dead, and stupid, with the heart as hard as adamant; and there is such a thing as the soul feeling alive in the things of God. When we experience the power of eternal things, and feel them to be our element, our meat and drink, the desire of our heart and the joy of our soul, then the soul prospers; and as the soul prospers, every grace and every fruit of the Spirit

prospers with it. It is just the same in soul-sickness. As one grace declines, all the other graces of the Spirit decline too; as faith grows weak, hope and love grow cold; but, as faith prospers, all the fruits and all the graces of the Spirit flourish and prosper with it. It is spiritually as naturally. If one limb of the body decays, the others decay with it; and when one member of the flesh is strong, the other members are strong with it. Now, when a soul is in a state of prosperity, the things of God are our element, and that which we feel most interest in. This is the thermometer of the soul. If the world, the things of time and sense, the cares and anxieties of this present life, most engage our minds, then it shows that the soul is sickly. But if the things of God, the precious realities in the Word of Truth, are the things that we chiefly think of, take most interest in, and give the most attention to, that is a sign and symptom of prosperity in the soul. When this is the case, every member of the new man, every grace and fruit of the spirit, is active and lively too. But how weak faith is when the soul is sickly. It is like the hand of a sickly man; it can grasp nothing; but when the soul is in prosperity and in health, faith is strong; it can take hold of the promises in God's Word, can embrace the things of eternity, feel them to be solemn realities, deal with the Word of God as a divine revelation, and feed upon it as sweet to the soul.

2. So with *prayerfulness*. When the soul is healthy and vigorous, then prayer flourishes in the heart; it is no longer a burden to bend the knee, but prayer then flows forth freely. There is a spring in the heart, gushing out in living water; there is a thirsting, breathing, longing, and panting after the Lord; and these flow out of the heart; not of custom, not of necessity; but they flow freely like a fountain; gushing because they must gush; freely flowing forth out of the heart into the bosom of God.

3. Again, when the soul is alive to God, *the reality of the truth of God is powerfully felt*. We see the world to be a passing shadow, a dream of the night that affords no pleasure, that yields no gratification, that cannot fill up the aching void of the soul. But the Lord of life and glory, his blood, his righteousness, his grace, his truth, his love, are powerfully felt. They occupy and fill up this void in the soul, and everything connected with Jesus is sweet and precious. The savour of his good name is like ointment poured forth, and all that he is, and has, is blessed and sweet to the heart.

4. Again, in seasons of soul-prosperity we feel *a sweet union with the people of God*; especially with the more heavenly-minded, the deeply-taught. The more powerfully exercised, the nearer they are to us. Our heart flows out towards and feels a sweet union with them, a knitting together in the bonds of affection and love. We then hate the form of an empty profession, and feel no more in union with such than with the profane of the world. We then can cover the infirmities of God's children. There is then no picking out their faults and frailties; no rejoicing in their slips, falls, and backslidings; but rather tenderness, sympathy, and affection.

5. Again, when the soul is in prosperity we can *bear affliction without murmuring or rebellion*. Patience then has its perfect work; sweet submission to the will of God prevails; we can kiss the rod and him that appointed it, and bless God for the very affliction.

6. *Humility*, sweet humility in *precious exercise*, is another symptom of the soul being in prosperity. A humble heart, melted down to feel itself less than the least, the vilest of the vile, and the very chief of sinners.

7. Another symptom of soul-prosperity is *spirituality of mind*

and heavenliness of affection. A heart going out after the Lord, trusting in him, looking to him, communing with him, enjoying his presence, walking in the light of his countenance, tasting his favour, seeing his glory, and being enamoured of his beauty. When a man feels this, his soul is in health; he is under the teachings of God the Spirit; he is like a watered garden; the scents flow out as the south wind blows, and the Word of God becomes to him like honey and the honeycomb.

8. When the man can *look back*, and see how the Lord has led him in providence; how he has appeared for him in time of need, and opened up doors which before were shut; when he can see the hand of God leading him, step by step, in the path he has travelled for years, and can bless the Lord for every crook, and cross, then his soul is in prosperity.

9. When, too, the man can see that the Lord has *led him by a right way*; when he has a clear view of the work of God in his soul, seeing the beginning clear, the carrying on clear, and looking in faith to the accomplishing of it; when he has bright marks and evidences of God's Spirit in his heart, then his soul is prospering.

10. When the man has *the witness of the Spirit* that he is child of God, a pouring out of his heart into his ear as a listening father, and a sympathising parent, then his soul is prosperous and in health. When as he walks he talks with God, enjoys sweet communion with him, prizes one smile from the Lord more than a thousand worlds; when he can delight himself in the Almighty; loves the Lord and the Lord only, and cleaves to him with purpose of heart, then his soul is in prosperity.

11. When the man's eye is *single to God's glory*, and his

conscience tender in God's fear; when he hates the garment spotted with the flesh; comes out of the world; walks in the Spirit; and lives, speaks, and acts to the glory of God in all things, then his soul is in prosperity.

12. When his *temper is subdued*, his pride laid low, his corruptions weakened, and his heart is a quiet principality where the King of Zion reigns, so as to enjoy pardon, peace, salvation, love, and blood shed abroad therein, then his soul is prosperous, and is in health. O what a difference when the soul is sickly and when it is in health! Of all wretched feelings to a child of God, a feeling of soul-sickness is the worst; and of all blessed feelings to a child of God, a feeling of spiritual health is one of the best. Especially if a man has ever enjoyed in his soul the presence and testimony of God, walked with the Lord, had his heart in some measure watered by the blessed Spirit, then he feels the sickness more. It is then the desire of his soul that the Lord would, by any means, make it to prosper. He counts spiritual prosperity to be the greatest blessing God can give, and temporal prosperity without spiritual prosperity little else but a curse.

Now the Lord brings about this state of spiritual prosperity sometimes by his rod and sometimes by his smile. We want both. We need the bitter medicine to purge out the filthiness, and we want the presence of God in the heart to make the soul prosper in his ways. All afflictions will not do; all smiles will not do. If the Lord were to give nothing but smiles, we should be like children pampered with sweetmeats. If we had not sharp afflictions and cutting convictions, we should argue thus: "What does it matter whether I sin or not? My backslidings do not provoke the Lord. It is all one how I live, speak, or act. The Lord smiles all the same." Thus, if the Lord were to throw his favours away, it would feed our pride and sinfulness. Therefore the Lord, to correct this cursed

recklessness, fills the backslider with his own ways, teaches him to loathe himself by laying his rod sharper upon him, and makes him groan and sigh over his baseness, before he applies the blood of Jesus, which cleanses from all sin, and restores to him the joys of salvation.

The apostle John, therefore, could not wish a greater blessing for his beloved Gaius than that "his soul might prosper and be in health." What would it profit Gaius that the farm flourished, that the business was going on successfully, that money was coming in like water, if the Lord frowned, and his soul was sickly.

But if the Lord was prospering Gaius's soul, watering it and making him fruitful, would he not, when he came to be stretched on the deathbed, bless the Lord for his dealings with him, however painful they might have been at the time; mercifully withholding those things which only feed the flesh, and giving him those which made his soul prosper?