Do you wish to get well?

By Gerard Feller

***The ‘advantages’  of illness from a psychosomatic perspective and the way to healing.***

*“Now there is in Jerusalem by* *the sheep* *gate* *a pool, which is called* *in Hebrew* *Bethesda, having five porches.* *In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.* *When Jesus saw him lying* *there, and knew that he had already been a long time* *in that condition, He said to him, “Do you wish to get well?”* *The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when* *the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.”* *Jesus said to him,* *“Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.”* *Immediately  the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk.*” (***John 5:2-8***).

This man probably had had an illness or an accident, due to which he could not walk anymore. The remarkable aspect is the duration of his illness, namely thirty eight years, which is more than the average  life span in those days. The people in those days did not have social insurance, which probably implied that the only way this man could survive, was through the means of begging. That is not much fun! That’s why the question of Jesus: *“Do you wish to get well?”* seems even stranger. The man answered that he had no one to help him to get into the pool when the water is stirred up (verse 7). That statement is a proof of a deep loneliness. It is a great need, also in our times. Nevertheless,  I am not quite sure whether he speaks the whole truth. How could it be possible that such an ill man could survive for so many years without any help? Didn’t he have any friends or relatives who took care of his basic needs? He said that nobody wanted to help him to get into the pool at the right time. He believed that it would have made him be healed. It is possible that his caregivers did not believe that he could become well. It is also possible that they did not believe the miracle of ‘being the first to get into the pool’ and thought that it was just superstition, which made them to refuse to cooperate in that nonsense. They probably did not see the possibility of what we in our days call a psychosomatic disease and therefore  the significance of his experience, his thought and his faith to get healed at the stirring up of the water. The power of the suggestion is familiar in our time, but naturally even more from a biblical viewpoint, the faith in healing by God.

Maybe his caregivers recognized that there was something different about his illness than the other people’s illnesses and even thought that he was just pretending or was consciously or unconsciously acting as if he was ill! That may have drawn the man to the place Betzata (Bethesda, which means: ‘house of mercy’). He longed for gentleness and understanding for his disease, which probably had much deeper emotional roots than the bystanders could think.

Back to the question of Jesus: *“Do you wish to get well?”* It looks like a dumb question, but this question goes deeper than you think. In the first place the Lord Jesus is asking the man if he wished to **get well**, not if he wished **to be** well. Many people, also in our time, want God to grant them healing by their prayer and often think that God gives a lot more blessing by making people to be well directly than by the blessing of a process to get well. They often do not have the view that healing is also a process which God uses and where the illness is also involved to learn skills and to practice faith.

**Illness profit**

One of the aspects which is often not recognized by many people of chronic diseases, is the possibility of illness profit, through which acute symptoms can even get chronic. In that way healing also means to give up all the ‘advantages’ that the illness can deliver.

Therefore many chronically ill people also get attached to the somatic (physical) illness label and they are often not willing to face the psychosocial and emotional aspects. In the thirty five years that I have been engaged with psychosomatics, I see less and less the difference between the so-called physical and psychological disease. Every physical disease has psychological and emotional implications and vice versa. Kees Meijer has described some examples of illness profit in his book ‘Handboek Psychosomatiek’(1) (‘a Manual of Psychosomatics’)

**Primary illness profit**

The first ‘advantage’ that the client can gain with his symptoms is that he has an alibi with his symptom to avoid the confrontation with or the choice which he has in a situation. In that way he can avoid emotions of for example anger, fear, sorrow and insecurity.

The client is excused by his complaint or disease. He cannot ‘do anything more about it’ and is not responsible anymore.

The complaint has become a ‘failure escape or excuse’.

**Secondary illness profit**

Secondary illness profit is gained by the client when he succeeds to gain **attention** to himself by his symptoms, to get rid of someone or something else, particularly of a problem or choice. The advantage of the symptom consists of getting attention and care and enjoying the exemption of effort, work or responsibility.

**Tertiary illness profit**

Also the partner and the system can benefit from a symptom.

Real conflicts can be avoided and the partner can feel better, stronger and more powerful in the role of caregiver. In that way a man with a phobic disorder can mask his symptoms, under the alibi of having to take care of his wife.

Mutual benefits often maintain the symptoms and form a resistance against a change. But often both the client and the partner, do not seem to be willing to give up the ‘advantages’ of a symptom for the treatment, in order to face the confrontation with the underlying feelings and conflicts. Therefore it is often desirable to involve the partner or the family in the treatment.

The term ‘illness profit’ assumes that clients have conscious goals. This is often a wrong conclusion, because it is often about an unconscious process, which can be made understandable. Complaints are often the last remedy for the client to meet his needs, to keep his life bearable or make it meaningful. If you take away the symptom and in that way the illness profit without offering him an alternative, then the client may collapse or get depressed. Therefore you should give the client an alternative for his complaints which can compensate the advantages of the complaints, such as better solutions and skills or another way to get attention.  This is according to Kees Meijer.

Someone who has not participated in the society for thirty eight years such as the man in **John 5**, may not particularly look forward to the choices, responsibilities and skills which are needed for a new situation, in order to participate in a complicated society.  Then the question whether the man wishes to **get well** is not so strange.

**Psychosomatic mechanisms**

The repression of emotional problems in the brains ultimately delivers pathological changes in the body.

Because one cannot deal with the emotional problems anymore, which often have to do with loneliness or insecurity and the feeling to fall victim to it, his brains switch over to a survival mode.

It implies that the brains deliberately cause physical symptoms via the unconscious nervous system, in order to divert the attention away from the emotional problems to the physical symptoms.

This occurs through the vegetative responses of the nervous system and the blood vessels. This often causes a poor oxygen absorption in the issues with chronic pain symptoms.

Dr. Sarno has described these responses in his book ‘The Mind Body Prescription’ ( 2). He regrets that the assistance of many counsels are limited to behavioral therapy and medications and that they do not deal with the unconscious, repressed emotional pains, which often are the reasons behind the chronic symptoms.

When we are only focused on the physical symptoms, it gives in its turn room for other changeable symptoms. For an extensive description of it, please turn to my article ‘Heel de mens deel 2’ (3) (‘The entire man part 2’).

**Illness because of sin?**

Some more information is given about the illness of the man and its cause in the chapter in **John 5.** When the man is healed by Jesus and He afterwards met him in the temple, Jesus says to him in **verse 14**: “*Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you*”. Here it seems as if there is a relation between his personal sin and illness. On the one hand, life with a pure conscience in fellowship with God, has a healing influence and even a life-prolonging effect. On the other hand the Bible also indicates that the results of sin in general and personal sin in particular, can lead to illness.

**This does not mean that I am saying that all illnesses are a result of personal sin.** Many psychosomatic symptoms arise due to unprocessed emotional problems or by unprocessed traumas and mental overburdening. Recently a book was published by an experience expert Nicky Robinson: ‘Toen ik zweeg …. (When I was silence)  (4). Also a video message of Wilkin van de Kamp discusses this relationship (5).

In the article ‘Psychosomatics in the book of Proverbs’ (6)  I go into more details between sin and symptoms.  Here the relationship between God and us especially plays an important role. A peaceful relationship with a purified conscience is a great advantage for a good health.

**Proverbs 4:20-22**: *“My son,  give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings.**Do not let them depart from your sight; Keep them in the midst of your heart.**For they are  life to those who find them and****health to all their body****”.*

Inner peace according to the Bible, is gained by keeping God’s commandments, and the result of that is a long and happy life.

**Proverbs 4:4** says:  *“Let your heart* *hold fast my words; Keep my commandments and live”.*

A Christian who is only focused on himself or on someone else or on the circumstances, but not on Christ, will be weighed down by a guilty conscience, which is an almost unbearable burden to the body. A person who is not focused on Christ or doesn’t know Him in his ways, is leaning on his old nature, the old heart, out of which flows nothing good. In **Mark 7:21-23** the Lord Jesus says, that the things that proceed from within, defiles man: “*For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts,* *fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,* *deeds of coveting* *and* *wickedness,* *as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander,* *pride* *and* *foolishness.”* Here we find a clear description of the psychosomatic causes. Actually, the biblical perception of the born again man is that the Holy Spirit, Whom is received by the believer, guides our spirit. And our spirit guides our soul and body. If we live by the Spirit, it will have a wholesome effect on our body. If we live after the flesh, after our old heart, we will quench and extinguish the Spirit and what proceed from the old heart, will defile and make us sick. The contradiction between living by the Spirit and living after the flesh, and their effect on the body is found in **Proverbs 14: 30** (KJV):  *“A sound heart (living by the Spirit) is the life of the flesh: but envy (living after the flesh) the rottenness of the bones*.”. Or another translation says: *“It’s healthy to be content,  but envy can eat you up”.* (Contemporary English Version)

Rottenness of the bones is therefore to be considered a result of inner tensions of the body. We can derive from the above mentioned that rottenness of the bones implies that not  only the skeleton hurts, but the whole body hurts and has been affected by sin. One of the most common causes of inner tensions from which many Christians suffer, is that of unrepented sins. Many psychosomatic complaints find their origin there.

**Proverbs 28:13**: *“He who* *conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who* *confesses and forsakes* *them* *will find compassion”.*

Like in the **Psalms 51, 38 and 32** the Proverbs speak about physical discomfort by emotional responses of a cast down spirit.

**Confession**

God is a holy God, Who does not tolerate sin in His presence and has no fellowship with the carnal life in which our body is not guided by the wholesome effect of the Holy Spirit, but by our (old) spirit. Psychosomatic complaints based on unrepented sins are an abomination to God, Who sees through everything.

**Proverbs 5:21-23**: “*For the* *ways of a man are before the eyes of the* *Lord,*

*And He  watches all his paths. His  own iniquities will capture the wicked,*

*And he will be held with the cords of his sin. He will  die for lack of instruction,*

*And in the greatness of his folly he will go astray*”.

The confession of sins is the remedy for these psychosomatic complaints, which gives relief and joy. The Bible gives a picture of such a situation, but also a solution.

**Psalm 32** tells us about a man who pushes away his problems, especially the guilt of his sin. “*When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer”.* (**Ps. 32: 3,4**).

It is a striking image of psychosomatic complaints such as depression (Thy  hand was heavy upon me: the body fluids (my moisture), the synovial fluid, saliva, etcetera are drying up in the body; it looks like the aging process is rapidly increasing).

It is remarkable that this old Psalm links the physical condition with the inward condition in such a way.

At the same time it indicates the way unambiguously, in order for us not to end up in such situations, or, in case we already do, to become liberated from it radically. The way that we are to go, is always the way to God. Not in the sense that we should ‘complain’  about our miseries (**verse 3b**), but: “*Therefore* *every loyal person should pray to you in time of distress”* (**verse 6a**). Then it will appear that the Lord God is not a judgmental or vengeful God, but a merciful God, as He revealed Himself in Christ Jesus, our Savior.

“*You are my shelter; you guard me from distress; with joyful shouts of deliverance you surround me”*.

He will be a shelter in our distress; and yet even greater: “He will surround us with joyful shouts of deliverance.

He will instruct us and show us the way we should walk”  (**verse 7b, 8**).

To confess means: to say the same like God says about sin. Only by confessing his sins, a man can stand righteously before God (be in fellowship with), or like **Pro. 15: 13** says: “*A glad heart lights up the face,  but an anguished heart breaks the spirit”.*

When a born again man *draws near to God with a* *sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having his heart* *sprinkled* *clean* (confession) *from an evil conscience and his body* *washed with pure water* (immersed in the Word) (**Hebr. 10: 22**), it makes the heart joyful and to be rejoiced in the Lord and it is like healing to his body and refreshment to his bones (**Pro 3:8**).

Or: like **Proverbs 17:22** says: “*A* *joyful heart* *is good medicine, but a broken spirit  dries up the bones.*”

To confess your sins also includes repentance and to abandon sin. Sin is never to be trivialized, for that makes the problems even greater.

It is said in **James 4:8b-10**: “*Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and* *purify your hearts, you double-minded.* *Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.* *Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you*.”

When the health complaints are a result of our sinful behavior, then it is important for us to confess our sins to get healed.

A lack of reality awareness is presented in **Proverbs 25:20** as follows:

“*Like* *one who takes off a garment on a cold day,* *or like* *vinegar on soda, is he who sings songs to* *a troubled heart.*”

Therefore we should not be ‘counterfeit’ happy when we have a sad heart. There is only one solution for a spirit and a body that are weighed down by the burden of sins. It is to draw near to God’s throne of grace, and to speak out the true nature of sin before God, in order to stand freely in fellowship with the Lord through forgiveness. This does not happen through all kinds of ‘external’ therapies, such as work or play therapies which distract a person for a while from thinking about sin. To work hard for a long time or to be fully fixed on all kinds of futilities, also does not raise one’s weighed down spirit up from the burden of a guilty heart.

**The man in Betzata**

We may not be able to draw all the information from the few sentences in **John 5** about the nature of the illness. Jesus might have had a longer conversation with this man, which has not been recorded in the **gospel of John**.

The Lord might have talked with him about his loneliness, fears or other emotional pains. He might have encouraged him to think differently and to learn to trust in God in all difficult prospects and responsibilities, which he never had learnt, and which might have worried him when he would get well.

Jesus might have exhorted him to come to Him with the loss of so many years, of so many things, which he had missed due to his illness, in order to learn to process it together with Him.

Jesus might have explained to him why the people who had brought food to him, did not carry him to the pool. Whatever the reason, Jesus had compassion with him and gave him grace. *“Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.”*  (**John 5:8**) He said afterwards to him:*“Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore.”* (**John 5:14b**)

**What can we learn from this?**

How can I apply these words in my life? We often have the tendency to complain and to be in fear all over, because we have lost the control over our lives. This self-accusation does not bring us closer to God. I think that God is not happy with it either. Self-accusation is often a warbling of keeping up the appearances of godliness.

We may not be as disabled as the man in Betzata, but still, (emotional) stress may have a threatening effect on our health. We also should learn to trust in Him in all circumstances.

In **Phil.4:11-13** Paul says: *“Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.* *I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going* *hungry, both of having abundance and* *suffering need.* *I can do all things* *through Him who* *strengthens me”*.

Obedience to and dependence on Jesus is the highest goal in our lives.

Jesus was merciful and at the same time very direct towards sick people. He can cuddle and punish us at the same time. That is also an order to all Christians (and social assistants) in order to meet the patients with their weaknesses in love and not to say what they want to hear, nor to stand above them, but to stand beside them and to serve them in love and truth.

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