
God the Physician

Healing can be painful

For if in regard to bodily health we occasionally find it necessary to take some very unpleasant and bitter medicine as a cure for the ills we have brought on through eating and drinking, and sometimes, if the character of the ill demands it, we need the severe treatment of the knife and a painful operation, yes, and should the disease have extended beyond the reach even of these remedies, in the last resort the ill is burnt out by fire, how much more should we realise that God our physician, in his desire to wash away the ills of our souls, which they have brought on themselves through a variety of sins and crimes, makes use of penal remedies of a similar sort, even to the infliction of punishment of fire on those who have lost their soul's health.¹

God's healing is not quick but thorough

Since a quick and too brief healing causes some to think lightly of the diseases into which they have fallen, as though they were easy to heal, and since this results in their falling into the same diseases a second time after they have been healed, God in such cases will reasonably overlook the evil as it increases to a certain point, even disregarding it when it progresses so far in them as to be incurable. His purpose is that they may become satiated by long exposure to evil, and by being filled with the sin they desire may so perceive the harm they have taken. Then they hate what they previously welcomed; and since they have been healed more firmly, they are able to profit from the health of their souls, which is theirs by the healing.²

God's cure is with a view to eternity, not the mere span of our earthly life

For physicians also, even though they may be able to heal a man quickly, yet act in a contrary way whenever they suspect the existence of a hidden poison in the body. They do this because they wish to heal the patient more surely, considering it better to let him remain in his fever and sickness for a long time in order that he may regain permanent health, rather than appear to restore him quickly to strength and afterwards to see him relapse and this quicker cure prove only temporary.

In the same way God, who knows the secrets of the heart and foreknows the future, perhaps in his longsuffering allows the hidden evil to remain while he draws it out by means of external circumstances ... For God deals with souls not in view of the fifty years, so to speak, of our life here, but in view of the endless world. He has made our intellectual nature immortal and akin to himself, and the rational soul is not shut out from healing, as if this life were all.³

¹ *On First Principles* 2.10.6 (p.143)

² *On Prayer* 29.13 (pp.157-8)

³ *On First Principles* 3.1.13 (pp.181-2)