

GOD LOVES THE

SICK



God Loves **THE SICK**

by Rev. Edmund T. Meehan

(The author, a former shut-in himself, lost years of active priestly work because of sickness.)



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LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

The very fact that you are confined to a hospital room or a sickbed at home classifies you as an invalid. There are some who could paint a very dark picture of this, but most common-sense people tell us to look on the bright side. The simple word "sick" suggests a remark in the Bible, "Lord, he whom You love is sick" (John 11:3). Not even His loved ones were spared. The Old Testament includes a wider group; it states, "Whom the Lord loves, He chastises" (Proverbs 3:12).

The dark side here would be: why the chastisement? The bright side is: God, the Creator of the universe (sky, sun, moon,

earth, sea, seasons, people, animals) He who made everything, loves the sick. Most wondrous of all, He loves me. Why not accept His love on its face value! Chase away doubts; banish questions such as, "Why should He love me?" Instead, have the thought, "He loves me." If I can get hold of that, then I need read no further. I have yearned for love, not so much the love of romance as the love of a friend. How often I have felt lonely in a world populated by millions! And a priest comes into my room and says, "Lord, he whom You love is sick."

Think of this every day on rising and retiring. No matter what has happened or may happen, I can blot out all unpleasantness by this awe-inspiring thought: God loves me; I have a friend . . . the best Friend of all.

The Saint's Secret

Canon F. J. Drinkwater has said, "Every once in a while someone takes Christ seriously and you have a saint." That is precisely the point with the saints. I can think over the life of each one of them: they took Christ and His word seriously, and, recognizing His sincerity, they actually fell in love with Him. Oh, this didn't remove all pain of body or anguish of mind and the many upsets of life. But,

from that moment on, His love was the headlight. The pain, anguish and upsets of life were things they brushed aside in the climb toward Him.

Resolution: "I do believe, Lord: help my unbelief" (Mark 9:23).

GOD LEAVES YOU NO CHOICE

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

— *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 1.

A man is looking for a job. He puts an ad in the newspaper under "Help Wanted," stating the type of work desired and his qualifications. A few days later he receives a number of replies, some quite enticing. He visits the firms for an interview and finds several openings to be almost equally attractive. Then he begins to weigh the advantages and disadvantages. One is near his home; another pays a top salary; still another offers great opportunity for advancement. Among them it may be that one provides a great deal of activity during the day, whereas another is sedentary — he would sit at a desk all day.

One of the hardest parts of job seeking is making up one's mind, deciding which one will be the best. For us in the shut-in life God has taken the element of decision out of the matter. He has a work to perform (and why, He alone knows) and He leaves no choice or decision to us. In the way things have happened God says, "This is it."

The lot He has chosen for us may be either temporary or permanent. We shall leave that to Him. But here and now the Creator and Director of the universe has assigned me a role, one which I am free to play joyfully or grudgingly. This shut-in part I am now enacting has not been my choice, but God's — just as it was His choice to create me without my approval or disapproval. With Samuel I can say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears" (I Kgs. 3:9).

"All the World's a Stage . . ."

The stage professionals give us a lesson here. In one production an actor will be the hero; in another he will be the villain. In either case, he receives his salary and it may be that he will play the villain so well that at the end of the year he will be honored with an Emmy or an Oscar.

Shakespeare has expressed the thought well:

All the world's a stage . . .

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts.

— *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 7.

The Director, God, has selected me here and now to play the part of a shut-in.

Resolution: “Be it done to me according to Your word” (Luke 1:38).

A ROLE TO FIT YOUR TALENTS

Hold on! The part of a shut-in! I never played anything like that before. In other roles I was always in the limelight; I had long lines to memorize and speak. I often heard the applause of the audience. I know that there were others in the cast who had just as much talent as I, and they were assigned minor roles. But when they did step forth to speak a line, their performance was unparalleled. One would have thought the whole show depended on that one line. Come to think of it, perhaps it did. Yes, I know it did.

I am now behind the scenes. The millions in the outside world will seldom see me, but, if and when they do, they must find me playing my part well. And even if they never see me, I must not let my Director down. He was good enough be-

fore to give me lead roles. In giving me this part He must have some reason; He must know that I can do it.

That is the bright side of my role: God has chosen me for the shut-in life; He knows that I am capable of playing the role well. If I think hard on this, I can see God's love for me made clear in this assignment. He could have abandoned me, left me simply to be one of the millions of "extras" in the world's background, but, instead, He has chosen me for this special part.

They Won a Crown

Now that I think of it, I can recall from the history of the Church—if not the history of the world—that some people even won the crown of glory in the role of the sick. The Little Flower is a recent example. Shortly before her there was St. Bernadette, to whom Our Lady appeared at Lourdes. Bernadette was anything but a well person either before or after the apparitions. I know I could find many other examples if I were to delve into the lives of the saints to find them.

If you had known these saints in their time on earth, you might have thought they were of little account; looking at them now and at the impact they have had on the world, we see that they carried

out their roles, their jobs in life, in a perfect manner. Thus they won, not an award of passing acclaim, but the official heavenly title of "saint."

Yes, I am now beginning to see the bright side; I am now beginning to understand the infinite wisdom of God. Oh, dear God, give me Your assistance that, first, I may imitate the saints to some small degree; then, as I learn the part better, I shall attempt with Your grace to go all the way.

Resolution: "Lord, I hope in You; strengthen my hope."

EACH LIFE HAS COMPENSATIONS

No matter how you look at it, sickness is not attractive from the physical point of view. But every life, even that of the shut-in, has its compensations.

A little story may illustrate the point. In the days when tuberculosis was far more common than it is today, various sanatoriums could be found in the Adirondacks because medical authorities thought that the rarefied mountain air assisted in the cure of the disease. The fact that the patients ate, played and slept outdoors two-thirds of the time gave them a deceptively healthy appearance.



One day a visitor from New York City, who had been working very hard during a rush-business period, visited a certain sanatorium. Fatigued and run-down, he looked ill himself. When his eyes fell on the outwardly healthy tubercular patients, he said, "They look like a lot of piano movers!"

We sick people, of course, won't take any prizes for piano moving. As a rule, we are pretty stationary. We are "on the horizontal," which is all right for one, two or three days. Then it becomes monotonous and we might say, "If only I could be up a day or two!" But people in the workaday world have their problems, too.

They are “on the vertical” for one, two and three days, and it is all right for a time. But then it becomes downright exhausting and they moan, “If only I could get 48 hours in bed!”

The lack of money is another big problem for many sick persons. But often God provides that money problems be taken care of in some way. If not through insurance, a foundation or public welfare, then through some private agency or relative who provides what is necessary. Accepting help might call for the virtue of humility, but at least the sick are removed — by necessity — from the anxiety and hard work of making a living.

On Balancing the Books

One of your first tasks as a shut-in, especially if you are inclined to pity yourself, will be to take up pencil and paper and make two columns listing the “advantages” and “disadvantages” of your present condition. The one column will probably balance the other. Then, if you wish to convince yourself further, think of the job you had when you were well, or the job you would like to have if you were well, and again list the “advantages” and “disadvantages.” They probably will offset one another, too.

In one of his Epistles, St. Paul complains

to God about the sting of the flesh which seemed at times to be overpowering and irresistible. Our Lord gave him an answer which we can apply to all temptations and to all things distasteful in life: "My grace is sufficient for thee, for strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Resolution: I will try to enact my seemingly impossible role with this thought in mind: His "grace is sufficient for me."

YOU HAVE WORK TO DO

Far from vegetating during this period of invalidism, we could add zest to our lives by waking up one morning and saying, "I've got work to do." This work will not require physical labor. It will call for the use of our thinking apparatus, and we shall exercise this faculty according to our physical strength: one large dose of thinking a day, or two fairly large ones, or several small doses.

This action, too, will be along the bright side of our being on the horizontal, for at last we shall be able to do something for which we never had time in the daily business of life.

Who has not heard or read — around New Year's time — the saying from *The Imitation of Christ*: "If every year we

rooted out one fault, we should soon become perfect men"? Holy Scripture tells us ". . . to put off the old man who is corrupted according to the desire of error and put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth" (Eph. 4:22-24). This we do so that eventually we shall be able to say, "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Ignatius Loyola was a soldier who became a shut-in after having been wounded in the leg. Only two books were available when he demanded reading material; one of these happened to be a copy of the lives of the saints. He read it and was profoundly stirred. The question came to his mind, "These men were of the same frame as I; then can I not do what they have done?" The fruits of the remainder of his life — the founding of the Society of Jesus and the attainment of personal perfection — give us the answer.

Far from looking upon his injury as an excuse to be forlorn or idle, he did what he could: he read, and out of what was an apparently evil thing, good came. It produced not simply one saint in Ignatius, but a number of saints who followed the *Spiritual Exercises* which he had written as a pattern for holiness.

There is a silver lining for every life, if only we look for it. Look today for the

silver lining which surrounds your own condition. It is there.

Resolution: Today I will often think of the work I have to do. Others have done it. So can I.

IT'S 85 PER CENT ROUTINE

It would help people in all walks of life if they knew the result of a survey made over 20 years ago. I read the item once and remembered it all these years. It is this: "Eighty-five per cent of everyone's life is routine and monotony; the maximum amount of variety to be found anywhere is 15 per cent."

We can at once think of certain jobs — like that of an elevator operator — which have practically no variety. A waiter or waitress may have little more. Were it not for her family and the love element, a housewife would find but a small percentage of variety in her daily chores.

Taking this perspective, we can see that the life of a shut-in will certainly be 85 per cent the same. But it may be that we can reach the maximum variety of 15 per cent by our reading, visiting, praying, occupational therapy, and the like.

There was a song when you and I were young that went like this:



Here's the way we wash our clothes,
so early on Monday morning;
Here's the way we iron our clothes,
so early on Tuesday morning . . .

And so it went on through the week, each day with its appointed task, the presumption being that, come Monday, the same procedure would start all over again. So it does. We need but review our daily lives, sick or well, in any field of endeavor, to see that we do pretty much the same things every day.

When people say they are tired of prayer, it is the sameness of prayer that is the secret of their boredom. Here we have the same few stand-bys — the Our Father, Hail Mary, Apostles' Creed, Acts of Faith, Hope, Charity and Contrition, and a few more. In the Rosary there is more repetition, with the Our Father and Hail Mary recited, not once, but six and 53 times.

Each day's Mass has what is known as its own Proper, that is, parts proper to that Mass alone, like the Collect, Secret and Postcommunion; but the Ordinary of the Mass, the major part, is the same day after day. A priest in only three years will have said more than a thousand Masses and 85 per cent of each one will have been the same.

How to Make It Count

Someone has said that in our daily lives we should not be seeking to do some extraordinary thing, but to do the ordinary things extraordinarily well. So a priest keeps striving to make each Mass his most perfect one; the baseball pitcher tries to make this one his best-pitched game; every salesman tries to make his sales record for the day an all-time high. And each of us who is ill could try to surprise the nurse and, even better, "surprise"

God, so that today everybody will find us, in our 85 per cent routine, the best possible patient. For, no matter what life we are in, the words of the Master still apply, "Be you perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

Resolution: God's word is for everyone. But for the moment let me exclude the rest of the world. I am standing alone before God and He is saying to me, "Be you perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect." My resolution must be to do as He wishes.

YOU HAVE TIME: DON'T WASTE IT

No matter what your physical trouble may be, thank God you still have your mind. It is true that mental and physical powers are related. We who are physically weak don't seem to have the energy for the same mental production as those who are perfectly well. In fact, too much mental effort can retard physical progress. The physician is the best judge. If you are too active, or not active enough, he will tell you so.

Another bright side of an illness can be this: we know we could have done certain things for our souls previously, but we never seemed to have the time. Now we

have that time. We read in the penny catechism that we should take greater care of our souls than of our bodies. Now we can do that. To repeat, Our Lord stated, "Be you perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect."

It's Everybody's Job

In this matter of perfection we have no choice. With God in heaven there are only angels and saints. There will be no pious lookers-on, no sidewalk superintendents, nobody in the grandstand or bleachers.



Everyone will be in the limelight by reason of his perfection. This perfection could be attained here, in which case we receive at judgment a nonstop ticket to heaven. Or, if we have not attained it here, then, assuming the grace of salvation, we receive a ticket to our destination, but with a tedious stopover in purgatory. There, as the very word suggests, the purging of imperfections will take place.

Therefore, if I am looking at things with a concern for my soul, this illness is indeed a blessing in disguise. Now, with little to do — certainly with much time to think — I can, with God's help, get my soul in order. Oh, I don't mean so much by confession and Holy Communion. I take it for granted that every sensible Catholic will make good and frequent use of the sacraments. I mean doing a job on oneself by rooting out the sources of our faults. There are only seven of these sources, commonly called the Capital Sins. Many people do not even know them by name, so it is difficult to understand how they can do anything about them. They are: pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth.

Pride is listed first because it is the source of all sin. If one can root out pride from his make-up, then he has indeed "made a killing," something like a 50-to-one shot at the race track. But it is not

so easy as it sounds. You could begin with pride or, looking them over like seven playing cards, you could choose the one that gives you the most trouble and concentrate on that.

This much is certain: you must start on one of them; you cannot let this opportunity pass. If Ignatius Loyola, a rough, down-to-earth soldier, could make a complete change during the healing of a wounded leg, then it is possible for almost anyone. It is possible! Why? The secret lies in these 15 words: "Every once in a while somebody takes Christ seriously, and then you have a saint."

Resolution: I must preserve the intimate viewpoint: God created me, God saved me, God loves me. To do anything else but take Him seriously would be sheer nonsense. Starting today, at this very moment, I shall take Him at His word.

A DAILY PROGRAM, SICK OR WELL

When this writer became sick many years ago, he received from his boyhood teacher copies of the New Testament and *The Imitation of Christ*. I thought the gift strange at first, but, as the days passed and I experienced all kinds of temptations

because of enforced idleness, I came to see that these two holy books were the wisest of gifts. I had to resort to them frequently in order to store up a reserve of strength to cope with the world, the flesh and the devil.

In the still hours when passion is at rest,
Gather up stores of wisdom in thy breast,
So when the storms awake, and in the din
Imprudence or malevolence to sin
Should tempt thy frailty, thoughts of wisdom stored
Shall check the passion ere its tides are poured.

— Canon Sheehan's *Geoffrey Austin: Student*.

It would be well for all of us, sick or well, to keep alongside our beds the word of God contained in the New Testament and to do some reading of it as a part of our daily schedule. As a patient, everything physical is arranged for us; the rising hour, three meals a day, the dosages of medicine, the doctor's visit — all run on a set schedule. But the patient himself must make provision for what he does along intellectual and spiritual lines, and he should set specific times for these duties or he won't do them at all.

For pleasure we should, by all means, have our radio or television programs, but let them, if possible, be toward evening. And let us have them then only if we have done something to earn them: (1) we have read something to further our knowl-

edge; (2) we have fulfilled our religious duties: prayer, spiritual reading, and even meditation — thinking for a few minutes on some religious truth, applying it to ourselves and forming resolutions.

Used in this way, shut-in time, far from being wasted, will be so much gold set aside for future years in the workaday world; if not for that, then certainly for our glory in heaven.

A Matter of Attitude

The following incident will help bring home what I am striving to say. Some years ago I met the Sister-superintendent of a very busy hospital in a big city. "Father," she said, "I never allow myself to sit down to a meal unless first I feel that I have earned it."

There is a great deal in that sentence. Even we who are ill, instead of thinking that we are unfortunate victims, should do what we can intellectually and spiritually so as to earn our meals and our recreation.

Take a look at the Divine Exemplar in Whose steps we walk. He was never sick, yet He was the most afflicted "patient" (from the Latin "patiens," one who suffers) in the world's history. We need but follow Him through the Five Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary — the Agony,

the Scourging, the Crowning, the Carrying of the Cross and the Crucifixion — to see that. Yet He was concerned not with hunger for food or pleasure, but thirst for souls; He satisfied His Father in heaven, not for any sin of His own, but for the delinquency of mankind. “He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross.”

Being Christians, “other Christs,” we are asked all through life to “humble ourselves” and to become “obedient unto death” in any way the will of God will indicate. “I have given you an example,” He said, “that as I have done, so you also should do” (John 13:15).

Resolution: I close my eyes so that I may better see myself standing alone with God. I can hear Him saying to me, “I have given you an example, that as I have done, you also should do.” I resolve to follow His example.

TIME-OUT IN THE GAME OF LIFE

Next to the Bible there is another book we should always have at our side: the dictionary. True, people seldom consult it except for the meaning or correct spelling of a word, but it can be a fascinating book to read and to study.



The dictionary, for instance, gives a half-dozen meanings of the word "retreat." The first is: an "act of retiring or withdrawing as from what is difficult, dangerous, or disagreeable." Sick persons, of course, do not withdraw from their active surroundings voluntarily; the doctor usually sees that they do. At any rate, having left one type of difficult living, they are now in another that may be difficult and dis-

agreeable in an altogether different way.

A retreat is very much like the time-out in a football game when the team is not functioning properly. Before things can get worse, the captain calls for a break and talks things over with his players. Then there is time-in again, and because of the short recess things may go better.

Our situation is something like that. The doctor could see that we were not doing very well physically, and before things could get worse, he called a halt, a time-out. Now we are enjoying or enduring that retreat until our illness is over or the damaged part has healed.

Say that you have a broken leg. It will take a while to heal. Very well, make the best of it by doing something for your soul.

Self-Mastery Is Hard

A spiritual retreat — when we take time out to see how our souls are doing — reminds us of a spiritual washing and ironing session, or what the soul writers call the purgative and illuminative stages of the spiritual life. During the purgative or washing stage, the soiled linens are gathered together, thrown into a machine and subjected to the detergent and the scrubbing. After they have been rinsed and wrung free of the water, they are

still not a very pleasant sight. But then the illuminative stage sets in; slowly each part is ironed. When finished we have an attractive stack of linens.

Washing our souls, or digging in to find out what we have done to make them a sorry-looking mess, is hard. And even when we have all the material lined up properly, we still have to subject it to a "detergent" in the person of the priest. True, he will be gentle in his "cleansing action," but it is hard to convince ourselves of that. But we do reveal everything and get rid of all the stains.

It won't be until we have done something positive, however, like the ironing, like practicing the virtues opposed to our faults, that we shall grasp the idea of this spiritual effort. Only then will we come to understand that we need an offense as well as a defense. We cannot be merely defending ourselves against the world, the flesh and the devil. No, we develop a one-two punch so that when Satan suggests the evil thoughts we react immediately: "Out you go"; or the vile word, "No, Sir, I'll have none of it"; or the bad act, "Are you kidding? Out, I said, and stay out!" Then we substitute good thoughts and good actions.

In a sense, then, we are retired from the scene of battle of the working world, but, so far as our soul is concerned, we

are engaged in one of the best phases of training we ever had the good fortune to enter. Learning music or art while sick would be very good, but learning to handle oneself spiritually — in other words, self-mastery — what is there to match it? When we have overcome self for God, then most truly can we say, “I am master of all I survey.”

Resolution: I must die to self in the manner of another wayfarer in this world, John the Baptist, who expressed it this way: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

MEDITATION—TV FOR THE SPIRIT

On visits to hospitals we have seen patients breaking the monotony by watching television. But we do not even need actual TV. We all have strong imaginations. We can imagine all kinds of unpleasant things: we can see danger where danger does not exist. On entering a hospital we can even imagine: This is it! Now, I am going to die.

Then, too, we can imagine good things and have a perfectly good time. For instance, we are on a ship and we see in our mind's eye all the places where the ship will stop. We are off the coast of

Africa, then ashore; now we are on the back of an elephant—thrilling at first, but just a little slow. Let us try a camel—more thrilling, but it is like a ship in rough waters. Ah, here is a lion! We dream until these wild imaginings become too much even for us. We shut them off and return to reality.

But let us put our imagination to work. This will be our spiritual or imaginary TV. Ah, we turn it on. Let us picture the Master, Christ, on the screen. We can imagine Him at birth, or as a boy, or entering on His public life. We can see Him preaching the Sermon on the Mount and note His great compassion when anyone was in need: His gentle words, kind words, but like steel when justice was to be enforced. How strong He was on the high mountain when tempted by the devil—no hesitation, no weighing both sides. The immediate, “Begone, Satan!” Three serious temptations brushed aside in no time at all. Why? Because He was prompt and direct about them. No dallying where the devil is concerned.

Who Will Be First?

In the early days of Christianity a Christian was known as “another Christ.” That is how he got the name “Christian”: he was one of Christ’s followers. In those

days people were Christians in act as well as in name.

How it is today? We know that, generally speaking, it is not so. It is not so because everyone waits for someone else to start doing good. If it is a village, we want the people of our village to start. If it be a city, very well, if the citizens of our city start, we shall gladly follow. In other words, where we should try to be *first*, we are usually willing to be *last*.

The words Christ spoke are as true today as on the day He said them: "I have given you an example, that as I have done, so you also should do." "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart." "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened and I will refresh you." These words of our Teacher are so familiar to us that they have become like so many bywords of the world. Were we to take them seriously, act on them today, tomorrow, and all our remaining days, we would become holy. The point is: "Whenever somebody takes Christ seriously, then you have a saint."

Like Missing the Boat

It has been said that when a soul goes to hell his first reaction is: "I could so easily have avoided this—a little more care here, a little more vigilance there."

It is like a man about to go from New York to Florida. There are a number of tracks at the railroad terminal. Instead of reading signs or asking questions, he rushes down a platform and onto a train. Presently the train starts and he finds he is on his way, not to Florida, but to Chicago. The train will not stop again for several hours, and as he speeds along in the wrong direction, he thinks, "If only I had paid more attention; if only I had asked someone." It will be like that when one lands in hell.

Conversely, if we reach heaven directly, or if we land in purgatory for that long, tedious stopover, we will surely be thinking: "In view of eternity, what did my stay in the hospital amount to?" Suppose I had suffered for 40 years with a leg injury like St. Camillus? Forty years in proportion to eternity? A mere drop in the bucket. Therefore, if instead of longing to be well, I try to *do* well, ah, that's the secret. If only I grasp that secret and work on it!

We have at our right hand the Word of God, the Bible. We take it up and read the 14th Chapter of Job: "Man born of a woman, living for a short time, is filled with many miseries. . . ." This was true not only for Job; it is true for all of us. Job, the symbol of patience for posterity, rightly concluded that no matter what



state man is in he "is filled with many miseries." I may be cured of my present malady, but as a well person I shall meet other miseries.

We must therefore look upon life as a probation, a proving ground. We must look beyond the brambles and thickets of our miseries to the ever-loving Jesus who stands waiting with a crown in His hand for those surmounting them. Then we shall know what life is about, and with Christ we will be able to say, "For this was I born and for this came I into the world: that I should give testimony of the truth" (John 18:37).

IN A NUTSHELL

● I must grasp the reality of God's love for *me*.

● I am one of His creatures and, as Shakespeare says, "a man in his time plays many parts."

● Sickness is not attractive, yet it is the "part" God has given me to play. Even more, it is an opportunity.

● Considering my own poor efforts, the role seems impossible. Yet His grace will be sufficient for me, for "strength is made perfect in weakness."

● The same thing every day! There is only 15 per cent variety in any life.

● I have the example of the Perfect One Who bids me follow in His footsteps. Christ singles out no class of people, sick or well, talented or not. He says merely, "as I have done, so do you also."

● I must give thought to the "part" God has given me to play in life. I have the time for it.

● Out of this illness and this thinking, I shall prepare myself for another role in this life if that is what God wants; but certainly, if I play my present role well, I shall be far better equipped for my permanent "part" beyond the grave.

