

## 6 | Illness and Healing

Sohaib Sultan served as the Muslim chaplain at Princeton University for more than a decade and touched the spiritual lives of many students as a scholar of Islam. In 2020, he was diagnosed with stage-four cancer and told that there was no cure for his disease. This was devastating news for him, his family, and the Muslim community. In one of his first reflections on his diagnosis, Sultan implied that while his illness was grievous and caused so much pain and suffering, it was God's decree: "He [God] gives and takes, He owes us nothing, all is His, His decree is merciful and wise and just even if we can't immediately see it."<sup>1</sup> In another post, Sultan pointed to cancer as his companion, one of the most important teachers in his life, a means of spiritual progress, and a reminder of his mortality:

A deep awareness of mortality has taught me to be truly grateful and joyous for life's blessings. It has also pushed me to be where God commands me to be, and to avoid where God prohibits me to be physically, psychologically, and spiritually. And in this sense, cancer has cured me of certain outer ethical and inner spiritual ailments that I've carried with me for too long.

One of the most interesting points in his writing is when he refers to cancer as God's creation: "Cancer too is a creation of God's and He has so wisely decreed to place it in my body. I am not battling cancer. I am struggling with cancer and accepting that it has much

<sup>1</sup> Sohaib Sultan, "Accepting the Diagnosis," *Medium*, April 11, 2020, <https://medium.com/@seekingilham/accepting-the-diagnosis-3685e22af2e9>.

to teach me in life's journey." In living with cancer, Sultan would often find comfort and clarity in this supplication (*du'a*): "There is no god except God, the One who has no partner. To God belong all the dominions, to God belong all praise, the One who gives and takes life, the One who has power over all things."<sup>2</sup> While Sultan's view of cancer is distinctive in many ways, it also reveals the Islamic theological view of illness.

Looking at illness through the lens of religion is an ancient approach. In Hinduism, illness is associated with one's karma. Hindus often turn to a deity for their mental and physical well-being. One can observe similar approaches in Buddhism as well. Like in Hinduism, illness is associated with karma. Therefore, the followers of the Buddha often seek to change their karma through meritorious deeds in order to have a better state of health in the future. The Buddha is believed to be a supreme physician. His teachings can cure the illnesses of those who practice his teachings.<sup>3</sup>

In Judaism, God is known to be omnipotent and omniscient. In the Hebrew Bible, illness is often mentioned as an affliction from God, and he is the one who eventually restores his people's health. One example is the story of Job, who was afflicted with sickness by God and eventually healed because of his devotion to and trust in God.

God as the healer is also a common theme in the New Testament. It relates the miracles of Jesus healing both mental and physical illnesses. In one case, Jesus went to a town and cured all the people who had certain sicknesses.<sup>4</sup> In another instance, a blind man came to Jesus. Jesus made some mud and smeared it on the face of the man.

<sup>2</sup> Sohaib Sultan, "Life Lessons: Living with Cancer," *Medium*, January 9, 2021, <https://medium.com/@seekingilham/life-lessons-living-with-cancer-49940fbd3754>.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Canda et al., "World Religious Views of Health and Healing," University of Kansas, Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Initiative, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://spiritualdiversity.ku.edu/sites/spiritualitydiversity.drupal.ku.edu/files/docs/Health/World%20Religious%20Views%20of%20Health%20and%20Healing.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 9:35.

He then asked the man to go and wash his face with water. When the man cleaned the mud from his face, he had his sight back.<sup>5</sup> A woman who had bleeding for twelve years came to Jesus and touched his cloak. Jesus told her: “Don’t worry, you are now well because of your faith.”<sup>6</sup> The woman then was miraculously healed.

Jesus also encouraged his disciples to go out and cure the sick. He is known to be a physician in the catechism of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>7</sup> One of the sacraments in the Catholic tradition, for example, is the anointing of the sick. According to the catechism:

When the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given, the hoped-for effect is that, if it be God’s will, the person be physically healed of illness. But even if there is no physical healing, the primary effect of the Sacrament is a spiritual healing by which the sick person receives the Holy Spirit’s gift of peace and courage to deal with the difficulties that accompany serious illness or the frailty of old age.<sup>8</sup>

The idea is that one can find both spiritual and physical healing through this ritual.

Today, an increasing number of mainstream churches and synagogues hold “healing services” and “healing circles” in the United States.<sup>9</sup> According to a study published in 2016, more than 75 percent of Americans have relied on healing prayer at some point in their lives. The percentage of praying for others was even higher.<sup>10</sup> Many of them have the conviction that God can cure someone, even if science

<sup>5</sup> John 9:6–7.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 9:20–22.

<sup>7</sup> “Catechism of the Catholic Church: The Anointing of the Sick,” Holy See, accessed February 4, 2022, [www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a5.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a5.htm).

<sup>8</sup> “Anointing of the Sick,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed February 6, 2022, [www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/anointing-of-the-sick](http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/anointing-of-the-sick).

<sup>9</sup> For a study, see Linda L. Barnes and Susan S. Sered, eds., *Religion and Healing in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Levin, “Prevalence and Religious Predictors of Healing Prayer Use in the USA: Findings from the Baylor Religion Survey,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 55 (2016): 1136–58.

says the person has an incurable disease. They turn to prayer as healing alongside medical care. Many modern doctors incorporate this approach in the treatment of their patients. The Cleveland Clinic, one of the best hospitals in the United States, for example, provides a number of healing services. One of them is spiritual support from clinically trained chaplains of different faiths.<sup>11</sup> Many hospitals in the United States offer a similar service to their patients.

### **Illness as the Creation of God**

Like the followers of other religious traditions, Muslims also turn to God and their religion to understand illness and find comfort. Perhaps one of the most distinctive teachings of Islam concerning illness is the belief that it is created by God. A disease can only inflict a person with God's permission. While there is much pain and suffering that is associated with illness, it is not considered evil. Illness not only demonstrates God's power over humans; it also manifests their weakness in relation to the Creator. Illness is often presented as a trial in the tradition. God tests his servants through afflictions.

### **God as the Healer (al-Shafi)**

God is not only the creator of the illness; he is also the healer. One of God's names in Islam is the Healer (al-Shafi). God is the one who can cure physical, mental, and spiritual illnesses. In the Qur'an, when Abraham challenges those who do not believe in one God, he describes the God whom he worships as follows: God is the creator, the provider, and the healer.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The Cleveland Clinics in the United States offers healing services to its patients. See "Healing Services," Cleveland Clinic, accessed February 5, 2022, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/departments/patient-experience/depts/spiritual-care/healing-services>.

<sup>12</sup> Qur'an 26:78–80.

God as a healer is also mentioned in a number of hadiths. Muhammad's wife Aisha reported that when anyone in the Prophet's circle had an illness, he would rub the area of the pain and recite this prayer for healing: "O God, Lord of people, relieve me from my suffering. Heal me as You are the only Healer and there is no cure except the one that comes from You. It is your cure that dismantles illness completely."<sup>13</sup> On another occasion, one of Muhammad's companions complained about a pain in his body. The Prophet then asked the companion to place his hand where he was feeling the pain and say "in the name of God (Bismillah) three times and invoke this phrase seven times: I seek refuge in God and his power from the suffering that has inflicted me."<sup>14</sup>

The Prophet himself suffered immensely from illness. His wife Aisha reported, "I never saw anybody suffering so much from sickness as God's messenger."<sup>15</sup> Muhammad would often turn to God with the following prayer during his illness: "O God, forgive me, bestow Your mercy on me, and include me among the companions who are elevated."<sup>16</sup>

### **Muhammad as a Means of Healing**

Muhammad is often viewed as a means of healing in Islamic tradition. It is reported in a number of hadiths that, like Jesus, he miraculously cured those who came to him for healing. For example, when the Prophet's wives became sick, he would place his hand over the spot of their pain and invoke this prayer over them: "O Lord of the people! Remove the difficulty and bring about healing as You are the Healer.

<sup>13</sup> *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-salam, bab istihbab ruqyah al-marid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-salam, bab istihbab wad' yadihi 'ala mawdi' al-'alam ma'a al-du'a.*

<sup>15</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-marda, bab shidda al-marda.*

<sup>16</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-marda, bab tamanna al-marid al-mawt.*

There is no healing but Your Healing, a healing that will leave no ailment.<sup>17</sup>

The followers of Muhammad even sought his blessings for healing after his death. Imam Busiri of Egypt, a thirteenth-century Sufi and poet, for example, was afflicted with paralysis. He persistently sought healing from God through worship and prayers. Busiri also wrote a number of poems in praise of Muhammad. One night, the Prophet appeared in his dream and asked him to recite one of his poems. Busiri was not sure which one to deliver, as he had many poems in praise of the Prophet. Muhammad then read out loud the first lines of one of them, and Busiri started to narrate it while the Prophet was listening. When Busiri finished reciting the poem, the Prophet took off his cloak and covered Busiri's body with it. He then patted the paralyzed area of his body. When Busiri got up in the morning, he realized that he was cured of his paralysis. The story became public, and the poem is known as the poem of the cloak or mantle (*qasida al-burda*). The poem is widely recited by Muslims as a form of remembering God and a means of healing for those who have paralysis.<sup>18</sup> There are also a number of hadiths in which Muhammad asked his followers to seek medical assistance. In one of them, he said: "Seek medical treatment because God has not sent down a disease without sending down remedy for it."<sup>19</sup> The Prophet also taught a number of treatment methods, including consuming honey and blackseed. He also recommended the use of wet cupping (*hijama*), a suction method to draw blood out of the body. Muhammad's reports regarding treatments are collected under the title "prophetic medicine" (*tibb al-nabawi*), and many Muslims use them as references in addition to modern medicine.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-tib, bab mash al-raqi al-waj' bi yadih al-yumna.*

<sup>18</sup> Mahmut Kaya, "Kasidetü'l Bürde," in *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: TDV, 2001), 24:568–69.

<sup>19</sup> *Sunan Abi Davud: kitab al-tibb, bab fi al-rajul yatadawa.*

<sup>20</sup> Many hadith collections, including *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sunan Abi Davud* and *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, have a chapter on prophetic medicine (*kitab al-tibb*). Also see Ibn

## The Qur'an as a Source of Healing

Muslims also turn to their scripture for healing. The healing aspect of the divine words is highlighted in a number of verses in the Qur'an:

People, there has come to you an advice from your Lord, a healing for what is in the hearts, and a guidance and a mercy for the believers.<sup>21</sup>

We send down the Quran as healing and mercy for the believer, but it increases the wrongdoers only in loss.<sup>22</sup>

It [the Qur'an] is guidance and healing for those who have faith.<sup>23</sup>

Because of the healing aspect of the Qur'an, Muhammad repeatedly encouraged his followers to seek healing from the scripture. The Prophet's wife Aisha reported that "whenever the Prophet became sick, he would recite Surat Al-Falaq and Surat Al-Nas [chapters 113–14] and then blow his breath over his body. When he became seriously ill, I used to recite these two chapters of the Qur'an and rub his hands over his body hoping for their blessings."<sup>24</sup>

Following the example of the Prophet, Muslims have been using the Qur'anic verses for both spiritual and physical sickness.

## Illness as a Means of Spiritual Progress

Illness is also often seen as a means of spiritual progress. People who are sick can be more mindful of the nature of themselves and this world. This aspect of illness is stressed in a number of hadiths. Muhammad said: "When God wants to do good to somebody, He

Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Tibb al-Nabawi*, ed. Muhammad Fathi Abu Bakr (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Qur'an 10:57.

<sup>22</sup> Qur'an 17:82.

<sup>23</sup> Qur'an 41:44.

<sup>24</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab fadail al-qur'an, bab fadl al-mu'awwidhat*.

afflicts them with trials.”<sup>25</sup> God inflicts those whom he loves with illness so that they can earn merits and progress spiritually. In another hadith, the Prophet pointed out that “one night’s pain and sickness is better than forty years of worship.”<sup>26</sup> So illness is a form of worship and plays a key role in one’s spiritual well-being. People should be thankful and grateful to God not only in times of prosperity but also in times of struggle. God wipes out the believers’ sin, purifying them for their spiritual progress through suffering. A tradition reads: “God wipes out the believers’ sin through the misfortunes that befall upon them even if it is the prick of a thorn.”<sup>27</sup>

Rumi, for example, points out that sickness can be a means of remembering God, and that is why people should be thankful for their sickness. For him, “pain is a treasure, for there are mercies in it.” Fever, suffering, and sleeplessness because of sickness are blessings. Illness during old age is a sign of God’s compassion and generosity: “He too had given me pain in the back, so that every midnight I cannot help springing up quickly from sleep. In order that I may not slumber all night like a buffalo, God of His grace has given me pains.”<sup>28</sup> Rumi writes that his soul found sweetness in bitterness that come from God, and he fell in love with his pain and grief because it was pleasing to his Creator.<sup>29</sup>

Rumi also mentions that illness gives humans an opportunity to repent of their sins and turn to God. In the midst of their illness, they see the ugliness of their sin and intend to do better. Sickness may make people more thoughtful and humble. Suffering because of physical sickness is a channel to spiritual advancement.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-marda, bab ma ja’a fi kaffarah al-marad.*

<sup>26</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-marda, bab ma ja’a fi kaffarah al-marad.*

<sup>27</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-marda, bab ma ja’a fi kaffarah al-marad.*

<sup>28</sup> Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book 2:2255–60, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 2:338.

<sup>29</sup> Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book 1:1777–78, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 1:97.

<sup>30</sup> Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book 1: 620–29, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 1:36.



## Pastoral and Spiritual Responses to Sickness

### *Patience and Trust in God*

One of the most important responses to illness is to put your trust in God and respond to sickness with patience. One of the best examples in the tradition is the prophet Job, a biblical figure who is also mentioned in the Qur'an. According to the tradition, Job was afflicted with a severe illness. But despite his suffering, he turned to God with humility and prayer. Job represents the archetype of patience in Islam. The Qur'an alludes to this character as follows: "Indeed We found him to be patient in adversity. What an excellent servant! He always turned to God."<sup>31</sup> In another verse, the Qur'an brings up Job's prayer in the midst of severe suffering: "Remember Job, when he cried out to his Lord, saying: 'Suffering has truly afflicted me, but you are the Most Merciful of the merciful.'"<sup>32</sup>

### *Physical Illness versus Spiritual Illness*

Some Muslim scholars have interpreted Job's complaint as concern about his spirituality, because his physical suffering became so severe that it prevented him from worshipping.<sup>33</sup> That is why these scholars often point to nonphysical illnesses. To them, the major sicknesses that believers should be worried about are the spiritual diseases of the heart. In this context, this tradition of the Prophet Muhammad is frequently quoted: "Beware! There is a piece of flesh in the body, if it remains healthy the whole body becomes healthy, and if it is diseased, the whole body becomes diseased. Beware, it is the heart."<sup>34</sup>

Sin and transgression, relying on something other than God, hypocrisy, falling into despair, heedlessness, hatred, arrogance,

<sup>31</sup> Qur'an 38:44.

<sup>32</sup> Qur'an 21:83.

<sup>33</sup> Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-iman, bab fadh man istabra' li dinih.*

envy, negative thoughts about others, being ungrateful, showing off, and love of the world are among the spiritual diseases of the heart. In order to deal with these illnesses, Muslim scholars have focused on the purification of the self (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). This is especially emphasized in Sufism.

Purifying the self (*nafs*) is one of Sufism's most important goals, and "The one who knows his self knows God" has become an important mantra in Sufi spirituality. Sufis regard the self as an even greater enemy than Satan. Dealing with the desires of the self is presented as the greatest jihad.<sup>35</sup> The Qur'an instructs believers that they should not claim their selves to be pure.<sup>36</sup> Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who is also known for outlining the orthodox views within Sufism, dedicated one of his treatises to fighting the ego (*jihad al-nafs*) in his magnum opus, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*. In this work, al-Ghazali highlights the importance of jihad against the ego:

Know that the body is like a town and the intellect of the mature human being is like a king ruling that town. Its armies are the external and internal senses and its subject are its organs. The ego that commands evil [*nafs ammara*] which is manifested in desires and anger, is like an enemy that contests him in his kingdom and fights to kill his people. The body thus becomes like a battleground and the soul is its guard. If he fights against his enemies and defeats them and compels them to do what he likes, he will be praised when he returns to God's presence, as God said: "Allah favors those who strive with their wealth and lives a degree above those who stay behind." (Qur'an 4:95)<sup>37</sup>

Here Ghazali indicates that the self should always be armed against the evil commanding ego as if it is at war because it is a threat to the spiritual well-being of a believer. That is why Sufi scholars

<sup>35</sup> Carl Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 104.

<sup>36</sup> Qur'an 53:32.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Cairo: Al-Quds, 2012), 3:11.

offered various guidelines for their disciples to purify their selves in order to overcome the spiritual diseases of the heart. Al-Qushayri (d. 1074), for example, listed fifty spiritual stations for the journey. Among them are repentance (*tawba*), solitariness (*uzla*), abstinence (*wara*), asceticism (*zuhd*), silence (*samt*), hunger (*ju*), abandoning desire (*tark al-shahwa*), humility (*tawadu*), opposition to the soul or ego (*mukhalafat al-nafs*), contentment (*qanaa*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), thankfulness (*shukr*), patience (*sabr*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), remembrance of God (*dhikr*), manners (*adab*), prayer (*dua*), poverty (*faqr*), gnosis (*marifa*), love (*mahabba*), and yearning (*shawq*).<sup>38</sup>

Like al-Qushayri, Imam Muhammad Mawlud (d. 1905), a Mauritanian scholar, also provided treatment for his students:

A comprehensive treatment plan for the heart's diseases is to deny the self of its desires, enjoin hunger, keep worship vigilance in the night, silence and meditation in private; also keeping company with good people who possess sincerity, those who are emulated in their states and statements; and, finally, taking refuge in the One unto whom all affairs return. That is the most beneficial treatment for all of the previous diseases. This must be to the point in which you are like a man drowning or someone lost in a barren desert and sees no source of succor except from the Guardian, possessor of the greatest power. He is the One who responds to the call of the distressed.<sup>39</sup>

### *Prayer and Worship*

The time of sickness is considered an opportunity for prayer and worship. Because while believers should be grateful and thankful

<sup>38</sup> Ernst, *Sufism*, 104.

<sup>39</sup> Imam al-Mawlud, *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart*, trans. Hamza Yusuf (Mountain View, CA: Sandala, 2012), 90.

during prosperous times, they should also turn to God during difficult times, including sickness. It is reported that Muhammad did not give up on his prayers and worship during his severe illnesses. He would still perform the five daily prayers (*salat*). Given that it requires many physical movements, believers can perform their prayers even with the movement of their eyes.

### *Visiting the Sick*

Visiting the sick is among the key responses to sickness that are deeply embedded in Islamic societies. The hadith collections often include a book on this teaching. Muhammad taught his followers that visiting the sick is a major duty of fellow Muslims toward one another.<sup>40</sup> He also reminded them of its merits. The Prophet reported that on the day of the resurrection, God will say:

O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant so and so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant so and so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that (the reward for doing so) with Me? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink. He will say: O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found that with Me.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-libas, bab al-mithara al-hamra'.*

<sup>41</sup> *Al-Bukhari, al-Adab al-Mufrad: kitab 'iyad al-marda, bab 'iyadah al-marda.*

The implication of this hadith is that there is a divine presence and blessing in taking care of the most vulnerable and needy, including those who are sick. Visiting the sick can be a means of being closer to God, because in another report, Muhammad said: “When Muslims visit a sick person at dawn, seventy thousand angels keep on praying for them till dusk. If they visit the person in the evening, seventy thousand angels keep on praying for them till the morning; and they will have their share of reaped fruits in heaven.”<sup>42</sup>

Illness is part of human nature. Muslims turn to God for their physical and spiritual illnesses because God is not only the creator of sickness; he is also the healer. They also seek remedies from the Qur’an, the teachings of Muhammad, the spiritual paths of scholars, and modern medicine. In Chapter 7, I discuss another aspect of life: death and suffering.

<sup>42</sup> *Jami’ al-Tirmidhi: kitab al-janaiz, bab ma ja’a fi ‘iyadah al-marid.*