

Healing

Matthew 8:1-17

by

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Sergio was a cantankerous old man. A friend had led him to Christ and he was a member of our church in Ecuador. His temperament had improved radically. Sergio was growing but he could still be a pain in the neck on occasions.

I mentioned to the congregation one Sunday morning that if anyone needed prayer for illness or other serious matters, we would be happy to pray for them. I assumed it was understood this would be after the service.

Sergio, however, took it to mean anytime during the service. So when I went to the pulpit to preach, he walked up the aisle, stood directly in front of the pulpit and said, "I have a pain in my neck. Will you pray for me?"

I wanted to say, "Sergio, the reason you have a pain in the neck is because you *are* a pain in the neck!" However, I knew this would be rude as well as intimidating for the congregation. I decided to go through the motions of praying anyway, convinced that God was not going to heal him.

My faith was strongly negative... which explains why I felt annoyed when God healed him on the spot.

I knew that God is not accountable to me for anything but my curiosity was strong. So that afternoon I asked the Lord in the most reverent tone I could muster, "Lord, why did you heal Sergio?"

After a couple of hours searching the Scriptures along with theological reasoning accompanied with inner impressions of the Holy Spirit, I had two answers. It seemed the Lord was saying, "You are not an adequate judge of who should be healed." Then, "I am not limited to your faith to do anything."

Upon that, I thanked the Lord and said, "I was just asking!"

Since that day, I pray for anyone I meet who is ill, without questioning the cause or what may be the result.

Is healing for today?

Healing is central to the Gospel narratives. We see it mentioned in the Epistles as well.

In this article we will touch on...

- Jesus is willing to heal and has authority and power to do it.
- The difference between healing ministry then and now.
- One of the most damaging doctrines about healing in the evangelical movement in our time and why it is false.
- How God works today through ordinary means like nature and doctors but is not limited to these.
- How to react if God does not heal you.

Jesus is willing: The leper, Matthew 8:1-4

The first individual healing mentioned in the New Testament was a leper. Other healings occurred before but this was the first one singled out for our attention.¹

Lepers were untouchable according to the Law of Moses and must be excluded from society. They were required, upon approaching anyone to cry out, “unclean! unclean!” This was to avoid spreading contagion.

How the leper learned about Jesus is unknown. Apparently he heard Jesus had the power to heal. Would he be willing to touch a leper?

The leper did the first thing necessary to receive a miracle from God. He came to Jesus.. He said, *Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.* Jesus replied, *I am willing.* Then Jesus did something nobody else would do. He touched him and healed him.

The term *rejection* is not in the vocabulary of Jesus. He is willing to heal.

Jesus has the authority: The centurion, Matthew 8:5-13

A centurion was a Roman officer in charge of as many as 100 men. As a military man, he understood rankings of authority. When a servant dear to him fell gravely ill, he came to Jesus.

How the centurion deduced the authority of Jesus over illnesses is a mystery. Apparently God used the centurion’s military mindset to show him Jesus held a high rank in God’s kingdom with the power to use it. *But only say the word, and my servant will be healed. Verse 7*

Jesus expressed amazement at the centurion’s faith because he saw it was grounded in the concept of authority. The Roman soldier understood authority when he saw it. Others around saw nothing.

Jesus has the power: The multitudes, Matthew 8:16,17

That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. (ESV)

With enough power, any task is easy. Jesus healed with a *word*, nothing more. It is easy for him. He has the power.

Did this power have limits? Yes. Jesus made it clear he could only do the works the father gave him to do.² He did not heal everyone everywhere at all times, only as the Father directed him. At the pool of Bethesda, for example, he healed only one man and left the others.³

Does Jesus heal everyone who has enough faith?

While visiting a church in Texas during a missions conference, I had a conversation with a lady who recently came through an operation for colon cancer. Judy related her story:

My church told me if I had enough faith, God would heal me and I would not need the operation. I listened to the sermons they gave me, read the books, prayed and believed God as best I could. The time came when the doctors said the cancer was at a crisis point and if I waited longer, it would be inoperable and terminal. I decided to go through with the operation.

When I returned to the church, a lady came up to me and said, "Oh, I'm so sorry you had that operation. If only you had enough faith, you would not have had to go through it."

That remark cut deeper than the incision. When I told my husband Tom he was furious and refused to ever return to the church.

Judy explained that she and her husband were not abandoning the Lord but seeking another church where that sort of experience did not happen. She was visiting the church that day only because of the missions conference.

Is healing in the atonement?

We have come across others like Judy who experienced similar insensitivity from Christians who hold a doctrine called *healing in the atonement*.

This doctrine states that Jesus died on the cross for our physical diseases just as he did for our sins. If we have faith to be saved, then we should also have faith to be healed. If we are sick and are not healed, it is either because we lack faith or have serious sin in our lives that hinder.

That kind of doctrine is what motivated the lady to approach Judy and utter that cutting remark. Jesus, it is said, bore our sicknesses on the cross so that we need not be sick.

Those who hold that doctrine quote two verses in support. One of those is Matthew 8:17,

This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases."

Matthew quotes from the greatest messianic chapter in the Old Testament, Isaiah 53. This chapter, written 700 years before Christ, describes the life and death of the predicted Messiah. Among those predictions is the ministry of healing that would identify the Messiah. *This was to fulfill... Matthew 8:17*

When was that prophecy fulfilled? The healing of the multitude mentioned above at that time fulfilled that prophecy. This occurred three years before Jesus went to the cross.

This fulfilled that verse in Isaiah, not the sacrifice on the cross. Therefore, neither this verse nor the original quote in Isaiah support physical healing in the atonement.

“By his wounds you have been healed”

The verse most often quoted to prove physical healing in the atonement is 1 Peter 2:24,

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

The key phrase in the King James Version is, *by whose stripes ye were healed.*

This has become a mantra to some groups. It is nigh impossible to mention healing within range of them without hearing, “By his stripes you were healed!” They mean if we believe that Jesus already paid the price of our illnesses on the cross, we should be healed just as certainly as we were forgiven our sins.

According to such teaching, if we are not healed, then we don’t believe God’s word, we lack faith and may harbor sin that hinders. The conclusion is inescapable. It must be our own fault.

The result? Frustration, doubt, fear, shame and guilt on those who have not been healed.

Three Greek words for healing occur in the New Testament. From one of them we get words like *therapy* and *therapeutic*.⁴ It means physical healing. This is not the word used in 1 Peter 2:24. The word found here means “cure.”

It carries no content of its own but takes its meaning from the context. If it is a physical ailment, it means cured from that and may be translated as “healed.” If the context refers to something non-material such as an emotional or spiritual state, then it carries that meaning.

What is the context of the verb “healed” in 1 Peter 2:24? *He himself bore our SINS in his body...* His wounds were for our *sins*, not physical ailments. Peter most certainly believed in divine healing but that is not the purpose of his teaching here.

Peter is dealing with the cause of the broken relationship between us and God, the problem of sin. The following verse supports this:

For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1Peter 2:25

Going astray was the problem. That's what he was talking about in verse 11 when he said, *abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul...* Returning to our Shepherd refers to repentance.

Nothing in 1Peter 2:24, nor Matthew 8:17 nor the text in Isaiah 53 from which these were quoted, have anything to do with physical healing in the atonement. Nowhere does the Bible teach Christ died for anything other than sin.

The redemption of our bodies, Romans 8:23

...we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

In Romans 8:19-23, we learn that the creation has been subject to corruption and this state of affairs will remain until the return of Christ. Paul says,

Not only the creation, but we ourselves...wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

This can only mean that our bodies are not presently redeemed. Any healing we may experience are foretastes of the final healing to come.

Where do I place my faith?

I wish to avoid anything that might undermine one's faith. My intent is to help people put their faith on a solid foundation of God's care where his word says to put it.

...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 1Peter 5:7

We must put our faith in God's providential care for us and his undeserved grace, not on any ability of our own to merit it by an indefinable level of faith. The former leads to a resting faith; the latter to self-condemnation. It's a settled trust in God's character, not a reliance on our own.

Healing then and now

According to Matthew 8:17, the massive healing ministry of Jesus authenticated him as the Jewish Messiah predicted in Isaiah 53.

Likewise, the apostles were given extraordinary signs and wonders to authenticate the message of grace, something foreign to the Jewish mind at the time.

...the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. Acts 14:3

To the Jews, this message appeared blasphemous; a departure from the teachings of Moses. It was rooted in their minds that righteousness was obtainable by adherence to the commands of God through Moses. To hear that righteousness is only through faith in a crucified Messiah seemed to assault their entire culture and history.

This necessitated a witness to the word of his grace in extraordinary fashion by granting signs and wonders.

Although a ministry of signs and wonders is not mentioned in the Epistles, prayer for healing among believers is plainly taught and presupposed as part of church life.

Are natural remedies supernatural?

To Timothy Paul says,

No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. 1 Timothy 5:23

Does this advice count as a ministry of healing? Yes.

Why didn't Paul heal Timothy? That is not addressed. Nor do we have clues as to how Paul knew this remedy for Timothy's ailment. Did Paul have a revelation? Advice from his friend Doctor Luke? Paul's own experience?

Answers are lacking. Also missing are exhortations for Timothy to just believe God to be healed. Nor does Paul suggest that Timothy lacked faith or failed to understand the right doctrine about healing. Paul did not consider a natural remedy to be spiritually inferior to prayer.

Medicine and miracles

My friend Jason had a stroke and heart attack at the same time and somehow survived it. The doctors mentally wrote him off as an end-of-life patient but applied treatment nevertheless. The chief surgeon said he had never seen a patient respond so well after such a disastrous event. Jason not only survived but recovered enough to enjoy several more years of life and ministry.

Have you ever heard doctors make remarks like that about a Christian recovering from a serious illness? Was this an answer to prayer and a miracle?

This is where the Bible doctrine of providence comes in. The Westminster Confession expresses it succinctly:

God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure. WCF 5-3

God *normally* works through ordinary circumstances, using people or commonplace means to accomplish his will in hidden ways. However, he is not limited to those and works supernaturally as he wishes.

God mixes himself in the life and circumstances of believers in ways we alone can detect. He is the hidden God who reveals himself to the elect. Jesus said,

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children...

Nothing in God's word suggests it is a lack of faith or spiritually inferior to go to a doctor. It is however, a lack of faith to trust in the doctor more than God. The doctor is the means to the end but he is not God.

When serious illness hits

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. James 5:14,15

...and pray for one another, that you may be healed. Verse 16

This is normal church life in action. Praying for the sick in the church is a part of the ministry of elders.

Notice the phrase, *Let him call for the elders of the church*. Apparently the illness is severe enough that the person may not be able to go to church. Counseling by the elders for sin issues in the life of the ailing believer may be necessary. *And if he has committed sins...*

If we have prayer by elders for healing and then go to the doctor and get healed, does that mean the prayers were unanswered? To the contrary. That is the answer: God working through providential means, the doctor.

What if God does not heal me?

Suppose we receive prayer by the elders, apply medical means and God does not heal us? What attitude should we take? Paul explains,

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

If we can't get out of it, get something out of it

Paul realized that he was not going to escape the affliction he suffered. Therefore, he asked from God what I call *compensatory grace*; a greater anointing, grace and power for ministry to others.

Like Paul, we pray for the sick even if we ourselves are sick.

From this we learn...

- Jesus is willing and able to heal.
- Jesus proved he was the Messiah by his healing ministry as predicted in Isaiah 53.
- Healing is not in the atonement nor guaranteed in this life.
- Nevertheless, we pray for healing for ourselves and one another.
- God is present and active in ordinary means like doctors and medicines or nature. He is not limited to these and may do a supernatural healing.
- If God chooses to not heal either directly or by medicine or natural means, we can ask God for compensation in terms of special grace for ministry to others.
- Pray for healing for the sick, even though you yourself may be sick.

...and pray for one another, that you may be healed. James 5:16

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Endnotes

¹ Matthew 4:23 mentions that Jesus went throughout Galilee healing all sorts of diseases among the people.

² John 14:10

³ John 5:1-9

⁴ *Therapeuo* is the Greek word. The other word is *sozo* and means "save," taking its meaning from the context as to what one is saved from, whether physical or spiritual problems.