

Is Healing Possible?

Acts 28:7-10, 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

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Every week people ask us to pray for healing for people they love. Every Sunday we pray together, asking God to heal them. Do we believe that healing is possible? We are not sure most of the time. We have all heard stories about times when people did recover unexpectedly and attributed it to God. But we also know that we have prayed for people who never got better.

I think a big source of our uncertainty is that we don't want to be like those cock-sure faith healers on TV who touch people on the forehead and make them fall into the arms of their assistants. They seem like so many snake-oil salesmen and hucksters in it for the money. We can't buy the idea that if someone does not get well it means the sick person didn't have enough faith. We don't want to blame the victim. And it just doesn't seem true that healing works like a magical incantation that is guaranteed to produce results.

So where do we start when we think about healing? Let's start with Jesus. If you read through any of the gospels, one of the most important facts you learn about the historical Jesus is that he did miracles of healing. This was the cause of his fame, rather than his teaching. The miracles of healing may well be the thing that got him in trouble with authorities. You can't really talk about Jesus without admitting that somehow he was an agent of God's power to make people well.

But there are two things I want you to notice about Jesus' healing ministry. First, he wasn't solely focused on the body in the way physicians today usually do. Illness for Jesus was something that involved the whole person—body, mind, spirit, and just as importantly, the network of relationships. When Jesus healed a person he restored her status within the community, made it possible to go home, to hold your head up, to be accepted in the place of worship. The aim of healing was the complete well-being of the person.

Second, an unusual feature of Jesus' healing as compared to other healers in the ancient world was the importance of the faith of the person who was ill. Repeatedly Jesus says, "Your faith has made you whole." Now, there were times when Jesus healed someone who didn't expect it at all, but often Jesus implies that there is a connection between his ability to heal and the sick person's ability to believe. There is an element of mystery here, and there is certainly nothing automatic about being healed if you have faith. You can never tell a sick person that if she only had faith she would have been made well. But somehow our own faith seems to be involved in the process of becoming whole.

Even in the gospels, healing was not limited to Jesus. He gave the same power to his disciples. Luke 9:2 says that "He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom and to heal the sick." In Luke 10:9, Jesus says to them, "Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" Notice the connection between healing and the kingdom. Healing is a sign that God's kingdom, God's reign on the earth, has come near. Healing is a sign that the new age of the kingdom has begun with Jesus' coming.

I read a doctrinal statement on healing from a Vineyard church, a church that places emphasis on signs and wonders, which made a lot of this connection between healing and the kingdom [<http://vineyardnorthphoenix.com/story/206>]. We believe that the kingdom of God came with the first coming of Jesus, but we also believe that the kingdom of God will come in its fullness with the

second coming of Jesus. There is an “already” aspect to the kingdom, and there is a “not yet” aspect. So it is with the manifestations of the kingdom, including healing. Healing is part of the kingdom introduced by the first coming of Christ, but it is not a guaranteed part of the kingdom. As God’s will is not yet done on earth as it is in heaven, as the kingdom has not yet come completely, so healing is something that we only see partially manifested at this time. Someday, everyone will be healed. There will be no more sorrow or sickness or death in the final kingdom of God, but in this “not yet” time the occasional healing is more like a foretaste than a guaranteed feature of the Christian life.

When you come to the book of Acts, there are many stories of the apostles, the first preachers and missionaries, healing people as a sign that they are messengers of the real God and his Messiah. “Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give thee”—which turns out to be healing. The apostle Paul on a missionary journey heals a man crippled from birth [4:10]. In another place Paul does so many extraordinary healing miracles that they begin to take handkerchiefs that even touch Paul’s skin and carry them to people who are sick, and they are healed [19:11-12]. In one famous story, a guy named Eutychus falls asleep during Paul’s sermon and falls out of a third floor window and is apparently killed; Paul touches him and brings him back to life [20:9-12]. Then there is the story we read earlier, where the father of the top official on Malta is healed and they bring other sick people to Paul for healing.

But at the same time, we are told that Paul himself was sick. He writes to the Galatians that when he first came to them he came because of an illness; those he preached to actually prayed for Paul to be healed. In the well-known passage we read, Paul tells about his “thorn in the flesh,” a physical ailment he begged Jesus three times to take away, but Jesus did not give healing. Instead, Jesus said, “My grace is sufficient for you.” There are also references in Paul’s letters to three co-workers who suffered from illness—Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Trophimus. Apparently Paul could not heal them, and they could not heal themselves.

My point is that healing is not something that automatically comes to people of faith. People of faith get sick, too, and they are not all healed by any means. Furthermore, I hate to break it to you, but you will die, even if you are healed. Even Lazarus eventually died. We will all die, but we will all also be healed someday. But not yet.

The fact that prayer for healing does not “work” all the time like magic does not mean that we should not keep asking God to heal people we care about. On the contrary, the implication of the New Testament is that followers of Jesus are commanded to heal. Healing is one of the normal spiritual gifts given in a special measure to some members of the church. And in James 5, we are given explicit instruction: “Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well.” The oil here may be sacramental, as a symbol of God’s presence, or it may simply be the everyday medicine used back then. But the command is not for a faith healer to be called for, but for the church itself to pray for healing with the elected officers of the church as its representatives. And the promise is that if we pray for one another in faith, the sick will be healed.

I used to wonder if this is still true. Like most of you, I have a scientific, germ-oriented view of sickness as something that isn’t really affected by spiritual powers. I never had a class in seminary on healing; I had a lot of classes on comforting the sick and dying.

So it came as a shock to me in the first church I served as pastor in New Jersey to have a member of the church—a registered nurse—come to me to ask to be anointed by oil and prayed over for healing. They had found a lump in her breast. They had scheduled her for surgery. The

day before surgery she wanted me to gather some deacons and anoint her with oil in the name of Jesus, just as James says.

The truth, which I didn't tell her, is that I wasn't a great believer in such things. But I did believe the Bible in general and I did want to be the pastor she needed, so I decided to give it a try. I got a little bottle of olive oil. I called a few deacons. This nurse sat on a loveseat in the pastor's office and let me put oil on her forehead and the top of her head. She let the deacons put their hand on her head and her shoulders while I prayed that God would heal her of that lump and not allow her to have any cancer. After everyone was gone and I had hidden away the oil, I'm sure I must have closed my office door with a shrug. Whatever. You do a lot of odd things in ministry.

Well, you can probably guess the end of the story. This nurse went to the hospital operating room the next morning as a patient. When they did the MRI to determine the precise location of the lump to be removed, they could not find a lump at all. When she told me, I almost fell down. And then I repented of not having faith to believe our prayers could be answered.

I should have known better. Several years earlier, my mother had been hospitalized for ulcer surgery. It was her second time. The first time they had taken half her stomach. Now there wasn't that much left, but there was a large ulcer in her stomach again and they were afraid it might be cancerous. She went to Dallas, where her brother was an internist and cardiologist. He wanted to be able to keep an eye on her and have one of his friends do the surgery. This time there was no one there to pray for Mom. Her brother was a decided skeptic about God. She lay in the hospital room alone the night before surgery and began to pray for her own healing. After a while, a deep peace came on her and she fell asleep. The next morning they did a test before surgery—maybe it was an X-ray with barium in those days—and they could not find the ulcer. Everything was healed. No one had an explanation—except Mom. Certainly not my uncle. It was some kind of fluke or error. I wept for joy when I heard the news, because I was scared for my mother's life, but deep down I identified more with my braniac uncle than with my faithful mother. It took miracles I saw with my own eyes, miracles worked through my own unsure hands, before I really came around.

Twelve days ago we had a group of American Baptist pastors from Rhode Island come here for a retreat. American Baptists are not noted for being fanatics or wild-eyed charismatics. We are a pretty mild-mannered group who love Jesus but don't make a show of it. We had a nice session at the Manisses about spiritual direction, and a wonderful dinner, followed by entertainment which was to be provided by Becca and me. I read some poems, alternating with songs by Becca—torch songs as well as praise songs. At the end of the program, someone said, "I think we should pray for sister Becca." They knew about her history of chronic pain and the dead end in dealing with it. Becca had shared with them that she had come to accept her pain as something that was given to her so that she could learn that "His grace is enough." One man from India said, "I think we should pray that she be healed." So they gathered around Becca as she sat in a chair. The man from India took the lead and two African American women stood closest to Becca. As they began to voice their prayers, I thought to myself "They actually *believe* that God can heal her!" So I joined in, "God *please* give Becca relief from her pain."

You know the rest of the story. The pain that had dogged Becca for three years was gone. Neither of us knew how to process that. At first, Becca said, "If this is only for the trip to Nathan's graduation, I'll still be thankful." Then when her pain did not return, it began to sink in that this might be permanent. We don't know, of course. She went to her chronic pain doctor,

who looked at it as a religious “experience,” but his two nurses believed that Becca had been healed.

Is healing possible? Obviously it is. It is not something within our control. It is not the guaranteed result of praying with a particular technique. But somehow the combination of faith—from either the prayer or the one who needs healing—and the power of God’s Spirit *can* bring about healing from pain and from all kinds of illness. I have seen ulcers and cancers healed, fevers reduced, surgery avoided, and people brought back to their right minds. It is not magic. It is not something a healer does. It is something God does.

I cannot promise you anything, but I can offer you the promises of God. If you would like Becca and me to pray for your healing, along with some of our deacons, I invite you to come forward and sit on the front pew while we ask God to heal your body, your mind, your spirit, your life. This is not something strange. This is something normal in the life of the church, and something we can do with faith as we announce the presence of the kingdom of God.