

A good friend of mine recently returned from a mission to Nepal. While his team was trekking through the mountains they had come to a remote village where a man whose foot was swollen to the size of a football was brought to them. This man did not yet know Jesus, and he had no medical hope of reaching a hospital to receive help. Feeling compassion for the man, the team laid hands on him and prayed for Jesus to heal his foot. Immediately following prayer, his foot shrunk down to normal size right before their eyes! Jesus healed this man's physical body in a miraculous way to the glory of God, which provided an opportunity for the team to share the gospel to those in the village. Jesus heals today!

We recently held a Sunday morning healing service here at church. People were invited to come forward for prayer for all kinds of healing: spiritual, physical, and emotional. There were teams of us ready to pray when people came forward. We were not prepared for the response! An estimated 150 people were prayed for. One person who came forward right at the very end was Dave. Dave was recently diagnosed with ALS, which is a brutal disease that is considered terminal. Dave and his family came forward to me specifically (because my uncle passed away from ALS almost 20 years ago), and asked that I would anoint him with oil and pray for his healing. I anointed his head, held his skeleton hand in mine, and tearfully asked God to heal his body. We pleaded with God that morning and many times since for God to heal Dave's body. Yet his body is still sick and degenerating. What I have seen evidence of in Dave's life is spiritual healing. His trust in Jesus is deepening and his affections for Jesus are growing. Maybe Dave's physical healing is future when he gets his resurrection body. Jesus heals today!

I tell you these two stories because they expose the deep mysteries that surround healing. Our understanding and longing for it are often limited. We expect to see miraculous physical healings that often don't materialize. But as the stories illustrate, healing is so much broader than that. Through Jesus, God heals. He heals physically, emotionally, and spiritually (and they are all connected). One man was instantly healed physically then was offered spiritual healing, while the other has received spiritual

healing and must wait for his physical healing to be completed in the future. What do we make of this? I believe that we live in this mysterious tension between God's sovereignty, our suffering, and temporary (any healing on earth) and ultimate healing. It is in this tension that I want to move forward with you.

I want you to imagine that you have recently been diagnosed with cancer and you have come to me for guidance. You are not asking why you have cancer, but are asking the more practical question: "Can and will God heal me of this cancer?" You need a worldview big enough to handle cancer, and a hope big enough to thrive in it. Here's what I would say in response to your question: "God frequently heals today, and it is very possible that he will heal you. We are still living in an age where the kingdom of God is *already here* but *not yet* fully here, which means that Christians in this life will experience healing but they will also experience continuing illness and eventual death. In the end it is God's sovereign Fatherly wisdom that decides the outcome, and our role is simply to ask him and wait for him to answer."<sup>1</sup> This is as balanced of a response that I can honestly offer, and there is hope in it.

Where did I come up with this? The Bible. Where we see that Jesus healed. I was recently re-reading the gospels and was amazed at the frequency and diversity of the healings of Jesus. It is not a minor theme. He healed all types of people from all types of diseases, using all types of means, and gave all types of explanations. It really is a fascinating read. Each gospel has its own flavor and purpose.

### **Messiah and King**

I'm convinced that the way Luke the physician tells it is intentional. He wants to show how the healings serve as *authentication of Jesus' identity as Messiah*. In Luke 4:16-19 Jesus stands up in the synagogue on the Sabbath day and reads from Isaiah 61:1-2. He is declaring that it refers to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those

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<sup>1</sup> Response adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1067.

who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The Spirit of the Lord was upon him, which Luke later explains to mean that the "power of the Lord was upon him to heal."<sup>2</sup> Jesus would have a special ministry by the power of the Spirit, which pointed to his identity as Messiah.

But not only were Jesus' healings authentication of his identity, Matthew seems to tell the story in such a way as to say that they demonstrate that there was a new king in town. He began his ministry with these words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand...And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people."<sup>3</sup> His *healing miracles demonstrated that the Kingdom of God was in fact at hand*. They pointed to this reality. There was a new world order. You could argue that his healings served a theological purpose, more than just a physical purpose. Authentication and demonstration.

### **Jesus Healed of Everything**

You don't get the impression that there was anything Jesus couldn't heal of. With the power of the Spirit, his repertoire was exhaustive because the infinite power of God was at his disposal. In two chapters alone of the gospel of Matthew you see that he healed of leprosy, of a fever, of demon oppression, demon possession, of paralysis, of death, of bleeding, of blindness, and of being mute.<sup>4</sup> You get the sense that if there were someone with cancer before him, Jesus could have healed him. He had infinite power to heal in the Spirit.

### **Jesus Didn't Heal Everyone**

Not only could he heal of anything, he could heal anyone. Jesus healed many, many people. Sometimes he healed *everyone* around him: "all those who had any who were sick with various diseases

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 5:17b

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 4:17b,23

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 8-9

brought them to him, and he laid his hands on *every one* of them and healed them,”<sup>5</sup> and others emphasize that he healed *many*: “In that hour he healed *many* people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on *many* who were blind he bestowed sight.”<sup>6</sup> And in John 5, he healed *one* of a multitude.

John describes that Jesus went to a pool called Bethesda where a multitude of invalids—the blind, lame, and paralyzed lay. He walked up to one man (of the multitude) who had been lame for 38 years and healed him instantly. We are not told that he healed any more than the one...and they were all sick and needy. Imagine...this means that he walked right past sick people to heal one sick person and we are not even told why not the others. Jesus certainly had the power to heal anyone of anything; and he did heal many...but he didn’t heal everyone. Jesus went to a pool called Bethesda where a multitude of invalids—the blind, lame, and paralyzed lay. He walked up to one man (of the multitude) who had been lame for 38 years and healed him instantly. We are not told that he healed any more than the one...and they were all sick and needy. Imagine...this means that he walked right past sick people to heal one sick person and we are not even told why not the others. Jesus certainly had the power to heal anyone of anything; and he did heal many...but he didn’t heal everyone. He must have had a purpose. He had the power to heal anyone of anything and he used it lavishly, but he didn’t use it exhaustively.

### **Jesus Doesn’t Change**

Jesus healed by the power of the Spirit, and after his ascension he sent us the Spirit. Which means that healings should be a part of what we see today in his ministry. Even though we don’t always see our prayers for healing realized as we ask, we should not be surprised to hear stories of healing. For the author of Hebrews reminds us that, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus can heal today, but as noted, he won’t heal everyone.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:40

<sup>6</sup> Luke 7:21

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 13:8

## Got To Have Faith

Many people like to debate what it takes to be healed by Jesus. What conditions must be met prior to healing. They want to figure out some sort of reason that some are healed, and others are not. They want black and white in the grey. So they argue about the role of faith in healing. Having a deep trust that Jesus *can* heal is certainly a prerequisite, but whose faith is it that heals?

This is much more complex than some would like. Some would say that it is the faith of the one seeking the healing, while others would say that it is the faith of the one asking for the healing of someone else. You see this at play in the same story in Luke 8. In the first story where Jesus heals a woman, he says that it is her own faith that made her well (verse 48). In the second story about the healing of Jairus' daughter (verse 50) it was Jairus' faith that made his daughter well (not her own). So which is it? The answer, I think, is not to emphasize faith to the neglect of the God of the faith. The emphasis ought to be on the Healer, not the healing. A.B. Simpson adds a necessary word of caution into the faith discussion: "There is a danger in getting one's mind so concentrated on faith that it may come between the soul and God...It is God who heals always. The less we dwell on the prayers, the faith, or any of the means through which it comes, the more likely we will be to receive the blessing.<sup>8</sup> Don't make your healing the object of your faith, but make God the object.

## Sick Christians?

Can teachings on faith and healing become damaging and anti-gospel? I think so. Some have developed a theory that says that true Christians will not suffer. "It is not meant, however, that man though being a mortal body, should live in pain and suffering, nor die by an affliction. Faith will secure for the believer a life of Divine health and vigor, and when death comes at the appointed time, it can be without great suffering or disease. Of course imperfect faith and obedience frequently hinders this full

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<sup>8</sup> A.B. Simpson, *The Four-Fold Gospel*, 88.

ideal physical state. But this provision is valid, notwithstanding, and is actually appropriated by many believers.”<sup>9</sup> Did you catch that? According to this teaching, man should not “live in pain and suffering, nor die by affliction.” It is not God’s will that man should suffer. Only weak Christians get sick and suffer, and this is always their own fault, and if only they had more faith they would not suffer. I guess that the apostle Paul never had enough faith or obedience, nor did any one of the apostles, nor those who suffered in the early church, nor those who get sick today.

It seems cruel to tell anyone that they would be free of sickness and suffering right now if they just believed enough. The danger of this teaching (in my opinion) is that it misses out on God’s redemptive purposes in our suffering. It is shallow, and it appropriates too neatly our future hope to the present.

### **Redemption Right**

Our traditions’ founder, A.B. Simpson, is famous for the connection he made between the atonement and physical healing. The Suffering Servant passage of Isaiah 53 was foundational to his understanding. It says, “Surely he [Jesus] has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities...and with his wounds we are healed”<sup>10</sup>. Jesus took our griefs and sorrows onto himself and exchanged them for his healing. Later on in Matthews gospel, immediately following a statement that Jesus healed all who were sick, Matthew interprets: “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took our illnesses and bore our diseases’.”<sup>11</sup> Simpson took this to mean that Jesus’ physical wounds not only provide our spiritual healing, but our physical healing as well. Jesus died for our sickness and disease, and we get his healthy

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<sup>9</sup> G.P. Duffield and N.M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, 410.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 53:4-5

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 8:17

life here and now. This right was to be experienced presently and was ours for the taking if only we would receive it by faith.

I consider this an over-realized eschatology. Could it be that the right of physical healing is a future guarantee and that now when experienced (and it is by some) is only a foretaste of what is to come...the fully realized kingdom? Because we eagerly await the day that, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."<sup>12</sup>

### **Already/Not Yet**

Wayne Grudem explains this tension well: "All Christians would probably agree that in the atonement Christ has purchased for us not only complete freedom from sin but also complete freedom from physical weakness and infirmity in his work of redemption. And all Christians would also no doubt agree that our full and complete possession of all the benefits that Christ earned for us will not come until Christ returns: it is only "at his coming" (1 Cor. 15:23) that we receive our perfect resurrection bodies. So it is with physical healing and redemption from the physical sickness that came as a result of the curse in Genesis 3: our complete possession of redemption from physical illness will not be ours until Christ returns and we receive resurrection bodies."<sup>13</sup> So in the meantime we groan with eager anticipation for what is to come...the redemption of our bodies.<sup>14</sup>

So to you who have just been diagnosed with cancer I say: Jesus is able to heal you of your cancer, trust him, keep your eyes on him, and he may heal you of your cancer...but he might not heal you here and now. Your healing is certain, but it may be future. Which leads me to a few questions and a word of counsel for you. Question – Is Jesus still who he said he was if he chooses not to heal your

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<sup>12</sup> Revelation 21:4

<sup>13</sup> Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology*, 1063.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 8:23

body right now? Is he still enough for you? Do you want his gift, or do you want him? Counsel – Don't stop praying and waiting and trusting, and invite others to join you.

### **Pray to Your Father**

I love how Jesus begins the Lord's Prayer as recorded in Matthew. He invites us to relate to God as our Father (6:9). It is key to prayer in general, and in prayers for healing, to remember who you are praying to. This affects our posture. You who are suffering with cancer are coming before God like a child to a Father. You do not need to come sheepishly, but can approach him with confidence. He wants to hear you. Jesus invites us to relate to God in this most intimate way. The point of the first half of how Jesus taught us to pray is to re-orient us towards God. To remind us of who he is, in order to shape what we ask. *He is the Father in heaven* – this means that he is infinitely powerful, yet present and accessible to us. *His name is to be hallowed* – as his children we ought to be most concerned with his glory and honor (not our own). *We want his kingdom to come and his will to be done* – we want our prayers to be shaped by his priorities. Then we are to ask Him to give us what we need. And surely he will give us what we need because He is a good Dad.

We know that he will give us what is best because that is what Jesus tells us. In Matthew 7:11 Jesus states, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" When we come to God to ask him for healing we can trust in his sovereignty and his goodness. We can trust that he knows best. I love how Tim Keller explains this, he writes that when we pray: "God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knows."<sup>15</sup> We are limited in our requests, while God sees his greater purpose. Prayers for healing are answered when we ask our Dad for what He already wants to give.

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<sup>15</sup> Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 228.



### **Pray for God to be Glorified**

As Christians, we are engaged in a glory war. We want it, yet God deserves it. When we ask God to heal, we ought to pray “for God to be glorified in the situation, whether he chooses to heal or not.”<sup>16</sup> It is possible that God may be more glorified in your suffering than in your miraculous healing.

### **Invite the Church into Your Pain**

James 5 is the quintessential text regarding prayers for healing. In it James teaches individuals to pray in times of suffering, to sing in times of joy, and to invite others into their pain and sickness. To sick people he exhorts: “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. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.” This is crucial to someone who is suffering alone – don’t stay alone. Call the elders, invite them in, have them pray and anoint you with oil. This not a magic formula, there are no healing properties in the oil; it is an exercise in obedience. In the end it is still up to God whether he heals immediately or not.

Our church practices anointing with oil and prayer by the elders every Sunday. Sometimes people are healed physically, sometimes spiritually, and sometimes emotionally. We do know that when our prayers and God’s will intersect there is healing. “We can be assured that God uses all prayer for healing to accomplish good in the life of the sick person. Sometimes the good which God does will provide immediate strength and an experience of divine grace, but not instant healing.”<sup>17</sup> All are experiences of healing.

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<sup>16</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1066.

<sup>17</sup> T.D. Lea, *Hebrews, James*, 356.

God may or may not heal you in the way that you ask (he may have a greater purpose than you can imagine in it). In the meantime, until you are completely healed, let me encourage you to not waste your sickness.

### **Don't Waste Your Cancer**

In 2006 John Piper was diagnosed with cancer. Immediately following the diagnoses he decided to write a counter-intuitive article called "Don't Waste Your Cancer" that has stood out to me since I read it years ago. In the preamble he encourages people to pursue healing prayer, and to pursue medical means, since they both can bring glory to God. He then lists 10 ways that people might waste their cancer:

1. You will waste your cancer if you do not believe it was designed for you by God.
2. You will waste your cancer if you believe it is a curse and not a gift.
3. You will waste your cancer if you seek comfort from your odds rather than from God.
4. You will waste your cancer if you refuse to think about death.
5. You will waste your cancer if you think "beating" cancer means staying alive rather than cherishing Christ.
6. You will waste your cancer if you spend too much time reading about cancer and not enough time reading about God.
7. You will waste your cancer if you let it drive you into solitude instead of deepen your relationships with manifest affection.
8. You will waste your cancer if you grieve as those who have no hope.
9. You will waste your cancer if you treat sin as casually as before.
10. You will waste your cancer if you fail to use it as a means of witness to the truth and glory of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

I thank God that He can and does heal today, that he has a plan and a purpose for our pain, and that we can trust him in the already/not yet because He is our loving heavenly Father. I trust that this offers you hope as you navigate the uncertainties of your suffering.

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<sup>18</sup> John Piper, "Don't Waste Your Cancer" in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 207-217.

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