

Does God Heal Today?

By Pastor David C. Forsyth

When beginning a study on the subject of divine healing it is important to affirm right up front that we believe that God can and does heal people every day of the week, sometimes in most unusual and remarkable ways. Every time a person gets injured or ill and then recovers, whether medicine and doctors are involved or not, the true healer was God himself. So the question is not does God heal, but does God heal through the agency of specially gifted people who are called healers? The answer to this question can only be resolved by a serious and thoughtful examination of Scripture.

In Matthew 11:2-6, John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus asking if He was the expected Messiah, or was there another to come. Jesus answered him *“The blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.”* (Matt. 11:5 – NASB) These events were the hallmarks of Jesus’ earthly ministry (Acts 2:22) and have an important bearing on the question of divine healing. First, when Jesus and His disciples healed someone it was done with a word or a touch and was instantaneous and complete.¹ Second, Jesus and the disciples healed people from organic diseases such as withered limbs, blind eyes, leprosy, chronic bleeding, death, etc. Finally, the healings were for the most part performed on unbelievers, and the presence of faith on the part of the recipient was not, in all cases, an essential element to the healing (Matt. 17:19-21; Jn. 5:1-16). The same pattern for healing was repeated by Jesus’ disciples in the book of Acts, where they prayed, and asked God for boldness to preach the gospel, and signs and wonders to confirm the message (Acts 4:29-30).

Outside of the Gospels and the book of Acts, the only references to healing occur in the early epistle of First Corinthians, (written AD 52-56) which list “gifts of healings” as one of the spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:9, 29-30). This passage however, does not in any way define the gift, thus we are forced back to the Gospels and Acts to determine its meaning.

It is further noted that Paul’s healing ministry apparently also tapered off as the Church became established and grew. For example, in Philippians 2:25-30 (written AD 60-62), Paul was unable to heal Epaphroditus who almost died from his illness. Also in First Timothy 5:23 (written AD 62-64) Paul advised Timothy to drink wine for his stomach problems, and in 2 Tim. 4:20 (written AD 66-67), Paul left Trophimus sick rather than heal him. This all in our judgement points to a fading out of the apostolic sign gift of “healings.”

¹ In Mark 8:22-26 the healing of the blind man occurred in two stages separated by a matter of a few seconds.

Will God Heal Me?

When in the grip of physical pain and suffering it is difficult to focus on anything else besides relief from the pain. This natural and occasionally desperate search to find relief understandably drives many people to seek out “faith healers.” Although we empathize with those in such great need, we do not believe that the “faith healer” route is the Biblical one. A careful examination of the prayers that are recorded for us in the Epistles demonstrate a noticeable lack of emphasis on physical health.² In Paul’s great prayers for believers in Ephesians 1& 3, he prays for them to understand who they are in Christ, and to live in accordance with that knowledge. Further, the books of James and 1st Peter teach that suffering is inevitable for the Christian and is important for the refining of our faith (Ja. 1:2-4, 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Does this mean that I can never pray for the recovery of a sick friend, loved one, or even myself? Absolutely not! Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus understands and sympathizes with our weaknesses, and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expressed the intimacy of the Father’s care for us, even including what we eat and wear. Thus it is quite appropriate for us to beseech our heavenly Father for physical healing or help (II Cor. 12:7-10). However this petition must be offered according to the model given to us by our Lord when He said “*yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt*” (Mk. 14:36 – NASB).

Frequently Misunderstood Verses

□ **Isaiah 53:5 cf. Matt. 8:17 1 Pet. 2:24**

Is there physical healing in the atonement? Doesn’t Isaiah 53 promise that “*by his stripes you were healed*”? In order to understand the message of Is. 53:5 we must understand the nature of man’s problem and the resulting nature of the atonement. Man is sinful and is thus separate from God. In Leviticus 16, God provided a temporary cure for that separation via a blood sacrifice or atonement. This animal sacrifice prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. When examining the prophetic description of Christ’s sacrifice in Isaiah 53:5 we must notice the emphasis of the verse is on the fact that Jesus’ sufferings were for our “transgressions,” “iniquities,” and “well-being,” or “peace.” These words relate directly to our sin problem, not to our problem with physical sickness. This is Peter’s point when he writes that Christ “*bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.*” (1st Pet. 2:24 - NASB) The context of 1st Peter 2:24 is Christ’s sacrifice for our sin problem not His sacrifice for our sickness problem.

Finally, Matthew quotes Isaiah 53 in conjunction with Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14-17). When examining this verse however, it is important to note that Matthew says that Jesus “carried

² Lockyer, Herbert, *All the Prayers of the Bible*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1959, pg. 13-14.

away”(NASB) our diseases rather than sacrificially bore them. This important distinction reveals that Matthew was speaking analogously from the sin bearing of Isaiah 53, to the healing ministry of Matthew 8.³

It is however, important to note that in one sense the atonement does contain our physical healing. According to Romans 8:23, at our glorification, Christ will eliminate the sin-caused corruption which presently infects our bodies. Speaking of this same event, John writes in his vision from Patmos “*He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.*” (Rev. 21:4 -NASB)

□ **James 5:13-18**

This passage in James describes the requirement for a sick person to call for the elders of their church (not those with the “gift of healing”) to come to their bedside and anoint them with oil and pray for their recovery. The exact interpretation of this passage, including the requirement for oil is subject to various interpretations, however, it is important to note several items that need to be accounted for in any satisfactory interpretation of the passage.

1. Why call for the elders rather than go to them?
2. Why does the passage include a reference to sin?
3. Notice that the passage contains a promise of both healing and forgiveness. Thus according to this passage, the healing and forgiveness can be expected to occur by all involved.
4. The question of whose “faith” is being referred to in verse 15 must be accounted for.
5. The conclusion statement in verse 16 involves an imperative to confess and pray in order to be healed.
6. The analogy drawn from the life of Elijah must be adequately accounted for.

Space does not permit a detailed examination of this passage, however, one conclusion can be clearly drawn, which is that the passage does not in any way promote or support “faith healers.”

We trust that this short study has been profitable for you and contributes to your obedient walk of faith. *Psalms 119:105*

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For further study we recommend the following:

1. Counterfeit Miracles – B.B. Warfield
2. The Healing Promise – Richard Mayhue
3. Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit – Thomas Edgar
4. Charismatic Chaos – John MacArthur

³ Mayhue, Richard, *The Healing Promise*, Christian Focus Publications: Great Britain, 1997, pg. 123.