

## Healing & the Christian Life

### Part 2

(Submitted by Pastor Ernie Roberts towards completion of requirements for Ordination within the  
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When it comes to the topic of spiritual healing, one of the most important, and controversial, areas of discussion and thought is that concerning the connection between sin and sickness. Similar to the topic of healing in general, there seems to be a wide spectrum of Christian thought/doctrine regarding the degree of cause and effect between individual and communal sin and individual and communal sickness and suffering. Some Christians at one end of the spectrum always see a direct link between the two; if a person is sick, they reason, the person must have done something wrong to deserve it. Sickness is always seen as evidence of God's wrath. On the extreme end of the spectrum, however, are those who seldom, if even, speak about the 'S' word (i.e. 'sin') and give little, if any, credence to the idea that sin and sickness are related, much less that illness is directly 'caused' by God. So, where should we situate ourselves on this spectrum? As we'll soon see, we can state with confidence one axiom regarding the question of sin and sickness, namely, that when it comes to the mystery of healing, sin and sickness, there are no easy answers. There is also abundant evidence to suggest that positioning ourselves on either extreme end of the spectrum may result in grave (sometimes literally-speaking) circumstances. In striving to discern the best position to take regarding the relationship between sin and sickness, let us consider the breadth of scripture on the topic.

First of all, though we tend to take sickness and death for granted, even going so far as to believe that they're 'just part of being human', because of their prominence in history and in our experience, we would do well to remember that, according to scripture sickness and death were *not* part of the original, God-designed human condition/experience and were *not* part of God's original purpose. (If they were, why would God eventually send His only Son to defeat sin, death and illness?) Though the exact mechanics of how death and sickness entered the world as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God is not clear, it is clear that when sin emerged, sickness, pain and death followed immediately after. There was the advent of emotional and relational pain when Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness (Genesis 3:7). There was the fracturing of the relationship between the two of them and God as they ran and hid themselves in shame (v.8). The following verses unravel a litany of suffering, such as pain in childbirth and agony of stressful work, that would plague humanity for generations to come. As the Apostle Paul so succinctly puts in Romans 5:12 "Therefore, (just as) through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned..." Acknowledging this early historical link between sin, death and illness is critical to a balanced theology of healing in two respects, first of all, we are reminded that sin and illness are NOT part of God's overall intent and that He's continually working to eradicate them (hence, the work of Christ) and secondly that what is at play here is not sin in the sense of an insignificant moral indiscretion but sin as a universal 'condition'. Though there is often a tendency to seek easy, cause and effect answers to the question 'Why am I sick', seeking a specific moral failure as the culprit, often times the reality is that we, as humans, are effected by a much more complex, mysterious and robust condition of sin. Bruce Reichenbach makes a helpful, though sobering distinction here: "Of course, sin and sickness are not identical. The first (sin) is the condition; the second (sickness) is the result. So we need a healer who will address both the condition and the result. Though addressing the sin is central, at the same time only by addressing the complete human condition-physical, economic, political and environmental- can we

attain well-being.” (p.126). It is seldom as simple as concluding “The cause of my being sick with shingles is because I cheated on my taxes...I’ll stop cheating on my taxes and therefore be cured.” Accusations towards others are, similarly, seldom accurate, such as “The reason she’s suffering from asthma is because she had sex outside of marriage.” Now, I’m not suggesting that specific cases of human sinfulness are inconsequential, only that the condition of sin that we find ourselves in often results in making easy, trite cause-and-effect connections between sin and illness difficult.

When we look at scriptures dealing with the issue of sin, sickness and calamity we see both clear and not-so-clear examples of the connection between sin and illness. In the Old Testament, for instance, there are stories in which clearly God uses illness to punish those who have sinned. Consider 1 Samuel 5:9 in which God uses tumors to punish the Philistines for capturing and moving the Ark of the Covenant, or when King David sinned with Bathsheba and “Then the Lord struck the child that Uriah’s widow bore to David, so that he was *very* sick.” (2 Samuel 12:15b). However, consider the experience of one of the Hebrew’s most faithful and successful kings, Hezekiah, in 2 Chronicles chapter 32. In verse 20, we learn that God honours Hezekiah’s faithful prayer for deliverance and destroys the Assyrians which are threatening Hezekiah’s kingdom. Then, in verse 24 we read that Hezekiah becomes mortally ill. Why? Where is the cause-and-effect here of Hezekiah doing something terrible which ‘caused’ his illness? Though there is no clear link here between the illness and sin, the verses that follow so show that when Hezekiah does sin, by becoming proud over the fact that God spoke to him and gave him a sign, calamity falls on Judah and Jerusalem (v.25). In this one story there is both clear, and unclear, cause and effect. And then there’s Job. A faithful servant of God by all accounts, and his entire life is devastated by loss and illness. At one point, Job seeks to figure out the cause and effect of his situation, by asking “Is it not calamity to the unjust and disaster to those who work iniquity? Does He not see my ways and number all my steps? If I have walked with falsehood, and my foot has hastened after deceit,

let Him weigh me with accurate scales, and let God know my integrity.”(Job 31:3-5). Though God responds by asserting His own majesty and sovereignty, there is no clear cause and effect answer.

In the New Testament there are many instances of Jesus working to heal the whole person, and thus, many cases where both sin, illness and other factors are dealt with together. Consider the case in Matthew chapter 9 in which a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus for healing. When Jesus says: “...Take courage my son, your sins are forgiven.”(v.2) it is closely related to Jesus’ later proclamation: “Rise, take up your bed and go home.” (v.6). Though Jesus is determined to heal the man entirely and deals with both his sin and his paralysis, there is no statement by our Lord “This man is paralyzed *because* of his sinfulness. In the story in John’s Gospel of the man born blind, it is Jesus’ disciples that ask the ‘Why?’ question, that seek a simple cause-and-effect relationship. “...Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?”(John 9:2). Jesus states that the blindness was not caused by sinfulness on either the man or his parents’ parts. Reichenbach sums up these diverse scriptures by stating: “Consequently, we must be very careful about linking sin and sickness. Though sin can be divinely punished by sickness and other calamities, it by no means follows that all sickness and calamities are due to sin.”(p. 123). Later, we’ll examine what implications this has for how we deal with prayers for healing that don’t seem to be answered.

Now, just as it is often difficult to make accurate statements as to how illness is related to sin, I would submit that it is difficult to make accurate statements with regards to how God heals. Last week, we noted A.B. Simpson’s distinction between divine healing and medical healing but raised the question whether it is accurate, or wise, to always make such a rigid distinction. Put another way, though God can, and does, heal directly through miraculous means, does it necessarily follow that He is limited to those miraculous means? Even from a biblical point of view, there doesn’t seem to be an easy answer in terms of whether or not healing can only come through miraculous means. In the Old Testament, for

example, there are no explicit prohibitions against the use of medicine and there are examples of natural remedies being used. This was true in 2 Kings 20, when the prophet Isaiah gives instruction to King Hezekiah, who is suffering from boils, to "...Take a cake of figs." And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered." (vs.7). Theologically speaking, to the extent to which the Holy Spirit is involved in healing it would seem unwise to limit the ways and means by which He brings healing. As Jesus affirmed regarding the dynamic, uncontainable nature of the Holy Spirit in John 3:8 "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it come from and where it is going..." If God created human intelligence, would it not be possible for Him to bring healing, albeit indirectly, through the vast knowledge of the medical community? If God created nature, would it not be possible for Him to bring healing, albeit indirectly, through natural substances such as penicillin, and morphine? Even from a basic understanding of human anatomy it doesn't seem an unreasonable stretch to suggest that God is able to bring healing through the amazing ability of the body to rejuvenate; an ability that He, after all, created us with.

With all due respect to A.B. Simpson, I take issue with the statement he makes after he distinguishes between divine healing and medical healing, namely: "We have nothing to say against the use of remedies so far as those are concerned who are not ready to trust their bodies fully to the Lord."("Fourfold Gospel."p.33). He's implying, of course, that medicine is to be seen as a last resort for those who are not mature enough Christians to trust fully in God. Though trusting fully in the Lord is important, I would contend that when it comes to illness, prayer and medicine, it is easy, and dangerous, to cross from trust into presumption. Let me use a variation on an old joke to illustrate the difference between faithfulness and presumption. There once was a Christian man who was very accident prone. One day, he tripped and broke his arm. "We'd better get you to Emergency so that the Doctor can set your arm and put it in a cast," his wife exclaimed. "No, that's OK," the man said "I'm a Christian and God will heal me." A few weeks later, the man developed an infection in his foot and his

Doctor wrote out a prescription for antibiotics. “No, that’s OK Doc,” said the man “I’m a Christian and God’ll heal me. I don’t need a prescription.” Over the next few months, the man kept seeing ads on TV urging men to have regular prostate exams, but when his wife urged him to go see the doctor, the man simply said: “No, that’s OK dear. I’m a Christian and I’m trusting that God’ll take care of me.” A year later, the man had completely lost the use of his arm, had developed gangrene in his foot and cancer of the prostate. He eventually died and went to heaven. Upset by this turn of events, He asked God: “Why did I die Lord? I trusted that you’d heal me.” God responded: “I provided an emergency room, antibiotics and a proctologist, what more did you expect?” Prayer for direct, miraculous healing is very important, but presuming that God can only work via miraculous means can be perilous.

I should say that my personal perspectives on this are not only informed by scripture and reason, but by experience. 30 years ago, my Mother’s youngest sister, my Aunt Shirley, was involved with a church (the denomination of which shall remain nameless) which placed a heavy emphasis on the scripture “...by His stripes, you are healed.” Regardless of whether it was explicit doctrine or not, Shirley understood this to mean that if she was a true Christian, trusting completely in Jesus, that she would never get ill. One implication of this for Shirley was that she felt it was no longer necessary to see her Doctor for regular PAP tests. Eventually, Shirley developed cervical cancer and by the time it was diagnosed, it was terminal. My father, a minister of a different church at the time went to Shirley’s bedside to pray with her and to offer some comfort during her last days but became very upset when he discovered that many people from her own congregation were there too, grilling her about what sin she had committed to ‘cause’ her cancer. Shirley died a few weeks later.

Though we sometimes find ourselves wrestling with the difficult questions regarding sin, sickness and healing, we are always drawn back to the assurance that God is continually working to establish His Kingdom ‘on earth as it is in heaven’, that part of that in-breaking Kingdom is healing, and

that there is a clear Biblical mandate for us to seek healing for ourselves and for others. Let's consider perhaps one of the best-known passages in this regard, James 5:13-16. As we explore this passage we will be able also to gain some insight into what might inhibit us from being healed and into that age-old question 'Why are some people healed and others aren't?'

In v.13 there is an interesting combination of encouragement to pray in the midst of suffering and celebrate in the midst of joy. One point we can glean from this is that as individuals and as a community of faith we are encouraged to attend to both the highs and lows of human experience. One could make the point that given the order of the themes in this verse, there should be a preference given to focusing on praying for healing, it's mentioned first! This is in direct contrast to our tendency, again both as individuals and as a community, to sometimes downplay the reality of suffering, and perhaps, if our theology is too rigid and oversimplified in terms of equating illness with sin, feeling embarrassed or guilty over the presence of suffering in our lives. In some cases, a person might have a sense that his or her suffering is not 'important enough' to bother God for prayer and choose not to pray for healing to keep silent about it. All of these things might inhibit healing, and be assured that evil will take any such reticence about praying or feelings of guilt or embarrassment and run with them. As is stated in an earlier chapter, James puts it frankly: "You do not have because you do not ask." (chapter 4:2b). In some cases people aren't healed because they don't ask.

The clear instruction in v.13 is that we are to pray, and the assumption here is that God will hear our prayers. It's important to understand, however, that because God is a Holy God, if we're involved in unrepentant sin it can inhibit our prayers from being heard. The Psalmist recognized this dynamic when he stated: "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." (Psalm 66:18). However, in subsequent verses, the Psalmist rejoices over God's grace and lovingkindness. To the entire nation of Judah, the prophet Isaiah instructed: "Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither

is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that does not hear.” (Isaiah 59:1-2). Though we should be careful in drawing too simple a conclusion here, when praying for healing we would do well to review our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit to discern whether there is any unconfessed sin that is inhibiting our prayers. This same theme is picked up later in our present passage where the instruction is given, within the context of community, “Therefore, confess you sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”(v.16). As Jesus’ ministry exemplified, God is interested in healing the whole person, not physical illness, spiritual brokenness as well.

Verse 14 emphasizes the role that church elders can play in the process of praying for healing and there are two points that are worth noting. First of all, the instruction “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him,…” implies that it is the sick person who is responsible for taking the initiative to seek out the elders for prayer. This instruction helps us break through any of the inhibiting feelings of shame or lack of confidence mentioned above. Though I still maintain that a church that claims to be welcoming and healthy should intentionally make room (create opportunities) for healing prayer to occur, this passage clearly states that the person who is sick has responsibilities in this regard too. There is also an assumption here that the elders are suitably equipped to know how to attend to people who come expecting prayers for healing. I recall being caught completely off guard during a Bible study at a United Church in Wolseley, Saskatchewan, where I was doing my Summer internship after having had only one year of seminary training when a person turned to me, out of the blue, and said “Ernie, I’ve been suffering with a sore shoulder for weeks, please pray for me.” I complied with the request, but I couldn’t help but feeling that my words were rather feeble. I want to say that I have every confidence in our present elders, but raise this point because it shows the importance of the church choosing wisely when it comes to who will serve in this crucial role.

Secondly, though we often assume that the second part of the verse, "...anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.", refers to a ritual anointing, Biblical scholar Spiros Zodhiates points out that the original Greek wording helps us gain a deeper insight into the meaning of the use of oil. The word translated as 'anointing' is the Greek word 'aleipho' is in the aorist tense which means that it precedes the praying for healing. It is best translated: "...and let them pray for him, *having been rubbed with oil.*" Furthermore, in connection with our earlier discussion on the topic of healing and medicine, Zodhiates sheds light on the fact that 'aleipho' is most commonly used with regards to applying oils of ointment, i.e. medicine. Applying oils used in rituals is most often the Greek word 'chrio'. Consider the story of the Good Samaritan. When the Samaritan takes pity on the man who'd been attacked he: "... came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil ('elaion') and wine on them..."( Luke 10:34a). This is a medicinal application of oil, as distinct from a reference in 2 Corinthians 1:21: "Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed ('chrio') us in God.", which is a more spiritual or ritual meaning of anointing. The 'anointing' here seems to bridge the gap between physical efforts toward healing, through the use of medicine and remedies on the one hand, and on the movement of God to bring supernatural healing in the context of worship and ritual on the other.

We have already made reference above to the connection made between seeking healing and seeking forgiveness of sins (v.16), but there is one possible aspect of sinfulness that I want to highlight as inhibiting healing. I'm referring to the tendency of all people to become so used to pain, especially when they struggle with it for months or even years, that though they *say* they want to be healed at one level, in reality they'd rather remain ill. This tendency is sinful not so much in the sense of doing morally wrong but in the sense of missing what God intends (which is health and healing). Put another way, illness can become so much a part of a person's identity that they'll actually resist reasonable efforts to become well because the resulting change would be too much to bear. This is probably what was behind Jesus' rather odd question to the sick man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem as we

explored last week in John chapter 5. That the man had been ill for 38 years (v.5), and that he still avoided answering Jesus' direct question: "Do you want to get well?" (v.6) makes one wonder if he *really* did want to be healed. It's also revealing that when Jesus does heal the man, rather than leaping for joy and worshipping Jesus, we learn in verses 15-16 that he ran off and informed the religious leaders that it was Jesus that had healed him, the result being: "And for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus because He was doing these things on the Sabbath." Some thanks!! I recall hearing about a study that was done which surveyed medical doctors, counselors and psychologists asking 'Of all the patients you treat, what percentage would you say were actually willing to put the work in to be healed.' The result was less than 20%. The question we may need to ask ourselves in the midst of illness (and I would suggest that we don't ask this of other people) is 'Do I really want to be healed?' After all, healing changes relationships and places more responsibilities on our lives than we might otherwise have if ill. Are we ready for those changes.

When we explore the question 'Why are some people healed and others are not' it is clear that there seldom are any easy answers. However, it may be beneficial to recognize God's sovereignty by acknowledging that God always answers prayers; sometimes he grants what we pray for, sometimes He waits for a time to answer the prayer, and at other times He says 'No'. Now, obviously when it comes to praying for healing we most often pray for, and expect, an immediate response. Sometimes, however, the healing occurs over a long period of time or we have to wait for a 'season' before God heals us. It's the not knowing when that can be discouraging and aggravating! We're in good company in such instances, though, given that even the Apostle Paul wrestled with wanting to be rid of his 'thorn in the flesh' but realized that he was a Kingdom of 'already, but not yet'. In the midst of his yearning to be healed, however, Paul begins to see that God is actually able to use the physical affliction for higher purposes. Paul states: "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet

me, to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). In the midst our waiting for healing, could it be that God is able to use, to transform, that which we’re suffering from for some higher purpose? It’s a touchy subject to be sure, and it begs the provocative question (which Paul implies) as to what extent does God sometimes *cause* suffering as a means to a higher end, but it is important to reflect upon it in order to gain a broader vantage point of what we’re going through.

As for when we pray for healing and nothing seems to happen, when it seems that God is saying ‘No’ to our fervent prayers, all that can be said is that such times require a community of faith to bear us up and a lot of patience and discernment as to what God’s purposes are. Truth be known, sometimes we’ll never know the answer. As Karin Granberg-Michaelson acknowledged in her book entitled ‘Healing Community’: “The church learned quickly that there are no magic formulas where prayer is concerned. Many who received prayer did not receive the healing they hoped for....Yet it became clear that to pray for healing is a way of living in hopeful expectation that God is present and active in our lives. This assumption and being in dialogue with God are healing. Whether or not people were cured as a result of our prayers, we saw that God was always drawing us into wholeness and challenging us to deeper faith.” (pp.43-44).

Though I hesitate to use the phrase ‘in conclusion’, given that so much of this is open-ended, I would like to draw this message to a close by re-affirming the fact that God cares for us, both spiritually and physically, that He does have the ability to bring healing directly and indirectly, that in Jesus Christ we have a wonderful healer who seeks to draw all creation to Himself, and that God’s Kingdom is breaking into our world with justice and health, though not entirely to its fullness just yet. It is on this

basis that in the midst of our pain and as we share the pain of others in this congregation as part of the Body of Christ that we are able not only to pray but to pray with *boldness*. Setting aside all worries about possible embarrassment regarding public profession or possible fear of building peoples' hopes up lest their prayers not be answered, we can focus upon placing our sin, illness and whole selves into the powerful hands of the living God through Jesus Christ. For this is not about us as prayers praying the properly articulated words, or approaching healing with the correct 'techniques', this is about availing ourselves to Jesus, the Great Physician, seeking our wholeness and entire salvation in Him and in Him alone. When it comes to praying for healing, Paul's words to Timothy seem applicable: "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power, and love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7).

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