

October 15, 2006

Redemption, Wholeness and the Healing of Persons (#1)

Isaiah 53:1-5 / I Corinthians 13:1-13 / James 5:13-18

Today I'd like to begin a 5 week series of messages dealing with the whole issue of HEALING. It's something I've intended to do ever since the elders met over a year ago, and we all sensed the Lord directing us (in light of past issues, not only in the church, but in the lives of people in general) to pursue healing in this body of believers — the healing of relationships / the healing of past wounds / the healing of present struggles / and even the healing of those buffeted by physical illnesses.

In fact, my desire to preach through Job was also prompted by the same desire to help bring healing to the lives of God's people — though I do believe that whenever the Word of God is preached rightly (within the context of redemption), it will always have a healing effect upon people, as can be seen time and time again in Scripture, and throughout the history of the church as well.

And let me say before I even begin, that as a pastor I am painfully aware of the vast divergence of opinion in any church in relation to the topic of healing. I've known some Christians who do not believe that miraculous healing takes place in the present at all, or are extremely, extremely skeptical of even the possibility. Some for purely medical or scientific reasons, and others for purely theological reasons (though some Westerners have developed a theology devoid of the supernatural and more in keeping with their scientific worldview).

Their faith is very academic or cerebral in nature (that is, it's a very intellectual faith that is suspect of emotions, spiritual experiences, or anything supernatural or subjective in nature). For them "church health" is evidenced most clearly by hair-splitting adherence to doctrinal orthodoxy. Most in that camp would be uneasy, or uncomfortable, and not know what to do with it if some invalid were to stand up and walk, or some blind person were to regain their sight miraculously, or immediately, in response to the prayer of faith, and the laying on of hands.

Though they may pray for those who are sick, they do not REALLY expect God to move in supernatural ways in their midst, to bring healing in response to their prayers, like He did with Jesus, and the Apostles, and others throughout church history.

Other churches, though admitting that healing was commonplace in the ministry of Jesus, and throughout the entire apostolic age, will go on to add that the more “miraculous gifts” (such as healing), or “signs and wonders” in general ceased as soon as the last book of the Bible was penned around 95 A.D. Such “supernatural activity,” they say, were “signs” whose sole purpose was to attest to the truthfulness of the Apostolic Gospel and its message about Jesus.

Using I Corinthians 13:9 as somewhat of a “proof text,” where Paul says, “When perfection comes the imperfect disappears,” they say that “perfection” equals the completion of God’s revelation to humanity in the Bible, and “imperfection” equals the revelation of God given through tongues, and miracles, and signs and wonders, and healing, and prophecy, and words of wisdom, etc., etc., etc.

Thus, they reason, that when the Bible was completed, there was no more need for attesting signs and thus miracles and supernatural healings quickly ceased. Which is why such people have rightly been called “cessationists.”

Others are more open to the possibility of healing in the present, and do pray for it, though they have rarely seen it (at least in any direct, immediate, or miraculous fashion).

Others know from experience that miraculous healing does indeed continue to happen, they have seen it on numerous occasions, and thus pray for it with earnest expectation, knowing that God can (and should it so please Him) will do it again.

For them it’s not a matter of if God STILL heals, or if He CAN heal. They know He can and does! Their only question is if He will, since it is obvious that for purposes known only to Him, He sovereignly chooses to heal some, and not to heal others, as was evident even in the ministry of Jesus and the early church as well.

And still there are yet others who are so convinced it happens, and that God wants everyone healed, and that if they have enough faith GOD MUST DO IT, that they actually make faith (and not God) sovereign, and demand Him to do it!

It’s what has been called “Name It Claim It Theology,” or the “Faith Movement,” or the “Health and Wealth Gospel” — since in such circles God is not only said to want everyone healed, but to want everyone rich as well.

And unfortunately it is THAT brand or variety of healing which is most often seen by the public on TV — sometimes in such circus-like fashion, with so much emotional hype, and excessive showmanship, and such sensational and unsubstantiated claims — that perceptive, discerning, thinking and truth-seeking people can't help but see that much of it is nothing more than a SHAM.

Such people give you the impression that miraculous healings happen every minute of every day in their ministries, that unlike the “regular Christians” they have a special other-worldly calling, connection and anointing, and that apart from their special powers and gifts, its questionable if you'll ever get healed (thus using God as well as people's earnest desire for healing to make a name for themselves, and usually a lot of money in the process).

And although you have probably picked up hints here and there, you're probably wondering, “Which group does he fall into?” and “Which way is he going to go with all this?!” And instead of keeping you in suspense, I'll simply tell you — I fall into the category of people who KNOW from experience that miraculous healing still happens today, I've WITNESSED on numerous occasion with my own eyes, and thus pray I pray for it with earnest expectation, knowing God CAN (and should it please Him to do so) He will do it again. Like many of you, I believe it's not a matter of if God still heals, or if God can heal. We know He can heal miraculously, and most of us even heard of people, or know people personally that He has miraculously healed.

Our only question, therefore, is not if He can, but if He will—since who is healed, and when they are healed is ultimately a matter of His sovereign grace and not our ability to muster up some acceptable or exceedingly great degree of faith.

Thus, although I have many friends that are “cessationists,” we have “agreed to disagree” when it comes to the continuing availability of the more miraculous “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” which I believe God STILL sovereignly apports to believers as He deems right and fit and necessary — for the health, growth and edification of each individual faith community (Eph. 4:1-16).

Yet I struggle even harder with those who would make a circus-act out of something God intended to be a beautiful, quiet, compassionate, sensitive, faith-enriching display of His gracious love to people in the present day. Those, who because of the questionable antics they employ, tend to glorify themselves more than God.

(II Cor. 11:19-21 / I Cor. 14)

What Prof. James Denny of Glasgow, Scotland once said in reference to preachers, could also be said in reference to healers: "No man can bear witness to Christ and himself at the same time. No man can give the impression that he himself is clever, and that Christ is mighty to save." He can't simultaneously convince people he is a great preacher, or healer, or evangelist, or miracle worker, and that Christ is a great Savior. If he is to do so, "he" must get out of the way!

Our goal in every Christian endeavor is never to upstage Jesus, or put ourselves in the limelight, but to disappear into the shadows that all may be mesmerized by Jesus and stand in awe of Jesus! "Beware!" said John Wesley, "Do not seek to be something, but rather seek to be nothing, that Christ may be all in all."

The Christian's aim is to be like a stage hand at the theatre, who stands behind an intensely bright spotlight with its beam shining so brightly upon the person on stage, that he or she is (for all intents and purposes) invisible to the onlooker, and the person on the stage is the focal point of everyone's attention.

So, having said all that, let's consider THREE things in relation to the issue of healing:

1st - The centrality of healing to the Christian message of redemption.

2nd - The two texts cessationists use to suggest healing no longer takes place today.

3rd - The texts that advocate a continuance of prayer for healing till Christ returns.

So **FIRST**, let's consider the centrality of healing to the Christian message of redemption — or better yet, to the whole message of the Bible since the Bible is, from beginning to end, little more than what we could call a record of the History of Redemption — a divinely inspired account of God breaking into our time and space continuum, to redeem a people for Himself (and as I mentioned last week) to redeem the whole of creation as well.

"Redemption," as I pointed out last week, means, "to purchase something back so that it may be restored or returned to its original place, state or condition, and thus enabled to fulfill its original role or purpose."

And when we understand that that is true, it becomes impossible to speak of redemption, or salvation from a biblical perspective without including the issue of healing, since healing (like redemption) is "a restoration of persons -- body, soul or spirit, to their original state or condition, so that they can fulfill their original role, function or purpose."

That's obviously why Isaiah in chapter 53, verses 4- 5 includes "healing" as one of the benefits of the ATONEMENT. In one of the most renowned Old Testament passages dealing with salvation, or what Christ would secure for us by His death on the cross, Isaiah lists the two most prominent benefits — peace and healing.

"Surely," says Isaiah, "He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him smitten by God, stricken by Him and afflicted. Yet He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was laid upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed."

And Alec Motyer, in his superb Commentary on Isaiah writes of that verse:

"Peace (that is, shalom) is from salem ('to be whole or complete') indicating a rounded wholeness comprising personal fulfillment, harmonious society [or harmonious interpersonal relationships] and a secure relationship with God it means the 'peace with God' whereby we are brought near to Him and He is reconciled to us."

And of the phrase "by his wounds we are healed" he writes:

"Isaiah uses 'healing' in a total sense: the healing of the person, restoring fullness and completeness..."

Wayne Grudem essentially says the same thing:

"This passage refers to both physical and spiritual healing that Christ purchased for us, for Peter quotes it in reference to our salvation: 'He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds we have been healed.' But Matthew quotes the same passage from Isaiah with reference to the physical healings Jesus performed: 'and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.'"

But it's not just Isaiah. David, when speaking of the benefits of redemption in Psalm 103 says:

"Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits — who forgives all your sins, and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

In fact, Jack Deere cites the well-documented example of Duane Miller, pastor of the First Baptist Church at Brenham, Texas who lost his voice at the conclusion of the morning service on January 15, 1990 and was unable to preach that evening. In fact, doctors told him he had damaged the myelin sheath of his vocal cords and that he would not get his voice back. After doing almost nine months of voice therapy without any improvement, he had to resign his pastorate in the Fall of 1990.

Two years later he began to teach a Sunday school class at the First Baptist Church of Houston (using a special microphone). But even with the special equipment his throat was so sore that he could hardly eat or drink for two days after teaching.

Then on January 17, 1993 (almost three years to the day from the Sunday he lost his voice) he read Psalm 103:3 to his Sunday school class: "who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases..." He paused to explain that there are two extreme views regarding healing.

Listen to what he writes in his own words:

"I had said that on the one side there is the group that believes God always heals miraculously and on the other is the group that says it never happens. But what you have to realize is that that puts God in a box...and He won't be put in a box. I told them that what you have to do with divine healing is just stand back and say, 'I know God does that from time to time, and I can't tell you why. I don't understand why some are healed and some aren't and leave it there and say that is in the Lord's wisdom; so be it.' I had just finished saying that and started to read the next line of the Psalm...AND MY VOICE CHANGED. I heard the first word and felt in my throat that what I had been feeling was gone. There was none of the feeling there that I had had for three years. I would love to tell you I knew exactly what it was...and that I expected God to do it and wasn't surprised. But it would be a lie. It scared me to death. I stopped, startled, and then said two or three words, thinking, 'Am I hearing what I think I hear?' I said to them that I didn't understand what was going on, but that God was doing something. I tried to get back to my lesson, but I couldn't and nobody cared. People began to applaud. Everybody was weeping. There were about 200 in the class and there were no dry eyes. Somebody began to sing the doxology. Someone else said we had witnessed the power of God. We just thanked the Lord for what He had done and walked out of the church."

What can you say about such an event? It was medically documented by competent doctors, and witnessed by approximately 200 people, whom I dare say will never be the same. On that Sunday morning God became much more real to that group of people. It was not only a display of divine power and grace, but a display of divine love in action in the present day.

Which brings us to our SECOND point. In light of such documented cases (and there are many, many more I could cite and will cite over the next few weeks), what texts do cessationists use to say miracles of healing no longer happen?

The first is I Corinth. 13:8 where speaking of prophecy and tongues and other miraculous gifts, it does say "they will cease, be stilled and pass away." And to answer the question "when will they cease" they turn to verse 9 where it says, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." That is simply what the text states!

But the point at which I think the cessationists are wrong is in equating the phrase "when perfection comes" to the completion of the Bible. One of the first rules of good interpretation is that a phrase in the Bible could never mean to us, what it never could have meant to those who originally received it. And the Corinthians (receiving this letter from Paul around 55 AD) never would have equated the word "perfection" with the completion of the Bible.

FIRST because they would have been unaware that a New Testament was even being put together. And SECONDLY because it's questionable as to whether they understood them as authoritative scripture that early on. Thus they never would have thought, "Oh yes, by perfection, Paul must mean that time when all those books we don't know are being written are finished and canonized!" And if they never would have understood perfection that way, we should avoid understanding it that way as well.

It's more likely what they understood "perfection" to mean, was "perfection"! The time when Jesus returns, and the Kingdom comes in all of its glorious fullness; when we are resurrected, and Christ has come to reign and reside in our midst; when sin and its effects have been eradicated, and we have been clothed with our immortal, imperishable, resurrection bodies, and the earth and all creation has been renewed! THAT is surely what they understood it to mean!

Thus, far from being a text that proves that God's miraculous activity and gifts will disappear when the New Testament is completed, it does just the opposite! It actually suggests that all the spiritual gifts and God's miraculous power to heal will be available to us until Christ returns, or until perfection comes!

Which makes much more sense in the context! Because when we stand in the immediate presence of God, why would we need prophecy or tongues or words of knowledge? When perfection comes,

and all sickness, illness, pain and death are done away with, why would we need the gift of healing?! We wouldn't! That's the whole point! Like all the other spiritual gifts (given to assist us in this age where the effects of sin still have their sway) it will disappear at that time, because there will be no more need for it!

The other text often used is Hebrews 2:4 (the only other text in the Bible that can even be made to suggest gifts have ceased). In the NIV it reads: "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. God also testified to it (past tense) by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will."

Cessationists are quick to point out that it says "God also testified," or "God also bore witness" (past tense), rather than "God testifying," or "bearing witness." Yet the problem is this — the Greek word can be translated as either a past or present active participle! Thus, the NIV, and RSV choose to translate it in the past tense — "God bore witness," or "testified" (as if He no longer does so), while the NASB, KJV and NKJV translate it in the ongoing present — "God also bearing witness" or "continuing to bear witness to it by signs, wonders and various miracles..."

My opinion is that the author of Hebrews purposely chose a word that pointed in both directions — God had borne witness and would continue to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel by signs, wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.

Which brings me to another place where cessationists go wrong. They rightly declare that miracles of healing are "signs" that affirm the truthfulness, authenticity and divine origin of the Gospel message as I've just pointed out—which is unquestionably true. Yet, they go too far when they suggest that that was their only function, and thus they are no longer necessary. Because as the N.T. also points out, "Jesus looked upon people, had compassion on them, and healed them" (Mt. 14:14). Or in other words, they weren't just signs to confirm the Gospel, they were displays of God's love!

That was one of the biggest problems I had with the Baptist Church I sometimes attended growing up. They were dispensationalist, or cessationists, and thus they taught that the sign gifts (including healing) ceased around 100 A.D. when the Bible was completed, meaning we should no longer seek or expect the miraculous. And that I just couldn't accept!

To ME, saying that God no longer HEALED people was equivalent to saying God no longer LOVED people like He did in N.T. times. In fact, it was THAT cessationist doctrine that actually caused me to reject Christianity for the longest time. I just couldn't accept it, and still don't!

Which brings us to our **LAST** point—the texts that confirm the continuance of miraculous, divine or supernatural healing. And to save time let me say I just covered TWO (!) since both of the texts cessationists use to say miracles have ceased, are actually, when interpreted rightly, two of the best passages to show they still continue, and will not cease until Christ returns or perfection comes!

But the last passage is James 5:13-18 where James talks about prayer and says:

“Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him, and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.”

And two verses later, including everyone in the congregation and not just the elders, he says: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed.” And notice, it is in relation to prayer for HEALING that James says: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (that is, effective to heal people)!”

Notice as well that James gives no indication whatsoever that a time will come when such prayer for divine or supernatural healing will ever cease! So long as the church exists, and so long as sickness afflicts those within its ranks, prayer for healing is to be practiced!

Yet one of the reasons it was so neglected despite that passage, is that Jerome (around 400 A.D.) mistranslated the word *sosei* (literally “Made whole” or “healed”) as “saved” in his Latin Vulgate Version of the Bible – for all intents and purposes, erasing one of the most prominent texts on healing from the N.T. for hundreds of years, and giving rise to the Catholic practice of Extreme Unction where the prayer the priest over the sick or dying person is actually seen to “save” the person.

The KJV followed his lead, and also translated *sosei* as “saved” thus turning this clear biblical admonition to pray for healing into an admonition to pray for one’s salvation. Thankfully the newer version have corrected that error, and because they have, there has been a marked increase in prayer for healing among pastors and elders of all denominations — even those who used to be cessationist!