

November 19, 2006

Redemption, Wholeness and the Healing of Persons (#6)

James 4:1-3 / John 5:1-15 / John 9:1-12 / II Corinthians 12:1-10

As I finish up my series on healing this morning, I thought I would like do so by addressing the question that inevitably comes up whenever prayer for healing is exercised in ANY church, or by ANY group of people, and they do see God move powerfully to heal:

It's the question, "Why are some healed (or improved) but not others?" or "Why some, but not all?" (I've even struggled with why, in my experience, prayers for the young seem to be more effective than for the old, and unbelievers I've prayed for are more often healed than believers! Why?)

In the early days of my ministry I struggled with many such questions, but none as much as, Why some and not others? As I mentioned previously, at one of the first healing services we had, we prayed for a boy named Bryan (the 16 year old boy with stomach cancer). And when we did, he was healed instantaneously and miraculously, bringing immense joy and encouragement to everyone.

Yet, about a year or so later, another person (a lady about 40 years old) started attending church. She was one of the most encouraging, bubbly, positive, energetic, caring people Nancy and I had ever met. She sort of adopted us and went out of her way on numerous occasions to make us feel special.

In fact, on one particular occasion when we were experiencing some struggles at the church, we drove by the church (returning home from vacation), and she had hung a banner from one front window to the other over the door, spanning the width of the church, which said in big huge letters, "Welcome back Pastor Jeff and Nancy! We missed you! You're the best!" It brought tears to my eyes.

Anyway, she had a mole on her leg which had become infected. Her friends had told her to go see a doctor, but she waited, thinking it would get better, only to discover it was melanoma cancer — one of the most aggressive forms of cancer. When she started coming to church it had been in remission for about 6 months (as a result of chemotherapy), but it wasn't long before it had popped up again, this time in her lymph nodes and various internal organs. So we all started praying. And I can't speak for all the others, but I know I personally prayed with every ounce of faith, and earnestness, and soul exertion, that I could muster up. Yet she only continued to get progressively worse.

We not only had a healing service at our church, but I also brought her to another local church — a Vineyard Christian Fellowship because they had healing services even more regularly than we did, but all to no avail (physically). She did put her trust in Jesus to save her during that time, and testified to having experienced the new birth, but pray as we did, she only got worse.

In the months that followed, I visited her once a week on Friday's, as Hospice also got involved. Each time she would ask me to pray, and I would, with all my strength — sometimes feeling emotionally exhausted from having prayed so long and hard.

Then one day she called me and asked if I could come over that day (it was either a Tuesday or Wednesday). She sounded very upbeat and said she had something she needed to share with me — in person. So I went over to visit her. She greeted me at the door, and led me into the living room which was brightly lit from the sun pouring in the front windows. She sat in one particular recliner, and I pulled up a chair and sat about 5-6 feet in front of her and to her left.

Then gathering her composure, and with a note of excitement in her voice, she proceeded to tell me how earlier that morning she had been sitting in that very chair reading her Bible and praying, when all of a sudden, what she could only describe as a shimmering, invisible, transparent-like tent, appeared above her in the chair, and proceeded to come down all around her, until she was inside it and surrounded by it. And then she said, "I became filled with such a peace that I lost all fear of dying. What was it Jeff?"

To be honest, I didn't know, and still don't — though the description sounded a bit like a spiritual version of the "Tent of Meeting" into which Moses used to go and commune with God outside the camp.

It didn't matter though, because as a result of that experience, she never again asked me to pray for her healing. In fact, she asked me to help plan her funeral, even telling me what she'd like me to share with the people on that day! Among other things, she said, "Tell them to live life to the fullest, and each day as if it were their last." Make sure you tell them, she said.

Now, I share that story because it spawned within me a profound internal struggle with God. When we prayed for BRYAN (who I did not know at all at that point) we simply prayed — no great profound prayers, or extreme exertion of faith (and to be honest, not really convinced anything would really happen). Yet it did. Big time! He was healed miraculously and instantaneously as for 20 minutes he felt, "flames of fire shooting through his body."

With MARYANNE, on the other hand, many of us prayed with all our might, for months on end, with great expectation and earnestness — with what could only be called fervent, faith-filled

prayers. Yet other than one time when she said she felt something “tingling inside,” she merely continued going downhill physically for 9 months straight until she died in great pain on a morphine drip.

And let me tell you, it would be an understatement to say I wrestled intensely with God. “Why Lord? I asked. Why did you heal Bryan instantly, when we prayed such seemingly effortless prayers, with so little soul-exertion? Yet with MaryAnne, we’ve poured out our hearts in faith and love and anguish of soul for months, with great expectations, only to see nothing happen — at least not physically?”

WHY?” It’s a question I’ve even heard people ask in relation to the ministry of Jesus. Sometimes, as we see in the Gospels, Jesus DID heal all who came to Him. But on other occasions it seems pretty clear that He did not. He simply healed one out of the many that were present, and not everyone in the place, or the crowd (as in John 5:3-15). We might ask Jesus the same exact thing. Why some and not others?

Thus, today, what I’d like to do is share what I believe God has taught me over the years in regard to that reoccurring question:

“If God heals, then why doesn’t He heal everyone? Why the selectivity? Why does He heal some and not others?”

So, what are the 4 major explanations for why God heals some and not others, or heals some completely and others only partially? And the **FIRST** explanation has to do with faith — either faith on the part of the person who desires healing, or faith on the part of the person praying. Here Acts 14:8-9 is extremely relevant in this sense, where Luke writes: “In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed, and called out, “Stand on your feet!” At that the man jumped up and began to walk.”

It’s an interesting phrase, isn’t it? “Seeing he had faith to be healed.” It coincides with what Jesus would often say after He healed a person, and then told them, “Go, your faith has healed you.”

Or as he told the disciples on at least one occasion, (you could not heal the boy) because you have so little faith” (Mt. 17:20). In fact, one of Jesus most frequent rebukes in relation to all sorts of things (and not just healing) was, “Oh you of little faith” (Mt. 6:30 / 8:26 / 14:31 / 16:8 / etc. / etc. / etc.).

Thus, whether we like to hear it or not, the presence or absence of faith does play a part in the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of prayer for healing. Jesus makes that very plain, be it faith on the part of the person doing the praying, or faith on the part of the person being prayed for.

In fact, I'll never forget one particular minister who came (at my invitation) to one of the healing services we had in my church at Westport. He had been steeped in cessationist views on healing, but because he was a friend, he accepted my invitation to come that night as John Polce played, and we followed up the concert with a time of prayer for healing.

He told me he was extremely skeptical. And I can remember him sitting there with this cynical look on his face while different people came forward for prayer. Thus, I was totally surprised when he stood up and came forward for prayer! Yet even as he did, it was very obvious that everything in his demeanor was saying, "I'm not coming forward because I believe something's going to happen. I'm coming forward to prove I'm right, and that nothing will happen."

AND YOU KNOW WHAT? He went away getting exactly what he had hoped for... NOTHING! Even though other people were deeply touched that night, he wasn't. WHY? Because it was obvious he didn't want to be healed. Rather, he wanted to prove such things no longer take place.

Paul looked straight at the crippled man, saw he had faith to be healed, and he was. I looked straight at my friend, saw he had no faith to be healed, and he wasn't. For him, it proved he was right. To me it simply confirmed what happened with Jesus in His own hometown, where Matthew records for us: "He did not do many miracles there, because of their lack of faith" (or literally, "because of their unbelief") (Mt. 13:58). (It's one thing to lack faith, it's another to persist in outright unbelief!)

Now I have to confess there's a part of me that hesitates to even mention this point, because I've seen it lead to what I call "the blame game" — people who are sick, being told by the people who are praying, that if they had only come with more faith they would have been healed, therefore implying it's the sick person's own fault that they're not healed, merely heaping more pain on an already hurting person.

Likewise I've also seen sincere, earnest children of God, muster up enough love and faith to venture out and pray for the healing of people, only to be told when the sick person didn't get well, that THEY didn't pray with enough faith, and therefore it was their fault that the sick person remained sick or ended up dying. (That's the problem with reducing healing to a formula.) In fact, in the case of MaryAnne, she did have one close friend who came over and prayed earnestly for

her healing about six months before she passed away, and never visited again (not even attending her funeral).

Why? I believe it was because she came from a church that taught that God wants all people healed, and that if you just have enough faith, God has to heal the person. Thus when she prayed and MaryAnne wasn't healed, she blamed herself for not having enough faith to heal one of her best friends.

That's why I need to say there are MANY MORE factors than faith involved, lest we get into "the blame game," and inflict unnecessary pain on people who are suffering enough as it is, or on sincere, earnest, loving people who are already stepping out in faith just to pray for healing in the first place!

Which brings me to my **SECOND** point. The effect SIN has on the whole process of healing—which again is a very difficult topic. Because in one place Jesus confronts a man born blind, and all the people ask him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus clearly says that his blindness has nothing to do with any sin he or his parents committed.

"Neither this man, nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (Jn. 9:3) Yet in our passage from John 5, Jesus finds an invalid lying next to the Pool of Bethesda. And after healing him, later finds him at the Temple and says to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."

It's quite a pointed warning, implying that EITHER his paralysis was caused by a particular sin, and now, being able to do what he hadn't been able to do for years, he's doing the very thing that caused it in the first place (putting him at risk again),

Or he's now able to do things he hasn't ever been able to do before, and one of the things he's contemplating is sinful, thereby risking the judgment of God if he were to do it. But either way, Jesus is concerned that his healing will be to no avail if he keeps on sinning!

So what can we say of the connection between SIN and HEALING? We can say that ALL sickness is ULTIMATELY the result of sin—that is, sin in general. It's part of the curse that infected all creation as a result of the Fall. If there were no sin in the world there would be no sickness, sorrow, or suffering.

Yet on a more individual basis, Jesus makes it clear that sickness or birth defects, etc., are NOT necessarily the result of SPECIFIC sins committed by the PERSON, or a MEMBER of his or her family (Jn. 5) — though they apparently CAN BE (Jn. 9).

For instance, a person who contracts SYPHILIS from being sexually promiscuous can be healed from that disease by miraculous intervention of God. (In fact, it wouldn't be totally out of the question to suggest that at least one of the blind people Jesus healed may have lost their sight from that very thing. We don't think of that now because penicillin is so readily available, but in Jesus day it was not, and blindness due to syphilis was NOT all that uncommon.)

Meaning that if a person who was healed of syphilis, engaged once again in their sexually immoral behavior AFTER being healed, it would not be out of the realms of possibility to say that he or she would contract the disease once again (and possibly the same symptoms) even though they had been totally healed.

I've seen the same thing with people whom we prayed for in terms of stress or anxiety-related illnesses. When we prayed, God moved, and they gave personal testimony to the fact that God healed them, or greatly improved their condition. And I believe they were right — God did. But because they took no steps to adjust their busy lifestyle, or reduce the constant tension of their high-stress work situation, or seek counseling for the co-dependency, or other addictive behaviors that fed the stress which brought on the sickness, it returned weeks or months later.

Not because the prayer wasn't effective, but because even the most effective prayer still needs to be FOLLOWED UP by wise choices, personal discipline, confrontation of unresolved issues, accountability, and common sense avoidance of certain harmful attitudes and behaviors! When I hurt my back, I adjust my behavior or I'll be back to the Chiropractor again, and again, and again! Prayer is NOT the cure all and end all for everything. We also need to, "stop sinning, lest something worse happen to us."

You see, we need to be careful that we don't look at prayer for healing as an excuse to be LAZY, or a reason NOT TO DO the things we KNOW we need to do -- like reading God's Word, or disciplining ourselves to pray, or seeking counseling, or finding an accountability partner, or confessing our sins, and praying with others — or just plain forgiving those who have hurt us, or seeking the forgiveness of those we've hurt. Being healed does not negate the need to do those things!

In fact, Jesus tells us, a person can be "healed" and actually come to be worse off after his healing, if he doesn't do something to remedy the CAUSE of his problem. Like the demon-possessed man who did NOTHING to pursue God, or fill his soul with the things of God AFTER

the expulsion of the demon! He was healed, but after he was healed his soul remained empty, says Jesus, and thus seven more demons even worse than the first came into that man, making his final condition worse than at first!

(Mt. 12:43-45)

Few things are as spiritually dangerous as a person who experiences the power of God, yet remains a soul devoid of God! Or experiences physical healing, but does not trust in Jesus for the salvation of their soul. A person who uses God, but then rejects God; or takes from God, but refuses to follow or obey God. Don't let it happen, my friends, lest you be worse off AFTER being healed than you were BEFORE you were healed! Remember, prayer for healing often needs to be followed up by other means of healing.

Which brings me to my **THIRD** point. It would appear that sometimes God is slow to heal, heals only partially, or does not heal at all, because there are lessons that still need to be learned, sinful attitudes that still need to be transformed, or things we still need to accomplish for God that can only be accomplished as we continue to struggle in our weakness, state of HANDICAP, ILLNESS or DISREPAIR.

One of the greatest examples of this in all of Scripture comes to us in II Cor. 12:7-10. There Paul tells us: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me (and as both Scott Hafemann and Ralph Martin point out, he means "by God."

"The importance of the passive verb edothe 'was given' can hardly be exaggerated. God is the unseen agent behind the bitter experience.")... There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger (literally an "angel") of Satan, to torment me. THREE TIMES I pleaded with the Lord (that is, I literally begged God) to take it away from me, but He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

And here I need to tell you there has been a lot of disagreement over exactly what the phrase "thorn in the flesh" refers to, even though the whole interpretation of the passage hinges on it! Most scholars agree that "in the flesh" means an affliction "in Paul's body," and thus they suggest it refers to some type of "illness," or "handicap." Calvin and Luther said it was some type of "spiritual temptation." Jerome said "sexual temptation." And still others have suggested it was reoccurring malarial fever, while yet others say it was "a group of antagonists that were harassing him."

In my estimation, the interpretation that fits best in the context, is that Paul suffered from poor eyesight — possibly the residual effects of the blinding he experienced in his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus.

That would explain why he says that the Galatians wanted to “pluck out their eyes and give theirs to him” (Gal. 4:15) / Why he dictated his letters to a scribe instead of writing them himself (Rom. 16:22) / Why he had to “write with such large letters” when he did include a personal greeting written by his own hand at the end of a letter (Gal. 6:11) / And why he couldn’t recognize the high priest sitting across from him at the tribunal in Acts 23:5.

But whatever it was, Paul says it was like a thorn constantly digging into his flesh, it hurt a lot, and because it did, he begged and pleaded with God to remove it. But God did not! And it wasn’t because God couldn’t! Nor was it because Paul lacked the faith, or earnestness, or desire to be healed!

No! Paul plainly says God gave it to him (that is, God allowed Satan to buffet him with it) for the express purpose of keeping him from becoming conceited, or puffed up with pride, because of his “surpassingly great revelations” (v. 7). And later he adds, that by continuing to be weak (that is, by continuing to struggle with his sickness, handicap or affliction) he was able to magnify the sufficiency of God’s grace, and retain in his person the very thing which perfected God’s power in him.

It was the secret to walking in the power of God —“for when we are weak, Christ’s power rests upon us, and hard as it is to grasp, we are actually the strongest in God, when we are the weakest in ourselves.”

Thus we see, Paul’s handicap was both given to him, and remained with him, because God not only had something to teach Paul through it, but Paul could only minister in the WAY God desired, with the degree of POWER God desired, if it remained.

(Joni Erickson Tada)

Which brings me to my **LAST** point — the one that needs to overshadow and inform all our thinking in this matter of healing. Because after we’ve done ALL we can and should, to the best of our ability, having repented of sin, and sought to remove all possible roadblocks to healing—after we’ve earnestly looked to God with our mustard seed of faith (which is powerful enough to remove mountains!) and yet still find some to be healed, or improved, while others are not, we must simply learn to rest in the Mysterious and Sovereign decrees of our All-Wise God, who CAN heal, and DOES heal, though He is not bound by either our prayers or faith to do so, nor

immobilized from doing so due to any lack of faith on our part. Faith is important, and so is being right with God, but those things don't ultimately determine the outcome — God does!

He who spoke the world into existence without the help of anyone's faith and raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, despite the OBVIOUS and TOTAL UNBELIEF of the disciples, ultimately determines (in the secret counsel of His own wise and sovereign rule), who will be healed and who will not, and to what extent they will or will not be healed. After we've done all we can, and should, we must simply learn to rest in the truth of God's Sovereignty!

In fact, it was the knowledge of that truth (that GOD is sovereign, and not my faith, or the quality, earnestness, or zeal of anything I do) that lifted from my shoulders the often heavy burden of guilt, when people I prayed for were NOT healed. Because, you see, it wasn't just MaryAnne's FRIEND that had a hard time visiting her after she prayed and MaryAnne just kept getting worse. It was ME too.

It's so easy, when people are NOT healed, to think to yourself — "If only..." "If only I'd only been more loving, or diligent, or full of faith / If only I'd fasted in addition to praying, or prayed longer, or harder, or more often, or with greater zeal / If only I'd done more, said more, or sacrificed more — so and so would have been healed.

In relation to MaryAnne I earnestly asked myself questions like this — Why didn't I visit to pray twice a week, instead of just once? Why didn't I organize additional healing services? Was I doing something I shouldn't, or not doing something should? Was something in me preventing her healing? And what did I do with Bryan that I wasn't doing with MaryAnne? (We love formulas, don't we?)

It's the same in relation to the SALVATION of others. People will say, "If only I'd prayed more, witnessed more, been a better example, shown them more love, or been more spiritual..." "Or if only I hadn't..." I tell you its enough to drive a person to the pits of despair!

And it would if it weren't for the blessed truth that it's NOT all up to us! That it doesn't all rest on our shoulders! That human responsibility must always be counter-balanced with a healthy dose of the Free and Sovereign Grace of God, lest it do immense spiritual and emotional damage to the souls of God's people!

Thus I leave you with a quote by A. W. Tozer which helped lift the burden from my shoulders as I struggled with that issue. He wrote this:

“Were every man on earth to become an atheist, it could not affect God in any way. He is what He is in Himself without regard to any other. To believe in Him adds nothing to His perfections [including His power], to doubt Him takes nothing away. Almighty God, just because He is almighty, needs no support... Probably the hardest thought of all for our natural egotism to entertain is that God does not need our help... [Yet] Let us not imagine that the truth of the divine self-sufficiency will paralyze Christian activity. Rather, it will stimulate all holy endeavor. This truth, while a needed rebuke to human self-confidence, will when viewed in its Biblical perspective, lift from our minds the exhausting load of mortality, and encourage us to take the easy yoke of Christ and spend ourselves in Spirit-empowered toil for the honor of God and the good of mankind. For the blessed news is that the God who needs no one has in sovereign condescension stooped to work by, and in, and through, His obedient children. If all this appears self-contradictory — Amen, let it be so. The various elements of truth stand in perpetual antithesis, sometimes requiring us to believe apparent opposites while we wait for the moment when we shall know as we are [fully] known.”