

A Biblical Response to Faith Healing

Every sickness brings a crisis. Every sick person who calls for help is aware of his human frailty. Sickness is an intensely human experience. There are sickness and death in the plant and animal kingdom, but they have an altogether different meaning.

The ancients said: "Media in vita in morte sumus," In the midst of life we are In death. The fear of death has a hold on us in one form or another. Pascal once said that we spend all our lives to take our minds off It. The problem of pain, sickness, suffering and death Itself remain a deep and overwhelming mystery.

How do we cope with serious sickness? I have seen patients quietly resign to the seriousness of their condition; others become rebellious and were even angry at God. If prescribed remedies and treatments don't bring Immediate results, some may consult one doctor after another in the hope of trying to find a new cure for their ailment. Others turn to anyone and anything that sounds helpful and promises beneficial results. Some even go to the extreme and try to procure help through magic.

They justify their actions by saying: "You are willing to do anything when you are seriously ill. When you are desperate, you don't worry too much anymore, about your sense of discernment. What have you got to lose?"

Christians are immune to neither disease nor to death. When they become seriously ill, their disease can cause a crisis of faith. Some turn to a faith healer with such high , expectations that they accept everything that comes in the name of the Lord without criticism. They turn a blind eye when others point out the dangers, the failures and psychological damage that can be caused by such people.

Others expect little of anything. Miracles are relegated to apostolic times. Their expectation level is often near zero or minus five. God is very much of the ordinary, a part of the traditional religious furniture.

The questions of health, sickness and healing are determined by our faith perspective. If a man Is totally secular, his highest good will be his life and health. If he is a Christian, his highest good will be Jesus Christ. Life and health will not be overestimated.

Sin and sickness

The original cause of all sickness, pain, suffering and death is Adam's fall into sin. The world would have been without sickness if paradise had not been lost. No man, whether a believer or an unbeliever, can escape the many woes of the fallen world.

Though all sickness is the result of the fall, we may not say that every illness is the result of a particular sin.

Countless fine Christians have had to undergo indescribable suffering of mind because they simply believed that their sickness was related to an actual sin or sins.

This harmful theory finds no support in the Bible. When our Lord's disciples asked concerning a man born blind, "Rabbi, who did this sin, this man, or his parents?" Jesus answered: "Neither did this man sin, nor his parents" (John 9:2-3). Our Lord's statement could not have been more explicit.

Jesus didn't draw a causal link between one's illness and one's particular sins. Many flocked to Jesus for healing. He didn't tell everyone to repent before they could receive healing. His calls to repentance were directed to everyone. Lazarus couldn't repent of his sin while dead in the grave; yet the Lord raised him to life.

Sickness

After the fall, mankind came under the sentence of death. Death is inescapable. Faith healers also grow old and die. Is aging itself not a form of disease? Each time one goes to the dentist, there is a warning that the body is deteriorating.

Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, used eye glasses, instead of denying the defects of eyesight. It is reported that she was considerably annoyed when asked why she didn't employ the mind-cure in her own case.

Health

How do we define health? Is it only the absence of disease? Is it merely a permanent fight against death? Health embodies the quality of physical, mental and spiritual life. When we consider health from this perspective, all healing whether through surgical means or through direct intervention by God, is divine. The Christian recognizes God's grace in all healing, whether it takes place in a Christian or non-Christian. The physical experience of healing is the same for both.

If health is not man's permanent earthly possession, God's people may pray for healing until it becomes clear that it is not God's will to heal a person; and then we are able to say with our Lord in Gethsemane: "Not my will but Thine be done."

Value in sickness?

Is suffering senseless? Can we see any meaning in a body wracked by pain? Some Christians say that Satan is the source of every sickness.

This is not always the case. As a matter of fact, there are more instances in Scripture where God is identified as the source of illness. Just to give few examples: "The Lord said to him, 'Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not the Lord?'" (Ex. 4:11); "The Lord afflicted the king with leprosy until the day he died. (2 Kings 15:5).

It is not always God's purpose to heal. He may have a purpose for affliction. It is sheer fallacy to say that God wills health for everyone, or that it is in God's will that any of his children should never be sick.

If health has meaning, so has sickness. The Bible teaches that misfortune, accidents or disease have a purpose. We remember the well known account of the Ten Plagues of Egypt (Ex. 7-11). Miriam, Moses' sister, was stricken with leprosy as a punishment for having spoken ill of her sister-in-law (Num. 12:10). Leprosy fell upon Gehazi, Elisha's servant, as he cheated and lied to Naaman (2 Kings 5:27).

What can we learn from our period of illness? We can become bitter or angry with God. If we do, illness has been a wasted opportunity. Every disease should compel a patient to examine his life. Where is he with God?

Each particular disease has its own meaning. God deals with us on a very personal and intimate level. Illness can give a patient a renewed opportunity to talk with God and to discover what He has to say.

Patients have told me how close they had come to God in their time of illness. Most people, when they are healthy, don't give much thought to the life to come. But death comes to every one of us. Even pagan sailors, when death was in sight, were afraid, and cried every man to his god. (Jonah 1:5).

Pascal once prayed: "Thou didst give me health that I might serve Thee, and I put it all to worldly use. Now Thou sendest me sickness to correct me; let me not use it to avoid Thee through my impatience."

Sickness can be a school of faith. We learn the reality of God's consolation and the beauty of His presence. Is this not the meaning of God's answer to the apostle Paul when he asked for healing and it was denied him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness?"

Sickness keeps us humble. Whether you are rich or poor, sickness is no respecter of persons. And a long or serious illness teaches the emptiness of the things of the world, the passing away of what we often think to be truly important.

Jesus the Healer

Christ's ministry on earth was spent in teaching and healing. He was even called a miracle worker. Why did Jesus perform so many miracles? To manifest His divine power and glory, to destroy the kingdom of darkness and to do the will of His Father. Through the phenomenon of healing, He drew attention to Himself, to His work of divine redemption and to His own divine origin.

Some of the acts of restoration are the healing of lepers (Matt. 8:1-4; Luke 17:12-19); a crippled woman (Luke 13:11-13); the healing of the High Priest's servant (Luke 22:50-51).

The Apostles and healing

in the apostolic age, many were healed by the apostles. A lame man was cured by Peter and John (Acts 5:15); Aeneas the paralytic was healed by Peter at Lydda (Acts 9:32-5); a cripple from birth was healed by Paul at Lystra (Acts 14:8-10). The very special nature of the apostolic work was testified to be the miraculous.

The miracles in the New Testament had a very special purpose. They were at the heart of Christ's redemptive ministry. They were attestations that Christ was the Messiah and that the apostles were the sent out ones. The miracles accompanied the preaching of the gospel of salvation, through Jesus Christ. And all the miracles were done to the glory of the Lord

Will God always heal?

The Bible records many miracles, but it also tells of those who were not healed. Many of Elisha's miracles have become part of the sacred record. Miracles, including healings, have been performed. Yet the Bible also records that he "was suffering from the illness from which he died" (2 Kings 13:14). James was martyred, but Peter was delivered by an angel from prison (Acts 12).

This miraculous deliverance was certainly not due to the lively and great faith of the early church. There have been times when Christians had to learn to live with their illness. Paul wrote to Timothy: "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Tim. 5:23). He also wrote: "Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus" (2 Tim. 4:20)

Healing is complex. Faith healers aren't only guilty of twisting Scripture but they also want to turn back the clock and try to recapture the spirit of the apostolic age. But history cannot be relived.

I am not saying that miracles are not possible today. But we may not command the Holy Spirit to perform miracles. We must be careful not to go into extremes. Faith healing has never been considered an astounding spiritual gift as some seem to consider it today. Hardly any of the "great" Christians of the past have performed, or claimed to be able to perform miracles. Just to name a few: Augustine, Calvin, Knox, Carey, Moody, Graham and others.

Healing and the new Jerusalem

The essential framework of the New Testament is eschatological, that is, it has to do with the second coming of Jesus Christ. We are living in the now and in the not yet. We have not realized the future. We are born, live and die.

The miracles of the New Testament point to the new future. The time is short. The fashions of the world will pass away. Suffering will soon be over. A few more funerals, and our own will be one of them.

D.L. Moody once wrote that when people read his obituary, they would know that he was more alive than he had ever been. Did Paul not exhort believers "to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God?" We travel towards the new city, where sickness, pain and death will be no more (Heb. 10:37). The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death (Rev. 20:14).

Faith healers reach for the future and want to make It real today. This cannot be done. The new order of God will only be realized when the kingdom of God is fully established; but in the meanwhile, each healing whether through medical means or through spontaneous intervention by God, is only a sign that points to that great day when pain and death shall be no more.

We shortchange ourselves if we overestimate our health and life here. Even death becomes healing. For through it, we shall enter a world where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 12:4). Don't we believe in the resurrection? "Christ Jesus... has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10).

J.C. Ryle, Evangelical Anglican Bishop of Liverpool from 1880-1900, sums up the argument so beautifully; "Yes; blessed be God! Christ lives, though we may die. Christ lives, though friends and families are carried to the grave ... He lives who will one day change our vile body and make it like His glorious body. In sickness and in health, in life and in death, let us lean confidently on Him. Surely we ought to say daily with one of old, 'Blessed be God for Jesus Christ!'"

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