

## Doing the Stuff - Does God heal today?

Leeds Vineyard, February 1st 2015.

"What do you do, Daddy?"

"What do you mean?"

"For a job?"

Now when you are first asked by your three year old about your occupation, the degree to which you can answer probably depends on your role. You might be able to say that you are a policeman or fireman or teacher and thanks to old episodes of *Camberwick Green* said three year old will have some insight of what that means. It might be that you answer more by explaining where you work - I work in an office for example. How do you start to explain what you do if you have a job like mine. For those of you who don't know, I am a Pathologist. Pathologists are medically qualified doctors who work in a hospital. Most of their work involves looking at pieces of human tissue with the aid of a microscope, both small pieces (biopsies) and larger organs. And we examine them to diagnose various medical conditions, including cancers. I document any abnormalities I find in the tissue and write a report for the clinical team so that the patient can receive the correct treatment. A small portion of a pathologists workload (and the bit that anyone who has seen even one episode of *Silent Witness* may think forms the majority) is in working out how people have died by conducting autopsies. Not suitable conversation material for a three year old. So how did I answer that question? I said I was a doctor and I worked in a hospital and I helped other doctors to make people better.

As a member of the medical profession, the question of does God heal today is one that at times is challenging. I think it can be to many of us, and sometimes when we start to look at this question we end up with more questions than answers. As we work through the series of talks we are doing at the moment, we are looking at the theme "doing the stuff" and building towards the event we are running in March. Today I want to look at this question of "does God heal today" and what implications that may have.

So if you have a bible with you, please turn with me to James chapter 5:

**13** Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. **14** Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. **15** And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. **16** Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

This passage addresses the question of healing. It was written by James, who was one of the leaders in the early Church in Jerusalem. Some scholars believe that he was Jesus' brother. This letter was written in about 50AD, so something like 20 years after Jesus' resurrection, and he addresses a variety of subjects. Here, he seems to echo something of Jesus in the great commission as we read in Mark 16:

**15** He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation... **17** And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; **18** they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when

*they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on people who are ill, and they will get well.'*

Both Jesus and later James are making it clear that praying for the sick is not an 'if you feel like it' option. It's always, 'Pray for the sick' not 'if it's not too much trouble, if you're a bit busy...'

### **Sickness is part of living in a fallen world.**

But as we are talking about healing, let's start at the beginning with the question of what health is.

The world health organisation defines health like this:

*Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*

In the book of Genesis we can read of how when God created the earth it was a perfect place. Then he created humans and put them in a perfect garden with everything they needed to be happy and healthy. And they were just that in Eden. And God gave them just one command: *Don't eat from that tree in the middle of the garden.* But then of course the man and woman did exactly that and ate an apple from tree. From that time humans have been suffering from the effects of that sin. One of those effects is bad health. People will fall sick, and it is not necessarily because they have committed some sort of sin - it is part of living in a fallen world.

In the garden of Eden there was complete physical, mental and social well-being. As Christians we believe that there is coming a time when Jesus will return, and a new heaven and a new earth will be created where there will be no more sickness, pain, crying or death. There will only be perfect health. But we are not there yet.

### **God intervenes in this fallen world.**

Two weeks ago we looked at the the question "does God speak today". And just as with that topic, there are a spectrum of views when it comes to the question of does God heal today. Briefly (and generalising somewhat whilst using some theological phrases) you could place people on a scale from:

1. Atheism – there is no God and therefore there is no healing from god. If you think you have been healed by God, then it is an unscientific belief of your own creation. It is not possible for a non-existent entity to heal.
2. Deism/Theism – there is a god or gods but they don't heal us - they don't intervene in our lives at all. They are out there somewhere but having perhaps from created the world, they are now otherwise occupied.
3. Dispensationalism – a technical term about Christianity which incorporates a cessationist viewpoint. Very simplified it believes that there is a God and that he reveals himself through the bible, through the people of Israel, through Jesus and will one day bring heaven to earth when everything will be restored – no more crying, no more pain, no more war. God healed people in biblical times, through the prophets, through Jesus and through the apostles, but has not done so since the last of the apostles died - he

only used healing up to that point to demonstrate the authority the prophets and apostles had in preaching his message.

4. Vineyard (sitting within a broad evangelical and charismatic part of the church) – where we believe that there is a God, that He reveals himself and he intervenes in our lives through the power of the holy Spirit which was promised to all believers by His Son Jesus Christ.

For myself, I sit firmly in category number 4 - I believe that God is active in the world today and that he can heal today just as he did in biblical times. Can God heal? Yes. Does God heal? Absolutely. Jesus healed many people as a part of His earthly ministry, including people who were blind or lame or suffered diseases like leprosy. He even raised one man back to life after the funeral had taken place.

God still works miracles at times today, some of which include miraculous physical healing. But Jesus didn't heal all sick people in the ancient near east. Why? Because it wasn't His primary mission and purpose. He came to save the souls of sinners, not to merely make their present life more comfortable.

And that is an important point to recognise, because within the viewpoint that God heals, there are some at the extremes who would say that regardless of the ailment, modern medicine is to be shunned in favour of prayer alone. Maybe something like this...

And they will use scriptures will be used to back that point of view up, possibly including the one we have just read.

The point of view may even extend beyond simple muscular aches and pains: if you have a chest infection, you don't need antibiotics, so don't go to your GP - call your pastor to pray for you. Some GPs would doubtless be delighted if we took that approach... More dangerously I think, is the school of thought that says that you don't need antidepressants or antipsychotic medication in the case of mental illnesses. The extreme viewpoint may just state that you need the elders to pray for you prayers of deliverance because, they say, mental illnesses are all caused by some variation on daemonic possession. And of course some will teach that if you are not healed of these things when you are prayed for, it is because of your lack of faith.

Interestingly people expounding such views often don't allow them to extend to the treatment hip having fallen in the snow, or the consequences of a severe road accident.

As you may have gathered, I do not agree with those viewpoints. I believe that God can and does heal today and can and does do so miraculously, but the wisdom and knowledge He has given to doctors, scientists and researchers over the last 2000 years allows him to work in other ways too when it comes to restoring our health.

*I'm reminded of the story of a terrible storm came into a town and local officials sent out an emergency warning that the riverbanks would overflow and flood the nearby homes. They ordered everyone in the town to evacuate immediately.*

*A faithful Christian man heard the warning and decided to stay, saying to himself, "I will trust God and if I am in danger, then God will send a divine miracle to save me."*

*As the man stood on his porch watching the water rise up the steps, a man in a canoe paddled by and called to him, "Hurry and come into my canoe, the waters are rising quickly!" But the man again said, "No thanks, God will save me."*

*The floodwaters rose higher pouring water into his living room and the man had to retreat upstairs. A police motorboat came by and saw him at the window. "We will come up and rescue you!" they shouted. But the man refused, waving them off saying, "Use your time to save someone else! I have faith that God will save me!"*

*The flood waters rose higher and higher and the man had to climb up to his rooftop. A helicopter spotted him and dropped a rope ladder. A rescue officer came down the ladder and pleaded with the man, "Grab my hand and I will pull you up!" But the man STILL refused, folding his arms tightly to his body. "No thank you! God will save me!" Shortly after, the house broke up and the floodwaters swept the man away and he drowned.*

*When in Heaven, the man stood before God and asked, "I put all of my faith in You. Why didn't You come and save me?"*

*And God said, "Son, I sent you a warning. I sent you a canoe. I sent you a motorboat. I sent you a helicopter. What more were you looking for?"*

## **What can God heal?**

So where are the boundaries? Can praying to God for healing cure:

Coughs and colds?

The Flu, chicken pox or other childhood illnesses?

Muscular aches and pains?

Broken bones or restore senses?

How about cure cancer or Alzheimers?

What about mental illnesses like schizophrenia or depression? C.S Lewis in *The problem of pain*, wrote that "Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say "My tooth is aching" than to say "My heart is broken."

It is easier to say "I have a chest infection" rather than "I can't cope."

I believe the answer in all of these cases is: yes, God can heal. There are no boundaries. God has no limitations on what he can do.

## **Healing - Now and not yet**

But here's the rub: there is nothing in Scripture that guarantees that in Jesus death and resurrection all sickness has been instantly conquered and as followers of Jesus we will no longer suffer illness. Sickness will be conquered, and of that we can be certain, but it is part of a tension we call the "now and not yet".

What does that mean? Well, chronologically it might look something like this:

- 1 the long past - Eden
- 2 then the fall
- 3 Jesus - the inauguration of kingdom power.
- 4 today - living in the already and the not yet
- 5 the long future - heaven.

How do we know there is a tension? We look in the bible. Sometimes we might get the idea that the Jesus or the apostles were healing everybody whom they came into contact

with. And we might even start to believe that they had a sort of indiscriminate healing power and ability or even that they could tell God when and where they wanted Him to work and heal through them.

The truth is that in the new testament church, the apostles could only do what God would enable them to do by faith. When they moved to heal someone it was at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and they confidently believed God for healing. But there were other times when God didn't heal, and they weren't in shock or awe about this. It didn't weaken their faith in any way. Take a guy called Timothy for example. Timothy was one of Paul's friends and a key young leader in the early church. Paul told him in 1 Timothy 5:23, "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." For whatever reason, Timothy had some stomach issue and he was regularly suffering from some variety of sickness. What did Paul do? His advice was not to exorcise some demon of stomach sickness, nor did he come to Timothy and bestow some healing power upon him. Timothy, as I say was was a man of great faith and key leader in the early church and one of Paul's closest friends. It wasn't for lack of faith that he wasn't healed. It just for whatever reason it wasn't God's plan. But Paul and Timothy accepted that and lived in light of that reality, taking practical steps to deal with the problem. As I indicated earlier, there is room in the Bible for doctors and medicine.

God does heal today, but there is no "magic formula". He does not heal because we pray clever prayers or know the latin name of the illness. He does not heal because we are special and hold any power in ourselves to bring healing. He does not heal because we convince him to, or have any power over him. He does not heal for the spectacle or for the Spiritual entertainment of those who attend church services meetings or conferences.

He heals because He wants to. He honours the prayers of faith from the righteous hearts of His children, but He doesn't always work how we want Him to work. Regardless of what God decides to do, we can trust that His way and will is best. It's a tension: *We cannot command God to heal, but we can ask Him to. We can believe that He will, but we cannot require Him to do so.* Sometimes healing will happen instantaneously, sometimes over time. Sometimes its miraculously, and sometimes through the surgeons hands or the physicians medications. One day, sickness of any sort will not be an issue, but until that time when we are with Jesus, we have a role to play as James says in the passage: to pray for the sick.

### **A prompt to prayer.**

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. God heals in response to the faithful prayers of those who follow him, as lead by the Holy Spirit. We can pray confidently: Matthew 7:7 says: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. and in John 15:7 we read "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." It is with that confidence that we should pray for people to be healed.

In medicine there is a scientific concept called the number needed to treat. Very simply what that means is that not every treatment works every time. Some effective cures might work 8 out of 10 times, but that means that you have to treat 10 people to cure 8. Of the other two, one will have got better by themselves and one will still be sick. A low cure rate medication may only cure one in ten, with one getting better by themselves and the remaining 8 still being sick. But statistically you have to treat the ten people to get the effect.

Now I am not convinced that you can directly apply the same principle to praying for the sick - for one thing God can confound any scientific experiment - but the point I want to make is this: If people are going to be healed through the power of prayer, then we need to have a culture where we pray for them.

Sometimes healing is a sign to those who don't believe: Mark 16 says "And these signs will accompany those who believe... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." Jesus reminds his disciples that the gift of healing was given to the Apostles as a sign to the unbeliever. People will be led into relationship with Jesus through seeing either themselves or others healed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayers for healing will demonstrate to those who don't yet follow Jesus that God the Healer is active and relevant today.

So where does that leave us when He doesn't heal in answer to our prayers? Or when people are only partially healed. Well, sometimes there are no easy answers to difficult questions.

It might be because we've not prayed enough. There is a passage in Mark Chapter 8, where Jesus heals a man who has become blind in a town called Bethsaida. It's a very interesting passage, because it is the only time that Jesus prays for healing where the man is only partially healed the first time that Jesus prays for him. He has some of his sight restored and is able to talk about people (Jesus' disciples) looking like trees walking around. Jesus then lays his hands on the man a second time before he is healed.

But people might not be because we are praying for the wrong thing or that it's not the right time, that we are not hearing effectively the leading of the Holy Spirit. Some of these concepts are difficult, but sometimes when we are suffering, God is taking us on a journey with him and the journey is not yet complete. A passage in Paul's letter to the Romans tells us that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

There are passages in scripture talk about faith: Mark 5: the woman who had been bleeding for years that only had to touch Jesus cloak to be healed - Jesus told her "your faith has made you well". He says the same thing to the Leper that returned to thank him in Luke 17. "Your faith has made you well."

Some of these passages might suggest to us that a lack of healing might be because we do not have enough faith. But this is neither the go-to answer for lack of healing, or even the only answer as some might claim.

He is the one who heals - not us. How, when, where or even "if" He does that, is up to him, not us. But we believe and trust in a great and wonderful God through whom all things work together for the good of those who follow him. Next week David will be leading us through a model for praying for healing which is really helpful, but for today as we finish my prayer for us is that we would know assuredly that our God is a god of healing power.

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they have sinned, they will be forgiven. **16** Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Our role: to pray for His Kingdom to come - to pray to move the “not yet” into the now. To pray for His will to be done and to pray that those who are unwell will be restored to full health through the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what “doing the stuff is about”.