**Divine Healing**

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Apostolic study Bible p1119-1120

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). With this short sentence, the writer of Genesis described how humankind differed from God’s other earthly creations; humankind would consist of both a material (body) and an immaterial (soul/spirit) dimension. The next chapter of Genesis recalls the catastrophic fall of mankind. The first humans, Adam and Eve, sinned, and their sin had lasting consequences. Not only were they personally driven from the Garden, but corruption also invaded every aspect of life. Death began to work in them and their offspring and even the course of nature was altered. All of life suffered from the pollution of sin. Sickness and disease became part of the human experience.

**Healing in the Atonement**

But God is gracious. He slipped a promise of redemption into His punishment of Adam and Eve’s behavior. Although the serpent (Satan) would bruise the heel of the seed of Eve, her offspring (Christ) would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). This promise is the first hint that death would not always reign supreme. The future promised to be better. However, because He is holy, God could not ignore sin. He had to find a way to remove the stigma of sin. He did so by making a provision for the atonement of sin. Historically the concept of atonement refers to a ransom paid to enable redemption and restoration. Ultimately through His incarnation and subsequent death on the cross, Jesus purchased our redemption and restoration. This redemption and restoration is the key theme in the overarching biblical narrative. Centuries before His incarnation, Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be “wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). Matthew referenced this passage to provide context for a number of healings performed by Jesus including the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14-17). That Atonement not only redeemed us, but it also made provision for physical healing.

The Old Testament includes accounts of physical healing. Probably every Sunday school child knows the story of Naaman and his seven dips in the muddy Jordan. Naaman’s leprosy was healed when he followed the instructions of the prophet. At the bitter waters of Marah, God declared, “I am the Lord that healeth thee” (Exod. 15:26). It is from this incident that we derive the compound name Jehovah-rapha – the Lord who heals. However, in the grand sweep of the Old Testament narrative, accounts of healing are relatively rare. They point forward to the coming of the Messiah.

The pace of healing quickened during the earthly ministry of Jesus. Healing was not only a central focus of the Gospels, but it is also a central focus of the gospel itself. In what some have called His inaugural address, Jesus set the agenda for His earthly ministry, and healing was a key component. (see Luke 4:19-20.) The Gospels show a close connection between the healing ministry of Jesus and His emphasis on salvation. In the account of the lame man who was lowered through the roof by his four friends, Jesus linked His power to heal with His authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-12). When John the Baptist had his moment of doubt brought on by his imprisonment, Jesus instructed John’s disciples to tell him that “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:5). Divine healing did not cease with the ascension of Jesus. In Acts 3, Peter and James participated in the healing of a man born lame. Paul included healing in his list of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:19).

But not every sick person in the New Testament was healed. The same Paul who outlined the gifts of the Spirit wrote of leaving Trophimus behind in Melitum because he was sick (II Tim. 4:20). In fact, every person healed in the New Testament eventually succumbed to death, even Lazarus who was at one time raised from the dead by Jesus (John 11:43-44). If healing was provided in the Atonement – and it was – how is it then that not all are healed? Why do people still die of sickness? The answer lies in understanding the unfolding of salvation history. The entry of Jesus into the world, and especially His death and resurrection, radically adjusted the condition of the world. His coming inaugurated the kingdom of God and ushered in the beginning of the eschaton or the end times. However, His kingdom will not be fully consummated until His second coming. Until then we live in a time of “now and not yet.” Healing is available now but all are not healed. Death can be pushed back but ultimately in this “not yet” period everyone will taste death. So we should see every healing as an eschatological event. Each Healing confirms the promise of His second coming when He will bring full redemption and restoration. One day sickness and death will only be a faint memory. We will live forever in His presence.

**The Role of Faith in Healing**

Just as salvation is rooted in grace, so too is healing. It cannot be earned. New Testament believers did not look on healing as something they could demand from God. Instead they asked in faith. And somehow in ways that cannot be codified, Jesus responded to their faith. Rarely, however, did healing occur in the same way twice. Jesus might have spit in the ground to make mud to put on a blind man’s eyes and had the blind man wash in a pool of Siloam (John 9:6-7). Or healing might take place in stages. In mark 8, Jesus spit in a blind man’s eyes and then laid hands on him. The blind man was healed enough to see men as trees walking. Jesus then put His hands on the man’s eyes and his sight was completely restored.

But faith was always present. Matthew tells of the unnamed woman who had been sick for twelve years with an “issue of blood” pressing through the crowds to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment. Jesus responded to her touch and her faith by healing her. In fact, He said that her faith had made her whole. (See Matt. 9:20-22.)

The opposite also seems to be true. Lack of faith hinders healing. After a period of public ministry, Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth. He was treated with skepticism, even from His own family. According to Matthew, He did little in the way of the miraculous in Nazareth because of their unbelief. (See Matt. 13:15-23.)

The book of James gives instructions to those seeking healing. “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” (James 5:14-15).

**How Should We Deal with Sickness?**

The first response should be to believe for healing. The Atonement makes healing possible and the Bible indicates that God responds to faith. We should also examine ourselves to see if it is possible that sickness has been brought on by our sin. Paul told the Corinthian church that their misuse of the Lord’s Supper caused them to be “weak and sickly” (I Cor. 10:30). If our sin is the root cause of our sickness, we should repent of that sin and live in obedience to God’s will.

If sickness persists, we should look for a way to redeem suffering. Unfortunately suffering is part of the human experience. Pretending that it is not real does injustice to those who suffer and may indeed steal from us an opportunity to deepen our relationship with the Lord. This is not to suggest that we actively seek ways to suffer as a means to spiritual growth. Suffering can whet our appetite for Heaven. Sometimes it just hurts and the only appropriate response is to trust the character of Jesus.

Divine healing has always been shrouded with mystery. We cannot completely understand how some pray and receive healing and others, just as faithful, continue to suffer with painful illness. Neither can we understand why God permitted James to be killed by Herod and Peter to be delivered from suffering the same fate at the hands of Herod (Acts 12:1-19). But Just because we do not always understand it, does not mean that we should not preach and believe it. Instead we should embrace each healing as an eschatological act and look forward to the time when death is fully defeated and sickness is no more.