



Health and Healing in the Bible

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The Bible has obviously been a rich resource to religious people at times of sickness. Though we do not so readily admit it, the Bible has also been the source of some confusion and even some pain to others who have sought a clear word about their illness from the Holy Writ. “If Jesus comes to heal the sick, why doesn’t he heal me?” “Is my illness a sign that I have done something wrong for which God is punishing me?” “Doesn’t God care about me anymore?” “If God heals those who have enough faith, does that mean that my faith is inadequate?” “The doctor tells me I have a terminal illness, but my Bible-quoting friends tell me to forget about what the doctor says and go directly to God for healing.” “How can I pray to God for health when I know I will never get any better?”

The Bible has much to say about the subject of health and healing. My purpose in this essay is to try to draw together the various biblical ideas on health and healing into some manageable order. I have not researched what others have written on this subject but have tried to let the Bible speak its own word. I have summarized what I see as the biblical teaching under several headings.

1. *Health and wholeness is the “normal” state.*

The world is not supposed to be in the shape that it is. That assumption runs throughout the Bible. God did not create the world with the intention that there would be sickness and suffering. After each step in the process of creation, God paused, looked at what he had made, and pronounced that it was good. God’s desire for human beings is peace, wholeness, health, well-being. That was the way it was meant to be at the beginning, and that is the promise of how it will be at the end. The present interlude in which there is sickness is the aberration, the abnormality, not what is either normal or permanent. The Bible looks back to the beginning as a time free from sickness (at least by implication—the troubles of toil and pain come after the fall). And when looking ahead to deliverance, salvation, redemption, the Bible speaks of God as the one who will bring healing (many examples of this, but see Exod 15:26; Ps 103:3, Ps 147:3). God is the healer, the one who brings us back to the “normal” state of health.

This is important to keep in mind as we confront illnesses in life. We should never give in to the illness quickly, as if this was the way God intended things to be, as if to fight against the sickness is somehow to rebel against God’s will, as if submission to every horrible event in our lives is the way God would want us to behave. This means that the church has an important role to fill as a healing

community, even reaching out to support the advances of modern medical science, founding hospitals, encouraging the finest medical care possible. Further, since God desires health for us, and since God will finally do what God wills, sickness and suffering will not endure forever. They will end. There will be health and wholeness again. That is assured. We have much to hope for. Whether or not all this will happen within this life is a question to which we shall return later.

Though it may sometimes be true that good comes from illness, the sickness in itself is not to be cherished as something good. Rather, it is a deviation from what God has actually desired for us human beings.

2. Where, then, does the sickness come from?

Obviously, something has gone wrong. If God wants us to be well, why is there so much illness in the world? If God doesn't want it, why should it happen? Whose fault is it?

Very often the biblical traditions make a connection between human sickness and human sin. Many biblical texts interpret the disruption of health as a consequence of disobedience, idolatry, sin. At the end of Genesis three, the woman and man are promised pain and the frustration of hard work with little reward. Though illness is not specifically mentioned, the implication seems to be that all the unpleasantness of the world has its roots here. Later in the story of Israel, various plagues and afflictions of one kind or another are sent by God as punishment. Sometimes individuals are singled out—such as Miriam's leprosy (Num 12:9-16) or the illness of the first child of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:14-23). At other times the whole people are struck by a disease, which is then interpreted as God's judgment (such as recorded in Numbers, chapters 14 and 16, and in 2 Samuel 24). In the listing of curses which will befall those who do not keep the covenant, physical ailments are also included. Deuteronomy 28 mentions "the boils of Egypt," and ulcers and scurvy and "the itch, of which you cannot be healed" (v. 27). Verse 35 warns us that "The Lord will smite you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head." No wonder that Job's counselors, probably familiar with this passage, suspected some secret sin in the life of Job which could have moved God to inflict on him such physical distress.

This is a common theme in the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament, and mostly in pre-exilic texts. There is a connection between sin and sickness. One of the unpleasant consequences of sin is physical illness. This is used as a warning to those who might contemplate flouting God's will. It also becomes away of interpreting illnesses which afflict individuals and groups. The sin may be our ancestor's, or committed by someone else in our society, but even though we may appear innocent, we all pay the price because we are all in this together.

God is mentioned as the one bringing the punishment. It is not mere cause and effect which works with or without God's participation. Most biblical texts want to protect the power of God, the involvement of God in the lives of his people, and therefore God is the one who brings illness (see Job 1:21-2:10; Exod 4:11; 1 Sam 2:6). But, in most cases, it is made clear that God does not enjoy the suffering of anyone. Rather, God prefers to bring life and health (see, for exam-

ple, Ezek 18:32). It is human perverseness which has moved God to cause (at least "to allow")

sickness, even though this runs counter to God's actual intention for human beings.

What is a sick person to think? One does not need to read much of the Bible before being confronted by passages such as these. Does God still act like this? Does God bring illness? Am I being punished for something? Am I worse than other people because I am sick and they are not? Such questions are not unusual for suffering people who know their Bible. They too often make analogies between their own illness and those ancient judgments on the Israelite community, and they are puzzled and hurt and excessively guilty. Or they may become totally alienated from a God who makes people sick.

The Bible itself tends to draw back from a too ready willingness to identify every personal illness as a judgment from God. That answer does not always work. It is too simple. My illness may be a result of sin, but only in some larger, more general sense. We all live in a fallen world where bacteria and viruses and air pollution and cancer-causing food additives are part of everyday life. It is a bit presumptuous for me to assume there is some cosmic significance to my being singled out as the victim of an illness that has multiple and complex causes (and we may not even know what they are).

There are other alternatives in the Bible to this narrow understanding of illness as retribution for sin. For example, God may use the suffering for some greater purpose (more of this later). Or, the illness may be the result of the evil work of a third force, neither God nor human (e.g., Satan in Job 1-2; demon possession in the New Testament). This possibility eases somewhat the negative aspects of viewing sickness as punishment. Maybe an enemy has done it to me. Still another alternative to the retribution theory is simply to admit the mystery and not attempt to over-explain the origin of the illness because, sooner or later, most explanations will lead us into some sort of difficulty.

So, a common biblical understanding of sickness is that it is the result of sin. This idea works best if we speak in broad terms about the fallen condition of humanity and do not try to connect individual illnesses with the sins which caused them. As these texts demonstrate, sin may lead to sickness. A life of disobedience to God may lead to suffering. But it does not follow (though Job's counselors thought otherwise) that all sickness is the result of sin. There may be other explanations which work better.

3. The relationship between forgiveness of sins and healing.

Many biblical passages make a connection between the forgiveness of sins and healing. That does not seem strange in light of what we have just been saying about the common biblical idea that sickness is the result of sin. If one is suffering for some iniquity, then it is logical that, as part of the healing process, the sin needs to be forgiven. Psalm 107:17-22 speaks of some who were afflicted because of their iniquities and who cried to God for help. God's subsequent deliverance of them involves acceptance and forgiveness as well as the physical healing. Psalm 103:3 puts these two redemptive acts of God in parallel: "[Bless the Lord] who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases."

Jesus sometimes forgives sins along with, or even prior to, his acts of healing (e.g., Mark 2:1-12; Matt 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26). Does that imply that the sick

person is guilty, that he is suffering because of some sin and therefore forgiveness must precede

the actual healing? That is certainly one way to interpret these passages, and that would be consistent with many Old Testament passages. Many Christians have understood them in this way, and it has reinforced their guilt and confusion as they wonder what sin they have committed. Read in such a way, these passages seem to portray Jesus as one who continues to preach a rather narrow doctrine of retribution. In other places (especially John 9 and Luke 13:1-5), Jesus says that you cannot make an easy connection between a person's misfortunes and his sins. Neither a blind man nor his parents are responsible for his blindness. And those who were crushed when the tower of Siloam fell on them were not any greater sinners than those who escaped this fate.

We should recognize the problem that some people have with the connection they make between the forgiveness of sins and healing. We should not encourage people to read these passages in a narrow way which assumes that all sick people are in need of forgiveness in order to be made well. The John 9 and Luke 13 passages can help us in this matter.

Perhaps there are some other points that need to be raised with regard to the forgiveness of sins and healing. Human sin may indeed be responsible for a fallen world. Jesus' act of pronouncing forgiveness is a symbolic word to all of us who are afflicted in one way or another by our own sins and the sins of other human beings. Jesus comes to remove our burdens from us, to restore wholeness and health as God first intended. The story of the paralytic who is forgiven and receives health is a paradigm—a small indication of the light and salvation that has come into the world. It is better to interpret passages like this in a broad general sense, as part of Jesus' greater message of an eschatological hope, than to assume that this is the typical way in which a good Christian is restored to health.

The connection between forgiveness and health also points out to us the complicated relationships between mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical health. Maybe the physical ailment is actually a manifestation of something gone awry in one's emotional or spiritual life. Someone who feels terribly guilty, who carries a deep and tragic burden from some long past deed, will not be able to achieve physical health until forgiveness has been granted and accepted. Until that happens, the person will find one way or another to punish the body. With forgiveness there is no more a need to be sick. Surely, there are mysteries about the causes of illness, the effect of our psyches on our bodies, that we only are beginning to understand.

Further, though it may not be true in any objective way that a person has deserved his or her sickness, it still may be important to pronounce forgiveness of sin. The idea of retribution is so close to the surface, so much a part of our religious heritage, abounding in our biblical texts and in our liturgies and in the often unintentional blunderings of our spiritual comforters, that we finally wear down under all that pressure and begin to imagine that maybe there really is something the matter with us. The belief that humans cause their own suffering has so affected our thinking that it has in itself created the guilt which the word of forgiveness is needed to address. In one way or another, persons who are sick often feel condemned for getting themselves into trouble. And

therefore a word of forgiveness is essential if they are to be fully healed.

4. *God invites us to ask for help in times of sickness.*

As we have said, sickness is not the normal state. God wants us to be well.. Even if God has acted to bring sickness as punishment, he can be persuaded to call off the punishment and restore good fortunes because God is genuinely moved by the suffering of people. Whether our sickness is in some way deserved or whether its origin is completely unknown, God will hear and respond positively to our need.

God heard the cry of the Hebrew children in Egypt and came down to deliver them, appointing Moses to be the liberator (Exod 3:6-7). Though Nathan had told David that his baby would die as a result of David's sin against Uriah the Hittite, David still felt free to beseech the Lord on behalf of the child (2 Sam 12:16). Jeremiah cried out to God on behalf of his people and himself: "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed: save me, and I shall be saved; for thou art my praise" (Jer 17:14). The book of Psalms contains many laments which provide us the words to use when coming to God to ask for help in times of trouble: "O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger, nor chasten me in thy wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is sorely troubled. But thou, O Lord—how long?" (6:1-3).

Likewise, Jesus urges people to come to him with their troubles. He says we should be persistent in asking what we want from God, not faltering and doubtful, but confident that we will find what we seek. Even human fathers will give their sons what they need and will not deceive them. "If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt 7:11). In his own life, Jesus incarnated God's response to the hurting of humanity and the willingness and power to bring healing.

So we are invited to pray for healing from our own sickness and the illness of others. God is compassionate and will hear our prayer. God can even be persuaded by prayer. Even if our illness is the result of sin, he can have his mind changed. God may "repent" of the evil that he had intended to do because he is moved by a person's repentance and pain or the prayers of an intercessor (some examples in Jer 18:7-8; Jonah 3:9-10; Exod 32:12-14; Amos 7:3-6). Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah were three of the great intercessors of the Bible approaching God on behalf of the health of their people.

Prayer is a great resource at times of illness. We are invited to take our trouble to God. We are to be honest and open, complaining and direct, persistent to the point of being obnoxious. We are to ask for what we want and not be willing to settle for second-best. If we want health, we should ask for it. If we want full recovery, we should not hedge our bets by asking only for "the serenity to accept whatever comes," or suggesting that "nevertheless, your will be done." Most of us have been conditioned to be realistic, laid back, less than optimistic in our prayers. We look around and see what is possible and ask for that instead of what we really want. We expect our prayers not to be answered, and they usually are not.

God invites us to ask for healing in times of sickness. He has promised to

hear. God can be persuaded to take away illnesses and other suffering, whether or not we have deserved them.

5. *Sometimes the answer is “no.”*

Here comes the problem. We have read those stories of healing in the Bible—Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament, the healing miracles of Jesus, the wonders performed by Peter and Paul. We have heard God’s invitation to come for help and healing. We have been promised that our prayers will be answered. We have had faith. We have dared to hope for the impossible. Dozens of people are praying for us. But health does not come. The illness persists. And doubts creep into our mind. Do we believe enough? Maybe a little more faith will help. Does God keep his promises after all? How can we be certain that God cares and that I am one of God’s children if there are not signs of that, if good Christian people get mowed down by accidents and disease just like everyone else?

Our biblical ancestors sometimes had to deal with a “No.” David’s son died after all. Jeremiah looked for peace and healing, but had to contend with terror (Jer 14:18). Baruch complained about his sorrow and pain but God did not take them away. How could Baruch find great things for himself in a time when the world was falling apart? The best God could do for Baruch was to keep him alive (no small matter, actually; see Jeremiah, chapter 45). God seems not always to respond; seems in fact to be distant or even absent. The one who tells us to come in prayer appears to be unable or unwilling to hear our prayer. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (Ps 22:1-2).

At times God even says that he will not hear the cries of his people. He will not take away their misery even if the great intercessors like Moses and Samuel (Jer 15:1) or Noah, Daniel, and Job (Ezek 14:14, 20) speak on the people’s behalf. God even tells Jeremiah to quit praying for the people (Jer 11:14; 14:11-12) because it won’t do any good.

Even Jesus, the personification of God for Christians, seems at times unresponsive to the hurts of those around him. He gets so tired of everyone clamoring around for some miracle, instant relief from one affliction or another, that he goes away and hides where he can be by himself away from all the demands on his power and compassion. Further, as a human being, he cannot hear and respond to everyone’s need anyway—not even in Palestine, let alone in the rest of the world.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul tells us about his struggle with his “no” from God. Three times he asked God to remove his thorn in the flesh. If anyone is going to have their prayer answered, you would assume Paul would. Who can question his faith, his commitment, his courage, his persistence? He could make a great case that the work of the kingdom could be enhanced even more if he had this affliction removed from him. To be sure, Paul had been a rather effective preacher in spite of his “thorn,” but just think what he could have accomplished without this impediment! No argument worked. He was stuck with the problem. And for Paul, in a profound way, it became part of his message—that God’s grace is sufficient and that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Paul provides us a beautiful example of living with a “No” from God.

And so sometimes our prayers will not be answered, at least not as we expected. The sickness will persist. The pain may get even worse. Our loved one will die. The amputated limb cannot grow back. The genes that predispose one toward a short life span are a reality that no

“miracle” can change. The agonizing life experiences that have left one constantly on the verge of depression cannot simply be washed away as if they did not exist. Many factors have been at work in our life for decades, and in our parents’ and grandparents’ lives before us. Their effects are already at work, and healing in this life may be beyond possibility.

It is no wonder that some of us become cynical (or at best, disillusioned) about the efficacy of prayer. We have been burned too many times. We have come with great expectations, believing the promises, and the answer has been “No.” What, then, to do? Abandon prayer? Refuse to ask for too much? Become very critical and suspicious of “faith healing,” which seems to promise too much and flirts dangerously with an idolatrous manipulation of God? It is hazardous to wander too far in this direction. God does still hear prayer. We are to tell God what we want and how we feel. Maybe all we can tell him is how disappointed we are, how absent he seems, how doubtful we are. But we are still called to prayer, even when the content of our prayers seems incoherent, disrespectful, and close to disbelief. For those times when it sounds like we are getting a “no” from God, the biblical lament is offered as a way to keep open the conversation with God. It gives us permission to say what needs to be said, the assurance that we are not alone in our suffering, a way to approach God when we are not sure where to find him.

6. Healing is more than attaining physical health.

Surely, we all want physical health. And we are right to ask God for that kind of healing. But we usually think of this matter of healing in too narrow terms. We take the healing miracles of the Bible quite literally, more concerned with the immediate results of physical healing than with the greater message of God’s defeat of sickness and suffering which those stories symbolize. We expect it to happen for us like it happened to the blind and deaf and halt who happened to be lucky enough to be around when Jesus was walking the roads of Galilee or Judea. We are set up for disappointment. The smiling faces on TV tell us about their cures. One success story after another is paraded before us. In moments of desperation, we begin to wonder if they might be on to something after all. “Maybe I am wrong to doubt. At any rate, the doctor isn’t doing me any good anyway. What have I got to lose?”

God’s promise to bring health to us may not come true in terms of physical health within this life. But we know that this life is not all that there is. All human beings must die. Our bodies wear out. With the possible exception of Elijah and Enoch (so says tradition), every human being has had to die. Some, like Lazarus, had to do it more than once. No one has the promise of perpetual good health in this life. If you are lucky enough to live that long, the aging process begins to make its mark and, though one may not actually be sick, the old body just isn’t what it used to be. In some cases, we may even be so bold as to say that death itself is healing—in fact, it may be the only healing possible.

So there must be more than this life if God’s promises about healing are to be kept. If God’s intention for us is wholeness, *shalom*, health, we need a life beyond this one in order for this to be accomplished. To be sure, we do not want to give up too quickly in our hopes for health within this life. But, on the other hand, we should not be so narrowly bound in our expectations that disappointment, frustration, pain, and illness in this life leave us with doubts about the goodness of God or our own worthiness.

7. God can use our sickness and affliction for good purposes.

We have been speaking about sickness as if it is a negative thing. For someone who is sick, that is certainly what it seems to be. As we have been saying, a life of illness is not the “normal,” not what God wants for the world. Our negative response to sickness (and other forms of suffering) has influenced our interpretations of such calamities as punishment from God.

But what if there is some good that can be accomplished through our illness? Is it possible to turn a basically unpleasant human experience into something positive? Many good pious sufferers have attempted to do that. They cannot believe that God is punishing them. They have moved beyond a view of illness as the consequence of their own sin. God is too good for that, and they are not bad enough for that. But they do believe that God is present in their illness, even if the answer to their prayers for physical healing has been a resounding “No.” Since God has left them in their illness, maybe there is a reason for it. Maybe there is some greater purpose that can be served. It may be that I will learn something about myself; I will get my priorities straight; I will find it easier to humble myself before God because I have learned something about having to live with situations that are beyond my control. Or, it is even possible that others will benefit from my illness. My serenity, faith, patience, and hope in my suffering may set a good example for them. I do not even know how it might happen, but I will desperately look for some meaning, some good that can come from a situation that looks on the surface to be anything but good.

This way of understanding sickness and other suffering has been a rather common one in our Christian traditions. It can be seen already a few times in the Old Testament, most notably by two of Job’s counselors, Eliphaz and Elihu. Job didn’t think much of the theory as an explanation for his troubles when proposed by Eliphaz (Job 5:17-27 and Job’s response in chapter 6). Since Job did not have the opportunity to respond to Elihu (esp. in chapter 33 of Job), we do not know if he was more accepting of the idea by then. It is a rather common New Testament way of dealing with suffering (good examples in Heb 12:1-11 and Rom 5:1-5).

God can use our sickness for some good purpose. That can be a very helpful idea for a number of reasons. It moves beyond a belief in retribution. God is not necessarily the cause of the illness. And yet this view allows for the presence and involvement of God in the outcome of the sickness. Even if healing (from this specific bodily dysfunction) does not come, that is not a sign of God’s absence. On the contrary, God works even in our misfortunes, our limitations, our weakness. As Paul said, God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

8. Removal of all illness is part of our eschatological hope.

Most of our Christian notions about healing are conditioned by the stories of Jesus’ healing. Those stories serve a special function in the gospels, telling us that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah, and that the new age has begun. In the present world there is sickness, suffering, and death—but in the new age, all those things will be gone. As a sign that the kingdom of God is at hand, Jesus heals the sick (see, for example, Matt 4:23 and 9:35; Luke 9:6, 11).

God’s intention is that sickness no longer exist, that all humans live in health. The prophets speak of God as the one who heals, the one who will come to bring health. One way of describing the wonderful new times that will come is to prophesy about the coming of God as healer. Those who remembered and collected the stories about the healing ministry of Jesus must have been familiar with passages such as these:

Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of the seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the hurt of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow (Isa 30:26).

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed (Isa 53:5).

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily (Isa 58:8a).

For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, says the Lord (Jer 30:17a).

Behold, I will bring to it (the city of Jerusalem) health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security (Jer 33:6).

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall (Mal 4:2).

In these Old Testament passages, words like “health” and “healing” have a broader meaning than only restoration to physical health.. They are often referring to the reconciliation that will take place between God and his people. Even though God has inflicted the blow, he will take action to renew the relationship and heal the wounds. Most of these texts have to do with the restoration of the *community* and the possibility of an ongoing people of Israel living in covenant with God. Words like this, delivered to people in exile, surely would speak to physical needs, but their overwhelming word of hope would be about God’ s reconciliation with the people who might have thought God was through with them.

Jesus comes preaching the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand. God has not turned away in anger but comes again in love to be reconciled to his people. God comes to heal. And so Jesus performs acts of healing, demonstrating in a visible, historical context the healing presence of God. There are real healings. The sick are cured. Some suffering is lessened. But that is not the most important thing that is being said. Certainly it is not all that is being said. “God’s kingdom is at hand. And these are signs of it.”

We often trivialize the healing miracles by making them an end in themselves instead of seeing the larger meaning conveyed by them. We often turn an eschatological hope into a hope for the present world. Though Jesus has come, the final age has not yet emerged in all its glory. For that we must await the second coming of Christ or our own death, whichever comes first. (The odds are that it will be the latter.)

For now we still live in a world of sickness and death, a world where the answer is sometimes “No.” The biblical word tells us of a God who desires health for us and who has demonstrated this in a most concrete way through the sending of his Son. We all continue to long for a time when sickness and suffering will be no more. We share in the hope of the great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah who spoke boldly of a God who would come again to heal. Now we also know the story of Jesus. The time of waiting for healing is much more tolerable, in the presence of a God who has experienced suffering with us.