

ADDRESSING OUR SKEPTICISM

Does Jesus Heal Today?

Mark 9:17-27
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How do you answer the question, “Does Jesus Heal Today?” Some people believe Jesus never healed. They believe the gospels are just stories. Others believe Jesus once healed, but they don’t think he heals anymore. Still others believe that Jesus heals through natural processes and medicine. They see Jesus at work in the research scientist and the medical practitioner, but not beyond them. Others may agree with that, except they believe in an occasional, rare miracle. For them such healing is the exception. Some people believe Jesus frequently heals people supernaturally. They believe that he is doing it more often now than when he walked the earth. Still others believe Jesus always heals if you believe. They suggest that you don’t really believe if you are not healed? What do you think? How do you answer the question, “Does Jesus heal today?”

Twenty years ago I believed Jesus healed through natural processes and medicine, and on rare occasion, supernaturally. I believed in prayer, prayed with people who were sick, gathered prayer support for seriously ill people and observed unusual answers to prayer once and awhile. I can’t say that I expected healing, but I always hoped for it. Frankly, that outlook is what I observe in most Christians. Most Christians hope for a rare miracle. Is that you? My perspective soon was challenged.

In 1985 I began leading a congregation north of Minneapolis. The first Sunday a thin man sat in the back pew. His name was Willard. Willard was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Chemotherapy was advised to control his pain and maybe give him a few more days, but he decided to forego it believing that it would only prolong his death. Willard disappeared part way through the service. I asked about him and found that his pain had become too intense. A short time later, the church met for a picnic at a city park. Willard was there. Shaking his hand, I said, "I understood you were fighting some intense pain. How are you feeling?" He responded, "I'm fine. Terry and Doug came over to my house after worship and chased the demons away." Willard surprised me not only with his presence, but also with his explanation. I didn't know if Willard was speaking figuratively or literally of demons. I was afraid to ask. What's more, Terry and Doug were two leaders in my new church, and when I talked with them, I found that they expected Willard's pain to leave as they prayed.

In the coming days I would hear testimony after testimony of astounding healing. A good number of parishioners had laid their hands on people, animals and even trees and reported astonishing results. Three things were quite different from my posture. One was their *expectation*. These United Methodist Christians expected their prayers would end in healing. I had prayed with hope but not with expectation like theirs. Second was their *practice*. These people would meet with people and pray for them, evaluate, and pray again until there was healing or until they felt they had an understanding from God that they were finished. In contrast, I had lifted a quick prayer up here and there for those who were sick, and most my words asked for comfort rather than healing. Occasionally I would cry out and beg God for healing. Yet I never went after healing like they did.

Third, these people experienced different results. Most people I prayed for, with a few exceptions, attributed their healing if it happened at all, to medicine and good health care. In contrast, many people they prayed for actually experienced improvement or complete healing, and nearly all attributed it to Jesus.

Despite these results, I found myself wrestling with doubts. I had serious misgivings.

First, I feared these practices might be associated with serious error or occult practice. There are all kinds of mystical, hokey practices. As I studied the Bible, prayed and read as many books as I could, I saw some aberrant practices, but I also found that healing was a central ministry of Jesus, of his disciples and the church. Despite that truth, many Christians still shy away in fear.

My skepticism was also fed by my vision of the world. The every-day-world I looked at was empty of angels, empty of demons and void of the supernatural. It was radically different than the one Jesus and his apostles talked about. Anthropologists have observed that various cultures have different ways of seeing life. They call it our worldview. In the United States and the west we have equated the supernatural with superstition. There is social disapproval for explaining anything in terms of non-material or supernatural causes. Yet the Bible is consistently supernatural. Embracing a biblical perspective of divine healing in this culture is difficult.

Our church traditions don't help us either. They give us little direction in healing ministry. Founders of the Protestant movement that shaped our Christian faith and practice relegated healing to a different era. Luther later changed his mind, and

Methodism's founder, John Wesley, concluded that we Christians have been crippled by the unbelief of earlier times.

Faulty understandings of God's will in suffering, offensive faith healers and our lack of experience of healing feed further skepticism. We Christians need to carefully study what the Bible says about suffering in view of Jesus and his disciples' healing ministry. We must not allow the indiscretion of others or our lack of experience limit our thinking. So much of what is known in the world is beyond our experience anyway!

Even as I began to recognize these forces of unbelief and skepticism at work in me, I personally saw more and more healing. I was really challenged by the incident that is recorded in the ninth chapter of Mark. Jesus had ascended a mountain to pray and brought three followers with him. During that time, God affirmed his love for Jesus and wrapped him in light. Perhaps Jesus looked like a light bulb. For certain he was sure of his Father's power and love. When he came down to see his disciples arguing and found them unable to heal a terribly afflicted boy, Jesus was angry. He exclaimed:

***You faithless people! How long must I be with you until you believe?
How long must I put up with you?*** (Mark 9:19, NLT)

Those are not the words of someone who believes that healing is rare or an exception. Those are not the words of someone who thinks supernatural healing will die out when he leaves the earth. Those are not the words of someone who thinks that God is neutral when it comes to your illness or struggles. This voice, so recently wrapped in God's loving light, was amazed at the skepticism. He was astonished by the unbelief. After the healing Matthew, who notes this incident as well (Matthew 17:14-20), records Jesus' admonition about how essential faith is. Mark remembers Jesus' words on the importance of prayer. Some early manuscripts also add fasting. Jesus wanted his

disciples to press in with prayer and fasting and know their heavenly Father's love and power. That would change their expectations, their practices and their results.

What I realized is that we have a great and loving God. We need to get to know him. Not just by hearing about him, but also through experiences with him. We are not to be daunted by how tortuous the problems are that we face or how resistant they are to solution. It matters not what stage the disease is in or how long the deformity has been. Healing mattered to Jesus, and it matters to God. That is an eternal fact, not a temporary reality. It, therefore, changes everything for us.

Over the next six weeks we will explore healing in the Bible. You will witness the love of God. You will hear God's call to us. You may reassess your beliefs and discover that God's compassion means a lot more than you ever imagined. Each week, you'll be invited to let Christ minister to you through his followers. How will you respond to that invitation? Will faith or unbelief, trust or fear direct your response? Let me share this from my experience. Good things happen whenever I act in faith.