

THE VISION OF THE GOSPELS

Does Jesus Heal Today?

Mark 1:14-15, 21-28

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This past week I struggled with a virus. Fever, congestion and body aches dogged me much of the week. The irony of preaching on healing and being sick was not lost on me. In fact, not only was my struggle with ill health not lost in my thinking, it is illustrative of what the gospels reveal about healing.

We have difficulty discerning a biblical perspective on healing. Part of that comes from our lack of personal experience with divine healing. Part of that comes from our negative impressions of some faith healers. The movie, *Leap of Faith*, starring Steve Martin, captures our wariness. Who wants to be gullible? Who wants their hopes lifted and dashed? Our church traditions have not equipped us to understand healing in the Bible. Have you ever heard in church a sermon that took Jesus' expulsion of demons seriously and made it relevant to your situation? Or was it all relegated to symbolism? It wasn't symbolism for the first century. For that matter, it wasn't symbolism for most centuries. Part of our difficulty in embracing the Bible's teaching on healing arises from our Western culture's skepticism about the supernatural and a spiritual world. Who of us want to be written off as superstitious or flaky? Yet, with all those fears and all those misgivings I had to reassess what I was reading in Scripture.

I had just arrived as pastor of a church where people were being healed through prayer. One woman's surgery was canceled after the tumor disappeared. A man reported a cut hand healing up overnight. These parishioners didn't always get results. But they got enough to keep them expectant and persistent. It became my quest to read through the Bible again and understand what God actually revealed about healing.

In the Old Testament, God is revealed as Yahweh Rapha, God your doctor. Since many feared other gods, the Hebrew Bible emphasizes God as the only player worth paying attention to. All things depend on God. In contrast, the gospels reveal a much more complex world. To understand it, let's consider the gospel of Mark.

Mark summarizes the message of Jesus in chapter one, verse 15. Jesus says:

The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news! (Mark 1:15, NIV)

Jesus announced two things. First, he said, "The time has come!" The English words "has come" translates one Greek term, which means *fulfilled*. That would clue every Jewish listener to the idea that a time the prophets predicted is now being fulfilled. Jesus is saying that *a prophesied age has begun*. Second, Jesus said the kingdom of God is near. He's saying the rule of God is present. What does this mean? It becomes clear in the verses that follow. In verse 21 Jesus enters the local synagogue and the people are amazed at how his teaching exudes authority. In verse 23 a man with an unclean spirit is worshipping in the synagogue. The presence of that authority frightens the spirit. The man cries out:

What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God! (Mark 1:24, NIV)

Jesus mutes the spirit and then commands it to leave. The man goes into spasms, and then with a shriek the spirit leaves.

This encounter unveils exactly what Jesus' message means. The prophesied time had arrived. God's liberating rule was now present. The violent shaking and shrieking indicated the conflict between powers as God's rule liberated humanity from the other. Even though Jesus had silenced the spirit, Mark thought it worthwhile to record what the spirit said. "*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?*" The answer was "Yes!" The Apostle John later wrote in his first epistle, "*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's works*" (1 John 3:8). God's authority was present to liberate what the dominion of darkness afflicted and enslaved.

Every place Jesus went he proclaimed the kingdom and liberated people from unbelief, sin, infirmities, illnesses and afflicting spirits. He tied healing to the proclamation of the kingdom. In other words, the arrival of the prophesied age and kingdom was to explain the healing and the healing demonstrated the arrival of this new age and kingdom. Healing not only demonstrated it. It was a consequence. The presence and authority of Jesus flushed out the impure spirit who asked, "Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus gave authority to his twelve disciples and sent them. He said:

As you go, preach this message: "The kingdom of heaven is near." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. (Matt 10:7-8, NIV)

Jesus shared his authority over these powers with the Twelve. They had received it freely from him. They were to be generous and charge no fee in ministering to others. They were advancing God's loving and liberating rule in a battle with God's enemies. Illness, death, leprosy, demons were all apart of Satan's grip on humanity. Jesus was

saving people from this. Indeed, the Greek word for “save” is often used to describe healing events. The Twelve were to proclaim the kingdom’s arrival and then heal.

Later Jesus gave that same authority to 72 more believers (Luke 10:1). He said:

Heal the sick who are there and tell them, “The kingdom of God is near you.” (Luke 10:9, NIV)

The 72 were to heal and then proclaim the kingdom’s arrival. Healing was seen as liberation through the advance of God’s rule. When the 72 later returned to Jesus and reported the many healings and the deliverance of many from spirits, Jesus was filled with joy and said:

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. (Luke 10:18-19, NIV)

Illness was not seen merely as a misfortune or human weakness. It was understood as the hold of the enemy from which we were to be liberated. With the arrival of Jesus Christ, God’s time of liberation began, and with Christ’s ascension, the power would only be greater. Jesus said:

Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:11-12, NIV)

Jesus clearly did not anticipate a falloff in healing. He did not see this ministry limited to special groups of believers. He said, “*Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing.*”

To understand healing from the gospel perspective, we must realize that it is God’s liberating work in a cosmic war. We live in a battle time. We live in an age of deliverance and liberation where we go toe-to-toe with the evil one and his minions. We

are called to bring people to faith and freedom. When Jesus returns, the deliverance from the evil one and death will be complete. Until then, we engage in the battle. We attack the dominion of darkness and we are attacked. We heal, we proclaim and we call people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Some will be liberated. Some will be healed. Each time that happens it is a sign of what's to come for all of us, even if we aren't healed. We are called to the battle until the battle is finally won with Christ's return.

I'll never forget what happened one summer evening. It was about a decade ago. I was doing a prayer clinic where people learned to pray for those who were sick. One woman attending had walked with a cane for eight years. She suffered many maladies both emotionally and physically. Her complaint that night was her back. She experienced crippling pain. I had the woman sit as straight as possible on a chair. An 88-year-old retired schoolteacher sat on another chair holding the woman's heels together while the other group participants gathered around to watch. Either the woman's pelvis was terribly misaligned or one leg was actually shorter than the other by an inch or more. I explained that one way to evaluate our prayer was to see if the shorter leg grew longer. (I didn't know if that meant the hip was realigning or if the leg was actually lengthening. I wouldn't make that judgment because I don't want to have my ignorance discredit God's work.) Before we could pray, the leg instantly popped out. The heels were exactly aligned. The woman cried, "My pain is gone." "Do you want to try and walk?" I encouraged. She got up slowly and started walking with her cane. Then she lifted up the cane as her gait grew steady. Soon she started twirling the cane in excitement. She cried and walked, walked and cried. At one point, she raced around the room spilling tears and praising God. For the next six months, the woman didn't touch her cane. She told me

that God healed her in 12 places, but the greater healing that night was in her spirit. She discovered that God cared deeply about her. Though her life had been filled with hurt, she found that Jesus loved her personally. No one could take that away from her.

Healing is not a sideshow in the gospels or in Christian faith and practice. Jesus came to bring liberation from the forces that attack, deceive, enslave and destroy us. The prophesied time has arrived. The rule and power of God is present. Do you believe the good news?