Tough Topics - Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions
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Why Doesn't God Always Heal the Sick?

God loved the apostle Paul. Yet God sovereignly orchestrated Paul's painful thorn in the flesh and then declined to remove it, notwithstanding Paul's passionate prayer that he be healed. We are not apostles. Yet, God loves us as his children, no less than he loved Paul. We don't know the nature of Paul's thorn (although see chap. 21 for an attempt to identify it), but each of us has undoubtedly suffered in a similar way, and some considerably worse. We, like Paul, have prayed incessantly to be healed. Or perhaps knowing of a loved one's "thorn," we have prayed for him or her. And again, as with Paul, God declined to remove it. Why?

It's hard to imagine a more difficult, confusing, and controversial topic than why God chooses not to heal in response to the intercessory pleas of his people. I don't profess to have all the answers, but I think I've got a few. I'm sure that this chapter will provoke many to anger and frustration, while others, I pray, will find a measure of comfort.

In the final analysis, virtually everything about healing remains a mystery. I don't mind saying that I'm weary of those who

claim to reduce healing to a formula or a manageable cause-and-effect phenomenon in which we can know with certainty why some are healed and why others are not. I labor in this chapter to avoid falling into that trap. That said, I would like to suggest that the reason why many are not healed may *possibly* be answered in any of seven ways.

Seven Possible Answers

1. Although we must not give more weight to the role of faith than does the New Testament itself, we must be willing to acknowledge that occasionally healing does not occur because of the absence of that sort of faith that God delights to honor. This does *not* mean that every time a person isn't healed, it is because of a defective faith, as if healing inevitably follows a robust and doubt-free faith. But it does mean that faith is very important. How can we conclude otherwise in view of the many texts that closely link healing to someone's faith? I hope you'll take the time to pause and read these passages: Matthew 9:22, 28–29; 15:28; Mark 2:5, 11; 5:34; 9:17–24; Mark 10:52; Luke 17:19; Acts 3:16; 14:8–10; James 5:14–16.

In my book on spiritual gifts,[1] I ask, "Why did Jesus emphasize faith?" Neither he nor his Father needs it. They could have orchestrated life such that something other than faith would be the condition on which they would heal. They are not hampered by the faithlessness or prayerlessness of the sick person or those who pray for his or her healing. The reason Jesus emphasized is this: *faith glorifies God*. Faith points us away from ourselves to him. Faith turns us away from our own power and resources to his. Faith says: "Lord, I am nothing and you are everything. I entrust myself to your care. I cling to you alone. My confidence is in your word and character no matter what happens."

Faith is not a weapon by which we demand things from God or put him in subjection to us. Faith is an act of self-denial. Faith is a renunciation of one's ability to do anything and a confession that God can do everything. Faith derives its power *not from the spiri-*

[1] Sam Storms, *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts*, 2nd ed. (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2013).

tual energy of the person who believes, but from the supernatural efficacy of the person who is believed: God! It is not faith's *act* but its *object* that accounts for the miraculous.

2. Sometimes healing does not occur because of the presence of sin for which there has been no confession or repentance. James 5:15–16 clearly instructs us to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another that we may be healed. Again, please do not conclude from this that each time a person isn't healed it is because he or she has committed but not repented of some specific sin. But in *some* cases (not necessarily all) this is undoubtedly true. We have to reckon with the possibility that lingering bitterness, anger, resentment, envy, or unforgiveness in our hearts is the reason why God withholds physical healing from our bodies.

3. Odd as it may sound to hear it, healing may not happen because the sick don't want it to happen. Jesus asked the paralyzed man in John 5:6, "Do you want to be healed?" What on the surface may appear to be a ridiculous question is, on further examination, found to be profoundly insightful.

Some people who suffer from a chronic affliction become accustomed to their illness and to the pattern of life it requires. Their identity is to a large extent wrapped up in their physical disability. I realize that sounds strange to those of us who enjoy robust health. Why would anyone prefer to stay sick? Who wouldn't jump at the opportunity to be healed? But I've actually known a handful of folk who in a very real sense enjoy their dependence on others and the special attention it brings them. They are convinced that the only reason people take note of them and show them kindness and compassion is their affliction. They fear that if they were healed, they would lose the love on which they've come to depend. To them, remaining sick is a small price to pay to retain the kindness and involvement of those who otherwise would simply ignore them.

Then, of course, in some instances people don't want the responsibilities that would come with being healthy. To their way of thinking, it's easier (and perhaps even more profitable) to remain the object of others' beneficence and good will than it would be to be healthy and thus expected to get a job and show up nine to five

on a daily basis. This is not a common phenomenon, but it does happen in a few cases.

4. We must also consider the principle articulated in James 4:2, where we are told that "you do not have, because you do not ask." The simple fact is that some are not healed because they do not pray. Perhaps they pray once or twice, and then allow discouragement to paralyze their petitions. Prayer for healing often must be prolonged, sustained, persevering, and combined with fasting.

5. Some are not healed because the demonic cause of the affliction has not been addressed. Please do not jump to unwarranted conclusions. I am *not* suggesting that all physical disease is demonically induced. Of course, it is interesting, is it not, that in Paul's case God used "a messenger of Satan" to inflict the thorn? There is also the case of the woman in Luke 13, who had "a disabling spirit [or, a spirit of infirmity] for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself" (Luke 13:11). According to Jesus, "Satan" had "bound" her (Luke 13:16; see also Acts 10:38). It takes considerable discernment, time, and patience to determine whether an illness has a demonic cause, together with even greater commitment to praying for the individual in question and leading him or her to address the reasons for such spiritual oppression. When these factors are ignored, healing may not be forthcoming.

6. We must also consider the mystery of divine providence. There are undoubtedly times and seasons in the purposes of God during which his healing power is withdrawn or at least largely diminished. God may have any number of reasons for this to which we are not privy, whether to discipline a wayward and rebellious church or to create a greater desperation for his power or to wean us off excessive dependence on physical comfort and convenience or any number of other possibilities. If this leaves you confused, that's why it's called a mystery!

But what must we say when the problem isn't the absence of faith or the presence of a demon or the refusal to repent or the failure to pray or a lack of desire? How then do we account for ongoing physical affliction, as in Paul's case? I strongly urge you to read the next point carefully.

7. Oftentimes there are dimensions of spiritual growth and moral development and increase in the knowledge of God in us that he desires *more* than our physical health, experiences that in his wisdom God has determined can *only* be attained by means or in the midst of or in response to less-than-perfect physical health. In other words, healing the sick *is* a *good* thing (and we should never cease to pray for it), but often there is a *better* thing that can be attained only by means of physical weakness.

More important to God than our physical health is our spiritual holiness. This isn't to say that the body is unimportant. God isn't a gnostic! He values and has redeemed our bodies and now dwells within them as his eternal temple. But while we live in this corrupt and decaying world, inner and spiritual conformity to the image of Christ often comes only at the expense of or at least simultaneous with physical deterioration and suffering (see 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

Let me personalize this principle. If I believe Romans 8:28, that God sovereignly orchestrates all events in my life for my ultimate spiritual good (and preeminently for his ultimate glory), I can only conclude that, all things being equal, if I'm not healed *it is because God values something in me greater than my physical comfort and health* that he, in his infinite wisdom and kindness, knows can be attained only by means of my physical affliction and the lessons of submission, dependency, and trust in God that I learn from it.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, we may never know why a person isn't healed. What, then, ought to be our response? In the first place, don't stop praying! Some people find this difficult to swallow. Many times I've been asked, Why should Paul bother to pray for release from something that God wills to inflict? The answer is that *Paul didn't know* what God's will was in this particular case until such time as God chose to make it known. And neither do you or I with regard to any particular illness we may suffer.

If the Lord had never said in response to Paul's prayer, "No, it isn't my will that you be relieved of this thorn," Paul would have been justified, indeed *required*, to continue to pray for his heal-

ing. I once heard my friend Jack Taylor put it this way: "Never cease praying for healing until you are shown otherwise either by divine revelation or by death!" If, like Paul, you are able to discern, through some prophetic disclosure or other legitimate biblical means, that it is not God's will now or ever to heal you, you may cease asking him to do so. Otherwise, short of death itself, you must persevere in prayer. You never know but that God's long-term will for you is complete healing after he has for a season accomplished his short-term sanctifying purpose.

In Paul's case, the only reason he ceased asking for deliverance was that God, in effect, told him to shut up! "No, Paul. I'm not going to heal you. It isn't my will in this instance that you be set free from this affliction. Rather, I have a higher purpose in view: your humility and my Son's glory manifest in the context of your ongoing weakness." And Paul in effect replied: "Okay, Lord, I'll shut up and submit to your merciful purpose in my life. I know you love me and desire what is ultimately of greatest good for my spiritual growth. Therefore, my prayer now is that you maximize in me the beneficial effects of this pain. Don't let me miss out on any spiritual good that might come my way from this malady. Teach me everything I need to know, and sustain me that I might be a platform for the glory of Christ and a source of comfort to other suffering saints."

I'm sure there are other ways to account for why God chooses not to heal, but I trust that these have proved helpful. There is much I do not know about this matter, but of this I'm quite certain: God's grace is sufficient in all circumstances so that we, "for the sake of Christ" (2 Cor. 12:10), might learn that in our weakness his power is made perfect!

Recommended Reading

Lawrence, Peter. *The Spirit Who Heals*. Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway, 2006.

Storms, Sam. *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts*. 2nd ed. Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2013.

Tada, Joni Eareckson. *A Step Further*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.