



## Faith and healing—what does God’s Word say?

Myths and theological misguidance abound when it comes to healing.

### A personal story

I was disturbed by the story a woman told me. Her 37 year old husband had passed on after a short battle with cancer. They had three young children. She and her church were praying for his healing and expecting a complete cure from the cancer. She fully believed that he would be cured so she never even said goodbye to him before he died. As he lay dying, and needing her loving presence, she was unable to be available to him. Neither she, nor the children said farewell to their husband and father.

Even after his death this faithful woman kept praying and believing that her husband would be resurrected. When he remained dead, her grief was inconsolable and she was filled with confusion, developing a crisis of belief. Where was this promised healing from her loving God? Twenty years later they are still deeply affected by this tragedy and are still grieving and processing their loss.

But this sad story did not end there; it got worse. Instead of receiving loving support in her grieving process, she was ignored by her church. Embarrassed that the healing prayer ‘failed’, people questioned her faith, as did she herself. Needless to say, she left that church community but her children have yet to return to the Christian faith which they have steadfastly avoided after that horrible and unnecessary experience.

What an utterly tragic story this is. It highlights the need for a solid theological understanding of health and illness, to comprehend the difference between healing and curing so those of us ministering at the coal face of suffering can avoid repeating this scenario.

### Understanding healing

Healing remains a controversial topic in our Christian churches. It was an active part of Jesus’ gospel message that was forecast by the prophet Isaiah (53:5) *‘But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed’*. The church is God’s body on earth today, empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue Jesus’ healing ministry. This can happen in many different ways and there is no prescribed formula in Scripture that assures us of a complete cure. Disease is in this world due to Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. God sent His son Jesus to address this. He brought healing, restoration and salvation to this broken world (1 Peter 2:24) *‘He himself bore our sins’* in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; *‘by his wounds you have been healed.’* God enables and encourages his church to actively participate in this ongoing redemptive work.



### *Old Testament words for healing*

In the Old Testament three important words describe healing (Taylor 2009). They are:

1. *Rapa- Rophe*: In Exodus 15:26 the Lord is described as *Jehovah Rophe* which means *I am the Lord who heals you to what you were meant to be—who restores you...* It is also used regarding water, land and the altar which was repaired/restored to become productive again (1 Kings 18:30, 2 Kings 2:21-22, 2 Chronicles 7:14).
2. *Sapo*: This means the cure of physical illness (2 Kings 5:3, 6, 7, 11). The restoration is not an end in itself, but for a larger purpose, e.g. Namaan was restored so he could return to his rightful place in his community. *Shalom*: This has three inter-related meanings:
  - a. *abundant wellness*; a rightness/soundness of body and mind (Jeremiah 33:6-9, Psalm 38:3, Genesis 43:27-28, Numbers 6:24-26)
  - b. *positive social relationships between nations* (1 Kings 5:12; Ezekiel 34:23-26, Isaiah 54:10) It is more than the absence of war, but good relations between nations.
  - c. *personal integrity*, speaking and living honestly and ethically (Psalm 34:11-15, 37:37)

If we put together all three meanings 'shalom' is how things should be for Christians—physical wellbeing, right social relationships, living a moral life, and positive spiritual relationships which contribute to good health. Shalom is being healthy in body, mind and spirit in relation to others, God, the creation and ourselves.

### *New Testament words for healing*

In the New Testament we see five main words used to describe healing that are all purposeful in their intent (Taylor 2009). They are:

1. *Sozo – soter*: to rescue, set free, release people so they can fulfil their purpose (Luke 8:48, James 5:15)
2. *Therapeou*: to cure from sickness/disease and restore to healthy function (Luke 8:43)
3. *laomai*: to restore to healthy function (Luke 8:47)
4. *Hugiano*: to be sound/complete so you can function in society. Jesus asks 'Do you want to be what I intended you to be?' (John 5:6, 11, 14-15)
5. *Eirene*: abundant wellness (Luke 8:48, 1 Thessalonians 5:23)

Interestingly, these five meanings are all about being restored to serve a function. Healing is not an end in itself, but it enables us to become what God intended us to be. Four of these words are used in one story in Luke 8:43-48 to describe the healing of the woman who bled for many years. It helps us understand the fullness of Christian healing because the woman was cured physically, restored to her community, repaired so she could function and serve her community and her Lord, and able to live in peaceful and just relationships with God, others and within herself.

**So what is the relationship between faith and healing?**



## The relationship between faith and healing

Our trust needs to be in the God that heals, not in our faith, because it cannot heal. We should not hold out for healing to occur, but hold on to the God who heals—sometimes in the present—but it may also be in eternity (Keefauver 2000, p. 40). Neither the initiative of our faith, nor the quantity of our faith will effect healing, even though God wants healing for all. Jesus often spoke a word, gave a touch, or allowed a touch so healing could flow from him. We see faith plays a part in 16 of Jesus' healing miracles, and in more than half of these the faith comes from a person other than the sick person, so clearly our personal faith is not critical! In 25 healings faith is not even mentioned as a factor regarding the healing (Keefauver 2000, p. 44). The 'quantity' of faith is only mentioned twice (Matt 8:10) where the centurion's faith is compared to Israel's lack of faith (Keefauver 2000, p. 40). Note, the centurion's servant is healed not because of his master's 'great faith', but because his master 'believed' (Matt 8:13). It is important to realise that even Jesus struggled to heal people when they lacked belief ['apistos' or unbelief] (Matt 13:58; 21:32), but even then, it does not imply people were not healed! The only certain thing we know is that Jesus was the factor common to all Biblical healing and in more than half of all the recorded healings Jesus spoke a word, preached, or taught and healing occurred. After his resurrection Jesus left his Spirit to empower the apostles and his church to continue the healing ministry in His name and according to His will (Acts 3:6; 4:10; 9:40ff).

In conclusion, Jesus heals people today just as he did when he walked this earth. We do not always receive physical curing, but we may. Jesus always brings healing, in His time and in His way to meet our needs. We will find rest for our soul and wholeness for our body, our soul (mind), and our spirit in and through Jesus. What God promises, He delivers. So we don't need to be afraid to ask for healing, confident that it is God's will and that He will supply our needs. Our healing may come now, but if we maintain our faith in Him it may come in eternity when '*Death is swallowed up in victory*' (1 Cor 15:54) and we are made whole in Jesus Christ to live in shalom forever.

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## References

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