

"Prayer and Healing"

by
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"And the prayer of faith shall save the sick."
James 5:15

The truth concerning this important phase of prayer may be best considered under four heads, namely: [1] Is God *able* to heal? [2] Does God *ever* heal? [3] Does God *always* heal? [4] Does God *use means* in healing?

Is God ABLE to heal?

We need not tarry here. There can be but one answer. The omnipotent God who made the body can just as easily heal it, if it be His will. There is no limit to His power, and to any child of His who believes in the omnipotence of God, there can be no difference of view here. Passing on then:

Does God EVER heal?

Here, too, there will be but little divergence of view. The Word of God plainly records the exercise of God's power in the healing of the sick. And not only was this true in the time of our Lord upon earth, but also even in all the centuries which have elapsed since He left it. There are too many authentic cases of the exercise of God's healing power in these latter days for any fair-minded man to deny the fact that He does still so exercise that power. But we approach a much more important and mooted question in the next point to be considered, and that is:

Is it ALWAYS the will of God to heal?

There is a large class of God's children who answer this question by an emphatic affirmative. They earnestly contend that it is the will of God to heal all sickness; that it is only our unbelief, our failure of appropriating faith which keeps us from being healed in case of sickness; and that all who will really trust the Lord for healing and claim the same in Him shall realize it in fact. This is one of the most important and vital teachings upon the whole theme; and as it reaches the heart of the whole matter, the arguments of its advocates are worthy our most careful and prayerful attention. And first they claim that:

Healing is in the Atonement.--This is true, in that every spiritual deliverance comes to us from the atonement. But it must be remembered that the atonement of Christ covers the Millennial age to *come* as well as this age in which we now live. And it does not follow that because the children of God are to be delivered from all disease and sickness, that deliverance is for now instead of hereafter, when "the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (that is, the dwellers in the Millennial age) "shall no longer say 'I am sick.'" For it is clear that there are many blessings in the atonement, the fullness of time for the enjoyment of which has not yet arrived. Thus deliverance from death is covered by the atonement of Christ. Yet it is not

ours in this age but in an age yet to come after the coming of our Lord.

So too it is argued that Christ was made a curse for us and that we are therefore made free from all the curse of the law, and that under this is included sickness. But that we are not made free *now* from all the curse of the law is clear in that the curse upon the earth is clearly not removed until our Lord comes; and in Rom. 8:19-23 we see the whole creation groaning under this bondage and looking forward to another age for deliverance from its thralldom. Thus we see plainly that we cannot claim in this age all that is included under the atonement of Christ, and therefore cannot claim universal exemption from sickness on the ground that it is in the atonement of our Lord.

Sickness is of Satan, it is furthermore said, and therefore it must be the will of God to take it away. But in answer to this it may be said that there are many things which are of Satan, which God yet permits to exist until His time for their removal has come. Thus as seen above, death is of Satan, yet God permits it for the present. Sorrow and suffering are of Satan, yet God suffers them for the present. Temptation is surely of Satan, yet God permits His children to be so assailed. So sickness may be an assault of the adversary upon our bodies, yet God may permit it. God clearly permitted Satan to attack His servant Job. So too Paul's thorn in the flesh is clearly declared to have been "a messenger of Satan," yet God did not remove it.

That it is not always God's will to heal seems clear *by the Experience of His children*. After all, is it not a fact of everyday observation that God does use physical affliction for the chastening and purification of His children, and that He suffers it to remain until He has accomplished His purpose of love and child-training with them. Surely this is the case in the lives of myriads of His godliest saints. Who is there of us who has not seen a strong, perhaps rebellious, life go into the crucible of affliction of all kinds, bodily included, and come forth strengthened and purified as no other dealing of God seemed hitherto able to accomplish. We recall the case of one of the most devoted and successful workers in the Lord's vineyard. For sixteen years she lay a helpless invalid, suffering keenly much of the time. At the end of all these long and weary years she awoke one midnight to the consciousness that she had never been wholly submitted to the will of God in her illness, that deep in her heart there had always been a root of bitterness, a spirit of rebellion that God should permit her thus to suffer. Then and there, with the vision of her rebellious will vividly before her, she yielded that will wholly and unconditionally to her Father in heaven, to patiently bear not only what He might send, but also all that He might permit to come into her life in the way of bodily affliction. She was, as she expressed it, just as willing to lie there a thousand years, if it were God's will, or to be raised up to health if that were His will. Within a week she was marvelously, yea miraculously, healed by the power of God. All those years God had permitted her to stay under this bodily affliction to bring her into that place of absolute submission to His will, without which He never could have used her for the glorious work to which he was calling her.

And do we not see Him permitting others of His own thus to be afflicted not only for years but for a whole lifetime, without the ensuing healing which came in this case? And as we mark the Christ-like patience, gentleness, and long-suffering which are wrought out in these lives in the chamber of affliction, must we not confess that for some reason God is suffering it to be thus? And dare we assert that the only reason such godly souls are not healed of their diseases is because they do not have faith in God? Such an inference is incredible to

those who know the saintliness of many such lives.

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews we have a striking lesson along this line of truth. There we are told of some who "obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword," and, in general, received mighty deliverance at the hands of their God. But we are also told that "others were tortured, had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, were stoned, were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented." What was the difference in these two classes? Were those who escaped delivered because they had faith in God while the others were not delivered through lack of the same? Surely not, for we are distinctly told that they "*all* obtained a good report *through faith*." They all had exactly the same faith in God. That is, the "others" who were afflicted, destitute, and tormented were so not because of lack of faith in God, but because, in His inscrutable wisdom, God's will for them was different than for those who were delivered from the same perils and persecutions. Do we not often see God acting in precisely the same manner with those diseased and afflicted in body? Some He heals marvelously, miraculously. Others, for some cause best known to Himself, He permits to stay in the place of infirmity and affliction. It seems clear that it is not because these lack faith to be healed, if God will, but that it is not His will to heal.

We see again that it is not always God's will to heal *because of the silence of God's Word*. If, as many claim, it is the will of God that all should be healed, and those who fail of this do so through lack of faith in Him, then it seems strange that so wondrous and important truth as this should not be very clearly taught in the Word of God, and especially in the epistles, in which God gives special light and teaching for His church. And yet all through these epistles there is a notable and significant silence concerning any such teaching. True, there are such passages in the Gospels as Matt. 8: 16, 17, in which we are told, "He healed all that were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses." Yet this seems to be a foreshadowing of the time to come when all sickness and infirmity shall be taken away rather than for the present period in which we live. For Paul, we are told in 2 Tim. 4:20, left Trophimus at Miletum with one of these very "sicknesses." And Paul himself continued to bear one of these self-same "infirmities," which was certainly not taken away in his case (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

If the deliverance from sickness and infirmities is so sweeping as is claimed, why should these and others be left under their power? But while the same epistles are so significantly silent as to the will of God to heal all sickness, they do set forth clearly and simply what God's own mind is upon this subject when they say in James 5:15,

"The PRAYER of FAITH shall heal the sick." What is taught here? Clearly, that sickness comes under the sphere of prayer. We are to come to God in prayer in sickness exactly as we come to Him in prayer concerning anything else in our lives. Therefore being brought by God into the sphere of prayer, it is subject to precisely the same conditions and the same great laws of prayer as anything else that falls within its domain. And one of the supreme and unchangeable laws of prayer is that only when we are praying according to God's will can we expect Him to hear and grant our petition. And that brings us to note the next point in the teaching of this passage in James, to wit, that

The prayer of FAITH shall save the sick. In other words, the mere bringing the sick to God in

prayer does not insure their healing. The mere praying to God and claiming healing does not bring that healing. There must be a certain kind of prayer; and only that kind of prayer, which is here called the prayer *of faith*, can insure the healing by the Lord of the one prayed for. Only then "the Lord shall raise him up." It becomes then of supreme importance to answer aright the question, "What is the Prayer of Faith?"

Note first that the faith of the prayer of faith, the only kind that brings healing, *is not a forced faith*. It is not that kind of faith which says, "If I ask for healing, all I have to do is to believe I am healed and I shall be." Such a faith is spurious and man-made. It is not true that "whatever we ask of God we would get if we only had faith enough," as we sometimes put it. Such a conception of prayer is crude in the extreme. *All true faith rests not upon its own daring and rashness, but upon the revealed will of God*. We have no right to trust God for that which is not His will for us. The same Christ who trusted Him in the hunger of the wilderness did not dare to trust Him to keep Him in hurling Himself from the pinnacle of the temple--a thing which was not according to His will. God was just as able to do the latter as the former, but it was not His will.

So that is not great faith which, without seeking to know His will, sets hard, rash things for God to do and calls on Him to work up to them. But that is great faith which, waiting on God to know His will, when that will is once seen rests without a quiver upon His eternal promise, as sure that the prayer has been heard as though the thing prayed for were already in hand. "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will he hears us . . . and we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him." God does not expect us to believe except upon evidence from Him. He gives us that evidence, as we saw in the preceding chapter, either through His Word, Providences, or inner witness of His Spirit. If, as we have seen, we have no revelation in His Word of universal healing, and none in His providences, then we have no right to believe save upon the one remaining evidence, namely the revelation of God to us by the inner witness of the Spirit.

The Prayer of Faith, then, is the prayer in which God Himself gives the petitioner an inward assurance by His Spirit that the thing he prays for is according to God's will and has been granted. The prayer of faith can thus only be prayed in that which is according to God's will. If the petition is not according to His will, God withholds this assurance. The absence of this assurance therefore is proof that it is not the will of God to heal the sickness concerning which we pray--unless indeed such lack of assurance is due not to God's unreadiness to give but our failure to spiritually discern the same through our unfamiliarity with the inward witness of God in prayer. But, barring this, we must have this confidence and assurance born of the Spirit of God, and not of our own imaginings, as the evidence that God has answered our prayer for the sick.

No other prayer than this prayer of faith heals the sick, and if we do not have it we cannot claim the healing of which it is the only divine witness. Our claims to healing if not thus founded may be only counterfeit, born of our own presumption and wilfulness instead of the inward witness of God by which "we *know* that we have the petition we have asked for." The *general* faith that God will heal because He is able to heal, or because He has healed others or us at other times, or because Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, today, and forever," is not sufficient faith for healing. It must be a *specific faith, given by God, for the individual case* as we pray concerning it. This alone is the prayer of faith. This alone is the

faith of God which brings healing, as distinguished from our own self-efforts at faith which brings only disappointment, self deception, and false claims to that which we have not really experienced.

We recall an illustration of this truth which some years ago came under our own notice. A number of friends had gathered at the call of one of the group to pray for a fellow friend who was lying at the point of death in a distant mission field. As we prayed with increasing earnestness there came into our hearts a marked, conscious spirit of assurance and confidence that our prayer had been heard and answered. One month after came the tidings by letter that although the family of the sick man had gathered at his bedside several times to see him die, yet a short time after the day on which we had received the assurance from God of his recovery he had been suddenly restored to health and was then about his usual duties. Not long after we were called to the room of a young friend whose eyes were also turned toward the foreign field, but who was being hindered by illness. We prayed, again and again, for him. At last, after an hour of supplication on his behalf, we arose from our knees without a shadow of assurance concerning his recovery. We could get no liberty save in resting in submission to God's will, whatever that might be. In one week the young man had gone home to be with the Lord. We had all faith in God's ability to heal the last named friend as well as the first. But we had no assurance of faith from God that He would do so. The lesson seemed clear. In one case it was God's will to heal, in the other it was not.

The supreme truth therefore which must be writ large over this whole question of healing is--*the Sovereignty of God*. If when we come to Him in prayer for healing it be His will to heal, He will give us the assurance of the same and enable us to offer the prayer of faith, which faith, being given by Himself, is at once the promise and pledge of answer. But if it is not His will to so heal, then, as in all prayer, it is simply ours to suffer patiently whatever He permits to come, and to miss none of its blessing through failure of submission.

A word as to the anointing with oil mentioned in this same passage in James. The oil is plainly the symbol of the Holy Spirit as the sole agent in healing. The formal anointing of the sick honors God in acknowledging Him as the healer as well as creator of the body. Doubtless it pleases Him to have His children, when so led, give this testimony to Him in sickness. On the other hand, the many cases in which He heals without this rite show that anointing is but the shadow of which the Holy Spirit is the substance. And just as God baptizes with the Holy Spirit without the water baptism with which He usually associates it in the Word, so does He heal myriads without the anointing here named. We are evidently to use it when the Holy Spirit leads us to it. We are plainly not to be in bondage to it as having any efficacy in itself apart from the Holy Spirit it typifies. The same interpretation of the Spirit--rather than the letter of this passage--would lead us to believe that where, for any reason, the elders of the church were not available, the calling of godly friends who knew the Lord in prayer would satisfy all needful conditions as to the persons who were engaged in this fellowship of prayer for the sick.

Does God use MEANS in healing?

There are two classes of believers who are in error here: Those who look to God and rule out means, [and] those who look to means and rule out God. Let us consider them in their order.

1. *Those who look to God and ignore means.* Two principles may be laid down here

concerning healing.

First, there are three forms of healing:--

The Supernatural.--This explains itself. It is that form of healing in which God Himself, without the use of means and by the direct touch of His own omnipotence, heals the body.

The Natural.--Where health returns through rest, sleep, nourishing food, change of scene, and a ceasing from the violation of those natural laws by the transgression of which health has been lost, and through the observance of which it again returns.

The Remedial.--Where remedies and means, either medical or surgical, are concerned in the restoration to health.

Second, all healing is divine healing; God alone heals. No physician will claim that medicines or remedies heal. They furnish a means upon which the healing life force within lays hold and uses in the process of healing, but they themselves do not heal. And back of all such life is the God of life who alone heals; for only He who is the creator of life can restore and renew it when impaired. Thus, whether healing is supernatural, natural, or remedial, it is God who is back of it all and working through it all. Therefore if God is thus back of, and makes use of, all these forms of healing, it is for God alone and not us to decide which form He shall use. *It is not for me the patient, but for God the physician to decide whether means shall be used or not.*

Wherefore no Christian man dare say, "I will not use means," lest he may be thereby saying, "I will not obey God." To look to God only and refuse all means is to confine God to the supernatural and rule Him out of the natural. But God will not have it so. For what we call the natural is simply God working through the natural. And for us to condemn the natural and insist upon the supernatural in the answers to our prayers for the body is simply to dictate to God that He shall act in one way and not in another. The natural is God's ordinary way of working, the supernatural His extraordinary way of working. If it is wholly a matter for God as to whether He will heal, it must be wholly for God to choose *how* He will heal. It is not for us to choose what we shall do, but to do what God shall choose.

What then shall we do here? Simply this. Suppose God gives us, in prayer, assurance of His will to heal. Then let us wait upon Him in prayer and communion until He shows us by His Spirit what He would have us to do. Then, "Whatsoever He says unto you, do it." If He leads us to trust Him for supernatural deliverance without the intervention of men or means, let us so do. If He guides us to some human instrument or means, let us receive it as from Him and trust Him in the natural as well as the supernatural. It is for God to choose. It is for us to trust and obey. And in it all, if our expectation is from Him, we shall never be disappointed.

2. *Those who look to means only and ignore God.* Why is this a mistake? And why should we go to God in prayer concerning sickness?

1. *Because of Obedience.*--"Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any among you cheerful (R. V.)? Let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? Let him," etc. Just as the cheerful were to sing praises, so the sick and afflicted were to pray. "The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." Therefore it honors God and pleases Him for us to bring

to Him in prayer everything which concerns that body. It is a simple step of obedience to the Word of God; a simple conformity to the command of God that "in all things with prayer and supplication, we should make known our requests unto God."

2. *Because of Teaching.*--The body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, the dwelling place of God, and should be regarded and used as such. Yet how many believers fail to so treat it. We are daily transgressing the laws which are created for its good. We live to eat instead of eating to live. We over-work and under-rest. We chafe and fret. We abuse in numberless ways the wonderful temple in which God dwells. "For this cause," says Paul, speaking of like transgressions, "many are weak and sickly among you" (1 Cor. 11:30). Much of our sickness is due to abuse of our bodies in various ways; is the natural result of violation of its laws.

God would teach us His own lessons concerning these things and have us walk in physical as well as spiritual obedience and holiness. Then, too, there are lessons of submission, of purification, and of patience to be learned in this selfsame school. It is for this reason that He calls us to come to Him in prayer, in sickness, that we may see and learn and obey these lessons and "perfect our holiness in the fear of the Lord," both in the body and in the Spirit.

3. *Because of Healing.*--The man who looks to means only and ignores God in sickness, may by neglect of prayer be losing one of the greatest blessings of his life. To miss prayer may be to miss a miracle of healing. For it may be God's will to heal by supernatural touch instead of means. This, as we have seen, is for God to decide. And we can only learn His will and know His omnipotent power in healing as we come to Him in prayer. The church of God is losing much here. Because of the erroneous teaching concerning divine healing, she has swung to the other extreme and is practically and daily denying the power of God to heal at all in these latter days. But God is the same mighty God as of old. The days of miracles are not any more past than the days of His omnipotent power are past.

It is surely a symptom of waning faith that so many of God's own children should scout [deride/mock] the bare thought of God healing by supernatural power in these days. Yet such mighty deeds at His hands are as much needed today as they ever were, both to strengthen the faith of children and as a sign to attest His omnipotent power to an unbelieving world. If God's children always came to Him in prayer concerning sickness, there would be many more cases of marvelous healing to the glory of His name than the church now sees. Granted, that the man who trusts God only and rules out all means is in error, yet the Christian who trusts means only and rules out God is just as much in error. If the first man confines God to the supernatural, the second limits Him to the natural. He insists that God work through second causes only. He comes to see only the means and is blind to the God back of the means. To neglect *God's* teaching concerning divine healing because men's teaching is marred by error, may be to miss untold blessing from our lives and to fall into a trap which has been set for us by no less an adversary than the enemy of our souls himself.

Chapter VII, "Prayer and Healing", in James H. McConkey, *Prayer*, 3rd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Fred. Kelker, 1906). Note: The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verbs forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.