

## “Spiritual Healing” (Part 1)

Is it possible for people to be healed through prayer? Are there healing miracles today, just as there were in the Bible? Should the church hold healing services and be involved in healing ministries? Today and next Sunday we will look at these, and other, questions on the topic of healing.

As soon as I mention healing or healing services, some are no doubt turned off! You may think of Benny Hinn, the TV healing evangelist, and people falling all over the stage, so that it becomes like a spectacle or a show; or the charlatan faith healers, who have faked miracles in order to garner a following, and take peoples’ money; or instances where we hear about members of religious groups that refuse medical help – cases where children have died because their parents refused to have them treated, and these parents being legally prosecuted as a result. No wonder when we talk about healing in the church, some have a bad taste in their mouths!

But in spite of these abuses, I believe that the church, with its spiritual resources, can have an important role to play in the healing of people today.

***I prefer to use the term “spiritual healing”.*** I like the definition found in a book called *The Church’s Handbook of Spiritual Healing*. “By religious or spiritual healing we mean the restoration of wholeness to the patient through the reuniting of the divided, separated self to God...spiritual healing is the application of spiritual principles such as faith, hope, love, prayer, etc. to the healing of the body, mind and spirit. In its fullness it involves a personal relationship with God and draws the one who is healed towards God.”

I emphasize the fact that *only God* can heal – whether through medication, or surgery, or through the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, prayer and faith. Only *God* heals. Spiritual healing, as I promote it, includes using all the resources of medical science and the medical profession. God performs healing miracles every day through physicians and surgeons and medical technology.

What we’re seeking in spiritual healing is not just that a person’s *body* be fixed, but that the *entire person* find wholeness – body, mind and spirit. It’s important to recognize that wholeness, at its core, includes a person being in a right relationship with God. ***We are recognizing more and more today that we humans are a unity of body, mind and spirit.*** We can’t separate these parts of the person. When one of these areas is affected, it spills over into the others. By the way, the ancient Hebrews were ahead of their time in recognizing this vital inter-connectedness between our body, our mind and our spirit.

So, our emotional state often affects our physical wellbeing. Our spiritual health or lack of it can affect our body. What’s happening physically (with our body) impacts our emotional and spiritual condition. For instance, maybe we’re worried or anxious, or there’s a lot of tension at work or at home. This *emotional distress* can be passed on to the body: perhaps causing acid indigestion, or an upset stomach, or we break out in hives, etc. On the other hand, let’s say that we’re not sleeping well or not getting enough sleep. How often does this put us in a negative frame of mind. It may even diminish our desire to pray or read the Bible. So, our physical dis-

ease interferes with our emotional and spiritual functioning.

Some illnesses are organic – i.e. there is some injury to the body, or some deterioration to a *part* of one's body. You cut your finger or pierce an eardrum. You fall and break your hip. Or you're 80 years old and your heart is weakening or discs in your spinal column are deteriorating.

However, there are a number of physical ailments that are not purely physical in origin. Some physicians estimate that 40%-60% of illnesses do not come from a *physical* source, but are caused by emotional or spiritual distress. Much research, for example, is being done on *stress*, and its effect on physical health. Stress is related not just to high blood pressure and heart problems, but possibly to a number of other things – like making our body more vulnerable to cancer.

My father died of cancer in 1986. For me, the months prior to his death were especially stressful. I was trying to carry on my work as pastor of a busy church, going to visit dad regularly, some distance away. I kept up this pace for months, taking little time off. Not many weeks after he died, my back problems flared up. I was immobilized for about 6 weeks. I went through all kinds of tests, having no firm diagnosis given. I lived on medications, which dulled the pain, but didn't heal my back. The neurosurgeon said I couldn't live on this medication forever, but he didn't give any viable alternative. Several times I tried to stop the meds – but the pain was severe. I began to think I would never get well. Finally, in desperation one day, I sat at the kitchen table and prayed, "Lord, please help me" – then I just stopped taking the pills. And the pain went away. I was able to move again and return to work. The severe back problem went away, as mysteriously as it came. Looking back, I'm convinced that this was nothing but *stress* that triggered the problems with my back and spine.

***If many health problems are rooted in emotional and spiritual dis-ease, then it is not enough just to want our body to get better.*** Praying for a person to get well physically and have their body healed may be praying for the *symptom* but not the *root cause* of an illness. So, it helps if we pray not just for a person to get better *physically*, but to be whole in every dimension of life – physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

One thing I emphasize again and again in the healing ministry is that there are many ways we can be sick and dysfunctional. We can be morally sick, to the point where we make a mess of our lives. We can have sick attitudes, which can make life miserable for us and others around us. We can be spiritually diseased: perhaps we are unable to trust God, or we are missing a relationship with God. In my work as a marriage and family therapist, I've seen many sick people – not physically ill – but with issues like depression, panic attacks, or personality disorders (such as OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder).

***Since there are many ways we can be sick, healing services are not just for people with physical ailments, but for whatever is hindering their being a whole person!***

I began this message asking some questions: Can people be healed through prayer? Are there

healing miracles today like in the Bible? Should the church hold healing services and be involved in healing ministries? I believe the answer to all of these questions is "Yes!"

When we look at church history we find something interesting. Roughly speaking, for the first 300 years, the Christian Church practiced healing ministries. But for the next 1500 years or so, this was pretty much ignored. Since the 1800's there has been renewed interest in spiritual healing. Particularly in the last 50 years, there has been a revival of interest in healing in the church. Both Protestant and Catholic churches are holding healing services. In the United Methodist Book of Worship, there is a liturgy for a healing service.

***If we take the Bible seriously, I don't see how we can avoid the conclusion that healing ministries have a place in the church. Physical healing was a central part of the life and ministry of Jesus, and of the New Testament Church.*** If we remove from the 4 gospels and the Book of Acts all references to healing, we will have thrown out a large chunk of material! Let's look at just a few Scriptures.

Matthew 9:35 says this: "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." Notice the three-pronged ministry of Jesus: teaching, preaching, and healing.

Look also how Luke describes Jesus sending out His disciples: "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal...they departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere...on their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city call Bethsaida. When the crowds found out about it, they followed him, and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured" (Luke 9:1-2, 6, 10-11). Note how Jesus spoke of the kingdom and healed, and gave that same power to His followers. We will see in my next message how healing is connected to the kingdom of God.

Healing miracles happened in the early church through Peter, Paul and the other apostles. Acts 5:12-16 relates: "Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured."

And Acts 19:11-12 says this: "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them."

In 1 Corinthians 12 healing is listed as one of the gifts of the Spirit. In other words the Holy

Spirit gifts some in the church to be able to heal in the name of Jesus. Just think, maybe someone in this church has this gift, and hasn't discovered it yet!

The Book of James gives us a glimpse into the life of the early church: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (James 5:14-16).

***There is really no basis for saying, "Healing miracles were only for Bible times."*** Healing didn't stop once Jesus left the earth physically. First century Christians healed in Jesus' name. The Church is Christ's *body* in the world today – continuing the things Jesus did when He was on earth.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, relates in his journal instances of healing through prayer. In his journal, dated May 8, 1741, Wesley wrote: "I found myself much out of order. However, I made shift to preach in the evening, but on Saturday my bodily strength quite failed, so that for several hours I could scarce lift up my head. Sunday, 10, I was obliged to be down most part of the day, being easy only in that posture. Yet in the evening my weakness was suspended, while I was calling sinners to repentance. But at our love-feast which followed, beside the pain in my back and head, and the fever which still continued upon me, just as I began to pray, I was seized with such a cough, that I could hardly speak. At the same time came strongly into my mind, 'These signs shall follow them that believe'. I called on Jesus aloud, to 'increase my faith' and to 'confirm the word of his grace.' While I was speaking my pain vanished away; the fever left me; my bodily strength returned; and for many weeks I felt neither weakness nor pain. 'Unto Thee, O Lord, do I give thanks'".

He also refers at another place in his journal to the day when he was riding on his horse, and having such a terrible headache, that he could hardly stand the bumping. Then, his horse developed lameness. He describes how, after praying, the horse was healed of his lameness and he of his headache at the same instant!

The late Dr. Paul Tillich, one of the most renowned theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, once wrote this: "How do we paint Jesus the Christ? The stories in the Gospel of Matthew contribute to the answer; they add a color, an expression, a trait of great intensity, they paint Him as the healer. It is astonishing that this color, this vivid expression of His nature, this powerful trait of His character, has more and more been lost in our time. The grayish colors of a moral teacher, the tense expression of a social reformer, the soft traits of the suffering servant have prevailed, at least amongst our painters and theologians...perhaps not so much in the hearts of the people who need somebody to heal them.

"The gospels, certainly, are not responsible for this disappearance of power in the picture of Jesus. They abound in stories of healing, but *we* are responsible, ministers, laymen, theologians,

who forgot that ‘Savior’ means ‘healer’, he who makes whole and sane what is broken and insane, in body and mind...those who are disrupted, split, disintegrated are healed by Him. And because this is so, because this power has appeared on earth, the Kingdom of God has come upon us.”

A physician, Dr. Elizabeth Milne, says, “In the days of the early church one of the signs of true discipleship was that they laid hands on the sick and healed them, and this same power is given to the Church today where people really desire to be healed.”

Early in my ministry I pastored a church in Tower City, PA. In that church was a woman, a mother of 3 young children, who was very ill, with many health problems, including cancer. I visited her in the hospital one day. She was having a terrible day. I could tell she was in agony. She looked very pale. She said she wasn’t able to keep anything down, not even water. I couldn’t help but wonder how long she would be alive.

It was either that night (or the next evening), we had our weekly prayer and study group in the church. I told them of Bonnie’s desperate condition. Before we prayed, I felt led to do something a bit different. Thinking we needed a boost of faith, I turned in the Scripture to some verses that meant a lot to me. The verses were Matthew 18:19-20, where Jesus gives a prayer promise to His disciples. “Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven, for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” I read this Scripture to the group and said, “Let’s claim this promise!” As I put my head down to pray, I happened to glance at my watch and noticed the time (I think it was like 8:10 p.m.). We prayed, and I felt no particular emotion at all.

The next day I went to the hospital and into this lady’s room. There she was – no longer in bed, but sitting on a chair! She greeted me with a wide grin, and I said, “What in the world happened to you!” “Well,” she said, “I’ll tell you. Last night I was feeling awful. For some reason I reached over to the table beside my hospital bed and picked up my New Testament. I picked no particular spot – I just opened it at random – and read a few verses, and they helped me.” I said, “Do you remember what you read?” She said, “Well, I don’t remember exactly, but it said something about where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, or something like that. I replied, “Was it this one?”...and I got the Bible and read the passage that we had read the evening before in our prayer group. She said, “That’s it! That’s the one!” And she continued, “After I read that, believe it or not I began to feel better. I was able to drink something last night, and I’ve been able to start to eat some light food.” I said, “Bonnie, do you by any chance remember about what time it was when this happened?” She said, “You know, I just happened to look at my watch. It was 8:10” At the very time we were reading Matthew 18:19-20, she had randomly turned to that Scripture and was reading it too. And a healing took place!

Some 30 years after that, I went back to that church to attend the funeral of one of the members, and guess who I saw! Bonnie! Still alive! Jesus is still in the healing business!

In my next message I want to say more about healing. I’ll try to answer some questions that are

often asked when the subject of healing comes up, questions like, “How important is faith for healing to take place?” And that difficult question so often asked, “What if the person we pray for doesn’t get well? Does this mean we have failed?”

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