

GOD'S HEALTH FOR ALL?

Introduction

Readers may be aware that two extremes are commonly found regarding supernatural healing. Some are fascinated by the occurrence of healings and assert that our thinking should be shaped by these phenomena.[1] Others reject supernatural healing as unscientific and unbiblical. However, our belief in God puts us in a position in which we have no difficulty in accepting miracles in the purposes of God. We believe in miracles because we believe in the Bible. Therefore, we will seek to look at the biblical account, without restricting God's power to the measure of our understanding.

Health and healing: some definitions

In any study of the biblical teaching on a subject it is helpful to begin by looking at how vocabulary is used. The Old Testament word for 'healing' is used in numerous ways, a few of which are listed below.

- i. physical relief from leprosy[2]
- ii. restoring of a land or nation[3]
- iii. spiritual well-being of a soul[4]
- iv. cure of a broken heart [5]

From these we may deduce three helpful guidelines which will enable us to look at the whole subject:

1. Health is ultimately a state of wholeness and fulfilment of God's purposes in every area of life.
2. Health has a distinctly ethical side; complete obedience to God's will. Healing is a transformation of everything out of sorts with God. It must not be confined to one particular area.
3. Health is also physical and means strength and long-life.

Thus, God does not view 'the sick soul in a healthy body' as a desirable condition.

A doctrinal overview of healing

How may we then structure our thoughts concerning healing? Biblical doctrine finds its ultimate expression in living. It is nothing if it is simply cerebral. Three great doctrines prove to be of immense help to us:

Doctrine of Creation

God has made us. The very bodies we inhabit he shaped and formed lovingly as a father.[6] Our bodies themselves have certain limited self-healing qualities. Many scientists and clinicians have written of medicine simply supporting us until our immune systems are capable of overcoming pathogens. Indeed, AIDS shows us dramatically what occurs when our immunity is destroyed. Further, this potential for healing is relied upon

by every surgeon who makes an incision. In a very real way he is dependent on God's healing power in a created body.

Doctrine of Providence

God in his infinite wisdom and care has provided various medicinal properties in nature. For example, the foxglove from which we extract digitalis has proved to be of immense relief to countless patients with heart complaints. God has provided these chemicals which may be used under skilled direction to great benefit. Therefore, the question 'Should I trust God or go to the doctor?' does not enter the equation. Surely to deny medicinal treatment is to deny God's providence.

Doctrine of Redemption

In the well known passage in Isaiah 53, Jesus is said to have 'taken up our infirmities'. This healing in Jesus' death and resurrection encompasses a number of thoughts which help to put into perspective what he accomplished. He removed the sin which burdened our souls. He cleaned our consciences stricken by grief. He filled our minds with peace toward God and others. He made right our relationships with God and others. He healed our physical bodies (this is referred to in Mt 8:16,17). However, the question we must ask for all of these is when did he promise all these things would be accomplished? Did he say that all these things would be fully realised here and now? Are we not to look forward to a coming day when we will have new bodies? Jesus demonstrated his power by conquering evil but he did not abolish Satan's powers.

What is miraculous healing?

A miracle may be defined as a striking interposition of divine power by which the ordinary operations of nature are over-ruled, suspended or modified.[7] By this criterion, almost all the healings in the New Testament are miraculous. The sick are healed of their diseases and the dead are raised. This was accomplished by word, touch or application of spit. We are told that these miraculous healings acted as a 'sign' to authenticate Jesus' messiah-ship.[8] Yet it is interesting to note that Paul,[9] Epaphroditus,[10] Timothy[11] and Trophimus[12] were unwell. Indeed when we read of the Church being established, it is the home life, character and teaching of leaders which is important.[13]

Does God heal today?

God certainly does not change.[14] He could raise the dead today. However, God has nowhere said that we should all expect to be physically well and healthy.

1. Healing services commonly occur today. However, one never finds the biblical miracles announced several days beforehand. It seems that an immediate commission was given to those who performed them.[15] They did not experiment and we are not given any reports of failures in the book of Acts. There is always a sense of certainty and confidence that they knew the miracle would happen.
2. The effect of New Testament miracles was fear and awe at God's power. People rejoiced in God. Is the laughter and frivolity seen in many popular healing meetings today in accordance with this?

3. It is abundantly clear that God chooses to work through faith.[16] However, this faith is not 'worked up'. All faith is given by God. The harm which can be done to people who feel because they are not healed that their faith must be inadequate is immense. Joni Eareckson, the famous artist and author, who became quadriplegic after a diving accident, has spoken regarding physical health. 'The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that God doesn't want everyone to be healed.[17]
4. When we pray for healing we must surely follow Jesus' example in the Garden of Gethsemane; heal if it is your will. Far from being a compromise this fills us with greater confidence and trust in what God will do. We do not want to go outside his ways for they are best.

Why would God not heal?

Alister McGrath writes most helpfully when he says that there is no inconsistency with the statements 'God is almighty. God is completely loving. There is suffering and evil in the world.[18] However, there is a logical contradiction if there are no good reasons for God to allow suffering'. Indeed, there are many indications that God positively uses suffering and illness for his greater purposes. It was the great preacher of last century, C H Spurgeon, who said, 'The greatest blessing that God can give to any of us is health with the exception of sickness. . . trials drive us to the realities of religion'-.[19] Yet, it is very interesting to note that the place of suffering of whatever sort is not one given much space or attention in contemporary Christian material. Have we become so conditioned to thinking that physical health is to be expected because of the advances of modern medicine that we do not accept that there might be a place for ill health?

- To some who conceive of God's love abolishing suffering and creating a world without disease and pain, the Christian gospel shouts of a love that made itself known through Jesus' suffering and agony.
- Is God's love shown in making us happy? This is to conceive of God as a celestial sugar-daddy' carrying out our every whim. Surely God's love means his desire for our ultimate best. It involves being reshaped and transformed to his ways. Do we think we know better than God when we claim healing?
- Ill health and death break down the pretence of human immortality and remind us of our final destiny. Indeed, hospitals are powerful testimonies to human frailty. Suffering is not pointless when it may alert people to eternal realities. Martin Luther referred to God's condemnation of sinners as his 'strange work'. [20] Initially it seems incongruous that a loving God would do such a thing. Yet, when we come to realise that to avoid this happening to us all he sent his Son, and heaven is to be perfect and without sin, we see this is consistent with his character. Illness and disease may be seen in the same light if they are to the greater end of bringing people to Christ.
- Like Job's misguided comforters many will always view illness as a mark of divine displeasure. On the contrary, we may be being drawn closer to God and being allowed to go through an experience which will break down more of the barriers hindering our advancement in Christian growth.
- As adopted children of God, Christians inherit everything Jesus received as an inheritance from God. He received suffering and glory.[21] If we are united to Jesus and are looking forward to heaven, do we expect not to suffer?

Conclusion

We have come to see that God is ultimately concerned with every area of our health. He desires *wholistic* health: wholeness and the fulfilment of his purposes in every area of life. He achieves this in numerous ways. He has chosen to use prayer, though he already knows what we will say. He has given us his Word that we might begin to see things as he does. Medicines and medical practitioners achieve the healing and palliation of disease in his providence. However, such a great God has abundant imagination to be able to use the supernatural as well as suffering and disease to achieve our wholeness. Indeed, phenomena may come to our notice which we cannot explain. This ought not to shake our biblical thinking and make us captives to experience. Let God be God![22] However, there are numerous explanations which we may give for the persistence of disease. What a privilege as doctors to be involved in the eschatological work of looking after the sick,[23] since cure and palliation point forward to the glorious day when we will be perfected with new heavenly disease-free bodies.[24] The doctor is an agent of the world to come; and whenever the sick are raised up or pain is relieved, it is nothing other than the power of the resurrection which is at work!

Roland McCaIum, *Clinical Medical Student, Glasgow.*

References

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