

“QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS”

Session Ten – Healing in the Bible

Healing in the Old Testament - Quarantine Laws

Long before the existence of medical science and the field of microbiology, there existed rules in the Old Testament for good community hygiene, and also a meticulous protocol that was mandated to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. Good hygiene (both personal and communal) is a rather recent phenomenon. It is important to note that history is full of examples of the spread of disease that could have been stopped with simple hygienic and quarantine rules. It is likely that the Black Plague that spread across Europe could have been mitigated if the principles found in the Bible had been followed. Interestingly, the Jews of Europe did follow these principles and were the least affected by the Black Plague.

Leviticus 13:1-6; :45-46; :55 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 2 “When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a shiny spot on their skin that may be a defiling skin disease, they must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest. 3 The priest is to examine the sore on the skin, and if the hair in the sore has turned white and the sore appears to be more than skin deep, it is a defiling skin disease. When the priest examines that person, he shall pronounce them ceremonially unclean. 4 If the shiny spot on the skin is white but does not appear to be more than skin deep and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest is to isolate the affected person for seven days. 5 On the seventh day the priest is to examine them, and if he sees that the sore is unchanged and has not spread in the skin, he is to isolate them for another seven days. 6 On the seventh day the priest is to examine them again, and if the sore has faded and has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce them clean; it is only a rash. They must wash their clothes, and they will be clean.

45 “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ 46 As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.

55 After the article (of clothing) has been washed, the priest is to examine it again, and if the mold has not changed its appearance, even though it has not spread, it is unclean. Burn it, no matter which side of the fabric has been spoiled.

Miraculous Healing

Throughout the Old Testament, “doctors” or healers are largely unknown. Healing is understood to come directly from God. The priestly role in healing is simply to determine who is ill, and to pronounce either “clean” or “unclean.” The priest and any rituals or sacrifices attendant upon the healing process are unconnected with the healing itself, which is from God.

Exodus 15:26 - “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you.”

Psalms 103 - Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits — who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.

The Serpent on the Pole - Numbers 21:4-9

During the Exodus, there were frequent rebellions. One such rebellion was quashed by this mysterious story of a “bronze snake”:

4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” 6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Jesus makes reference to this event in his discussion with Nicodemus:

John 3:14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Some 400 years after the Exodus event, the bronze snake was still in existence, and had become an object of veneration. During the reforms under King Hezekiah, it was destroyed:

2 Kings 18:4 - He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it.

It is possible that the Greek myth of Asclepius, and the symbol of the serpent on a pole as a sign of healing, had its roots here. It is not to be confused with the Caduceus, the double snake on a winged rod, carried by the mythological god Hermes, which has nothing to do with healing – but was mistakenly adopted as the symbol of the American Army Medical Corps!

The Healing of Naaman the Syrian – 2 Kings 5

The story makes a clear point that God, not Elisha, is the source of Naaman’s healing. Elisha doesn’t even meet with Naaman!

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. 2 Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

10 Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." 11 But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

13 Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" 14 So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Miraculous healing of this type was rare in the Old Testament, as Jesus himself says:

Luke 4:27 - And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

Healing in Old Testament Prophecy

The most prominent role of divine healing in the Old Testament was assigned to the coming Messiah, who would bring physical and spiritual healing. Isaiah is particularly strong on this identification:

Isaiah 29:18 - On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.

Isaiah 35:5-6 - Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Isaiah 53:4 - Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

Isaiah 61:1 - The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

Jesus reads this passage from Isaiah 61 in the Nazareth synagogue, and identifies himself with it. He also validates his Messiahship with John the Baptist by quoting it again:

Luke 4:21 - He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 7:22 - So (Jesus) replied to the (John's) messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

Sickness as Judgement

In the Old Testament, illness is often interpreted as a mark of disfavour from God as a result of sin. The illness is sent to bring the afflicted to repentance. Obedience is rewarded with healing:

Exodus 15:26 - "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you."

The Book of Job struggles with this question – a seemingly innocent man has calamity befall him. Even Job's friends agree – despite Job's claims of innocence, Job must have sinned!

Job 4:7-8 - "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.

Jesus seems to reject this concept of sin/disease, in the healing of the man born blind:

John 9:1-3 - As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Healing in the New Testament

Jesus was famous as a healer during his ministry. The Gospels record between 37 and 40 distinct miracles, of which 28 are healings. Additionally, there are numerous "summary statements" such as Matthew 4:23-24:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. 24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.

In some instances, Jesus healed by simple touch; in other instances, at a distance; sometimes, with a command; sometimes, on account of the faith of the sick person; other times, through the faith of others; on occasion, he used his own saliva to communicate the healing.

Matthew 8:1-3 - When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. 2 A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing,

you can make me clean.” 3 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.

Matthew 8:5-8, 13 - When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 6 “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” 7 Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?” 8 The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed... 13 Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.

Matthew 8:16-17 - When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. 17 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.”

Matthew 9:1-7 - Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. 2 Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” 4 Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, “Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? 5 Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? 6 But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralyzed man, “Get up, take your mat and go home.” 7 Then the man got up and went home.

Matthew 9:20-22 - Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. 21 She said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.” 22 Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed at that moment.

Demons or Disease?

Little distinction is made in the Gospels between natural and supernatural causes of suffering. Those described as being “healed” are sometimes healed of disease, others are “healed” of demonic oppression. In some instances, one Gospel will describe a malady as rooted in the supernatural, while another in the natural. Sometimes, the same passage describes both:

Matthew 12:22-24 - Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. 23 All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” 24 But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”

Matthew 17:14-15 - When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. 15 “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water.

Mark 9:17-18 - A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid.

Physicians in the New Testament

Doctors are not highly regarded in the New Testament, despite Luke’s reputation as a physician (*Colossians 4:14 - Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you*):

Mark 5:25-26 - And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. 26 She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.

Luke 8:43 - And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her.

Miraculous healings by the Apostles

Jesus passed the healing ministry on to the disciples, particularly the Twelve:

Matthew 10:1, 7-8 Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness... As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

The disciples were not always successful:

Matthew 17:16-20 – “I brought (my son) to your disciples, but they could not heal him.” “You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” 18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment. 19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” 20 He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

In the Book of Acts, the Apostles carry on Jesus’ healing ministry. There are numerous individual healings, as well as this summary:

Acts 5:12-16 - The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. 13 No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. 14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. 15 As a result,

people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. 16 Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

The Apostle Paul became known as a healer, with surprising results!

Acts 14 8-11 - In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed 10 and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. 11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"

Acts 19:11-12 - God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.

Healing in Paul's Epistles

Paul puts the "gift of healing" in the category of spiritual gifts:

1 Corinthians 12:7-9 - Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 8 To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,

1 Corinthians 12:28 - And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.

1 Corinthians 12:30 - Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Healing in James

James is the last letter written in the New Testament that speaks about healing. It does so in the context of prayer:

James 5:13-16 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Summary:

Jesus was known throughout Galilee, and then throughout the whole region, as a healer. It was his reputation as a healer which resulted in his early fame. It was his healing miracles – including restoring life itself – that caused many to identify him as the Messiah. Healing was a sign of the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' healing ministry covered both natural and supernatural causes of illness and distress. In Jesus' day, there was not a strong distinction between the two. Healing was not only cure of a disease or physical infirmity; it was regarded as physical, spiritual, relational, and social. Jesus on several occasions instructed those who had been healed to "submit themselves to the priests" – which is to say, to undergo the physical examination necessary to be reintegrated into the community. He often equated physical healing with spiritual healing – the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus' healing ministry was conferred to the Apostles. The Apostle Paul, although not one of the Twelve, was also gifted with healing powers. In most cases, healings performed by the Apostles were said to affirm the truth of their testimony, and resulted in the spread of the Gospel.

James encourages Christians to pray for one another for healing. John closes for us with this prayer (3 John 1:2) – "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well."

Living Faith (A Presbyterian Statement of Belief):

2.5.7 All people fall short of God's standards and need salvation. God's way to salvation has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Through the death and resurrection of Christ our sins are forgiven. Salvation means life, forgiveness, healing, wholeness. It comes from God's grace received through faith in Christ alone.

8.4.1 God is always calling the church to seek that justice in the world which reflects the divine righteousness revealed in the Bible.

8.4.4 Justice requires concern for the poor of the world. It seeks the best way to create well-being in every society. It is concerned about employment, education, and health, as well as rights and responsibilities.