I'm Sick. Why Doesn't God Heal Me?

Over the past months, I have been asked the title question many times. "Why doesn't God heal me?" Or more specifically, "why doesn't God answer the prayers of **His faithful people** for healing?"

I even asked the questions:

- Why me?
- Why now?
- Why doesn't God heal me?

when I developed acute knee pain during the MN Women's Conference that I oversee. I had difficulty walking and couldn't engage as I intended. I wondered why God let this happen **at** the event for which we'd spent a year preparing and why He didn't heal me. It wouldn't have mattered if the pain had developed just a few days later (Really? Wouldn't I wonder the same things even then?).

This issue of health comes down to the age-old Garden of Eden dilemma of trusting God versus knowledge – as if knowing the "whys" will somehow make the suffering of ailments and health conditions easier to handle, or at least meaningful.

There is risk of people losing their faith over unhealed illness. And those without faith may ask "why believe in a God who does not hear or respond to requests for healing" or wonder if God even has the power to heal and make us whole.

After my study so far about healing, and I've only begun, I find that Job expresses well how I feel about trying to understand this very big and very difficult topic. Job said:

> "I know that [God] can do all things,
> And that no purpose of [His] can be thwarted. . . .
> I have declared that which I did not understand,
> Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." (Job 42:2-3, NASB)

I don't know whether I'll say anything tonight that you don't already know. I've tried to organize and draw conclusions from examples throughout the Bible about illness and healing. I hope this will be food for thought, maybe giving some ideas for helping those who long for healing and, if you are struggling with a health issue, bring some encouragement.

Define terms

I will use words that refer to general ill-health interchangeably. In general, as I wrote this, I had in mind a long-term condition (physical or psychological) from any cause that hasn't healed in spite of prayer and treatment.

Origin of Ill-health

In one sense, all sickness and disease are caused by sin – the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden. When Adam disobeyed God's command, death, accompanied by corruption and deterioration, was unleashed in creation, in general, and in the nature of mankind, specifically. Romans tells us that "creation was subjected to futility" and enslaved to corruption (8:20, 21). This includes humans – whose "outer man is decaying" (2 Corinthians 4:16). We now have a perishable and mortal body subject to disease, sickness, and abnormalities as a result of the sin in Eden (1 Corinthians 15:42, 53, 54).

Even though the effects of sin are common to everyone's health, we still wonder why people develop particular ailments or physical problems. In the account of the blind man in John 9 we read that even the disciples with Jesus asked: "'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?'" (9:2) This is typical of our attempt to understand why someone is ill or diseased or handicapped.

Bible reasons for ill-health

There are examples throughout the Bible of ailments and illness and I put these examples into at least 8 categories of "why" sickness, injuries, and abnormalities occur.

1. We are subject to a fallen world

Since God does not remove His people from experiencing the world with all its flaws and dangers, we believers will be at risk for health issues.

We may wonder why God doesn't protect us from threats and dangers to our health? Is He unloving because He doesn't undo the effects of life in this fallen system?

Although David's example in the Psalms is that we can express ourselves honestly (and God already knows what is in our hearts), we must be cautious about challenging the actions and wisdom of God or we may face the scolding God gave Job:

> "Who is this that darkens counsel By words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, And I will ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding . . . Will the faultfinder contend with the

> Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it. . . . Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified? Or do you have an arm like God?" (Job 38:2-4; 40:2, 8-9a)

Everything we look at in this study is under the premise that God does not have to answer to us, His creatures. If He did, He would no longer be Sovereign God. And, by the way, He does have a plan to undo the effects of living in this fallen world through Jesus, if we sign up for it.

There are three subheadings under this topic of existing in a fallen world. First, our bodies are subject to decay and death as a result of Adam's choice. "As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years" (Is. 90:10). We live in a weak and vulnerable physical state, and there are times when the natural healing process of our bodies is unable to fully do its work. This is the damage brought about by Adam's sin.

Secondly, other people's choices and actions impact our health. Physical and psychological harm can be caused by thoughtlessness, recklessness, and intentional acts of others.

Thirdly, there simply are risks from many sources and activities in life. Some we bring on ourselves; others are as simple as slipping on an icy pathway. King "Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber which was in Samaria, and became ill" and Elijah told him that God said, "'You shall not come down from the bed where you have gone up, but you shall surely die'" (2 Kings 1:2, 4). We cannot escape that our health and well-being is affected by dangers in this fallen world.

2. Consequence of sin

We are aware that sin can result in illness. Remember how God afflicted Miriam with leprosy for her sin? (Numbers 12). In fact, the disciples with Jesus thought that sin was the reason for the man's blindness in John 9.

> As [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3)

Although Jesus said sin did not cause the man's blindness, we too may wonder if an affliction is caused by someone's sin. Galatians 6:7-8a states: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption."

Yet, we probably all can think of a situation where someone did not seem to reap a consequence for sowing sin while another person suffered without sinning.

Job's friends believed illness is a result of sin. Eliphaz says "'According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity And those who sow trouble harvest it.'" (Job 4:8-9). Another friend, Bildad, says, "'If your [Job's] sons sinned against Him, Then He [God] delivered them into the power of their transgression'" (Job 8:3-4).

Bildad says Job's children died because of their sin. But we know the deaths of Job's children followed God giving Satan the right to challenge Job's faith through adversity.

We are told Job is "a blameless and upright man" (Job 1:8b) and his ill-health and suffering are not a result of any personal sin. The question then is: did Job's children die for their own sin, did they suffer evil as fallout from their father's spiritual battle, or were their deaths the result of being human in a world of dangers?

The lesson here is that God sees the overall situation, the causes and consequences for the individual as well as for those on the periphery. As individuals, we can examine ourselves and, if we are brutally honest, identify whether we are trespassing God's commands and suffering ill-health as a result. David expresses this in Psalm 38:

> There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation;
> There is no health in my bones because of my sin.
> For my iniquities are gone over my head;
> As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me.
> My wounds grow foul and fester
> Because of my folly.
> I am bent over and greatly bowed down;
> I go mourning all day long.
> For my loins are filled with burning,
> And there is no soundness in my flesh.
> I am benumbed and badly crushed;
> I groan because of the agitation of my heart. (38:3-8)

David recognizes his physical agonies are related to his "sin," "iniquities," and his "folly."

Sin is resolved through repentance and confession, but doesn't guarantee physical healing, although it is instrumental in psychological healing. Of course, righteousness always should be the goal even if physical healing is not the result.

Generational (family/parental) sin

The disciples asked Jesus if the blind man's parents sinned and so he was born blind. In this case, Jesus said that was not why the man was blind.

But it was the parent's fault in the case of King David and his child by adultery with Bathsheba. The prophet "Nathan said to David, 'The Lord also has taken away your [David's] sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die'" (2 Samuel 12:13b-14). We wonder at God who "struck the child that Uriah's widow bore to David, so that he was very sick" (2 Samuel 12:15b). David's sin was forgiven, but his innocent child paid the price.

This is a hard fact to accept, yet it is vital we remember the ultimate focus is God and His honor and glory, not us humans. David gave "occasion to the enemies of YHWH to blaspheme" (12:14). His dishonor of God is embodied in the son born to him and Bathsheba. If the child survived, he would be a constant symbol of David's sin without consequence. God's commands cannot be flouted without consequence, even when those commands are broken by the king chosen by God for his devotion. Maybe especially because David had been recognized for his devotion to God, he had to pay a severe consequence for his direct affront to God. If he hadn't, it would seem to give license to others to ignore God's standards without repercussions, as the king had up to the time of his son's death.

Could family sin be a reason for our own illness or impairment? Sometimes we hear generational sin spoken of based on Exodus 20:5 and Exodus 34:6-7 (see also Deuteronomy 5:9).

> He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:6-7).

This sounds as though the sins of forefathers are carried to the descendants, yet Deuteronomy 24:16 says "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin." And also, Ezekiel 18:4, 20; God says:

> "Behold, all souls [lives] are Mine; the soul [life] of the father as well as the soul [life] of the son is Mine. . . . The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself." (See also Jeremiah 31:29-30).

It seems reasonable that the Exodus passages are referring to the influence of an older generation on the younger. Worldliness and idolatry, moral compromise and selfish attitudes are "caught" by children, who then grow to exhibit like character which God will

judge. Graciously, God gives every individual a chance to overcome and reject sinful character passed along generationally and choose to live according to God's statutes.

Here are a couple biblical examples of confessing ancestors' sin:

- Leviticus 26:40, 42 "'If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me [YHWH] . . . then I will remember My covenant.'"
- Nehemiah 1:6 "'Let Your [God's] ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant . . . I and my father's house have sinned."
- Nehemiah 9:2 "The descendants of Israel . . . stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers."

Upon confession, our sin and the sin of our ancestors are removed "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12). Peter says we are redeemed "**from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers"** with "the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19, emphasis added).

Will a child's physical infirmity caused by a parent's sin be healed? It seems to depend on the infirmity. A child abused by a parent who suffers a broken bone may naturally heal, as bodies do heal. Psychological issues can be healed as well through faith, confession, and repentance. But if that child is blinded through some injury committed by the parent, our experience is that there may not be healing.

This opens more questions: in this case of abuse, is a child not healed because the parent must suffer the consequence of his/her sin, or because the child lives in a fallen world, or some other reason? Such healing is in the purview of God, just as protection from the injury before it even happens rests in God's hands.

On the flip side, there is a couple I know who found out from medical scans *in utero* that their child had brittle bone disease. The doctors counseled abortion as an option since this child's quality of life would be affected by this disease. The parents chose not to abort their son. Their son was born with brittle bone disease and does suffer the limitations, pain, and other results of that disease. Although the parents chose to honor life, as God would want them to, it did not result in a miraculous healing. Yet, this boy, when compared to other children with this disease, has fewer broken bones. Perhaps this is a result of the parents' choice for the life of their son.

Parental sin or righteousness may or may not relate to a child's physical health. More important is the spiritual health of the individual. While children may suffer for a parent's sin as King David's son did, the avenue for peace with God through personal faith,

repentance, and righteousness in Jesus is available to that child in spite of parental sin, even if healing may not result. (The situation of children, such as David's son, who do not live to an age to know God is beyond the scope of this discussion.)

3. For the glory of God

Interestingly, when the disciples ask Jesus, "'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him'" (John 9:2-3). It might be hard to accept that sometimes illness and physical abnormalities are for the glory of God. When word came that Lazarus was sick, Jesus specifically stated: "'This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it'" and then Lazarus died and was buried in a tomb. Lazarus suffered illness and the experience of death, his family watched in impotent horror and sorrow as he suffered, and even Jesus "was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled" and he wept over Lazarus' plight (John 11:1-44). Of course, Jesus raised him from the dead and it brought great glory to God and recognition of Jesus.

Our lives, our beings, the condition of our minds and bodies - our health – belong to the God who created us (Ezekiel 18:4, 20), but offering our bodies to Him as living sacrifices (Ro. 12:1), yielding to His work in and through us, is how we worship and serve God. If He chooses to use us as a instruments of witness and salvation for others through pain and suffering, glorifying Him in faithfulness while battling ill-health, testifying by the weakness of our bodies to the reality of the need for salvation, our task is to yield to His mastery of us, our abilities, and the fruit of our lives.

The other option is to criticize and deride God's choice to use us as less than whole instruments. Criticism sets us up as judges of God's management of His creation, which includes us and our bodies and minds, as though we know better than He. This was the sin of Aaron and Meriam that led to Miriam's leprosy (Nu. 12).

Scripture commands us believers to glorify God, no matter what we do, even in such matters of health as to what we eat and drink (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:23). God is glorified when we let our light of faith shine, even when that light comes from a person suffering from ailments or limitations (Matthew 5:16). In our struggle with pain and suffering, or maybe **especially** when struggling with ill-health, we glorify God as we trust Him, accept His work with and through us, and serve Him as we are able.

4. Character development

The Apostle Paul wrote: "to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:8). This unexplained thorn caused some kind of weakness that

tempered Paul's tendency toward arrogance. We presume, since God did not remove the thorn, that without it, Paul's arrogance would have hindered his ministry or, in the extreme, cost him his salvation.

Paul then shares that his weakness allows the "power of Christ [to] dwell in" him, "for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). "When I am weak, then I am strong" highlights that his accomplishments were really being performed by Christ, not himself (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Paul also could affirm: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

There are several Scriptures about spiritual growth through suffering:

- We also **exult** in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint (**Ro. 5:3-5**, emphasis added).
- Consider it **all joy**, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (**James 1:2-4**, emphasis added).
- Be **joyful** in hope, **patient** in affliction, **faithful** in prayer (**Ro. 12:12**, NIV; emphasis added).

These passages use strong terms for our response to affliction: exult, joyful, all joy, patient, faithful.

God does not waste our illness, disease, or anguish. Instead, He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love" Him (Romans 8:28). He has purpose and intention behind how He works with us. Growth is possible when we are less than whole, leading to what is most important - a mature spiritual character. Our confidence is that His power is at work when we are weak in body and mind.

5. To advance the Kingdom work – the larger scope of other people

It is interesting that there are several accounts of infertility in the Scriptures that are tied to the work of advancing the Kingdom. Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth are healed in God's timing and God's way for His purposes related to advancing the Kingdom program.

Our mindset is integral to contributing to the Kingdom work. We can choose to capitalize on the struggles of ill-health, or we can waste the experience. Infirmity can help us develop empathy and learn how to comfort others. Demonstrating strong trust, faith, and joy in the midst of suffering and struggle may actually enhance our witness.

6. To get our attention

Saul, who becomes the Apostle Paul, certainly has his attention caught when he is struck with blindness in his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Illness can slow our pace of life so that we spend more time with God or face up to something in our spiritual life that we've been avoiding or haven't recognized. A period of recovery can be a time for self-reflection, learning, and connection with God.

7. To test our faith

Almost any illness, disease, or condition can test our faith if it challenges our belief in God and our Scriptural worldview.

Peter writes of being "distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, . . . even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

James tells us to "consider it all joy . . . when you encounter various trials, knowing that [this is] the testing of your faith" (1:3). Ailments of body and mind may be the trials that we face.

Scripture does not teach that God inflicts ailments to test your faith, although He allows conditions that may be such a test. This was the case for Job. Our faith is tested by virtue of our attitudes and responses to ill-health.

The spiritual battle

The test of faith is the heart of the spiritual battle. "Will we remain faithful to our God if He allows us to suffer ailments and does not heal us when we ask Him to?" Frustration and uncertainty, suffering and loss related to poor health can be strong attacks to faith and trust. There is real danger in entertaining thoughts that God doesn't love us, has abandoned us, or is even actively against us if we are not healed.

Job of the Bible engages in a severe spiritual battle that includes a physical attack on his health, among other troubles.

There are examples in the Bible of individuals who deal directly with forces of evil that possess them, the battlefield being both physical and psychological.

Paul's "thorn in the flesh" is described as "a messenger of Satan to torment" him (2 Cor. 12:7). Since Satan is involved, it sounds like a spiritual battle, yet this torment actually is to Paul's benefit – somehow keeping him from becoming "arrogant" (NET) or "conceited" (NIV). Whatever the metaphor of the thorn in the flesh refers to, as Paul engages in this

struggle with a messenger of Satan, his personality is protected from taking an unrighteous direction.

Scripture counsels us to resist the devil and rely on Scriptural truth, stay armored up, let Jesus be our strength when we feel weak and tired, and not give the devil an opportunity to take us away from our God.

8. Eating and drinking the Lord's supper without recognizing the body of Christ

Paul wrote:

> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. . . . So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. (1 Cor. 11:28-30, 33-34)

Paul indicates that sickness and death can occur when believers disrespect the solemnity of sharing the bread and wine as the symbols of the "precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet 1:21) that bought our redemption.

Reasons for illness do not explain why God doesn't heal us. We are His people, after all. We go again to the Bible where we find many examples of illness and unanswered prayer.

Biblical Accounts of Illness and Unanswered Prayer

Second Samuel 12:15b-23 is the account of King David's son, born as a result of David's adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah's widow.

> Then the Lord struck the child that Uriah's widow bore to David, so that he was very sick. David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. . . . [he] would not eat food . . . . Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died. . . . [David] said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.' But now he has died."

This father who is pleading for the life of his son is David on whom God put a special calling as king of Israel. Yet God does not answer with healing and life.

Paul prays repeatedly for a thorn in his flesh to be removed, but God does not take it away (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Job is struck in his health with painful boils all over his body. And this follows deep emotional trauma from the deaths of **all** of his children as well as economic disaster. And after chapters of laments and attempts by friends to comfort Job, and communication directly with God, he receives no answer for the purpose of his physical ailment.

In Jesus' day, there is a woman who suffers a hemorrhage for **12 years** (Luke 8:43-48) "and could not be healed by anyone."

One presumes Jairus, an administrator/overseer of the synagogue, has prayed diligently for the healing of his 12-year-old daughter before he goes to Jesus for a miracle, yet she dies. (Of course, Jesus then raises her back to life.)

There is record that Apostle Paul healed many: a man who had been lame from birth (Acts 14:8-10), the father of Publius who had a recurring fever and dysentery (Acts 28:8-9), and "people on the island [of Malta] who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured" (Acts 28:9). Paul even raises Eutychus who died when he fell from the window of an upper room (Acts 20:8-12). In Acts 19:11-12 we read, "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." So why doesn't Paul heal Timothy, whom Paul calls his son in faith, from a chronic stomach ailment and perhaps more health problems (1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 5:23)? Why does Paul leave Trophimus sick at Miletus rather than heal him (2 Tim. 4:20)? Why does Paul's friend Epaphroditus become so sick he nearly dies (Phil 2:27)?

There are many descriptions in Scripture of ailments that are not healed until the time was opportune. A man is blind from birth and he is an adult, "of age" before he is healed (John 9:1-34). In Acts 3:2-8 we read of "a man who had been lame from his mother's womb" until Peter heals him. This is a long time for prayer for healing not to be answered.

Even Jesus did not heal everyone he came in contact with. Here's one example.

> Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:2-6)

Among the great number of disabled people at the Bethesda pool, Jesus asks **one man** if he wants to get well. Didn't all those people want to get well? But Jesus did not heal all of them. The account doesn't even record that Jesus healed two of them. He healed only the one man, an invalid of 38 years.

These accounts provide plenty of evidence that God does not always heal illness, disease, and abnormalities, although He can and sometimes does.

Why we may not be healed

I am going to propose at least 4 reasons why we may not be healed, besides the basic truth that "it is appointed for men to die once" (and frequently death is preceded by illness that is not healed) (Hebrews 9:27).

1. *God is not a health vending machine*

It would be wonderful if God protected His people from every illness, injury, and disease. Or that He would automatically heal a believer who develops an ailment. The problem is that if God healed each time it was requested, people might come to look at Him like a vending machine: put in your prayer request coin, out drops healing. This would have obvious negative repercussions – devotion for what we get out of it rather than true faith through hardship, rituals rather than relationship. We believers may not be healed so that others recognize that faith is foremost about honoring God, spiritual healing, and the hope of *shalom* life in the Kingdom of God.

2. *Unconfessed or continuing in sin*

It is logical that if our impairment or illness results from sinful acts and choices, and we continue in that sin, that God would not heal the ailment. We see a connection between the need for forgiveness of sin and healing in the account of Jesus forgiving, then healing the paralyzed man (Matthew 9:2-7; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:18-25). James 5:16 directs believers to "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

King David's confession that he had sinned did result in the LORD taking away his sin, but his child was still to die. Joining our lives to Christ is not a "Get Away Without Consequence" pass. Like David, we might also become an example to others that God does not let His people get away with sin. And since we understand what sin is and how abhorrent it is to God, we may find the fruit of our sin even harsher than an unbeliever would experience. Jesus summarized a parable this way:

> That slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more. (**Luke 12:47-48**)

3. *Issues with Prayer (3 subtopics):*

Lack of prayer

James 4:2 states, "You do not have because you do not ask." Prayer gives an indication of the quality of relationship we have with God. Lack of prayer scorns the God who created us and knows our bodies much better than we or a doctor can ever know them. Prayer for healing affirms our belief in His word, that He hears us and has power to heal, and that we acknowledge His mercy and compassion

Sin blocks prayer (including prayer for healing)

Isaiah 59:2 states: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear" and Psalm 66:18, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear." Spiritual evaluation is an important step toward ensuring there is no sin hindering our prayer life so that our pleas for healing can reach the ear of God. Fortunately, we have the assurance of 1 John 1:9 that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The need for faith

Recently a woman told me that she believed no one would die if they had faith to believe all the Bible teaches about health and healing. She was obviously not reading the verses that state "in Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22) and that all die once (Hebrews 9:27). But does suffering influenza or cancer mean someone does not have enough faith to be healed?

Jesus spoke on the connection between faith and prayer:

> "Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be *granted* you" (Mark 11:22-24, also Matthew 21:21-22).

We are all probably familiar with the experience of the disciples who could not drive out a demon when Jesus was away.

> "Jesus rebuked him [the demon, according to Mark 9:25], and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not drive it out?' And He said to them, 'Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you'" (Matthew 17:18-20, emphasis added; see also Mark 9:14-29).

In the Mark account, the father says to Jesus, "'if you can do anything, . . . help us!' And Jesus said to him, "'All things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the boy's father cried out and began saying, 'I do believe; help my unbelief'" (Mark 9:22-24).

It is clear also from James that faith is integral in prayer:

> "Ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8).

If we need more faith, then we should ask God for more faith, as the demon-possessed boy's father said: "I do believe, help my unbelief." But also remember that the Bible gives the example of many prayers offered in faith that received answers of "later" and "no," and in some of those cases, the non-yes answer actually affirms the petitioner's faith.

4. *Wrong motives*

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3). John writes: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything **according to his will**, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15, emphasis added). Remember the prayer Jesus taught: "Your [God's] will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

It may sometimes seem like a "cop-out" when someone prays for healing and then qualifies it with "if it is Your will." It sounds like a back-up in case there isn't an answer. Yet, John does instruct that our prayers are answered when we "ask anything according to his will."

We presume, and I think rightly that, in general, God's will is for us to be whole and healthy. That's why He has a plan for the Kingdom when "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Rev. 21:4).

First John assures that "we know that we have what we asked." Although this seems as though healing now is what it promises, the verse actually does not lock God into any

timeframe for granting what we've asked. God's will **is** that His people be whole – the Hebrew word is *shalom* – but the fulfilled experience of that will be at the resurrection to immortality and incorruptibility into the Kingdom of *shalom*. It is not promised or guaranteed now. The expectation now is that the believer yield to God's will as it is played out in the current evil age.

Putting it all together

Yes, No, Later

We are told that every prayer is answered by God with either: Yes, No, or Later. This might seem a simplistic and perfunctory explanation for not receiving what we ask, yet we see examples of this in Scripture.

Our Lord Jesus, the greatest example of a man of faith, did not have every prayer answered – he prays for his followers to have unity (John 17:11). Look at the disunity and disagreements among all those who claim his name today demonstrating Jesus did not receive a "yes" to his prayer. Then before he is killed, Jesus asks his heavenly Father for a path other than the cross, "yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The answer is a silent, yet painful "no."

Moses, another leading man of faith, pleads with God to let him go into the Promised Land after 40 years of preparation to lead Israel and an additional 40 years of leading a complaining people (Deuteronomy 3:23-27). The answer is a strong and definite "no." These men certainly were asking in faith, faith larger than a mustard seed and still did not receive their requests.

Hannah prays for a child, year after year, and the answer, which seems to be "no" actually is "later." And her child Samuel becomes a great prophet and leader, anointing the first two kings of Israel (1 Sam. 1). Zechariah, a priest, petitions God on behalf of his barren wife Elizabeth (Luke 1:13). His answer, also, seems to be "no" until they are both "advanced in years" when God gives them a miraculous message that they will have a son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-20). Their "no" is actually "later." Job's healing comes "later." Paul's request for the thorn in the flesh to be removed is answered "no." David's son is sick unto death. David's plea is answered "no."

But there are also "yes" answers. King Hezekiah becomes mortally ill and the prophet Isaiah even tells him he is going to die. Hezekiah prays to God regarding his wholeness of heart for doing what is right in God's eyes. Isaiah hasn't even "gone out of the middle court" before God sends him back to tell the king that 15 years have been added to

his life (2 Kings 20:1-6). There are numerous accounts of God's "yes" to healing through Jesus as well as the apostles.

There is much we can learn from "no" answers, primarily submission and humility before an all-knowing and powerful God. My son suggests God may deny a request for healing to show we're not "all that" in this life and body. We can also learn persistence in prayer in light of a "no" (see the example of Hannah). We can watch for how God is at work and learn to have deeper trust in Him and gratitude for what He does grant us. We may need to learn to pray about all things. Above all, we can learn joy and contentment in whatever situation He allows us to face.

Some of us will hear "no" to requests for healing and will never have an explanation for why we suffer. Others will receive healing, although later, as I did for my knee after the women's conference had ended and after it taught me the lesson of being steadfast in service in spite of limitations – which was in line with the theme of the conference. And then there are much later "yeses." I was nearly 40 years old before I gave birth to my only birth child. Who can explain these differences in answers to prayer? Only God, and He doesn't always tell us.

What we do know is that our lives belong to a God who is compassionate and merciful, powerful, almighty, and able to heal. He has a plan for our ultimate healing and shalom wholeness at the resurrection as long as we hold fast in faith and persevere regardless of the difficulties in our health now. We may bring our petition to Him, but not question His wisdom and understanding. This is the difference between trust with obedience versus knowledge – the issue raised long ago in the Garden.

Job gave us the attitude that helps us strive toward acceptance and contentment, regardless of our circumstances: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

What Not to Do

Superstitious prayer

It is true that Scripture says to pray continuously (1 Thess. 5:17) and Jesus taught to pray persistently and in his name (Luke 18:1-8; John 16:23-24). Apparently, God does not mind hearing the same requests a number of times. Paul asked for the thorn to be removed three times – a specific number but not in any way to be taken as a prescribed number of prayers. As with any request we make of our God, we should pray until we understand His

reply, whether to grant, refuse, or delay fulfillment of our request but be careful not to tip over into legalistic ways of relating to God.

Some may believe we must appeal to God in a particular way for healing to occur, things like what time of day we pray, laying hands on the unhealthy part of the body, whether two or more are praying for the same outcome, and the position we are in for prayer. We must be cautious about superstitious and magical thinking about prayer (as well as other superstitions such as prayer cloths), remembering that prayer is communicating in a relationship. It is not a means of manipulation, giving God direction what to do, nor creatively coercing or convincing God to give us what we want.

Scripture tells us that compassion and love are God's nature and He remembers He has made us from dust (Ps. 103:14), so He has provided the spirit which "also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the [s]pirit [itself] intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Ro. 8:26).

Bargaining with God

Sometimes we see skits that portray a person in trouble making a bargain with God to save him. When the danger passes, the person retracts what he's offered to God. Although the skit may be done in humor, this is not funny. It can get us into a lot of trouble. Consider Jephthah who offered God a sacrifice of the first thing that came out of his house if he had a victory in battle (Judges 11:30-39). That first thing was his daughter. God is not open to negotiation as though He needs anything that we can give Him.

Of interest is the account of Hannah who pleads with God for a child:

> [Hannah] greatly distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. She made a vow and said, "O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head." (1 Samuel 1:10-11).

She does then have a child, Samuel, and she fulfills her vow by giving him over to the priests to raise and train and he becomes a strong spokesman for God. Did God only give Hannah a child because she negotiated a deal that pleased God? Or is it more likely that God wanted an obedient and dedicated leader of Israel, devoted to God's ways and with the influence of the priesthood behind him? The leader God wanted could not be held back by his mother nor have loyalties divided between a clinging mother and God. Although God could take Samuel for His use whether Hannah let him go or not, we see God's gentleness with this woman who struggled with infertility by bringing her to make the choice to release her son to the work God had for him.

Approaching God with the intent to negotiate for healing indicates a failure to know who our God is. As one of God's creations, man has nothing to give God that isn't already God's, including our health and lives.

Instead, our attitude before God should be one of humility and recognition that as the "Potter," God has every right to form us, His "pots," in whatever way He wishes for whatever purposes He has. Remember how our Lord Jesus taught us to pray: "Our Father. . . **Your** will be done on earth as in heaven." (Matt. 6:9-10, emphasis added). That includes His will being done in and with us as earth creatures as well.

Seven-Step Action Plan

Even after looking at causes of ill-health and Bible examples of people who were or were not healed, there are no clear-cut answers to "Why doesn't God heal me?"

Nevertheless, there is an action plan possible when we face unhealed ailments that glorifies God and gives meaning to suffering. The goal is to persevere in faith and dignity so that our light of faith shines to encourage and strengthen those who already know God and His Messiah Jesus, and that we might show the way to salvation in spite of this fallen and evil world.

- **"Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God" (Ro 12:1)**
    - Yield to God as the potter, as the owner of your body, your being, knowing He can work good through your suffering and your imperfect body
    - Prov. 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body And refreshment to your bones."
    - Praise God for spiritual well-being (salvation and forgiveness of sin)
    - Take care of your health by eating and drinking healthy: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31)
    - Be grateful to God for the health of body, mind, and spirit that you do have
    - Trust God for the hope of eternal life with a whole and healthy body in the Kingdom
- **Repent of and confess sin**, whether it is related to being sick or not. We may suffer ill-health due to prior sin, but the sin is cleansed by the blood of Jesus. To think sin is not forgiven because we aren't healed is to commit the sin of disbelieving God word in the Scriptures.

- **Immerse yourself in Scripture**
    - Psalm 107:20, God "sent His word and healed them"
    - John 6:63, Jesus said: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life."
    - Prov. 4:20-22, "My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; Keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them And health to all their body."
- **Pray for healing**
    - Pray with faith and persistence, "no" may be found to really be a "later" answer
    - Seek to understand God in and through your situation
    - Enlist others to pray as well – "Again I [Jesus] say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:19).
    - Ask elders to anoint and pray

      "Is anyone among you suffering? *Then* he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." (James 5:13-16)

- **Defeat demonic attempts to exploit your health condition**
    - Guard against lies that discredit God's love and ability to heal
    - Wear the armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18)
    - Resist the devil with the word of God (1 Pet. 5:8-10; Matt. 4:1-11)
- **Grow spiritually and develop godly character**
    - Seek to understand if there is a character lesson in your ailment (as Paul's thorn)
    - Build dependence on God; when we are weak, then we are strong because it is not we who do it but Christ in us.
    - Develop joy, peace, patience, humility, compassion, trust in God, endurance
    - Do not become self-focused regarding your illness or impairment – don't dwell on it in conversation, overwhelming others with self-pity; reject the pride we find some exhibit when listing all their suffering

- **Pray for others' healing, faith, and spiritual growth (James 6:15)**
    - Visit the sick (Matt. 25:36)

The witness to the unsaved is in our faith, trust, and peace through illness. If witnessing to someone who is suffering, we can point them to the Great Physician, Jesus (Matt. 9:12; Mark 2:17), who makes possible our wholeness and health in the Kingdom of God.

Closing Summary

The bottom line is not so much why doesn't God heal us, but what kind of God is He that He leaves us unhealed?

We do not escape living in the fallen creation because we have Jesus as our savior. Instead, we have the task to live for God and share His salvation plan with others. As we do that, we have assurance of God's presence with us and His aid to make it through each day or each aspect of our struggle with ill-health. But above all, we have the promise of restored health and *shalom* in the Kingdom at our resurrection to eternal life.

The meaning of our ailments depends on our mindset and what we believe life in the fallen world looks like. To one who thinks we should have perfect health today, ailments mean one is abandoned by God and a reason for discouragement and frustration. To one who understands the frailty of man and being subject to the same troubles as those who don't know God, health issues can be used to enhance one's walk of faith and service.

What a pity to think that one's life might be all struggle, pain, and anguish only to be ended by the great enemy death with nothing afterward but judgment. This is the plight of many. We can help those who do not yet have the resurrection hope. We can tell them of the loving God's salvage plan because He knows what we face in this broken existence and wants something better for us. This is His love and His grace – that regardless of the reasons for our ill-health and regardless of why He won't reach into creation to heal us physically **now**, He doesn't abandon us. There is spiritual healing available that promises health and so much more in the Kingdom for He "is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).

The Apostle Paul wrote: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us . . . Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him" (Ro. 8:18; 1 Cor. 2:9)

Why doesn't God heal me? Because He is God. He is sovereign, even over my body. And the real purpose of my life is to yield to Him in faith and rely on Him (Prov. 3:5-6; Isa. 12:2; Ro. 12:1).

May these closing verses be a comfort to you in your struggles with health:

"After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you." (1 Pet. 5:10)

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word" (2 Thess. 2:16-17).

"You [God] have taken account of my wanderings;
Put my tears in Your bottle.
Are *they* not in Your book?
. . . This I know, that God is for me" (Psalm 56:8, 9).

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