

Part 5 - The Biblical Foundations for healing

This section delves more deeply into the biblical foundation for confidence in healing. Although the bible does not assert the simple equation of “if you are sick it is because you have sinned” it does make the important equation “sickness is because of sin”. This gives rise to a connection between healing and the Atonement. Sickness came into the world because of the fall and because of the combination of global, national, community, family and individual sin, we commonly suffer sickness. The Atonement dealt with the curse and power of sin, so healing has its roots in the Atonement.

Forgiveness and healing

Because sickness came through the fall scripture makes a strong association between bodily sickness and the state of a person’s relationship with God. Jesus associated healing with forgiveness:

“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the paralytic, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” (**Mk 2:9**)

Jesus knew that sickness and sin were bound up together and the symptom, sickness, could only be dealt with by resolving the root, sin. For the infant nation, Israel, this connection was made explicit, first in the Passover lamb which ensured that the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians would not touch them, then in Moses’ Law which contained promises of health for trust and obedience and curses of sickness for rebellion:

“If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.” (**Ex 15:26**)

The Law also established the principal of atonement “for the diseased person at the time of his ceremonial cleansing”. “Then the priest is to sacrifice the sin offering and make atonement for the one to be cleansed from his uncleanness” (**Lev 14:2,19**). Because the sickness may not have been the direct result of the diseased person’s sin, repentance and atonement for sin is not mentioned in relation to the sickness, nevertheless atonement is still required. This is very important. It shows us that sickness, as well as sin, requires atonement.

This connection is further illustrated by the plague of snakes that afflicted Israel after one of their rebellions in Numbers 21, bringing terrible sickness to the people. Jesus referred to this incident where Moses lifted up a bronze snake for their healing. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (**Jn 3:14-15**). Jesus’ atoning death was for the healing of the serpent’s (the Devil’s) bites which bring both sickness and death. The atonement brings both forgiveness and healing.

Healing in the Atonement

Most Christians would agree that Christ’s atonement has fully purchased all that we will ever inherit in Him, including “every blessing in Christ” and our perfect resurrected bodies. Most would also agree that since sin is the ultimate cause of sickness, the ultimate cure for sickness is the atonement. So on this basis, we can all agree that “healing is included in the atonement”.

But this phrase was adopted Pentecostals in the late 1800’s to refer to a teaching they introduced, claiming that every person has already been healed at the cross of Jesus and needs simply to receive this heavenly reality by faith in order to experience it as an earthly reality. When people argue about whether healing is in the atonement, it is normally this Pentecostal definition they are referring to.

It is not possible here to go into all the details of the various arguments, but it is important to note that the Pentecostal and “Word of Faith” teaching on some issues, including healing and prosperity include many special “revelations” from the Lord leading to obscure interpretations of some scriptures. It takes maturity and wisdom to weed out these Gnostic elements from their otherwise often excellent teaching which is widely disseminated through satellite TV and other media.

Put very briefly, their teaching on how to receive healing is based on these two scriptures:

“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God... Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” (**Col 3:3,5**)

“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (**Mk 11:24**)

The first scripture talks about our “position” in Christ which must be made manifest in our bodies through our faith and obedience. Pentecostals say that this includes our full healing. We are already healed in Christ in the heavenly realm and all we need to do is to bring that reality into our physical bodies. This we do by applying Jesus’ promise that whatever we believe in prayer we will receive. Thus, they say, it is wrong to ask God for healing, since we are already healed. We should simply deny our symptoms of sickness and give thanks to God for our yet-unseen healing. It is simply up to us to make the heavenly reality of our healing manifest in our bodies by faith. This distortion of the scripture tends to lead to faith in faith rather than faith in God and does not reflect the teaching and practice of the Gospels and New Testament.

Two significant questions are:

1. Is *present* physical healing available for all in the atonement?

2. Is healing simply claimed by faith, in the same way as forgiveness?

The first question concerns God's will and the second our access.

Is *present* physical healing available for all in the atonement?

We have already dealt with the question of God's will always to heal based on Jesus' teaching and ministry. But can we say that the atonement has made present physical healing *available for all*? Is there a *covenant* aspect to our healing? Can we claim a *right* to healing in the same way we can claim the right to forgiveness? This is an important question when faced with our accuser, Satan. He wants us to doubt our forgiveness and sink in a mire of self-condemnation for our continued sin. The New Testament is clear; we are to stand firm in our confidence in God's forgiveness on the basis of the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus.

Can we also say this about healing? Can we stand against the accuser and say "You have no right to inflict sickness on me. Jesus died for my present healing and God wishes me to enjoy it."?

Two scriptures often quoted to support the idea that present physical healing is part of the atonement are these:

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (**Isa 53:4-5**)

"He who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases..." (**Ps 103:3**)

The Isaiah passage is most often quoted, but in its context healing is almost certainly used as a metaphor for the restoring of our broken relationship with God. This is consistent with Isaiah's use of physical sickness as a metaphor for the spiritual sickness of the nation:

“Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (**Isa 6:10** see also **Isa 1:4-6**).

“But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,” declares the LORD, “because you are called an outcast, Zion for whom no-one cares.” (**Jer 30:17**)

We must not be misled by Isaiah’s use of the word “healed”. As is evident from Jer 30:17 the established Old Testament usage of the idea of healing in prophetic writings is for spiritual healing of the nation, not physical healing of individuals (See also **Jer 17:9, 30:12-15**). Jesus also used sickness as a metaphor when he said “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (**Lk 5:31-32**).

The Psalm offers a possible connection since the context is atonement and healing seems to refer to individuals rather than the whole nation. But this is not enough to say that *present physical healing is available for all* in the Atonement.

Matthew quotes the Isaiah passage saying that Jesus’ healing ministry fulfilled this prophecy:

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. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.” (**Mt 8:16-17**)

However, Matthew does not use the quote to say anything about the atonement but to show that Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies.

Peter also quotes Isaiah, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (**1Pe 2:24**). But note Peter’s application: “live for righteousness” not “receive physical healing”.

Whatever Matthew and Peter's intention in quoting Isaiah, it would be foolishness to suggest that they considered physical healing to be *excluded* from the atonement. But that is not the question. Do they support the claim that *present* physical healing is *available for all* in the atonement? Many main-stream commentators think these scriptures do support such a claim (and I would love to join them), but in my view, these Scriptures do not speak to this issue. There are however other scriptures which make broader claims which I think are relevant.

Jesus overcame the powers of evil on the cross, has broken the curse within the Law and even death has been overcome (**Col 2:15, Gal 3:13, 1Cor 15:51ff**). What is the point of such teaching if it does not have present relevance? The curse was for *present* sickness so the breaking of the curse and the annulling of Satan's power must open the way to present healing. Consider also Paul's teaching in Romans 8:

"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (**Rom 8:19-23**).

Here we see creation waiting to be brought into the "glorious freedom of the children of God" whilst we ourselves, having "the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies". There is a tantalising picture here of "glorious freedom" which we have now, whilst "we wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies". That freedom is in contrast to creation's continuing bondage to decay. I venture to suggest that this refers to our present healing. Sickness is

our human experience of decay. If the saints continue in sickness, what is there for creation to be jealous of? But Paul says that whilst creation is jealous of our present freedom [from sickness], we ourselves have a higher hope – the eternal glorious redemption of our mortal bodies. This is wholly in keeping with Jesus practice of proclaiming the Kingdom of God with healing.

Paul is always at pains to convince us of the magnitude, not the limitations, of Christ's accomplishment on the cross. Consider the following:

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us **from the present evil age**, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Ga 1:3-5)

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously **give us all things?**” (Ro 8:32) (Note: what is Paul's point if he only means that God gives us all thing in heaven, and not now?)

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with **every spiritual blessing** in Christ.” (Eph 1:3)

“I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and **his incomparably great power for us** who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.” (Eph 1:18-21)

“And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6)

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being...”(**Eph 3:16**).

Our problem is not that we believe too much of the atonement, but that we believe too little.

So although I reject the Pentecostal definition of healing in the atonement (that we are already healed in the heavenly places and just need to receive it by faith) I do believe that we can safely answer our first question with a firm “Yes”. **Present physical healing is available for all in the atonement.** The power of sickness is broken along with the power of sin and God has given us all things in Christ. God always wants to heal, just like He always wants to forgive. The teaching of Jesus is our main source of confidence, backed up by the bold claims made for our inheritance in Christ.

Is healing simply claimed by faith, in the same way as forgiveness?

Our second question was “Is healing simply claimed by faith, in the same way as forgiveness?” The claim of the Pentecostal and “faith” movement is that just as forgiveness has already been given, so has our physical healing. They say, we do not need to pray for healing, but just claim it and give thanks for it. This claim is based on their teaching that healing and forgiveness are as one in the atonement.

If healing was available in the same ways as forgiveness, then Jesus would have treated them in the same way, and the apostles would have spoken of them together as the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection. This was not the case. Although the apostles *practiced* healing to authenticate their message, they only *preached* forgiveness and deliverance from the power of sin as the benefits of the Gospel. Although they were confident in God’s will and power and presence to heal the sick, they never taught that a person’s healing already existed in the heavenly realm and simply needed to be claimed. (See “Sickness in the New Testament” below).

On the contrary, healing was pointed to as authenticating apostolic ministry and authenticating the Gospel. Healing is part of the inheritance we have been given, which we must enter into by faith. If we are forgiven we can also be confident in God for healing. Forgiveness was obtained for us on the cross so that we can come into a restored relationship with God and enjoy all the blessings of the Kingdom, including healing. But these blessings are obtained by faith and require persistence and confidence in God (**Heb 6:11-12**). That is why James says the sick should ask for prayer for healing.

Jesus healed the sick and passed this instruction and authority to the disciples and those who would believe through their witness. He did not tell them to instruct people in claiming their pre-existing health. Jesus taught that He obtained His works of healing from the Father and in the case of Lazarus (**Jn 11:41**) specifically addresses

His Father for healing. Healing comes willingly from the Father's hand, it has not been pre-obtained through the atonement.

So in answer to our second question, "Is healing simply claimed by faith, in the same way as forgiveness?" I would say a firm no. I am convinced that healing *is* freely available for all, but each healing comes from the Father as part of our inheritance which we obtain through faith and patience. (See "Part 4 - Inheriting the Promise of Healing").

In conclusion, I am not persuaded by the Pentecostal claims of healing being part of the atonement, in the way that they use this teaching. But I am persuaded that the Atonement fully dealt with sickness and that we should have full confidence in Jesus's commission to heal the sick and His promises to answer our prayers.

Old Testament promises for healing

The Old Testament often portrays healing as a natural part of a restored relationship with God. However the Mosaic covenant is now closed and in any case these promises were conditional on the **national** implementation of godliness, justice and equity and therefore do not translate directly to the church who live as exiles in this world and not as a nation. Nevertheless, the promises clearly agree with the general premise that sickness is an evil and health is an expression of good which God wants His people to enjoy in His kingdom.

The prophets looked forward to the day when God's creation is restored. But these are not promises that can be "claimed" but promises of a future time when creation will be restored:

"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy ... No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there." (Isa 35:5,9)

“For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: ... I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.” (**Isa 65:17, 19-20**)

But although the promises within the Mosaic Law are not directly applicable and the prophets looked forward to the Kingdom of God in the New Creation they do give us a picture of God’s Kingdom. Jesus was intent on demonstrating the presence of this new kingdom where the Gospel was preached. Jesus taught us to pray “Your kingdom come and your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven...” so we can be confident in seeing the New Creation break into the present age as we pray for healing even though we know the full expression of that age awaits the return of Christ. Healing is one aspect of the New Creation that Jesus firmly placed in our hands.

Sickness in the New Testament

If present physical healing is so amply provided for in the atonement, as I believe, then what are we to make of the sickness we see amongst the apostles in the New Testament? Before we look at Paul, let us deal with the other instances:

Epaphroditus nearly died from sickness (**Phil 2:25-27**). But Paul tells us that “God had mercy on him” – an indication that he was healed (or at least recovered). This also shows us that Paul did not believe Epaphroditus was already healed in the heavenly places and simply needed enough faith to receive it. It was God’s mercy not Epaphroditus’ faith that healed him.

Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus (**2Tim 4:20**). We are told no more.

Timothy suffered from frequent illness: “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (**1Tim 5:23**).

In none of these circumstances is sickness attributed to unbelief, nor is positive confession prescribed nor the power of the atonement claimed. Even though Paul exhorts Timothy to set an example of faith (**1 Tim 4:12**) he does not point to his sickness as evidence of or the result of unbelief. Neither does Paul exhort Timothy to stand fast in claiming healing to show his faith. On the contrary, he simply advises the homely remedy of drinking wine (perhaps because the local water was contaminated). It is clear that Paul both experienced healing himself and ministered powerfully in healing to others, as did the other apostles. We know that Epaphroditus recovered and assume that Trophimus and Timothy did – but we are not told either way.

Paul makes no comment on his approach to healing for these people, from which I conclude that although he was passionate about preaching the gospel with healing and other signs and wonders, he did not get into knots over every incidence of sickness. He seems to accept that healing does not always come and adopt a realistic approach to health. Paul’s letters are inconsistent with the idea that healing has already been obtained for us on the cross.

The main issue people raise regarding healing is Paul’s own health.

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (**2Co 12:7-9 NKJV**)

Many commentators do not think that the “thorn” was sickness. Paul refers to all kinds of troubles as infirmities, (**2Cor 11:23-30**) and qualifies sickness as “physical infirmity” (**Gal 4:13**). The OT law spoke of enemies being a “thorn in the side” by harassing Israel (**Num 33:55**). It seems more likely he was referring to the constant stirring up of persecution wherever he went, which he described as “a messenger of Satan, to harass me” (RSV).

Paul suffered brief sickness whilst with the Galatians:

“You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first.” (**Gal 4:13** NKJV)

The NIV translates this as *sickness*, whereas *infirmity* is a better translation. It is possible this was as a result of the stoning he received at Iconium, (**Acts 14:19**) and from which he soon recovered.

We do not have any clear evidence that sickness was simply accepted as inevitable by the apostles. On balance, I think it is far better that we err on the side of expecting too much rather than too little. I do not want to be accused of burying the riches Christ has obtained for us on the cross.