

DO YOU WISH TO GET WELL?

Seems like a pretty straightforward question, huh? Ask anyone, and you would suppose, wouldn't you, that they would answer "yes," don't ya think? But in reality the various answers people give are much more complex than one would first imagine, and the motives behind these answers lie at the root of why healing doesn't occur. If a person claims to be a Christian, and he or she professes some conviction that the Bible is a true document, then the relevance of faith, prayers, blessing, and healing must ultimately be put to the test. In this case I'm talking about our convictions regarding real, honest-to-goodness, "Jesus touched me and I'm healed" kind of stuff, why it apparently happens to some and not to others, and why this and similar issues divide our faith. After all, if some are healed and some are not, if some get miracles and some don't, if some seem to get the good gifts and some get the mundane ones, doesn't it seem a bit unfair? "God plays favorites and I must not be one of them," doesn't seem like the right answer, does it? Yet some churches are full of sick people wanting to get well, and some are full of well people who act like they are well because they have more faith than the others.

With that said, on to the story from whence this question arises. "**Do you wish to get well?**" was the question Jesus asked a lame man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. You can read the story in John 5:1-9, but here's my take on it: Jesus had just recently returned to Jerusalem from Galilee, and had stopped to observe the people gathered at a pool where they believed miraculous healings occurred. In v.3 we are told these folks were comprised of the sick, blind, lame, and withered. It was a large, permanent gathering of miserable people, and probably not the place where families went to picnic on Sunday. Scanning the crowd, Jesus noticed a particular man who, according to the text, had been there thirty-eight years, described simply as sick, but who apparently could not move himself. Although verses 3 and 4 are not found in the earliest known manuscripts of the Gospel of John, and were probably added later as editorial information, they mention a legend in which an angel of the Lord would periodically stir the waters of the pool, and whoever got to the pool first was immediately healed. Only the first to enter was healed, while the rest had to wait for the next opportunity. Kind of like the lottery: one didn't want to get too far away from the pool, and the more time spent there the better the odds were.

As the narrative continues, Jesus approached this particular individual, knowing that he had been there a long time, and simply asked him "*do you wish to get well?*" A simple, straightforward question, to which the sick one replied "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am dragging myself down to the water someone steps in before I can get to it." You would think that after 38 years he could have come up with a little better plan. Despite that answer, Jesus commands him to get up, take the pallet on which he had been lying, and walk. Immediately the man was made well. Of course, as he was walking around showing off his newly healed body, the Jewish leaders hammered him for carrying his pallet, saying it was not permissible for him to do

work on the Sabbath. Later, when they found out it was Jesus who had performed the miracle, they were even more incensed that He had violated their Sabbath restriction.

Here's how it breaks down: crowds of sick people hanging around the lotto healing pool; one sick man who had been there 38 years; Jesus asking if he wanted to get well; getting the wrong answer; Jesus healing the man regardless of his answer; and the rest of the religious community whining that some petty infraction of the rules invalidated any notice of the miracle. That seems about right, not too complicated, but totally confusing. The rules were all broken here; . . . this is not a story that the average do-gooder sitting in a Sunday pew should be nodding his head in rote acceptance of. You cannot find one correct or righteous practice on the part of the players in this story that would have resulted in Jesus graciously giving them a big dose of His miraculous grace.

Here's how the rules were broken. *First*, the throngs of sick people were gathered around a legend, a pool where an angel would stir the water without warning, and only the first to enter would be healed. Kind of a fickle angel, don't you think, and a practice totally without support in the Hebrew scriptures. God never did things that way. *Second*, that one person, by hurrying to the water, would beat the others to the healing miracle, and would deny another the opportunity. God has never been competitive in the giving of His grace. *Third*, that after 38 years the sick man upon whom Jesus focused his attention could not manage some plan to get into the water at the opportune time. After all that time everyone else must have known him at the pool as a permanent fixture. Was no one kind enough to help him, or were they all selfishly fixated on their own desires? And you also have to wonder if he truly believed that he could be healed. God does not reward selfish appropriation. *Fourth*, when asked if he wanted to be healed, the sick man launched into a complaint about his inability to get to the water. His goal was no longer his healing, but rather just the goal of getting to the water on time. Competition, leading to bitterness and envy, God never honors. *Fifth*, the religious leaders who wished to keep a firm hold on the dispensation of all gifts from God became petty and enraged when someone ignored them and their restrictions. God just dearly loves those who by dogma, theoretical agendas, and confining rules attempt to fence in His power (cynicism, if you didn't catch it.)

Okay, you say, so Jesus healed this guy despite everyone doing the wrong thing. We live in a world where we see little or no miraculous healing, and, after all, Jesus was "the man." He could do whatever He wanted, and heal whomever He pleased regardless of the rules. How does this story do any good for us today?

Now we get to the problem. Churchgoing folks say they believe in the Bible and the promises made in it. They profess a belief that God will answer prayer, and they pray for stuff. Congregations make a "special" effort to have prayer teams and prayer lists, and they form small cells of prayer specialists, sometimes called "prayer warriors." They labor over the needs, illnesses, and injuries of people, praying for healing and "blessing" in the hope of what turns out to be, at best, a selective answer from God. In other words, they pray a lot and see

few answers. In fact, they see so few answers that an outsider would chalk them up to chance. This problem runs so deep among believers that most won't face up to it, as if the subject were taboo.

So you don't think I'm just picking on someone, let me borrow a story from Charles Finney, the great evangelist from the 19th century. He related the following observation of the time when he was still a young lawyer and being called out by God to his new faith:

I was particularly struck with the fact that the prayers that I had listened to from week to week were not answered. Indeed, from continued prayers and from other remarks, I understood that those who offered them did not regard them as answered. I heard the people pray continually for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and just as often I heard them confess that they did not receive what they had asked for . . . This inconsistency was a sad stumbling block for me. . . . It seemed to me that the teachings of the Bible did not at all agree with the facts that were before my eyes.

On one occasion, when I was in one of the prayer meetings, some of the attendees asked if I wanted them to pray for me. I told them no, because I did not see that God answered their prayers. . . . "I do not see that it will do any good for you to pray for me, for you are continually asking, but you do not receive. . . . You have prayed enough since I have attended these meetings to have prayed the Devil out of Adams (a small town in New York State), if there is any virtue in your prayers. But here you are, still praying and still complaining."

Finney made it clear that though they prayed they did not pray in faith, expecting God to answer them. Considering the great work he went on to do, starting and finishing a revival which pretty much kept New England from destroying itself in infancy, I find his observation entirely enlightening. The same problem pervades the Church at large today. People pray as an exercise, with no real hope of answers.

Let's get to the bottom line here. Do you wish to get well? When Jesus asked this of the sick man at the pool He purposely did not ask him if he wanted to walk, or if he wanted to be healed by the power of the pool, or if he wanted healing his way. By asking as He did there was a much larger implication than just walking again. Today, many people pray for a specific thing, wanting only that, whether it involves healing or some other emergency, such as finances, marital problems, adolescent angst, etc., almost all stemming from a pain or crisis in their lives. Sometimes prayers are even made as a deal with God, "If you do this for me then I will do something for you, like live a better life, or tithe, or some other offering which you might like." Bluntly, people want God to fix stuff, but they want Him to do it their way.

So, in order to get "well" we need to understand "well" from God's perspective. Further on in John chapter 5 Jesus says "You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life: and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life." (Jo. 5:39-40) In the case of the man at the pool, he didn't even know who Jesus was and yet he was healed, but many knew who He was and yet asked for the signs and miracles before they

would commit to anything. Such is the case today, people, even those claiming to be Christians, want to see the prayer answered or the miracle performed before they commit, thinking skepticism is the better course. Yet Jesus first asks for us to walk in faith, stepping out into the darkness, risking our self-respect or reputation. Only when a person is so sick or miserable that he or she is on the verge of death does the commitment come without reservation. Despite the intensity of our crisis, we must first “come” to Jesus.

Getting well involves giving the sickness to God in order for Him to decide what needs fixing and what doesn't. He knows true handicap and true disease, and He knows what destroys the soul. When He heals we are "well" by God's standards. As you have all heard, we are to give or submit our entire life to God, to make it “all” His. Yet by being so general in our offering by using “all”, we also are vague about what the giving means. We say we've given it “all” to God, but we see no evidence that He has taken it. Sometime ago, in a sermon by a bright young upstart preacher, I heard a very valuable illustration regarding this problem. It went something to this effect: When God really gets down to asking us for everything He often points to just one thing, The Thing, which most owns us. This is the thing which at the core of our being is the most precious, whether beneficial or destructive, whether a blessing or an addiction, and yet God is asking for us to give it up. It may very well be the thing we most love about ourselves, and it will certainly be the hardest to give up. Once it is submitted to God, the rest of our lives fall to Him like dominoes.

We want healing, we want blessing, we want miracles, we want our prayers answered, but we want it our way, and we really don't believe that God will do it anyway. As a result our prayers are generally not answered. But we will keep on praying for these things, we will keep on forming prayer cells, and writing prayer lists, etc., etc. . . Kind of sums up the problem, huh? That may be blunt and it may even hurt someone's feelings, but it is still true and it needs to change. I could set down a list of prayer “rules” which, according to scripture and experts on the subject, are the best way to get results, but they are all over the place, in books, bookmarks, and Bible inserts. But there is one specific thing, which I never see addressed, and yet which is evident when healing occurs, and when prayers are answered. Although I have already mentioned it, here it is again:

Real faith requires real risk. We must be entirely willing to risk our reputation, self-respect, and public opinion in order to have adequate faith to qualify for God's attention. I know you have said you would give your life up for Jesus, and that you would go where He calls you, but are you willing to be made a fool of for His sake. Are you willing to be ridiculed and made fun of in order to stand by His side? Well, are you?

Jesus said “he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father.” (Jo.14: 12) If this is true, then why aren't we doing it, why aren't we doing what Jesus said we would do? If the answer's not obvious, its close. Let us not be as Finney said “still

praying and still complaining.” We not only must pray in faith, expecting God to answer, and to heal, but we must, particularly when praying for others, be willing to risk our reputations and self respect for our faith in God. This is the biggest risk, are you up for it?

Peace, Bill Z