

Exodus 15:22-27 and James 5:13-18

It was hot and humid, with mozzies buzzing around me. I was working late into the evening at the remote Rumginae Hospital in Papua New Guinea. I heard a ute rumble down the dirt road in front of the hospital, and caught a glimpse of it through the window, as it headed at speed for the house of Rudy & Margaret Behrens – another missionary couple.

A few minutes later it rushed back up to the hospital and a sick man was carried into the ward. He was a pastor from a bush village where had been bitten by a death adder. He walked through the jungle to the nearest road and then got a lift to get help. He had gone initially to Rudy's house because he wanted Rudy & Margaret to pray for him for healing from the venom. They said, *yes, we'll pray for healing for you but then you must go straight to the hospital and get snakebite medicine.* Margaret and Rudy prayed. We gave him the antivenom he needed, and he made a full recovery. We all praised God for answering prayer and providing the means of his healing.

This story reflects the mindset of the Papua New Guinean when it comes to sickness. For them sickness is primarily a spiritual problem, needing a spiritual cure, and only secondarily a physical issue. For us in the materialist West, we see sickness as a physical problem and we look for a physical solution. Got a headache? Reach for some Panadol. Feeling depressed? Ask your doctor for an antidepressant pill. If that doesn't work, try another one. Maybe, if all else fails, then ask for prayer. As CS Lewis wrote, "*We regard God as an airman regards his parachute; it's there for emergencies but he hopes he'll never have to use it.*"¹

The contrast between these two approaches to sickness drove us to search the Scriptures for a Biblical approach to sickness and healing. God had an even better idea and blessed Jo and I with years of sickness and pain to help us reflect on this further. I'm not just a clinician looking from the outside on people's suffering and pain, I've had the privilege of being there. It never

¹ *The Problem of Pain*

seems like a blessing or privilege at the time but only in retrospect, if we allow God to do His work in us.

This is a big topic and there is much in the Scriptures about it, and it spills over into the even bigger topic of suffering. Today we will only have time to reflect a little on the two passages read this morning. Much more could be said. Also, a warning: This topic might be close to the bone for you, if you or a loved one are suffering from chronic illness or pain or are suffering bereavement or are feeling disappointed with God. If you need to talk with Matt or I about this afterwards then please do so after the service.

In the book of Exodus, God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt through the powerful signs He did through Moses, including plagues that came upon the Egyptians. After passing miraculously through the Sea that swallowed up the Egyptian army, the people trekked for 3 days in the wilderness with no water. They would have suffered badly from dehydration. Their health was compromised and their lives at risk. When they finally arrived at a water hole, their hopes were dashed by discovering it was too bitter to drink. This was bitter indeed! So, they did what we all tend to do when we don't get what we want, they complained to their leader; and they grumbled about their leader.

Moses turned their complaints into prayer and asked for God's help. God showed Moses a piece of wood, which when thrown into the water turned it from bitter into sweet. God heard Moses' prayer, saw the people's need and provided them with drinkable water.

God then went on to elaborate his covenant love for his chosen people: that this had been a deliberate test for them to learn of his loving care for them. If they listened to his Word and obeyed him, he would protect them from the diseases he had inflicted on the Egyptians. He concluded with these astounding words, *For I am the LORD who heal you*. The Hebrew word for 'heal' means *mend, heal, make whole*. The name used for God here is *Yahweh*, the great I AM, which carries the sense of the only One who is ever-present in every situation. God is the ever-present One who heals you. No-one else heals you. As a footnote to this, as a doctor I've come to realise

I don't heal anyone; God does the healing, sometimes he uses my hands as his instruments, that's all.

Having fixed the undrinkable water supply at Marah, God leads them on to Elim in v27, a veritable paradise with its super-abundance of spring water and palm trees - a little glimpse into God's gracious future provision for them.

The rest of the book of Exodus relates the story of God's people travelling in the wilderness for 40 years, learning by their mistakes and sufferings to trust and obey God, preparing them to enter the Promised Land. Israel's wilderness experiences on their way to the Promised Land can be seen as a metaphor of the Christian life in this world, preparing us for Heaven. Just as they experienced hardships and suffering in the wilderness so do we in this fallen world. These testing experiences can draw us to depend on Him more. He is present in our time of suffering, and He is the One who heals us.

Ultimately what really matters in the end is not what befalls us, but how we respond to it. When sickness and pain enter our lives uninvited, as it will to almost everyone, we may feel like crying out as David and Jesus did in their pain, "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*"² Yet, while they felt abandoned, both David and Jesus knew YAHWEH would not forsake them. They knew that through their suffering God was working out his plan of salvation and healing for his people; his plan of salvation and healing for you.

The OT has many other stories and texts about illness and healing in the context of God's Covenant with his people. Here are two from the Psalms to encourage you:

E.g. Psalm 103:2-5

*Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins, and heals all your diseases, who redeems your
life from the pit, and crowns you with love and compassion, who*

² Ps 22:1, Mk 15:34

satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Psalm 147:3 *The LORD...heals the broken-hearted & binds up their wounds.*

Then in Isaiah 52-53 we meet the Suffering Servant who,

*Surely... took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his
wounds we are healed.*³

Which brings us to the NT where Jesus is clearly shown to be the Suffering Servant who by his suffering and death on our behalf removes sin and brings healing. In the Gospels we see Jesus going around healing people of diseases and on occasion also forgiving the sick person their sins.⁴

Jesus doesn't always attribute sickness to personal sin. The clearest example of this is the healing of the man blind from birth in John Ch9, where Jesus specifically says his condition is not the result of his or his parents' sin. In the book of Acts there are several examples of miraculous healings in response to the prayers of the Apostles as the Gospel advanced.

Years later, Jesus' brother, James, gives his instruction on what followers of Jesus should do when they are sick in James 5:13-18.

But the first thing to say about this passage is the dominant theme here is our communication with God, whether praying in our troubles or singing songs of praise to God when we are happy. James' main point is to pray, pray, pray ... in faith.

*¹³ 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*

³ Is 53:4-5

⁴ E.g. Mk 2:5

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. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He **prayed** earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he **prayed**, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*

So the main message is to pray, pray, pray!

Secondly, this section should be read in the light of the James 1:2-5, & v.12 where James writes more generally about trials, suffering and prayer.

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Like the Israelites wandering in the Wilderness, trials, including sicknesses, will come to us. Expect them, embrace them with joy, allow them to test your faith, to grow your perseverance, and develop your spiritual maturity. Pray for wisdom and put your trust in God.

We will focus in now more closely on the verses about sickness & healing.

James 5:14-16 contain plain instructions for the sick person which seem very straightforward: If you are sick, call the Elders to pray for you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Confess your sins and they will be forgiven. The prayer of faith will heal the sick person and the Lord will raise them up.

It seems clear; yet this passage raises more questions than it answers.

Firstly, **should I call the elders every time I get sick?** No. For most illnesses, especially minor ones, we should pray ourselves and follow good medical advice. We should reserve calls to elders for more serious illnesses, or when the sick person is struggling in faith or in sin.

Secondly, **what about seeing a doctor and taking some medicine?** Yes, do it. Nowhere in Scripture is the use of medical help condemned. On the contrary, Scripture teaches that God has given us all good things as gifts to be used to care for our bodies, which are the temples of the Holy Spirit; including medical advice and medicines. Paul had his own beloved physician, Dr Luke, and he advised Timothy to use a little wine for its medicinal value. The good Samaritan used oil, wine and bandages on the victim's wounds. When we get sick, we should pray & seek medical advice.

Thirdly, **why aren't we doing what it says?** On occasion people do call the elders to pray over them, but it's rare. An elder with 20 years' experience recalls only 3 occasions when he was called on to go and pray for someone for healing. And part of the reason for that may be because:

Finally, even when we do follow these instructions in James 5, **we don't always see the healing** that seems to be on offer here. Immediate healing is rare, slow healing occurs sometimes, in other cases the person may improve for a period of time but then deteriorate again. In other cases, they just get worse and die. Bible scholars have written many pages to try and resolve this paradox, but I am unsatisfied with any of their explanations. I am happy to accept some paradox here and be guided by other Scriptures.

From other scriptures we can safely say that this passage does not promise a certain formula for healing. In the New Testament there are many records of miraculous healing but also other mentions of conditions that were not healed:

The Apostle Paul's *'thorn in the flesh'*, for example. Three times he prayed for healing but the answer he got was,

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*⁵

In 2 Timothy, Paul writes, *"I left Trophimus sick in Miletus."*⁶ Why didn't God heal him?

God is sovereign in choosing when he heals, we cannot twist his arm by following formulas or sacraments. And regarding this we should note that there is nothing magical about anointing with oil. It was a common practice in their day, but the text is clear it is the prayer of faith that is effective.

We should note the strong connection in this and other passages between sickness and sin, confession and healing. While the Bible is clear that sickness and death are a result of the sin of humankind, it is equally clear that not all sickness is a result of particular personal sin. It is not usually a personal punishment.

However, sickness is probably caused by sin and guilt more often than we realise or are prepared to admit. In Psalm 32 David sang of the time unconfessed sin made him sick, and of the relief experienced when he confessed and was forgiven:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore, let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. You are my hiding place;

⁵ 2 Cor 12:9

⁶ 2 Tim 4:20

*you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.*⁷

We would be wise when we are sick to examine ourselves and see if God is using it to wake us up to the sin in our life. CS Lewis famously wrote, “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*”⁸ Sickness is a time for us to examine ourselves, confess our sin and repent. Don’t waste the opportunity.

In conclusion, things we can learn from these passages are:

- Like the people of Israel wandering through the wilderness on the way to the promised land, we are on a journey. If we have faith in Christ, our destination is heaven, where we will enjoy abundant health in the presence of God and his people for ever.
- In the meantime, we should see trials, including sickness as an opportunity to grow in faith.
- Knowing that God is our Healer, when we are sick, we should pray to Him for healing and wisdom. Often that wisdom will include getting medical help. We should examine ourselves and confess our sin.
- For a more severe illness we should ask our Church elders to come and pray for us, possibly anointing us with oil. If we are able, we should examine ourselves, and confess our sins to them confidentially, and they should pray for our forgiveness. The elders who pray should be men who believe that God is Sovereign over our lives and is fully able to heal any condition. Believing this they should ask God in prayer to heal us.

If we do not receive healing now, we know that we have asked for healing in faith according to his Word; that we have handed to God the sovereignty over our healing. Whatever happens, we should recognise and trust that God

⁷ Ps 32:3-7

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has not abandoned us, but he is still with us and is still our Healer. “The LORD himself ... will be with you. He will never leave you or forsake you.”⁹

He is with us in our pain and suffering. He has been there himself. We know that he will raise us up to eternal life when we shall be fully healed and enjoy life forever with him.

Pray: Father God, we thank you for the gift of life and health. We thank you too for the trials of life, including sickness and pain. Help us to persevere and grow and pray in faith in You.

We thank you Lord Jesus for your saving grace. You are the suffering servant who was pierced for our transgressions, ... crushed for our iniquities, and by whose wounds we are healed. Thank you for the gift of eternal life with renewed bodies in your presence.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for being with us and in us, strengthening our weak faith and enabling us to keep trusting the Father and the Son.

I pray this morning for those here who are sick and for those of our congregation who are at home or in care who are sick or suffering pain.

Jesus, Saviour of our souls be near
Rescue us from doubt and fear.
Take our sin and pain away,
Help us live for you another day. Amen

⁹ Deut 31:8