

# Does God Promise Healing Today?

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Many Christians suffer from various illnesses and injuries or have loved ones who do. Understandably, they wonder whether God still heals today. As we know, the Bible is full of accounts of healings. Many of them were spectacular, and the authorities of the day investigated some of them. In John 9 and in Acts 4:16, for example, the authorities never denied that the healing had occurred, they just took the stupid position of trying to cover it up. But does God still heal today? Or, to get right down to the heart of the controversy, does God *promise* physical healing to believers?

The question of healing is important, not only because there are people who would like God to heal them, but also because the question divides believers. Roughly, Christianity can be divided into three positions on this subject. There are those who say, Yes, God gives us an absolute promise of healing, and if we are not healed, it is because we lack faith. Then there are believers who say that God does not give us a definite promise of healing, but He may sometimes heal anyway. And then there are those who say that God does not heal today at all.

## The Pivotal Verses

The verses that are at the heart of the controversy are Isaiah 53:4-5. Their context is that of a prophecy of the coming Messiah, whom we on this side of the New Testament know to be Jesus Christ. Let's look at Isaiah 53:4-5 along with verse 6:

Surely he has borne our sickness, and carried our suffering; yet we considered him plagued, struck by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought our peace was on him; and by his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. Everyone has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:4-6

*Isaiah 53:4:* I think it would be hard to deny that the focus of the above passage is on Jesus' atonement for our sins. Yet, as we read, it

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does also speak of Jesus bearing our "our sickness" and says that "by his wounds we are healed." The Hebrew word translated "our sickness" is *chōlîy*. Bible translators have long debated the meaning of this word. In over twenty other places in the Old Testament, it is translated as "sickness" or "disease." And some translations also render it that way in Isaiah 53:4. But other translations render it in this verse as "griefs" or "pains" or "weaknesses." In other words, scholars disagree over whether this word should, in this verse, be translated as referring to physical illness or whether it should be understood as meaning spiritual illness that is the result of sin.

Remember that elsewhere in the Old Testament, *chōlîy* is translated as "sickness" or "disease." The weight of this evidence would seem to answer the question, except it doesn't. Because the Septuagint (often referred to by its acronym LXX), which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was completed over one hundred years before Christ was born, translates *chōlîy* in Isaiah 53:4 as the Greek word *hamartia*. And *hamartia* means "sin." Like the Bible, the LXX has been translated into many English versions, but they all translate Isaiah 53:4 similarly. Here's one of them: "He bears our sins, and is pained for us: yet we accounted him to be in trouble, and in suffering, and in affliction" (*The Septuagint LXX in English*, Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, tr).

The LXX cannot be dismissed lightly. It was commonly used by Jews at the time of Jesus and writers inspired by the Holy Spirit quoted it throughout the New Testament. So, perhaps we should understand Isaiah 53:4 the way the LXX translates it. But we shouldn't be hasty. Like a good mystery story, just when we think we know the answer, there is another twist. There is an exception about the use of the LXX in the New Testament concerning this very verse. Matthew, in Matthew 8:16-17, says, "When evening came, they brought to him many possessed with demons. He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying: 'He took our infirmities, and bore our diseases.'"

Matthew, here, does not quote the LXX. In fact, he doesn't even give us a standard translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew, acting under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has reinterpreted Isaiah 53:4 to show it was fulfilled in Jesus' healing ministry. In fact, Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament is a major theme in Matthew. The apostle Matthew frequently follows an account of an event in Jesus' ministry by quoting an Old Testament Scripture along with saying that

the event fulfilled the Scripture. Thus, Jesus' fulfilling of Isaiah 53:4 was His taking and bearing the people's sicknesses, not in the sense of imputing them to Himself in the way our sins were imputed to Him, but simply in his taking the sicknesses of the people away.

So, what can we conclude about Isaiah 53:4? While Jesus certainly bore our sins, and while He certainly bears us up in our afflictions and infirmities, the authoritative word of the New Testament clearly says that Isaiah 53:4 was fulfilled by Jesus' healing ministry prior to the Cross. Jesus' healing ministry ended at the Cross and, thus, Isaiah 53:4 cannot be used as evidence either for or against healing today.

*Isaiah 53:5*: Perhaps the most often quoted verse in defense of healing today is Isaiah 53:5: "But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought our peace was on him; and by his wounds we are healed." The last part of the verse is what is most often cited, and the Hebrew Scriptures and the LXX agree on the translation.

The evidence concerning Isaiah 53:5 sounds pretty conclusive, doesn't it? Should we then agree with what this article says? "The price for your healing was paid at Calvary by Jesus Christ. Your physical healing is part of your redemption from sin and ultimately Satan. A believer in Jesus Christ should have just as much confidence that God will heal their bodies as they have that God will forgive their sins" ("God's Redemptive Plan") (<http://stronginfaith.org/article.php?page=22>).

Does Isaiah 53:5 mean that Jesus not only atoned for our sins but also atoned for our sicknesses, thus procuring a sure healing for believers? Be careful before you answer. If Jesus' atonement procured sure healing for believers just as much as it procured sure salvation for believers, then everyone who exercises saving faith in Jesus should also be instantly healed of any diseases and live a life of perfect health from then on. And anyone who professes to be a Christian but becomes sick would be immediately exposed as a false believer and not a real Christian at all. I think that very few people would want to teach this interpretation of Isaiah 53:5, but it is the logical conclusion of saying that healing is a part of the atonement.

Those who teach that the last part of Isaiah 53:5 is a promise of healing in the atonement tend to isolate "by his wounds we are healed" from its context. The first part of the verse says, "But he was pierced for our transgressions." That's talking about Jesus giving His life for our sins. Then, the verse says, "He was crushed for our

iniquities." The word "crushed" here is referring to being ground like grain in a millstone. This is talking about Jesus receiving the full force of God's wrath for our iniquities. This is directly connected with what the verse next says: "The punishment that brought our peace was on him." This punishment—this bearing of our sins while God's wrath poured down upon Him—brought us peace with God. All of this is talking about Jesus' atonement for our sin, not healing.

Now, let's look at Isaiah 53:6: "All we like sheep have gone astray. Everyone has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Again, Isaiah is talking about our straying in sin and how those sins were imputed to Jesus. So, the context before and after "by his wounds we are healed" is about sin. It would be odd for Isaiah, in the middle of these statements about sin, to inject something about healing.

The Hebrew word for "healed" in Isaiah 53:5 is *râphâh*. It is a common word for physical as well as spiritual healing. Notice just a few examples of how the Bible uses this word for spiritual healing: "He heals the broken in heart, and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3); "Return, you backsliding children, I will heal your backsliding. Behold, we are come to you; for you are the LORD our God" (Jeremiah 3:22); "I will heal their waywardness. I will love them freely; for my anger is turned away from him" (Hosea 14:4). It seems likely, given both the context and the possible meaning of the word, that *râphâh* in Isaiah 53:5 means spiritual healing.

But let's let the Bible interpret itself. Peter makes a direct reference to Isaiah 53:5-6:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps, who did not sin, "neither was deceit found in his mouth." Who, when he was cursed, didn't curse back. When he suffered, didn't threaten, but committed himself to him who judges righteously; who his own self bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness; by whose stripes you were healed. For you were going astray like sheep; but now have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

1 Peter 2:21-25

Notice that Peter is discussing how the innocent Jesus suffered for our sin. Peter's entire context, before and after "by whose stripes you were

healed," is sin. The context is not physical healing. Now notice 1 Peter 4:1-2: "Forasmuch then as Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind; for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin; that you no longer should live the rest of your time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God." Part of Peter's intention in this letter was writing to steel his readers against hardship. Pointing out a promise of physical healing, once again, does not fit the context.

Clearly, Peter has something other than physical healing in mind. I believe that it is very safe to conclude that the word "healed" in Isaiah 53:5 refers to spiritual healing. The Greek word Peter used to translate *râphâh* is *iaomai*. It is the word used in the LXX of Isaiah 53:5. It is one of the words commonly used for physical healing, but it is also used for spiritual healing. According to *Thayer's Greek Definitions*, it means "to cure, heal," "to make whole," or, "to free from errors and sins, to bring about (one's) salvation." It is without doubt used for salvation in Matthew 13:15: "For this people's heart has grown callous, their ears are dull of hearing, they have closed their eyes; or else perhaps they might perceive with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and should turn again; and I would heal them." It has the same meaning in John 12:40.

Peter isn't talking about the healing of our physical infirmities. He's talking about the healing of our deadness in sin, the healing of our spiritual blindness, the healing of our spiritual deafness, the healing of our spiritual dumbness, the healing of our crippling inability, and the healing of our relationship with God from being enemies to being sons. This is the healing that Jesus procured for us with His stripes. This is the healing that is guaranteed to all believers.

### **Jesus' Healing Ministry**

Why, then, did Jesus heal the people in His physical ministry on earth? One reason, as we saw in Matthew 8:16-17, was to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies that spoke of His healing. Another reason is compassion (see, for example, Mark 1:41). But the major reason Jesus healed people was because the healings were types of the more important, spiritual healing He was going to obtain for His people by His suffering and death at Calvary.

On the Cross, Jesus healed us from spiritual death: "You were made alive when you were dead in transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1; see also Colossians 2:13). Before regeneration, all sinners are

spiritually dead (and stinking like Lazarus—John 11:39), blind, deaf, dumb, diseased, leprous, unclean, crippled, and withered in their limbs so that they are unable to do any good work. And so Jesus healed people who had the physical types of these afflictions to show what He was going to do for us spiritually on the Cross. That's why He told John's disciples, "Go and tell John the things which you have seen and heard: that the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22). He knew that John would recognize these things as signs identifying the Messiah who was bringing salvation.

After Jesus' death, the apostles went to the world as eyewitnesses of Jesus (John 15:27; Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; and so on). God gave them the gift of healing, which, as I have just explained, was the type of spiritual healing. This was to show that they were Jesus' witnesses, and that the message they heralded was the power of salvation through Jesus Christ to those who believe (Romans 1:16). This healing ministry continued through the time of the apostles and no further. And even toward the end of Acts, we see no further miraculous healings. Why? Because we were passing from a time of shadows and immaturity into a time of light and maturity. Jesus told Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and have believed" (John 20:29).

Even Paul himself had some sort of affliction in his flesh for which he prayed and for which God refused to heal him:

By reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted excessively, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, that I should not be exalted excessively. Concerning this thing, I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me. He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Most gladly therefore I will rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on me. Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Notice that Paul accepted God's decision without freaking out and doubting God or doubting his own conversion. He thereafter actually gloried in his weakness.

### **Our Faith Must Not Hinge on Physical Healing**

One of the reasons I have written this article is because so many preachers teach that Jesus procured our physical healing on the Cross as much as He did our salvation. Their hearers then believe this false gospel and start demanding healings from God. When the healings don't come and they and their families begin to suffer, these people, like the seed on the stony ground in Jesus' Parable of the Sower (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par1sower.htm>), fall away.

One such person who crashed and burned this past year was not only a professing believer, but he was a teacher of New Covenant Theology. We live on different continents and had never met, but we often exchanged emails as we explored the Scriptures. Then he posted a couple of articles on Facebook against Sola Scriptura and the authority of the Bible over being led by the Spirit. He followed these with a post in which he renounced his Christianity. In this post, he claimed that Christianity promises "health, wealth, happiness, joy, peace, prosperity, and lots of other things." Now, if this man had not given up on the authority of the Bible, and if he had ever been truly serious about wanting to know what the Bible teaches instead of reading into it what he wanted it to say, he would know that the Bible promises nothing of the kind.

I get pretty upset when I think of all of the people—my parents were among them—who have been deluded by the health and wealth hucksters. What health and wealth did Jesus have as He hung bleeding on the Cross? What health did Paul have with his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7), his bad eyes (Galatians 4:14-15; 6:11), his weak bodily presence (2 Corinthians 10:10), and the wounds from his whippings and beatings (2 Corinthians 11:24-26) and stonings (Acts 14:19)? What "good life" did he live being shipwrecked three times (2 Corinthians 11:25), in "perils of rivers, perils of robbers, perils from my countrymen, perils from the Gentiles, perils in the city, perils in the wilderness, perils in the sea, perils among false brothers; in labor and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, and in cold and nakedness" (2 Corinthians 11:26-27), when having a simple cloak brought to him to cover his body in a stinking, freezing dungeon was something he looked forward to (2 Timothy 4:13)? What "health, wealth, happiness, joy, peace, prosperity, and lots of other

things" did the faithful have who "were stoned...were sawn apart...were tempted...were slain with the sword...went around in sheep skins and in goat skins; being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated...wandering in deserts, mountains, caves, and the holes of the earth" (Hebrews 11:37-38)?

Where was this man, who turned his back on Jesus this past year, looking when he opened his Bible? How did he not see *this* promise of Jesus Christ: "I have told you these things, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have oppression; but cheer up! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33)? Are we in the world? Yes, Jesus clearly said so (John 17:11, 15, 18). Therefore, we will have oppression (*thlipsis*—pressure, affliction, distress, anguish). Our peace comes through our spiritual eyes of faith, seeing that we are in Jesus and He has overcome the world, and, therefore, we have also overcome the world. But the payoff isn't in this life; the rewards—including a perfect, spiritual body—are in the next life. Our peace and comfort are spiritual, not physical.

So when this man's child developed a life-threatening medical condition, and he prayed for her, and nothing happened—"ZERO. NADA. ZIPPO. ZILCH," as he put it—and the doctors had to operate, he spiritually disintegrated: "Nobody promises me something as crucial and vitally important as HEALTH and then decides to take a nap when they are supposed to deliver the goods. NOT WHEN IT COMES TO MY FAMILY!! You will NOT f\_\_\_ with my Family!!"

I sincerely feel sorry for him. What he went through must have been an awful trial. But he had been believing a lie.\* The Bible never EVER *promises physical healing!* It promises eternal life and a resurrection to glory: "This is the promise which he promised us, the eternal life" (1 John 2:25); "When Christ, our life, is revealed, then you will also be revealed with him in glory" (Colossians 3:4); "Whom he predestined, those he also called. Whom he called, those he also justified. Whom he justified, those he also glorified" (Romans 8:30); "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with God's trumpet. The dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. So we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

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\* After I learned of his Facebook posts, I wrote to this man expressing my sympathy and explaining what the Bible teaches about healing. He has not responded.

God is not a genie in a lamp or bottle that we rub with prayer and who will then come out and do our bidding. He is not obligated to do what we want. Even Jesus Christ, knowing the suffering He was to go through, prayed in such agony that "His sweat became like great drops of blood" (Luke 22:44) beseeching the Father, "If you are willing, remove this cup from me" (verse 42). But He ended that prayer with, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Hebrews 5:8 tells us that even Jesus Christ the Son of God "learned obedience by the things which he suffered." And if Jesus Christ, why not us? Why should we think that God will always deliver us from a trial instead of having us go through it for our spiritual benefit?

I am as human as anyone else, and I understand how awful it is to suffer in my flesh or to see suffering in my loved ones. But we must see these things in perspective, from the backdrop of eternity. Speaking of the sorrow His disciples would have over His death, Jesus said, "A woman, when she gives birth, has sorrow, because her time has come. But when she has delivered the child, she doesn't remember the anguish any more, for the joy that a human being is born into the world" (John 16:21). That's the way our whole sorrowful life will eventually seem to us. We will hardly remember it. Paul wrote, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which will be revealed toward us" (Romans 8:18), and, "For our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

### **Does God Ever Heal Today?**

Just because God does not give us a sure promise of healing in this life does not mean that He never heals today. I know this from personal experience. A long time ago, I suffered a badly sprained ankle in an ice skating accident. I was on crutches for a month, and my foot was swollen like a purple balloon. My doctor said that he was very concerned that, if the swelling didn't go down, I would suffer permanent tissue damage. When I got back from the doctor, I sat on a sofa and prayed that God would heal me. As I prayed, I was overwhelmed with sleepiness and felt that I had to lie down on the sofa, which I did. I instantly fell asleep. I don't know how long I was asleep, but it probably wasn't very long. When I woke up, my ankle was healed. The swelling was gone, the ankle looked normal, and I was able to get up and walk on it normally with no pain. Yet, I have had many other illnesses and injuries from which God has chosen not

to heal me. Why does He choose to heal sometimes and not others? I don't know. I can only trust that He knows best.

So, it is certainly right and good to pray for your own healing and the healing of others. But it is a prayer that must appeal to God's mercy and will, not to any supposed promise that obligates Him to heal.

### **What about James 5:14-15?**

Many see James 5:14-15 as a promise of healing: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the assembly, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will heal him who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15).

There are at least two problems with the common interpretation of these verses that they refer to the elders healing someone. One is that the gift of healing is never mentioned in the Bible as a qualification of an elder. The other problem is that the key words, "sick" and "heal," can have other meanings. "Sick" is from the Greek word *astheneō*. It can mean "sick," but its primary meaning is "weak." The Bible often uses it to mean spiritual weakness or weakness in faith. I'll give you two examples. Speaking of Abraham, Paul writes, "Without being weakened in faith, he didn't consider his own body, already having been worn out, (he being about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb" (Romans 4:19). "Weakened" is from *astheneō*. In Romans 14:1 Paul writes, "Now accept one who is weak in faith, but not for disputes over opinions." Once again, "weak" is from *astheneō*.

"Heal" in James 5:15 is from the Greek word *sōzō*. *Sōzō* does not really mean "heal," so the *WEB Bible* has a poor translation here. *Sōzō* is only used in relation to healing in the sense that a person is saved from a disease or from death. That's because *sōzō* really means "saved," and it is used ninety-four times in the New Testament to mean "saved," and in most of those times it clearly means spiritual salvation. For example, Acts 2:21 says, "It will be, that whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved."

"Sick" in verse 15 is translated from the Greek word *kamnō*. It means "weary." It is found in only two other places in the Bible (Revelation 2:3 ["fainted" in the KJV] and Hebrews 12:3) where it clearly means spiritually "weary."

Keeping this in mind then, James 5:14-15 can be translated: "Is any among you weak? Let him call for the elders of the assembly, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save him who is weary, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Thus, in keeping with the qualifications of elders to teach and exhort and encourage, James is saying that if anyone is spiritually weak in the faith, burned out, or weary, he should call for the elders to anoint him with oil (as a symbol of the Holy Spirit) and pray for him. The prayer is for salvation from his spiritual weariness and so he will be raised back up to a useful, spiritual life. I believe that the last sentence of the passage, concerning forgiveness of sins, is added in case the root cause of the person's weakness is sin. That is, by this prayer, he can be reassured of the forgiveness of those sins.

I have also heard James 5:16 being used of physical healing: "Confess your offenses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The insistent prayer of a righteous person is powerfully effective." This may again refer to spiritual healing, and, certainly this would fit the context. But even if it does refer to physical healing, notice that "may be healed" (*iathēte*) is in the subjunctive mood. That is, it only refers to a possibility, not to any definite promise. So, nothing in James 5:14-16 is a promise of physical healing.

### **Ultimate Healing**

In the age in which we live, God may or may not heal us. But there is coming a time when we will receive a complete and permanent healing. Some day we will be fully healed, even from death, because our bodies will be changed from corruptible to incorruptible. But that will happen, not because Jesus atoned for physical healing, but because He atoned for our sins, fulfilled and ended the law that was against us (Matthew 5:17; Colossians 2:14), justified us, and sanctified us.

*For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this corruptible will have put on incorruption, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then what is written will happen: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "Death, where is your sting? Hades, where is your victory?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.*

1 Corinthians 15:53-58