

# praying for the sick

**Bernard Palmer** examines our approach

**J**on Farrar was a very good friend of mine. He loved sport and was an accomplished athlete. Football, hockey, squash, tennis, cycling, swimming, running, 'Iron Man races' and off-piste skiing were his delight. He had become a Christian as a young man whilst travelling the world 'to find himself'.

He met some Christians in Spain who started him thinking about the claims of Jesus. He gradually became convinced and committed his life to Christ. After returning to this country he trained as a primary school teacher. He rose to be a headmaster and his school won a national 'school of the year' award. Then Jon's speech became gradually more slurred. He noticed some twitching of muscles in his legs and arms. He felt that he was getting weaker. He couldn't swallow so easily. The dreaded diagnosis was made. He had progressive motor neurone disease. We prayed for him regularly. He was anointed with oil at his request. He discussed the option of euthanasia but rejected this as not being honouring to his Saviour or to the Church. So many people prayed but his disease relentlessly progressed. He needed a gastrostomy tube so that he could be fed. Significantly, as he became weaker and could only communicate through a voice machine, his passion increased that his old friends should hear the gospel. He became weaker and weaker. What a heart-wrenching sight it was to see such a previously fit athletic, able man become so





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weak and dependent. Why had God, who according to the Bible is all powerful, not intervened?

Another close friend in our church had married a beautiful girl from the Philippines. Just a few months after the marriage she became very ill. She was diagnosed as having acute myelocytic leukaemia. She received aggressive chemotherapy but the disease affected her brain and she was not the same woman again. The church prayed. Her Filipino friends, who were great believers in the idea that what was claimed would be given by God, prayed fervently. Even when she was terminally ill and comatose they still expected a miraculous healing. But she died leaving behind a bereft husband and puzzled friends. Why had God not intervened? Some suggested that she died because we had not had enough faith to see a supernatural miracle.

I find it interesting that some public faith healers put on a forceful persona when they are 'on stage'. They appear to be acting and appear to be using very strong psychological techniques to influence people. The preaching is emotive and insistent. The speech is confident and forceful. The music is rhythmical and repetitive. People are praying all around, often making strange noises. Claims of supernatural knowledge abound with statements such as: 'God is telling me that there is someone here with a bad back.' Yet when I read about Jesus he did not behave in this way.

There have been documented cases where people have died from treatable conditions after being told they had been healed. One

often-cited US case from 1973, exposed in a 1980s documentary, involved Larry and Lucky Parker, who attended a 'Faith Assembly' that had such teaching. Their eleven-year-old son became ill and weak. Their response was to pray and, when there was no improvement, to pray harder. He died of a diabetic coma. The parents were charged with both involuntary manslaughter and child abuse. Subsequently the parents changed their views and wrote a book called, *We Let Our Son Die* in which they admit that they were wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Philip Yancey tells the true story of a faith healer from the United States who led a healing campaign in Cambodia where there are few Christians. It was very well advertised throughout the country. At great personal cost many sick people travelled to Phnom Penh for the rally. One of the consequences of the Vietnam War is that one in 200 Cambodians has had an amputation because of the many landmines used. Such people flocked to the crusade. However when no amputees were healed a riot broke out in the soccer stadium. The evangelist had to be rescued by an army helicopter. Later the angry crowd besieged the evangelist's hotel forcing him to flee the country.<sup>2</sup> How do such episodes honour the Lord Jesus? Have those attending the crusade learned the Christian gospel that they can be forgiven and put right with God because Jesus came and died for them?

## the benefits of faith

Evidence from over 1,200 studies and 400 reviews show that there is undoubted health benefit resulting from having a faith. 81% of

these studies show benefit and only 4% showed harm.<sup>3</sup> In one such study 21,204 American adults were followed up for nine years. Much information was collected, including religious activities. Income levels and education had surprisingly little effect on mortality, but those who attended church lived seven years longer than those who did not. For black people this benefit was 14 years. The researchers attributed this to a variety of causes. Having a faith is associated with healthier life styles and stronger relationships; those with a firm faith tend to drink less, smoke less, use less drugs and are less promiscuous sexually.<sup>4</sup> These factors are not easy to dissociate, but it is becoming increasingly clear that faith itself does contribute to health. Other studies have shown that those with faith make more rapid recovery from operations and heart attacks.

In the realm of psychiatric disease there is much misunderstanding. It is commonly thought that religion is at the root of many of these illnesses. However the famous psychiatrist Carl Jung felt that it was an absence of personal faith that contributed to many of his patients' symptoms. He wrote, towards the end of his life:

*'Among all my patients in the second half of life - that is to say, over thirty-five - there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.'*<sup>5</sup>

Recent studies have confirmed that those with a faith are protected against psychoses and fare better under treatment:

*'In the majority of studies religious*

*involvement is correlated with well-being, happiness and life satisfaction; hope and optimism; purpose and meaning in life; higher self-esteem; better adaptation to bereavement; greater social support and less loneliness; lower rates of depression and faster recovery from depression; lower rates of suicide and fewer positive attitudes towards suicide; less anxiety; less psychosis and fewer psychotic tendencies; lower rates of alcohol and drug abuse; less delinquency and criminal activity; greater marital stability and satisfaction.'*<sup>6</sup>

Professor Andrew Sims, a former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, is concerned that more attention should be given to this strong association between faith and wellbeing:

*'...for anything other than religion and spirituality, governments and health providers would be doing their utmost to promote it.'*<sup>7</sup>

People need to know the true explanation and answer to life in order to have full, satisfying existences.

## how does faith help recovery?

The health benefit of faith has been known for centuries. This has been called a 'psychosomatic' effect. Today there is a derogatory suggestion in the use of the word that this is somehow 'improper'. This is unfair. The word comes from the Greek words, '*psyche*' and '*soma*' which mean 'mind' and 'body' respectively. The mind undoubtedly does have an effect on the body. Studies at the Cold Research Institute have shown that it is very difficult to infect a person with a cold virus just before they are due to get married and go on honeymoon. In contrast spouses are more likely to die of cancer, heart disease and a variety of other causes in the year after their life partner's death.

Is it therefore surprising that there is a benefit to patients if they are spiritually well? The mind, body and spirit are all closely related. In palliative care 'spirituality' is taken very seriously indeed. Spiritual well-being reduces the feelings of hopelessness whereas spiritual distress, fear of death and lack of purpose are linked with despair and anxiety.

Improvement, at least for a time, is not that uncommon when people with a variety of conditions are prayed for. Dr Paul Brand was a Christian surgeon who spent much of his life treating patients suffering from the effects of leprosy in India. Dr Brand concluded that:

*'... [God] primarily works through faculties of the mind to summon up new resources of healing in a person's body.'*<sup>8</sup>

In my own life as a cancer surgeon based in the UK, I have been looking out for truly miraculous healing of organic disease but have yet to see it. Yet I have not infrequently seen people who have benefited symptomatically from spiritual support. God does sometimes intervene using the natural processes that he built into our makeup. Even some cancers have been known to regress when the body's defences are encouraged. The immune system is remarkable. Pharmaceutical drugs and surgery only support these natural processes. Such healings will take time in contrast to Jesus' healings which were spontaneous and beyond natural mechanisms. Dr Brand wrote an article with Philip Yancey in *Christianity Today* magazine in which he said:

*'...from my own experience as a physician I must truthfully admit that, among the thousands of patients I have treated, I have never observed an unequivocal instance of intervention in the physical realm. Many were prayed for, many found healing, but not in ways that counteracted*

*the laws governing physiology. No case I have treated personally would meet rigorous criteria for a supernatural miracle.'*<sup>9</sup>

The famous French surgeon Ambroise Paré (1510-1590) recognised that God heals through natural means when he said:

*'Je le pansai, Dieu le guérit.'*<sup>10</sup>

There are natural processes that fight against bacterial and viral infections and even cancers. Where has our sense of wonder at this gone? Dr Brand concluded:

*'Those who pray for the sick and suffering should first praise God for the remarkable agents of healing designed into the body, and then ask that God's special grace give the suffering person the ability to use those resources to their fullest advantage. I have seen remarkable instances of physical healing accomplished in this way. The prayers of fellow Christians can offer real, tangible help by setting into motion the intrinsic powers of healing in a person controlled by God. This approach does not contradict natural laws; rather, it fully employs the design features built into the human body.'*<sup>11</sup>

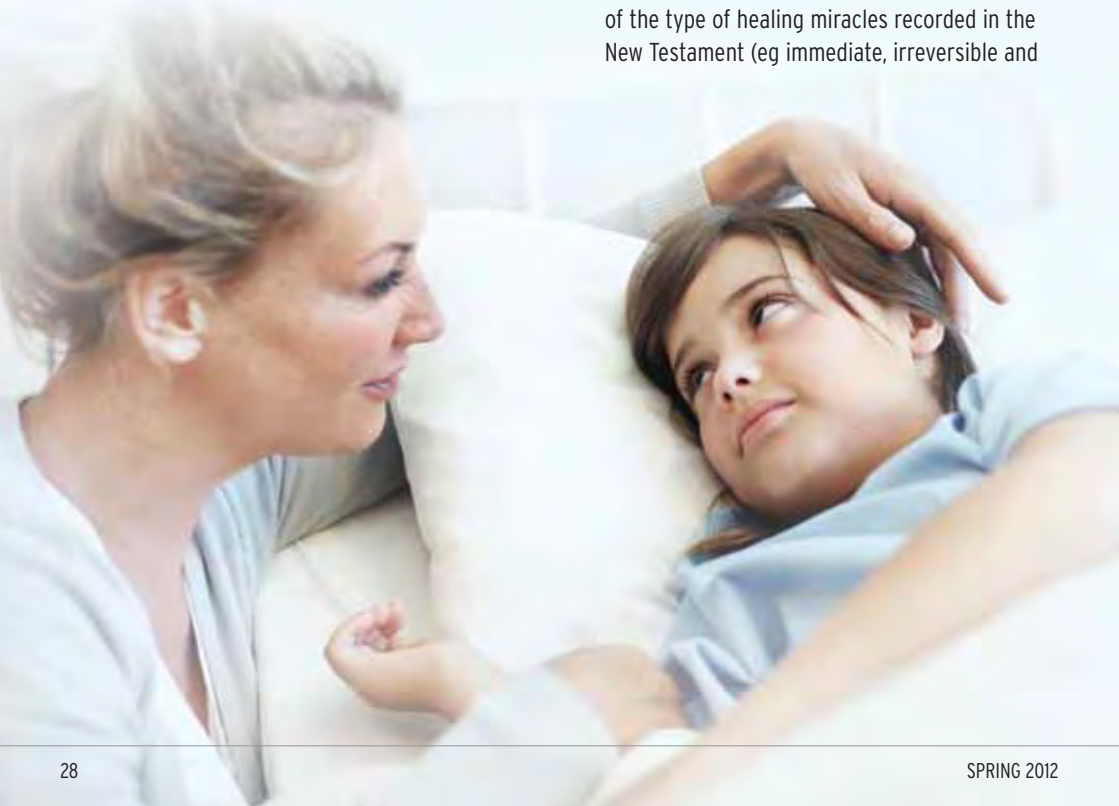
This would explain why no amputees are 'healed by faith' and those people whose backache improves after prayer find that their x-rays have not changed. The improvement these people claim from prayer are real, but may just represent changes in symptoms rather than underlying pathology. God can of course break his own natural laws of nature to alter pathologies (we know he did so in biblical times), but it is wrong to suggest to people that he has done so in any given case without presenting reliable supportive evidence. Jesus was never afraid to have his healings objectively verified. Similarly anyone claiming a healing miracle today should be willing to be properly assessed and examined.

## natural law

There is so much confusion on this subject. God is clearly able to do anything; he could prevent us ageing and dying yet most of the time he does not intervene supernaturally by breaking his own laws of nature. Jesus and his twelve apostles (Acts 5:12), plus Paul (Acts 14:8-10) Stephen (Acts 6:8) and Philip (Acts 8:6,7) performed miraculous signs that broke these laws of nature. Everyone who saw them was staggered. Lazarus was raised from the dead after being in a tomb for four days! Jesus himself, after repeatedly foretelling that this would happen, rose from the dead three days after his crucifixion. Everybody that Jesus said would be healed was immediately and completely healed (with one notable exception).<sup>12</sup> The paralysed got up and walked straight away.

No wonder people believed in him. But in the UK today, we don't see reports of proven pathological conditions being cured in this way. His disciples who followed him for three years were convinced about him. Eleven of the apostles were killed as they travelled the world to tell others about Jesus, talking about him and who he was.

Dr Peter May has made an extensive study of Christian faith healing claims, looking for cases of supernatural organic healing where God has worked outside the laws of nature. In his book, *Healing-The Rift*, subtitled *Does Miraculous Healing Occur Today?*<sup>13</sup> he investigates particular cases of faith healing in detail. Although a committed evangelical Christian himself who believes all the biblical accounts of healing miracles, he did not find evidence of the type of healing miracles recorded in the New Testament (eg immediate, irreversible and



visible reversals of major pathology which convinced even sceptical onlookers) in any of the cases he has studied.<sup>14</sup>

In our church a one-year-old toddler was playing in the garden. He fell into a covered pond and drowned in nine inches of water. When he was removed he was blue and pulseless even though he could only have been immersed for two or three minutes. He was resuscitated by a paediatric nurse who just 'happened' to be in the house at the time, was rushed to hospital and ventilated for several days. Much prayer went up for him. He has now made a complete recovery. Is that a miracle? For the parents it certainly is. They thought they had lost their lovely son and now he is fully restored. To the physician however it is known that if children can be quickly resuscitated then this can happen and, statistically, results are improved by early ventilation for a few days. No laws of nature were broken, but this child's cure was overwhelming for his parents and friends. Unfortunately other parents in similar situations have also prayed, but for whatever reason the results were not so favourable, the child either dying or being brain damaged.

## true miracles

In much of Africa AIDS is a frightening infection; in some areas up to 40% of the population are infected. Churches that had previously taught

a 'health and wealth' gospel are finding that people are not cured of AIDS by prayer. What they need is teaching that to believe in Christ means a new lifestyle. Then Christians will not catch the disease and will care for those who have it. The miracle is that God does change people to behave like Jesus.

In contrast Jesus did restore to life a widow's only son who was being carried out for burial; he healed a man who had been paralysed for 39 years. They both returned to normal living. Repeated miracles such as these by both Jesus and his apostles were independently verified. Indeed, when Jesus healed ten people with leprosy he sent them off to the priest to have their healing verified and authenticated.<sup>15</sup> Oh that this practice were repeated today by churches who advertise a healing ministry!

There is a real miracle God is doing throughout the world today. People are turning from selfish lives to live for Jesus Christ. They turn their backs on sin. They have a peace and joy that helps them overcome the problems of life. They are making major lifestyle changes which will help protect them from many diseases. They have a sure and certain future with God in eternity where they will receive new bodies that will never get sick or die. They have been 'born of God'.

'For everyone born of God overcomes the world...' <sup>16</sup> ■

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4. Hummer R. et al. Religious involvement and U.S. adult mortality. *Demography* 1999;May;36(2):273-85
5. Jung C. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* 1933:264
6. Koenig H. et al. *Op cit* :228
7. Sims A. *Is Faith Delusion. Why religion is good for your health*. Continuum 2009
8. Brand P, Yancey P. A Surgeon's View of Divine Healing. *Christianity Today* 1983;November bit.ly/zxmjpt
9. *Ibid*.
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11. Yancey P. *Op cit*:246
12. *Treating the Whole Person Triple Helix* 2012;Spring:23
13. May P. *Healing - The Rift*. London: HarperCollins, 1994
14. These were largely UK and US examples
15. Luke 17:14
16. 1 John 5:4