

does God heal miraculously today?

Andrew Fergusson gives a biblical and medical review of healing miracles, and prayer for healing



Old Testament

Miracles in the OT are comparatively rare and are mainly confined to times of deliverance. Most are miracles of nature, provision, preservation, or are revelation of God's will. The most numerous are of judgment. There are only eight healing miracles,¹ three of which involve raising the dead.²

New Testament

By contrast, healings appear on almost every page of the Gospels. There are 25 healings of individuals by Jesus and 16 descriptions of him healing large

groups. The Gospels and The Book of Acts also describe 18 healings by the apostles and other disciples.³

20th century

After 1,900 years of almost total silence, the Charismatic Renewal Movement (of the 1960s onwards) revived interest in prayer for healing. Controversial claims were made and re-examined. By the new millennium, most churches had settled down into one of two agreed positions.

Some leaned towards the cessationist position -



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that once the canon of Scripture was closed by the end of the first century, God did not need any further accounts of himself and so supernatural gifts and activities ceased. Proponents added that in any case we now have the 'miracles' of modern medicine and the NHS. The other extreme tended towards the 'Blessed are they that expect nothing for they shall never be disappointed' position. We see no miracles because we don't expect them and therefore don't pray for them.

Let's explore this continuing controversy by considering two key words in the debate.

what do we mean by 'miracle'?

A large part of our problem is that we use the word 'miracle' very casually. Every brand new parent is awestruck by the miracle of childbirth, but it is a very natural phenomenon. Early risers will be amazed by the miracle of a beautiful new dawn, but one has happened every day for a long time now!

Any dictionary will help us decide the right use of the word for this debate. Mine defines miracle as:

1. An event contrary to the laws of nature and attributed to a supernatural cause.
2. Any amazing or wonderful event.
3. A marvellous example of something: a *miracle of engineering*.⁴

We need to stay with the first definition. Years ago, Dr Peter May analysed the characteristics of Christ's miracles of healing and found:⁵

- The conditions were not symptoms but obvious examples of gross physical disease
- At that time they were incurable and most remain so today
- Jesus almost never used physical means
- The cures were immediate
- Restoration was complete and therefore unarguable
- There were no recorded relapses
- Miracles regularly elicited faith

Applying this biblical gold standard to contemporary claims of miracles, and with the wealth of technology and medical documentation we have today, scientifically trained doctors will be sceptical of frequent modern miracles.

why are there inappropriate claims for miracles of healing?

Leaving aside the few fraudsters and charlatans, well-meaning lay people may sincerely believe a miracle has happened, but a quick review can usually suggest alternative medical explanations:⁶

- Was the original diagnosis wrong?
- Spontaneous remissions do occur - was this one?
- Were the symptoms psychosomatic?
- Have there been simple misunderstandings?
- Have there been exaggerations and half-truths?

So, from an evidence-based consideration of the word 'miracle', let us now turn to the second key word.

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what do we mean by 'healing'?

Most people wanting prayer for healing are actually looking for a cure - for the relief of distressing symptoms, for their cancer treatment to be completely effective etc. Luke, the physician, was the only Gospel writer to record a passage that shows the difference between cure and healing:

'Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.'



One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him - and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

(Luke 17:11-19)

healing is much wider than cure. The word is linked with 'whole' and with 'holy'. It is about us as body, mind and spirit

Ten men were cured of leprosy (though the original Greek word applies to a range of disorders affecting the skin and does not necessarily signify the bacillary disease itself). Jesus miraculously removed their physical pathology and their signs and symptoms. Luke uses the word 'cleansed' - cured.

But leprosy then, as often now, did not just affect the physical body. To protect against the transmission of infection the sufferer was removed from family, friends, synagogue, and work. There were clear psychological, social and spiritual consequences of the skin stigma. Nine of the ten only received the physical, psychological and social

benefits, and rushed off after the priest's confirmation to celebrate. Only one came back (a Samaritan) to worship and thank Jesus; only he fully realised the spiritual benefit; only he was truly healed.

This 'nine cured; one healed' narrative shows us that healing is much wider than cure. The word is linked with 'whole' and with 'holy'. It is about us as body, mind and spirit.

does God answer prayer for healing?

Yes, of course he does. God always answers prayer! Sometimes he quickly gives us the green light of 'Yes'; sometimes the unwelcome but useful red light of 'No'; but often the frustrating amber light of 'Wait'.

In the 1980s, I worked in a Christian mission practice in south-east London, where some of our patients were believers and where most others expected occasional spiritual inputs. Praying with patients is of course very different now, but over those ten years I probably prayed with a patient on average about once a week, and briefly for almost every patient as they entered or left the consulting room.

Later, I chaired for five years the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation and regularly participated in healing services, doctor alongside Anglican clergyman. At the end of the services, any who

wished were invited to come to us with a one sentence summary of their request. We would usually anoint their forehead symbolically with oil, and pray very simple brief prayers.

In both these contexts, I think I can honestly say that when we heard follow-up God had always done something. It was usually in the 'healing' area of holistic benefit, but sometimes physical benefits in the 'cure' domain followed. People got better quicker than we would have expected, treated cancers did not recur over the years. Now of course those people had also received medical treatment and there was no need to invoke the supernatural to explain developments, but I firmly believe that 'more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.'⁷

should Christian health professionals pray for healing?

In our church lives, yes we should be prepared to offer prayer. Very few will say no. Prayer in a professional context is a very different matter, requiring a clear change of role, fully informed consent and confidentiality.

'Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 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. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 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.'

(James 5:13-16)

James gives us helpful guidance

Prayer for healing is available for all:

- It should always be patient-centred
- It should always be practised responsibly
- It may involve symbols
- It is associated with faith
- It is associated with the forgiveness of sin

So, whatever you think on the subject of miraculous healing today, it is always worth praying! ■

REFERENCES

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