

---

# Does God Heal?

2 Kings 5.1-14, Mark 1.40-45

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 15, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

---

As far as I can tell, there's two kinds of healing in the church. We could call them Loud Healing and Quiet Healing. Loud Healing involves a lot of shouting, uses plenty of expansive hand gestures, and often stretches the name of Jesus to four syllables (Je-eee-su-us). Quiet Healing uses the words like "wholeness" and "journey" a lot, tends to avoid large crowds, and is pretty resistant to definitions except that it knows it wants to keep a mighty long way from Loud Healing.

Naaman the Syrian, the large-egoed Syrian general at the center of today's Old Testament story, is very much in the Loud Healing camp. He wants a big audience, including the King of Israel, he's happy to write a fat check, and he wants Elisha to stand before him and wave his hands around and perform a spectacular cure. Naaman is healed, but it's not a loud healing that heals him. It's the quiet words of his wife's Israelite slave girl and the simple washing in the River Jordan that end up making his skin as smooth as that of a young boy. He moves from arrogance to demand, from demand to disappointment, from disappointment to humility and from humility to simple obedience. "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult," say his servants, "Would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" Turned out Naaman had to be healed of his pretension before he could be healed of his leprosy. No Loud Healing for him. By the end, God has not only given this man a fresh body, but he's put a new man *in* that body.

There are a lot of healing stories in the Scriptures, and it's easy to glaze over and think "That's just another healing story." It becomes one of the greatest barriers between ourselves and the world of the Bible: back then healings seem to be two a penny, while today they seem thin on the ground. It gets us into the way of thinking the Bible isn't really a story about us. But in fact there's no such thing as "just a healing story." Every healing story in the Bible is there for a reason and is telling us something specific about salvation. Because in the New Testament healing and salvation are more or less the same thing. We find that hard to grasp because we've got hold of the idea that healing is a present thing for the body while salvation is a future thing for the soul: but that's not what the New Testament is saying. For the Bible, salvation is a personal, social and cosmic thing that refers to everything God wants for us and every way God touches our lives. Healing is the same.

One day when I was a young teenager my mother sat me down on the sofa one Friday night and said "Samuel, I have something to tell you." Those words have ever since sent cold shivers down my spine. She held my hand and she said, "I'm going to die. The cancer in my body is not going to get better, and in a few months it's going to kill me." I was stunned. It turned out she was right. She didn't get better. And some while later, just as she said, she died. And from the moment she told me to the moment she died I never once prayed for her to be healed. Ours was a household that didn't do Loud Healing. My mother had been a nurse. For her it was about accepting facts.

And yet ever since I've wondered whether my refusal to pray for healing was a lack of faith on my part – a desire to protect myself from disappointment, a resistance to showing God how naked and defenceless I was, an urge perhaps more than anything else to protect God from my own anger and despair and terror. I'm not saying if I'd prayed for healing my mother would have got better. I'm not saying it's fair to judge a kid who's out of his depth in every way. But I am saying that if salvation is what the gospel is about, then healing is something we pray for, and that my reluctance to do so was more about self-protection and a misguided God-protection than it was about faith. The gospel and healing don't always come together, but they're wrapped up in one another. The mistake is to assume we can have one without the other.

To understand the relationship between healing and salvation we need to name precisely what salvation is. It's about past and future. Salvation is the transformation of our past from a burden to a gift – from a place of grief and regret to a heritage of wisdom and joy. And salvation is the transformation of our future from curse to a blessing – from a place of fear and death to a destiny of hope and glory. When we talk about the salvation of the past we call it *the forgiveness of sins*. When we talk about the salvation of the future we call it *eternal life*. These are

the gifts Jesus brought in his life, death and resurrection: the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The restoration of the past and the promise of the future. This is what salvation is.

And so what is healing? Well we know that even when we've been forgiven, there's still a mess to clear up. Forgiveness takes away the guilt and the blame and the enmity and the shame, but it doesn't immediately take away the pain and the loss and the hurt and the damage. Something else is required. And we also know that eternal life may last for ever, but there's some parts of it we'd like right now, because there are parts of ourselves and our lives and our relationships and our communities that are diseased and deathly and disordered and distressed. Something is required right now, a kind of advance payment of eternal life. And the name we give to those two things, the part that remains to be done when forgiveness has done its work, and the part that we need to be done right now despite our hope for life eternal, is the same name: that name is "healing." Healing is the third part of salvation, the part sandwiched between forgiveness and eternal life. This is what salvation means: there's forgiveness, there's eternal life, and in between, filling up any space that may linger between forgiveness and everlasting life, there's healing.

Some while ago I was talking with a friend who teaches at a boarding school. He told me how a 14-year-old boy was dying of cancer and how it was dominating the life of the whole school, testing everyone's faith to the limit. I decided to leave my compassionate pastoral hat on the peg for a few minutes and ask some simple, direct questions.

"Does the boy have any friends?"

"Oh yes," said my friend, "he's found who his true friends are and made some of the deepest friendships between teenage boys I've ever seen."

"How are the boy's parents?"

"It's wonderful how the whole community has embraced them like an extended family and they often turn up during the week unannounced and stay over."

"Does the boy have faith?"

"You know he wasn't one of the especially religious ones but I've often been with him and given him the sacrament and kept silence and held his hand and there's an incredible feeling in that room."

"I guess this must have been your worst semester in teaching."

"Well, you know, in a way it's been my best, because there's been a meaning and purpose about the whole school I've never known before. It almost feels like a transfiguration."

And then I took a risk and said, "What you're describing doesn't sound like hell. It sounds like the kingdom of God. This boy isn't being healed, but he sure is bringing salvation."

There was a long silence. My friend was in tears. I wish now we'd hugged but you have to understand we were male and British so instead we talked about the England soccer team and whether there was any chance the new coach would get them to the World Cup finals the next year. My friend's head was spinning but he needed a bit of time for his breaking heart to catch up. By the end of the walk his anger and bewilderment was turning to thankfulness and an extraordinary kind of joy.

These are things you only get to say to a very close friend or a complete stranger. What I was trying to explain was, if you've truly known the forgiveness of sins, and if eternal life really has intruded on your here and now, healing may not be quite so important to you, because healing names the gap between forgiveness and eternal life, and very occasionally, like at that school, the gap is actually very small. Of course they still longed for the boy to recover, but forgiveness had done its work and eternal life was very tangible and the kingdom of God was close at hand. If you have forgiveness and eternal life, you don't need healing quite as badly. You don't have to believe God sent the cancer, or suffering has a purpose, or any of that stuff – you just have to see that God offers us forgiveness and eternal life and sometimes in our most extreme situations we and those around us are more aware of that than ever.

Around 15 years ago I had a young man in my adult confirmation class. He walked a bit on the wild side and his girlfriend was pretty wild too, although she didn't always walk on the same wild side that he walked on. One morning I heard from her that they'd split up and that she hadn't seen him in days. An hour later I heard he'd woken up 12 hours after taking a bottle of Tylenol. I sat with him in the hospital as he lost consciousness, his liver being long gone. His brothers had turned up from all over the country, and their sober conclusion was that was dying as impetuously and tragically as he'd lived, leaving a long trail of emotional and physical wreckage behind him. The following morning I got a call to say he'd been given a liver transplant and was regaining consciousness. I couldn't believe it. I rushed to the ward and to my dismay I found the angriest man I've ever seen. He'd meant to commit suicide and he was discovering he'd been foiled and he was incandescent with rage.

I tell this story because by sheer medical criteria it ought to be a story of healing. But it obviously isn't. There's more to healing than getting a new liver when you've destroyed your old one. I tell the story because it's the opposite of the 14-year-old boy in the school. What my teacher friend discovered was that when you have forgiveness and eternal life, you don't need healing quite as badly. What my wild friend discovered was that if you're a million miles from forgiveness and eternal life, healing isn't really going to help you. At that boarding school forgiveness and eternal life were so close that the kingdom of God had come very near. In that critical care ward forgiveness and eternal life were so far away there was simply way too much for healing to do on its own.

What we think we *want* is healing. What we truly *need* is forgiveness and eternal life. Sometimes we get healing, sometimes we don't. If we get healing in the context of forgiveness in the past and the hope of eternal life in the future, it's a kind of fulfilment of forgiveness and an anticipation of eternal life. If we get healing in the absence of the things we really need, we may find it pretty much useless.

And that brings us back to Naaman. He comes down from Syria, pumping his chest and demanding healing. Elisha is too busy to see him. Of course Elisha's not really sitting in his study taking a conference call from the State Department. He's teaching Naaman a lesson. "If you receive healing right now," Elisha's saying, "that healing ain't going to help you." Naaman's got to get down from his high horse and chariot first. And notice at the end of the story Naaman praises and worships the god of Israel. Here's our context: forgiveness and eternal life – restored relationships and the dismantling of death in the face of God's glory. Oh – and sandwiched in between, healing. Healing in the only context in which it makes any sense.

"What can I get you, sir?" "I'll take a healing, please." "Would you like that with forgiveness and eternal life, sir?" "No thanks, I'll take it as it comes." That's the human condition. We want healing without salvation. But what does God offer us? God offers us forgiveness of sins and life eternal. That's salvation. That's where healing is truly to be found. And sometimes sandwiched in between is healing; sometimes not. And of course we long for the healing. Of course we do. I did as a kid, my friend did at his school, everyone here has done at some time or other, some people here are doing so right now more deeply than anything they know. And of course we pray. And what God gives us over and over again is forgiveness and eternal life, everything we need in the past and everything we could imagine for the future. And sometimes they are so close together that we call it healing, and sometimes even when they aren't especially close together healing comes and fills that gap, and sometimes healing comes but forgiveness and eternal life are so far away that the healing is no good to us.

So the question "Does God heal?" can only be asked alongside the question "Does God save?" And these are the answers. "Does God *heal* me?" Sometimes. "Does God *save* me?" Always. Always. Always.