

## THE GIFT OF HEALING IN THE SCRIPTURAL RECORD

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### Introduction

Healing has been a universal human passion ever since the decay of sin entered the world. Disease, deformity, weakness are common to the human experience in every region and age. The Scriptures are not silent on the matter of healings of various sorts, using the common terms nearly 150 times in the Old and New Testaments, along with many other passages that speak of healing events in other terms. It is not surprising that such an activity captivates the imaginations of fallen men. Men have tried to practice it, imitate it, counterfeit it, and otherwise pursue it for their own gain or the betterment of others (for the more magnanimous among the sons of men!). The pursuit of healing and health has taken mankind along the medical path of the physician and surgeon as well as along the mystical path of the healer and shaman, with equally passionate adherents on both paths. Some even try to walk on both paths at the same time, lending whatever credibility either path possesses to the other. Healing has marketability galore, and fallen men have been eager to exploit that fact for millennia.

If that last statement sounds cynical, it should be borne in mind that God warned the people early on about false prophets who would deceive them by delivering divine-sounding messages or producing signs and wonders. He gave specific guidelines for determining how true prophets and servants of God were to be identified in Deut 13:1-5. Moses was confronted by Egyptian sorcerers who imitated God's miracles to a degree in Exod 7-8. Simon the sorcerer tried to buy the Holy Spirit so that he could perform miracles as the apostles did, as recorded in Acts 8:9-24. In Rev 13 the Antichrist and the beast will perform wondrous miracles of healings, including resurrection, which will deceive the nations completely. All of these examples make it clear that wisdom dictates careful examination of "faith healing" in light of the Word of God. Allow it at the outset to be said that in writing this article the author makes no attempt to improve upon the classic works on this subject,<sup>1</sup> but hopes rather to complement those excellent treatments as best he can.

### The Record of Scripture

#### Terms

The Hebrew term רָפָא, *rapha'*, means to *heal*, or *make healthful*. Derivatives hold the idea of *remedy*, *healing*, or *health*. The *TWOT* entry reads in part:

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<sup>1</sup> It would be hard to improve upon B. B. Warfield's *Counterfeit Miracles* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), for instance. John McArthur's work, *The Charismatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), also has an excellent section on the subject of healing (pp. 130-155).

This is a purely Hebrew root which appears over sixty times in the OT.... The meaning is straightforward in virtually all passages. In the initial occurrence (Gen 20:17) in which God heals Abimelech, the Qal stem is employed. The root is also used of human healing, as a substantive, “physician” (Gen 50:2). *Rapha*’ is also used of the healing and forgiveness of Gentile nations (Isa 19:22; 57:18). ... A human subject is generally the object of the healing (Exod 21:19), “He shall cause him to be thoroughly healed.” ... The stem is also used for the restoration of objects (2 Kgs 2:22); the turning of salt water into fresh (Jer 19:11). The themes of healing and restoration as connotations of *rapha*’ are combined in the usage of Isa 53:5, “With his stripes we are healed.” In many of the occurrences, it is God who causes healing or afflicts with disease or catastrophes which cannot be healed but by divine intervention.<sup>2</sup>

The Greek term  $\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha\pi\epsilon\upsilon\omega$  *therapeuo* is similarly straightforward. The Louw-Nida Lexicon’s entry 23.139 notes that the word means “to cause someone to recover health, often with the implication of having taken care of such a person.”<sup>3</sup> So, the ideas of *service* and *care* are part of the word’s semantic range.

When considered together, the biblical terms used indicate a relatively simple concept of healing as restoration to wholeness by the direct or indirect (through human agents) intervention of God. The terms are used in both physical and spiritual contexts, as will be demonstrated below.

### ***Divine healing in the OT***

These texts describe the direct healing work of God himself and provide the foundation for consideration of biblical healing:

- Exod 15:26 – “If you diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I *am* the LORD who heals you.”<sup>4</sup>
- Num 12:13 – “So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, ‘Please heal her, O God, I pray!’” (concerning the rebellious Miriam, whom the LORD smote with leprosy, and then let her suffer in her illness for a week before healing her at Moses’ request)
- Deut 32:39 – “Now see that I, *even* I, *am* He, and *there is* no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor *is there any* who can deliver from My hand.”
- 2 Kgs 20:5 – “Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD.”’”

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<sup>2</sup> R. Laird Harris, et al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. II, entry #2196. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 857.

<sup>3</sup> “Bibleworks” software database.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture citations are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible.

- 2 Chr 7:14 – “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”
- Ps 41:4 – “I said, ‘LORD, be merciful to me; Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You.’”
- Ps 103:3 – “Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases....”
- Isa 53:5 – “He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.”
- Isa 61:1 – “The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted.”
- Jer 33:6 – “Behold, I will bring it health and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth.” (context of new covenant restoration)
- Hos 6:1 – “Come, and let us return to the LORD; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up.” (Spiritual healing is a major theme in Hosea’s prophecy.)

From these passages it is clear the God is *the* Healer; that his healing is not limited to physical ailments but more significantly and frequently targets the ailments of the soul; and that his healing work is always done in the context of the obedient covenant community in response to their prayers.

### **Healing ministry of OT saints**

The OT does not speak of specific gifting in the same way that the NT does (with the possible exception of the artisans of the tabernacle furnishings, Exod 35:30-36:1), but there are several examples of healings that take place in the physical realm by divine action through the agency of men, as well as healings in the sense of using available medical resources and knowledge to care for the infirm.

- Exod 21:19 – “If he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck *him* shall be acquitted. He shall only pay *for* the loss of his time, and shall provide *for him* to be thoroughly healed.”
- Lev 13:18 – “If the body develops a boil in the skin, and it is healed,....”
- Lev 14:48 – “But if the priest comes in and examines *it*, and indeed the plague has not spread in the house after the house was plastered, then the priest shall pronounce the house clean, because the plague is healed.”
- Num 21:9 – “So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.”
- 2 Kgs 5:11 – “Naaman became furious, and went away and said, ‘Indeed, I said to myself, “He will surely come out *to me*, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.’”’ (Elisha did not employ any theatrics, and apparently never laid eyes on Naaman.)
- 2 Chr 30:20 – “The LORD listened to Hezekiah and healed the people.”
- Eccl 3:3 – “A time to kill, and a time to heal; ....”

- 2 Kgs 4:17-37 – Though the term for healing is not present in this passage, Elisha’s raising of the Shunammite’s son from the dead certainly would qualify as a miracle of healing!

These passages demonstrate that those healings done by such men as Moses and Elisha were extraordinary, not common, parts of their ministry; that little or no human agency other than prayer was involved (Elisha’s raising of the Shunammite’s son excepted); that medical means were employed as the norm of healing; that it was not always God’s will that healing take place; and that God’s servants did not adjust their methods to accommodate the sensibilities of fallen men.

### **Healing ministry of Christ**

There are, of course, many examples of Christ’s healing ministry, but a few will suffice for the present purposes.

- Matt 4:23 – “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people.” (Essentially the same wording occurs in 9:35.)
- Matt 13:15 – “The hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with *their* eyes and hear with *their* ears, lest they should understand with *their* hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.” (Quoting Isa 6:10.)
- Mark 5:29 – “Immediately the fountain of her blood was dried up, and she felt in *her* body that she was healed of the affliction.” (See also v. 34.)
- Luke 4:17-21 – (reading the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue of Nazareth)
- Luke 5:17 – “As He was teaching, ... there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, .... And the power of the Lord was *present* to heal them.” (They wouldn’t seek healing, but the man lowered on the bed through the roof experienced that power. See also Luke 6:19.)
- Luke 9:11 – “He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who had need of healing.”

Jesus forcefully declared that he did the works that he did so that people would know that he was the Messiah sent by the Father (John 14:11). In some places, he refused to do any miracles because of the belligerent unbelief of those about him (Matt 12:38; 13:58). These representative texts reveal that Jesus saw himself as the one who fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy (61:1, above); that the goal of physical healing was to awaken a desire for spiritual healing; that the power was divine in origin; that it often came in response to prayer; that it often came at Jesus’ own initiative; that it was nearly always connected to the ministry of the Word; that it was not about glorifying the healer, but God; and that this power could be delegated to commissioned servants for particular purposes.

## **Healing ministry of the apostles**

Passages giving examples of the gift include:

- Matt 10:1 – “When He had called His twelve disciples to *Him*, He gave them power *over* unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease.”
- Acts 4:23-31 – This passage clearly lays out what the apostles and disciples at the time understood the purpose of the gifting for healing to be.
- Acts 5:16 – “Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”
- Acts 9:34 – “Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed.’ Then he arose immediately.”
- Acts 14:9-10 – “*This* man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, ‘Stand up straight on your feet!’ And he leaped and walked.”
- Acts 28:8-9 – “It happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.”

The Twelve are specifically given gifts for their tour of the cities of Judah in Matt 10:1. The Seventy of Luke 10 are not given gifts specifically, though demons were said to be subject to them in Jesus’ name (vs. 17-20). From these passages one may reasonably deduce that every example recorded is of one of the apostles employing the gift given to him by Christ. None of the healing events were revelatory, but were to confirm the divinely commissioned status of the apostles and identify them with the earthly ministry of Christ. The Acts 4 passage in particular emphasizes the governing relationship of the Word to works of healing and other wonders. Finally, in comparison to the ministry of the Word, healing and other gifts were relatively miniscule in importance and frequency, at least as they are recorded in Scripture.

## **NT propositions regarding healing**

There are some significant New Testament passages where the specific “gift” or empowering to heal is mentioned. These passages are often considered to be “proof texts” for current faith healing practices.

- Matt 10:8 – “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons.”

Matt 10:8 is clearly spoken to the twelve disciples who would become the apostles. Even Judas experienced this commissioning, but Judas forfeited that office and was replaced by Matthias. The Apostle Paul, by direct appointment of the Savior, would become an apostle at a later time. The context dictates that this command be understood to be applicable to the situation at hand, and is not to be taken as a universal command for all ages of the Church. Jesus did not give this

gift to any other disciples so far as is recorded, and modern Christians should be content with that.

- 1 Cor 12:9 – “...to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit...”
- 1 Cor 12:28 – “God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.”
- 1 Cor 12:30 – “Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?”

Corinth was a congregation rife with division over the arrogant, selfish, and disorderly practice of gifts granted to the church. Through the ministry of the apostles, first generation Christians were very much a part of the establishment of the church universal. The canon of Scripture was not yet complete, and God in his providence magnified the work of the apostles through their converts to spread and establish the gospel testimony in the known world. The Spirit granted various gifts to the church during this time to empower its growth and testimony in the world. First in priority was revelatory work through the apostles, then preaching, then teaching, then miracles of divine origin, and only then the various spiritual gifts (compare 1 Cor 12:31). Significantly, in a similar list in Eph 4, Paul does not mention spiritual gifts at all, only the offices of various ministers in the Church.

- Jas 5:14-16 – “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

This passage from James’ epistle is among the most frequently cited as proof that a healing ministry is to continue as a normative practice of the Church today. Actually, it is normative, but not in the way the faith healer perspective would like it to be. The anointing with oil that is mentioned is of the sort that refers to the application of oil medicinally.<sup>5</sup> That we should pray for one another when sick is normative, and we should indeed take our medicine. The leadership of the church especially should unite before the Lord to seek the intervention of the Spirit of God in the life of the sick. God does answer prayer and heal directly when he so desires. We should also pray for spiritual healing during a time of physical frailty, in keeping with the emphasis upon spiritual healing that we have seen throughout the Scriptures. One of the effects of division among the Corinthian church, for example, was that many were sick and some died. So confessing wrongs done to one another and restoring relationships is a good way to invoke the blessing of God upon needed physical restoration.

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<sup>5</sup> The Greek term is simply that which refers to olive oil, ἔλαιον *elaion*, used in the same way as found in Luke 10:34, where the Good Samaritan uses the oil and wine to treat the wounds of the injured traveler. The same phrase is used in such passages as Mark 6:13, in the context of the healing ministry of the disciples as they went about doing the work of the kingdom.

## How Are We to Understand Healing in the Post-Apostolic Age?

Luke 16:31 is a very important passage for this discussion. It reads, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.” Jesus, through the story of the rich man and Lazarus, posits clearly that the Word is supreme and sufficient. The gospel is complete even if spiritual gifts are not seen.

The biblical terms referring to healing convey the idea of restoration to health or wholeness through care. The terms are used of the direct acts of God in physical and spiritual contexts, and of the efforts of men acting on God’s commission or simply on their own initiative in the care of others. Healing is an indication of the blessing of God upon his people. Prayer and humility are key factors as God responds to the cries of God’s people in times of their physical or spiritual distress. The gift of healing, along with other spiritual gifting, is particularly stated to have been given to the disciples/apostles, and to others in the first century church under their authority. Christ’s healing ministry was for the specific purpose of validating his claims that he was sent from the Father. The NT gift was given to confirm the sent status of the apostles and the continuity of Christianity with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Healing and other spiritual gifts are relatively unimportant even in the first century church, though many abused and elevated them to abnormal prominence in the life of the church. Finally, God continues to heal in response to the prayers of his people, either directly by his sovereign and immediate power or through the agency of medicinal means.

There is no Scriptural record that the spiritual gifts, including healing, are still ordinarily being dispensed today. In light of such passages as Luke 16:31, Deut 12:32, and Rev 22:18-19 (“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book”), contemporary Christians can understand that the role of the spiritual gifts has been completed with the apostles, and that the Word of God validates itself through the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the reader/hearer (Heb 4:12).

God continues to act as God directly, with his completed revelation as our means of evaluating those acts properly. We need no further substantiation for God’s reality and work.