

The Holy Spirit and Physical Healing

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[0 : 00] Let me just open us in prayer. Lord Jesus, I say you come and be among us, come be free among us, even as we sought you in worship. Come respond to us, pour your spirit out on us, and we thank you.

Amen. So this is the third sermon in this summer mini-series on the Holy Spirit and what would happen if we had more of the Holy Spirit. The first sermon was on the Holy Spirit himself and looked at the ways that you can know the Spirit by understanding the close connection between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and also the close connection between Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

And the second sermon last Sunday was on inner or emotional healing and pointed to the way Jesus is tender and compassionate towards those of us who are wounded inside, and I gave some examples of what inner healing can look like. In today's sermon, I'll want to talk about physical healing.

I'm going to look at some of what the Scripture says on it, Jesus's ministry in the early church, and then talk about physical healing itself. So to start with in the Old Testament, I want to say a few things about physical healing in the Old Testament. Physical healing is talked about in two different ways in the Old Testament in a very factual way. It's just simply something that God does for people, for His people, because of who God is and as part of how He acts in and for Israel to rescue them from evil and oppression. The first way that we see physical healing talked about in the Old Testament is in individual stories of people being healed. One of my favorites is Naaman the Syrian, the senior military figure who was advised by the girl he had abducted in a raid to go back to Israel and get healing. It's an amazing story. And actually, my favorite version of it is in my kid's Jesus calling Bible. So if you can get your hands on one of them, it's a great, great telling of it. The second way that the Scripture talks about physical healing in the Old Testament is in the way that it's just simply celebrated as a part of what it means to live life with God. Psalms 103 and 107 are great examples of that. When we fast forward to the Gospels, the Old Testament Scriptures are important for us to keep in mind, and they're important for the people in Jesus' day because they set the conceptual and experiential foundation for Jesus and His ministry. It was understood in the Old Testament for Israel that God heals. And so when Jesus came on the scene and also started healing, it would have been an important signal, a clear connection between Jesus and God of the Old Testament and a sign that He is the Messiah. And in fact, physical healing was hardwired into Jesus' ministry. It was part of His mandate. It was part of His practice. So Jesus announced His mandate for His ministry in Luke 4. He quoted Isaiah 61, and He said,

[3 : 20] The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And healings, Jesus' healings in the Gospels are described in ways that are similar to the way they're described in the Old Testament, both in stories of individuals receiving healing and in these broader summative statements about how Jesus healed. And there are frankly too many examples of individual stories of people being healed in the Gospels to try and pick out a couple. So I want to give you a couple phrasings of the broad summative descriptions. This one's from Matthew 4. It says, Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So His fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to Him all the sick and those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and He cured them. And this one from Mark 6. And whenever, and this is echoed in Matthew as well, and wherever He went into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged Him that they might touch even the fringe of His cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

In Jesus's time, He was well known as someone who healed. But even more than that, it was a well-known fact that you could touch the edges of Jesus's clothes and get healed. We read about the woman who suffered from hemorrhages for 12 years. She'd spent all she had on doctors with no effect, and her story is told in all three synoptic Gospels. And when she comes up to Jesus, she elbows her way through the crowd, and she says, if I but touch the hem of His garment, I'll be healed. If you read the story in isolation, you think, wow, that's amazing faith. And it is. But part of the reason why she did this is because she knew, like lots of people, that this is something you could do. This happened with Jesus all the time. Physical healing was a constant, consistent, standard feature of Jesus's life and ministry. So it's important to ask ourselves, why did Jesus heal? Why did He do this? There were lots of reasons. And the first reason, frankly, is love. Like I mentioned in, I think, last week's sermon,

Jesus was always compelled by an overwhelming emotional love or compassion for those who are around Him in pain. He was compelled by that love to stop and do something. Jesus healed as part of bringing the kingdom. Jesus was aware that He was in a battle against a kingdom of darkness, and this action that He took in healing people was a direct opposition to the kingdom of darkness. Jesus is the king, and wherever He is, His kingdom is too. And whenever people saw healings and miracles, they recognized that Jesus was the king and the Messiah. Jesus healed people to create faith in Himself and to stretch our imaginations around what God's intentions could possibly be for us in this broken world.

Jesus wanted us to have even more faith in what He could do for us. And sometimes Jesus did heal to make a teaching point or to link it to a teaching point. Sometimes that was true, sometimes not. Sometimes He just healed for the sake of healing, but sometimes He built a teaching point on it. But it wouldn't be right to say that He'd heal just for the sake of teaching. And it's also important to see that Jesus was a full-packaged miracle person. He healed people of physical illness and injury because of His love. But He also taught people. He healed them emotionally and socially. He freed people from the demonic. And He did miracles like raising people from the dead or multiplying loaves.

[7 : 25] Even the gospel writers talk about Jesus' ministry, and they reference Isaiah 53, which says, Surely He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases. And yet we accounted Him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and upon Him was the punishment that made us whole. And by His bruises, we are healed.

And it's very clear to the gospel writers that Jesus was fulfilling the messianic prophecy and mandate from Isaiah, and that what He was doing in His ministry, He would bring to an even fuller completion on the cross. That when Jesus died on the cross, it wasn't just for sin. It was for sickness as well. So some of us can ask, so what happened to physical healing in the church? I have a friend of mine who described, he grew up in the northeastern U.S. and said that when he was growing up in church, that he always thought that the Holy Spirit was for people from the south and maybe California.

I don't know if that's true. And so for Him, you know, what happened to physical healing? What happened to the Holy Spirit? Initially, nothing. In Jesus' lifetime on earth, He modeled physical healing for His disciples, and then He sent them out to do the exact same thing. So we read about one of those commissionings in the gospel readings in Mark 6. It's echoed in Luke 9. And then later on in Luke 10, Jesus sends out an even bigger group to go ahead of Him. He gave them authority over unclean spirits and to heal all disease. The expectation that Jesus placed on those who followed Him was that they would do like He did. And this practice continued on into the early church. Last week, we read about Peter and John praying for a man who was unable to walk from birth. And in the book of Acts, it just keeps going from there. Individual stories of people being healed dot the book of Acts, but also passages that make, again, like other parts of the scriptures, broad commentary on what is the normal life and practice for followers of Jesus. The passage we read this morning describes how it was common that people carried the sick out into the streets. People came not just who lived in Jerusalem, but from the surrounding area to seek out the followers of Jesus because they had the understanding that you could bring sick people to them and they would pray and they would be healed. It was just a known thing.

When I read passages like that, it makes me want to know why was the early church like this and why was their experience different from ours? I've spent a fair bit of time reading through church

history, kind of wanting to know what happened after the time of the apostles. And what you find when you read through church historians is that for about a thousand years after Jesus' death and resurrection, physical healing was just a standard part of Christian churches and communities. So all the major writers that we know and reference when we're talking about church fathers and doctrine, they all write, if you look to the side of their doctrinal statements, they also talk about in their own lives and ministries and in those of the churches they were part of, there were healings and miracles.

And all through the first 300 years of the early church. And then church historians who pick up the pen from that point on also talk about healings happening. If you go to any of the Catholic mystics, you see that healings and miracles were just a part of their lives. It never really went away.

[11:14] My read is that over time, the healing gifts were not given the same primacy in church life. There were fights over doctrine and ecclesiology and attempts by secular kings to control the church.

There was worry about the external threat of military forces on the borders of Europe and Christian Europe. So the focus got distracted from the gifts of the spirit. And eventually, our own ways of thinking, our own Western ways of thinking split the material and the immaterial into two separate categories, the seen and the unseen. And value and primacy was placed on the things we can touch and see. But physical healings still never really disappeared. They always showed up in these outpourings of the Holy Spirit during revivals. The Wesleys, John Wesley in particular, in his journal, documented all the healings that he saw happening in his prayer meetings. His contemporary, Jonathan Edwards, did the same. One of the things I like about Jonathan Edwards, and I may have mentioned this, is he was so matter-of-fact about his teaching and his following of Jesus, it shocked him sometimes that the Holy Spirit burst out on the scene. And people would, you know, the Holy Spirit would hit them, and he would just kind of keep preaching and then later write about it. And so I find it really interesting. He grappled with what it meant. If any of you know who John Wimber is, he founded the

Vineyard Movement. When he started praying for people and having prayer services and worship services, and he saw the Holy Spirit moving among people, he didn't know what to do with it. So he went to, that was not me. Somebody say Gesundheit. Yeah, thank you. I can't tell if we're Anglican anymore.

I'm sorry, we're doing this call and response thing. It's nice. But he went to John Wesley's journals. He read Jonathan Edwards because he needed a grid to try and interpret what's going on in my prayer meetings. I don't understand it. And for any of us who remember the charismatic renewal of liturgical churches like ours in the 70s and 80s, we saw a fresh wave of the Holy Spirit and a renewed interest in physical healing. So it's never really gone away. And it's something that, for me, I want to encourage all of us to keep pressing into. So a couple working assumptions for pressing into physical healing. First of all, Jesus heals. He did it in the Gospels, and he's the same today as he was yesterday and will be forever. And so we should assume that he still heals. Another assumption, that he wants to heal through us. This is what happened with the disciples and the followers of Jesus in the early church, and it's not changed. But there is some variation and some nuance that we should be aware of in Scripture when it comes to physical healing. We read, for instance, that there are moments when the anointing for healing is greater than at other times. Luke 5, 17 says, one day while Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby.

They'd come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem, and the power of the Lord was with them to heal. In another part, we read that the anointing for healing was lower. Mark 6 talks about when Jesus went back home for a visit in his hometown. And it says he could do no deed of power there except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them, and he was amazed at their unbelief. I find it so interesting that in the life of Jesus, who had perfect access to the Father and who had the most free access for the Holy Spirit to operate through him, experienced days of greater anointing and lesser anointing, when the power of God was present to heal, but he could only heal a few people. And I think we should take that as a bit of a help to us. We pray for people in faith, but there are times when people seem to get healed more often and times when they don't.

[15:31] It happened even to Jesus. To be very frank, the bad day Jesus describes where he can only lay his hands on a few people and heal them would be an amazing day for me. It said he could

do no deeds of power, just heal a few people. I'm like, Jesus, take me there. A few people would be great.

Another thing we should pay attention to is actually the issue of faith. There are two times in the Gospels when Jesus was amazed. We should pay attention to the things that amazed Jesus. First instance was when he saw the faith of the centurion. So this person was outside of the Jewish faith. He was part of an occupying military force causing his people to suffer. And yet, when he came to Jesus with faith for his servant who was sick, Jesus was amazed at his faith. And he even said that he hadn't seen such great faith in all of Israel. That's amazing, and a little bit ouch, to be frank, that Jesus was calling out great faith among someone who was not an insider. And the other time Jesus was amazed was for opposite reasons, in the passage I just quoted, when he went to his hometown and people couldn't think of him as anything more than the carpenter's son. And their faith was low, and their expectations were low. Faith seems to matter. We should also recognize that in 1 Corinthians, Paul lists, it's kind of his catalog of spiritual gifts, and he includes in them the gifts of healing.

There are some people in the body who will have a healing gift, along with other people with other gifts. And these are given for the benefit, comfort, and upbuilding, and even assurance of the church, and to bear witness to people outside of the church about the reality of Jesus. We shouldn't turn down those opportunities for prayer from people. So what that means is, if you start praying with each other, and you start noticing that there's somebody among us who consistently seems to, God seems to work through, and when they pray, there seems to be a change or a result, keep going back to that person. This is how the body becomes aware of how the Holy Spirit has given gifts to people.

And it's, but it's other gifts too. We all know somebody around us who we think, I need good advice. And you think of somebody in the congregation, I should go have coffee with that person, because they always give good advice. The Holy Spirit's given them a gift of wisdom. Why wouldn't we go talk to that person and have coffee with them when we're in need and benefit from what God's given to them?

We should do the same for physical healing. But it's also important to notice from Scripture's testimony itself, that while God's intention is to heal, sometimes it doesn't happen. So Paul tells Timothy in 1, he writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy.

[18:24] He says, no longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. And then in 2 Timothy, Paul writes to Timothy saying, Trophimus, I have left and Miletus sick. So I'm thinking, surely Paul prayed for Timothy, and he prayed for Trophimus, but apparently they weren't healed. And Paul doesn't kind of hide that or sweep it under the rug and, you know, make sure that nobody knows about these missed healings.

He acknowledges them. They're a part of his life. People were not healed. And even Paul had his own afflictions that he wanted healing from and never received. Paul also tells the Philippians that his co-worker, Epaphroditus, was so ill he nearly died. He eventually recovered, but we don't know how, and it sure wasn't an instant miracle. There was no conflict for Paul between praying for the sick and giving somebody medical advice. And there shouldn't be a conflict for us. For me, all healing comes from God, whether it's by prayer or through medicine, medical research, and practice. So we shouldn't say no to any of it. I will say, I've not ever seen anybody take, Paul's advice was, take a little wine for the sake of your ailments. And I haven't really heard anybody quote that as much as I thought they would. You know, the blessed St. Paul said, take a bit of wine. Um, so when do we see physical healing happening? When people ask for it and when they want it. There has to be intentionality. There has to be a little bit of risk-taking, a little bit of opening yourself up to the possibility that God might heal if you ask. It happens when people believe that the Lord can and will do it. Recall that there was a man with leprosy in Mark 3. He believed Jesus could heal, but wasn't sure he would heal. But Jesus loves to take our tiny grains of mustard seed faith and that we sow persistently in prayer, and he honors them with his love.

Um, we read in, in James, in his letter of instruction to the church, that if somebody is sick, gather the elders, and they should anoint somebody with oil and pray. It's supposed to be just what happens in a church. And it happens also all throughout the Gospels and through the, in the book of Acts, through the laying on of hands and prayer. In some ways, these are easy things for us to do. We can all pray. We can all anoint with oil, and we can all ask Jesus to help.

So I want to, I want to tell a few stories, a few examples to close off, um, this sermon. So when I was a deacon, I mentioned that I did my diaconate placement in what I called an Anglicostal church in Baltimore. And as part of my, my formation and my process, I had to write, I think they were quarterly, monthly or quarterly reports to the bishop on how I was doing, how was ministry going, what was I doing, things like that. And I always added an annex with testimonies of the healings that I saw when praying for people. And I'm actually grateful for that now because I can, I have them as a bit of a, um, a bit of a record and a testimony to encourage myself. Um, I want to tell one story.

[21 : 45] I told this in our healing prayer bootcamp. I pray for people at my work. Well, I did before COVID, but I pray for people at work a lot. And, um, these are people from all over the world. Some people know church, some people don't, some people know Jesus, some people don't. Um, and people are not generally open to talking about faith or church, but everybody is spiritual and everybody will take prayer. So I had a colleague, uh, she was French and, uh, she, we were supposed to talk about, we were trying to meet over some work issue. And she said, my day is super jammed, but I'm going to go downstairs for a smoke break. Why don't we talk on my smoke break? I said, sure. So we go down for her smoke break and we're standing outside and she's, she's clearly, she starts struggling in her breathing, uh, with one hand holding the cigarette in the other. I say, oh, what's wrong? And she says, I've had this sinus infection for two weeks. I can't smell and I can't taste. And I'm thinking she's French. If she can't taste food, it's an existential crisis. So I say to her, you know, this might sound a bit odd, but can I, can I pray for your, your sinus infection? And she sort of pauses and looks at her cigarette. And I say, that's okay. Like, you know, that, that's not going to get in the way. Just like hold it to the side for my sake and I'll pray for you. And, uh, and so I'm thinking, you know, colleagues could walk by. So I said to her, you know, here's what I'm going to do.

I'm going to pray for you and I'll just reach over and I'll, I'll tap your nose and ask the Lord to heal you. So I start praying in a, in a, in a normal voice, right? Like I wasn't going to start using King James language or shouting in a loud voice. I wasn't going to slap her. So I just, in a conversational eyes open way, just prayed for her, her healing. And I reached over and I tapped her nose and I'm kind of closing my prayer all the time thinking, I wonder, you know, do she think this is weird? Is she going to call HR? Like what's going to happen? And she interrupts me to say, I can smell my cigarette smoke. And I'm like, that means you were healed. And so, and so she's looking at her cigarette and I'm thinking, I never thought Jesus would use a cigarette to verify someone's healing, but it happened. Um, another, another, um, story I, I, before COVID, I like to go, uh, pray on, I do walk and pray for people. And there are parts in my neighborhood and, um, Union Station and other places where there are homeless, uh, encampments, people who are sleeping on the street. And I would go in the summertime, maybe with some water and say, you know, talk with them and offer prayer. And so there was a guy, um, I can't remember his name. I think it was James. He said that he had a broken fist. He'd punched somebody. And he said, but I don't think, you know, I don't think Jesus is going to heal my broken fist because after all, I broke it hitting someone. And I said, let's, you know, let's pray anyway. So he holds his hand up. He can't open it. It's like this and it's bruised up and he can't open it. And so he's standing like this and he's talking to his friend, just kind of almost humoring me. So I put my hands on his hand and I pray for him and he interrupts himself to say, what the, and I'll let you supply the word that came afterwards. But he just suddenly stopped. And I'm thinking again, like he has, he testified to his hand being healed in, in a way that I wouldn't have picked for, you know, a shout out to Jesus. Right. And he starts opening his hand and he, and he says, that's, you know, I don't even know what to say. And I'm just like, kind of me either. Right. Like, I'm, you know, that's amazing. And, and it turned into a conversation about how Jesus sees him, even in his circumstance. Um, uh, my daughter, uh, she, she has a testimony of praying. She, uh, one of her legs was shorter than the other and she was complaining about it. And so we prayed for her leg. And if you still ask her, she'll, she'll tell you about the time we prayed and she felt her leg lengthen so that they were the same length. Now we tried this at our healing prayer bootcamp and we had a couple of people with legs that were uneven. Um, nobody's, as far as I can tell, nobody's legs lengthened in the healing prayer bootcamp. So just to keep it real, I, it, nothing happened at that time. Um, I had, uh, one time I remember, I mean, you pray for people sometimes at services or in prayer meetings or things like that. And you don't always remember that you prayed for them. And I remember a time, a woman came up to me and she said to me, um,

a year ago, you prayed for me for my stage four cancer. And I said, um, maybe, yeah. Um, I said, tell me more. And she said, well, you prayed for me for healing. And so that was the turning point for me.

[26 : 19] She stayed with her doctor. She stayed in her treatment, but she felt that this was the moment that things started turning around and her cancer really started responding. And she said, it's funny. I'm seeing you at this service today because two days ago, my doctor declared me cancer free. And I was like, wow. So I'm telling you this because you never know when you pray for someone and it seems like nothing happens in the moment. You never know what's happening. The Lord honored this person's prayer. She stayed with her doctor. She stayed in treatment, but she felt like they all, it all came together. And to her surprise a year later, she was declared cancer free. So pray in faith, always pray for each other. You know, we know, yes, it may not always happen, but you don't know if it didn't happen. It may be that somebody will come back to you at some point with a testimony of what changed. So let me close us in prayer. Lord Jesus, we're grateful that this is something that you did.

You healed people's bodies. You healed people's minds and hearts. And Lord, you want us to receive from you and you want us to take the risk and pray for each other and take this journey of risk with you.

And Lord, it's a big deal to come to you and to open ourselves up to you and to be vulnerable before each other in moments asking for prayer. It feels high stakes when we put our needs out before you with others. So Lord, I ask that you help us take those steps of courage and boldness and risk to put our needs before you and to really see and wait on you for you to come and do what you do in scripture and what you want to do for us still. We thank you, Lord. Amen.