

Healing: Promise-Sovereignty-Mystery

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance. I want to give a special welcome to anyone who might be a guest or visitor this morning. If you are visiting us for the first time this morning, then you are catching us right in the middle of a teaching series on the subject of healing. I want to begin this morning with a story.

Illus: The story is told of two young boys--six years old--who were in a hospital, laying on gurneys next to each other, just outside the operating room. The first boy leaned over and asked, "What are you in here for?"

The second boy said, "I'm in here to get my tonsils out, and I'm really afraid." The first boy said, "You've got nothing to worry about. I had that done when I was five. They put you to sleep, and when you wake up they give you lots of Jell-O and ice cream. It's a breeze!"

Well...the second boy felt a whole lot better and so he asked the first boy, "What are you in here for?" The first boy said, "I'm in here for a circumcision." To which the second boy replied, "Whoa! I had that done when I was born...and I couldn't walk for a year!"

There's nothing quite like a good circumcision joke to start a sermon--that might be my first and last one, stay tuned. It's good to laugh isn't it? As promised, we are going to continue in our series on the subject of healing; this morning I've entitled my message: *Promise. Sovereignty. Mystery.*

As we begin this morning's sermon, I want to conduct a brief, three question survey. By a show of hands,

(a) *how many of you have prayed, asking God for something that is good, and you received what you asked for?*

(b) *how many of you have prayed, asking God for something that is good, but you didn't received what you asked for?*

(c) *how many of you raised your hands for both questions?*

Healing is one of those subjects that cannot be worked out in an ivory tower; it's worked out in the laboratory of real life. It can be difficult to account for the different results, but one thing is certain: prayer is not a formula for manipulating God.

All of us have experienced joy and sorrow, pain and peace; we've witnessed life and death. As I said last week, there are no formulas when it comes to healing because God cannot be explained by way of mathematics. When it comes to healing, God's promise, sovereignty, and mystery are all in play.

The Bible presents the same reality we experience today--not every prayer is answered in the way we wish, and not everyone receives healing in this life.

While God's power was at work among the early church, God didn't answer every prayer according to their request. When Peter and James were imprisoned for preaching about Jesus, the church prayed fervently for their release--if you remember, James was put to death, but Peter was miraculously rescued.

In the early church, God's healing power was present but not all received healing. Trophimus, Paul's ministry colleague, was left

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behind in Miletus because he was sick.¹ In 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul instructs Timothy to begin to drink a little wine because of his stomach and his frequent illnesses. Another ministry colleague of Paul's, Epaphroditus, had to leave the missionary field because he was sick and almost died.² Not even Jesus healed everyone who had need--on one occasion there were all kinds of broken-bodied-people crowded around the Pool of Bethesda, but Jesus healed just one person (John 5:1-9).

In Matthew 13, Jesus told the story about a farmer planting seed. The farmer was an expert planter, and his seed was uniformly good, and yet, the farmer didn't experience uniform success--he didn't expect to; some seed grows and other seed withers.

Not everyone who hears the good news about Jesus will receive it, not every relationship will be reconciled, not every difficulty will go away, and not every sickness will be healed in this life. As I said last week, "The ministry of healing, like all other aspects of Christian ministry and experience is partial, provisional, and ambiguous."³

illus: a little over year ago, I went to Lions Gate hospital to visit Lois McCann--a former elder and long time member of our church. Lois had been diagnosed with cancer 8-9 months before and subsequently she had undergone a number of rounds of chemotherapy. Lois was full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, and had a large team of people

who were praying for her healing--I was one of the people on Lois' prayer team.

After months of treatment, Lois was checked into the hospital; her cancer had spread, but we were still praying for a miracle. I stopped in one day to see Lois and before I left I asked if I could pray for her. I prayed that she would know and experience the love of God, I prayed for her to be aware of God's presence with her in the hospital room, and I prayed for God to rid her body of cancer.

When I left Lois' room, I walked towards the elevator and wouldn't you know it, Leta Jones was coming out of the elevator pushing her niece in a wheelchair. Her niece had suffered a head injury that had affected her brain--she was sharp as a whip, but her balance was gone, she hadn't been able to stand or walk in over a month, and the doctors had no timeline for her release.

Leta was kind enough to introduce me and I struck up a conversation with her niece. When she heard I was a pastor, she immediately said "*Oh pastor, I'm afraid I'm not a very good person.*" That's the kind of comment that begs to be followed up, and so I asked "*Why would you say that?*" She replied, saying "*I don't go to church very often.*" With a twinkle in my eye, I was able to tell her that I knew quite a few people that went to church all the time but weren't very good either. *Is it our goodness that makes us lovable to God, or is it God's love that produces goodness within us?*

¹ 1 Timothy 4:20.

² Philippians 2:26-27.

³ Ken Blue, *Authority To Heal*, 91, 108.

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I assured her that God knew her and loved her, regardless of her church attendance. I asked if it would be alright if I prayed for her, and she gave me an enthusiastic “yes”. I knelt down beside her wheelchair, grabbed her hand, and prayed that God would fill her with a deep sense of His love for her. I prayed that she would be aware of God’s presence in her hospital room, and, I prayed that God would heal her physical body.

When I was finished praying, she asked if I would come visit her the next time I swung by to see Lois, and I promised that I would. Moments later I was on the elevator and on my way back to the church; the entire interchange had been less than ten minutes.

Two days later I was walking into the front entrance of the hospital to and I heard someone yell, “*Hi Pastor Mark!*” It was Leta’s niece--she was standing outside the hospital, smoking. I yelled back, “*What are doing out here? I thought you weren’t able to walk?*” She yelled back, “*You healed me the other day!*” Now, I was about to yell, “*I can’t heal anyone, only God can heal,*” when I decided that a conversation might be better than yelling back and forth. I walked over and told her that I can’t heal anyone, but God can and does. God had healed her, and she told me the doctors were releasing her that afternoon.

After another brief interchange, I went up from the front entrance to see Lois--we talked, I read some Scripture to her, and once again I prayed for her healing; less than two weeks later Lois died.

I don’t have an adequate explanation for what does and doesn’t happen when we pray for healing, but I do know that God’s promise, sovereignty, and mystery are always in play. As I’ve said before, I’ve

been so convinced by the Scriptures, by the inner witness of the Spirit, and by experience that Jesus still heals today, that out of obedience to Him I will continue to pray for the sick and the broken regardless of the results. It’s not our responsibility to determine who, when, or how Jesus heals, but it is our responsibility to pray for healing.

What I’d like to do now is to shed some light on the interplay between the sickness we experience and God’s promises surrounding the present and future nature of healing.

Healing: God’s present + future promise.

illus: Some of you, like me, enjoy a good mystery; whether it be a novel, a movie, or a t.v. series, I like being drawn into something that is unclear and watching details align and clarity emerge.

If you’ve ever read Sherlock Holmes, or watched a show like C.S.I, you’ve witnessed investigators who are trying to make sense of what they are observing. And quite often, as the investigation unfolds, a critical clue is uncovered; this clue ends up being the linchpin--an interpretive key--that unlocks the other information that has been gathered.

When it comes to understanding the New Testament, there is one particular theological construct--if you like, an interpretive key--that has been very helpful to me in understanding the present and future nature of God’s promises. Biblical theologians refer to this interpretive key as the “*already and not yet*” nature of God’s Kingdom.

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God's kingdom is already present on the earth; God is already saving, leading, healing, and transforming. And yet, Jesus taught His followers to pray for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as in heaven. The question is, *why pray for something that is already present?* Because God's kingdom is not yet fully present; God's saving, leading, healing, and transforming work is not yet complete.

Jesus Christ has come, and so the rule of God has already come, but because Jesus has not yet come in all of His glory, because evil still persists in the world, the kingdom of wholeness is not yet complete. This tension is what discipleship is all about--already and not yet.

So the question is is: *how much of God's kingdom can be realized on this side of heaven, and how can I get in on it?* Let's talk first about promise.

I. Promise. Nothing unleashes the justice quotient in the human heart like a broken promise. When a politician breaks her campaign promises, voters are outraged. When a boss promises a promotion or raise, when our coach promises us more playing time, when the weather network indicates that tomorrow will be sunny--if any such promise is made, and broken, we cry "*foul*".

"*But you promised!*" I wonder--how many times, how many parents, in how many languages, have heard this phrase? I probably used it on my parents, just as my children are now using it on me--*but you promised!* Sometimes children hear a promise one way and parents mean it in another way.

God has dealt with sin and sickness through the death and resurrection of Jesus, meaning, that forgiveness and healing are available to us through Jesus. But, while God's promise is before us, in this life our experience of this promise will be incomplete until Jesus returns.

We are forgiven, yes, but sin's consequences have not been eradicated. For example, if we are caught in a lie, we may be forgiven, but forgiveness does not set us free from consequence-- the break in trust will need to be rebuilt over time. One might break free from a drug or alcohol addiction, but there may be long term consequences from that addiction: a damaged liver, an altered mind, a suspended driver's license.

Gordon Fee writes, "God is revealed to have limitless power and resources; He regularly shows Himself strong on behalf of His people. Yet His people still live out their redeemed lives in a fallen world, where the whole creation, including the human body, is 'in bondage to decay' (Rom 8:21), and will continue to be so until we receive the 'redemption of our bodies' (Rom 8:23)."⁴

Until Jesus returns, healing will always be partial and provisional. Jesus will heal everyone who belongs to Him--some will be healed in this life, and all will be healed in the life to come. Because this is true, God's response to prayer for healing ought not be thought of in terms of a "yes" or a "no;" it's more accurate to think of it as either a "now" or "not yet."

⁴ Gordon Fee, *The Disease of Health and Wealth Gospels*, 17.

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When we overemphasize the “not yet” nature of God’s promises, we trend towards prayerlessness and faithlessness. But when we overemphasize the “present-ness” of God’s promises we cultivate a demanding spirit. Let me just say that I suspect that there is more “*already*” than we know, but I also know that we are not yet living in a heaven on earth.

Let’s move on to talk about God’s sovereignty.

2. Sovereignty. From my perspective, there are all kinds of dangerous ideas that been swept under the rug of God’s sovereignty. Let me try and put it this way: *God is sovereign over all things, but He is not responsible for many of the things we encounter day by day.* For example, is it God’s will for a baby to be born without any muscle function? Is God responsible for the drunk driving accident that caused the death of an unsuspecting family? Is God to blame for the illnesses we experience, the things we do to others, and the things done against us?

When we say that God is “*sovereign*” we are not saying that the world is functioning in the way He intends. God is sovereign, **and yet** God’s will has been temporarily frustrated by sin, brokenness, and death. Jesus came to establish God’s kingdom--through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has been reclaiming a world that has always been His.

⁵ Blue, 38.

⁶ Eugene Peterson and Marva Dawn, *The Unnecessary Pastory*, 68.

We live in the midst of constant tension: God’s kingdom has *already* been established in our world, **and**, God’s kingdom has *not yet* come in fullness. In between the *already* and the *not yet*, we will regularly experience things that stand apart from God’s will. Ken Blue writes, “To say that every sickness, accident, sin or stupidity that happens because God wills it is...inadequate. And expressions like God ‘permits’ or ‘allows’ certain bad things to happen are at best crude attempts to account for a [mystery that is beyond us]”.⁵

Let’s take a few minutes to talk about mystery.

3. Mystery. It seems to me that if we are going to relate to God in any significant way, then mystery will always be present. We are finite, limited beings, dealing with an infinite, unlimited God--like it or not, we are forced to admit that God is beyond us.

But there are two kinds of mystery, *hidden* mystery and *revealed* mystery, and God belongs to the latter category. Eugene Peterson notes that in the New Testament, mystery is “not the mystery of a darkness that must be dispelled but the mystery of a light that must be entered into. It’s not something we don’t know but something that is too much to know.”⁶

God is *revealed* mystery: a Person who can be known, and, Who is too much to know. And so, we must reconcile ourselves to the fact

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that in every given circumstance, there is always more going on with God than we can see, know, and comprehend.

When we enter into the ministry of healing, we have to admit from the start that we have entered into something that we do not fully understand or control. There is mystery involved in who receives healing in this life and who must wait until the next life.

Ken Blue writes, “there will always be mystery in what God does and why. He does not answer to us for his actions nor does he always explain them...until Christ’s return all our ministry is partial, for now we only have a foretaste of what we will perfectly have then.”⁷

But Thomas Smail writes, “When the prayer [offered] in faith is not answered and the healing for which many have sought does not come, we are not to look for someone to accuse of failure...Rather we are to remember that besides faith there is hope. Hope has to do with God’s promises that are still future and hidden, just as faith has to do with God’s promises that are here and now. To the person who has believed for today but has not seen the answer come today, there comes the call to hope. Hope says, ‘Tomorrow also is God’s. Enough has happened already to assure that the rest is on the way.’”⁸

Conclusion

Illus: In 1994, Tom Hanks starred in a movie that became a box office hit; for his role, he later won an Academy Award for Best Actor. Can anyone tell me the name of the movie? *Forrest Gump*.

⁷ Blue, 159.

⁸ Thomas Smail, *The Forgotten Father*, 154.

By a show of hands, how many of you have seen the movie? Hank’s character is portrayed as a slow-witted, big-hearted, young man from Greenbow, Alabama. Throughout the movie there are plenty of opportunities to laugh with and at Forrest Gump. However, there are plenty of other moments where this simple-minded character says something that is so profound, the viewer is cut to the heart.

Early in the movie, young Forrest went over to visit his best friend Jenny; she hadn’t been at school that day. Forrest found her around the back of the house, on the edge of the corn field, and just as they began to talk, they heard Jenny’s father screaming “*Jenny, where did you run to? You better get back here girl!*”

Jenny’s father was a drunk, he was sexually abusing his daughter, and the moment she heard his voice she grabbed Forrest’s hand and the two ran deep into cornfield to hide. At one point, buried in the cornfield, Jenny pulled Forrest to his knees and she began to pray the words of Psalm 55:6-7: *Dear God, make me a bird, so I can fly far, far away from here. Dear God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far away from here.*

Later on in the movie, Forrest and Jenny are now adults, and they’ve been reunited in their hometown of Greenbow, Alabama. They’re out walking one day and they happen upon Jenny’s old house--it’s broken down, abandoned, lifeless. As Jenny sees the house, all of her old memories come flooding back.

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She stoops down and picks up rocks and starts to hurl them at the house--she's frantic, angry, wounded--the scene ends with Jenny collapsing in the dirt, sobbing. Poor Forrest doesn't comprehend all that's going on, but he does feel Jenny's pain, and so he sits down in the dirt right beside Jenny. As the scene fades, we hear Forrest say: *Sometimes, I guess there just aren't enough rocks.*

I don't pretend to know what pain you may be carrying this morning. Perhaps you have been sexually abused, or grown up with alcoholic parents, or you've been made to feel small and insignificant by the people around you. You may have been born with a physical or mental limitation, or experienced the untimely death of someone you loved; you may be experiencing physical sickness or disease today.

And you might be asking, *Why me? Why this pain?* I can promise you this, no answer I could ever give will explain your pain away. And for this reason, we need more than a reasonable, Biblical response; we need the presence of the living God.

Our answer to these these questions must include a coming to Jesus. And this morning I want to invite you to come to the cross of Jesus. Set your eyes on His twisted, tortured body. One author writes, "Consider the broken, bleeding Son of God. Reflect on *your* hurts and wounds in the light of *his*."⁹

You are not alone in your pain--the Christian message is that God has taken our pain into Himself. Jesus feels all the wreckage, Jesus enfolds all the wreckage--He has made it His own. And when we consider this truth, when we know that Jesus knows our pain, it is

easier to trust Him to do what is right in between the *already* and *the not yet*.

In a healing community there is room for those who lament and those who rejoice. We rejoice with those who experience healing--we celebrate the present nature of God's kingdom--it is both a sign and a witness to what will come in fullness one day. And, we lament with those who are still in pain, we contend in prayer for healing with them, we shoulder their burdens as our own--and we hold on to hope because tomorrow also belongs to God.

Pray

Alana's Song/Worship

Benediction/Invitation to Prayer

⁹ Stephen Seamands, *Wounds That Heal*, 10.