

**“The Power to Heal”**  
**Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit***  
**Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
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**(Acts 9:32-43)**

**Introduction.**

When John Wimber became a Christian back in the 1960s, he came to faith in Christ as a part of the Jesus Movement in southern California with no background of growing up in the church. The Lord changed his life in a remarkable way, and he became very passionate about following Jesus. And he read the New Testament day and night during the early weeks after his conversion.

One Sunday he wandered into a church. After the worship service, he went up to the pastor and said, “Hey, your sermon made me really think, and the music was great. But when do we get to do the cool stuff?”

The pastor looked puzzled and asked, “The cool stuff?”

Wimber replied, “Yeah, the cool stuff. You know, like healing people and raising them from the dead. The cool stuff that I’ve been reading about in the New Testament. When do we get to do the cool stuff?”

The pastor thought for a moment, and then he answered, “I’m sorry, we don’t do the cool stuff here. We talk about it, but we don’t do it. You might try another church down the street. But I’m not sure if they do the cool stuff either.”

Why is it that the church of Jesus Christ in North America is reluctant to ask God to do the “cool stuff,” as Wimber called it? What exactly does the Bible teach on the subject of healing, and how are we to apply it to our lives today? This morning I hope to address these questions.

**I. The Power of God to Heal.**

For most of chapter 9, Luke has been writing about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who later became the apostle Paul, and the author tells us about the early phases of Saul’s ministry. However, in verse 32 Luke takes us back to the leading figure in the early church, the apostle Peter.

Peter is reintroduced in this passage as he traveled around Palestine. You’ll recall that previously when persecution had broken out, all the apostles decided to remain in Jerusalem (8:1). But now that the church was enjoying a time of peace (since Saul’s conversion) they were free to leave the city without fear. The purpose of Peter’s travels was two-fold: to share the gospel; and to visit new followers of Christ in order to encourage and teach them. On one of these tours, Peter traveled along the western seacoast of Palestine where two particular miraculous events took place in the cities of Lydda and Joppa respectively.

While in Lydda, Peter met a paralytic named Aeneas who had been bedridden for 8 years. The apostle spoke to him and said, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat.” Immediately, the man got up, and he was healed. The news of his healing spread throughout the surrounding area, and when people saw him and heard the testimony of his healing, many turned to the Lord themselves.

The passage also tells us that in Joppa there was a woman who lived there. Her name was Tabitha, or Dorcas (the Greek translation of her Aramaic name). Both names were the respective words in their languages for "gazelle." Luke describes Tabitha as a very special woman who had a heart for the poor and a talent for sewing. But she grew ill, and tragically she died. Her body was washed in preparation for burial, and it was placed in an upper room. They sent two people to Lydda, 12 miles away, who pleaded with Peter to come and help. When the apostle arrived, he sent the mourners out of the room, got down on his knees and prayed. Turning to the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, Peter took her by the hand, and he helped her to her feet. She was raised from the dead. Pretty amazing.

This passage which talks about the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha demonstrates that there is healing power in the name of Jesus. Part of the ministry that Christ began in the world, and His disciples continued after the resurrection, was a ministry of miracles. Death and disease entered the world as a result of the Fall, but Christ came to reverse the effects of the curse and to bring healing and new life to people.

However, we must sadly admit that most of us by and large don't expect much from God in the way of healing. We give Him credit for all the ordinary and even special blessings in our lives, but most of us have a pretty low expectation for God to do anything really great for us. Even though we pray, "Lord, heal so-and-so," if God actually answered our prayer and did so miraculously, we'd probably fall over in a dead faint! Jesus' word to His disciples a long time ago all too often applies to us today, "O, you of little faith."

This passage makes it clear that our God is a God of miracles, and sometimes He wants to work supernaturally in the lives of His children. That was true then, and it's still true today. It's one of the reasons the Session of our church decided to institute a time of healing prayer after every worship service whenever we celebrate communion. We believe that God is still in the business of healing, and we want to join with the Holy Spirit and ask for His power to heal people today in body, mind, and spirit.

## **II. What Do You Do When God Chooses Not To Heal?**

So God has the power to heal. But have you ever had to deal with unanswered prayer? Or, even worse, have you ever had God say "no" to your prayer? I know I have. There are many stories I could tell you of faithful people who have happy endings to their prayer for God's healing power. Amazing things have happened, and I've witnessed them myself. But I can also tell you stories of people who have had folks pray for them with equal fervency and faith, and nevertheless they continued to suffer, and some of them died.

My own son Jason suffered from chronic asthma growing up. Once, a number of years ago, we took him to a leading Christian figure who had the gift of healing. I had personally seen God heal a number of people through the ministry of this man. He prayed over our son, asking that God would heal him. But the next day Jason went into a terrible asthma attack, and he actually got worse after we prayed for his healing!

My father died nearly 40 years ago after a massive heart attack, and I was the one who found him when I came home late one night after being out on a date. I tried to revive him, but it was too late. He had been dead for several hours. After I called the authorities and our family doctor, I went back into my bedroom and knelt down beside my bed. I prayed to God with all my heart and all the faith I could muster, and I said, "Lord Jesus, you raised people from the dead in Your day, and I know You're able to raise my father, too. I pray that You will raise him this night for a spiritual purpose and as a witness to Your power."

When I walked back into the den where his body lay, I was confident that I would see my father alive again. I knew Jesus was able. But when I walked in, I discovered he was as dead as ever. God said "no" in answer to that prayer.

If God is all-powerful and He can heal people, like Aeneas, if He can raise them from the dead, like Tabitha, what are we to make of those times when His answer is "no"? How do we make sense of it all and find a way to move forward in faith? I'm convinced one reason people are reluctant to pray for healing is they don't want to be disappointed. They aren't sure their faith can stand what feels like a rejection from God.

In 2 Corinthians 12, we're given a picture of a person who prayed diligently for healing, but to whom God answered "no" in response to his request. The apostle Paul struggled with what he called a "thorn in the flesh". We're not sure what the physical problem was. But it's clear that the illness was debilitating, and Paul felt that it was limiting his effectiveness in life.

Three times he asked the Lord to remove this thorn, to heal him, but three times the Lord answered "no." Then God added, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in your weakness*" (2 Cor. 12:9). Reflecting on this later, Paul said that his human weakness provided the opportunity for God to demonstrate His divine power, and Paul's physical illness kept him humble before the Lord and before other people.

The reality is that the most faithful believer still gets sick, and all of us will eventually die. Our most fervent prayers are not always answered in the way we hope. Even with Peter in Lydda and Joppa, as far as we know only Aeneas and Tabitha were healed. How many other sick people lived in those towns? Sometimes, the true measure of faith is how we respond to the "no's" we receive from God, trusting that He has a good purpose in it all for us.

The best way I can make sense of what the Bible has to say about these things is that physical healing is intended by God to be temporary witness to the inbreaking power of the kingdom of God in this world, and we should ask for the Lord to do a great work and demonstrate His power with boldness. However, we should never want the healing more than we want God Himself, or more than we want to be in the center of His will, whatever it may be. If our heavenly Father believes we can glorify Him more in a state of illness than a state of health, like the apostle Paul, then our calling is to accept even this as a gift from His hand, and we should use our weakness to lean upon God in a new way.

Healing is faith's reward on many occasions, because faith is confident that when people have done their best and failed, the power of God in Christ is inexhaustible. God is revealed in Scripture as having limitless power and resources, and He regularly demonstrates His strength on behalf of His people. Yet, as Christians we still live out our lives in a fallen and broken world, and we await the time when we will experience the full "redemption of our bodies," as Paul says (Rm. 8:23). That will happen when the Lord returns. In this life, we can enjoy substantial healing, but not total healing. In this life we can enjoy substantial victory over sin, but not total victory – not until Jesus comes again.

### **III. My personal story.**

I've talked a lot in a theological way about what the Bible has to say with regard to these matters, but how do we put it into practice. And what does this look like in real life? I want to share with you a bit autobiographically. This is not intended to say, "Look at me! I've got it all together!", because I don't. Rather, it's to provide an example of a struggling soul who has tried to be faithful to Christ and live out these teachings in Scripture.

When I was 25, I developed rheumatoid arthritis during my first year of marriage to Lorie. She was probably wondering, “Have I got damaged goods here?” I noticed a gradual but increasing pain in my hip that shot down my right leg, and eventually it crippled me. I remember the Sunday morning Lorie had to dress me because I was in so much pain. Eventually, I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, because the blood tests indicated the possibility of the disease, and I responded to the anti-inflammatory drugs.

After months of no physical exercise, once I got on the meds I rejoiced at being able to run and play basketball, and I felt like a kid again. However, there were side-effects to the drugs I was taking, and eventually these began to have a debilitating effect on my body as well. By this time, Lorie and I were in Washington, DC, when I was a pastor in a church there. I was also seeing a rheumatologist who was a Christian and had been a missionary in Africa.

In consultation with him, I approached the senior pastor of my church and the Session and I asked them to lay hands on me, anoint me with oil after the pattern laid out in James 5, and pray for my healing – just like we will do after the service today. The doctor supported my decision. After the elders prayed over me, I began to back off my medication. The pain was gone, and I was healed. Over the last 35 years, I’ve experienced only minor pain in my hip on very rare occasions, and an Advil has been sufficient to address the pain. I believe I experienced a miracle of God’s healing, and I praise His name for it!

Let me tell you another story. Several years ago I had another physical problem which was quite a puzzle. On a Monday, I noticed a pain in my ankle. It felt like I had sprained it, even though there had been no precipitating event that would have caused this kind of pain. By the time I returned home from a committee meeting the next day, I was in a crisis. (Now, some of you may be thinking, “Oh, that explains it. Committee meetings can often be a real pain!”) I called my doctor, somewhat in a panic, because I was leaving the next day for a denominational meeting. Eventually, I was on crutches and unable to walk without a limp.

Over the next 5 weeks, they took x-rays, I tried different drugs, they did an MRI, they gave me a cortisone injection, they drew blood, but no one could quite figure out what the problem was. I remember coming to a point when I realized that there was a chance I might never run or play basketball again, and I have to confess I slipped into a bit of depression over it. It was a time of testing and leaning on God, because it meant losing something very dear to me. That may sound silly to some of you, but those in our congregation who love to play sports understand what I’m talking about.

Then one Sunday, I went to a service of healing prayer at my church. Elders there also anointed me with oil, laid hands on me and prayed. I have to be honest and say that nothing much improved after that for a couple of weeks. However, one day I felt strength in my ankle and an absence of pain unlike I had experienced in quite some time. Gradually, the pain left and I was able to run again and resume playing the sports I love.

Now, to what should I attribute the improvement in the ankle? Was it the healing prayer? Was it the cortisone injection? Was it just a virus that attacked the joint, and it worked its way out? Was it a reoccurrence of the arthritis? Has something gone into remission, or have I been healed? To be honest, I’m not exactly sure. But I do know God is called the Great Physician in Scripture, and whenever healing occurs, whether it is as a result of medical treatment, prayer, or a spontaneous miracle, God is at work to bring healing to the body, mind and spirit. It is for our good, and it is for His glory.

### **Conclusion.**

God can be glorified by healing us of physical disease. I'm convinced of that. And we're praying that God will heal Lorie of her cancer. But He can also be glorified by sustaining us in the midst of suffering. Jesus is more concerned with what is happening inside us, in our spirits, than He is what's happening in our physical bodies. One relates to the other, but God is always more concerned with the interior of the soul, which will last forever, than our outward flesh and bones, which will one day pass away.

Wade Boggs was an All Star third baseman who used to play for the Boston Red Sox. A friend of mine worked as a chaplain to the team, and he told me that for the longest time Wade had no interest in spiritual things. Even when his world was shattered by a moral scandal involving a woman other than his wife that was in all the papers, he still had no interest in God. However, one winter Wade's sister was miraculously healed of MS, and as a result he made a promise to God that he would turn his life over to Jesus. Wade began to attend chapel with the team, and he started coming to the Friday bible study.

Wade Boggs came to Christ because of the miracle of healing in his sister's life. But I would suggest that the real miracle here wasn't the healing of the MS. It was the healing of Wade's heart. God is more concerned with what happens in us than He is with what happens to us. Physical healing is only for a season, but the healing of the soul will last for eternity. Do you need healing in your body today? Ask God for His power to heal. Do you need healing in your heart today? Look to Jesus, for God has the power to heal that, too. Amen.