

“In Sickness and in Health”

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2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

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I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”
-2 Cor. 12:2-10

Have you ever been disappointed by a health outcome? Maybe you’ve prayed for healing and not received it? Or perhaps you really counted on and expected doctors and other medical systems to get you back to health, but despite tests, procedures, and treatments you’re still suffering?

As Christians we live in an uncomfortable tension between praying to God for healing on the one hand, and learning to accept and live with sickness and pain on the other.

Should we pray or not pray? Should we lean into hope of recovery or work on acceptance of what is?

This morning I want to explore where sickness fits in to our Christian theology and how we can understand sickness today in relation to our faith in Jesus.

On the whole we humans like things to be simple: black or white, man or woman, good or bad, sick or well. Our modern medical system sets us up in a simple either/or framework for sickness and health. I use the word ‘modern’ deliberately as opposed to ‘post-modern’ because things are changing, but the western medical model we grew up with is set up to see sickness as bad, as the enemy, and absence of sickness as the only marker for success.

We had a friend out west who was a Palliative Care physician. He talked about how difficult it was for the medical system to get out of their head

that death was always a negative outcome. Palliative Care sees death as a natural part of life and seeks to care for the whole person, instead of just fighting a disease and seeing death as having 'lost the fight'.

But we see this attitude not just with death but also with illness and injury. We have a model or a frame of reference that sees illness as something that is temporary — something that with intervention and time will be over and you will be "as good as new". Just like you take your car to the garage and get a new battery or a new muffler and expect it to be fixed, we have an expectation that our body can be fixed. And certainly, there are some sicknesses and injuries where this does indeed happen. If you go into the hospital with appendicitis at the age of 24 with no other pre-existing conditions, a few weeks after surgery you are likely to be 'good as new'.

But so very often that's not how it works. So often when we develop an illness or condition or have an accident, especially as we get older, we don't go back to 'normal'. Particularly if what we have gone through is significant, like a heart attack or stroke, or a journey with cancer. Often the effects stay a very long time and sometimes for the rest of our lives. Even if you end up in remission, as in the case of cancer, and your body has indeed recovered from the illness, you as a person have forever changed from that journey. In these situations, there is no 'going back to normal'. There is no 'good as new'.

But because of the expectation of full recovery, we experience great disappointment or worse — we feel like either we, our prayers or the medical system "failed".

Friends, we need a deeper and richer world view and faith so that we can better live wholly in sickness and in health. The interesting thing to me is that the scriptures offer a deeper, healthier view—perhaps because they were written long before modern medicine.

Our scripture reading begins with the apostle Paul trying not to boast about himself. He is so committed to not boasting that he says "*I know a man who was taken up to the third heaven.*" It's pretty clear that he is talking about himself. Paul had some kind of a profound vision or experience that took him into the presence of God. It was so incredible that he wasn't sure whether it was just a vision or really happened. He talks about the third heaven – this is the highest heavens – the closest to God – three being a holy number. Jewish people believed in different layers or sections of heaven and the third heaven, (also the 7th heaven, another very holy number), is the holiest and the closest to God.

So Paul is basically telling us, without wanting to boast, that he and God are super tight. They are as close as you can get while Paul is still alive.

And yet it's curious that Paul, as close as he is to God, continues to suffer with something that he calls a 'thorn in the flesh' and a 'messenger from

Satan'. We have no idea what it was he was suffering with. We don't know if it was something physical or something mental like depression or anxiety. People have speculated on just about every ailment and condition you can imagine, but we don't know and we won't know.

What we know is that he had something, it was in some way painful and he wanted it gone. In fact, he prayed that God would take it away. He says he prayed three times—but remember that three is a symbolic number – so he may have prayed earnestly three times or many more times. Despite his prayers, healing didn't come, he isn't fixed and the suffering continued.

We know that the problem was not Paul's faith. People with deep faith suffer from illness. We know this.

Last year my father who was the minister Emeritus at this church became very ill. We were working on one thing—thinking it was pulmonary fibrosis — but it turned out that a cancer he had had 5 years before had returned. It certainly explained how sick he had become in a few short months, and within a month of the cancer diagnosis he died.

The problem was certainly not a lack of faith; nor was it a lack of faith on the part of the many who were praying for him. The Bible says that the “rain falls on the just and the unjust.” (Matt 5:45). In other words, just because we are Christian does not mean we get a better shake at life or are dealt a better hand when it comes to hardships.

Paul gets that. When it comes to hardships Paul is practically an Olympic medalist: he'd been shipwrecked, whipped, beaten, and imprisoned. Paul was not expecting a better deal because he was close with God, but I want you to notice that *he still prays for healing*. Paul does not just think to himself, I've got this thing, it sucks, I hate it, but it must be God's will. No! He prays. He prays earnestly that God will remove it.

That tells me that we too should pray to God to heal us, to strengthen us and restore us. I don't understand why it is that some are healed and others are not. Why some who come to Jesus walk away able to see or walk and why others like Paul are told, “No, I'm not taking this away from you.” The 'why's' in this life are many. Regardless of unanswered questions, we are still called to pray for ourselves and for others. Jesus spent a lot of his ministry healing. He did not spend *all* of his ministry healing – he could have stood on one spot his entire ministry and had a never ending medical/healing clinic and he still would not have healed everyone who needed healing in his country. Nevertheless, wherever he went, Jesus brought healing.

One of my favourite healing passages of scripture is the one where four friends bring a sick friend on a mat to Jesus. But because there is such a big crowd around Jesus, who was teaching in a house, they break open the roof and lower him down.

I want you to imagine being that guy being lowered down to Jesus. Can you imagine the feelings of hope and maybe fear or embarrassment? Or maybe he'd all but given up and wasn't daring to feel anything? Can you put yourself on that mat being lowered down? You can't see the crowds or even Jesus yet, you are looking up and can only see your friends who love you, and whose strong arms are gently but with determination lowering you down to Jesus. Who are those people for you? Who would bring you who are suffering to Jesus? Who would pray for you?

I think it's time we got our prayer wall back up and running. That was a place near the entrance to our sanctuary where people could put their request on a sticky note and pin it to the wall so that others could pray for them.

I believe in the power of prayer. I believe that Jesus healed then and I believe that Jesus still heals now. Whenever you come close to the kingdom of God, healing happens.

Wait, what? First you said healing doesn't always happen, now you're saying it does! *Healing always happens when you come close to the kingdom of God.* Always. It's just not always healing of the body, and it's not always healing the way we want healing.



One of the books I read for my doctorate course is called the *Jazz of Preaching*, which talks about the similarities between jazz and preaching and what we preachers can learn from jazz. One of the things is learning to improvise. There is a delightful story of a time that Wynton Marsalis – who is one of the best jazz trumpeters of all time—was playing a gig and was in the middle of performing a poignant ballad, “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You”, when someone’s cell phone rang out and totally ruined the moment. At least, the cell phone would have ruined the moment, except that Marsalis, on the spot, took the tune and played with it. As the author wrote: “Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note¹” and then managed to bring the song back to where he had left off. Instead of ruining the piece, Marsalis managed to create an incredible and unforgettable experience for his audience.

I don't know why annoying cellphones go off in the middle of a near perfect performance. Even more I don't know why there is suffering or why despite prayer or modern medicine that some conditions linger and are not resolved.

I do know that we are human, and that part of being human is that we have signed up for a lifetime of challenges and blessings.

¹ Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching: How to Preach with Great Freedom and Joy*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), Location 992.

I know that God is right here in the midst of the beauty and the chaos and the hurt and the stress.

I know that God loves you. God loves all of you — your frail and limited body, mind and soul.

God loves you so much that God became human like you. God became fragile and took on suffering and even death so that an entirely new song of resurrection and hope and healing could be heard and experienced.

Paul was healed — not in the way he initially wanted to be healed, but wow, did he have healing!

In the end, it seems that God chose not to heal Paul's body but to heal his relationship with his frail body so that Paul could see that even with a limp, even with suffering, he could experience the fullness of life and the fullness of a relationship with God.

He could also fulfill his life's calling of bringing others into a relationship with God just as well, in fact, better in this context of weakness.

Because in ways that are hard to understand, God shines most brightly through what is small and fragile and weak, like a baby born in Bethlehem, like you and me.