

Does God Still Heal His People Today?

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Many brethren these days are suffering from severe health crises. People are dealing with many problems, some of which are long-term issues. And, these are certainly not unique to our organization at all. If you look at the prayer requests other organizations send out, you'll find this is a common trend. It's not only individuals in the retirement age group. You expect aging will cause more health problems, but there are numbers of people, even small children, who are dealing with ongoing severe, sometimes life threatening health crises.

For us in the Church of God this can be puzzling. If you look at some of the examples we see in the Bible—such as Christ and the apostles, which we'll look at later today—in regard to the subject of healing or if you look back at the promises God gave to Ancient Israel regarding healing, we can scratch our heads and wonder what's going on? We see examples of healing there, but we're not seeing the magnitude of dramatic healings in our lives today. That could cause us to be shaken and even ask the question: Does God still heal His people today? That's what we're going to talk about today. If you would like a title for this sermon, it's:

Does God Still Heal His People Today?

As I mentioned, if you look at the examples in the New Testament, you will see a number of cases where wide scale healings occurred. These were not just individuals who were anointed and some got better quickly, some got better over time, and some just suffered with their problems. You will see many cases where on a wide scale, entire groups are healed instantaneously on the spot with their problems completely taken away.

To start off with, let's look at a couple of those examples. Turn over to Luke 4 and we'll begin reading in verse 40. This is an example involving Jesus Christ.

Luke 4:40. *When the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them.*

41) And demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of God!" And He, rebuking them, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ. (NKJV)

I want you to notice several things in this particular scripture.

Again, on a broad scale, people are healed instantaneously on the spot—all of them. It's not just a few people got better and a few suffered with their problems and other people in between. It's everyone was healed instantaneously on the spot.

Also, notice here that you see the subject of the casting out of demons and healing of physical problems mentioned in the same context together and both are referred to as "healing." We'll look at a number of scriptural examples of this. What I want you to see is oftentimes when the Bible uses the term "healing," the primary meaning is spiritual healing, although it also refers to our physical healing. Yet, we, as physical human beings, when we see the word healing, our brains typically immediately go to "removing my physical aches and pains and making me feel better." Again, that's understandable, but it's important for us to understand that when we look at this subject in the Bible, oftentimes the focus is actually on spiritual healing. You'll notice oftentimes when healing is mentioned, you will see physical and spiritual healing mentioned together in the same context.

Also, turn over to Luke 6 and we'll start reading in verse 17. This is another example of Jesus Christ.

Luke 6:17. *And He came down with them and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases,
18) as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. (NKJV)*

Notice the combination of physical healing and spiritual healing together in the same context with both referred to as healing.

19) And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out from Him and healed them all. (NKJV)

Again, we're not just talking about a few selected people having a supernatural healing. On a broad scale, Jesus healed many people, all of them instantaneously on the spot.

Now, notice Jesus Christ was not the only one who did this. We also see examples of the apostles, which play out similarly to Christ's examples. Turn to Acts 5 where we'll begin reading in verse 12.

Acts 5:12. *And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. (NKJV)*

We'll come back to this comment later in this sermon. Note how it talks about "signs and wonders" being done by the apostles. The reason I'm pointing this out will become important later.

*12b) ... And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.
13) Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.*

14) *And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,*
15) *so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them.*
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. (NKJV)*

Notice again, there is across-the-board, wide-scale, instantaneous healing. And, the casting out of demons and healing of physical health problems are mentioned together. We have physical healing and spiritual healing mentioned in the same context.

Now, turn to Acts 28 and we'll start reading in verse 7.

Acts 28:7. *In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days.*
8) *And 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.*
9) *So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.*
10) *They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary. (NKJV)*

Notice, it says that on this island, everyone who was sick—when the word got out that Paul was healing people—they all showed up and they all were healed across the board.

Now, if you think about that, it can be puzzling when we look at our situation today. We see many faithful, dedicated Christians and they've been anointed, prayed over, had prayer request sent out with many brethren praying for them. Yet, oftentimes in many instances, we don't necessarily see these supernatural healing. Instead, we see people enduring through these issues. Again, this can be puzzling for us. We scratch our heads, wondering, "What's up with this? Are we doing something wrong? What's happening?"

It can be even more puzzling if we look at the promises to Ancient Israel on this subject. As we're about to see, God made promises to Ancient Israel that were even better than this. It wasn't simply being promised that if you become sick, you could be healed supernaturally. Ancient Israel was promised that if they were continually faithful to God, they wouldn't get sick in the first place. They could avoid the whole ordeal.

Now, turn over to Exodus 15:26.

Exodus 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." (NKJV)

Notice here what God says. He's not simply referring to Himself as a healer, as God being our healer. He's saying, "If you are consistently faithful in obeying Him, you won't get sick in the first place. You just avoid this whole issue."

Now, turn to Deuteronomy 7 where we'll see a similar promise made. What we just read in Exodus specifically said that all the diseases the Egyptians had. Of course, the audience God talks to had spent all their lives in Egypt and is now coming out of that. That is their context. We'll see an even broader statement made in Deuteronomy 7, verse 12.

Deuteronomy 7:12. *Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers.*

13) And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you.

14) You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you or among your livestock.

15) And the Lord will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay them on all those who hate you. (NKJV)

Again, now we have a broader statement. It's not just specific to what happened in Egypt. God will take all sickness away from Ancient Israel if you are consistently faithful. Again, when we look at these Biblical examples and look at what we actually witness in the Church of God today, this can be very puzzling. We wonder: What's happened? Why isn't God doing the same thing here? Are we doing something wrong? It can be a very puzzling situation.

First we need to understand both examples I've discussed in their proper context to have a realistic view of them. It is very important and critically important when you look at the promises made to Ancient Israel that you understand the differences between the Old Covenant contract and the New Covenant contract. Oftentimes, we miss aspects of this.

I think most all of us when we think about the differences there, the things that immediately come to mind are, obviously, the animal sacrifices were stopped. We don't do those today. That was clearly part of the Old Covenant contract.

We also know the holy spirit and salvation are including in the New Covenant contract, which is true. Both the holy spirit and salvation were not included in the Old Covenant contract, which is also true. Yet there is more to the story than that.

We also need to consider what I like to call "the definition of blessings." If you're looking at the promises made to Ancient Israel, keep in mind the context of what took place there. This was a physical covenant with a physical nation being promised physical blessings if they obeyed the letter of the law consistently. Salvation was not on the table in the contract with Ancient Israel. There is no ultimate reward. Of course, they have an opportunity later in God's plan. Yet, at that time, the Old Covenant contract was completely a physical arrangement. The essence was: If you consistently obey God, the sky will rain blessings down on you. Your physical life will be a physical utopia. Just read Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 to see that. These chapters list the wonderful things that would happen to Ancient Israel if they consistently obeyed. This includes the statement in Deuteronomy 28:13.

Deuteronomy 28:13. *And the Lord will ... you shall be above only, and not be beneath, (NKJV)*

In other words, as long as Ancient Israel consistently obeyed God, everything physical would go good for them.

Then look at what happened with disobedience, all the curses. There are health problems and other types of trials and adversities, all of which are mentioned in the context of disobeying God. Israel brought these curses upon themselves for going against God's will.

Think about it like this. If all you are offered is a physical contract—you can have this physical life for however many decades you are on this earth—what is the definition of the best deal you can possibly get? That is, to live however many decades you are on this planet having as little pain and suffering as possible and as much pleasure and enjoyment as possible, because, when you die, that's it. I realize God's plan has more to it, but if you're just looking at the terms of this contract, that's all there is.

This is exactly what God was offering them. When you look at Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, God gives them the promises of "If you consistently obey"—which we know they didn't from history, but if they had—God promises to make life a physical utopia for Ancient Israel.

When you skip to the New Covenant where the holy spirit and salvation are put on the table, that is a game changer. This not only changes the reward, it changes, you might say, some of the rules of the game. The definition of blessings in the New Testament contains concepts and promises made that, frankly, go against our physical understanding and our physical nature in this life. Here are some examples: Blessed are you when you fall into fiery trials; Consider it all joy; Blessed are you when they persecute you and say all manner of evil things about you when you're going through grueling hard trials. Those kinds of comments are all throughout the New Testament.

For us, as physical human beings, we often think, "That's not my idea of a blessing. I like the blessings where pain and suffering are taken out of my life and pleasure and enjoyment are given to me. That's what I call a blessing." Don't get me wrong. God certainly does bless us physically even as New Covenant Christians. We have to understand God has a different perspective on the subject. Now, the ultimate reward no longer is how enjoyable this physical life can be. It's being born into God's kingdom as a God-being, being able to rule with Him in a spiritual state where there is no physical pain. That is the payoff there; which has changed from the physical payoff of the Old Covenant. Now, since the reward is greater, greater sacrifice is involved.

Again, you can't take the Old Covenant contract promises made to Ancient Israel exactly as God promised them and think those will play out exactly the same way in the lives of us under the New Covenant contract. It doesn't work that way, because, again, we have to face trials. In fact, later in the sermon, you will see stated as an absolute requirement in the contract for a New Covenant arrangement that we must suffer. We are directly told, "You will have to suffer as Christ suffered." We'll see that later today. Yet, again, this explains the context of the Old Covenant examples I mentioned where Ancient Israel is promised, "If you consistently obey, you won't even get sick."

Yet, what do we do with the New Covenant examples we looked at earlier? Obviously, with Christ and the apostles, the New Testament Church, the holy spirit and salvation are available. What is the context here? It's important to understand this context as well. There was more going on with the healings that took place at that time than just the individuals who had health problems removed from them. It was a much bigger picture than that.

Turn over to Matthew 9:1.

Matthew 9:1. *So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city.*

2) *Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."*

3) *And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!"*

4) *But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts?"*

5) *For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'?*

6) *But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" — then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."*

7) *And he arose and departed to his house.*

8) *Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men. (NKJV)*

Now notice what Christ just said there. There were two separate issues going on here. One was telling the paralytic that his sins were forgiven. The other was physically healing the paralytic. Christ said, "So that you will know that I can really forgive sins

and My claim is legitimate, stand up and walk." This was the evidence that proved that credibility. We'll see a couple examples of that.

Think about it like this. Imagine yourself living in the time Jesus Christ was on earth. You live near where He grew up. You know Joseph and Mary and you've seen Jesus grow up from a little child all of His life. He's a local kid in the neighborhood that everyone has heard of. Now Jesus is in His thirties and he's walking around claiming that He is the God of the Old Testament. He is claiming that He is the one who made the planet, created Adam and Eve in the garden. He is the one who spoke to Abraham and said, "Go that way. I'll tell you when to stop" and, then, told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Jesus Christ appeared in the burning bush to Moses. He parted the Red Sea; He spoke the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. Jesus says that is who He is and now He is in a physical body standing in front of you in your neighborhood. Pretty incredible claim! Isn't it?

Why should the people believe that? Why should the people stop and think, "He's for real," rather than thinking, "I think He's lost His mind. We need to give Him some psychiatric help and lock Him up. I think He's gone a little crazy." Wouldn't that be a natural human reaction to that?

One of the reasons that Christ performed so many miracles like this was to establish evidence of His credibility. Turn with me over to Matthew 11 and we'll see this directly stated in that regard. What we're about to read is the story where John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to Christ to inquire and to verify that Jesus really is the Messiah, or should they look for someone else. Notice here in Matthew 11:1.

Matthew 11:1. Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities.

2) And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples

3) and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (NKJV)

What John's disciples are asking is: Are You the Messiah that has been prophesied that we're waiting for? Notice what Christ gives as His answer to this question in verse 4.

4) Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see:

5) The blind [receive their sight] and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

6) And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." (NKJV)

The vast majority of that list contains the physical healings Christ carried out. In other words, these healings were evidence that Christ was real.

So, there has to be a way to sort out if Christ really is who He says He is. And, as Christ says here, "Go tell John that you witnessed these miracles. John will know what that means."

Understand that providing evidence was part of what was accomplished there. It wasn't just about healing the people. There was a greater purpose being accomplished here of proving who Christ was as the Messiah.

A similar concept is also true of the apostles. Turn over to 2 Corinthians 12. We're going to start in verse 11.

2 Corinthians 12:11. *I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. (NKJV)*

Notice verse 12.

12) Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. (NKJV)

Paul refers to signs and wonders as evidence of a true apostle. Certainly, people in Christ's day claimed titles for themselves as well. To verify that all you have to do is read the letters to the seven churches in Revelation because the letter to Ephesus specifically makes the comment, *You have tested those who claim they are apostles and are not.* What that means is that in the first century church, when the New Testament was being written, it wasn't just the true apostles claiming that title. There were other people, similar to the situation today.

I say "similar to today" because I'm sure you are all aware in the Church of God environment that we have today, numerous people claim to be the two witnesses. We have many more than two of them. Also, many people claim to be apostles or prophets, or those who will train the two witnesses. There are various kinds of titles. I have yet to see anybody calling fire down from heaven, turning water into blood, or stopping the rain. The reason I mention those specific examples is that Revelation 11 records the two witnesses will be able to do these things.

Regardless of how hard someone beats his or her chest saying, "I'm so important. I have this title," if the evidence is not there, that's a problem. The point I'm getting at is Paul refers to this when he says, *You've seen the signs of an apostle.* If you go through the book of Acts, you'll see a number of cases where not only does it give many specific examples of physical healing and other types of miracles the apostles performed, several times, you will see the blanket comment of, *And the apostles performed many signs and wonders.* It's a blanket comment said of all of them.

My point being that these miracles are, again, evidence of the apostles' credibility. Think about the situation. The apostles are not claiming to be the Messiah. They are claiming to be the Messiah's representatives. The apostles actually were adding to the Bible because they wrote the New Testament. They are establishing new teachings, writing new scripture. There has to be a way to sort them out from the frauds and people who claimed they were apostles. That's the major reason for the miracles the apostles' performed. It wasn't simply an issue of the people's deep faith that the apostles could heal so many of them.

If you study those examples, you will find that a good argument can be made that a number of those healed in these situations—such as being on an island and everybody who is sick shows up—how many of those people were actually being called? I'm willing to bet a good number of them weren't being called. That wasn't the purpose for those healings. The healings were evidence of something greater being accomplished. Not that people had such a tremendous faith that everybody was healed. In fact, think about that. Faith is a fruit and a gift of the holy spirit. Does it make sense that a group of new Christians—or even during Christ's ministry when He's healing everybody and almost nobody has the holy spirit—Does it make sense that they have such great faith to be healed that they're beyond every generation since their time? Especially during Christ's time, when no one had been converted yet, because the holy spirit wasn't given until after Christ was killed. God gave the holy spirit on Pentecost after Jesus had been dead and resurrected. Think about it in that context.

Am I saying that God doesn't heal us today? Not at all. Turn over to Psalm 103:3. This is a common scripture we look at when considering the subject of healing.

Psalms 103:3. *Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases,*
(NKJV)

God definitely does make us promises of healing. One of the names He refers to Himself as is our Healer. That is definitely a fundamental part of what God does. In fact, God gives us a specific protocol you might say, and a ceremony that we should perform when someone asks specifically for His healing intervention in his or her life. Let's turn over to James 5, verse 14.

James 5:14. *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.*

15) 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.

16) 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.
(NKJV)

Certainly, God still makes us promises of healing today. He specifically gives us instructions here of what we are supposed to do. You might call it the protocol, the ceremony we should perform if someone is seeking God's healing physically in his or her life. That's certainly something we should do. That doesn't automatically mean—the way I like to put it is—that God is a genie in a bottle. In other words, just because we've gone through these steps that God is obligated to heal us every time.

Think through this logic. If it's as simple as being faithful in obeying God and we've reached out to Him in many prayers and we're asking for healing, if God is obligated to heal us every single time we ask—as we'll see later in the sermon—this violates other scriptures we talked about in terms of the New Covenant contract. It also tends to set up a situation where we can look at God as a genie.

I'm sure you all heard the myths about a genie in a bottle. When someone finds the bottle, rubs it, and lets the genie out, the genie gives that person multiple wishes. The person tells the genie what he or she wishes and, then, the genie has to give him or her the wish.

Based upon this myth, there was a television show in the 1960s that you might have heard about or seen. It was called "I Dream of Jeannie." If you're familiar at all with the show, it starred Larry Hagman, who played an astronaut, and Barbara Eden played the genie. And, as the story goes, he was on a deserted island and finds the bottle. He lets her out of the bottle and she becomes a "Jeannie."

The reason I mention this is if you ever saw the show, Barbara Eden's character routinely referred to Larry Hagman's character as "my master." That's often contained in the myth about genies that the person who lets them out of the bottle is their master or in other words, "my boss." Think about that in terms of our relationship with God. We are never His "boss." God is not a genie that answers to us and we dictate our orders to Him and He has to fulfill those out. God is the boss and we go to Him to make requests of Him. We don't give Him our list of demands of what He has to do. That is the reverse of the relationship we have with God.

It's important that we realize God is not a genie in a bottle. Sometimes His answer—even when we have been faithful, diligently obeyed Him, been anointed, prayed to Him and others have prayed to Him for our healing—sometimes God still says "No" for our ultimate good. Again, God is more concerned about our spiritual well-being than He is our physical well-being. It's important to understand that.

Turn back over to 2 Corinthians 12. This time we'll start up in verse 7. This is, of course, Paul relating this.

2 Corinthians 12:7. *And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.*

8) *Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.*

9) *And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

10) *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (NKJV)*

Now notice here, Paul talks about "a thorn in the flesh." This subject oftentimes has been speculated about as to what exactly Paul refers to here. The Bible, quite frankly, simply doesn't us what it is. The term "a thorn in the flesh" could refer to a number of things. What is most often suggested is that this was a health problem, specifically an eye problem. Again, that is complete conjecture and speculation because the Bible doesn't simply doesn't tell us.

Also, look at this. Obviously, it was an unpleasant trial that Paul wanted to go away. He says he appealed to God three different times to "Please take this away from me." Paul says the answer he received was, "My grace is sufficient for you." Notice Paul did not say, "God's response was, 'Well, Paul, if you just had more faith, if you just got that particular sin out of your life, then I'd take everything away. If you would just perfectly obey, I would be able to do that.'" No, Paul understands God to say, "I think this is better for your overall spiritual development that you have to endure this one."

When Paul mentions here "because of the magnitude of the revelations," think about it. Paul writes more of the New Testament than anybody else. He is the most common author. God gave Paul a lot of revelation. It can be easy for a human being, regardless of how converted they are, to let that pride get hold of them to where they start thinking, "I'm really important and I'm significant." Paul says, "In order to keep that from happening to me, I have this thorn in the flesh." It was better for Paul's ultimate spiritual development and that was more important to God than Paul's physical comfort. Again, per the terms of the contract that Paul made, the ultimate reward is salvation. It's not just having an enjoyable physical life. It's ultimately being born into God's kingdom. As we're going to see, reaching that goal requires us to suffer and to endure through harsh trials that we don't enjoy and we want to go away.

The best way I know to drive this point home to you is the way it was driven home to me. Let me share with you a conversation I had during my junior year at Ambassador College. I was in services one day. My roommate brought me over to an elderly gentleman that he knew and introduced me. Then, my roommate quickly disappeared from the conversation. It was one of things that no one else knew, but I quite frankly needed to hear that conversation that day.

I'm talking with this elderly gentleman I literally just met five minutes earlier. Understand the context of this conversation. He is in his seventies; I am in my twenties because I'm a college student. He's standing hunched over his walker as he looks at me.

At one point in the conversation, he abruptly changed the subject. He looked me in the eye and said, "You know, son, I don't get around as well as I used to. And there are some days, that reality gets me down. You probably know what I'm talking about. But it dawned on me the other day that God is not in the fix-it business. He's in the character building business. If we just trust Him and endure what He puts us through so He can do things His way, He's ultimately going to make us God-beings who live forever without physical pain. So, what's it all really matter anyway?"

This gentleman had no idea I needed to hear those words at that particular point in my life. It really made an impression as you can understand. Here I am over twenty years later and I still remember that conversation almost verbatim. The point this gentleman was getting at is that God is much more concerned about our spiritual development than He is our physical situation. That's very important to understand for New Covenant Christians because when the holy spirit and salvation are part of the contract, again, that changes the entire game. Now, you have to understand the entire focus of the contract is not about our physical comfort and enjoying our physical lives. Our focus is on building the character of God and being born into His family.

That's very important to recognize when you look at this subject, whether you yourself are going through severe, harsh health trials or maybe someone you deeply care about, a loved one, is going through that. It's very easy for humans at times to look through God's word, especially the Old Covenant promises, and try to apply those to our lives. It is, as I like to put it, "We're going to have our cake and eat it too." That's literally what that thinking leads to. "I'm going to have a perfect physical life, have all my problems taken away, and I still get salvation as well." That is not how the contract works. Numerous times this is stated throughout the New Testament.

The reason I mention this is because it is very important when you endure a harsh trial that you have realistic expectations. As I like to put it, "Happiness equals reality minus expectations." If your expectations are that all your problems will be taken away as long as you're faithful, yet, God allows you to suffer and endure through them anyway, what is going to happen? This is a setup for discouragement and disillusionment because you're not looking realistically at what is actually going to happen.

In the New Covenant arrangement, our spiritual development and developing the mind of God requires suffering.

Think about it. What one word do we associate in the New Testament with summing up the very character of God? It's *agape* love. Isn't it? God is love. If you read 1 Corinthians 13, what is the first definition given for *agape* love? *Suffers long and is kind*. How do you do that if you don't have to suffer first? By definition, you can't.

We need to understand the subject of spiritual healing. Turn to 1 Peter 2:19. Before we start reading this, I want to point out a couple of things. One is we're probably all very

familiar with the statement we see in the Bible that says, *by His stripes you are healed*. What we're going to do now is also look at the context of that.

For most of us when we hear that phrase, again, we immediately think of healing in terms of physical healing—my physical aches and pains and having those removed. And, it does refer to that as well. You've probably heard those words quoted if you were ever anointed at some time and an elder was praying over you. He probably mentioned that. I know I oftentimes do.

What I want you to notice as we read through this section of scripture is the context in which that statement is used. What you will see is the primary focus is not on our physical healing. It's on our spiritual healing. Notice in 1 Peter 2:19:

1 Peter 2:19. *For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.*

20) For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. (NKJV)

Notice here we've just read the definition of *suffering as Christ suffered*. In other words, suffering because we've sinned and are facing the consequences of it are specifically excluded. Think about it like this. How did Christ suffer? It certainly wasn't because of His own sins. He never had any. He suffered in spite of the fact that He was righteous. As we're going to see here, this is a fundamental part of our calling because read the next sentence, verse 21.

21) For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

22) "Who committed no [guile], nor was [guile] found in His mouth";

23) who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;

24) who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness — by whose stripes you were healed. (NKJV)

Notice the word "were" in the past tense. We're going to come back to that.

25) For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (NKJV)

Again, let's notice the context of this statement *by whose stripes you were healed* is mentioned in. I'm going to cover these last two verses again.

24) who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness ... (NKJV)

Notice our whole focus here is spiritual.

24b) ... — by whose stripes you were healed.

25) For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (NKJV)

Again, this healing is about their spiritual life. Notice Peter says, *by whose stripes you were healed*. Past tense, this is something that's already happened. Who is Peter writing to? He's writing to a converted audience. In other words, *you were like sheep going astray*, pursuing a totally carnal life. You weren't going God's way at all. Then your eyes were opened, you were given God's spirit, and you were put on the right path. This is part of the spiritual healing to which Peter refers.

If you would, turn back over to Isaiah 53. This is the section of scripture Peter quoted. You'll see a similar focus in how this is laid out in Isaiah 53. We'll start in verse 4.

Isaiah 53:4. *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

5) But 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.

6) All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (NKJV)

Notice the entire focus here is primarily spiritual in nature. God takes those who are going in the wrong direction, following the carnal way of life, and turning them towards following God. It's turning your path in the right direction, primarily referring to our spiritual healing. Not our physical healing.

Am I saying this doesn't apply at all to our physical healing? No, I'm not saying that because turn over to Matthew 8, verse 16.

Matthew 8:16. *When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick,*

17) that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses." (NKJV)

This is quoted from the same verses in Isaiah that we just read. Obviously, Matthew tells us that this refers not only to spiritual healing (casting out of demons) and healing physical problems as well. Clearly, both are included in the meaning of what Isaiah wrote. My point is to show that the primary focus here is our spiritual healing.

Oftentimes, when we see the word healing, as physical human beings our brains immediately go to "removing my aches and pains and making life comfortable for me." Oftentimes, what the Bible primarily refers to is the healing of our minds to follow God.

Turn with me over to Matthew 13 where we can see this being carried out. We'll start reading in verse 10 here. The context of what we're about to read is Christ explaining why He taught in parables. As we know, that was to conceal the meaning. Not to make the meaning easier to understand. No, that's so Christ could conceal the meaning from those whose minds were not open.

I want you to notice, in the latter part of this section we're about to read, what Christ refers to using the word "healing." It's Matthew 13:10.

Matthew 13:10. *And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"*

11) He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

12) For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.

13) Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

14) And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive;

15) For 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, ... (NKJV)

And, notice the last sentence.

15b) ... So that I should heal them.' (NKJV)

"*Seeing with their eyes*" and "*understanding with their hearts*" is referred to as healing.

16) But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear;

17) for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (NKJV)

In other words, what Christ refers to as healing here is being converted, being called to God, having the mind opened up, being given God's spirit, and the opportunity to develop God's character to become more like God. Christ refers to this process as healing. Again, that is spiritually healing our hearts and minds, which is much more important to God than healing our physical bodies, because this has a much more lasting value. Regardless of how healthy you are physically, you'll live a few decades on this planet and then die because your body will wear out. Spiritually, we can live forever. Eternal life is much more important.

It's important that we understand, as I mentioned before, when the holy spirit and salvation are offered and salvation is the reward (not just enjoying a physically pleasurable life), the terms of the contract change. That's very important to understand.

Turn with me over to Romans 8, verse 16.

Romans 8:16. *The Spirit [itself] bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
17) and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, ...
(NKJV)*

Now notice the condition.

*17b) ... if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.
(NKJV)*

To be glorified with Him and to become part of God's family, we have to suffer as Christ suffered. Again, by definition, we saw in 1 Peter 2 how the Bible defines that. It's not suffering because I made dumb decisions and I sinned and now I'm facing the consequences of it. It's suffering even when you have been righteous. The New Testament is very clear to us that this is not an "if." It's a "when." In other words, this is not unusual. It is a normal expectation for a New Covenant Christian. To see this, turn over to 1 Peter 4. We'll start in verse 12.

1 Peter 4:12. *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; (NKJV)*

In other words, don't think this is unusual or don't be puzzle over why this happened. Peter says, "No, this will happen." It's not an "if." It's a "when." Pick up in verse 13.

*13) but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.
14) If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.
15) But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. (NKJV)*

Notice, again, we are eliminating the concept of suffering because you sinned. Peter qualifies this as suffering as Christ suffered. Notice in verse 16:

*16) Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.
17) For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?
18) Now "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?"*

19) Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator. (NKJV)

It required for us to deal with harsh trials because that develops our character. Going through trials, we learn valuable lessons that we couldn't learn any other way. God puts pressure and stress upon us to see if we will still be faithful even when it's difficult, even when it's hard and it's a struggle.

Again, since we're talking specifically about healing, I think it's also good to notice that health trials can be particularly troubling for us as physical human beings. This is something revealed to us in the book of Job. Turn over to Job 2. I'm going to summarize some of the context that leads up to this because I think we're probably mostly familiar with this.

As you know, as the book of Job starts off, God basically challenges Satan to a duel, you might say. God pulls Satan over and says, "Hey, have you noticed my servant Job?" Then a negotiation plays out and God give Satan permission to go after Job. Satan really just turns Job's life upside down and causes him all sorts of trials.

If you notice, Satan begins by killing Job's children. Satan takes away Job's wealth. Satan attacks numerous things along the way. In the initial barrage of trials, Satan does not affect Job's health. Notice what Satan says to God later, Job 2:3.

Job 2:3. *Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil? And still he holds fast to his integrity, although you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause."*

4) So Satan answered the Lord and said, "Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life.

5) But stretch out Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will surely curse You to Your face!" (NKJV)

What Satan is getting at here is "Just let me go after Job's health. Let me get even more personal with him. We'll break Job if You'll let me do that." What Satan reveals here is, again, it can be a particularly unnerving situation for us as human beings when we have to endure harsh physical trials in terms of our health. Basically, you can't escape your own body. There can be many other trials where there are other ways to address those. Yet, if it's in what you have to live in—your own physical body—that comes in ways you cannot manage in the same way as other problems. That's how it can be more personal and unnerving for us. That's important to understand in how we face those.

But it's also important for us to realize that God's ultimate perspective is not on our physical comfort. As physical human beings, that's near top of the list for us. "I don't want to have to endure pain. I want life to be comfortable and enjoyable." I think we all think in that regard. God's primary focus is on our spiritual development. We have to

realize that just as God did with Paul when Paul reached out to God asking, "Take this trial away from me," but God said, "No, it's actually for your ultimate benefit. You'll thank Me later. You're not going to like this now, but I think it's for your ultimate benefit to endure through this."

To illustrate this point, let me share with you another story. Back in the early '90s, still in the days of the Worldwide Church of God, I was attending the Feast in Pensacola, Florida. If you ever attended the Feast sites in those days, this was held in an arena where there were literally thousands of people attending the Feast at this one site. In places like Pensacola where they would do this, oftentimes because of the size and logistics of these facilities, on the bottom floor level close to the entrances, they would have a designated handicap section for people who needed an easy convenient place to sit.

The reason I mention this is in the particular sermon I'm about to relate, the minister mentioned that prior to giving that sermon he had gone down to the handicapped section in the hall. He posed a question to a person there. The minister said he was talking to an elderly gentleman who was sitting in a wheelchair. The minister asked the man this question, "Sir, if you had the power of God today, what would you do with it?" And I've always loved the answer this gentleman gave because I think it's absolutely profound. The older gentleman looked back at him and said, "Well, I'd probably be carnal and I'd go heal everybody." The elderly gentleman certainly realized, facing it himself, the desire to be healed and have physical problems go away and the joy that could be from giving that to everyone else. Yet, he also realized at the same time that he might be depriving them of spiritual value that would be more meaningful and long lasting. That's why the elderly gentleman said, "I'd be carnal and go heal everybody." He admitted, as a physical human being, that was what he would love to do for himself and for his friends, but God knows better and it might actually be bad to heal everyone.

I think it's very important for us to realize that because oftentimes when you look at the subject of someone suffering through a severe health trial—or any kind of trial for that matter—the issue can be bigger than just the person who faces the trial. If you are that person or a close loved one watching someone you care about suffer like this, we think, "Why does that person have to go through this? Why do they have to deal with that?" Many times we're focused on how it affects that one individual or how it affects ourselves. It's also important to realize that what God is working out may be a much bigger picture that goes way beyond just that one individual.

Turn with me to John 9, verse 1.

John 9:1. *Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. 2) And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (NKJV)*

For a moment, let me stop to address one other issue. Even in the modern day history of the Church of God going back multiple decades ago, it was a common idea—

unfortunately even put in some of our booklets—that if someone had health problems or an issue of that nature, it was automatically, one hundred percent an issue of sin. In other words, by virtue of the fact that someone would have a health problem, it was caused by sin. And the healing of that was the forgiving of sin. This was in a 1950s booklet.

Notice here the disciples just posed that very question. The disciples question is, "Who sinned?" Obviously, somebody did because this man is suffering from this. Notice Christ's reaction, verse 3.

3) Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.

4) I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work.

5) As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

6) When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay.

7) And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing.

8) Therefore the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged?"

9) Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him." He said, "I am he."

10) Therefore they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?" (NKJV)

I'll just summarize the rest of this story. If you read through the rest of this chapter, you will see is how the Pharisees reacted to this healing. Christ performs this dramatic healing but the Pharisees don't want Christ to have credit for the healing. They don't want word getting out that Christ is healing people. The Pharisees interrogate this man, his family, and the Pharisees pressure them to change their testimony. The one thing the Pharisees don't want the man or his parents to do is to give credit to Jesus Christ as the one who did this.

The man Christ healed refused to change his story or to play along with the Pharisees. So, the Pharisees disfellowship the man and kick him out of the synagogue. The Pharisees' motive here is political. It's about their power. The Pharisees don't care that this man has been healed and had all these years of suffering removed from him. The Pharisees simply see this healing as a potential political threat to their power and turn on the man who was healed.

My point here is that this man had this health problem, but it affected and revealed things about a much larger group of people outside the individual himself. The Bible shows that health trials—how we deal with those who are suffering with these problems—are useful criteria to evaluate those who will be in God's kingdom.

Turn with me over to Matthew 25. We'll start reading in verse 31. To summarize the context here, if you compare what you see in the rest of Matthew 25 with Revelation 20,

you will find a strikingly similar scene. It portrays the Son of Man judging mankind. The sheep are on the right, the goats on the left. Christ says, "*Well done, thou good and faithful servant,*" to those who are taken into the kingdom and not thrown into the lake of fire. This parable portrays a glimpse of the final judgment, which takes place at the end of the Last Great Day period, or you might say the white throne judgment period." I want you to notice the criteria Christ uses and how He separates who are the sheep and who are the goats. Matthew 25:31.

Matthew 25:31. *"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.*

32) All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

33) And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

34) Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35) for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in;

36) I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; ... (NKJV)

Notice how Christ handled those who were sick and dealing with health trials. How we treat the sick and those dealing with health trials is one of the criteria used to separate those who will born into God's kingdom and those who doesn't. If you read on through this chapter, Christ addresses the goats with a negative version of these things. "You didn't take care of anybody. You didn't visit the sick. You didn't feed the hungry." Christ laid all this out.

Think about it like this. God can accomplish much more through someone having to deal with health problems, who is not being healed. This circumstance can have a greater spiritual value much bigger than the growth of the afflicted individual. This could be an evaluation criteria for how others handle this—how we treat the person, how much care and concern we show them. God is watching all that as well. It's important that we understand that overall context as well.

I think there is another important thing for us to look at as well. At times, you in your life, you have known Christians personally who are devout and sincere. They're that kind of person. Yet, you see them suffer through years of hard times—health trials and other things where the person feels like he or she is just getting beat up. There are times you look at that and ask, "Why does this good person have to suffer through that? Why are they ripped off? Why do they get the bad deal that they have to suffer through all of this? I think that sometimes we have the wrong definition of what is a good deal and what is a bad deal because, again, we're looking at it as physical human beings.

Think of it in terms like this. When James and John go to Jesus Christ and they ask for the choice positions, they say, "We want to sit on Your right and on Your left." Christ looks back at them and says, "Guys, you don't know what you're asking. There's a lot that comes with those positions. Are you prepared to deal with all the trials that are

going to come upon you to receive this?" Of course, young and zealous, the two disciples answer, "Sure, we're ready to take this on." Christ says, "I don't think you know what you're asking." The point I'm getting at is *To whom much is given much is required*, to put it in Biblical terms. In other words, to receive the great reward, you must go through the great trial.

Oftentimes, I think we can be there ourselves or you can watch a close loved one suffer and in your mind, you're thinking, "Why is this good person getting ripped off? Why are they getting the worst deal in all of this?" I think God sometimes scratches His head, thinking, "My children, you don't understand. I'm giving him (or her) the better deal."

Think about all the comments made throughout the New Testament. *Blessed are you when you fall into harsh trial. Blessed are you when all this adversity happens to you.* God isn't kidding. He literally means that is a blessing and there is a reward for enduring that. Think of it in that context because very often I think we look at it from a physical perspective of our aches and pains and our enjoyment in our physical life. We tend to believe that if someone has more physical problems, then, they got ripped off; they got the bad deal. Oftentimes, we're not looking at the long-term perspective that we have to suffer as Christ suffered to ultimately receive the reward of salvation. And, that reward is also tied to how faithfully we endure the trials that are thrown at us.

Brethren, the best way I know to sum this up and, again, to get across this concept because it's most important that we understand God's focus is on our spiritual healing, our spiritual wellbeing much more so than our physical wellbeing. Yet, we, as physical human beings, are oftentimes more focused on our physical comfort, on our aches, our pains, and having those go away.

So, I'll conclude this sermon, again sharing with you the conversation I mentioned earlier. Quite frankly, it always comes to mind with me when I look at this subject. As I mentioned, it was my junior year at AC. I was at services in Big Sandy and I was talking to an elderly gentleman hunched over his walker who was in his seventies. He looked me in the eye and said, "You know, son, I don't get around as well as I used. And, some days that gets me down. You probably know what I'm talking about. But it dawned on me the other day that God is not in the fix-it business. He's in the character building business. And, if we're just patient and do things His way, He's going to ultimately make us God-beings who get to live forever without physical pain. So, what does it all matter anyway?"