

**“Reflections on Healing”**  
**Mark 10:46-52**  
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James Dunn was an icon in Baptist life and a treasured resource for all Americans who have a genuine concern for religious liberty and the preservation of the two clauses in the First Amendment which protect it. He was also a feisty soul who was as loyal in his friendships as he was passionate about issues of public concern. A colleague once said that James was a rottweiler trapped in a chihuahua’s body.

I had the privilege of serving as his pastor for eleven years and partly because I was his pastor, as a member of the board of directors for the Baptist Joint Committee which he led faithfully for twenty years. I had many memorable experiences with James over meals, during travel and in the midst of important work, but one of my strongest memories dates back to the first week he got off a ventilator.

James had an aortal tear and would have died immediately had not a friend at Wake Forest Divinity School sought help. He then spent more time on a ventilator than anyone I have known. It didn’t seem very hopeful for days and weeks, but then he started to improve, got off the vent and went to a regular room at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem.

The first time I saw him after he got off the vent, he was doing a little self-criticism. A friend and fellow leader in Baptist life had called him and said in reference to his healing, “James, doesn’t it make you believe in the power of prayer?” to which James replied with customary spunk, “No, but it does make me believe in the goodness of God!”

He expressed regret at the comeback, but I assured him that his friend would have expected nothing less and added that I liked what he said better, though both claims have their place and both raise questions. We believe prayer makes a difference, but sometimes when people talk about the power of prayer, it seems like they are saying God doesn’t act until we force God’s hand. We believe in the goodness of God, but what do we do when this good God doesn’t heal our loved one?

This may sound like we are overthinking things here, especially if nothing earthshaking is going on in our lives or if our loved one has received the hoped-for healing; but if we are on the other side of life, the side where the deeply-loved and much-prayed-for friend or family member has not gotten well, these are the concerns that eat away at us and threaten to take away our faith or at least alter it irrevocably.

And I would contend that even if we are not struggling with such agonizing concerns, we need to reflect more deeply on the nature of healing in the context of varied experiences. We may one day benefit from such reflection, and even if we don't, we owe it to those who are struggling today.

Our reading from Mark provides fertile ground in which to root such reflection as Jesus heals a blind man named Bartimaeus, and one obvious thing to note here is that healing does take place in the biblical world and in ours.

As the story begins, Jesus and the disciples are leaving Jericho, an ancient city, indeed perhaps the oldest city in the world. Mark says that a man named Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, cries out for help from the side of the road saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The way Mark names the beggar is reminiscent of a line Sheriff J.W. Pepper uses in a James Bond film, *The Man with the Golden Gun*. He says to Bond, "You're that Secret Agent! That English secret agent! From England!" It is redundant as is Mark's reference to the beggar because Bartimaeus literally means son of Timaeus.

Anyway, Bartimaeus cries out for help, the crowd tries to shush him but he perseveres, and Jesus heals him. Healing does take place here in this story and in many other biblical stories. Jesus heals the deaf, blind and disabled. He heals paralytics and people thought to be possessed by demons. He even brings one man, Lazarus, back to life after he has died. And Jesus is not the only one who heals in scripture.

In like manner, healing takes places in our world today. I have known people who lived decades after a diagnosis of metastatic melanoma and a prognosis of no hope. I have known people diagnosed early on in life with forms of diabetes and severe arthritis who were told

they would live short and limited lives but who lived fully well into their nineties. I visited a church member in another setting who was in a coma from which the neurologists said he had zero chance of recovering. The staff thought I was crazy to visit and pray with him until one day I walked in his room and he was sitting up in a chair playing solitaire. “You’re not supposed to be here!” I said, to which he replied rather sheepishly, “That’s what everyone keeps telling me.”

We all know healing does take place. Many of us have personal stories. We usually look for medical explanations for any recovery of health, but even if we find them, does this exclude God from the equation? Can God not work through medical knowledge? In some cases, where a health challenge seems to have miraculously disappeared, there might have been a misdiagnosis, but that is not easy to confirm.

I was diagnosed with a mitral valve prolapse in my heart when I was twenty and had to have antibiotics and other precautions for all sorts of simple procedures, including basic dental work. When I was approaching twenty-seven and preparing for marriage, the person I was marrying, Dana, apparently wanting me to live a good while, insisted that I have a physical, which I had not done in a very long time.

When my EKG came back as abnormal, I was sent to a cardiologist who checked me out and said my heart was in phenomenal condition, asking if I was an athlete. When I told him I ran for a shoe company, he said, “Exactly, you do not have a normal heart. You have the heart of a professional athlete,” to which my wife-to-be eventually replied, “Well, where is all the money then?” But to finish my story, I asked the cardiologist about my prolapsed mitral valve. “You don’t have one,” he said. “Could it have been healed?” I said. “No,” he said, “It was a misdiagnosis.” And I believe that, but who knows?

The bottom line is that there are many ways to explain experiences of healing. There is no way to prove divine intervention or a lack thereof. But whenever we experience healing, we are grateful.

Another thing to note in this story from Mark 10 is that there are certain common details in many healing experiences, but there is no formula or guarantee. Jesus says Bartimaeus is healed because of his

faith. Here faith refers to trust in Jesus and his ability to heal, not cognitive assent to certain claims about Jesus. Bartimaeus reveals a high view of Jesus when he calls him “Son of David” before Jesus heals him. It is a reference to some kingly claim, perhaps even a messianic hope. So, there is some irony embedded in this story as the man who cannot see actually sees more of who Jesus is than his own disciples.

But while Bartimaeus’ faith may include specific beliefs about Jesus, it centers in his trust in Jesus, as revealed in his perseverance. He cries out for help, but the crowd lining the street tells him to be quiet. Previously, when people were trying to bring children to Jesus, the disciples tried to turn them away. Now it is the crowd who wants to perform the role of ecclesiastical bouncer, thus begging the question of who we might attempt to exclude from Christ’s presence.

But Jesus will have none of it, then or now. He welcomes everyone into his presence. He wants the man to come near, and when he does, Jesus asks what he wants him to do. Bartimaeus says, “*Rabbouni* (my teacher), I want to see again.” And not only does Jesus heal him and say his faith has made him well, he follows Jesus. Clearly both the actions of Jesus and the faith of the man are involved in this story of healing, and this would square with many of our stories. It is mostly up to God, but our openness to God’s help is important.

Yet this does not mean that if our loved one is not healed, either his/her faith or ours is not strong enough or for some reason God does not care about us. There is no formula or guarantee. Sometimes the best people we know with the strongest faith suffer and die, many far too young. Even Jesus himself and many of his followers die very young, we might say with a specific purpose in mind, but this does not mean God causes these deaths directly.

My theology professor, Frank Tupper, has said that God always does the most and best God can within God’s own self-chosen limits. That is, if God gives us free will, God will not undo that freedom, even by overriding our bad decisions. And if God creates a world with natural laws, God will not suspend those laws for our benefit. God will do all that God can to help, but the way life works and the decisions we make have some say on specific outcomes. As a result, sometimes we

do not experience the healing for which we long and pray. Some things just don't happen as we wish. It doesn't mean our faith is not strong enough or that God does not love us. It's just the way life works.

So, healing does take place, and both God's goodness and our faith are involved, but there is no formula for when and how. Yet it feels like something is still missing in this reflection because there is. It's not really part of this story from Mark 10, but I think we need to add that God always offers grace in some form, healing in some form, even if it is not the healing we desire. Perhaps this is simply an expansion of Dr. Tupper's insight – God always does the most God can - and this always makes a difference.

I have known people who did not get well, but whose forced confrontation with finitude provided the motivation to reconcile with someone they had been alienated from for years. I have known people who experienced no healing of the body, but found a kind of mental and spiritual peace they had never known before. God doesn't make us physically ill so that we can grow in other ways, but God can help us to grow in the midst of struggle. As the Apostle Paul says to the church at Rome, God is always working for good in the midst of all things (Romans 8:28). God works miracles in many different ways.

In his book *The Philippian Fragment* Calvin Miller includes the writing of a fictional early church leader who reflects on the early church in a way that speaks to the contemporary church. In one chapter, he begins by referencing his disdain for a faith healer named Hiram of Hellepoint who claimed that anyone who touched his sequined toga would be instantly healed. He lost favor in West Asia when he could not get relief from a toothache.

Another healer the author admires - Helen of Hierapolis. She came to Philippi with a conviction that God loves those who suffer and a desire to participate in that love. She didn't even try to heal a group of blind beggars she passed but gave each of them a new cane and reminded them that the curbs on Caesar's Boulevard were very high.

One day she passed an amputee selling styluses. She touched his legs and cried, "Grow back! Grow back! In the name of Jesus of

Nazareth, grow back!” She waited a moment and nothing happened. So, she sat down, crossed her legs on the cold pavement and started selling styluses with him. Soon they were talking and laughing together, having a wonderful time. When it was time to go, she had a little trouble standing, and the man said, “Grow strong! Grow strong! Grow strong!” and she staggered to her feet.

Then, she looked down at her new friend and said, “I offer you healing, you will see. It is only one world away. Someday...” she stopped and smiled, “you will enter a new life and you will hear our Savior say to your legless stumps, ‘Grow long! Grow long!’ And then, you will know that glory Sister Helen only dreamed for you.”

The man smiled and said, “Do you heal everyone this way?” “It is better to heal with promises than to promise healing,” she said to which he replied that she was right, but more than that, she was evidence that God heals the spirits of those who suffer even when their suffering cannot be undone.

It’s just a fictional story and yet it is true. God does offer healing in some form to all who suffer – sometimes in a physical way, sometimes in the gift of friendship and laughter, sometimes in the hope of eternity - but God does offer to heal our spirits in the midst of whatever suffering we face if we will allow God to do so.

So, in the end, it’s “O.K.” to believe in the power of prayer and the goodness of God, it is more than “O.K.” as long as we leave room for God to choose the path of healing.