

HEALING IN THE CHURCH

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Alas, I have never seen a medically-verifiable miracle of healing. I have often prayed for people to be healed. Indeed, there have been occasions when I have followed the injunction of James 5.13-16 and taken some of my church leaders into people's homes and prayed for the sick, but in spite of our prayers we have not seen a real miracle of healing take place. I have seen people get better – but not permanently. I have seen people helped – but not physically healed as a direct result of our prayers. And yet I have met many people who claim to have seen God work amazing miracles of healing. Some of these claims I respect; but, if the truth be told, many test my credulity: why, even this week I was told of a lady who had prayed for her dog, and the wart on its nose had vanished! A further personal complication in this healing business is that for years I have suffered chronic back-pain: and although I have been prayed for on countless occasions, my back still gives me problems. So does God heal today? I believe he does. But, my experience is that God acts through normal medical and surgical skills as much as through prayer; or rather, that he works through medical and surgical skills together with prayer. So, when James urged church elders to pray and rub olive oil on the sick, the oil was the 1st century equivalent of deep heat treatment and sticking plaster, as we see for instance in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10.34). In other words, for James prayer went hand in hand with medical treatment – James did not view prayer as the last resort when all else failed. This does not mean that God limit himself to normal medical practices: there are times when the skill of doctors and nurses only goes so far, and God in his mercy goes even further. But, as we know all too well, God does not always heal our loved ones. Healing, like suffering, is a mystery. Sadly, there are some misguided Christians who believe the key to healing lies in our exercise of faith, and that if prayers are not answered then it is because we have not prayed with sufficient faith. However, although clearly faith has an important role to play – indeed, James boldly declares that “prayer made in faith will heal the sick” (5.15) – faith in itself heals nobody. Faith is but a channel for the healing power of God. Sometimes God allows our faith to become a channel for his healing, and sometimes he does not. Why God heals some and not others, I don't know. And yet I dare to believe that God does always answer prayer. He may not answer it in the way in which we want, but answer he does. This was Paul's experience – for instead of removing his 'thorn in the flesh', God gave him strength to cope. What was true for Paul, has been true for many others. Through his Spirit God has held people's lives firm, even when they had to go through the most appalling tragedies. God has kept their spirits serene and trusting, even when everything has seemed to go wrong. This surely is as much a 'miracle' as physical healing.

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