

CHRISTIANS AND SICKNESS IN THE PRESENT AGE

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The "Word of Faith" movement has insinuated itself deeply into Pentecostal churches and the Charismatic movement generally over the last two decades. A central tenet of this group's theology is that God wills for every Christian to be completely free of all illness and disease in this present life. Accordingly, any Christian who is not experiencing perfect health is lacking the faith necessary to appropriate God's promise. Several arguments are made in support of the claim that God has promised complete health for Christians in the present age, but all of them are flawed.

ARGUMENT 1: It often is argued that since disease was one of the curses promised for disobedience to the law (Deut. 28:21-22), when Paul wrote in Gal. 3:13 that Christ redeemed us from the "curse of the law" he was affirming that Christ secured for all Christians a complete freedom from illness and disease in this life. That is a misunderstanding.

It should first be noted that the curses of Deuteronomy 28 were promised to the people of Israel as a warning prior to their entrance into Canaan, the land in which God was planting them as a nation to be a light to the world. These curses never had any applicability to Gentiles because the Mosaic law was not given to them (Rom. 9:4), so any illness or disease suffered by Gentiles was not God administering the curses of Deuteronomy 28. It was either a consequence of the Fall, by which all of creation became subject to death and decay (Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:20), or God doing (by decree or permission) some other work among them. Since Gentiles were never cursed with illness or disease for failure to obey the Mosaic law, whatever the redemption from the curse of the law mentioned in Gal. 3:13 means, it cannot mean Gentile Christians were freed from the Mosaic curse of illness and disease. Therefore, the verse is irrelevant to the claim of total health as it applies to the vast majority of Christians today and throughout the ages.

The historical context of the letter to the Galatians is that Paul and Barnabas had made converts among the Gentiles in the southern part of the province of Galatia during their first missionary journey. After they left, some Jewish Christians entered the area and taught, with some success, that those who become Christians must submit to the Jewish law in order to be saved (see, Acts 15:1, 5).

Part of what led the Judaizers to their view was that some within Judaism gave the Mosaic covenant priority over the Abrahamic covenant and exalted it to the point that works of the law, the commands of the Mosaic covenant, became the basis of one's relationship with God and thus the basis of one's inheritance (Lk. 18:9-14; Rom. 3:27 - 4:8, 9:30 - 10:8; Gal. 2:16, 3:2, 5, 10; Phil. 3:2-11). Such an interpretation impermissibly changed the prior Abrahamic covenant by canceling out its promissory character (Rom. 4:13-17; Gal. 3:15-18).

This exaltation of the Mosaic covenant made them resistant to the fact it had been rendered obsolete. They clung to it as an indispensable aspect of salvation, an attraction reinforced by their sense of nationalism. Since the Mosaic law was tied to the Jewish nation and

Jewish identity, salvation apart from the law diminished their significance. Salvation was not tied to Jewishness in the same way it had been. This clinging also was reinforced by some political realities. From the late forties until the outbreak of the Jewish war in A.D. 66, the Zealots sought to purge Israel of all Gentile elements in the hope that God would then bring in the Messianic Age. Their activities were directed against all who had Gentile sympathies. This created pressure on Jewish Christians to want the church to be as Jewish as possible.

Paul wrote the letter to reverse and to prevent the Galatians' defection to the Judaizers' false doctrine. He stated in Gal. 3:10-14:

¹⁰For as many as are [relying on] works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all the things written in the Book of the Law, to do them." ¹¹Now it is clear that no one is pronounced righteous before God by the law, because "The righteous from faith shall live."
¹²But the law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse on our behalf -- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" -- ¹⁴in order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, in order that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

This section is a rebuke of the Judaizers and their converts. Those who rely on their submission to the Mosaic law for righteousness are under a curse because they do not continue to do everything written in the book of the law. In other words, their obedience to the Mosaic law is not flawless. That is inevitably the case, which is why Scripture makes clear that no one will be pronounced righteous *by the law*. It says instead that "The righteous man shall live *by faith*," and the law is not based on faith; rather, it is based on performance: "The man who *does these things* will live by them."

In redeeming Jewish Christians from the curse of the law, Christ rescued them from the punishment their disobedience deserved under the law by taking that punishment on himself, becoming a curse on their behalf in his crucifixion. (Jesus likewise redeemed Gentile Christians from the punishment they deserved for their sin, their violations of the law of the heart [Rom. 2:14-15] – what analogously could be called the "curse of the law [of the heart]" – but Paul is addressing a situation in which Gentile Christians are being pulled into Judaism so that point was not relevant.) Though forgiveness was available in association with the sacrificial system of the old covenant, and thus the punishment/curse could be avoided by the faithful prior to Christ's coming in history, it was based on the atoning death of Christ. His work is the basis of all divine forgiveness and thus the true means of release from any consequence for disobedience. All prior forgiveness (curse avoidance) was "on credit" so to speak; it was possible only because Jesus was coming. And with his coming, the covenant of which the law was a part has been rendered inoperable and the sacrifices by which forgiveness was appropriated under that covenant are no longer valid.

Paul in v. 13 probably quotes a stock Jewish Christian confession when he says Christ redeemed the Jews ("us") from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, the implication being that Christ cannot properly be used to bring Gentiles under the law. Having employed this

stock confession, Paul focuses in v. 14 on the reference to Christ's death rather than on the reference to Jewish redemption from the curse of the law. The death that redeemed the Jews from the curse was died in order to extend the blessing of Abraham, which is by faith (vv. 7-9), to the Gentiles; that death was died so that all nations, Jew and Gentile ("we"), might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. It is inconsistent with this purpose to make the law an essential part of salvation, because the law is not based on faith (vv. 11-12).

This does not mean *Jewish Christians* are promised complete health in this life. In the first place, Paul in Gal. 3:10 refers to the unspecified curse of Deut. 27:26 not the specific curses of Deut. 28:15-68, which are tied expressly to Israel's presence as a nation in the Promise Land. Notice how the blessings promised in Deut. 28:11 are linked to the land: *And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give you.* Deuteronomy 28:20-22, 45-52, and 61-65 make clear that the curses of pestilence, sicknesses, and affliction would be administered only until the nation was destroyed by conquest and exile from the land, which occurred thousands of years ago. Indeed, it is declared in Deut. 28:45-46 that all the curses will come upon them, culminating in their destruction as a nation, and that the occurrence of those events will stand as a sign and wonder against them and their descendants forever. In other words, the judgment God foresees he is going to execute on the nation, which was completed in the conquest and exile, will be a perpetual monument of his amazing punishment of their rebellion.

So the curses of Deuteronomy 28 were specific to Israel's initial planting in Canaan and were exhausted with Israel being scattered among the nations. Whatever illness and disease the Israelites experienced thereafter would be for discipline or some other divine purpose (whether by decree or permission) or as a consequence of their living in a fallen world, not as a pre-exile punishment in service of the nation's special mission. The curse placed on creation at the Fall (Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:20) will not be removed until the consummation (Rev. 21:1-4, 22:3; Rom. 8:21-22). As put by Simon Kistemaker, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 582:

After Adam and Eve sinned in Paradise, God pronounced a curse on creation and the human race (Gen. 3:17-19). And this curse remains in effect until the restoration takes place and everyone can freely take fruit from the tree of life. Then the sad history of sin and its consequences will have ended, never to be repeated. The curse will forever be lifted through the sacrificial death of the Lamb on Calvary's cross.

Secondly, even if the curse of the law from which Jewish Christians were redeemed by Christ's death still included illness and disease, there is no reason to insist that this element of redemption is experienced fully now, before the consummation at Christ's return. After all, other consequences of sin are dealt with according to the fundamental eschatological framework of "now and not yet," meaning those blessings of sin's defeat are present now in a limited sense and will be experienced fully only in the eternal state. For example,

- Eternal life is **now** (Jn. 5:24, 6:47; 1 Jn. 5:11, 5:13) and **still to come** (Mat. 19:29, 25:46; Mk. 10:30, Lk. 18:30, Rom. 6:22; Gal. 6:8; Tit. 3:7; Jude 21)

- End of the ages is **now** (1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26) and **still to come** (Mat. 13:39-40, 13:49-50, 28:20; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; 1 Cor. 2:6; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:21, 2:7, 5:16; Heb. 6:5)
- Redemption is **now** (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14) and **still to come** (Lk. 21:28; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30)
- Salvation is **now** (Rom. 8:24; Eph. 2:5, 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:21; Jude 3) and **still to come** (Acts 15:11; Rom. 5:9-10, 13:11; 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:9; Heb. 1:14, 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5)
- Adoption is **now** (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 3:26, 4:6; Heb. 12:7-8) and **still to come** (Lk. 20:36; Rom. 8:23)
- Death's defeat is **now** (2 Tim. 1:10) and **still to come** (1 Cor. 15:26)
- New creation is **now** (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15); **still to come** (Rom. 8:19-23; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21:1-4)

This understanding that Jewish Christians were not promised complete health in this life is confirmed by the fact the Apostle Paul, a spiritual giant and a Hebrew of Hebrews, was subjected to a bodily ailment that was such a difficult condition it proved to be a trial for the Galatian Christians (Gal. 4:13-14; see also 2 Cor. 12:7-9). That Paul felt no need to explain anything when reporting his ailment shows that it raised no theological questions for him or his readers. If his ailment were the result of his failure adequately to trust in Christ's atoning work, it is hard to imagine he would not acknowledge that failure in some way.

Similarly, when the Lord's brother James asked the Jewish Christians to whom he was writing if anyone among them was sick (Jas. 5:14), he said nothing about sickness being due to a failure to claim the complete health Christ has made available. Again, this silence makes no sense if illness was a product of an inadequate faith. Given the concern over health, why not tell or remind the recipients that there is no need for them to be sick if they would receive in faith the healing already provided? That is crucial information to leave unspoken in this context.

Many faithful Christians who lacked the Jewish pedigree of Paul and James also are reported in Scripture to have been subject to illness and disease. Dorcas/Tabitha was a disciple full of good works and acts of charity (Acts 9:36); yet, she became ill and died (Acts 9:37). Epaphroditus was Paul's fellow worker and fellow soldier (Phil. 2:25) and one whom the Philippians were instructed to honor (Phil. 2:29); yet, he became so ill he almost died (Phil. 2:26-27). Timothy served with Paul in the work of the gospel as a son with his father (Phil. 2:22); yet, he had stomach problems and suffered frequent ailments (1 Tim. 5:23). Trophimus accompanied Paul on his missionary travels (Acts 20:3-4, 21:29); yet, he was left ill at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20).

All of these illnesses are mentioned without comment. There is no record of surprise, no acknowledgement of a failure of faith, and no exhortation to return to a proper, illness-preventing faith. In the course of urging the Philippians to receive back Epaphroditus as an honored servant, if his illness was understood to represent a failure of faith, a failure to adequately trust in Christ's atoning work, Paul certainly would have explained why that failure did not negate his being worthy of honor. If Timothy was suffering stomach problems and frequent ailments because of some kind of failing of his faith, Paul certainly would have offered advice or instruction on that matter instead of recommending that he drink wine! Paul was quite willing in 1 Cor. 11:29-32 to

declare that the illnesses (and deaths) afflicting the saints at Corinth were divine discipline for their disobedience regarding the Lord's Supper. If his illness or that of Epaphroditus and Timothy were the result of a flawed faith, he would be no less willing to identify that failure so as to instruct his readers in the path of blessing.

It makes far more sense to recognize that illness – like trauma, aging, and death – is a phenomenon of this fallen world that has "not yet" been finally removed but will be at the consummation of the kingdom at Christ's return. Indeed, why think that death, mourning, crying, and pain endure to the consummation (Rev. 21:4) but not the crying and pain attendant to illness, sickness, and disease? The words of the Charismatic scholar Gordon Fee in *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing; Kindle Edition), Location 413-439, are spot on:

The problem in Corinth, and that which the wealth and health gospel is repeating, was to emphasize the "already" in such a way that they almost denied the continuing presence of the world. They saw Christ only as exalted, but not as crucified. They believed that the only thing that glorified God was signs and wonders and power. Because God heals, He must heal everyone. There is no place for weakness or hunger or thirst for this kind of eschatological existence. . . .

Thus the "perfect health" evangelists simply repeat the Corinthian error. They find it impossible to live in the tension between the already and the not yet. Because God has already brought the Kingdom, they demand all of the future in the present age – except for the final resurrection. But 1 and 2 Corinthians stand over against the *over-realized* eschatology of theirs. Paul lived out a free, joyous existence in the already (in both want and plenty, in both sickness and health), because he knew that God had secured his life for the future – even though it was not yet fully realized. "Death is ours," Paul says, and yet we still die. So with healing. It is ours; yet our bodies are not yet perfected. And in this present age, even some of God's choicest servants continue to be perfected through suffering, as was the Son of God Himself (Hebrews 5:8-9).

ARGUMENT 2: It is often argued that the reference to Isa. 53:4 in Mat. 8:17 and the reference to Isa. 53:5 in 1 Pet. 2:24 prove that Christ's atoning death provided physical healing in the same way it provided forgiveness of sin and that complete health is therefore presently available for all who will receive it. This too is a misunderstanding.

First, the conclusion of this argument, that complete health is *presently available*, does not follow from the claim that Christ's atoning death provided physical healing. His atoning death is the basis for the immortalization of our bodies for the eternal state, and yet that transformation awaits his return in glory. So it cannot simply be assumed that a blessing will be fully experienced in the present because it was procured by Christ's death. That must be demonstrated.

Second, the reference to Isa. 53:4 in Mat. 8:17 makes no mention of Christ's atoning death. Rather, Matthew clearly is saying that the Isaiah text was being fulfilled *in Jesus' earthly ministry* as he performed the kind of healings reported in Mat. 8:1-16. That fulfillment of

Scripture bears witness to Jesus' identity as the Messiah, a prominent theme in Matthew. The healings also testified to Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom by illustrating in his ministry the kingdom's character and providing a foretaste of how the consummated kingdom will be for all who share in it. Only then will God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mat. 6:10). David Turner comments in *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 235-236:

As indications of kingdom authority, the healings are tokens of the ultimate eschatological results of Jesus' redemption. Some Christians have made too much of this, taking it as supporting the notion that Christians need never be sick, that physical healing is in the atonement. Yet this must be qualified by pointing out that such healing is universally and fully experienced only during the future aspect of the kingdom, when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. There are individual instances of healing in the present age, but these are only temporary and do not warrant the teaching that Christians can simply name and claim their healing because it has already been guaranteed by the atonement. Matthew 8:17 connects Isa. 53:4 to Jesus's earthly ministry, not to his atoning death. The point of the miracles is to stress Jesus's unique messianic authority, not the therapeutic blessings he brings to his people.

John Piper similarly remarks in his sermon "Christ and Cancer":

The answer to why Jesus did not raise all the dead is that, contrary to the Jewish expectation, the first coming of the Messiah was *not* the consummation and full redemption of this fallen age. The first coming was rather to purchase that consummation, illustrate its character, and bring a *foretaste* of it to his people. Therefore, Jesus raised some of the dead to illustrate that he has that power and one day will come again and exercise it for all his people. And he healed the sick to illustrate that in his final kingdom this is how it will be. There will be no more crying or pain any more.

Third, 1 Peter 2:24 does not refer to the healing of physical illness or disease. Verses 24-25 state, *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, in order that, having died to the sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you were healed.* ²⁵*For you were going astray like sheep, but you have now turned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.* Fee explains as well as any why the text does not support the claim that complete health is a present entitlement of Christians (*The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, Location 282-307):

The citation of Isaiah 53:5 in 1 Peter, on the other hand, does not refer to physical healing. The usage here is metaphorical, pure and simple. In a context in which slaves are urged to submit to their evil masters—even if it means their suffering for it—Peter appeals to the example of Christ, which Christian slaves are to follow. This appeal to Christ, beginning at verse 21, is filled with allusions to and citations of Isaiah 53, all of which refer to Christ's having suffered unjustly as the source of the slave's redemption from sin. Thus Peter says: "He himself bore our sins (Isaiah 53:12, cf. 53:4 in the Septuagint)... that we might die to sin." He then goes on: "By his wounds you have been healed (53:5), for you were as sheep

going astray (53:6)." The allusions to both verses 5 and 6, joined by for and referring to "sheep going astray," plus the change to the past tense, all make it abundantly clear that "healing" here is a metaphor for being restored to health from the sickness of their sins. Such a metaphorical usage would be natural for Peter, since sin as "wound," "injury" or "sickness" and the "healing" of such "sickness" are thoroughgoing images in the Old Testament (see, e.g., 2 Chronicles 7:14; Psalm 6:2; Isaiah 1:5-6; Jeremiah 30:12-13, 51:8-9; Nahum 3:19). Furthermore, the Old Testament citations in 1 Peter rather closely follow the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament), even when this translation differs from the Hebrew; and the Septuagint had already translated Isaiah 53:4 metaphorically ("He himself bore our sins," rather than "our sickness").

ARGUMENT 3: It also is argued that God has promised to answer prayers of faith and therefore has committed himself to provide complete health in the present for those who seek it in faith. This fares no better.

Prayer certainly can change what God does (e.g., Mat. 7:7; Jas. 4:2, 5:16b), but as with much in theology, there is more here than meets the eye. God has a plan, and he is taking his creation to the end he determined; nothing can stop that. In the outworking of his will, there are some things he will do and some things he will not do, no matter what. In other words, God will or will not do certain things regardless of whether anyone asks that they not be done or that they be done. But within the breadth of God's will, there are many things he chooses to do or not to do on the basis of prayers, actions he chooses to condition on our requests.

This is the idea behind 1 Jn. 5:14-15: *This is the assurance we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.* This is what Jesus meant in the Garden when he prayed "if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me," and then added, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Mat. 26:39).

We do not know if many of the things for which we pray are consistent with God's will, with how he is working to achieve his overarching purposes. We know what we want and what seems to us like a good idea, but we simply are too limited to comprehend God's working or to see all the ramifications of what we are asking. Paul, for example, prayed three times for the Lord to take away his "thorn in the flesh," but the Lord's answer was "No," saying instead that his grace was sufficient for Paul because his power was made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:8-9). Someone has written:

I asked for strength that I might achieve;
He made me weak that I might obey.
I asked for health that I might do great things;
He gave me grace that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy;
He gave me poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;

He gave me weakness that I might feel a need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
He gave me life that I might enjoy all things.
I received nothing I had asked for;
He gave me all that I had hoped for.

By saying "if it is your will" we simply are saying that we acknowledge God's supremacy and the inscrutability of his working (e.g., Rom. 11:33-36) and that we accept his answer in the matter. Such prayers are not faithless or prayers of doubt. That would be very serious given that faith is a requirement of effective prayer (e.g., Mat. 21:22; Jas. 1:6). Rather, they are prayers of faith because we have every confidence in God and in his wisdom, his love, and his power – we just realize our own place and our limitations. We have no doubt God will give what we ask if it is in our best interest and not contrary to a higher purpose we do not perceive. If a child asks his father to go get some ice cream and adds, "but only if you think it is right," that in no way reflects poorly on the father or indicates a lack of trust in him.

This is part of what it means to pray "in Jesus' name," which Jn. 14:13-14, 15:16, and 16:23 indicate is a condition of effective prayer. To do something in someone's name means, in part, to do it in a way that is consistent with their character, a way that represents how they would do it. In this sense, praying "in Jesus' name" approaches the idea of praying according to God's will. The requirement that prayer be offered "according to God's will" also is implicit in the oft-stated requirement that prayer be offered in faith. As Craig Blomberg says about Mat. 21:22 in *Matthew*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 318, praying with faith ("if you believe") *presupposes* that we leave room for God's will to override ours. It does so because the faith of the disciple is in a God who is sovereign.

Scripture identifies a number of other conditions for prayer to be effective. It must be offered by a righteous person (Jas. 5:16b; 1 Jn. 3:22), meaning one who is living in covenant loyalty, it must be offered with proper motives (e.g., Mat. 6:5-6), and it must be offered out of a desire to glorify God rather than to indulge selfish desires (Jas. 4:3). It also must be offered by one who forgives others (Mk. 11:25; see also Mat. 6:12-15) and who seeks the forgiveness of those he has wronged (Mat. 5:23-24).

Because Jesus taught his disciples there were conditions to effective prayer (which was consistent with Jewish understanding), they would not have been expected to take literally his unqualified statements that God will grant whatever one asks in faith. They would have understood that Jesus spoke without condition or qualification on those occasions to drive home forcefully the point that the Father delights in answering the requests of his children. Cataloging the understood conditions would have detracted from the point the Lord was emphasizing. One can imagine a father wanting to emphasize the giving nature of his heart toward his child saying to her, "I will get you whatever you want." He would do so with the unspoken understanding that he would not get something he considered dangerous or morally harmful to her. He would leave that condition unspoken because it would rhetorically blunt the point he was stressing.

Robert Stein expresses it this way in *Difficult Passages in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 80:

In conclusion, Jesus' promises on prayer should be interpreted as broad general statements meant to emphasize God's readiness and desire to hear and answer the prayers of his people. Built into these statements is the understanding that believers should pray only for those things that will be good for their well-being, or, what will be in accord with God's will. At times believers may not even know for what or how they should actually pray (Rom. 8:26). In so praying they know that when they ask, they shall receive.

The question then is whether God has revealed that it is his will for all Christians to be free in this life from all illness or disease such that all prayers for healing will be granted. The responses to Arguments 1 and 2 make clear that he has not. As even Fee acknowledges (*The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, Location 330) (emphasis supplied):

[T]he crucial question is whether God specifically wills all Christians to know perfect health. If that were true, *and there is not a text that supports it*, the "failure" to be healed miraculously would indeed be a failure of our faith. But if it is not true, *and it does not appear to be so*, then faith not only believes specifically for healing, but also knows how to trust God when the effects of the Fall continue to be very much with us.