

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Health and sickness

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! This morning let's reflect on a theme that's relevant to every one of us. The subject is health and sickness. We all want to be healthy, but the reality is that we become sick from time to time. Some people live with health issues all their lives. As we all grow older, we all have to come to terms with increasing weakness, frailty, and eventually, death.

For a Christian, we know that God has the power to heal us and remove our sickness if he chooses to. We read in the Bible of miraculous healings, where sick people were made well. Jesus healed sick people, and so did his apostles.

What should we expect God to do? What should I expect God to do when I'm sick, or when someone I love is sick? This question is a painful one, and a perplexing one, for many people. Stay with us, and after this song let's consider what the Bible says about health and sickness.

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A few years ago I had an experience as a pastor that taught me many lessons. It centred on a man we will call 'Andrew'. Andrew was about 40 years old. He was married, with young children. Andrew and his wife were Christians. About 5 years earlier Andrew's wife had serious cancer, and they were afraid she would die. But after a lot of prayer and chemo, the cancer went into remission and she recovered. But later the cancer re-emerged, and Andrew's wife was obviously dying. They both claimed promises from the Bible that God heals his people when they have faith in him. Even when she became very weak and seemed close to death, this couple still believed God would heal her.

In desperation Andrew contacted a Christian healer in Africa, and paid for him to fly to Australia. This African man had, reportedly, healed many people and even raised the dead. Before the man arrived Andrew's wife died. Andrew arranged a session for the African man to come to an open viewing of the body and pray for her to come back to life. She remained dead. This all made the wife's parents and siblings very upset – they were not Christians, and they wanted to grieve and come to terms with death rather than watching this refusal to accept death. Andrew himself needed to accept that his wife was now dead, and at peace in the presence of the Lord she loved.

That experience made me grapple with many questions. What is the expectation Christians should have when another Christian is sick and dying? What is the expectation I should have about my own health and healing when I face illness or physical frailty? Christians have differing expectations about health and healing. On the one extreme are people like Andrew, who believe, on the basis of promises from the Bible, that the Lord wants to heal his people of all their diseases and sicknesses (cf. Ps 103:3 'The Lord heals all your diseases').

On the other extreme are Christians who, when faced with illness, don't expect any direct intervention from God, but instead consult with health care professionals like doctors and chemists (cf. King Asa in 2 Ch 16:12 – 'King Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians.' This doesn't mean, of course, that Christians

shouldn't seek medical advice. It simply reminds us that we should pray to God when facing sickness, and not rely only on human intervention.). Then there is a whole range of positions in the middle, where Christians accept both weakness, suffering and death, along with an expectation of God's saving interventions. Our question this morning is: which view is correct? What does the Bible teach us about health and healing?

This is a vast topic, and the Bible has much to say. This morning we'll confine ourselves to a few key texts from God's Word. Let's consider this more after the next song.

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This morning we're considering the theme of health and sickness. The best place to begin is to remind ourselves of the main story-line of the Bible. Our thinking about health and sickness should fit in to the big-picture story of God which the Bible presents. The Bible story begins with the Creation (Genesis 1-2). God made all things good, and Adam and Eve enjoyed robust health in a garden where there was no sickness. The next part of the story is the Fall (Genesis 3), where the man and woman rebelled against the Creator. The consequence of that sin was that Adam and Eve, with all their descendents, will live in a fallen world, with weakness, pain and death part of the reality of normal life. T

he next stage of the story is God's intervention to save and rescue his people. That story covers most of the Bible, from Genesis 3 to Revelation 20. The climax of that story of redemption is the coming of Jesus, especially his death and resurrection. The final part of the story is the return of Christ, and the transformation of our old bodies into glorious new resurrection bodies in the new heaven and new earth (cf. Rev 21:4 – 'God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away').

So in our thinking about health and sickness we must take all these stages of God's dealings with humanity into account. He's the good Creator, so we thank him for the health and many blessings we enjoy. We are sinful people, so we share in the brokenness of our world. God has stepped in to rescue and save his people, and he is still doing that today. One day God will renew the creation, and God's people will share in the perfection and complete healthiness of God's eternal kingdom.

This makes it clear how important it is that each of us makes a choice to become a Christian. When you commit your life to Jesus Christ you receive God's love and forgiveness. God becomes your loving heavenly Father. He will care for you and be present with you, since you are one of his loved children. God has made promises to his people, promises which are contained in the Bible. We know from the Bible that the Lord is good, powerful, and wise. Christians can read those promises and statements and rely upon God when we face sickness. Here is just one example, from Psalm 46 – 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. The Lord Almighty is with us, the God is Jacob is our fortress' (vv.1, 11)

But if you are a Christian, what can you expect from God when your health is threatened and you face sickness? The apostle James encouraged Christians, when we are sick, to turn to God immediately in believing prayer. We can ask God to heal us, and to heal those we are concerned about. The Lord's Prayer tells us to pray 'Your will be done' – so it's right to say 'Lord, if it be your will, please show your mercy and heal me of this sickness.' You can trust God to do what's best, for you and for others, because he cares and he is able to miraculously heal if he chooses.

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What should we expect God to do when we face sickness? We should certainly pray to God, and ask him to intervene in the situation. He's able to heal, and he may choose to do so in response to our believing prayer. But God often does not choose to intervene with miraculous healing. I find it helpful to consider the apostle Paul. Paul was given gifts of healing, as we see several times in the Book of Acts (e.g. Acts 19:11-12). It

seems, though, that most of these healings took place when Paul was engaged in pioneer missionary outreach. Most of the time for Paul, in his normal life, he accepted his weaknesses and sufferings, and also at the same time expected God to intervene with saving power. We see this pattern often in modern missionary work. When the message of Christ is first brought to new people groups the Lord often does miracles of healing in answer to believing prayer; but once the church is established and the Word of God is being taught, there may still be lots of prayer but miracles fade away and the believers seek help from medical facilities and hospitals.

It's interesting that the apostle Paul was himself often sick and weak. In his letters he refers to the way Christians should deal with sickness. In 2 Corinthians 12 he mentions a particularly painful experience which he calls his 'thorn in the flesh' (see vv.7-10). Paul is not specific about what this thorn was, but it was perhaps a difficult illness connected with his eyes which he refers to in his letter to the Galatians (see Gal 4:13-15; 6:11). Paul prayed for his 'thorn' to be removed, but the Lord didn't heal him. Instead, God said to Paul: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Often that's how the Lord answers our prayers when we are sick and frail - he gives us patience and strength to endure. He teaches us humility while we go on obeying him and serving him. He shines the beauty and truth of Jesus through us so that others see the power of God sustaining us.

Our Western culture seems to be preoccupied with health and healing. People spend lots of money and time to remain as healthy as they can and avoid sickness. But this was not the apostle Paul's preoccupation. He was committed to serving Christ, and even though his body was often sick and weak, he looked to the Lord to sustain him and look after him. I love Paul's words – 'Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day' (2 Cor 4:16). Paul's focus was not on his health or sickness, but on the future that lies ahead for all believers on the other side of death. Paul wrote: 'we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence' (2 Cor 4:14). Like Paul, as our bodies weaken and we face death, we can meditate on God's promises and strengthen our hope as we prepare ourselves for death, our resurrection, and God's eternal kingdom.

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When we face sickness and physical weakness, it's great to know that the Lord is interested in our situation. He knows about every intimate detail of our lives. God's Word provides us with helpful perspectives that show us what we can expect him to do when our health is failing or those we love are sick.

Let me pray: 'We thank you, loving God, that you are present with your people in our times of sickness and frailty. Thank You for your love and forgiveness available to us through the sacrifice of your dear Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to trust you. Show your mercy and grace to us when we are sick, whether you choose to miraculously heal, or strengthen us to endure, or lead us safely through death into your eternal kingdom. May your will be done. May you be honoured and glorified. We ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.'