

When God doesn't heal
Psalm 71:9 - 16, John 5:2 - 9

Some years ago Antony and I worked together in a Christian organisation. He was a diligent worker, great with people and passionate in his love for the Lord. I think he was aged about 28 when we worked together. Soon after that he went to work for another Christian organisation. He met and married a lovely young Christian woman. They were of a similar age and wanted to accomplish great things for the Lord together.

They'd only been married a couple of years when Anthony's beautiful wife was struck with a deadly and quick moving form of cancer. Lot's of people prayed for her healing – lots and lots! She was young, beautiful inside and out and doing great things for the Lord. Of course the Lord would want to heal her.

So it seemed. But he didn't heal her. At least not in the way we wanted or expected. And many, many people struggled with that. Some were very angry at God which is fine – he can cope. Others doubted his ability to heal.

If I were able to contact all of those people it would be interesting to see what has happened in their lives since then; what the Lord has taught them – how they have changed and how they relate to others now.

You will have your own stories; stories of people you've loved and prayed for; stories of so many people; some close to you and others on the periphery of your lives.

Why doesn't the Lord always heal - given that he promises our prayers will be answered. Remember Jesus said "Ask and you shall receive?" Why would he say that if he wasn't going to respond in the way we think?

We should always ask the Lord for healing. If he doesn't heal, we need to press into him to find out what his plan is. There is always a good reason. It is always for our good and the good of everyone concerned.

Now that is a big claim!

Let's check out Psalm 71. It's a prayer really –a direct address to God; to the Yahweh of old.

Like most prayers there are requests and declarations. Recently some of us were reminded how important it is in our conversations with the Lord; first of all to praise him before presenting our list.

The psalmist does just this; beginning with a statement of commitment "I rely on you Yahweh". Some translations say something like "O Lord I have come to you for protection." The Psalmist expects God to show up and do his thing because the Lord has done this in the past.

I'm reading from verse 6:

*...you have been with me from birth;
 from my mother's womb you have cared for me.
 No wonder I am always praising you!
 My life is an example to many,
 because you have been my strength and protection.
 That is why I can never stop praising you;
 I declare your glory all day long.*

The Lord has been faithful and so the writer praises him. But then comes the plea – the writer isn't young any more. In fact he's getting on and the struggles of old age are hitting!

Don't switch off now if you aren't old. At this point it could be any struggles that are hitting – ill health, rebellious teenagers or trouble at work. Life happens like this for all of us; we are cruising along fairly well and then something comes and smacks us in the eyes, or perhaps something has subtly been getting worse over time. Whatever it is; we find ourselves in a place we never wanted to be.

The writer has been upheld by the Lord til now but worries about the future. Will the Lord still be there when the going gets tough. It sounds like the writer is not so sure.

*And now, in my old age, don't set me aside.
 Don't abandon me when my strength is failing.*

Physically the writer is struggling. Perhaps his knees are packing up or he has arthritis in his spine or perhaps he has something more life-threatening?

And to add to his problems other people start judging him. They say things like "Oh because he isn't walking a victorious Christian life there must really be something wrong with him. He can't have enough faith or the Lord would have healed him." That is sometimes what happens today.

Actually it's worse than that for the psalmist. His enemies hone in on the guy's weakness, intending to take advantage of God's apparent abandonment, by apparently actually plotting to kill him.

He could've done without that. He had actual enemies.

Sometimes those who should be our friends feel like enemies though. None of us needs friends who will criticise us or undermine us when times are tough. We need friends, and we need to be friends, who are there for each other. We won't judge each other assuming lack of faith or sinfulness. We will support and encourage and have faith for them. Hopefully we can help each other see the Lord is in the midst of our struggles.

The Psalmist resumes his plea (v12)

*O God, don't stay away.
My God, please hurry to help me.*

It's so interesting isn't it, that when the Lord doesn't act as we expect we often assume he isn't there at all?

Let's have a look at our New Testament reading:

This story is one of many where Jesus heals those who need it.

Joni Eareckson tells how it was her favourite book in the early months after her accident where she became a quadriplegic.

Joni was immobile in hospital after the accident. She was depressed and lived with suicidal thoughts as well as deep doubts about her Christian faith. During this time Joni would ask anyone who offered to read the Bible to her to read that story. She was desperate for healing and would imagine herself into the story hearing the sounds and smelling the sounds of Judea two thousand years ago. She would imagine herself at the edge of the pool of Bethesda. She would be one of the disabled people suffering in the heat, unable even to swat away the flies that settled on her skin. Then she'd hear the sound of Jesus voice but somehow he would always overlook her. He'd pass her by and she'd stay just as she always was – in hospital, immobilised, unhealed. In her imagination Jesus didn't come and he didn't heal.

In her book, a lifetime of wisdom, written forty years after her accident, Joni says that she would tell her younger self that Jesus had heard her pleas. Joni had learned over the years that, although Jesus didn't heal her physically, he did pick her up and carry her. Joni wrote that the Lord had carried her in his arms ever since she asked him bring physical healing. He actually brought something far more than she could have imagined.

Joni testifies that Jesus continues to carry her now.

Jesus could have healed her physically; instead he chose to walk beside her, restoring her soul and her spirit.

Back to Psalm 71. The writer has a brief deviation into vengeful thinking. He wants payback for those who have tried to harm him.

*Bring disgrace and destruction on my accusers.
Humiliate and shame those who want to harm me. v14*

Sometimes we get like that don't we? We don't feel we can argue with the Lord or blame him so we take our anger and frustrations out on others – we can always justify it too. There is always a reason they deserve it or so we think. We allow resentment and bitterness to affect our relationships with others.

When the Lord doesn't heal, or act in the way we want, resentment, bitterness and projected anger is normal. But how much better if we just could tell the Lord himself, right up front, how disappointed and angry we feel.

One of the main aims in preaching from Psalms is to show us that it is okay for us to do this; to be honest with God. Sometimes life really sucks, whether it is because we or others have not been healed, or for other reasons.

If we speak or yell and express our anger directly to the Lord, honestly working through our emotions with him, then perhaps we can avoid the stage of resentment towards others.

Anyway, the vengeful feelings don't last. The writer gains his equilibrium (v14-16).

But I will keep on hoping for your help;
 I will praise you more and more.
 I will tell everyone about your righteousness.
 All day long I will proclaim your saving power,
 though I am not skilled with words.
 I will praise your mighty deeds, O Sovereign Lord.
 I will tell everyone that you alone are just.

The writer cannot write stuff like this without having done some major business with the Lord. These are not trite, optimistic phrases, written on a whim.

The writer has determined in his mind that the Lord is good, whether or not he heals and rescues.

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The writer has made a choice which is not dependant on how the Lord acts. Rather the choice is based on the character of God; his goodness and his faithfulness.

The writer can rely on God to act in just and fair ways – that is what righteousness looks like; justice and fairness. That is who God is and the writer knows that in spite of feeling abandoned at times.

I said earlier that we all have stories where the Lord has not acted as we had hoped; has not healed us or ones we love. But that still the Lord can be trusted.

A couple of people are going to tell us their stories now:

9am John Green and Barb Lash

10:30 John Green and Michaela Ross

Thank you for those stories. In our readings we also had the story of Jesus healing a man who had been sick for 38 years. That man had given up hope when he met Jesus. Jesus asked him to hope again; then he healed him.

Some people believe the days of healing are over. They were only for the days of Jesus and the apostles. But we have been given the same Spirit who lived in them. I'm sure you have all seen and heard of healing miracles. Probably you have all received healing miracles – healing of the mind, spirit and emotions, if not physical healing. I know that I have.

And yet the Sovereign Lord knows best. He knows when and how to heal and when to withhold healing if there is a deeper work to be done.

In the gospels most of the healings were for outsiders. The gospel was always given to outsiders, some of whom became insiders and then went out to win more outsiders.

Sometimes I wonder if we don't see more miracles because we are too inwardly focused. It is not all about us. Rather we are to take the Gospel to those outside the sheep fold. That Gospel does include the power to heal. However we must never promise what is not ours to know. A wise woman I know told me she would always say to people that Jesus can heal. And she would pray for healing for the person she was witnessing to, but she would never promise them they would be healed.

Antony's wife wasn't healed physically. She is with the Lord now, healed in every way. Antony has since remarried and has 3 beautiful children.

Joni Earekson wasn't healed physically. She has been able to do far more things than if she had been. She has written books, painted, hosted her own television show, spoken at so many events and helped so many people who don't fit society's view of living a normal life.

Elizabeth Green wasn't healed physically

Barb Lash wasn't healed in the way she might have wanted initially

Elliot's hearing has not been restored in the way his Grandma prayed for and yet look at this wonderful young man now.

We are to ask for healing. Scripture is clear about that. So we ask and we pray, for ourselves and our loved ones, and especially for those outside the church, and we leave the results up to the Lord.

Reflection Questions

Can you recall a time when the Lord didn't heal as you had hoped?

How did that affect your relationship with him?

The Psalmist says: But I will keep on hoping for your help; I will praise you more and more. What helps you maintain trust in God?