

When Healing Doesn't Come

My daughter needs a miracle." Several years ago I heard these words in a phone call I received late one night from a man in our church. I had known him for many years, and he was like a brother. His daughter was barely 2 years old. I told him we would be praying and asked where they were and if it would be OK for my husband to come to the hospital. I couldn't go since our two kids were infants and sleeping at that time.

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This story ended in tragedy. I still feel the memories of that journey: believing in faith for her healing, listening to the discouraging doctor's reports, doing a church-wide prayer vigil, walking with the family through the experience and wrestling with God when this beautiful little girl died.

Perhaps this experience is seared into my soul because my kids were similar in age to the little girl who died. I desperately wanted her to be healed—for a witness to the doctors, for comfort to her parents, for evidence of the power of faith, for God's glory and many more justifiable reasons. Nevertheless, she died, and my family and my church family faced a challenging journey filled with intense grief.

When healing doesn't come, the hurt can run deep. After going through this crisis, I found myself angry, frustrated, confused, disappointed and uncertain about God. I even felt disconnected from Him. Some of my rants went like this: "Since You didn't heal this little girl, why would I continue to put my faith and trust in You? You don't seem very trustworthy right now. How can You say You're loving when You let an innocent little girl suffer so horribly?"

I spoke some harsh words to God, and as I look back on this journey, I'm grateful I was so real and raw.

If you're reading this article, I suspect you may have had some negative experiences with healing, or you may know someone who finds it difficult to trust God because of a healing dilemma. Perhaps you have some of these questions:

Is it possible to constructively reconcile what the Bible says about healing with some of our modern experiences?

What do we do when we face dissonance between a healing deficiency in our lives and what we read about in the ministry of Jesus, who healed all kinds of people in all kinds of situations?

What do we do when we ask God to heal, but nothing happens?

Why didn't healing happen?

How can we trust God amidst disappointment or devastation?

Let's wrestle with this healing predicament using the familiar questions—why, who, where, how and what—since “When Healing Doesn't Happen” is the springboard for our journey.

Why?

When we wrestle with these questions, it's only natural to ask, “Why?” Why didn't I get healed? Why didn't my relative or friend get healed? Why didn't I get the miracle I was believing God for? Why does the Bible tell me to pray and ask for healing if God isn't going to heal?”

“Why?” seems like a reasonable question, one commonly asked when we're disappointed. As we wrestle with this, we must also discover what the Bible says about the absence of healing. Here are some ideas and verses to consider:

The struggle to believe: “And He did not do many mighty works

there because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58). “Immediately the father of the child cried out with tears, ‘Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:24).

The need for obedience: “But his servants approached and spoke to him, ‘My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more when he said to you, “Wash and be clean”?’” (2 Kings 5:13).

Sketchy motives: “You ask, and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your passions” (James 4:3).

A lack of compassion: “Whoever shuts his ears at the cry of the poor, he also will cry himself, but will not be heard” (Prov. 21:13).

Ultimately, the “why” question is tricky because we can work on all the reasons to get healed and still not receive healing. Let’s also consider that healing and miracles don’t happen from guaranteed formulas—if we do steps No. 1, 2 and 3, God will wave His healing wand, and healing will magically appear. When we have this mentality, we may be setting ourselves up to be disappointed. If you find yourself in this quicksand, I want to encourage you to wrestle with God rather than disappear into your frustration, anger, disappointment, pain, grief and questions. In raw honesty, I don’t know why healing doesn’t always happen.

Who?

The question of “who” comes up in two ways—directly and indirectly. We ask the direct question “Who is God?” when healing doesn’t happen. Perhaps we have been taught and believe that God is all-powerful and loving, so when healing doesn’t happen, we find ourselves questioning His identity. We try to reconcile our earthly living, with its pain, grief, disappointment and questions, with God, who is supposed to be loving, compassionate, omnipotent, gracious, healing and caring.

Who is God? Is God really who He says He is? Is God loving? Compassionate? Engaged? Concerned? When healing doesn't happen, let's watch how that might affect our perceptions and beliefs about God's identity, keeping in mind that Satan always wants to distort our view.

The "who" question also comes into play indirectly with believers around us who might be less than compassionate or gentle. This common experience has occurred since the onset of human existence. I remind you of Job's friends, who sit with him in the worst experiences of his life. When they first observe Job's suffering, they remain quiet for seven days. In my opinion, these are their most helpful days as Job's friends. Once they start talking (Job 4-37), the situation moves from harsh to horrendous.

Job's friends want him to own up to his failures and shortfalls as the reason for his immense suffering. I don't understand how that would be either constructive or compassionate. Yet there is no shortage of Christians who blame and criticize fellow believers when they suffer, accusing them of wrongdoing and erasing any compassion or empathy from their conversations. I pray that the goodness of God would confront such critical people, leading them to repent and align more authentically with genuine love.

Where?

When we think about the "where" question, our thoughts may automatically travel to the actual location where healing didn't happen. Perhaps we think about the hospital, church, prayer group, home situation or other place where we petitioned God for His intervention.

Though we can associate a location with the emotions we experience from the lack of healing, I'd like to ask another "where" question you might find helpful: Where does a lack of healing position you (or your relative or friend) on the faith

journey?

Sometimes I think we look at healing as the ultimate destination in our path of faith. When and if healing doesn't happen, perhaps the development of our faith takes a hit or suffers a catastrophic collapse. I've met loads of people who park in the disappointment, anger, frustration, pain, discouragement and various emotions that arise.

Mary, Lazarus' sister, is someone who feels disappointed in Jesus for not healing her brother. She falls at His feet in a puddle of tears (John 11:32-33). As I read this chapter, I don't see Mary get up and follow Jesus to Lazarus' tomb. In contrast, her sister, Martha, goes with Jesus to Lazarus' tomb and sees her brother raised from the dead and bursting from the grave. We must allow ourselves to experience the healthy array of emotions that can accompany disappointment in a lack of healing. But let's determine to keep walking with Jesus rather than remaining parked in despair.

If you're walking alongside someone who is wrestling with the absence of healing, I'd encourage you to be gentle, patient, kind, compassionate, steady and present with this person.

How?

How can we reconcile our belief in God with the absence of healing? There's no shortage of Bible verses that talk about healing, encouraging us to be persistent in our petitions to God and keep strong in faith. While I recognize that the Bible has valuable insights related to healing, endurance and more, I think we would be wise to keep some core principles embedded in our hearts and thoughts.

Here are some truths for reflection:

God's character doesn't change regardless of the presence or absence of healing. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom

is no change or shadow of turning" (James 1:17).

Genuine love is our highest priority. "If I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

We can choose to remain faithful to God no matter what happens with healing or miracles. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego demonstrate this when they are confronted with the fiery furnace and the option to surrender their faith to keep their lives. "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up" (Dan. 3:17-18).

What?

What should we think about healing when it doesn't happen? Should we quit praying for the sick? Should we keep our distance from the subject? Should we warn others about impending disappointment? What can we do when healing doesn't happen?

These are all good questions, along with heaps more. For some answers, let's begin with some essential and unchanging truths that can anchor our souls. Scripture tells us God is all-knowing, and His ways are higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8-9). We must come to terms with the reality that God chooses to do things differently than we would often desire.

It's also important to consider that God's character remains stable in our dark valleys. Remember what David says in Psalm 23:4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Understanding that God's lovingkindness endures forever (Ps. 136) has been a steady anchor for my soul. Let's remember that no matter what we go

through or how we feel, God is genuine love and nothing less (1 John 4:8).

We must also remember that Satan always wants to deceive us. Part of his plan includes distorting God's character and identity from who we perceive Him to be. Satan's schemes include telling us God doesn't care or that He is unkind, impatient, unforgiving, unloving, callous and detached. Let us determine to keep walking with God and reject Satan's lies, remembering that Satan is the father of lies, and deception is his native language (John 8:44).

Finally, when healing doesn't happen, I believe true intimacy with God demands that we wrestle with Him in gut-wrenching honesty in our disappointment, pain, frustration, anger and grief. I say this because of reading the psalms David wrote and how honest he was with God. It's possible that God calls David "a man after His heart" (1 Sam. 13:14b) because he is so vulnerable with Him. Being transparent with God postures us for greater connection and intimacy, and this may be God's endgame. Perhaps God has hardwired each of us for doing life with Him in deep connection.

When healing doesn't happen, it can be disheartening. It can also bring us to a crossroads in our walk with God, where we choose to keep walking with Him even through some somber seasons. I've concluded that while I don't like hardship, and I certainly don't understand His reasoning, I can still keep walking with God, showing up day by day with honesty—frazzled, even limping at times. Let's recall Genesis 32, where Jacob walks away from his wrestling match with God with not only a lifelong limp but also a new name and transformed identity.

I leave you with this thought as I reflect back on the journey I referenced at the beginning of this article. My friend's daughter died, and her death left a sadness lingering in my heart for a very long time. During that time, I wrestled with God, spilling out my heart and emotions, sometimes being angry

and disconnecting myself from Him. But I also settled into the reality that God wants to help us in our most unraveled existence, even when we struggle with healing that doesn't happen. In these situations, let's bring God all of our struggles and choose intimacy with Him instead of isolation from Him—even in our darkest days.

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