

Acts 5:12-16 Teacher's Lesson Divine Healing

Today's passage, Acts 5:12-16, is Luke's third literary oasis, a picture of paradise, the churchly equivalent to a state of the union address.¹

Introduction: Many of us suffer various physical maladies: baldness, poor eyesight, gall bladder problems, thyroid trouble, digestive disorders, back pain, cancer, a torn ACL, liver trouble, diabetes, or an Irish accent (joke). *Why are we in such bad shape? Why don't we see the divine healings reported by Luke in Acts? Is it lack of faith or maybe poor teaching? Has something changed since the first century?*

**** Some people tout the healing properties of essential oils, acupuncture, mineral toddy, or of exposure to the sun for 20 minutes a day, but few are familiar with the healing power of shadows! I assure you, shadow healing is biblical, as we shall see today! **What revolutionary, medical break-through did Peter discover regarding the healing power of shadows (5:12-16)?** God gave the apostles the unique ability to work signs and wonders, so much so that if even Peter's shadow fell on a sick person he was healed!²

According to 5:12, how common were these signs and wonders? See 4:30. In fulfillment of 4:30, they were "regularly" done among the "people" (unbelievers).

Who performed all these signs and wonders (5:12)? See *Matthew 10:1*. They were being done by the apostles.³ Miracle healing was a special ability that the twelve apostles had:

ESV **Matthew 10:1** [Jesus] called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority . . . to heal every disease and every affliction.

Trickle-Down Miraclenomics: Acts 5:12 makes it clear that it was not common for ordinary believers to be able to heal. Jesus the Messiah worked miracles the twelve apostles never could, such as stilling a storm, walking on water (Peter only did it as part of Jesus' miracle), or feeding 5,000 people. Similarly, the Twelve apostles worked miracles most ordinary Christians never could, such as divine healings.⁴ Miracle healing remains extra-ordinary.⁵

¹ In 5:12, Luke indicated this was done in Solomon's Portico to prepare the reader for what happened next (Temple arrest, 5:17).

² Luke did not actually state people were healed, but rather people were hoping at least his shadow might fall on them. The implication, however, is that they were healed.

³ "Apostle" is transliterated letter by letter from Greek (*apostolos*). Outside the New Testament it was not a religious word as it is with us. In classical Greek it was used, for example, to refer to a nautical expedition. In the New Testament it commonly meant delegate, envoy, or messenger. Today we call such people missionaries. The word *apostolos* took on special meaning when used to refer to the group called the Twelve.³

⁴ According to 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, a few non-apostles were given the gifts of healing and miracles.

⁵ In the absence of Jesus and with the death of the twelve apostles, one might logically expect a lessening of signs and wonders (except for those few with the Holy Spirit-given gift of healing, 1 Corinthians 12:11).

1. What was the purpose of the miracle healings so far in Acts? See 2:43, 3:1-10, 4:4, 10, 29-30, 5:12-14, John 20:30-31, Hebrews 2:3-4.. They were done to authenticate the message that Jesus had risen from the dead. For example:

ESV **Acts 4:10** let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well.

ESV **John 20:30-31** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

ESV **Hebrews 2:3-4** how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles . . .

What the apostles did was an extension of what Jesus had done to signify He was Messiah:

ESV **Luke 4:40** . . . all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

Functional & Organic: The miracle healings were both functional and organic. Functional illnesses do not have identifiable causes, and can include things like headaches, fatigue, insomnia, irritability, abdominal pain, indigestion, low back pain, or simply not feeling well. Organic (or pathological) diseases are those that can be identified by diagnostic testing, such as cancer, arthritis, heart disease, gastric ulcers, and emphysema. It is easy to fake the healing of a functional illness. Jesus and the apostles cured both functional and organic diseases (withered hand restored, blind man's sight restored, lame man cured, or the dead back to life!).

Observations:

Point One: God's special purpose in miracle healing was not, in general, to make people happy and healthy. It was specifically for the greater purpose of signifying that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Point Two: Most of the time, it is God's will to heal us through the "normal" healing process. One of the names for God is Jehovah Rapha (Healer). When we slowly recover from a sickness through the amazing "natural" healing process, it is still God who is enabling our bodies to heal. There truly is healing in the atonement ("by his stripes we are healed"). Were it not for Jesus' atonement, we would all already have died from sicknesses due to our sin.

2. Where did the idea come from that Peter's shadow could heal (5:15-16)? See *Matthew 9:20ff, Acts 19:11-12*. The superstitious idea that shadows had magic power was common in the ancient world.⁶ A similar healing happened with the woman who thought that by just touching the hem of Jesus' cloak she could be healed (and she was!).⁷

Healing Hanky: Later on, Paul had a powerful healing hanky ministry:

ESV **Acts 19:11-12** God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

God seems to have honored their belief, coming down to the level of their crude thinking!⁸ This shows how powerfully the Holy Spirit was working through the apostles.

3. Based on 5:16, how widespread was the apostles' healing ministry? People brought in the sick from towns all around Jerusalem.⁹

What was their cure rate (5:16)? "They were all healed" (5:16b). Note that Luke distinguishes between sickness and demon possession. However, a scary source of sickness can be demonic oppression:

ESV **Luke 13:11** . . . there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.

So What?

How does 5:12-16 apply to us? What should we conclude about divine healing today? (*Rhetorical*). To answer this, we must factor in other biblical passages. We've already seen that:

Point One: *One purpose of divine healing in Acts was to confirm the fact of Jesus' resurrection.* It was not the start of a new plan by God to make everyone in the church healthy. The miracle healings in Acts were based on God's plan for the initial establishment of the church.

Point Two: *Most of the time God uses the "natural" healing process (Jehovah Rapha)*

⁶ Marshall, 122.

⁷ Matthew 9:20ff.

⁸ Ibid, 329.

⁹ The apostles eventually traveled to the ends of the earth spreading the Gospel. However, in these first years of the church, the apostles stayed put in Jerusalem and the people from all round came in to them.

4. Fact: The mortality rate has been 100% among Christians for the past 2,000 years. How should this fact factor into our thinking about miracle healing? See 2 Corinthians 4:16, Romans 8:21, Genesis 27:1, Genesis 48:1-10, 1 Kings 1:1. Dying from “old age” is actually due to some sickness typically associated with advanced age: heart failure, kidney failure, pneumonia, a compromised immune system, etc. Thus, sickness from old age has to be accepted as an illness that God at some point does not heal! Paul assumes decay will come with old age:

NAS 2 Corinthians 4:16 . . . though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

ESV Romans 8:21 . . . creation [is in] . . . bondage to decay . . .

Examples of saints with infirmities of old age:

ESV Genesis 27:1 When Isaac was old . . . his eyes were dim so that he could not see . . .

ESV Genesis 48: 10 Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see.

ESV 1 Kings 1:1 Now King David was old and advanced in years. And although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm.

Point Three: *Whatever one concludes about divine healing, it excludes the normal aging process which eventually leads to death.*

5. What purpose can God have in allowing us to be sick? See Hebrews 2:9-10, 12:6, 11, Job 1:8ff, 2:5ff.

ESV 1 Peter 3:17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

ESV Hebrews 2:9-10 But we see . . . Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he . . . in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Based on Hebrews 2:9-10, God sometimes uses the suffering to help make us perfect. The suffering that comes through sickness can be a test to build our faith or draw us closer to God or make us more Christ like. Never-the-less, we should be asking God to heal us!

Joni Eareckson cites her injury as an example of Hebrews 12 divine discipline:¹⁰

¹⁰ Marvin Olasky, *July 4, 10, 30, 31*, World, August 5, 2017.

ESV **Hebrews 12:6** . . . the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

ESV **Hebrews 12:11** For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Point Four: *God has spiritual purpose in sickness.* God may use sickness in the discipline process (not necessarily as punishment, but to make us like Jesus). Whenever God does heal, He does so on the condition that such healing is good for you in terms of his overall plan for your life.

6. Paul is an example of a man mature in the Faith. If anyone understood God's will concerning divine healing, it was Paul. Yet what did Paul experience in Galatians 4:13-14?

ESV **Galatians 4:13-14** . . . it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me . . .

Fact: Paul was sick while he was in Galatia and the church there had to take care of him. Yes, he got over it, but the question remains: Why was Paul sick at all, unless sickness is sometimes God's plan for us? (Rhetorical).

7. What prayer request was denied to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7ff?

ESV **2 Corinthians 12:7ff** . . . a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me . . . three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

It was God's will for Paul to suffer from some unidentified fleshly thorn (It may or may not have been an illness).

8. What was God's sovereign plan for Job regarding sickness (Job 1:8ff, 2:5ff)? God willed to allow Job to get sick. Satan can do only what God allows him to do. In as much as God could have stopped it, it was God's will for Job to suffer. If one electron in one atom anywhere in the universe is beyond God's control, outside of God's will, then God is not God.

ESV **Job 1:8ff** And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason?"

ESV **Job 2:5ff** "But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

Point Five: *It is sometimes God's will for us to be sick.* Sometimes it is not God's will to heal us, because the suffering has an overriding purpose in our lives or in the lives of others. Sickness can also be part of a great cosmic purpose.

9. What can we learn from Philippians 2:25ff and 2 Timothy 4:20 about Paul's ability to heal as an apostle?

ESV **Philippians 2:25ff** . . . Epaphroditus . . . was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.

Though he was an apostle with the gift of healing, Paul evidently did not have the ability to heal on demand. Epaphroditus was ill, near to death. It is evidently from what Paul wrote that he was genuinely concerned Epaphroditus might die and not be healed despite his prayers. Yes, Epaphroditus recovered, but Paul could not cause an immediate healing, nor was he even sure of his eventual recovery.

ESV **2 Timothy 4:20** I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus.

Why did Paul leave him behind? Why did Paul not simply heal him? Paul obviously did not have the ability to heal him. Paul's healing gift was related to affirming the resurrection of Jesus. Paul could not use his gift on demand.

Insight: If apostolic worker Trophimus, under Paul's ministry, was not immune from sickness, then neither should we expect to be immune from it.

Point Six: *Not even the apostles could cure on demand.* Their ability to heal was related to God's purpose in granting them the gift of healing (as a testament to Jesus' resurrection).

10. In 1 Timothy 5:23, how would Paul's prescription for Timothy's frequent stomach problems apply in principle to us?

ESV **1 Timothy 5:23** No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

Point Seven: *God wants us to use medicine.* Medicine is Good! Paul did not say, "Brother have more faith" or "Timothy, grow in grace and claim healing" nor "It is always God's will to heal, so believe it." No. He told him to take wine. This allows for medicine in the healing process. Luke was a physician, but he did not renounce medicine in his writings.

11. What role should prayer play regarding both sickness and health? See 3 John 1:2, James 5:14-15.

ESV **3 John 1:2** Beloved, I pray that . . . you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.

ESV **James 5:14-15** Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Point Eight: *We should pray for sick people to get well and for healthy people to stay well.* Just as living in sin is supposed to be the exception rather than the norm, so also to be to be sick is generally the exception and not the norm.

12. In light of the above texts, if someone asked you what the Bible says about divine healing for today, what would you say?

Point One: *The purpose of divine healing in Acts was to confirm the fact of Jesus' resurrection.*

Point Two: *Most of the time, God uses the "natural" healing process (Jehovah Rapha).*

Point Three: *Divine healing ultimately excludes the normal aging process, which eventually leads to death.*

Point Four: *God has spiritual purpose in sickness.*

Point Five: *It is sometimes God's will for us to be sick.*

Point Six: *Not even the apostles could cure on demand.*

Point Seven: *God wants us to use medicine.*

Point Eight: *It is biblical to pray for sick people to get well and for healthy people to stay well.*

ESV **Habakkuk 3:17-19** Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

Extra Notes:

According to 5:13, what mixed feelings did unbelievers have toward the church? See Acts 2:44, 47, 4:21. They did not dare to associate with the church, yet they held the church in high regard.

Why were people afraid join in with the church (5:13)? See 5:11. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in divine judgment showed how dangerous half-hearted commitment could be.¹¹

What paradox can you detect between 5:13 and 5:14? Despite general fear by unbelieving people of joining in with the believers, “multitudes” came to faith anyway and were added to the church. Those, of course, did join in.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
- You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.Com/NTRF.

Stephen E. Atkerson
NTRF.org
Revised 08/06/2017

¹¹ Bruce, 118.