

Hutson Smelley, copyright 2009

QUESTION: What does it mean when the Bible says that a person's faith made him/her whole?

ANSWER: Certain Christians teach what is called a "health and prosperity gospel." The essence of this teaching is that a Christian who has a strong enough faith will enjoy physical and financial blessings. As a preliminary matter, we should note that there is only one gospel; a person is saved from the death penalty of sin by placing faith in Jesus Christ as his/her personal sin bearer on the basis of his death, burial, and resurrection (see Galatians 1:6-9 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). There are a group of passages in the Gospels that are used to support the teaching that if a person has faith, he or she will enjoy good physical health or a healing of a present infirmity:

Matt. 9:22 But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour.

Mark 5:34 And he said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.

Mark 10:52 And Jesus said unto him, Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received his sight, and followed Jesus in the way.

Luke 8:48 And he said unto her, Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace.

Luke 17:19 And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.

The idea that is being taught is that "faith" is an end in itself, a "power source" that, once attained, yields material and physical benefits. If a person prays for a new job with a higher salary and has sufficient faith, God will grant the prayer. If a person is diagnosed with a cancer and prays for a healing with sufficient faith, God will grant the prayer. But is this Biblical teaching or heretical nonsense?

First, what is faith? It is the Greek term *pistis*, the noun form of *pisteuo*, which is typically translated as the verb "believe" (e.g., throughout the Gospel of John). Strong's defines *faith* in this way:

4102. ΠΙΣΤΙΣ pistis, pis'-tis; from 3982; persuasion, i.e. credence; moral conviction (of religious truth, or the truthfulness of God or a religious teacher),

especially reliance upon Christ for salvation; abstractly, constancy in such profession; by extension, the system of religious (Gospel) truth itself: — assurance, belief, believe, faith, fidelity.

What we see is that faith must have content or an object. Faith is a “persuasion” or “moral conviction” about something. Those that peddle the “prosperity gospel” typically teach that you need to have faith that God will grant your wish, but is that the content or object of the faith in the passages quoted above where Jesus told people that their faith had made them whole?

Contrary to what some people teach (i.e., that the thrust of the Gospels is about health and prosperity), the primary purpose of the four Gospels is evangelistic. The most important question a person can ever answer is the question of who Jesus is, and the four Gospels, although written from different perspectives, are all about this question of who Jesus is:

Matt. 16:13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

Matt. 16:14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

Matt. 16:15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

Matt. 16:16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Indeed, this is the express purpose of John’s Gospel: “But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” (John 20:31). All of the events recorded in the four Gospels further the overall purpose of the Gospels of explaining who Jesus is.

My hypothesis is that the faith that makes people whole in the Gospels is faith that Jesus, as the Messiah (or Christ), the Son of God, is capable of granting deliverance. It is not faith that he will deliver, but that he is capable of doing so if he wills it. After all, if it is faith that he will deliver, then what is being taught in the “prosperity gospel” is that God is subject to us, which is contrary to His sovereignty as expressed throughout the Bible. Consider the faith demonstrated by the three young men in Daniel 3 when they were thrown into the fiery furnace:

Dan. 3:16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter.

Dan. 3:17 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 thine hand, O king.

Dan. 3:18 But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

They did not express faith that they would be delivered, but instead, faith that God was capable of doing so if He wished to. The faith that makes whole at issue in the Gospel passages can only be properly understood if we determine from the context what the content of the faith was. Let's look at the Matthew 9 passage more closely, for it is the most explicit:

Matt. 9:20 And, behold, a woman, which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years, came behind *him*, and touched the hem of his garment:

Matt. 9:21 For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole.

Matt. 9:22 But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour.

There is no doubt that this woman believed that she would be healed if she could only touch Jesus' garment, but is that the faith that Jesus praises her? Or is it the root belief supporting her confidence, namely that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ and, as such, could heal her. Just a few verses later the question is answered:

Matt. 9:27 And when Jesus departed thence, two blind men followed him, crying, and saying, *Thou* Son of David, have mercy on us.

Matt. 9:28 And when he was come into the house, the blind men came to him: and Jesus saith unto them, Believe ye that I am able to do this? They said unto him, Yea, Lord.

Matt. 9:29 Then touched he their eyes, saying, According to your faith be it unto you.

The critical question was "Believe ye that I am able to do this?" Their belief that he was able, rooted in their belief that he was the Messiah ("Son of David"), was the faith that made them whole.

It bears saying here that Jesus did not have a "healing ministry" as some of the charlatans on television today. They purport to heal diseases the eye cannot see, but Jesus was in the business of healing real physical ailments, the blind and the lame and even the dead. But Jesus was not about a healing ministry.

He was preaching the Kingdom and then in Matthew 16 he announced he would be about the business of building his Church. His ministry was always directed toward the cross of Calvary. His mission was to save lost and condemned sinners. The healings were not simply an end in themselves, but instead, vindicated his message that he was Messiah. In view of that, it should not surprise us that the faith that made whole was not that Jesus would heal, but that as the Messiah he could do so.

One final point should be made. Those who teach that God must heal those that believe they will be healed is nowhere taught in the Bible. Moreover, it is not born out in our experience. Good and faithful Christians die of diseases. To be sure, God is still in the healing business, but He does not always heal. Whether or not He heals is within His sovereign will and for His sovereign purposes. If those that taught that God must heal were correct, then they themselves would never get sick or die from disease, but our experience tells us that they do.