

Chapter 18

Healing Prayer

(Audio reading)

Many great and wonderful things were wrought by the heavenly power in those days; for the Lord made bare his omnipotent arm, and manifested his power, to the astonishment of many, the healing virtue whereby many have been delivered from great infirmities. —George Fox

Healing Prayer is part of the normal Christian life. It should not be elevated above any other ministry in the community of faith, nor should it be undervalued; rather, it should be kept in proper balance. It is simply a normal aspect of what it means to live under the reign of God.

This should not surprise us, for it is a clear recognition of the incarnational nature of our faith. God cares as much about the body as he does the soul, as much about the emotions as he does the spirit. The redemption that is in Jesus is total, involving every aspect of the person—body, soul, will, mind, emotions, spirit.

Infinite Variety

God joyfully employs an infinite variety of means to bring health and well-being to his people. We are glad for God's friends, the doctors, who with skill and compassion help our bodies fight against disease and sickness. We rejoice for every advance of modern psychiatry and psychology as better ways are discovered to promote the healing of the deep mind. We also celebrate the growing army of women and men and children who are learning how to bring the healing power of Christ to others for the glory of God and the good of all concerned.

Furthermore, we can be grateful for every cooperative effort of the many branches of healing. After all, the distinction between priest and psychologist and physician is of recent vintage. Always before, the physician of the body, the physician of the mind, and the physician of the spirit were the same person. The ancient Hebrews, in particular, saw persons as a unity, and for them it would be unthinkable to minister to the body without ministering to the spirit and vice versa. The Pentateuch contained detailed stipulations about going to the priest whenever disease was suspected (Lev. 13ff). Jesus used well-known first-century medical techniques in his ministry (Mark 7:33; John 9:6; etc.). Even in many "primitive" cultures today the doctor and the priest are one and the same person. So it is with enthusiasm that we applaud the demise of the heretical tendency to fragment and compartmentalize human beings.

There may be times when God asks us to rely upon prayer alone for healing, but this is the exception, not the rule. The refusal to use medical means to promote healing may be a gesture of faith—more often it is a gesture of spiritual pride.

It is just as possible to err in the opposite direction, of course. Many trust in medical means exclusively and turn to prayer only when all available medical technology has failed. This only betrays the materialistic base of so much of our thinking. Normally the aid of prayer and the aid of medicine should be pursued at the same time and with equal vigor, for both are gifts from God.

Small Beginnings

My initial interest in Healing Prayer began out of a concern for emotional, not physical, healing. At the time, I worked at a family counseling center, and I was acutely aware of my seeming inability to bring the healing power of Christ to bear on emotional and mental illness. The only success I had was completely explainable by human techniques of psychological manipulation. While I never felt any need to reject these professional tools, I came to believe that Healing Prayer could greatly enhance the good that was being accomplished.

My first experience was with a man who had lived in constant fear and bitterness for twenty-eight years. He would wake up at night, screaming and in a cold sweat. He lived in constant depression, so much so that his wife said that he had not laughed for many years.

He told me the story of what had happened those many years before that had caused such a deep sadness to hang over him. He was in Italy during the Second World War and was in charge of a mission of thirty-three men. They became trapped by enemy gunfire. With deep sorrow in his eyes, this man related how he had prayed desperately that God would get them out of that mess. It was not to be. He had to send his men out two by two and watch them get killed. Finally in the early hours of the morning he was able to escape with six men—four seriously wounded. He had only a flesh wound. He told me that the experience turned him into an atheist. Certainly, his heart was filled with rage, bitterness,

and guilt.

I said, "Don't you know that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lives in the eternal now, can enter that old painful memory and heal it so that it will no longer control you?" He did not know this was possible. I asked if he would mind if I prayed for him—never mind that he was an atheist; I would have faith for him. He nodded his consent. Sitting beside him with my hand on his shoulder, I invited the Lord Jesus to go back those twenty-eight years and walk through that day with this good man. "Please, Lord," I asked, "draw out the hurt and the hate and the sorrow and set him free" Almost as an afterthought I asked for peaceful sleep to be one of the evidences of this healing work, for he had not slept well for all those years. "Amen."

The next week he came up to me with a sparkle in his eyes and a brightness on his face I had never seen before. "Every night I have slept soundly, and each morning I have awakened with a hymn on my mind. And I am happy. ..happy for the first time in twenty-eight years." His wife concurred that it was so. That was many years ago, and the wonderful thing is that although this man has had the normal ups and downs of life since then, the old sorrows have never returned. He was totally and instantaneously healed.

In time, this led me to the inescapable conclusion that the healing ministry of Jesus is intended for the total person, and so my prejudices against physical healing began to crumble. But my early experiences in praying for the sick were dismal failures. First I prayed for a cancer patient—he died. Next I prayed for a lady severely crippled with arthritis—she continued to be crippled.

I guessed I had a few things to learn! "Teach me," I prayed. Within a few days the answer came through an elderly lady who did not know me or my question. She said to a group of us, "When you are first learning to pray for healing, do not start with the most difficult cases...like cancer or arthritis. Instead begin more simply."

I nearly fell out of my seat. It was utterly fundamental—this principle of progression—I used it in every other field of endeavor, but somehow I had failed to apply it to the spiritual life. That elementary teaching opened up a whole new world to me. I began to pray for small things like earaches, and headaches, and colds—whatever needs arose among my family and friends. And slowly, one step

at a time, I began discovering the ways of Healing Prayer.

Since those early days, I have learned many things. While some I pray for today are still not healed, many others are, especially when I am praying with a team or in a loving community.

The Perplexing Question

But what about the fact that not everyone who receives prayer is healed? I call this a fact because simple observation shows us that Jesus is the only one of whom it can be said, "He cured all of them" (Matt. 12:15). Certainly not everyone I pray for is healed. I imagine you experience the same. And sometimes the lack of healing can take on tragic dimensions that precipitate a genuine crisis of faith. Why, then, are some not healed?

The most straightforward answer to this perplexing question is "I don't know." I wish—desperately so—that every single person who sought Healing Prayer were instantaneously and totally healed. But it simply does not happen that way. Some are, and we thank God. Many others evidence substantial improvement, though not total healing. But others show no change whatsoever. I even know of people who have effective healing ministries in their own right that are themselves crippled by some persistent physical malady.

In one sense Healing Prayer is incredibly simple, like a child asking her father for help. In another sense it is incredibly complex, involving the tangled interplay between the human and the divine, between the mind and the body, between the soul and the spirit, between the demonic and the angelic. As Kenneth Swanson reminds us, "We all live in a fallen world, where illness, suffering, and pain are part of the fabric of existence.'

Sometimes we make a faulty diagnosis of the problem and pray, for example, for physical healing when the real need is for emotional healing. Sometimes we neglect the natural means of health such as diet and exercise and sleep. Sometimes we refuse to see medicine as one way God heals. Sometimes we do not pray specifically enough or do not get down to the root problem.

Sometimes we are not an adequate conduit for the flow of God's love and

power, the faith and compassion in us not yet sufficiently developed. Sometimes there is sin in our lives that hinders God's work. I could go on, for the reasons healing does not occur are labyrinthine, but whatever the reasons, the sad fact is that sometimes we stand face to face with one for whom we have prayed and he or she is not well.

What are we to do? Well, first of all, let me tell you what we are *not* to do. Under no circumstance are we to tell those receiving prayer that it is their fault: that they lack the faith, or that there must be some sin in them that is hindering the prayer, or any such thing. This will only redouble the burden they must carry. It has been painful enough for them to seek us out. If we must place blame somewhere, let's place it on ourselves as the prayer-ers; perhaps it is *our* lack of faith or *our* sin that is hindering the flow of God's grace and mercy.

Actually, the matter of blame is simply not the issue. When the disciples got into the blaming game—"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"—Jesus dismissed their speculations as irrelevant (John 9:1-12). The simple fact is that we are learning about the prayer that heals, and there is much that we do not understand. Often we must stand under the imponderable mysteries of the divine. On occasion Jesus' disciples also failed in their attempts at Healing Prayer (see, for example, Mark 9:14-29).

The one thing we are to do is show compassion. Always! The Gospel writers frequently mention that Jesus was "filled with compassion" for people. In one story a leper came to Jesus, begging to be healed. When Jesus looked at the leper, he was moved with compassion. The Hebrew and Aramaic roots of compassion are inward parts, what the old King James Version used to call *bowels of mercy*. It comes from the same source as the word *womb*, and so we could speak of the womb like heart of Jesus, which brought healing mercy to the leper. Now, Jesus could have kept his distance and commanded the man to be well, but instead he touched him. Jesus' touch of compassion was comparable to our taking hold of a person with AIDS, stopping the bleeding with our bare hands, and putting our own life in jeopardy. This is the compassion of Jesus.

The Laying on of Hands

Since I have mentioned the touch of compassion, this might be a good

time to discuss the laying on of hands. This is a teaching found throughout the Bible, and it is a valid ministry ordained by God for the benefit of the community of faith. It is not an empty ritual but a clear understanding of the law of contact and transmittal. It is one means through which God imparts to us what we desire or need, or what God in his infinite wisdom knows is best for us. It is one of the elementary matters of the Gospel without which we cannot go on to maturity (Heb. 6:1-6).

The laying on of hands is used in Scripture in a number of ways such as the tribal blessing, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and the impartation of spiritual gifts,- but one of its most preeminent uses is in Healing Prayer. Jesus laid hands on the sick at Nazareth and healed them (Mark 6:5). He laid his hands on the blind man at Bethsaida twice before he fully recovered his sight (Mark 8:22-25). On the island of Malta the Apostle Paul laid hands on the sick, and they were healed (Acts 28:7-10). In the longer ending of Mark's Gospel ordinary believers are encouraged in this ministry (Mark 16:18).

The laying on of hands in itself does not heal the sick—it is Christ who heals the sick. The laying on of hands is a simple act of obedience that quickens our faith and gives God the opportunity to impart healing. Often people will add the accompanying means of anointing with oil, following the counsel of James 5:14. Like many others I have discovered that, when praying for people with the laying on of hands, I sometimes detect a gentle flow of energy. I have found that I cannot make the flow of heavenly life happen, but I can stop it. If I resist or refuse to be an open conduit for God's power to come into a person, it will stop. Also, a spirit of hate or resentment arrests the flow of life immediately.

Unforgiveness on the part of the person receiving ministry is also a roadblock.

Obviously, common sense and a respect for the integrity of others will keep us from engaging in this work lightly or carelessly. We simply do not go around plopping our hands on anyone we please. Paul cautions about laying hands on people indiscriminately because it might bring them into things for which they are not ready (1 Tim. 5:22).- Sanctified common sense will teach us what is appropriate at any given time.

I might add that while we adults struggle with this idea of the laying on of hands, children have no difficulty with it. I was once called to a home to pray for

a seriously ill baby. Her four-year-old brother was in the room, and so I told him I needed his help in praying for his baby sister. He was delighted to help, and I was delighted to have him, for I know that children can often pray with unusual effectiveness. He climbed up into the chair beside me. "Let's play a little game/1 suggested. "Since we know that Jesus is always with us, let's suppose that he is sitting over in that chair across from us. He is waiting patiently for us to focus our attention on him. When we see him and the love in his eyes, we start thinking more about his love than about how sick Julie is. He smiles, gets up, and comes over to us. When that happens, we both put our hands on Julie, and as we do, Jesus puts his hands right on top of ours. He releases his healing light right into your little sister sort of like a whole bunch of soldiers who go in and fight the bad germs until they are all gone. Okay?" Seriously the boy nodded. Together we prayed just as I had described it to him, and then we thanked God that this was the way it was going to be. Amen. While we prayed, I sensed that my small prayer partner had exercised unusual faith.

The next morning Julie was perfectly well.

Now, I cannot prove to you that our little prayer game made Julie well. All I know is that Julie was healed, and that was all I needed to know.

Straightforward Steps

I doubt that anyone who reads these words will ever have a healing ministry in large auditoriums before thousands of people. But we all will have numerous opportunities through the course of our routine days to bring the healing light of Christ to those who are around us. Therefore, I would like to provide you with a simple approach to Healing Prayer that I hope will be helpful in ordinary situations. It has four straightforward steps.

First, we listen. This is the step of discernment. We listen to people, and we listen to God. Sometimes people share their deepest needs in the most casual offhand way. But if we are listening, really listening, there is often a rise within us, an inner "yes," which is a divine invitation to prayer. So we ask politely if

they would like prayer for the situation. In over twenty years of praying for people in this manner, I have yet to have one person turn me down—and I have done this in airports and shopping malls and crowded hallways. It is the most natural thing in the world to show love and concern in this way

We are also listening to God, asking him to show us the key to the problem. This sometimes comes by direct revelation, sometimes by hearing the words beneath the words, and sometimes by a combination of both. A friend of mine was listening to a well-dressed woman share in rapid-fire monologue a sad tale of emotional illnesses, psychiatric treatment, and mental hospitals. All the time there was rising within him the counsel, "Tell her her sins are forgiven her." But she never seemed to stop long enough even to catch her breath. Finally he said, "Lady, your sins are forgiven you." She kept right on with her story of this illness and that hospital stay. Again he said, "Lady, your sins are forgiven you," and again, she kept right on with her monologue. Finally he held her by the shoulders and looked her directly in the eye and said, "Look at me. I'm trying to tell you that your sins are forgiven you!"

The woman stopped mid sentence as if her breath had been taken away. "What did you say?" she asked.

He said, "Your sins are forgiven you "

Tears came to her eyes. "They are?"

My friend answered simply and lovingly, "Yes, they are."

The dam broke, and the flood gushed forth from her eyes. She turned to her husband and announced through her tears, "My sins are forgiven me!" It was the breakthrough that was needed and the key to substantial healing. This good woman has needed ongoing counseling, to be sure, but in the dozen years since that encounter, she has not had to return to the mental hospitals and has been functioning in a relatively normal way. We listen.

Second, we ask. This is the step of faith. As we come to clearness about what is needed, we invite God's healing to come. We speak a definite, straightforward declaration of what is to be. We do not weaken our request with ifs, ands, or buts. We speak with the boldness of Martin Luther when he prayed for his sick friend Melanchthon: "I besought the Almighty with great vigor... quo

ting from Scripture all the promises I could remember, that prayers should be granted, and said that he must grant my prayer, if I was henceforth to put faith in his promises."

I was once visiting a young boy whom I shall call Franky, who was in the hospital, suffering from a deteriorating eye condition. Each time I visited, we got a little better acquainted, but his eyesight continued to degenerate. The parents told me that the doctors feared the worst. Then one day I walked into his hospital room to find the shades pulled down and the lights off. Franky could not recognize me, though he knew by the shadows that someone had come into the room.

I stood there, trying to decide how to counsel Franky and for an instant I entertained the demonic notion that perhaps blindness was the will of God for him. But immediately there was a rise of faith in me, and I murmured to myself, "No! Now is not the time to counsel acceptance of his disability. We must still fight this thing." To Franky I said quietly "We both know that your eyes are not getting better, but somehow I think we should ask God to help. Would you let me put my hands on your eyes and invite Jesus' healing light to come into them? I can't promise anything will happen, but I'm sure it won't do any harm?" Franky quickly agreed, and together we asked for what up to this point I had not dared to ask.

The next week when I came to see Franky, sunlight was streaming through the window, and Franky, ball and glove in hand, was preparing to check out of the hospital. His parents told me that wondrously the deterioration had been reversed somehow, and Franky's eyesight was now almost normal. Now, I do not know what kind of medical treatment the doctors had given him, but I am glad for their efforts. I am also glad that on one dark afternoon Franky and I together dared to ask for his sight. We ask.

Third, we believe. This is the step of assurance. We believe with the whole person: body, mind, spirit. At times we must confess with the father of the demonized child, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). But regardless of

whether we feel strong or weak, we remember that our assurance is not based upon our ability to conjure up some special feeling. Rather, it is built upon a confident assurance in the faithfulness of God. We focus on his trustworthiness and especially on his steadfast love. Francis MacNutt writes, "Personally I prefer to concentrate on the love of God made visible in Jesus, from which flows his healing power.

I was new at the university, and it was the second week of the semester. I went into the classroom early for a course on spiritual formation that I was teaching. One student—I shall call her Maria —was already there, and so we got acquainted. Later that day I was walking across a part of the campus I had not seen before, and I noticed a crowd gathering on one corner. As I went over to see what was going on, an ambulance pulled up, siren blaring. A bystander told me that a student had fallen out of the back of a pickup truck as it was turning the corner and that her head had struck the concrete pavement. As they lifted the nicians worked on her. She was unconscious, and blood was oozing from one ear.

Student friends of Maria began to gather in the hospital emergency room. "You can help me," I told them. Briefly I gave them a crash course on Healing Prayer. "The brain is bleeding and swelling from the impact of the injury/" I went on to explain. "So our initial prayer efforts must focus on seeing the injured capillaries in the brain begin to heal and for the swelling of the brain to slow down." They took their prayer assignment quite seriously, some of them staying in the hospital throughout the night. They actually believed that their prayer work could make a difference in Maria's condition.

The doctor asked me to call Maria's parents, who lived in Texas some eight hours' drive away. "Tell them to come as quickly as they can," he instructed. "We may have to operate."

Maria's parents arrived about midnight, and I updated them on her condition. "Yes, she is still unconscious, but they have not taken her into surgery yet. They may not need to if the bleeding and swelling stop in time." I then explained how we were praying for Maria and gave them a few suggestions on how they too could help in prayer. Normally parents are not very helpful in such prayer efforts because of understandable fears, but Maria's parents were exceptional in this regard and prayed with unusual faith.

This was in stark contrast to a meeting I had had earlier in the evening with a few faculty who wanted to pray for Maria. One prayed, "We place Maria into your hands; there is nothing else we can do." I understood the sentiment, but he was completely wrong, for there was a great deal we could do in bringing the healing light of Christ into Maria.

Another prayed, "Lord, help Maria to get well, if it be thy will." That was enough for me. I knew that my colleagues, while well intended, did not believe Maria would get better, and their prayers hindered faith. I left the room as quickly as possible and returned to my students at the hospital, who were filled with faith, hope, and love.

Eventually I went home to get some sleep, and so I learned from the students what happened about 6:00 A.M. the next morning. The parents were in a motel near the hospital and decided to pray as I had taught them, picturing in their mind's eye Maria awakening from her unconscious state. At precisely that moment a student was in the intensive-care unit at the hospital, and Maria opened her eyes and smiled at her. Within a week Maria was released from the hospital, completely restored, due in large measure, I think, to the faith-filled belief of those students and parents. We believe.

Fourth, we give thanks. This is the step of gratitude. Simple courtesy leads us to express our thanks for what we have asked to happen. Now, I have never been able to pray in quite the way some do, with their bold pronouncements of accomplished fact. What I do say is something like this: "Thank you, Jesus, that what we have seen and what we have said is the way it is going to be. Amen." What am I doing? With the eyes of faith I am just looking ahead a little bit—a few weeks or months or years, it does not matter—and giving thanks for what can be...what will be, by the mercy of God.

Gratitude itself is often very powerful. A psychiatrist in England was teaching about the history of inherited traits in the family tree and the need to pray for healing so that the negative characteristics would not come down upon future generations. The next week one member of the class—an elderly woman far into

her seventies—began looking over her family tree, but she was unable to find any problems to pray over. Her family had a godly history with many pastors and other relatives who truly loved and served God. She could find no major inherited sicknesses or tragic deaths. As she read of her ancestry, great waves of gratitude swept over her, and she began thanking God for her wonderful heritage. This good woman had not seen her own situation as needing Healing Prayer. As a child she had been stricken with polio and as a result had a withered leg. She needed to use a brace in order to walk. But this was something she had lived with all her life; she never dreamed of praying about it. And so she went to bed, praising and thanking God for the women and men she had never met but to whom she was so deeply indebted. The next morning, when she woke up, she discovered her leg completely healed—the result of a heart of gratitude. We give thanks.

Healthy Skepticism and Wholesome Faith

I wish I had space to go into other matters, for there is so much to learn. You may remain skeptical about Healing Prayer. That is not all bad—there are some people in our day who could profit from a little healthy skepticism.

Saint Augustine was that way. He doubted the validity of Healing Prayer, stating in his early writings that Christians should not look for the continuance of the healing gift. But in 424 A.D. a brother and sister came to his town of Hippo, seeking healing of convulsive seizures. They came every day to Augustine's church to pray for healing. Nothing happened until the second Sunday before Easter. The young man was in the crowded church, praying. Augustine was still in the vestibule, ready for the processional, when the young man fell down as if dead. People nearby were seized with fear, but the next moment he got up and stood staring back at them, perfectly normal and fully cured.

Augustine took the young man home for dinner, and they talked at length.

Slowly Augustine's skepticism began to crumble before the witness of this young man. Finally, on the third day after Easter Augustine had the brother and sister stand on the choir steps, where the whole congregation could see them—one quiet and normal, the other still trembling convulsively—while he read a statement from the young man. He then had everyone sit down, and he began a sermon on healing. Augustine was, however, interrupted by shouts from the congregation, for the young woman had also fallen to the ground and was instantaneously healed. Once more she stood before the people, and, in Augustine's own words, "Praise to God was shouted so loud that my ears could scarcely stand the din/-

All of this happened while Augustine was writing his magnum opus, *The City of God*, so he devoted one of the final sections to the miracles of healing occurring in his own diocese. He described how he set up a process for recording and authenticating miracles, for "once I realized how many miracles were occurring in our own day ..[I saw] how wrong it would be to allow the memory of these marvels of divine power to perish from among our people. It is only two years ago that the keeping of records was begun here in Hippo, and already, at this writing, we have nearly seventy attested miracles,¹ -

May we, like Augustine, be able to trade in our healthy skepticism for wholesome faith as we witness the humble testimony of those who receive the healing touch of God.

My Lord and my God, I have a thousand arguments against Healing Prayer. You are the one argument for it..., You win. Help me to be a conduit through which your healing love can flow to others.

For Jesus' sake. —Amen.