

## Faith Healing

Robby came from way back in the woods, from a world where 8-year-olds drive farm equipment, where kids get their first rifle for Christmas around the same time they start school, where it's not unheard of for someone to bring a copperhead to church. But Robby didn't fit my stereotype. At seventeen he was tall, clean-cut, fresh-faced, and always neatly put together in the style of every other high-schooler I knew. I was sixteen, and after working nearly a decade in my family's store, I finally had my own job: pushing shopping carts in the local Wal-Mart. Robby and I were a good team and didn't mind staying in the parking lot until eleven most nights getting all the shopping carts put away.

You might not be surprised to learn that – even at sixteen – I was incredibly interested in religion. Robby had much to discuss. He had seen things that I could barely imagine in my downtown First Baptist Church: people so fervent in their prayers that they could not help themselves but run in circles as they worshipped, people easily slipping into tongues that you and I would call gibberish – but that they understand as the deepest, most private language of their souls communing with the divine. Robby was more than just a spectator in this world. He had been preaching on and off since he was twelve. He could quote the Bible chapter and verse like so many good southern preachers, and he understood intuitively the communal faith of those house churches out in the woods.

One night, we got on the subject of healing, and Robby told me that he had seen some pretty miraculous things happen in those church services. He had seen deaf people restored to hearing, people with arthritis suddenly moving with ease, and any number of other things the rest of us would scarcely dare to ask for during a church service. I was astounded to be near someone who had seen these things happen, and I had loads of questions.

But Robby needed to talk about something else that night as well. He was tired of the intensity of that spiritual life, the peaks and valleys of revivals and backsliding. He was increasingly interested in spending time with his girlfriend to the exclusion of church. And at the ripe old age of seventeen, he was starting to feel a little jaded about his preaching. I felt taken aback by this discussion, coming so quickly as it did on the heels of his miraculous stories. I couldn't understand how someone could just so nonchalantly walk away from such a vibrant and full life of faith.

In his book [Zealot](#), Reza Aslan explored at length the world in the time of Jesus, and his treatment of Jesus' healing ministry is insightful. Apparently in first century Palestine there were no shortage of healers: people with healing gifts regularly visited towns and worked with the sick. What made Jesus revolutionary in this world, says Aslan, is that he didn't charge for them: his healing was not a career choice or a ministry fundraising tactic: it simply flowed from him – a side benefit to spending time with the God of all space and time.

Often I read these stories of healing and I think of them as a sort of idealized template: this is how life *should* be. It's satisfying sometimes to look at the Gospels as a kind of unrealized potential: if only we had the kind of faith Jesus espoused, *then* we would see healing like that. And we set up our lives and our beliefs as a kind of subtle judgment upon those who are suffering and sick. Perhaps if you were as upright as I am, or if you prayed the right way like I

do, or if you just put your faith all into Jesus... perhaps if you would just do those things, you'd be healed.

There are church communities who seem determined to take this idea to its extreme: that if their commitment to Jesus is pure enough, they need never go to a doctor. In some churches it can start to look like a weakness to seek help in your suffering, to seek relief for your pain. And somewhere deep inside ourselves we are all a little like this, we have this voice that reassures us that the reason this person lost everything when the economy tanked or the reason that person got cancer is because they didn't do things right. For better or worse, it can be a very strong temptation to look at the suffering of another and say simply that it is their own fault, that they didn't play their cards right.

I don't think anyone really means to do this. I don't imagine that a single person in this room tries to dream up ways to undermine the needs and suffering of fellow human beings in their spare time. Instead, the matter has far more to do with our own fear than the pain or misfortune of another. The reason I want to be able to say why another person failed and reaped the consequences – be they depression or bankruptcy or cancer or a broken family – is because then I can walk away with the belief that I have the power to keep that same thing from happening in my life. I am afraid that I will end up in the same boat if I stand too close.

On the other hand, if you see somebody walking the countryside and making a name for himself by healing everyone who comes, what's to say some of that good fortune might not just rub off on you if you follow him around. Often the healing we seek is really nothing more than a freedom from some inconvenience that distracts us from what we'd rather be doing. There are times when Jesus seems acutely aware of this: he turns on those around him and accuses them of sticking around because he feeds them; he becomes exhausted from the throngs of people pressing in on him; he calls attention to the lepers who did not come back to thank him.

But at other times Jesus commends the people who reach out to him for healing. He takes special note of the four friends who dismantle the roof so their friend can be near Jesus, of the soldier who trusts that his servant is healed even though Jesus was not physically present, of the beggar who only cries louder as the crowd tries to silence him. It seems that Jesus was often especially attracted to those at the edge of society whose ailments were seen as the result of sin. When the Pharisees asked him if the man born blind had such misfortune because of his own sin or his parents, Jesus was clear that they had missed the point. God makes everyone for the same reason. God brings the circumstances of life to all of us equally. The man born blind, the woman with the hemorrhage, the demoniac lurking among the tombs on the other side of the lake: they existed, just as you and I do, so that God's glory could be known in the world.

At face value, this seems to imply that God might actually *cause* suffering just to make a show of healing it. This only underscores the point that Jesus makes in so many ways: it is not our bodies that need healing. Bodies are temporary, and clearly for many in the crowds, healing their bodies was not enough to inspire the kind of commitment it takes to follow Jesus in the long term. What Jesus responds to in so many of these stories is not so much need as it is tenacity, a deep belief that more – and better – life is not only possible, but there for the taking. That wholeness is worth the trouble of throwing caution to the wind and darting into the crowd, worth the so-called indignity of crying out even when others demand silence. The truth? It is not our bodies that need healing. It is our faith.

Does God still heal miraculously today? The fact that this question persists through the millennia is answer enough for me. The fact that some of the poorest, most stricken people in the church are among the first to answer with a resounding 'yes!' is indicative of something else entirely about the rest of us. Do we know what healing is? Do we really want to be healed?

My friend Robby learned a version of faith that – even all these years later – still disturbs me. I can bristle at the way they sometimes pick and choose the Bible they like the most. I can feel indignant as they exclude and condemn some of the people most in need of love in our world. I can poke holes in the theology, but I cannot deny that these people know redemption in a way that is all but inaccessible to me. They are a sign, like the people Jesus healed wherever he went, that God is at work bringing us all to wholeness.