

**“EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE
FOR ONE WHO BELIEVES”
FAITH AND HEALING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

SIGURD GRINDHEIM

“According to your faith let it be done to you” (Matt 9:29). “Your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34). The gospel writings betray a close connection between faith and healing. For the suffering Christian, the question lies near: Could I be free from this if only I had enough faith? In other words, is my predicament a result of my own lack of piety?

The answer to this question can be found only when the healing narratives in the NT are seen in their right context. Healing is not the goal of faith but faith is the goal of healing. Suffering and lack of healing are not indicative of ungodliness, but the power to heal is indicative of the true nature of Jesus Christ: he is the Son of God. Faith does not primarily come into view as an instrument for healing, but healing miracles are frequently seen as instruments for inspiring and nourishing faith in Jesus Christ. Only the gospel of John explicitly states that this is the purpose of the miracle reports (20:31), but careful analyses of the narratives in the other gospels show that they share the same concern.

I. HEALING AND RELIGIOUS WORTH

The negative counterpart to the idea of religious faith as a prerequisite for healing is the thought that suffering is a consequence of sin. It is commonly noted that the NT represents a corrective to some of the ideas that were current in the first century regarding sin and sickness. While it is sometimes assumed that sin is the cause of sickness and suffering (John 5:14; 1 Cor 11:30), the NT also makes clear that there is no one-to-one relationship. If a person suffers from some kind of ailment, it is unwarranted to conclude that there must be a special level of sinfulness that has caused the condition (John 9:3).¹ While the connection between sin and suffering is not denied, the NT dismisses the notion that suffering is indicative of a person’s ethical standard or value.

Neither is healing indicative of a commendable religious faith. At first sight, however, the connection between faith and healing appears tight. It may seem that, while the healing power comes from God, faith is the

*Sigurd Grindheim is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

¹R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 125.

instrument that triggers the healing miracle. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that the connection is not so clear-cut. In several instances, we learn nothing about the faith of those being healed, whether they have any or none at all (Matt 12:9-14; Mark 1:29-34; John 5:5-13). This observation reminds us of the obvious fact that the focus of the miracle stories is not on the faith of the petitioners but on the power of Jesus. His miracles are the sign of the inauguration of the kingdom of God (Matt 12:28) and the sign that he is the Messiah, as John the Baptist is informed when he inquires about Jesus' identity (Matt 11:2-5). In his reply to John the Baptist, Jesus promises a blessing on the one who takes no offense at him (11:6). The question is not whether one is a beneficiary of a miracle, but what one thinks of Jesus Christ. For the incarcerated John the Baptist, part of the message is that he is blessed if he accepts the testimony of Jesus, even though he does not experience deliverance from prison.²

Probably in order to highlight Jesus' identity in connection with the miracles, Matthew also preserves the address "Son of David" more frequently than do the other evangelists (compare Matt 15:22 with Mark 7:26, and see Matt 9:27; 20:30). Whatever the petitioners originally meant when applying this title to Jesus, Matthew probably chose to include it in his account because he wanted to highlight Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the promised Savior of Davidic descent.³ By associating this title with the healing miracles, Matthew subtly reinforces the point that the miracles are a testimony about who Jesus is. Their purpose is not to say anything about the religious quality of those that are healed, but something about the religious quality of the healer. As the healer, he is the one who fulfills the Scriptures. He is the Messiah. In Matt 8:16-17, the purpose of Jesus' healings is explicitly said to be fulfillment of prophecy.

On the other hand, the persons requesting and receiving healing miracles cover the full spectrum of religious types. In the gospel of Matthew, two people are singled out and commended for their "great faith." They are the Roman centurion who pleaded for his sick son (8:5-13) and the Syro-Phoenician woman who prayed for her daughter (15:21-28). Both of these characters stand out by their strong affirmations of their own indignity and strong confidence in the power of Jesus' word. Matthew's two examples of faith are both Gentiles, clearly pointing to the universalistic nature of Jesus' mission. Both of them are also intercessors on behalf of someone else who was in need of the miracle. As we shall see later, when insufficient faith is criticized in relation to healing, it is never the sufferer, but always the intercessor that is censured.

But it is far from the norm that those who request and receive a healing miracle are commended for their faith. In many instances, the nature of their faith is ambiguous. They show some kind of faith, but they are ultimately not commended for it, even though they receive the requested healing. It is obvious that at least some faith is required, because the very petition for a miracle presupposes both the belief that Jesus is or may be able and willing

²Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 33A; Dallas: Word, 1993), 301.

³W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. II (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1991), 135-36.

to perform a miracle and the faith to approach him. This is also what the word “faith” usually refers to when it occurs in the Gospels. It does not normally have the qualified sense of being in a right relation to God.⁴

Sometimes the faith of those who approach Jesus is evidently defective, however, in the sense that it does not lead them to a right relationship with their benefactor, Jesus, the Son of God. In some instances, the gospel narrative ultimately presents them in a negative light. A case in point is the story of the healing of the leper in Mark 1:40-45. The leper made a bold confession of his faith in Jesus’ ability to heal (v. 40) and his request was granted (vv. 41-42). Nevertheless, the leper showed blatant disobedience of Jesus’ command not to speak about the miracle to anyone (vv. 43-45). The motif of non-commendable faith is also highlighted in the account of the two blind men in Matt 9:27-31. They are challenged to express their faith, which they do, and their request for healing is granted. As the leper in Mark 1:40-45, however, they flagrantly disobey Jesus’ command to secrecy.

II. HEALING AS AN AID TO FAITH

That the response to the experience of healing is more important than the healing itself is particularly evident in the story of the lepers in Luke 17:11-19. Nine of the ten lepers who approached Jesus praying to be healed stand out as the negative counterparts to the one Samaritan who came back when he had experienced the healing. The contrast between the nine and the one contains an implicit critique of the ingratitude of the nine, and it is probably significant that salvation is specifically predicated of the returning leper only. The Samaritan is commended, not because he had faith to be healed, but because he came back to give thanks and give glory to God. It is not perfectly clear how much this implies in terms of his understanding of Jesus’ divine nature, but in any case, his experience deepened his relationship with Jesus. He did not remain focused on his own experience of healing, but this experience caused him to direct his appreciation to the person who had healed him, and he acknowledged that what he received from Jesus, he ultimately received from God.

The concluding announcement, “your faith has saved you,” is a phrase that occurs frequently in Luke’s healing stories. Usually, it is translated “your faith has made you well,” as it is spoken in connection with the healing event. The Greek word, *σωζω*, can refer both to physical healing and to salvation in a comprehensive sense, which denotes a right relationship with God, resulting in salvation from his judgment. In Luke 17:19 the Samaritan leper has already been healed, just as the nine others who did not get to hear this pronouncement. “Saved” must therefore be taken in the more comprehensive sense here.⁵ The phrase “your faith has saved/healed you” occurs more frequently in Luke than in the other gospels and is apparently one of the elements he wants to highlight in his gospel.

⁴Sharyn Echols Dowd, *Prayer, Power and the Problem of Suffering: Mark 11:22-25 in the Context of Markan Theology* (SBLDS; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 95-103.

⁵Maureen W. Yeung, *Faith in Jesus and Paul: A Comparison with Special Reference to “Faith That Can Remove Mountains” and “Your Faith Has Healed/Saved You”* (WUNT 147; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 192.

Perhaps Luke wanted to hint at how the experience of healing was supposed to lead to a more comprehensive acceptance of the gifts that Jesus brought. Such an acceptance could only take place if the healing led to a deeper appreciation of who Jesus was, that he was the Son of God, who also brings comprehensive salvation from God.⁶

As the example of the ten lepers shows, the experience of a miracle can be an opportunity to allow beginning, miracle-focused faith to grow into Jesus-focused faith.⁷ This opportunity is often missed by the miracle seekers, however. Frequently, those witnessing the healing miracles fail to make the appropriate connection between the power of Jesus and his true identity. In his study on faith in the gospel of Mark, Christopher Marshall lists four types of inadequate responses to the miracles: hostility, incomprehension, sign seeking, and amazement. Marshall also makes a good case that the function of the miracles in Mark is ambiguous. Just as the parables have a double function, to produce faith and hardening, so also the miracles, depending on how they are received.⁸

When the many miracle accounts in the gospel of Mark are read as a call to let faith grow and mature, light is thrown on those instances where Jesus delays his response to a request for healing. His delay is intended to allow the focus to shift from the miracle to Jesus himself. In 5:1-20, the healing of the hemorrhaging woman is sandwiched within the healing of Jairus's daughter. The contrast between the two characters is striking. On the one hand stands the respected synagogue leader Jairus. On the other hand, the nameless bleeder. Jairus, a man of great status and influence approaches Jesus face to face, summoning him to his home. The nameless woman, constantly ritually unclean because of her condition, stealthily approaches him from behind. In Mark's composition, the two characters are connected in their predicament; the bleedings have lasted for twelve years, which was also the age of Jairus's daughter. In the end, however, the nameless woman is commended for her faith and serves as the foil against which Jairus is called to faith.⁹ Jairus himself receives no such commendation. In fact, nothing is said directly about Jairus's faith. The miracle story, then, is open-ended. The miracles serve as a call to Jairus (and the reader) to realize who Jesus is and imitate the nameless woman in her faith.

III. FAITH AS A CONDITION FOR HEALING?

Several statements in the gospel of Mark, however, seem to be saying that it is faith that leads to miracles and that faith may even be a condition for miraculous divine intervention. In the account about the possessed boy

⁶Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Vol. II (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1402-6.

⁷Similarly, Paul Achtemeier emphasizes how the miracles lead to faith in Luke-Acts ("The Lukan Perspective on the Miracles of Jesus: A Preliminary Sketch," in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts* [ed. Charles H. Talbert; Edinburgh: Clark, 1978], 159-61).

⁸Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (SNTSMS 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 57-74.

⁹James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 160-68.

(Mark 9:14-29), faith appears to be a prerequisite for healing. But as it turns out, the father is helped despite his confession that his faith is wavering. The story becomes another testimony of where help is to be found, Jesus' willingness and ability to help, and the futility of seeking help elsewhere. First, the disciples are shown to be unable to cast out the demon. The reason for their failure may be that both they and the supplicant understood their ability to stem from their own power, maybe understood as exorcistic technique. This is indicated by how the father explains their failure on the basis of their lack of strength and by how Jesus tells them that no (exorcistic?) means is effective here, but directs their focus to prayer instead.¹⁰

When the father finally comes to Jesus, the healing is not immediately granted. Instead an exchange about faith follows. The father is given an improved understanding of who Jesus is and of the nature of faith, so that his own faith can be corrected. The father's initial request opens up for some doubt (perhaps prompted by the inadequacy of the disciples) as to whether Jesus really can heal (v. 22). Jesus' response is paradoxical: he denies any inadequacy, provided there is faith (v. 23). To the doubting father, this may seem like a hopeless command: you will see that your doubts are unfounded, but first you must get rid of your doubts! Whether or not Jesus meant to refer to himself or to the petitioner with the words "the one who believes," the function in the story is for the father to cry out his helplessness and turn to Jesus: "I believe, help my unbelief" (v. 24). He is no longer addressing Jesus as one among several available exorcists, presumably more powerful than his disciples; he is dependent upon him, crying out of despair. The exchange has not resulted in an affirmation of the strength of the father's faith. On the contrary, it climaxes in an expression of weakness in ambivalence. The weakness, however, was what instigated the father to direct his faith to Jesus, in true dependence upon him. The healing, then, becomes a testimony to Jesus' omnipotence even when faced with wavering faith.

The evangelist's remark in Mark 6:5-6, that Jesus could not do any powerful deeds and that he was amazed with their unbelief, has often been interpreted as saying that faith is a condition for miraculous divine intervention.¹¹ Several observations must be made, however. The remark cannot be taken as an absolute statement of limited ability to heal, for that clearly goes against what Jesus says on more than one occasion in the gospel of Mark (9:23; 11:23-25). Rather, this means that it was not in accordance with Jesus' purposes to perform any miracles there. Nevertheless, he did perform a few, healing some sick people. If the point were simply that only those who had faith could be healed, the evangelist could have said so. The picture he draws, however, is of a town where he is not received in faith, and, consequently, he does not make a big showing of miracles there. The unbelief, however, is not predicated of the individuals seeking to be healed, that they did not have sufficient faith to be healed, but of the city of Nazareth collectively. There appears to be a corporate liability

¹⁰Marshall, *Faith*, 110-23.

¹¹E.g., Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas: Word, 1989), 311.

connected with the reprobate nature of the townspeople (cf. Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13). Their unbelief does not mean that they did not believe that Jesus had miracle working power (which is what faith normally refers to in the gospel of Mark). They did acknowledge the great works and they were amazed (6:2), but their unbelief was their failure to accept that this miracle working power was God's power and that this meant that Jesus was God's Son (6:4). In this spiritual climate, it would be against Jesus' purposes to perform miracles as his mission was not to make a public display and inspire "miracle working faith," but to produce faith in Jesus as God's Son (1:1, 15; 15:39).¹² It was not the lack of faith as a prerequisite for miracles that troubled Jesus, but the lack of appropriate faith as the response to miracles. This understanding is confirmed by a comparison with the reports of Jesus' stilling of the storm, where it is revealed that Jesus' supernatural aid is not necessarily conditioned upon faith. The disciples did not believe and were reprimanded for their disbelief but that did not deter Jesus from helping them (4:35-41; 6:45-52).¹³

In Mark 11:22-25, Jesus makes his strongest affirmation of the power of prayer: "So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (v. 24). But the point is not that the one who prays can do anything he or she wants to do, as long as the faith is strong enough. The point is to say that the power of prayer, when directed in faith to the almighty Father, is unlimited. This power remains subordinate to the will of God, however, as Jesus' model prayer in Gethsemane (and in fact the only model prayer in the gospel of Mark) shows. Facing suffering and death, Jesus sincerely and intently prays for deliverance, but humbly subordinates his wish to the will of God (14:36). With this prayer, he models the attitude of taking up the cross that he demanded of his disciples (8:34) and accepts that, even though the almighty Father has the power to eliminate suffering, the Father's will may include suffering. This suffering is not the last word, however; Jesus promises that those who lose their life for his sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it (8:35).¹⁴

While the paradox of the suffering of God's children ultimately remains incomprehensible, in the light of the cross it is seen in a new light. As the Savior was perfected through suffering and the Lamb of God was victorious when he was slain, so the children of God are strong when they are weak and victorious when they are defeated.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is unwarranted to see faith as a precondition for healing or to see healing as a result of particularly commendable faith. The relationship between faith and healing differs considerably in the gospel accounts but these accounts have important elements in common: the miracles of Jesus always serve to direct attention to who Jesus is, not to the faith of the

¹²Thomas Söding, *Glaube bei Markus: Glaube an das Evangelium, Gebetsglaube und Wunderglaube im Kontext der markinischen Basileiatheologie und Christologie* (SBB 12; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1987), 251-80.

¹³Dowd, *Prayer*, 109-14.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 151-62.

sufferer. Faith is not a goal in itself but the goal of faith is Christ. For the contemporary struggling believer, it is liberating to be assured that healing is never a reward for excellent faith. The healing miracles glorify Jesus, never the believer. Sometimes Jesus delays his healing so that the petitioner's faith can develop. This development should not be understood as growth in the strength of the faith but rather as gaining focus, until the faith is directed towards Jesus alone, and towards Jesus as the Son of God.

Since the purpose of the healing narratives is to glorify Jesus, rather than to say anything about the sufferer, the question about those who do not experience healing falls outside the perspective of the gospel accounts. It remains God's prerogative to know why some are healed and some are not. What we may conclude from the gospels, however, is that healing or lack of healing is not indicative of anyone's faith or lack of faith. God sometimes allows his name to be glorified through healing and sometimes allows his disciples to glorify him in their suffering.