

Is the Health and Wealth Gospel Biblical?

Answered by Randy Alcorn

A writer friend was at an event many years ago when he witnessed the following: He was standing near a woman confined to a wheel chair. Suddenly a well-known woman, who had written and spoken extensively about her gift of healing, marched up to the lady in the wheelchair, dramatically laid hands on her head and prayed loudly that God would heal her, claiming God's promises to do so.

The healer's entourage enthusiastically agreed with the prayer, some praying in tongues. After this went on for a while, finally they backed away, and the celebrity went on to the next interview, book signing, or healing.

The woman in the wheel chair is a sister who God has shaped into the image of Christ and used mightily through her disability. When the crowd dispersed someone asked her, "Did you feel anything happen?" My friend says he heard her answer: "Yes. My neck really hurts because she pushed down on my head so hard."

The woman in the wheel chair continues to love and serve Christ faithfully.

The woman who was certain it was God's will to heal her, who loudly and without invitation to do so claimed her healing, either has or soon will succumb to the ultimate health problem: death.

I have seen God heal miraculously. I have also seen so-called healings which "didn't last" the next hour or day or week, and therefore, in my opinion, were not true healings.

When it comes to healing or anything else, "What does God's Word tell us?"

Christ's disciples revealed their false assumptions when they asked "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

Jesus responded by saying their presupposition was entirely wrong: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3). In other words, God had a higher purpose for this man's adversity that simply didn't fit in the neat little boxes of "Do good (or have faith) and you'll be well off" and "Do bad (or don't have enough faith) and you won't be."

Jesus said of his Father in heaven, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). In other words, God extends his common grace to all. The air breathed by every man, sinner or saint, is God's gift, regardless of the man's morality. Likewise suffering may be equally distributed among the righteous and unrighteous—but God will use it for the good of the righteous, and likely the unrighteous too, drawing them to Him, should they respond in faith.

True, there are passages promising certain material blessings. Yet there are other passages saying the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer. The evil man may have good soil and a large crop, the good man poor soil and a small crop. The evil man may live a long life, suffer little, and prosper much, while the righteous man may have his life cut short, may

live it in pain, and may be materially poor. (All this will, Jesus says, be radically reversed in the life to come.)

Indeed, Scripture demonstrates not only that the righteous may suffer despite their righteousness, but will often suffer precisely because of their righteousness—"Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

There is a great irony to the popular saying in some health and wealth circles, "Live like a king's kid." The "King's kid" was Jesus, who lived a life exactly opposite of what is meant by the phrase today, a life without material abundance.

The King we serve came stripped down for battle. He will don the royal robes of victory at the end of the age, and so shall his faithful servants with him, but this is now the time for battle garb, not regalia.

In verses you will never see embroidered, or framed or posted on refrigerators, the King promised persecution, betrayal, flogging, and the opportunity to being dragged before courts and tried for our faith (Matt. 10:16-20). He warned, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33), and said, "Any of you who does not give up everything (sometimes our health, sometimes our life) he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

As the health gospel tries to experience the full redemption of the body in this life, so the wealth gospel tries to experience heaven's material rewards here and now.

In Philippians, written from a prison—not a plush office or the Rome Hilton—Paul said, "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (1:29). He then depicted Christ as the suffering Servant, whose ultimate prosperity came after his life on this earth, not during it (Phil. 2). Indeed, had Jesus laid claim to prosperity in this life, there would have been no crucifixion, no atonement, no gospel, and no hope for any of us.

Paul described his daily adversity, his persecution for Christ, and his nearness to death (2 Cor. 4:7-12). Two chapters later he refers to his troubles, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, and hunger, as well as the experience of nearly dying, and being sorrowful and poor (2 Cor. 6:3-10).

Read Paul's "testimony" and ask how you'd respond if someone shared it at your church:

"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Cor. 11:23-29)

Paul seems to be making a strong case for "adversity theology," or the "sickness and poverty gospel." I wonder if in his dreams the apostle ever heard a faint chorus of voices from the far future saying, "Paul, you don't have to live like this—why don't you trust God, have faith, claim prosperity and healing, and live a king's kid?"

Paul explained that God had given him some spiritual privileges, including special revelations. Then he said:

"To keep me from being conceited . . . there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)"

First, Paul said he knew God had a definite purpose in his illness or disability. We don't know what the disease was, but among other things it apparently involved his deteriorating eyesight. His affliction, Paul said, was "given" to him in order to keep him from being conceited.

Second, God had a specific purpose for not removing the disease—to teach Paul that his grace alone was sufficient. Paul was not to trust in his own strength but in God's. His disease was a day-by-day reminder of his need to trust in the Lord rather than his own gifts, accomplishments, or privileged position.

In our area, most of the health and prosperity broadcasts are on the Christian station, especially on Saturdays. A Christian doctor sponsors a frequently run ad on this station, always signing off with "Helping you get well is all that matters." Well, actually, it isn't—there's a great deal that matters a great deal more. God will make us well in the resurrection, but between now and then He uses adversity, including not being well, to accomplish much in us.

Though I thank God that I can still play tennis and be in the ocean for hours and go on long bike rides, I have seen God accomplish greater things through my sickness than through my health. (I do believe in and try to practice eating right and exercising. That's just good stewardship. What I'm opposing is the belief that it's never God's will for us to be sick or have a disease, and it's always God's will for us to be healed of it.)

Instead of assuming God wants us healthy, we need to realize that he may accomplish higher purposes through our sickness rather than our health. We may certainly pray for health and pray for healing when we are sick, which is exactly what Paul did. (And I'm all for and have been part of anointing with oil and praying as James said; I've seen God choose to heal and not heal when this is done.)

But notice Paul prayed only three times. When God chose not to heal him, he did not "name it and claim it" and demand that God heal him. Instead, Paul acknowledged God's spiritual purpose in his adversity.

Any time we insist God do a particular thing, including answering a certain question or defending His justice, we might want to look up "God" in the dictionary to remind ourselves who we're attempting to hold accountable to us.

Health and wealth preachers bypass the rest of this passage and say, "Look, Paul called this disease a 'messenger of Satan.' It's from the devil, not God. The devil wants us sick, but God wants us well."

Paul DID call the ailment a messenger of Satan. But God is bigger than all beings and sovereign over all wills, and Satan is just one more agent he can use to accomplish his own purpose. After all, whose purpose and plan is the passage talking about? It wasn't Satan, but God whom Paul saw as the ultimate giver of the disease, for Satan would never give anyone something to keep him from being conceited (the stated purpose of the disease).

And it was not Satan but God who refused to remove the disease despite Paul's pleadings.

So if you have prayed for healing and not received it, take heart—you are in good company ... with the apostle Paul!

Not only was Paul not healed, but he had to leave Trophimus in Miletus because of sickness (2 Tim. 4:20). His beloved friend Epaphroditus was gravely ill (Phil. 2:24-30). His son in the faith, Timothy, had frequent stomach disorders, concerning which Paul didn't tell him to "claim healing" but to drink a little wine for medicinal purposes (1 Tim. 5:23).

Paul was surrounded by sick people. Those who claim "anyone with enough faith can be healed" either have more faith than the apostle Paul, or less understanding of God and His ways.

Paul, like many of God's servants in the early church, was neither healthy nor wealthy, and it is clear that God did not intend for him to be healthy or wealthy. Of course, Paul is now enjoying perfect health and wealth for all eternity. But to prepare him for his eternal reward, when he was on this earth, it was God's higher plan that for much of his life he not have either.

We are right to believe God promises blessing to His followers, and we are right to believe He will ultimately bring us prosperity and blessing. But the great majority of it will come after death, and in the resurrection, and on the new earth. Expecting or demanding it here and now, in the form we want it (health and prosperity and relational bliss) is not grounded in Scripture.

I think about this when the faith healers quietly die of cancer after decades of telling everyone it is God's will that they be healed.

If it is always God's will to heal, we should have people of faith walking this planet that are hundreds or thousands of years old. (Certainly we should have thousands of faith healers whose ministries should be going on century after century.)

The basic problem with the health-and-wealth gospel is that it is man-centered rather than God-centered. When approached from the prosperity posture, prayer degenerates into coercion, where we "name it and claim it," pulling God's leash until he comes through. We attempt to arm-twist the Almighty into increasing comforts and underwriting life-styles.

"Faith" becomes a crowbar to break down the door of God's reluctance, rather than a humble attempt to lay hold of his willingness. We treat God as an object, a tool, a means to an end. God's blessing on financial giving is turned into a money-back guarantee whereby he is obligated to do precisely what we want him to.

A Florida man heard the senior pastor of his church say that if he gave a hundred dollars God would give him a thousand back. The thousand never came, so he brought a lawsuit against the church. Imagine if faith healers could be successfully sued in light of their promise that someone has been healed.

In health and wealth theology, God is seen as a great no-lose lottery in the sky, a cosmic slot machine in which you put in a coin and pull the lever, then stick out your hat and catch the winnings while your "casino buddies" (in this case, fellow Christians) whoop and holler (or say "Amen") and wait their turn in line.

In this sort of system, God's reason for existing is to give us what we want. If we had no needs, God would probably just disappear—after all, what purpose would he have anymore? To revise the Westminster Confession, "The chief end of God is to give man whatever He wants, and to serve Man forever."

Recently a well-dressed businessman came up to me after I spoke at a conference. He said, "You mentioned that you are an insulin-dependent diabetic. I'm curious—why haven't you asked God to heal you?"

I told him "I have. But after the first year, I stopped asking him."

He seemed stunned that I would say such a thing. "Why?" he asked.

I said, "Paul stopped praying for healing after three times. He said God made clear that He had a spiritual purpose in his disease. God made that clear to me twenty years ago. And it's just as clear to me now as it was then."

In fact, and here's my testimony, the two greatest things God has done to cause spiritual growth in my life, are 1) in 1985, getting a serious disease and 2) in 1990, being sued for millions of dollars by an abortion clinic, forcing me to resign from a pastoral ministry I loved.

This disease came on me exactly the same month my first book came out, in 1985. Coincidence? I think not. And it was the abortion clinic lawsuit that freed me to invest far more hours in writing than I ever could when I was a pastor.

In both cases, many Christians have assured me that if I only had enough faith, God would remove both the disease and the lawsuits (and now the judgments that came out of the law-suits).

I asked God to make me more Christlike. So then He sent these two things (and others) to help me become more Christlike.

So what should I then do? Insist that He remove the very things He sent (arguably in answer to my prayers) to make me more like Jesus, and use me for His glory, and prepare me for eternal fellowship with Him and His people?

I don't think so.