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Faith *Really* Makes *a* Difference

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FAITH REALLY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

There are times in most of our lives when we pray desperately for a miracle; times when healing seems the right thing for God to do. But what if the handicap, or the cancer or the pain just doesn't go away? What kind of faith can we hold onto in a world that stays broken?

We live in a world where affliction seems to strike at random. People suddenly lose what we all take for granted—a normal life. People in their prime suddenly can't control their muscles. Some exotic disease

has ravaged their nervous system. A few weeks ago, they were playing soccer, now they're crumpled in a wheelchair.

A malignant tumour grows here, a heart valve ruptures there, a deadly new virus attacks somewhere else. And suddenly a loved one is wasting away.

That's tough for anybody to take. And it presents a special challenge for people of faith. What is a loving God going to do about this? How is faith going to cope?

Recently, one answer has begun to stand out. It's speaking loudly, and gaining more and more followers. It's making big promises.

Christian magazines even have articles featuring this movement. I'm talking about

a movement in Christian churches called “the word of faith”. It uses a number of other names, such as “positive confession”, “name-it and claim-it”, or the “health and wealth gospel”.

It is based on this simple premise: God is in the business of healing people, period. The answer to human affliction is, simply, to get healed! There’s healing power, they say, in “the word of faith”. You just have to believe, and you will be healed. You just have to say it to make it so.

“The word of faith” teaching is applied to material needs as well. Why are people poor? “Not enough faith,” they say. “You can claim wealth just like you can claim health. God wants to bless you abundantly.”

This certainly sounds like good news, doesn't it? After all, Jesus went about healing every kind of affliction when He was on this earth. And isn't He "the same yesterday, today and forever"?

After all, the Bible tells us that faith can move mountains. We have been told that God wants to bless all His children. Faith healing. What could possibly be wrong with that?

Let us consider more carefully what Christ and the Apostles did, and what they taught. I believe it is important to establish a solid Biblical foundation here, because many individuals who have bought into "the word of faith" have been bitterly disappointed. Many who have tried their best to have enough faith for healing, have

not been healed. And, as a result, they have given up on faith.

The key question is about the nature of faith. What exactly is faith supposed to do in this broken world? What difference does it make?

First of all, let us look at Christ's ministry. Here is a picture of what Jesus did:

Now Jesus went about all Galilee, ... preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people (Matthew 4:23).

Jesus did indeed heal the blind, the lame, the paralysed, the lepers. And Jesus did indeed often say, *...your faith has made you well* (Mark 5:34). Certainly, a faith

connection with God opens the door for healing.

But the other side of the picture is one which I believe the health-and-wealth people ignore. Note the following verses:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings (1 Peter 4:12,13).

The Apostle Peter is writing to people who are suffering, who are going through a fiery trial. And what does he say? Don't think it's so strange that good people might be hurting.

Why? Because God can bless you through this misfortune. In the passage above, Peter was speaking about how God can

bless through persecution. He reassured his readers that they could come especially close to the Christ who also suffered. They could know Him in a way they couldn't otherwise. It is the same for you.

The Apostle Paul writes in a similar vein to the Christians in Rome: *...we have peace with God...*, he writes: *...we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance* (Romans 5:1,3).

Paul isn't running away from every tribulation. He sees value in it. He understands that God sometimes uses trials to produce perseverance, to create character.

This is a theme that runs through the New Testament. Jesus was made perfect through suffering. In Corinthians we read that our affliction today *...is working for us*

a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Paul had to come to terms with this truth in his own life. He told the Corinthian Christians that he was given a ...*thorn in the flesh*... (2 Corinthians 12:7), evidently some physical affliction. He believed this happened to keep him from exalting himself, from getting too proud; but still, that thorn wasn't fun. It hurt. So, Paul prayed that God would take it away.

This was God's response to the Apostle: ...*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness*... (2 Corinthians 12:9).

That is a sobering principle. Sometimes God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. Sometimes God is able to do

more when we can do less. God's power can shine the brightest when human strength fails.

This is what the New Testament teaches. Here, then, we have two very important truths, both of which Jesus and the Apostles taught. We must keep both of them in mind.

Firstly, faith enables us to be healed. However, on the other hand, not being healed can help grow our faith, and our character.

We must accept both of these facts. God is a healer and God wants to bless us. But sometimes His greatest blessings are found in the midst of trials and sufferings.

The problem with "the word of faith" teaching is that it accepts one fact, but

totally ignores the other.

Here is an example of what can happen. Joe is labouring under a chronic affliction. He hears about miracles, and is referred to a particular healer. People are walking out of wheelchairs. Tumours are disappearing.

The minister in question claims he has been given divine power. He even claims that God's Word in our mouths can create in the same way that God created the world out of nothing—with a command.

So, Joe wonders, "Should I get my hopes up? Should I expect a miracle? After all, hope is good, right?"

It is good, if it's aimed in the right direction. Joe reads more about this ministry. He reads things such as this: "You are a little

god. Because you have the Almighty Spirit inside you, you can just name the blessing; you can just claim the blessing.”

But that makes him think, “Wait a minute, if every believer has this miraculous power, why do people need to go to a healer?”

In the end, Joe decides to go anyway. He decides it’s worth a shot. He has arthritis in his back, a very painful chronic condition. At the service, the healer lays hands on Joe. Suddenly, he can straighten right up, no pain. It’s wonderful. God seems so real.

But a month later, the pain has returned.

Joe is upset, naturally. What has happened to this ‘miraculous’ healing? He phones the healer, and the man tells him, “Well, you can lose the healing you know, without

proper faith.”

Rather reluctantly this time, Joe returns. There is another apparent miracle; the pain vanishes again. But this time, it takes only two weeks for the arthritis to flare up again.

Not knowing what else to do, Joe returns to the healer yet again, but the story repeats itself. Joe is desperate, so he keeps going. He tries other healers, about a dozen in all. With each failure he becomes a little more miserable, a little more bitter. However, he just can't let go of the hope that God, somehow, somewhere, through someone, will get rid of the arthritis once and for all.

Here is a contrasting situation. Joan Hermon was a woman who spent 20 years in an iron lung. She was only 38, but

she was dying. On top of her paralysis, brought on by polio in her late teens, she now had terminal cancer. When her minister visited her, shortly before her death, he was struck by the radiance in her face and her cheerful spirit.

She asked him to open her Bible to Psalm 119, and to read verse 67 aloud, because, she said, it was a text that had given her encouragement all her life.”

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word (Psalm 119:67).

When the minister had read the verse, Joan explained, “Jesus is good. I’ve grown in my affliction. I understand that the great values of life are eternal. It’s made me a more kind, compassionate person.”

The church was packed for Joan's funeral. These were the many people who had been deeply touched by this woman confined to an iron lung.

Joan contracted polio in 1948. At that time, the government would take young adults afflicted and paralysed by the disease and put them in nursing homes. There was no other place for them.

As she lay in the iron lung, Joan began to dream. In her mind, she established New Horizons, a full-care facility and home for those who were physically afflicted, but mentally alert. And eventually, Joan's dream became a reality. She was a real pioneer in the area of hospital facilities for the handicapped.

This young woman impacted a vast number

of people; more indeed, than she possibly could have impacted, had she never been afflicted with that awful disease.

That is something truly powerful: it is the touch of God.

God is a healer. Faith opens the door for God to heal us. But sometimes God's greatest healing comes through physical and emotional affliction. We need to grasp that concept, for many people today are missing it.

The book of Hebrews gives us a remarkable picture of faith working throughout history in this broken world.

Hebrews 11 is often called the "great faith chapter". It is a recital of the great biblical heroes of faith. We begin at verse four

with Abel. We are told that by faith he ... *offered to God a more excellent sacrifice...* As a result, the Bible story tells us, he was murdered by his brother, Cain. Abel had so much faith it killed him.

Then we come to Enoch in verse five. He had faith. And he *was translated so that he did not see death...* Enoch had so much faith that he went straight to eternal life.

A little further along, in verses 21 and 22, we are reminded of Joseph. He certainly had faith. His story culminates with him in high office in a palace, one of the wealthiest men in Egypt, but he began as a captive, a slave, and a prisoner.

Then we come to Moses in verse 23. His faith prompted him to abandon the palaces of Egypt, and choose instead

to suffer affliction with the enslaved Children of Israel.

This list of people with great faith offers us vastly contrasting situations. Faith certainly enables individuals to do great things. But great things happen through all kinds of circumstances. They happen in life, in death, in palaces, and in mud pits by the Nile.

We should know that it is God's will to heal us and to bless us. Our faith can assure us of that. But we cannot claim to know exactly *how* God will heal us, or bless us.

It is simply wrong to say that it's God's will to heal every physical affliction right now. It seems to me that this idea is akin to commanding God. Sometimes affliction is the healing! Sometimes affliction is

the medicine. This may be how God is choosing to work through us.

It is completely wrong to say that it's God's will to make every believer wealthy. Sometimes poverty is the blessing. It may actually be the tool God is using to teach us something valuable.

As humans, with our limited understanding and vision, we can look for happiness in all the wrong places.

Let us take a very simple example. Consider noisy children. Let's say little Jimmy is screaming his head off. His Lego space station just fell apart. His big sister Samantha has been teasing him all morning. Then, to make matters worse, she starts complaining about the broccoli on her lunch plate.

Most parents have those days. They are the days when you would like to shut everything out and just relish the silence. Certainly, a little peace and quiet is good. But think for a moment what it would be like to be blind and to need those sounds as your only connection to the world. The theologian, John Hull, described how the world disappeared when there were no sounds. The only way he had of knowing he was not alone in a park, was sound: footsteps on the path, or children's voices coming through the trees. Those sounds were very precious to him, because they gave him the world.

The attitude we take to a situation is all-important. We can either complain about the noise, or we can appreciate a stray note of music, or some laughter.

Affliction can help us understand what really matters. And misfortune can help us to focus on eternal truths.

God heals, God blesses. But don't limit His healing. Don't limit His blessings to all the things on your 'wish list'.

What should we do with our faith? How should we aim it? If we can't believe that God will always remove an affliction, if it's not correct that He will always make us prosperous, what exactly can we believe? What difference does faith make?

It makes one very important difference. The writers of the New Testament zero in on it. Consider these text that help make it clear.

The Apostle Paul writes:

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing (Romans 15:13).

The key here is the final word: believing. We can be filled with joy and peace “in believing”, in other words, by believing in God’s providence to direct our lives for ultimate good.

Peter echoes this same theme:

...Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8).

Peter has to resort to superlatives to express how he feels about his belief. We can *rejoice with joy inexpressible*, he tells us.

This is the difference faith makes. It does not guarantee physical health or wealth.

Instead, it promises happiness and joy. And isn't that the whole point of health and wealth?

Faith brings us joy. Faith brings us peace. This the powerful difference it makes in a person's life.

Faith works this miracle in our lives by connecting us to Jesus Christ, the source of peace and joy. By faith, we enter into a relationship with Him and receive His Spirit. By faith, we experience the fullness of God. By faith, we can overcome the world and know that God works for our good in all circumstances. Our faith teaches us, as it did Paul, to be content in every situation, whether we are in plenty or in want.

Faith does indeed make all the difference

in a person's life. It doesn't guarantee a life free of illness or hardship. It does, however, promise freedom from human misery. That's the bottom line: if you live by faith, you will not be miserable.

There are many people in perfect physical health who are absolutely miserable. There are many extremely wealthy people who cannot find any happiness or contentment in life. Human misery is the problem, regardless of a person's health or wealth. Faith is the solution.

Faith is the choice to trust God as a well-known friend. Faith enables us to do whatever God asks, and to accept whatever He allows. And that is not a consolation prize; it is without doubt the best way to live a happy and fulfilling life.

Hebrews 11 expresses it this way: *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith brings us ‘substance’. Another version of the Bible translates this word as ‘assurance’. It is something solid and reliable. So many things in this world are fragile and momentary. They blow away. But faith brings us a solid connection with the eternal, with things unseen. Faith opens up our eyes and hearts to what matters most.

The writer, Flannery O’Connor, suffered from lupus, a disease that eventually killed her. In spite of this illness, she wrote, “In a sense, sickness is a place more instructive than a long trip to Europe. When you live in the dark ... the line between the visible

and the invisible disappears.”

Faith opens up the world for us, regardless of the quality of our eyesight. Faith enables us to listen to the voice of God, no matter the state of our hearing. Whether we are athletes or confined to a wheelchair, faith helps us follow in His steps.

I invite you to make a commitment of faith today, and to give it a chance in your life. This is the faith that enables you to do whatever God asks, and to accept whatever God allows. This is not a get-rich-quick scheme, which may or may not result in physical wealth, and certainly will not guarantee happiness. However, it is the only sure path to human happiness. It is the straightest route to contentment, and the very best way to live.

Whatever your circumstances, whatever your afflictions or challenges, I invite you to begin a journey of faith. Make the choice to open your heart to your Heavenly Father and to begin trusting Him in all things. Allow God to fill you with His faith.

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Pastor Gary Kent is Speaker for The Incredible Journey ministry. He has produced and presented numerous documentaries on subjects including the Bible, Bible prophecy, world events and natural health. His passion is to share the good news of Jesus' imminent return.

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