

THE HOLY SPIRIT, SICKNESS, PRAYER, AND HEALING

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There is a growing interest among some Adventists concerning the nature and role of the Holy Spirit. Questions related to the personality and individuality of the Spirit are being debated, motivated by opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity. Occasionally the power of the Spirit is emphasized and the result is a type of popular charismatic view of the function of the Spirit. Some are suggesting that in answer to our prayers for the sick God will send the Spirit as a healing power, making it almost unnecessary to consult physicians. The idea is that if we persevere in the prayer of faith the power of the Spirit will be manifested. This is a dangerous emphasis that could do serious spiritual, psychological, and physical damage to those who are sick.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, let me reaffirm that we obviously do not want to reject the Biblical view that God can answer our prayers and heal those for whom we pray (James 5:13-15). But that does not exclude the use of the wisdom that God has granted us in the fight against diseases. That fight is part of the cosmic conflict, and God and humans are directly involved in it. He expects us to do our part through preventive medicine and by seeking ways to restore health using rational approaches.

The topic of God's direct intervention in human affairs in answer to our prayers for the sick raises important theological questions. Here I can only touch on some of the concerns. When dealing with this particular issue, we should realize that God interacts with us in at least three different ways.

First, there is the dramatic, supernatural way in which He *comes from the outside* and personally, directly, and radically alters the situation. The case of the opening of the Red Sea during the exodus from Egypt would be a good example of the irruption of the transcendental in human affairs in order to bring deliverance (Exod 14:21-22). In cases like that there was usually a glorious display of the power of God, and the person involved experienced deliverance or healing in a unique way (cf. 1 Kings 17:20-22). What is often overlooked is that this type of unequivocally divine intervention in human affairs is not the dominant way of God's interventions found in the Bible.

The second way God intervenes in answer to our prayers is less obvious, but still recognizable. He *works from within the situation*, guiding it and using humans—their knowledge, experience, and disposition—to answer our prayers. This is illustrated in the book of Esther, where deliverance apparently comes through actions of humans. But as the story develops, it is clear that God was involved in the process from beginning to end (cf. Esther 4:12-14; 8:17; Gen 14:14-16, 20). He is active under the apparent mantle of silence, producing at a particular moment an unexpected turn of events. In many cases the human instrumentality may be more visible, but for the one who prayed the resolution is clearly God's response to the request. The timing of the healing, the coincidences, the sudden reversal of the threatening experience, as well as the acknowledgment that human power had practically run out of options, confirm the conviction of faith that it was God who quietly intervened producing a wonderful miracle of love through human instrumentalities or other means (e.g., Isa 38:21; Luke 10:33-35). This type of "miracle" is today much more common among God's people than we realize.

The third way the Spirit intervenes in answering our prayers for the sick is by creating in the human heart a humble disposition to trust in God's loving will for us. Our prayer for the healing of the sick could be in conflict with God's will for the person (cf. Matt 6:9-10). Such a conflict does not mean that God is uninterested in their well-being. It simply means that the divine, loving intention does not coincide with our

personal desires. In such cases, we simply trust in His love and wisdom knowing “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom 8:28). The important thing is to remember that in the *eschaton* God will answer all our prayers for the sick by bringing suffering and death to an end (Rev 21:4).

Anyone who argues that the healing power of the Spirit makes practically irrelevant the intervention of proper medical care does a disservice to the sick and distorts the biblical teaching on the prayer for the sick and the work of the Spirit.

1/08

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