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IS THERE HEALING IN THIS APPLICATION?

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“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24 NASB).

The lovely wooden plaque on my office wall declares a foundational truth of the Christian faith: “By His wounds we have been healed.” Peter clearly said Jesus died in our behalf in order to heal us; but what is included in this healing, and when and how is it given?

The Word-Faith movement has specific answers to these questions. Kenneth Copeland, for example, asserts, “*Healing belongs to you. Jesus purchased it by going to the cross. You have just as much right to be healed as you do to be saved and filled with the Holy Spirit. According to Matthew 8:17, Jesus ‘...took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.’ He bore them in His own body so that you and I wouldn’t have to. We are redeemed from sickness and disease*” (emphases in original).¹

Copeland goes on to explain 1 Peter 2:24: “The stripes laid on Jesus’ back by the Roman soldiers stood for your healing. By those stripes, you *were* healed — *past* tense. You were healed 2,000 years ago, but you have to receive it by faith today. *Healing is part of your inheritance, part of the blessing of Abraham; but in order to live in your inheritance, you have to believe it for yourself and accept it as a reality in your own life*” (emphases in original).²

This remarkably bold application of this verse claims the healing purchased by Jesus’ wounds applies to physical sickness today. This means that, as Christians, we should be living free from sickness; if we are not, the problem lies in our lack of faith. This application, moreover, makes it unthinkable to have faith to be saved and filled with the Spirit, but not to be healed; they are a salvation package. Is this a legitimate application of the meaning of 1 Peter 2:24?

Application in Due Time. We expect things to happen very quickly in modern culture. If the bank’s automatic teller machine takes more than 10 seconds to access our account, we frown impatiently. This impatience is especially noticeable in reading and applying God’s Word. It almost seems we pick up the Bible with an impatient frown, rush to the bottom line, and ask, “How does this passage apply to my situation?” before we ask, “What does this mean?” This would be equivalent to impatiently assembling a wonderful but complicated Christmas gift without first reading the instruction manual.

Peter plainly said by Christ’s wounds we have been healed (1 Pet. 2:24), but this invites the question, healed from what? From medical illness? From financial debt? From sinful attitudes? We can’t just *assume* that Peter was talking about healing from physical illnesses and then apply his statement to our current ailments. There is a logical approach that builds toward, not rushes to, application. Let’s survey this approach using 1 Peter as an example.

Whenever we read the Bible, we should start by *developing a sense of the whole passage* — getting a big picture of the text. Whether we know it or not, our sense of the whole text has a shaping effect on how we interpret the parts of the text. This is because meaning works from the top down, that is, from the text’s larger units of meaning down to its smaller ones.

What is the sense of the whole in 1 Peter? First Peter is a letter by the apostle Peter to churches in five Roman provinces in what is now Central and Western Turkey (1 Pet. 1:1–2). In light of their significant suffering as Christians, this letter exhorted them to keep their eternal deliverance in view as they

regularly need earthly deliverance from their “various trials” (1:3–12). Viewing the earthly in light of the eternal is central to the sense of the whole of 1 Peter. Every part of the letter develops a different outworking of this theme.

As we move to the *second* aspect of interpretation, we now *observe how the parts of the text develop the sense of the whole*. We do this by relating these parts to the whole. We observe, for example, that Peter initially encourages us to live before God on earth as obedient children in light of our eternal redemption (1:13–21). He then encourages us to manifest on earth what is true of us eternally: we are a loving family (1:22–25) and a chosen people (2:1–10). Peter then introduced a longer section called a “household code” that explains how we are to live in submission to all God-ordained authorities. By doing this, we will keep our behavior honorable among the Gentiles in that our exceptionally good behavior in earthly relationships points to our heavenly Lord (2:11–12). Within this household code in 2:11–3:7, we are instructed to submit ourselves “for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.” These are discussed in order of increasing intimacy: to governing authorities (2:13–17), to work authorities (2:18–25), and to family authorities (3:1–7). We also observe that our verse under consideration, 2:24, occurs within the discussion of how servants are to be submissive to masters. Peter saw Jesus’ work on the cross relating meaningfully to the issue of submission to work authorities.

Interpretation before Application. After honing a sense of the whole and observing how the parts of the text develop that sense, we *interpret the passage*, our *third* step. We have technically already been interpreting the text, but at this point we do it with a focus on our specific passage. Since meaning comes from the top down, we want to look at the paragraph that contains verse 24. One of the best lessons we can learn about interpreting the Bible is that *the paragraph* is the primary unit of thought in most of the Bible’s genres (kinds of literature). This means that interpreting any verse involves first establishing the overall meaning of the paragraph that contains that verse. The “big idea” of the paragraph in 1 Peter 2:18–25 is: Servants should submit to both just and unjust masters to fulfill God’s calling. The supreme example of this submission was Christ, whose sinless suffering also enables us to live righteously under His shepherding.

Four points are significant in this paragraph’s interpretation. First, it is about the submissive behavior of God’s people in the arena of work. Second, bad authorities do not void the need to submit. Third, Jesus is the best example of One who suffered unjustly (for us), since He is sinless (vv. 21–23). Fourth, through His suffering He is both *an example to follow* (v. 21) and *the One who enables us to submit in this manner* (vv. 24–25). Note that we are arriving at this *interpretation* (what it means) only after carefully *observing* the structure and argumentation of the surrounding passage (what it says). We are now ready to ask how this text *applies* to our situation (how the meaning relates to us).

The Payoff: Legitimate Application of the Meaning. In light of an accurate interpretation of the meaning of the passage, we should also have a good sense of whether a particular application legitimately flows out of this meaning. The obvious application of 1 Peter 2:18–25 is that *both* Jesus Christ’s example and His substitutionary work in our behalf as Messiah enable us to submit to just and unjust authorities in our work. In verse 24 specifically, Jesus’ substitutionary suffering and death paid for our sins *with the result* that we could now be healed of our rebellious attitudes (“die to sin”) and be submissive even to unjust authorities (“live to righteousness”).

Messiah Jesus both experienced this submission Himself and enabled us to enter into it through His suffering. Through His substitutionary suffering, we were healed of sin’s demand that we rebel and assert our own rights. In other words, within this specific argument about submitting to work authorities, Peter appealed to Jesus’ substitutionary suffering and death to give us hope of healing in this area. There will be total healing *ultimately*, including physical healing, which will come from the Messiah’s substitutionary work (pictured in Matt. 8:14–17). The *present application* of it in the New Testament, however, seems to center in *the spiritual healing* that is immediately available. This is also the main emphasis of the Old Testament source of this teaching: Isaiah 53:4–12. Neither the Isaiah nor the 1 Peter passage precludes physical healing, but neither do they demand it. They focus, rather, on the spiritual

healing of our guilt from sin. In other words, *the application* that Peter derived from Jesus' substitutionary death is one of *spiritual healing in the present time*. There is more to come in the next age, but the present application is focused on the healing of our souls from sin.

To see physical healing mandated in 1 Peter 2:24, therefore, one must *ignore the topic* (submission to authorities in our work) and *shift the focus* (from spiritual to physical healing). In other words, one must ignore the meaning of the passage to establish this application. This is what Copeland and the Word-Faith movement seem to be doing. They are saying the healing provided by Jesus guarantees physical healing right now for those who meet the condition of faith. This application, however, is disconnected from the meaning of the passage. Handling the biblical text in this manner seems to say more about what they want to find than what God has revealed. The passage indeed offers a firm expectation of perfect physical health in the immortality of the resurrection, but it provides no basis for claiming such perfect health in the mortality of this present world.

— *Walt Russell*

NOTES

1. Kenneth Copeland, "Welcome to the Family," Kenneth Copeland Ministries <http://www.kcm.org/studycenter/articles/salvation/welcome_minibook.htm>.
2. Ibid.