

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Providence and Thanksgiving

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This is a pleasant essay to write, for in the past year something extraordinary has happened to me, and I must speak about it. Our closest friends already know much of this information, but the matter is so amazing that everyone should know. God is great and greatly to be praised.

The Bad News

In mid-September 2005 I consulted my doctor for a routine physical examination. I had had nothing more serious (or so I thought) than indigestion for about a year, and I had successfully treated it with over-the-counter antacids. But the laboratory tests indicated moderate anemia, though everything else appeared to be in order. Because of my age (56), family history (my mother and her sister had died of colorectal cancer in their sixties), and the fact that I had never had a colonoscopy, my doctor scheduled me for the exam. By the end of September I had the diagnosis: poorly differentiated adenocarcinoma of the ascending colon. It was an aggressive, malignant, and large tumor. My family and I were stunned.

In the days between colonoscopy (Monday) and diagnosis (Friday), I had further tests; my wife Linda and I set about putting our affairs in order; we informed the rest of the family; and my youngest daughter, Meri, using her research skills on the Internet, began looking for the best surgeons and scheduling appointments with them for me. The Monday following my diagnosis we were in Durham, North Carolina, consulting Dr. Douglas Tyler at Duke University Hospital, one of the best colon cancer surgeons in the country. The following Friday we consulted Dr. Michael Choti at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, one of the best surgical oncologists in the world. Both surgeons gave the same advice: immediate resection of the colon followed by chemotherapy.

On October 13, after a battery of further tests at Duke, Dr. Tyler performed a right hemicolectomy, removed many lymph nodes from my abdomen, and wedged two tumors he had found on my liver. The diagnosis was confirmed, and the cancer was Stage IV, the worst possible stage. Dr.

Tyler was not optimistic. During the operation, he had found evidence of peritoneal disease, an intractable condition in which cancer has invaded the peritoneum. He also left one tumor in my liver, difficult to resect because of its location.

My daughters Juley and Laura and their families had traveled to visit me at Duke before and after surgery. After several days in the hospital, Linda, who had stayed in my hospital room, drove Meri and me home to Tennessee so I could recuperate from the surgery. (Linda is a Christian high school teacher, and her school allowed her to stay with me at Duke, and would later do the same when I went to Johns Hopkins.) In the meantime, my brother and sister found over-the-counter agents to use against cancer, and I began taking them soon after surgery. In early November I sent a letter to friends informing them of my precarious health situation, and they started praying for my health, my family, and The Foundation. Several sent gifts to help with medical expenses. God has blessed me with a loving and knowledgeable family, and in his providence he had led me to the most competent doctors. Now hundreds of people were praying for my recovery.

Later in November I visited medical oncologists near our home in Tennessee. I choose Dr. Thomas R. Johnson, who is meticulous, cautious, and considerate in his treatment of patients. In mid-December I started chemotherapy, taking both the oldest and newest agents: fluorouracil, leucovorin (a vitamin), oxaliplatin, and bevacizumab (a biologic agent). (I tried to obtain another new biologic agent, panitumumab, by signing up for a Phase III clinical trial, but I was randomized into the control arm of the trial.) Dr. Johnson pre-treats his patients for side effects of the toxic chemicals, which prevented most of the common side effects. But in January, after only three treatments (the recommended series is twelve treatments), I suffered rare and severe side effects, and he stopped all chemotherapy. Since surgery, my one remaining tumor had shrunk to half its previous size. I immediately scheduled liver surgery with Dr. Choti at Johns Hopkins. (I told him that the Latin fine print on my diploma entitled me to one free surgery at Hopkins, but he

sent me a bill anyway.) On February 28 Dr. Choti successfully removed the one remaining tumor and 25 percent of my liver, using techniques and instruments he had pioneered for such surgeries.

The Good News

After the surgery, Dr. Choti reported that there was now no evidence of disease in my abdomen. This was extraordinary: I had been in Stage IV in October, and my first surgeon, Dr. Tyler, had been somewhat pessimistic about my prospects. Five months later, I was in the condition cancer patients call NED – no evidence of disease. This was most extraordinary. I am told that the median survival time of someone with Stage IV colon cancer is less than a year. Peritoneal disease makes it almost a foregone conclusion. But God not only had removed the tumors, but also the peritoneal disease. The condition that made Dr. Tyler pessimistic in October was completely gone by the end of February. The liver itself, a most remarkable organ, grew back to normal size in about six weeks.

Although I was now NED, both Dr. Choti and Dr. Johnson advised me to have further chemotherapy as a precaution. The statistics suggest that even if treatment is successful, this sort of cancer returns in most cases, and chemotherapy, they thought, might thwart or slow its return by killing any cancer cells floating around in my bloodstream. So I began chemotherapy again in May, this time taking only fluorouracil and leucovorin. I received these three-day treatments every two weeks during May, June, and July before once again developing a reaction that caused Dr. Johnson to stop all chemo. But in April, July, September, and October, all tests, including three PET/CTs, could find no disease. Since July I have had no chemotherapy, and I am scheduled to be tested every three months for any sign of recurrence. The doctors continue to report no detectable disease.

A Miracle?

Some have called what has happened to me a miracle. Improving from Stage IV to NED in five months and staying there, for eight months now, is indeed remarkable and extraordinary. But this extraordinary healing should not be called a miracle. All healing is from God, but the term *miracle* should be restricted only to those events described as such in the Bible. There we have reports of people with various disorders – blindness, lameness, deafness, death, demon possession – being healed by Christ, the prophets, and the apostles. These cases differ in several ways from extraordinary healings today.

First, we know infallibly that the diagnoses stated in Scripture are true and accurate. Because Scripture is inerrant, we know that the man who was born blind (see *John 9*), for example, was in fact born blind. (The rulers of the synagogue tried to find out whether he was or not by

questioning people, including his parents.) But there is no such knowledge in medical science. Patients sometimes lie; tests yield both false positives and false negatives; doctors jump to false conclusions; and patients are frequently misdiagnosed, sometimes for years. There is a very good reason that doctors speak of “second opinions”: All science, including medical science, deals only in opinions, not in knowledge, that is, not in proven truth. To suggest that the investigations of scientists can attain such knowledge demeans Scripture and propositional revelation. It also asserts a theory of knowledge that is itself false and logically indefensible. To understand science and its proper purpose, which is not cognition, one ought to study Gordon Clark’s book *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God*. Scientists, including physicians, are always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. They are properly interested in what works, not what is true.

A proper understanding of the limitations of medical science tends to make doctors humble. Some doctors, like some men in every profession, are know-it-alls, but they are likely to be the least competent and the worst educated. The most competent doctors are not know-it-alls. Because they understand both the limitations of science and their own limitations, they tend to be more cautious, more thorough, and to listen more attentively to patients. They will accept with gratitude a journal article in their field that they have not seen – and actually read it. In the past year I have spoken with many doctors, and my impression is that the more competent the doctor, the more humble he is, because he better understands the limitations of science. After my second surgery one cancer marker increased rather than decreased, as one might have expected it would. Dr. Choti explained that there is so large a margin of error in the test that the fluctuation is meaningless. But margins of error do not fit into any philosophy of science that asserts that science discovers truth. In truth the margin of error is zero.

The second reason we call some healings reported in the Bible miracles is that the divine healing miracles reported in Scripture were always the result of actions taken by God-sent prophets or apostles or the Son of Man himself. Christ, Peter, or Elijah did something in order to accomplish the healing, but they never used medicine. Infrequently they used mud, water, and a touch, but almost always they used only a spoken word. These demonstrations of power over disease and death corroborated their claims to speak a message from God. However, there are no God-sent prophets and apostles on Earth today. The writing of the New Testament was completed in the first century (not the fourth), and so we have the full and final revelation, to which nothing is to be added; the Son of Man is now seated at the right hand of God the Father in Heaven; and, since there are no God-sent messengers on Earth, there are no present-day divine miracles. (Just as the wizards of ancient Egypt could perform a limited number of miracles but could not match Moses’ divine miracles, it is possible that there are diabolical miracles on

Earth today. Next year we hope to bring out a new edition of Benjamin Warfield's 1918 book, *Counterfeit Miracles*, because it sets forth in great detail the Biblical view of divine and diabolical miracles.) If there are no miracle-working prophets and apostles on Earth today, then Paul Crouch, Benny Hinn, Pat Robertson, and their ilk are impostors and false prophets. They have no message from God, but they use God's name in vain in their shameless attempts to lend credence to and collect money for their bizarre ideas and ministries. Today's "faith-healers" and "miracle-workers" have no anointing from the Holy Spirit; therefore, they cannot and do not perform divine miracles (though whether they perform diabolical miracles is an open question).

However, the televised faith-healers are rank amateurs compared to the Roman Catholic Church-State, which for more than a millennium has claimed the power to perform miracles. The Roman Church keeps millions of allegedly wonder-working relics in its churches and repositories around the world; it even claims that every time a priest or a bishop says, "Hoc est corpus meum," a cracker becomes the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ, and those who eat the consecrated cracker and drink the consecrated wine are eating the literal, physical, body and drinking the literal, physical blood of Jesus Christ. Such claims are not true; they are not Biblical; they are disgusting, blasphemous hoaxes that many gullible people believe. God's warning through the prophet Jeremiah is relevant to our situation today:

Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord. They continually say to those who despise me, "The Lord has said, You shall have peace" and to everyone who walks according to the imagination of his own heart, "No evil shall come upon you...."

I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings....

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed! I have dreamed!" How long will this be in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make my people forget my name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor....

Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who steal my words, every one, from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who use their tongues and say, "He says." Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams, says the Lord, and tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them [*Jeremiah 23*].

Just as ancient Israel had her false prophets, so the modern religious world has its false prophets, whom God will punish for twisting his word, taking his name in vain, and telling lies.

The third reason we call the healings in the Bible divine miracles but we should not call healings today divine miracles is that we know the people in the Bible were actually cured. When the infallible Word of God says that the deaf were made to hear, the blind to see, and the lame to walk, we know those things are true. The God who cannot lie or err says so. But the opinions of medical science are just that: opinions. They may or may not be true; and medical science cannot tell which. Using the most sophisticated machines, tests, and techniques, the doctors cannot detect any disease in my body, but that does not mean it is not there. Not only are all tests fallible, but sinful men make mistakes as well. The most that we can say is not that I am cured, but that there is no detectable disease in my body. This humble recognition of the limits of science brings us to the matter of prayer.

The Power of Prayer?

Some have attributed my remarkable recovery to the power of prayer. What role does prayer play in healing? It was widely reported that someone recently conducted an extensive investigation of the effect of prayer on the recovery of hospitalized patients and concluded that prayer had no effect on their recovery. Rather than being surprised, I expected that outcome. Why? Because the prayer in question was generic: Any petition to any god by anyone was included as prayer. One might as well argue that the prayers of the 451 prophets (see *1 Kings 18*) show that prayer is almost never answered.

Christians, however, do not believe in the power of prayer: Rather, they believe in the power of God. American religion – I do not say Christianity – has become so subjective and man-centered that the "power of prayer" and the "power of faith" are touted continually. Power is ascribed to our words – prayer – and to our believing, rather than to the effective Word of God, who heals by speaking a word. This subjectivism – this idolatry – explains why Christ warned us not to think that much speaking, chanting, or rote recital of prayers is Christian prayer. God does not and will not listen to such prayers. Instead, Christian prayer is to be done privately and succinctly, and comprises praise to God as well as our petitions for help. The model prayer that Christ taught his disciples in the Gospels is focused on God on Heaven, his holy name, and the advancement of his Gospel and Kingdom. Prayer is speaking to God in Heaven, and it is God, not prayer, who hears and heals. Faith is believing God's Word; it is his Word, not our believing, that saves and heals us. In our idolatrous religious subjectivism, we have not kept our minds on our Heavenly Father, but we have focused on our praying and our believing.

Deism and Predestination

Furthermore, God alone heals. In the Gospels Christ once used mud, but on me he used surgery and medicine. God himself performed the first surgery in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, and the good Samaritan properly treated the beaten, half-dead man with wine (antiseptic), oil (ointment), and bandages. Unlike Christ, the good Samaritan used medicine, and God healed the half-dead man using those means. Some men (though there are cults that deny their importance) seem to understand the importance of surgery and medicine, but they have difficulty understanding the role of prayer. Sinners tend to be deists; even many who profess to be Christians think that the universe has its own intrinsic laws – natural laws – by which it operates. The doctrine of natural law – in both its moral and physical senses – is one of the great superstitions of the fallen mind. It allows sinful men to ascribe power and offer praise to Nature – with a capital N, of course – rather than to God – to the creature, rather than to the Creator. But there are no natural laws, in either the physical or the moral sense. The universe is not a watch that someone long ago wound up. Rather, it is completely dependent at every moment on the thought of God. King David was not a deist; he understood that all the good he had received or ever would receive had come directly from God in Heaven:

The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters: He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff – they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Notice that God is always, and in every situation, the active agent: God gives rest; God gives refreshment; God gives salvation; God gives eternal life. Though we have plenty of food in our kitchens, we ought to pray daily for our daily bread, because it is God alone who makes that food nourish our bodies. And it is God alone who heals.

The End of the Matter

In the past year I have walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and God has preserved me. I am profoundly grateful to my family, to my friends who have prayed for me faithfully, and to my doctors and nurses who have treated me with competence and compassion. But all their efforts would have amounted to nothing had not God blessed them. While I was sick a friend reminded me of a passage from Jerome Zanchius' book *Absolute Predestination*. It is an eloquent statement of who God is and what he does:

Without a due sense of predestination, we shall lack the surest and the most powerful inducement to patience, resignation, and dependence on God under every spiritual and temporal affliction. How sweet must the following considerations be to a distressed believer:

1. There most certainly exists an almighty, all-wise, and infinitely gracious God.
2. He has given me in times past, and is giving me at present (if I had but eyes to see it), many remarkable intimations of his love to me, both in a way of providence and grace.
3. This love of his is immutable; he never repents of it nor withdraws it.
4. Whatever comes to pass in time is the result of his will from everlasting.
5. Consequently, my afflictions were a part of his original plan, and are all ordered in number, weight, and measure.
6. The very hairs of my head are (every one) counted by him, nor can a single hair fall to the ground but in consequence of his determination.
7. Hence, my distresses are not the result of chance, accident, or a fortuitous combination of circumstances, but
8. The providential accomplishment of God's purpose, and
9. Designed to answer some wise and gracious ends.
10. Nor shall my affliction continue a moment longer than God sees meet.
11. He who brought me to it has promised to support me under it and to carry me through it.
12. All shall, most assuredly, work together for his glory and my good.
13. Therefore, "The cup which my heavenly Father has given me to drink: Shall I not drink it?"

Yes, I will, in the strength he imparts, even rejoice in tribulation; and using the means of possible redress, which he has or may hereafter put into my hands, I will commit myself and the event to him, whose purpose cannot be overthrown, whose plan cannot be disconcerted, and who, whether I am resigned or not, will still go on to work all things after the counsel of his own will.

Above all, when the suffering Christian takes his election into account, and knows that he was by an eternal and immutable act of God appointed to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, that, of course, he has a city prepared for him above, a building of God, a house not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens; and that the heaviest sufferings of the present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in the saints, what adversity can possibly befall us which the assured hope of blessings like these will not infinitely overbalance? However keenly afflictions might wound us on their first access, yet, under the impression of such animating views we should quickly come to ourselves again, and the arrows of tribulation, would, in great measure lose their sharpness. Christians need nothing but absolute resignation to render them perfectly happy in every possible circumstance, and absolute resignation can only flow from an absolute belief of and an absolute acquiescence in God's absolute providence, founded on absolute predestination.

May God bless us all with such an understanding of his power, wisdom, love, and providence.

