

Does My Child Need to Be Healed? A Father's Reflections

By Rev. Steve Bundy

...and a little child shall lead them.

ISAIAH 11:6

Sitting at the dinner table one evening, my four-year-old son surprised us with a profound question about his older brother. “Daddy,” Jaron said, “why did God make Caleb with special needs?” Gathering my thoughts, I responded, “What did you ask, son?” Jaron repeated his question without hesitation, “Why did God make Caleb with special needs?”

Caleb, who was eight at the time, was born with a deletion on his number 2 chromosome, resulting in developmental disabilities, intellectual and physical delays, muscular dystrophy and autism. Caleb didn't walk until he was six years old, has challenging autistic characteristics, and has never spoken a word.

I was amazed that such a deep question was coming from my preschooler and paused, trying to find a way to express my thoughts on a level he could comprehend. Honestly, part of my own heart still struggles with the “why” of it all. I'm not sure any parent can fully satisfy this question, although many have found great comfort in the plans and purposes of God.

I turned to my wife Melissa, who had a look of expectation, wondering how I was going to answer Jaron. Finally, I broke the silence, and began explaining how Caleb was like any other boy except due to his “special needs” he had to interact differently. God had a plan when he created Caleb and wanted to use him to touch other peoples' lives. I told Jaron that one day when Caleb went to heaven he would be healed. He would run, talk and play like all the other children.

My answer seemed to appease our questioning theologian for a moment. Then he rolled his head around, looked up to the sky and asked, “Why doesn't God just heal him now?” Melissa's eyes were filling with tears (mine were wet, too). Such a simple follow-up question! With a complicated, sometimes heart-wrenching answer.

We told Jaron that it was not God's desire to heal his brother right now, but that God loved Caleb very much, whether he could speak or walk or talk. All people are created in God's image and we bring him glory by being who he created us to be. I spoke of the gifts and abilities Caleb has and how he can have a full life in spite of his disabilities. I also reassured Jaron that my answers may not make complete sense because sometimes we simply have to trust God even when we don't understand his ways. In short, I told him that Caleb did not need to be healed.

I wish I could say I had drawn such a simple conclusion shortly after Caleb's birth. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The first two years of Caleb's life were a huge struggle for me, and consequently us as a family. At that time I couldn't yet accept Caleb for who he was—I needed him to be healed. I experienced

anger, grief and depression over his condition. I desperately wanted him to be healed and felt my prayers fell silent at heaven's doors. My God seemed impotent as my world crumbled. My biblical theology and real-life experience were out of alignment. I labored to interpret Scripture out of my experience, instead of allowing Scripture to interpret my experience. Let me explain.

I had been impacted by a theology that erroneously emphasized God's will for all to be healed . . . 100 percent of the time! No exceptions! In fact, if there was a sickness, disability or ailment of some sort, it was due to a lack of faith on that person's part, or the work of Satan, or sin in one's life, or a combination of all three. At the time of Caleb's birth, my support group was comprised of friends—functioning under the same theology—who prayed for my faith to be increased, for Satan to be bound, for sins to be confessed, and for Caleb to be healed! And when he was not healed, it was a clear indication that God's favor no longer rested on me. I later discovered that this "Faith-Theology" is actually "Fear-Theology." This doctrine focuses on the "works of man," whose authority and healing is solely based on one's perfection of faith. I was in a dangerous, downward spiral and needed a new, God-centered perspective.

Who Needs Healing?

When we see our children through an eternal perspective rather than an earthly perspective, there is much to celebrate. In Psalm 127:3 we're told that children are a reward from the Lord. Psalm 139:13–14 tells us that they are "fearfully and wonderfully made," and it was God who knit each of them together in their mother's womb. If my mind had been focused on Scripture and the revelation of God as our Creator, I would have understood that Caleb was perfectly designed by God. Maybe the word "understood" is too strong; I would have at least been able to accept Caleb and work through my wounded emotions. But it took a personal lesson for me to grasp these principles.

One of the common challenges of raising a child with disabilities is sleep deprivation. Caleb was no exception. It's as if he was born without an "internal body clock." It wasn't until Caleb was six years old that we discovered a combination of medications that helped him get a good night's sleep (and us as well). Prior to that, Caleb would sleep irregular hours and randomly wake up crying in the middle of the night. I remember one night, when he was two years old, he awoke crying. I went to his room as usual to comfort him until he went back to sleep. As Caleb dozed off, I laid down on the floor, staring at the ceiling and questioning this mysterious God I claimed to know. I asked why he had not fixed Caleb. After all, that was really what I wanted. I thought: *All the therapies, all the doctor's visits, and all the special time and attention is not going to help Caleb's development. It won't fix him! Think of all the glory you would receive, Lord. The testimony of his miraculous healing would reveal your glory to so many!*

I am not one who would claim to have had many "encounters" with the Lord. No burning bush experiences that I can speak of. But at that moment I sensed the presence of God filling Caleb's room. I cannot fully explain it in words. Although I heard no audible voice, as clear as I have ever heard anyone, these words flooded my soul: *Son, aren't you glad that I did not require you to be fixed before I accepted you?* I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I could only reflect on the words that just pierced my heart and mind. In a watershed moment that I can only describe as a revelation, an understanding of the unconditional love of my Heavenly Father burst into my soul. I was praying for Caleb's brokenness to be fixed and instead I came to grips with *my own brokenness*. In an instant it became clear to me that God, the Creator of the universe, the Incarnate Word made flesh, the Spirit who moved within man, loved me unconditionally and it had nothing to do with my own performance, abilities or even holiness. I was broken and in denial. I was accepted and loved by God not because of my worth, ability or goodness. It was because of God's own love, goodness and existence that I can cry out with confidence, "Abba Father . . . Daddy!"¹

My soul was also flooded with an understanding of how utterly selfish, earthly and unloving I had been to my very own son upon whom I had placed such high requirements. With tears running down my cheeks,

I held my sleeping son in my arms and said, “Caleb, I love you just the way you are, for who you are, and I don’t need you to be fixed. Today, I truly become your father. You are my son and I’ll love you unconditionally from this day forth whether or not you are ever healed.” That moment changed my life and Caleb’s, because he had a new dad. I wish I could say that I’ve always lived up to my vow to love unconditionally, but I can’t. However, I have been able to accept my son and rely upon God’s help to continue becoming the father I want to be. That night, for the first time, I realized that it wasn’t Caleb who needed to be healed—it was me.

Reflecting back on that experience in Caleb’s room a decade ago, I am amazed that I could have been so blind to the gift that God gave me in my son. On the other hand, we can’t ignore the real disappointments and challenges that daily accompany life with disability. Our family has experienced a great deal of pain and suffering throughout this journey. And as Caleb gets older the challenges will increase. As much as I love my son for *who* he is, I do not always love the *way* he is. Honestly, there are many days when I wish Caleb was an active boy without disabilities. But at the same time, he is amazing and continues to be my greatest teacher. Without a spoken word, Caleb touches more hearts for Christ than a lot of Christians I’ve known.

For His Glory

I recognize how some people may believe that God receives more glory when a miraculous healing takes place such as Jesus’ healing of the blind man in John 9. We struggle to comprehend that God has also ordained glory for himself through the person who finds joy and peace in the midst of their disability, without ever experiencing healing on this earth.

Two years ago I had this conversation at a Bible college in Belgrade, Serbia, while teaching on the subject of “Theology and Disability.” I was using biblical and modern examples of those with disabilities whom God has used without healing them such as Joni Eareckson Tada and Nick Vujicic.² The Lord is using these leaders in mighty ways. A fiery, young student named Philip was on the edge of his seat during the discussion. Waving his hand in the air, Philip could hardly contain himself, “Tell me how God can possibly be glorified by *not* healing Joni and Nick since healing them would surely display his great power?”

I understood his question. It’s the same one I worked through years before in seminary and on my own personal journey with Caleb. As we discussed Philip’s view of healing, he articulated the doctrines he had been exposed to by “faith-healers” on the internet and Christian television. We also talked about other views of divine healing. Then, I challenged him with this question, “On a global scale, Joni and Nick have led millions of people to faith in Christ or a deeper walk with Christ although they have not been physically healed of their disabilities. Can you name one person in history who has had such an impact on Christ’s Kingdom by being healed?” He was stumped. I could see the confusion in his face as he searched his mind for an answer. Philip could think of no one. One question seemed to dissolve the erroneous theology he had been accepting. My point to this young man was not to deny healing and the glory God receives through it; rather, to challenge him with his belief that healing *had* to happen for God to be glorified. He was so convinced that healing was only of a physical nature, that he had overlooked the fact that biblical healing is first and foremost of a spiritual nature.

Biblical Healing

This is not to suggest that healings have not occurred and resulted in people finding Christ. There are a number of Greek words used in the New Testament for healing: *sōzō*, *hygiēs*, *iaomai*, and *therapeuō*. At times these terms are used to refer to physical healing. On other occasions, *iaomai* and *sōzō* are used to refer primarily to spiritual healing. For example, in Matthew 9:22 when Jesus spoke to the woman with the issue of blood, he said, “Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well (*sōzō*).” However, in the next chapter, Jesus commissioned the twelve disciples for ministry and gave them the mandate to “heal (*therapeuō*) the sick” (Mt. 10:8). Matthew 15:31 speaks of the “crippled restored (*hugiaino*).”

These examples are instances of physical healings—that is, to completely cure a condition; but healing is also for the soul. For example, Ephesians 2:8 reads, “For by grace you have been saved (*sōzō*).” This verse is not a reference to physical healing, but rather to spiritual healing. The same is true for 1 Peter 2:24, “by his stripes you were healed (*iaomai*).” Although sometimes used for physical healing, *sōzō* and *iaomai* typically carry the meaning of spiritual healing, which is the primary focus of New Testament healing. Spiritual healing is the salvation of the soul.

Although we use the terms synonymously, “healing” has a much broader meaning than simply to cure someone.

- Cures may eliminate the symptoms, if not the disease or disability itself.
- The term healing describes well-being, peace, comfort or support, but may not imply a cure.

People are sometimes “cured” from a disease or disability by a miracle, therapy or medicine—but this does not mean that true spiritual healing has taken place. In reference to Jesus, Isaiah 53:5 says, “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.” This peace (*shalom*) is the well-being, completeness and reconciliation that Christ provides. Healing refers to “being made whole” in spirit, as in our healing from sin.³

In Scripture we see an emphasis on spiritual healing, not physical healing. The soul will live forever; the body will not. Although physical wellness is encouraged and should be sought, true biblical health and wholeness relates to the spirit, not the physical. For example, Paul’s physical body was broken after years of beatings and poor treatment. He reminded the Corinthians that our bodies are like temporary tents—our new bodies will be in heaven (2 Cor. 5:1). Paul also apparently struggled with a physical disability of poor sight,⁴ which he sought physical healing for: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you . . .” (2 Cor. 12:8–9). Though the Lord denied to restore Paul to wholeness physically, he received spiritual healing—that of community and acceptance. He testifies of the Galatian church that they would have “torn out [their] eyes and given them to me” (Gal. 4:15).

There is a misconception that “wholeness” is the absence of any deficiencies in our bodies or lives, but everyone has deficiencies. Everyone Jesus healed eventually died. Wholeness is a matter of contentment based on one’s perspective—a biblical perspective defines wholeness in terms of relationships, not physical or material conditions. Christ’s primary mission was to redeem man for eternal life and a right relationship with the Father (Jn. 3:16). Spiritual healing includes a right relationship with God—that is salvation and a dedicated life of surrender. His secondary mission was to restore right relationship with one another (Jn. 17:20–21). Therefore, spiritual healing, which would include emotional healing, involves a right relationship with people—that is the Body of Christ and the community in which we live. In biblical times, as it unfortunately is today, people with disease or disabilities were often excluded from community life and part of a person’s healing involved restoring him or her to community.

When a cure was the means to accomplish this, then Jesus did so. Otherwise, his ministry was to the heart and soul of mankind. For example, in Luke 5:17–26, Jesus healed a man who had been lowered to him through the roof of a house. Here, Jesus healed the man by forgiving him of his sins (restoring him to God). He did not immediately cure the man physically, because he was already in community, as evidenced by his caring friends. It is only when Jesus discerned the thoughts of the Pharisees that he cured him “so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .” Even in curing the man Jesus’ focus was on restoration to a right relationship with God—that is, true healing.

What He Really Needs

I was recently at a conference with Joni in which she was interviewing a good friend of the Joni and Friends ministry, Robin Hiser. Robin was born with Down syndrome and has lived an active and fruitful

life. She has an amazing love for God and people, using her skills and gifts to minister to youth across the nation. Watching Robin worship or hearing her pray brings an appreciation for who God created her to be—just as she is.

During the interview, Joni asked Robin what advice she wanted to give to parents who might have a child with special needs. Without hesitation Robin stated there are two very important things for parents to remember. “The first,” she said, “is to always remember that the greatest gift you can give your child is love—unconditional love.” Tears began to fill my eyes as Robin went on the second point, “and the second thing is just as important, no matter what, accept them just the way they are—the way God created them.” At this point the tears were running down my face as pictures of Caleb filled my mind. When I returned home from the conference that weekend and my wife asked me how it went, I told her I was reminded of two very important things . . .

You too may struggle with anger, depression or disappointment with God over your child's disability. Your cries are real and God hears you—he feels your pain. Your prayers for healing may seem to have fallen short of heaven as you look for evidence of God responding. When we properly place healing in the light of eternity, we realize that physical and developmental disabilities experienced on this earth, though difficult and at times very painful, are temporary. Spiritual healing is eternal. We realize that God has responded with salvation and restoration (healing)—the greatest response he could have given. When life is lived out in the love and support of the Body of Christ, of family and community, then the context is set for a life of celebration and wholeness.

My son Caleb may not be healed as people traditionally think of healing. But I can assure you he has been healed from a scriptural perspective of relationship and love. So, the next time a four-year old theologian questions you about healing, you may want to simply reply with a question, “What healing does he need?”

Notes

1. Romans 8:15
2. For more about Nick Vujcic and his ministry Life Without Limbs, visit www.lifewithoutlimbs.org.
3. David Anderson, *Reaching Out and Bringing In*. (Roseville, NM: Crossing Bridges, Inc., 2008), p. 58.
4. Though the text does not specifically indicate, many scholars believe that Paul's reference in Galatians 4:15 is related to his having poor or limited vision, most likely caused by a common eye disease of his day. It is this author's belief that Paul's reference to “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Corinthians 12:8–9 is also related to this physical challenge.

About the Author

Steve Bundy brings 25 years of experience in nonprofit leadership, both domestically and internationally. The last 17 years have been at Joni and Friends, where he has launched multiple initiatives and now leads our international efforts around the world. Previously he has served as an executive at the US Center for World Mission, as a missionary in Eastern Europe and as a pastor of disability ministry. He is a published author and co-author with Joni Eareckson Tada on projects such as *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View of Disability Ministry* and the Telly-Award winning television episode, *Making Sense of Autism*. He has also co-authored, *Another Kind of Courage: God's Design for Fathers of Families Affected by Disability*. Steve and his wife Melissa know firsthand the joys and challenges of parenting a child with disabilities, as their own son, Caleb, was born in 1999 with muscular dystrophy, intellectual disability, and autism. Their second son, Jaron, is a musician and produces Christian worship music. Steve holds a B.A. in Theology and Missions from Bethany Global University, an M.A. in Organizational Leadership from Biola University, and certificates in executive management from Harvard and Stanford.