

SLIDE ONE

ANTICIPATING COMMUNION

Tomorrow is February and a reminder once again of how quickly time marches on. As usual next Sunday we will respect our Lord's wish for his disciples to remember his death on a cruel Roman cross some two thousand years ago.

So, we will Lord willing, once again celebrate the Lord's supper. On the one hand it seems weird to use the word 'celebrate' to refer to such a tragic event. But on the other hand, we can genuinely and gratefully celebrate because of the great victory that was won on that old, rugged cross.

Sometimes it seems that communion is upon us without having spent much in the way of preparing our hearts for it.

So, I thought that it might be appropriate on this Sunday preceding communion that we turn our thoughts to what was prophesied, what subsequently happened, and what we celebrate.

We begin by examining one of the most graphic prophecies concerning the mission and death of our saviour.

It is found in Isaiah fifty-three. And I am reading from the ESV translation this morning.

*Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been
revealed?*

*For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or
majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty
that we should desire him.*

*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of
sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from
whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we
esteemed him not.*

*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our
sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by
God, and afflicted.*

*But he was pierced for our transgressions; he
was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the
chastisement that brought us peace, and with his
wounds we are healed.*

*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have
turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD
has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet
he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to*

the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

One of my memorized childhood verses is the KJV rendering of verse five from this text:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we

have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

It is indeed a very good verse to memorize and if you have not already done so I would encourage you to do so. One might even call it the gospel in a nutshell.

The primary focus in this prophecy from Isaiah is truth about sin and God's provision for it.

We have all sinned, punishment for it was our future but Jesus stepped in and took our punishment, making atonement for our sin.

This truth alone makes communion, the death of our Lord on our behalf, worth celebrating.

And our primary reason for celebration as part of our communion observance is the opportunity our Lord has given us to find forgiveness for our sin and restoration of our relationship with our heavenly Father.

We celebrate those words "by his stripes we are healed."

Now when we in our twenty-first century culture see, hear, or read the word 'heal' we almost automatically think about physical healing, although

some might include mental health issues in their thoughts.

But some commentaries, for example my old faithful standby King James Thompson Chain, make a note beside this verse saying this refers to ‘spiritual healing’. Why would they do that?

Well, the answer lies in understanding the Hebrew word translated as ‘healed’.

The Hebrew word is ‘raphah’. You may recall that word if you have studied the various names of God. Jehovah raphah is one of the many names of God that reveal his character.

We see it used in Exodus 15:26 (KJV) where we read:

“If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and will do that which is right in his sight, and will give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am Jehovah Raphah or the LORD that healeth thee.

So, remember Hebrew names typically have meaning and in this case, ‘raphah’ points to the healing nature of God. Healing in this particular verse is not used in the sense of a physical need that

needs restoration but in a preventative nature, God interceding to protect from disease.

It's a great prayer to be praying right now in these difficult times.

Given this verse, we can legitimately pray for healing as protection from the pandemic.

But we also have a hint here that the word 'raphah' translated as healing is a very broad term with many nuances of meaning.

And to suggest that the name Jehovah Raphah applies only to one or two aspects of God's nature would diminish his role as healer. God, as we see in the pages of scripture heals in a wide variety of ways.

And with that thought, we go to the definition of that Hebrew word.

This word appears and is translated sixty-seven times with considerable variation in the (KJV).

In reality, translators have a difficult job, particularly when they cannot find an English word that exactly matches the Hebrew word and thus they must carefully examine the context to determine the English word that accurately depicts the meaning in the original.

So, we find that this word is used in a variety of ways, for example it is used to describe a physician, and hence our reference to our Saviour as the great physician.

Among the other ways, it is used is to describe physical healing in an individual. One of the first cases of physical healing is found in Genesis 20:17 (NLT) where we read:

Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants, so they could have children.

It is important to note here also that this healing took place a result of the prayer of Abraham which should be an encouragement to us to keep on praying for the healing of physical issues.

There are many examples throughout scripture where God supernaturally heals physical ailments.

But ‘raphah’ is also used to describe healing for nations.

For example, in Isaiah 19:21-22 (NLT we read these prophetic words concerning Egypt.

The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians. Yes, they will know the LORD and will give their sacrifices and offerings to him. They will make a vow to the LORD and will keep it. The LORD will strike Egypt, and then he will bring healing. For the Egyptians will turn to the LORD, and he will listen to their pleas and heal them.

And then in a brief glimpse into the future we read concerning the Tree of Life in Revelation 22:2:

The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Yet another important aspect of healing is spiritual healing. The word ‘raphah’ can be used to speak about healing with respect to our sin problem.

This is the key aspect that we celebrate at communion.

So, we see that the word can be legitimately used to reference a wide array of situations. How do translators then deal with this problem?

I have had considerable personal experience in having to work through interpreters. Their job is tough too. They are expected to immediately provide an accurate translation in a language that is not usually their first language.

I quickly found in Russia that I would have to ask questions in slightly different ways before I was confident in the answer I was given.

Biblical translators don't have that luxury. All they have is the original text to work with. And so, what becomes critically important is the context.

What has been said before and after that can help determine the appropriate meaning?

Let's look once again at the central verses in our earlier reading:

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Note carefully why he was pierced. For our transgressions, another word for sins.

Why was he crushed? For our iniquities, another word for sin.

What was laid on him? The iniquity or the sins of us all.

So, this is why Bible commentaries can legitimately make a note that healing here in the context of this prophecy refers to spiritual healing.

There is repeated references to our sin sick condition but no direct reference to physical healing or the healing of nations or other aspects of healing.

The Apostle Peter in his first letter also speaks about the death of Jesus. Here are his words about the suffering of Jesus from verses twenty-one to twenty-four of chapter two.

For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.

He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered.

He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed.

So, Peter here in his explanation of our Lord's suffering mentions sin as the reason for the Lord's punishment, with no mention of physical

healing or the healing of nations, or other aspects of healing.

‘So when Peter says ‘By his wounds you are healed’ he is speaking about the healing of our sin made possible at Calvary.

Now there is another important aspect to consider here.

God created a perfect world. Our enemy tempted Adam and Eve and they rebelled against God’s instructions and sinned.

From that point on the creation was cursed. Ageing, sickness, disease and eventual physical death became part of the human condition.

In Romans 8:20 Paul writes:

Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay.

This verse can be both a source of discouragement and a source of hope.

The discouragement is that we will live with the impact and effects of the curse, until the day when God restores his creation.

And obviously the hope is in the day that Paul alludes to. The day when God's creation is completely restored, sickness, disease, suffering, aging and death will be no more.

And Revelation gives us a preview of that day in Revelation 21:4-5 (NLT)

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!"

Now there is another important point to consider when we think about the various kinds of healing that come from our God who is indeed Jehovah Rapha.

The sin that Isaiah spoke about, the sin that Peter spoke about, the sin mentioned in many places throughout the bible required atonement.

What does that word atonement mean? It means that reparation is required. God and man are separated from fellowship because of the sin mentioned so frequently in the scriptures.

The perfect justice of God demands punishment for sin before peace with God can be

restored. Isaiah and Peter picture that restoration becoming possible through the death of Jesus.

Hebrews says without the shedding of blood there is no remission. It was through and only through the horrible beating and death on the cross that atonement for sin, and thus healing for our sin is possible.

While the curse was initiated by Adam and Eve's sin, the impact that the curse has on us is not because of our personal sin.

Now there may be cases where careless use and protection of one's body could be argued as sinful, but in general, when we are sick or are infected with a disease it is not because of sin.

So, in order for physical healing to take place there is no atonement required, no blood to be shed, no reparation as in the case where we needed healing for our sin.

But praise the Lord, our God is still Jehovah Rapha, the God whose very nature is to heal.

Down through the ages right up to the present day God continues to reveal his healing nature. People are healed. It is simply a product of God's grace, and mercy.

It is confirmation of his Jehovah Raphah nature.

Now in Matthew Chapter eight we find verses fourteen to seventeen (NLT) quite interesting.

¹⁴ When Jesus arrived at Peter's house, Peter's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever.

¹⁵ But when Jesus touched her hand, the fever left her. Then she got up and prepared a meal for him.

¹⁶ That evening many demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. He cast out the evil spirits with a simple command, and he healed all the sick.

¹⁷ This fulfilled the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, who said, "He took our sicknesses and removed our diseases".

There's no doubt that Matthew was referring to Isaiah's prophecy. But at this point in time the cross was still in the future. Atonement had not been made. And therefore, it was not through the atonement that healing was made rather it was another series of amazing healing miracles from Jehovah Rapha the God who heals.

Matthew's prime recipient for his gospel was the Jewish people. Matthew is writing several years after these events. He is trying to convince them that Jesus was indeed the true messiah. Trying to convince them that Jesus is the healer predicted by Isaiah.

And he is using this example of Jesus healing many, with both physical and spiritual issues as evidence that the healing nature of Jehovah Rapha has been clearly manifested in the ministry of Jesus.

So, as we look forward to communion Sunday and prepare our hearts for it let's reflect on the atonement, the great price that was paid for our sin.

Let's remember that the atonement made forgiveness possible but that we still must seek that forgiveness.

Now when our church is open, I often leave time to pray for healing in our communion services. I continue to believe in Jehovah Rapha, the God who heals. I believe that we should continue to pray for those who need healing regardless of the nature of the need.

The God who heals our sin, the God who heals nations, the God who heals diseases, the God who heals the mind, the God who heals in so many ways.

And what better time could there possibly be to pray for healing than Communion Sunday?

