



Can faith heal?

The meaning of Jesus' words
"Your faith has healed you"

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Let's talk about the question: can faith heal? And what did Jesus actually mean by saying "your faith has healed you"? Did he mean that faith has the power to heal, as the Faith & Prosperity Gospel claims? We need to look at these questions as how you answer them greatly affects the way you approach faith, healing, and ultimately your relationship with God.

Jesus' words "your faith has healed you" (e.g., Mark 5:34) are taken by the Faith & Prosperity Gospel to make a direct connection between faith and healing. Their logic is expressed like this: if the biblical character's faith could make them whole, your faith can make you whole. That is, since the biblical characters (i.e., the woman with flow of blood) got healing through their faith, as long as we can have the same kind of faith we will get the same result.

At a first glance, the logic might sound quite straightforward, leaving little to argue about. That's at least what I believed when I was part of the movement and until I began to study the Bible for myself. I've spent years researching the beliefs of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel and worked with the original biblical texts to test their interpretations. I've made some interesting discoveries that have revolutionized my life and I want to share some with you. So let me take you on a tour through all the times Jesus said "your faith" in the Gospels. Our goal is to learn more about faith and faith's relationship to healing. This study is more focused on faith than healing—for studies on healing per se, please see other teachings I've done. Pour

yourself a nice cup of tea (or if you insist coffee), and let's begin.

Is Healing for Today?

Before we take off, I need to settle an underlying concern that you might have, namely what my position is regarding healing and miracles. I know that the moment you speak about faith and healing some might feel anxious that you somehow want to undermine belief in divine healing. So, to take the bull by the horns: do I belong to the group of preachers who say that healing and miracles died out with the apostles and that we are not to expect any such things today? Absolutely not! I'm a firm believer in the reality of the supernatural and particularly in Jesus the healer—he is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

I've experienced miraculous physical healings in my own life, in my family, and in my ministry. I've seen Jesus open blind eyes, instantly heal tumors, and many other miracles. Let me share one story. I once was preaching in a church in Holland and as I was seeking God before the service my heart was impressed by the

Holy Spirit that someone had a back problem that Jesus wanted to heal. So, after the sermon, I shared what I believed was the leading of the Spirit and one person acknowledged the need for prayer and we prayed. Later I came to hear the testimony: it was a lady who had had several back operations and was no better but rather grew worse and was scheduled to do an arthrodesis surgery the coming week (even the very next day, if I remember right). She went to church and there she met Jesus who healed her. By God’s grace, I can share numerous stories like this but here is not the place for that. I only want to settle any doubts about my stand on healing.

“Your Faith” in the Gospels

After settling my position on healing, we now return to the original question that we can phrase like this: does faith heal? In other words, does faith carry healing power? Is that what Jesus wanted to teach us in the accounts where he said “your faith has made you whole”?

When you do a search in the Gospels on the phrase “your faith” you find it used by Jesus ten times in the original Greek texts:¹ eight times in four accounts of healing.²

- 1. To the woman with a flow of blood (Matt. 9:22; Mark 5:34; Luke 8:48)
- 2. To two blind men (Matt. 9:29)
- 3. To blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:52; Luke 18:42; see Matt. 20:29–34)
- 4. To the leprous Samaritan man (Luke 17:19)

Apart from these Jesus also said “your faith” in other contexts than healing:

- 5. To a repentant woman (Luke 7:50)

- 6. To his disciples in the storm (Luke 8:25)
- 7. To Peter before his test of faith (Luke 22:32).

I’ll come back to those later to see if they contribute any insights but now I want to focus on the stories in the context of healing.

The Faith of the Woman with the Flow of Blood

Since the woman with a flow of blood is mostly used in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel, we start our journey with that story.

This is how it goes (see Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48):

When Jesus came back to his ministry headquarters in Capernaum, a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years and couldn’t be helped by

doctors, touched the edge of Jesus’ cloak. The bleeding stopped immediately. Since Jesus had felt how power had gone out of him, he asked the one who touched him to disclose themselves and the woman came forward and told him everything. Jesus then said to her: “Daughter, **your faith** has healed you” (Mark 5:34 NKJV, emphasis added. It is the exact same phrase also in Matthew 9:22 and Luke 8:48).³

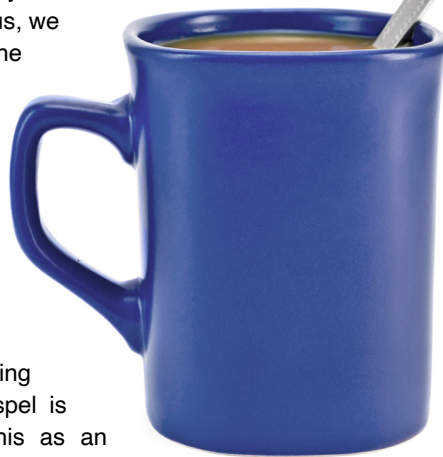
We recall the logic of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel as it was phrased by one of the classical teachers: “if her faith could make her whole, my faith can make me whole”. Based on this logic emerge a number of teachings on how to nurture faith for healing, how to release faith, and so on. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel runs healing schools and healing conferences for sick people to be taught faith so that they also can get well, just like the woman was. There is an underlying belief that this logic simply assumes, namely that it was her faith that healed her. But was it? Does faith heal? Is that



what Jesus meant? These are important questions that we need to settle.

The Power of Hidden Assumptions

Let me make a quick note on the power of underlying, hidden assumptions. You will never grow much in your Christian walk unless you learn how to identify and analyze underlying assumptions. By “assumptions” I mean things people take for granted without always stating them. If you simply accept on face value what you are taught, you will be unstable in your faith and can be carried here and there by every new wind of teaching (Eph. 4:14). Like Jesus, we need to use the discernment of the Holy Spirit to see through the surface of what people are saying to see what lies beneath. Jesus did this repeatedly and we must too. For example, Jesus knew that Judas didn’t really care about the poor even though on the surface of things it looked like he did (Mark 14:4–6). I’m not saying that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is similar to Judas. I only use this as an example to show the importance of never accepting things at face value without testing the underlying assumptions. Our task here is to test the underlying assumption that faith heals because much of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel teaching on faith and healing rests on this belief.



illness made her ceremonially unclean and she would have to stay away from crowds and by touching Jesus, she would make him unclean too (Lev. 15:25–30).

The most important truth that emerges from this story is that faith is always centered on Jesus. What Jesus really says to the woman is “Your faith in me has made you well”. The “in me” part is not stated but is surely implicit in the whole story (I’ll come back to this point later). Jesus is the object of the woman’s faith.

It is a key insight that biblical faith always demands an object, that is, something that faith is put in. You cannot just have faith on its own. Faith on its own is actually nothing! When I realized this biblical truth, I was shocked. I’d been taught, mostly on the level of assumption, that faith was something in and of itself. But biblical faith only exists in relation to Jesus.

Think of a compass. Faith is like the needle that points to the north and Jesus is the magnetic pole that attracts the needle. If the magnetic power of the North Pole ceased, every compass would immediately be useless and worthless, because they have no power in themselves to point the way. And as a compass has no power in and of itself, neither does faith. Faith is relational; that is to say that faith happens and exists only in a relationship. Faith is our trust in Jesus. That Jesus is the absolute center of faith is so important that I wish I could write it with a finger of fire on your wall (wouldn’t that be scary!).

Jesus-Centered Faith

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is correct to say that this story in Mark 5 teaches us very important truths about faith. Let’s look at some a bit closer. What comes out when you study the woman with the flow of blood is that her faith was Jesus-centered. How so? We can see that in how her faith made her look to Jesus for help, approach him, reach out to touch him, and fall down in worship. Her faith led her to take great risks, as her

We learn from the woman that her faith was set on Jesus and Jesus gave substance and definition to her faith. Let me say it this way: if you take Jesus out of her story, is there anything left? Nothing. Is there any reason to speak about her faith if Jesus was not part of the story? Certainly not. In fact, without Jesus, we would never have known about this woman; the healing is *not* foremost a story about faith or healing—it is a story about Jesus! And that is what our lives should be as well: Jesus stories.

The Faith of the Two Blind Men

How can I say that Jesus meant “your faith in me has healed you”? Isn’t that reading too much into the text, you might ask? Let’s look at this text in Matthew’s Gospel, because there it is immediately followed by the second story where Jesus says “your faith” and this story will help us to better interpret the meaning of his words.

The story found in Matthew 9:27–29 is about two blind men who followed Jesus and shouted “Son of David, have mercy on us!” (Matt. 9:27). Jesus responds with an important question: “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” (Matt. 9:28). The force of Jesus’ question is often lost on us as we read it in English. The Greek translated “believe” is the verb for having faith (*pisteuete*). So, what he asks is “do you have faith that I am able to do this?” Why is it so important to recognize that Jesus asks them if they have faith that he can do it? Because when he heals them and says, “According to your faith let it be to you” it shows us the direct connection between the Jesus-centered faith and the healing. Let’s look at Jesus’ question again. Note what he didn’t ask: “do you have faith for healing?” It is so, so crucial that you see this point that Jesus didn’t ask if they had faith for healing. Rather, he has asked if they had faith in him: “do you believe that I can do this?” Wow! Faith didn’t bring sight to the blind—Jesus did! Underline the “I” in this phrase in Matthew 9:28 with some colorful marker so you never forget it. If you read the bible on your phone, make a scratch in the screen under the “I” (or on second thought, please don’t). Jesus was checking if they had a Jesus-centered faith.

How I wish you could see the importance of the fact that the faith Jesus is looking for is the faith placed in him because this is exactly where the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is unclear, or rather, where they waffle-waffle on what Jesus meant. The common question in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel “Do you have faith for healing?” turns out to be a nonquestion. It is as useless of a question as asking a compass to show the north without putting it in

connection with the magnetic power of the North Pole. Faith should never be put in healing. Faith is always put in Jesus. So, does faith heal? No. Faith has never healed anyone. Jesus is and will always be the healer! Jesus is the object of true faith.

The Faith of Blind Bartimaeus

Let’s turn to the blind Bartimaeus and see (sorry for the pun) what we can learn about faith and healing there. You find the story in Matthew 20:29–34, Mark 10:46–52, and Luke 18:35–43. But Jesus only uses “your faith” in Mark and Luke. It is also noteworthy that only Mark gives us the name Bartimaeus. Luke doesn’t and Matthew adds a second person to the story. Ok, now to the story.

Faith has never healed anyone. Jesus is and will always be the healer! Jesus is the object of true faith.

Bartimaeus sat by the roadside in Jericho and as Jesus passed by he shouted: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (Mark 10:47). This made Jesus stop. Notice first of all how Jesus-centered his cry is; he understood Jesus’ true identity as the Messiah, God’s anointed king. His eyes might have lost vision but his heart could obviously see (in contrast to the crowds, who had the reversed problem: seeing eyes but blinded hearts). What happens is very interesting because Jesus asked another question: “What do you want **me** to do for you?” (v.51, emphasis added). Again, underline “me” here. Can you see that Jesus wants to make certain what the object of Bartimaeus’ faith is? In what does he place his trust? It is in Jesus and Jesus’ actions for him.

Notice what Jesus’ doesn’t ask: “What do you want faith to do for you?”. It seems almost silly to have to say it but there you have it. But that is how many using the filter of some Faith & Prosperity Gospel teachings understand Jesus’ question. They might not say it straight out, but it is part of the underlying assumptions of their belief system. When Jesus healed him, he said, “your faith has healed you” (v.52). Because Jesus just had made certain that Bartimaeus’ faith was squarely placed in himself (i.e., Jesus), it is obvious that Jesus meant “your faith **in me** has healed you”. Any

interpretation of this to speak of the power of faith for healing is simply mistaken. How so? Because notice what Bartimaeus did once he got his sight restored: he followed Jesus (v.52)—the very object of his faith.

The Faith of the Samaritan Leper

The last healing narrative we will look at where Jesus uses “your faith” is the Samaritan who had leprosy (Luke 17:11–19). The story is that as Jesus was going toward Jerusalem a group of ten men sick with leprosy called to Jesus: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (v.13). Jesus tells them to go to the priest and as they went in obedience they were healed. One of them returns “and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. He was a Samaritan” (vv.15–16). To which Jesus replies, “**Your faith** has made you well” (v.19, emphasis added). The pattern is the same as in the other stories: it is a Jesus-centered kind of faith that the Samaritan expressed. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and gave thanks—he worshiped the object of his faith. Notice also what he doesn’t say: “faith works” or “my faith healed me”. The Samaritan obviously doesn’t credit faith.

So, when Jesus says, “your faith has healed you” it is again quite obvious for anyone who reads this without a preconceived filter shaped by underlying assumptions that Jesus meant “your faith in me has made you well”. The lack of response of the others and Jesus’ surprise—“where are the other nine?” (v.17)—shows that the faith Jesus acknowledges is the faith that orbits around him. Not a faith that starts with Jesus and ends up somewhere else. But a faith that starts and finishes with him.

A Woman, a Storm, and a Test

Now let us briefly look at the last three instances where Jesus uses “your faith” and see if we can gain some insights. The first is addressed to a repentant woman, the second to the group of disciples, and the third to Peter. None of these are in the context of physical healing but studying these stories will help us to make sure that we haven’t missed anything significant in Jesus’ meaning of the phrase.

The Faith of the Repentant Woman

The first of the three stories in Luke where Jesus says “your faith” is about a repentant woman (many commentaries and Bible headings refer to her as “the sinful woman”, but surely “repentant” is a better description). The story goes like this: Once when Jesus was visiting the home of a Pharisee named Simon, a woman who had lived in sin (probably a prostitute) began to wash his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair, she also kissed his feet and anointed them with perfume. The host gets

upset by Jesus’ acceptance of this, considering what kind of life she had lived. After giving Simon a parable of forgiveness Jesus turns to the woman and says: “your sins are forgiven... **Your faith** has saved you” (vv. 48, 50, emphasis added).

It is important that we recognize how Jesus uses the exact same phrase in connection with the forgiveness of sins that he used for the healing of sicknesses. He doesn’t say that this is another kind of faith: one for healing and another for salvation. Rather, what this shows is that salvation is by the same faith that also brought healing.



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Before we pursue this point, let's look at what happens when we apply the Faith & Prosperity Gospel logic we spoke of earlier. It would run like this: "if her faith could save her, my faith can save me". Here we start to see how such a focus on the power of faith can lead us away from the Jesus-centeredness that is the Alpha and Omega of the Christian faith. If we change our initial questions to say "does faith save?", the answer is of course "No. Jesus saves."

This story is not about the power of faith to bring forgiveness. Such an interpretation fails because it doesn't take much study to see how Jesus-centered her faith is: she is all about Jesus! Her love for Jesus is just incredible. And in light of this, it is quite obvious that what Jesus really means is that "your faith in me has saved you".

The Faith of the Disciples in the Storm

The disciples were in a boat with Jesus and a storm makes them panic (Luke 8:22–25). They woke Jesus and he stilled the storm and said to them: "Where is **your faith?**" (v.25, emphasis added). The disciples said to each other: "Who can this be? For He commands even the winds and water, and they obey Him!" (v.25). This episode tells us a lot about faith.

Most importantly we see again that Jesus expects himself to be the object of their faith. In fact, I love how he phrases his question: "where is your faith?" The Greek word *pou* translated "where" is a reference to position. It most certainly means the same as "where have you put it?". But you could interpret Jesus' question to say—and I like this possibility: "in what have you placed your faith?" By this Jesus wouldn't say that they had no faith, but rather that they had put their faith in the wrong object. His question could be paraphrased as: "since I am obviously not the object of your faith, what is the object of your faith then?" This opens great insights into what unbelief or non-faith actually is. Unbelief is well understood as misplaced trust. As

humans, we are creatures of faith. It is not a matter of having faith or not but rather in what you place your trust. To use Jesus' question, "where have you directed your faith?"

From the story, it is clear that the disciples' faith was not in the person of Jesus. You can see this in the fact that the disciples didn't know who Jesus really was—they asked, "Who can this be?" (v.25). That shows us that faith is only as strong as your personal knowledge of Jesus. In other words, the measure of your faith is the measure of how well you know Jesus. Wow, again! The way to grow in strong faith is therefore to press on to know the Lord better.

It is time to replace the Faith & Prosperity Gospel logic with the biblical logic: "if her faith brought her to Jesus, my faith will bring me to Jesus"

The Faith of Peter

The last time Jesus used "your faith" is when he warned Peter of Satan's upcoming temptations (Luke 22:31–34). Jesus adds, "But I have prayed for you, that **your faith** should not fail" (v.32, emphasis added). Peter obviously understood what Jesus meant, because he replied: "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death" (v.33). Peter knew that by the phrase "your faith" he meant "your faith in me". That is why he

affirms his personal loyalty and commitment. To which Jesus says that Peter will deny *him* three times. We learn here that the ultimate act of unbelief is denying Jesus, it is to be unfaithful in the relationship. Why? Because faith is faith in Jesus. Pure and simple.

Does Faith Heal?

Now after studying all seven stories where Jesus used "your faith" we are better equipped to answer our initial question: does faith heal? The answer is a resounding "No! But Jesus does". What we have learned about faith in relation to healing is that faith has never healed anybody—it is Jesus who heals. That is the message of the Gospels and that is the good news that we need to share with the world.

Let's not get confused with some of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's teachings on faith that start off with the wrong assumption that faith is something in and of itself. Faith is not a force or a power. Faith is relational trust in Jesus. It is time to replace the Faith & Prosperity Gospel logic that "if her faith could make her whole, my faith can make me whole" with the biblical logic "if her faith brought her to Jesus, my faith will bring me to Jesus"—and in encountering the Object of our faith anything is possible—no sickness is too powerful for Jesus to heal, no sin too big for Jesus to forgive, no storm too big for Jesus to calm, no test too great to bring us through. But where is your faith? In what object have you placed your trust?

The Jesus Test

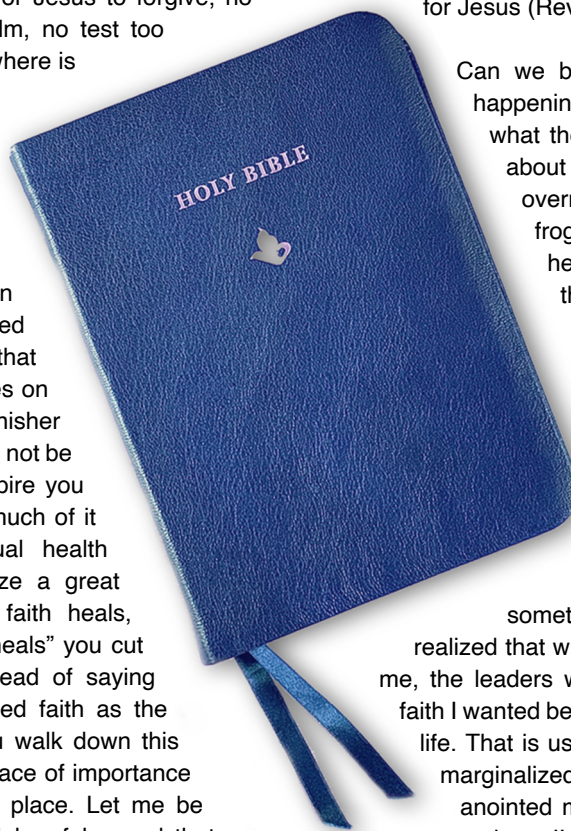
You should test all teachings on faith to see how Jesus-centered they are. Do teachings on faith that you hear help you set your eyes on Jesus, faith's author and finisher (Heb. 12:2)? If not, then you will not be helped by them. They can inspire you but like candy, if you eat too much of it you will end up with spiritual health problems. And here we realize a great problem with the belief that faith heals, which is that by saying "faith heals" you cut Jesus out of the picture. Instead of saying "Jesus heals" you have credited faith as the source of healing. And as you walk down this path, faith starts to occupy a place of importance that is way beyond its rightful place. Let me be frank: faith can turn into an idol, a false god that usurps Jesus' place of privilege. In other words, Jesus is replaced by faith. This is a devastating situation, especially if you want to call yourself a Christian—a person who has Jesus at the center of life.

From the Center to the Margin

I'm not saying the Faith & Prosperity Gospel has cut Jesus out of healing or replaced Jesus with faith. But what I'm saying is that there are unchecked and untested assumptions that can lead in that direction. I've seen that in my own life and in the life of countless others—that in the focus on faith there is a slow but steady drift away from the person of Jesus. It is highly ironic that pursuing faith can quench our first love for Jesus (Rev. 2:4).

Can we be honest for a while? I saw this happening in my life when I embraced all of what the Faith & Prosperity Gospel taught about faith. It didn't of course happen overnight but slowly like the proverbial frog is boiled by a gradual increase of heat. But I woke up to the realization that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel teachings on faith had moved Jesus from the center to the margin. Imagine that teachings on such a noble and good thing as faith can end up marginalizing Jesus!

The resulting problem is that when Jesus is not in the center, something else will take his place. I realized that when faith was of such importance to me, the leaders who seemed to display the kind of faith I wanted began to occupy too great space in my life. That is usually what happens: when Jesus is marginalized, some powerful, charismatic, and anointed man or woman of God will take his place. I'm of course not saying that it is bad to love and honor our leaders—those are biblical practices—but that we must be careful not to over ascribe importance to any human being, regardless of how strong faith they display.



Radical Jesus-Centeredness

In every story where Jesus used “your faith” in a positive and affirming way (i.e., in all stories apart from the disciples and Peter) we see that it comes in the context of Jesus attracting their faith. The woman with the flow of blood took great risks in her pursuit of a close encounter with Jesus, the two blind men knew that Jesus had the power to do the impossible, Bartimaeus shouted out his deep revelation into Jesus’ true identity as the Messiah, the Samaritan leper departed from his community to express strong personal love and devotion to Jesus, and the repentant woman acted out her radical love and affection for Jesus. As you can see, most if not all stories force the person to take social and personal risks. Their faith in Jesus made them risk embarrassment, rejection, and failure. And their stories teach us that Jesus responds positively to such radical trust in him. Jesus always honors faith that has him at the center. Exactly how he honors such faith is up to him—we cannot direct that. Jesus moves the mountain for some while he gives others the strength to climb. So let’s press on to know him—the true Object of “your faith”.

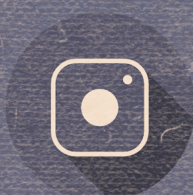
least hold them in high esteem when formulating their beliefs.

Notes

1. The English “your” (possessive pronoun) can be referring to a singular person or to more but in Greek there are two different words showing if it is one (*sou*) or more (*hymon*). Jesus said “your faith” in plural to the two blind beggars in Matthew 9:29 and to the disciples in Luke 8:25. All others are in singular.
2. There are of course other stories where Jesus references faith without the exact phrase “your faith”, e.g., the healing of the lame man brought to Jesus where he “saw their faith” (Matt. 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20); deliverance of the Canaanite woman’s daughter (Matt. 15:28) and the Centurion’s servant (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9).
3. I’m using the New King James Version (NKJV) because many in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel are either using it or the King James Version (KJV)—or at



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