

Our Health Rests in Our Creator

In 1680, toward the end of his life, German preacher Joachim Neander wrote his most famous hymn, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.” (Yes, they named a valley after him, the Neanderthal, where they later found those famous bones.) Nearly three hundred years later, I had to sing his hymn in eighth grade choir so many times that I wished he never wrote it. But it must have done some good—after all this time, I still remember the words:

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation,

All my soul praise him, for he is our health and salvation.

And in the course of many years as a physician caring for patients, with Neander I came to realize that health and salvation, for three good reasons, have much in common.

1. Health, like salvation, is a given, not a gotten.

How much and how often we are reminded in the Bible that the more we try to get what can only be given, the more likely we will lose exactly what we hope to find. The rich young man in Matthew 19:16 (also in Mark 10 and Luke 18) and the lawyer in the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25-37) both begin with the wrong question, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” In both cases Jesus, wisely seeing their problem, points them to the commandments. Though they feel they have kept them, the stories unfold in a most uncomfortable way for these questioners, for neither of them is finally able to justify themselves. Yet both are offered life, impossible to obtain by individual effort but fully available through the love of a merciful and generous God. Much like salvation, health can be received as a gift but not gotten as a possession.



2. Health, like salvation, though received personally, must be nurtured corporately.

One of the distractions and deceptions of our contemporary culture is our hyperindividualism. It has corrupted our view of salvation and turned our pursuit of health in America, for the most part, into an individual endeavor. We portray health as an individual responsibility, which it can only be to a small extent, and demand it as an individual right, which no society can ever grant.

As a solo effort, individual health—like individual salvation—is a contradiction in terms. Health, like salvation, received as a gift, must be nurtured in community. Though received personally, like Abraham when he received the promise in Genesis 12, both health and salvation are given that we might be a blessing to the world. Once received in whatever form they are given, they must be lived out corporately; for unless we nurture both health and salvation with others, we will never be able to preserve or protect either of them.

3. The church is a community uniquely qualified to offer both health and salvation.

The church, unlike any other human institution, exists to proclaim the mystery of faith that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. In this message is the salvation of the world, and though the greatness of the message is bigger than the church, she has received a unique call to transmit it. Unfortunately, the church in weaker moments has tried to control salvation as if the church alone possessed it, restricting access to it and thus failing in its responsibility.

In our day and age the church may be guilty of different error, forgetting how rich a word she has to offer to an anxious and worried world. One place where that occurs is in the hallways and hospitals of our medical establishments, where the power and prestige of medical technology creates a sanctuary with its own rituals and worship. But the church need not shrink back to a corner when its members are sick, leaving the institution of medicine to dictate how health is maintained and the sick are treated. For only the church knows the unempirical preciousness of her people, their place in the larger community, and the true source of their health and salvation.

Sadly, Joachim Neander died of tuberculosis when he was just thirty years old. According to the rules of medicine, he died a premature death. But according to the ways of God, his life was healthy and his salvation secure. Will our lives be likewise measured not by how long we live but how faithful we are with the lives we are given?

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