

A Terminal Case of the Word of Faith Disease

by [Jeff Plude](#) (April 2023)



Interior from Strandgade with Sunlight on the Floor, Vilhelm Hammershøi, 1901

My wife and I had the day off and were sipping tea and coffee on a late morning and my phone buzzed. It surprised me because the call was from the wife of an old friend, or rather the brother of an old friend and we'd become sort of friends too,

we'd all known each other for a long time. She told me that she wanted us to pray for her husband, whom I'll call Steve. Steve had been diagnosed with cancer almost nine months before. But we didn't know much more than that, since they wouldn't talk about it. Which I understand, to a point.

She was calling us because she knew we were evangelical Christians.

Now Steve and his wife were Catholics, and still were as far as I knew. I never heard him mention or talk about Jesus. But this didn't surprise me, because I had been Catholic myself and for Catholics like us, which is to say most Catholics in my opinion and experience, at least in the recent past when we were growing up, Jesus was only talked about on Sundays, for an hour, in church, by the priest directing the service and giving the homily. The only time the parishioners, as they're called, mentioned the J word is when they were repeating their part in the little occult play called mass, in which they were periodically required to respond like the chorus in a Greek tragedy.

So Steve's wife said she was calling all these people—family, friends, priests, one of whom agreed to enlist a hundred of his fellow clergy—to pray for her husband to be healed. They were still going to a local Catholic church in the area we grew up in. I suggested to her that they join a local evangelical church, there was one not far from them that seemed to be doctrinally sound and followed the Bible.

I sympathized with Steve and his wife. My wife and I were true believers—that is, not in name only like when we were Catholic—for eight years before we finally decided that we needed to join an evangelical church, as the New Testament prescribes. It's a weird experience if you've been through the Catholic formality and ritual, which at times can feel like you're at a pagan royal ceremony instead of worshipping God and Christ his Son and the Holy Spirit. I pointed out to her

that the entire congregation in an evangelical church could pray for Steve, which would be a lot more effective (not to mention more efficient), and that the elders and pastors could anoint him and pray for him as well, as James advises in his epistle.

Steve's wife said in defense that they were counting on Isaiah 53:5. She quoted the end of the verse with conviction, that "by his wounds we are healed"—"his" referring to Christ, to his scourging and death on the cross.

Now I had to go down a road I really didn't want to. But as a believer it's my duty to point out when someone is misinterpreting God's Word. I don't always speak up when I should, but this was very different. This was someone who was not only a sort of friend, but one who may be about to enter the valley of the shadow of death.

I gently tried to tell Steve's wife that what Isaiah was talking about was *spiritual* healing, not physical healing. So you don't believe Jesus heals people? she asked me point blank. I said that of course I believe that Jesus heals people, but he does so according to *his will*. He may or may not heal a believer depending on what his will is for that person. But Isaiah 53:5 is saying that all believers will be physically healed *after* death, according to the apostle Paul and to the Book of Revelation, when they receive new "glorified" bodies that will never get sick or die ever again. I recall telling her that we should pray for healing and believe that God will answer our prayer as we want him to, but that it's not *guaranteed* by that verse.

She and Steve were taking those words in Isaiah literally, or maybe I should say carnally. She was quoting a more colloquial translation of the Old Testament like the New International Version.

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

More importantly “wounds” point back to “our transgressions” and “our iniquities,” that is, *our* sins, meaning of all the Israelites and eventually of all humanity. Jesus, the one Isaiah was foretelling, was going to die for the sins of humanity as a substitutionary atonement. He was the one Christian sacrificial lamb, for all time, that the Jews were each commanded by the Mosaic law to sacrifice at each Passover. Since he was both man and God and lived a sinless life, he could take the divine “punishment” for all those who would eventually believe in him.

Of course this is the famous chapter that paints a vivid picture of the Messiah who would come about seven hundred years after Isaiah was prophesying this. The whole verse lays out in graphic and poetic brevity the mission of the suffering servant, “the man of sorrows” in verse 3, the future Messiah and savior of Israel and the world.

Steve’s wife refused to budge.

She went on the offensive now and said that I should read Joyce Meyer’s books. When my wife and I heard that name—I had the phone on speaker—we just looked at each other. It irked me, but at the same time I felt very sorry for Steve and his wife. I said as gently as I could, but which must’ve had a tinge of sarcasm in it, that I knew all about Joyce Meyer, that we’d listened to her many times on the radio and that we’d even gone to a live event she held in Albany several years ago just to see her in action firsthand (call it spiritual journalism). Meyer preaches the prosperity gospel, I told Steve’s wife, and was a charlatan.

We talked for maybe fifteen minutes. She ended up commanding

me not say anything to Steve about all this.

My wife and I were a little shaken, realizing Steve's condition must be much worse than we thought. We also recalled the last two times we saw them. They invited us to spend a day with them about a month after his diagnosis. It was awkward. His wife met us at their back door and told us not to ask Steve anything about his condition. My wife had to go to the bathroom, and she told me later that she saw pieces of paper with prayers, or more properly, affirmations, tacked up in there and in the living room and on a bulletin board in the kitchen. She also spotted books by Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen and Joseph Prince in a bookcase.

My wife mentioned to Steve's wife that they preached the prosperity gospel. Steve's wife said she'd never heard of that.

About a month later they invited us to a party they were having; Steve had recently turned sixty-one. When we arrived his wife, who looked haggard and distracted more than you'd expect for a casual summer party at their house, asked how we were. I said, well we just came from a funeral for my cousin, he was only fifty-four and died unexpectedly, and he was divorced and had three youngish sons and was in pretty bad straits ... And she immediately jumped on me and said, "Don't say anything about that to Steve, let's not talk about anything like that today. Let's keep it positive."

It was the prosperity gospel, which is also known as Word of Faith. All of this, though, is just another manifestation of the New Thought movement, which emerged in this country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, influencing Christian Science and melding into Pentecostalism. Even luminaries like William James were caught up in "mind science." Pastor Norman Vincent Peale repackaged it in his 1952 book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. It was resurrected again in the new millennium as *The Secret*, which was

popularized by Oprah. In other words the prosperity gospel is nothing but an old but prevalent satanic scam, New Age for the nominal Christian. And the prosperity principally flows one way—into the bank accounts of its preachers.

But how should I go about this? Another phone conversation with Steve's wife was out of the question. And I felt bound to abide by her desperate demand.

This is why Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount teaches not to wait until the storm hits to make sure your house is built on a rock, because it's too late—you're house is built on sand, i.e., you don't believe in the gospel, the truth, and now you realize you may be dying and everything will be swept away physically. Steve's veneer of belief in Christ forced him to scramble for the real thing, not Catholicism but original Christianity as it's revealed in God's Word. But instead he fell prey to the prosperity peddlers.

So I texted her a few days later. I realized this might be my last shot with them. I wrote that the people they were following—Meyer, Osteen, and Prince—preached the prosperity gospel and were heretics. I also included an article by Pastor John MacArthur (my wife and I use his study Bible) and a video by evangelist and preacher Justin Peters (an expert on the subject who wasn't healed of his cerebral palsy by faith healers when he was a teenager). I asked her to "PLEASE share them" with Steve, and then: "I wouldn't say all this if it weren't important—nothing, in fact, is more important than your eternal salvation." I ended with the sentiment that my wife and I knew they were under a lot of pressure and that we were praying for them both. "But please carefully consider what I and the article and the video are saying. This is something you can't afford to be wrong about. God bless, Jeff"

Steve's wife texted me back—almost three hundred words. First she was "begging" me not to "speak this over" them anymore (that's Word of Faith lingo). They refused to allow "negative

thinking” to enter their minds. She said that Jesus heals people, he’s no “respector of persons” and can do for Steve what he has done for others, and for them to accept that death is God’s will for Steve “shows a lack of faith in God’s love, grace, and mercy.” She said she wasn’t doing well herself and pleaded with me “to keep the conversation positive as this type of message is very upsetting ... Please don’t mention this again.” She said we could have a “respectful conversation” about all this “AFTER” a medical report confirmed that Steve was completely healed. And she ended with a misguided flourish: “God never punishes anyone for believing He is the great physician and His word is truth and medicine that heals. Much love to you both.”

Indeed you might even say Jesus is not only the Great Physician, but the Great Metaphysician. Her reference comes from Jesus’s presence at a gathering at Matthew’s house. When the Pharisees accuse Jesus of eating and drinking with “sinners,” Christ rebuffs them: “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick ... I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

This is the problem with cherry-picking from the Bible, or from any text for that matter. Steve and his wife were disregarding the context of the words they were hyperfocused on. Which is what the scammers bank on.

Jesus had a very different attitude than Steve and his wife regarding his own impending death. He prayed in Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion to the Father to spare him, but then crucially added: “Nevertheless not as *I* will, but as *thou* wilt.” (emphasis added) That’s why John in his first letter says to ask God for whatever you want “according to his will.” This principle is technically known as God’s sovereignty; in other words it’s not for the prosperity gospelers or anyone else to *demand* that the king of the universe do what they want.

I was in a dilemma. I felt I should tell Steve directly what I'd told his wife, but I wasn't sure. I prayed about it and consulted a pastor in my former church. He told me about a couple he and his wife were once friends with who also were convinced the husband was going to be healed even on the day he died. The pastor told me he believed I shouldn't call or text Steve considering what Steve's wife had said. I also believed that Steve was unlikely to listen.

So I let it be.

A few months later we saw Steve and his wife at a party and he looked a little gaunt. I spoke briefly to him and a little more to his wife. Between her and me, it was like our phone conversation and texts never happened. It was now almost a year after his diagnosis.

That was the last time I saw Steve. Eight months later his brother texted me that he had died. He lived a year and a half with cancer (what kind we weren't sure). Later, either at the burial or the gathering afterward, Steve's wife told us that a Catholic priest had come to the house to see him in his last days and that he marveled at Steve's faith and said it was greater than his own! (That's a Catholic priest for you!)

It's been four years since Steve's wife called me that day, and I often think about whether I should have called him directly or not. I was reminded of him recently during a sermon the pastor of our church was preaching on Luke 6:12–19. In the last verses of that passage Jesus heals the crowds of “diseases” and “unclean spirits.”

Then our pastor said something similar to what I had told him one time when discussing Steve's story with him. He warned the congregation: “I want to tell you that everyone who is physically healed is going to die. You're welcome.” There was tentative laughter. Only God knows when each of us will leave this world. But for true believers, that's the beginning of an

eternity not only free of pain and sickness but filled with bliss.

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