

The Miraculous Healing Benefits Jesus Freely Gives You

When He was in a certain city, a man full of leprosy, upon seeing Jesus, fell on his face and begged Him, "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean."

He reached out His hand and touched him, saying, "I will. Be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him.

Then He commanded him to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Yet even more so His fame went everywhere. And great crowds came together to hear and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. But He withdrew to the wilderness and prayed (Luke 5:12-16).

Recently, our pastor spoke on this passage in Luke. It's one we've probably read or heard sermons about countless times. But it rekindled my curiosity. What more do we know about this man? Someone had to know his name, where he came from, whether or not he was married and had children, what he'd done for a living, how old he was when stricken by the disease, and whether he had friends or was totally abandoned.

Luke, a follower of Christ and a physician, records within this biblical story a graphic piece of information. The man was "covered" or full of leprosy. End-stage leprosy, in today's terms. With his obvious decomposing body, death was imminent.

Leprosy. The word makes me cringe. The medical community considers leprosy to be contagious, but only mildly so. It can

be spread via droplets from the mouth or nose, or during close and frequent contact with an untreated leper. The incubation period can be as few as two years or as long as 10.

The disease begins with a tiny red or white dot on the skin and then progresses. Without going into too much medical detail, there is severe pain with ulcers, nerve damage and numbness. An interesting note is that leprosy attacks cooler parts of the body, which explains why toes and fingers eventually fall off. Its damaging effects can be seen externally, but the disease alters the body internally as well.

Reading about this disease paints a painful, desperate, undesirable picture. Thank God, there are few cases of it in the United States. Sadly, there are millions of active cases in third-world countries. Today, if caught early enough, antibiotics may help and even cure the disease.

A quick review of available materials says Jesus performed approximately six miracles prior to encountering this leper. Possibly, a friend told the man Jesus was nearby. More likely, he overheard conversations between those passing by—on the other side of the road. By law, a leper could not come within six feet of other humans, 150 feet during windy conditions. No one came near a leper. Other than touching a dead body, contact with a leper was the second most vile, defiling reason to become ceremonially unclean—unable to participate in Jewish ceremonies or social events, cast out from the in-crowd. Having a priest pronounce you unclean was feared worse than becoming infected with leprosy, a very prevalent disease in those times.

In Jesus' day, what would happen to people who contracted leprosy? Among other things, their lives would undergo radical changes. They would need to move away from their families and live on the outskirts of town, where no one wanted to reside. It was the first place marauders or enemies of Israel would

attack. Outwardly, lepers were required to keep their hair disheveled, tear their clothes, cover the lower part of their faces, and while their body parts disintegrated, they'd have to call out "unclean" whenever anyone approached. For the remainder of their painful lives, they'd be outcasts from society. Wherever they ended up, whatever miserable place they would call home, there they waited to die. A beggar. Alone. Smelling the stench and squalor of rotting flesh.

But Jesus was coming. Somehow, this man heard that. He also knew he couldn't leave his area—not with his disease. He was forbidden, confined to his unclean place. Maybe, at one time, this leper might have held a prominent place in the temple and had financial success, an adoring wife and six respectful, loving, playful children who would jump into his lap the minute he came home from working long hours at his lucrative olive oil business. His servants would wash his feet and bring him clean, soft sandals, and then go water his camels without a word from his lips. Until the day he discovered his own death sentence.

Quite possibly, one evening, as a servant bathed him, the man noticed a white, scaly spot hidden between his fingers or toes. He tried to ignore it at first, but as the spot grew, he decided to hide it. He'd wash himself, so none of the servants could see it. But then the pain from damaged nerve endings in his extremities became too great. He went to the company doctor and gave him a hypothetical situation. "What if someone had ..."

In biblical times, people would equate illness with sin. They'd ask, "Who sinned that this person received this disease?" Oddly, leprosy, like sin's destructive nature, changes us on the inside too.

Did this man's leprosy have anything to do with sin? The Bible doesn't say, so we don't know the answer. We do know, however, sin separates us from God. Isn't the hypothetical example

above just what we do with our sin? We try to hide, ignore and cover it up. *No one will see it.* But soon the pain becomes too great. And when sin has its way, James says, it brings death. Eternal separation from God.

After all the extensive research, multiple Bible verses, several commentaries, dictionaries, sermons and volumes of material on leprosy itself, there seems to be no other information on this man. Not a word, not a peep. Nothing. However, a couple of interesting things surfaced about this particular leper who is about to meet Jesus.

The man's first words tell us he respected Jesus because he addressed Him with the title of "Lord." But did he believe Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God? Luke records that the leper knelt down and fell on his face. He had enough faith to believe Jesus could clean him. But why didn't he ask to be healed? Sure, we can debate if the words "clean" and "heal" mean the same thing. However, this begs the question about his possible loss of social status. Did he ask for cleansing because he wanted to return to his position in the synagogue? He missed the social aspects and, like old times, wanted to hang out with his peers? Maybe he just wanted to go home, to the family he loved before leprosy changed his life.

What he asked of Jesus is a lot like what we ask when we've come to the end of ourselves. We're wondering about God's will for our lives during times of illness, suffering, confusion, loneliness, loss or when we're reliving guilt from our past. This dying man had enough faith to know what Jesus could do. And, somewhere inside him, he found the courage to ask. He wanted to know, "Will you clean me?"

Finding tons of information on leprosy and reading the various accounts of it in the Bible and around the world was disheartening. A grim picture of a deadly disease. At best, the research was enlightening. But what about *this* leper? Why

go through all this bother to come up empty-handed?

I went back to the source, again reading through the four-verse exchange between a diseased and dying man and his healer. What had I missed? What was the relevant, primary fact of this story? There wasn't one new piece of information or single shred of personal detail about this leper before or after his encounter with Jesus.

Jesus.

Jesus touched the leper. He became ceremonially unclean in the eyes of the law so this man—and you and I—could be clean. Jesus—the central figure in these four verses. He is the reason this leper became clean. My focus was wrong. I missed the relevant information I had had all along.

Today, just as in Bible times, Jesus walks among us. If we'll let Him, it's His will to clean us. 2 Corinthians 5:21a says it best: "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us." We need His touch. We need His cleaning. And just as He touched and cleaned the leper then, He'll do that for us now. In fact, as He stretched out His hands on the cross, he provided cleaning for us, once and for all.

No need to stay out of the temple, to sacrifice, or to live in shame on the outskirts of town, alone and unprotected. We don't have to stay six feet away or go and prove we are no longer unclean. There's no need to cover our faces or hide our sins. Jesus paid the price. His blood cleanses us and makes us whole.

After all the research and digging to uncover the identity of the leper in Luke's account, I discovered Jesus, anew and afresh. Jesus—the perfect sacrifice, the one touched by our infirmities and willing to cleanse us. All we have to do is ask. {eoa}

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