

## *Leprosy*

Opening Hymn: #243—Precious Saviour (first and last verses)

Leprosy is caused by a bacillus similar to the one that causes tuberculosis. Surprisingly over 95% of the human race has immunity and can never become infected. People used to think the flesh of lepers just fell off. It doesn't. The disease kills nerves that send pain signals to the brain so lepers don't know when their bodies are being damaged. I read about this in Dr. Paul Brand's book *The Gift Nobody Wants*. That gift is pain, one of the body's most important protective systems. Lepers can break an ankle and continue walking, not knowing anything is wrong. At one time finger joints in lepers were mysteriously disappearing for no reason in a leprosarium in India where Dr. Brand worked. Eventually they discovered that rats occasionally ate the fingers of sleeping lepers. The problem disappeared when they brought cats into the facility.

Even though today leprosy can be cured by a combination of drugs, people often hide their symptoms because of the stigma associated with it. In 2003 more than half a million new cases were detected—that's over 1,400 every day. In ancient Israel [and until recent times] anyone displaying the obvious signs of leprosy was banished from the community. In poor, rural communities in India families must eject a member with the disease because otherwise the village will banish the whole family and destroy the house.

Lepers in Israel, or any place else until recent times, had no hope; begging was all they could do. They must have felt there was no God. In fact to a leper it was worse than that: leprosy was seen as a direct punishment from God:

Num. 12:1 Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married. [vs. 9] And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Miriam and behold she was leprous. [vs. 12 Aaron pleads] Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed.

Miriam is the leader, and Aaron goes along with her much as he did when the people wanted him to make an idol because they thought Moses was dead. It's not really Moses' wife that bothers the two of them. Verse 2: "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us?" Nothing could be more dramatic than smiting Miriam with leprosy. Now she must be put outside the camp and isolated from everyone forever. Aaron pleads for forgiveness and Moses asks God to heal her. He does, but Miriam must still spend seven days outside the camp following the instruction in Lev. 13.

People have often wondered why Aaron was not punished. It is possible his punishment was not being allowed to enter the promised land. Others have suggested that God did not want to defile the priesthood by inflicting leprosy on the high priest.

Another example of leprosy as a punishment from the Lord is found in 2 Chronicles. King Uzziah begins as a good king of Judah. But one day pride makes him decide to burn incense in the temple. The priests try to talk him out of it:

2 Chron. 26: 19-21 Then Uzziah was wroth and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy rose up in his forehead ... and the priests thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out because the Lord had smitten him. And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death.

## Naaman

2 Kings 5:1-6 [Knox] At this time the armies of the king of Syria were commanded by a certain Naaman; a great captain, high in his master's favour; brave, too, and a man of wealth, but a leper. Naaman's wife had a servant, a young Israelite maid that had been captured by Syrian freebooters; and this maid said to her mistress, If only my lord would betake himself to the prophet in Samaria! He would have cured him soon enough of his leprosy. Upon this, Naaman went to this master, and told him what the Israelite maid had said; and the king of Syria promised to send him with a letter to the king of Israel. So he set out with thirty talents of silver and 6000 gold pieces, and ten suits of clothing. And the letter he carried to the king of Israel ran thus, Know by these presents that I am sending my servant Naaman to thee to be cured of his leprosy.

Let's stop for a moment. If Naaman were an Israelite, he wouldn't be commanding armies. He'd be quarantined and unclean. Still even though he's a Syrian, he must be very good for his king to show him such favor in spite of his condition. And it does show a certain amount of faith on Naaman's part to believe anyone in Israel could help him when there was no one to help him in Syria. He's willing to pay a great price to regain his health, so he goes to the king of Israel. If there's a great prophet in Israel, surely he would be found at the royal court.

Now put yourself in the place of the king of Israel. What do you think after reading this letter? The king says, "Am I God that he should send a leper to me to be cured?" Everyone knows either God cures leprosy or it doesn't get cured. The king thinks this is some kind of trick to start a war.

So why doesn't the king send Naaman to Elisha? The king certainly knows Elisha because in chapter 3 he consults him about a battle he expects to fight against Moab. Perhaps he doubts Elisha has the power to cure leprosy or, if he does have the power, that he'd use it on behalf of a Syrian general. But Elisha hears of this affair and tells the king to send the man to him.

2 Kings 5:9-13 [Knox] So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent word out to him, Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, if thou wouldst have health restored to thy flesh and be clean. At this, Naaman was for going back home; Why, he said angrily, I thought he would come out to meet me and stand here invoking the name of his God; that he would touch the sore with his hand and cure me. Has not Damascus its rivers, such water as is not to be found in Israel? Why may I not bathe and find healing there? But as he turned indignantly to go away, his servants came and pleaded with him [to do what the prophet had prescribed].

Naaman is not used to being treated with such indifference. This prophet doesn't come out to see how great he is and how much he stands to gain by treating him. No wonder Naaman was angry. Yet we can deduce something about his character when we see his servants were not afraid to advise him to do something he didn't want to do. They could have said, "How terrible. We have all been insulted by this

so-called prophet.” But they don’t do that. This tells us that Naaman didn’t become great by surrounding himself with YES men. He listens to their advice and even at the risk of appearing foolish, goes down to the Jordan. He dips himself once. No change. He dips himself a second time. Still no change. A third and a fourth. This is beginning to look like a big mistake. A fifth and a sixth time and still no change. Finally after washing the seventh time, Naaman is healed. In a way, his faith had made him whole. He joyously returns to Elisha:

2 Kings 5:15,16 [Knox] Now pray accept a gift from thy servant to prove his gratitude! As the Lord I serve is a living God, Elisha answered, I will accept nothing from thee.

Here’s another insight into Naaman’s character. He could have been happy about his healing and congratulated himself on how cheap it turned out to be. If Elisha didn’t want to see him, that was fine. But Naaman returns and tries without success to get Elisha to accept a gift. He feels an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the wonderful salvation God has given to him.

### **Naaman in the New Testament**

In the 4th chapter of Luke, Jesus returns to Nazareth. The people are amazed at how different Joseph’s and Mary’s son has become. They expect him to do miracles like he did in Capernaum. But because familiarity breeds indifference, if not contempt, Jesus told them that God’s special people don’t always receive the blessing:

Luke 4:25-27 But I tell you of a truth many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elijah sent save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them were cleansed save Naaman the Syrian.

Many lepers in Israel? Yes! Two chapters after the story of Naaman (2 Kings 7), we read about Elisha and four lepers. Why didn’t Elisha heal them? It wasn’t because HE lacked the power. THEY lacked faith that God through Elisha would heal them. So they remained lepers.

It’s not the PROFESSION of faith that’s important. It’s easy to say, Lord, Lord. But it is the exercise of an active, living faith that brings the blessing. Naaman demonstrated his faith by repeatedly washing himself seven times in the Jordan. Seven represents completeness. We might say a half-hearted, incomplete consecration will not bring cleansing from a leprous, sinful condition.

The widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian illustrate that God dispenses his benefits when, where, and to whom he pleases. Those Jesus spoke to in Nazareth could receive blessings only if they had the right heart attitude, if they exercised faith. But they did not:

Luke 4:28,29 And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong.

Of course they didn’t succeed. Jesus left their area never to return because they showed they were unworthy of God’s grace. Likewise the nation of Israel proved unworthy. So 3½ years after Jesus was

crucified, the gospel went to the Gentiles, again illustrating that God's favors go to those who appreciate them, who have faith in them.

## **The Ten Lepers**

Later in Luke chapter 17, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem:

Luke 17:12-19 As [Jesus] entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off: And they lifted up their voices and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go show yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.

The lepers were not permitted to go into the village and could not approach near anyone. Knowing of Jesus' power, they cry out for mercy. And Jesus tells them to go to the priests, as specified in Lev. 14 for the cleansing of a leper. They do have faith for all ten immediately proceed on their way. However, one notices he has been healed. Like Naaman he is grateful and returns to thank the master. And again like Naaman, he is not an Israelite. Where are the nine? Where are those who should be grateful for being cleansed, for being made "clean" in the sight of God?

Notice that Jesus didn't bargain with the lepers. He doesn't say, "I'll heal you of your leprosy if you agree to become my disciples." And why didn't he do that? Because that's not the kind of worship the Father seeks:

John 4:23 The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

Jesus gave unselfishly of himself, doing His Father's will in all things. Perhaps the cleansed Samaritan became a footstep follower of the Master when the Gentiles were accepted into God's favor. Perhaps the nine never were. Although the Master had touched their lives, it apparently had no lasting effect.

## **Leprosy a Type of Sin**

The scriptures often use symbols to convey meaning. Some symbols are explained, others are not. Although the Bible doesn't directly say so, leprosy is a symbol of sin. Here's why:

1. Leprosy has loathsome characteristics; it disfigures the one who suffers from it.
2. Leprosy is progressive in nature. It starts small and eventually infects the entire body. (Similar to leaven, another type of sin: a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.)
3. Until the middle of the last century, leprosy was incurable by human means.

In every respect, leprosy typifies sin. Sin has disfigured the human race, marring the beauty of perfection in God's original creation. Sin starts small, but it eventually infects whatever it touches.

This is illustrated in a dialogue where God through Haggai questions the priests:

Haggai 2: 11-14 [Amplified] Ask now the priests to decide this question of law: If one carries in the skirt of his garment flesh that is holy and with his skirt touches bread or oil or any kind of food, does what he touch become holy? And the priests answered, No! [*Holiness is NOT infectious.*] Then said Haggai, If one who is unclean because he has come in contact with a dead body should touch any of these articles of food, shall it be unclean? And the priests answered, It shall be unclean. [*UNholiness IS infectious.*] Then answered Haggai, So is this people before Me, says the Lord: and what they offer is unclean [because they who offer it are themselves unclean].

## Cleansing the Leper

If you read Lev. chapter 13, you'd think it was a medical textbook. The priest was the chief medical officer of the nation. This chapter tells him how to determine the difference between a benign skin disease like eczema or psoriasis from leprosy. Imagine the fear in someone who had a skin problem. If the priest called it leprosy, this was the treatment:

Lev. 13:45,46 And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.

This chapter even describes what is called a leprosy in garments or in leather. If the priest says the condition is malignant, the article was burned. At the end of chapter 14, a kind of leprosy within a house is described. If patching doesn't stop the spread of the defilement, the house is torn down and consigned to an unclean place.

But on occasion and without any human intervention, a leper might find himself free of the disease. In these circumstances, the individual was to present himself to the priest and if the priest agreed he was cured, these rituals of chapter 14 were followed:

1. The priest kills a bird, takes cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop and sprinkles the blood seven times on the cleansed leper. (Some say the scarlet was used to bind the hyssop to the cedar wood to make an instrument for sprinkling.)
2. A second bird is dipped in the blood and allowed to fly away. (Similar to the picture of a scapegoat taking the sins of Israel away.)
3. The cleansed leper washes his clothes and waits outside the camp seven days.
4. On the seventh day he shaves off all the hair on his head including eyebrows and washes his body and his clothes.
5. On the eighth day he presents himself to the priest with certain items:
  - a) An unblemished male lamb for a trespass offering plus a log of oil. The lamb and oil are first waved before the Lord. Then the priest slays the lamb and puts some of its blood on the right ear, right thumb, and the great toe of the right foot. He sprinkles some oil seven times before the Lord and places some oil over the blood on the ear, thumb, and toe. The rest of the oil is poured on the person's head.

- b) A male and female lamb for a sin offering and burnt offering plus a meal offering. The priest offers the sin offering, then the burnt offering on the altar with the meal offering.

Afterward the person is pronounced clean and can re-enter the congregation. This ritual is quite similar to chapter 8 when Aaron and his sons were consecrated to God's service. A ram was sacrificed and some blood was placed on the right ear, thumb, and great toe of Aaron and his sons. They wave a portion of this sacrifice. Both blood and oil were sprinkled on Aaron and his sons to sanctify them. Oil was poured on Aaron's head. One animal was sacrificed as a sin offering and another as a burnt offering.

Chapter 8 illustrates the consecration and sanctification of Jesus and his church during the Gospel age. During the Kingdom the world of mankind are like lepers. When they reach perfection they will also be permitted to enter a sanctified relationship where they can serve God. But the blood of an unblemished lamb is required before they are acceptable to God. A poor leper could bring two turtledoves instead of lambs for a sin and burnt offering, but without exception every leper had to bring an unblemished lamb as a trespass offering.

The ritual associated with the cleansing of a leper illustrates what will occur in the kingdom. Those who enter a sanctified relationship with God follow a procedure similar to the footstep followers of Jesus during this Gospel age. Blood on the right ear shows the newly cleansed individual should hear God's voice; blood on the thumb shows he should perform the works of righteousness with sanctified hands; and the blood on the great toe indicates that he should now walk in God's ways. Pouring oil on the head shows that God's spirit will be poured out upon all who are cleansed from sin during the kingdom.

## **Gehazi**

We are not quite through with Elisha and Naaman. There is more:

2 Kings 5:20-25 [Knox] But to Gehazi, the prophet's servant, the thought came, Here is this Syrian, this Naaman, with all his gifts, and my master has sent him away no poorer than he came. As the Lord is a living God, I mean to run after him and bring back some trifle with me. So after Naaman Gehazi went; and Naaman, when he saw him running up, dismounted from his chariot and went to meet him; Is all well? he asked. All is well, said the other, but my master has sent me with a message to thee: Here are two young prophets but now come to visit me, from the hill-country of Ephraim; to these thou mayest well give a talent of silver and two suits of clothing. Better two talents, Naaman said, and would take no denial. So two of his servants must shoulder a sack that held a talent of silver and a suit of clothes each of them, and carry these in front of Gehazi. Evening had fallen when he reached home, took their load from them to lay it up in the house, and sent them away on their journey; then he went in to wait on his master.

What do you think about that? Gehazi has had a long association with Elisha, but what has he learned? Familiarity breeds indifference. Since the Syrian is so eager to pay something and since Elisha won't take anything, Gehazi sees nothing wrong with helping himself. Because he covets wealth and the things wealth can buy he:

- 1) Lies to Naaman by saying his master sent him;

- 2) Hides the wealth in his house so he won't have to share it; then
- 3) lies to Elisha when asked where he's been.

He gets more than he bargained for when Elisha says to him:

2 Kings 5:27 [Knox] To thee, and to thy race for ever, Naaman's leprosy shall cling. And Gehazi went out from his presence a leper as white as snow.

Paul says, "We beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain." [2 Cor. 6:1] Gehazi had surely received the grace of Elisha in vain. He forfeited whatever cleansing he had and became unclean. Jesus said, "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" [Matt. 16:26] According to the Scriptures Gehazi dreamed of money, garments, olive groves, vineyards, sheep, oxen, menservants, and maidservants. He thought he had the whole world, but instead he lost his own soul.

Have **we** learned anything from our close association with our master? Surely our eyes and ears have been opened. So when we read about Uzziah, Gehazi, Judas, and others who served God at the beginning but later became unfaithful, we should see the lesson that's there for us. We will not attain salvation just because we have been walking in the right way for years. We must continue in the right way until God says it is enough.

## Summary

In our study of leprosy, we have considered several lessons:

1. God bestows his favor upon whomever He pleases, but generally in proportion to the active faith possessed. Naaman the Syrian was healed; others in Israel were not.
2. Leprosy pictures sin. When we are cleansed of sin, we should, like the Samaritan leper, be grateful and give the glory to God.
3. In the kingdom the world of mankind will be like cleansed lepers and will be able to reenter a relationship with God because of the blood of Jesus, pictured in the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb.
4. We must never permit familiarity to breed indifference. Remember Gehazi: he received the grace of being with Elisha in vain. He thought he had gained the whole world, but lost everything when he became leprous.

May the words of David be our constant prayer:

Psalm 51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Closing Hymn: #267—The Beauty of Holiness