

# “The First Gospel: Power over Disease”

Mark 1:40-45 <sup>1</sup>

Last week we saw Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum and casting out an evil spirit, and we thought for a while about the whole matter of “evil spirits.” When Jesus and His disciples left the synagogue that day, they went to Simon’s home, which appears to have been nearby, and they found Simon’s mother-in-law sick in bed with a high fever.

We can note first of all that Peter was obviously married, and that his decision to follow Jesus did not involve abandoning his previous relationships and responsibilities, although we don’t hear much about them in the rest of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus went to the woman’s bedside, and, where Mark and Matthew tell us that Jesus “*took her by the hand and helped her sit up,*” Dr. Luke noted that Jesus also “*spoke to the fever, rebuking it, and her temperature immediately returned to normal*” (Luke 4:38-41).

As with the storm and with the demon possessed men, Jesus expelled the fever with a clear, simple word of command. Jesus cited no authorities and quoted no experts. The Power was not in a spell, a formula, a magic chant, or an elaborate ritual. The Power was in Jesus, whose voice was the Voice of God!

Dr. Luke also wrote—in the woman’s “chart,” as it were—that not only did the fever disappear instantly, but Peter’s mother-in-law was able to get up at once and prepare dinner. Now if you’ve ever had a high fever, you know that even when the fever breaks, you’re still as “limp as a wet rag” for a long time afterward. But when Jesus spoke the word of healing, both the problem and its normal after effects were removed.

The emergence of so great a power and authority was not something that could be kept secret, so the evening found Peter’s house besieged by a crowd of people seeking Jesus’ healing touch. They waited until evening because the law forbade the carrying of any burden on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath officially ended when three stars were visible in the sky, so the people of Capernaum waited until the sun had set and the stars were out, and then they brought their sick to Jesus – and He healed them.

Jesus had now had a long and tiring day, and at some point the crowd dispersed and everyone went to bed. But Mark was careful to tell us that Jesus was up before dawn and went to a secluded spot outside of town to talk with His Father.<sup>2</sup> The crowds returned with daylight, and the disciples came looking for Jesus, but He didn’t return to Capernaum, saying “*We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. That is why I came.*”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 16, 2016. Parallel passages include Luke 4:38-44, 5:12-16 and Matthew 8:2-4, 14-17.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

<sup>2</sup> As distinct from the other Gospels, Mark only records three times when Jesus prayed. He prayed here (1:35) as he was launching His ministry. He prayed in the middle of His ministry after He had fed the 5,000 (6:46); and He prayed at the end, in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42).

Later, as Jesus traveled through Galilee, He was approached by a man with leprosy who knelt in front of Him, begging to be healed. *“If you are willing,” he said, “you can heal me and make me clean.”*

As you may remember, in Bible times, “leprosy” was a term applied to many sorts of skin diseases, including Hansen’s disease, which is the technical name for leprosy today. In Bible times—and sometimes today as well—persons with any ailment considered to be “leprosy” were banished from the healthy community until they either got better or died.

Leprosy was feared because there was no known cure for it (I think it is treatable today), and some forms of it were highly contagious. No one in biblical times would knowingly touch a leper, but notice what Jesus did: *Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed.*

In addition to this man, Jesus healed quite a number of people in the Gospel accounts, and the most common methods He used were speaking words of healing and touching the sick persons with His hands. Sometimes He did both. Jesus used only words in the raising of Lazarus (John 11:43) and the healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:14). He healed the nobleman’s son and the Centurion’s servant at significant distance from them (John 4:50; Luke 7:10). The catalog of people Jesus healed and the methods He used to heal them could go on and on.

I don’t know about you, but while I’m amazed by and grateful for the truth of these stories, I also wonder what’s up with all the disease that is not healed, with all the pain that is not relieved, with all the disease that ends in death. Given such realities that we face all the time, healing stories such as these seem to have as much power to *quench* hope as to *quicken* it, and it is that perplexity to which we now give our attention.

Deep and fundamental questions frequently have complex answers, and this is true here as well. As we begin, we need to bracket our discussion by acknowledging two truths. On the one hand, pain and suffering, sickness and sorrow were not God’s original intent for us, but were brought into Creation as the natural consequences of human choice. You and I live in a sin-shattered world. On the other hand, when Time is complete, God has promised to completely remake Creation and will remove from it all sorrow and death, all crying and pain (Revelation 21:4).

You and I live in the age that lies between sin’s entrance into Creation and its final banishment and destruction. The brokenness, disease and pain that exist in our bodies, in our minds, in our emotions, and in our spirits were never God’s purpose for us, and we do well to work against them with all our might. Jesus spoke appreciatively of the healing work of human physicians, for example, and clearly allied Himself with them, though as their Sovereign, not as their peer (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31).

While there were occasions when Jesus apparently healed all of the sickness in the crowd, this was not always the case. Jesus didn’t heal everyone He met. And when Jesus healed a man born blind (John 9:1-3), He indicated that there are sometimes purposes for illness that aren’t immediately apparent to us.

The truth of the matter is that Peter’s mother-in-law, the man with leprosy, and the other people Jesus healed are exceptions. They are not the rule. God does heal in extraordinary ways, but such healing is “extra-ordinary” by definition—*extraordinary* healing is not how God usually works.

While Jesus was the Healer above all healers, we know that He himself was most certainly not spared all trouble and pain. And although Paul sometimes healed the sick and raised the

dead (Acts 20:10), there were also times when Paul wanted to heal the sick and was not able to. **Most of the sick people Paul knew stayed sick**, such as Trophimus, who Paul “*left sick in Miletus*” (2 Timothy 4:20).

Beyond this, Paul himself had some sort of illness—he called it “*a thorn in my flesh*”—that tormented him. As he described it, “*Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’*” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

In his second letter to Corinth, Paul expanded on this point: “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us*” (2 Corinthians 4:7). One of the reasons why you and I are not healed, then, may be so that we—and those who know us—won’t be tempted to think that we really can do life on our own, without ultimate, practical, *daily* dependence on God. And there are other reasons.

Why does God allow sickness, disease, and affliction among us? I think the reason is partly because of the opportunity these afflicted ones provide for the rest of us.

Chush is a school for learning disabled children in New York, and one father had a son named Shaya in that school. Speaking to the parents at Shaya’s school, his father said, “Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. *Where is God’s perfection?*”

The audience was shocked by the question, but Shaya’s father continued. “I believe,” he said, “that **when God brings a child like Shaya into the world, the perfection that God seeks is in the way people react to this child.**”<sup>3</sup> And you know, that father just may have been right.

Jesus put it like this: “*I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me*” (Matthew 25:35-36).

My friends, **every need around us constitutes a test**, and we are the ones being tested. It is crucial for us to remember that God’s purpose is this life is not our comfort, but our character, and *our character is seldom shaped toward the image of Christ when we’re comfortable*.

Jesus’ encounter with the man with leprosy reminds us that the real, essential, eternal value of a person is spiritual, not physical. Although a person’s body may be diseased or deformed or may be damaged by accidents or by sinful choices, the person inside that body is no less valuable to God as a result of these changes. No human body is too misshapen for God’s touch, and if our character is like God’s character, that will be true for us as well.

Sometimes we are not healed, or are not healed immediately, to remind us of the real Source of our power. Sometimes we are not healed, or are not healed immediately, in order to give others the opportunity to be shaped through ministry to and with us.

Sometimes we are not healed, or are not healed immediately, because God intends to shape our own character through our pain. As the Swiss physician, Paul Tournier, used to tell his patients, “I will do all I can to restore you to health. But I will also be praying

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Paysach Krohn, “God’s Perfection,” [www.truthorfiction.com/godsperfection/](http://www.truthorfiction.com/godsperfection/).

that you will not get well until this illness has accomplished its purpose in your life—until you have learned what it has to teach you.”

In this sin-shattered world, every last one of us is going to die, sooner or later, and there will obviously be some mechanism—perhaps sickness—by which our death comes. While our testimonies to God’s power do sometimes include inexplicable physical healing, **we’re called on far more often to give testimony to God’s goodness, grace, and power while we’re suffering and when we’re dying.** As Paul put it, “*For when I am weak, then I am strong*” (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Dr. Larry Dossey, former Chief of Staff of Humana Medical City Dallas, has written that “Prayerfulness allows us to reach a plane of experience where illness can be experienced as a natural part of life, and where its *acceptance* transcends *passivity*. If the disease disappears, we are grateful; if it remains, that too is a reason for gratitude.”<sup>4</sup>

We are able to have such attitudes because for those who see things as they really are, for those who understand life as it really is, *final healing is always guaranteed.* While we who are in Christ are sometimes healed in our bodies, we are always healed by resurrection, when all things become new! The Empty Tomb reminds us that all of our life on this earth is only the preface to the Real Story, which lies beyond the grave.

Professor Tony Campolo told a story that makes this point quite powerfully: “I was in a church in Oregon not too long ago,” he wrote, “and I prayed for a man who had cancer. In the middle of the week, I got a telephone call from his wife. She said, ‘You prayed for my husband. He had cancer.’ I said, ‘Had?’ *Whoa*, I thought, *it’s happened.*

“‘He died,’ she said. I felt terrible.

“She continued, ‘Don’t feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn’t take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God.

“The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. After you prayed for him, peace came over him and joy came into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We’ve sung. We’ve laughed. We’ve read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they’ve been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing.

“And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, ‘He wasn’t cured, but he was healed.’”<sup>5</sup> Let me say that again: “**He wasn’t cured, but he was healed.**”

You and I pray for healing, as well we should, but the healing that we really need is frequently rather different from what we think it is. Our bodies wither and die—as they must—but our essential, spiritual Selves are totally immune to every disease—well, every disease except one: Sin.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Dossey, M.D., *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 27).

<sup>5</sup> Tony Campolo, “Year of Jubilee,” *Preaching Today* #212.

**Our real need is to be healed from Sin.** When all is said and done, the only prayer for healing that really matters is the prayer for God's forgiveness and spiritual healing, purchased on Calvary's Cross and available to every one of us at this very moment.

In a sense, every one of us has "leprosy" because we have all been deformed by the ugliness of sin. But God, by coming to us in the person of Jesus, has given us the opportunity to be healed, both in time and in eternity.

Having said all this, honesty compels me to tell you that I personally don't like pain. I don't like any sort of pain, and I don't like it one little bit. When disease or other suffering attacks my body or someone in my family, I pray shamelessly for God's healing of that pain. I'm not at all reluctant to pray for a miracle of healing.

But while I pray for a miracle, I also try to live into that Spirit-borne peace that Jesus promised and of which Habakkuk wrote: "*Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, **yet I will rejoice in the Lord!** I will be joyful in the God of my salvation*" (Habakkuk 3:17-18, NLT; John 14:27).

The prayers for healing that you and I usually pray are generally focused on living long and well, and those prayers are also generally very short-sighted. The Bible tells us over and over that this life is only the prelude. Everything we know in space and time is just the introduction, just the first paragraph of the title page. God's Real Plan is for us to move on past the end of this life to experience *endless* life and *unimaginable* well-being in the New Creation that is yet to come.

Because I know this to be true, in times of pain, as well as in other times, I'm going to do my best to anchor my life to Jesus' promise that "*When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be where I am*" (John 14:3, NLT). Then, and only then, will we know all that Jesus intended when He said to the man who had leprosy, "**Be healed!**"