

iHurt

2 Kings 20:1-6; 1 Chronicles 4:9-10; Matthew 8:1-13 ¹

Our text in Matthew told two stories of healing, to which I want to add another two from the Old Testament. The first of these stories is about Hezekiah, the only godly king Judah had over a period of more than one hundred years. The Bible says, “*Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the LORD and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the LORD had given to Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook*” (2 Kings 18:5-7a).

Just before we pick up the story, Jerusalem had been under siege by the Assyrian army, nearly 200,000 strong. Hezekiah had no means by which to resist such a force, so he took the matter to God in prayer in the Temple. In response to Hezekiah’s prayer, God’s angel destroyed nearly all of the Assyrians in the night, and the remainder of the army quite understandably fled away.

It was after this deliverance that Hezekiah became deathly ill. Though at first it seemed that Hezekiah would die, God responded to his plea for healing by granting him both healing and fifteen more years added to his life.

The other Old Testament story I want to add is this: “*Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, ‘I gave birth to him in pain.’ Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, ‘Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.’ And God granted his request*” (1 Chronicles 4:9-10).

The first story in Matthew is about a man who had leprosy. 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. Leprosy is a chronic, infectious, and deforming disease that affects the skin and peripheral nerves.

In Bible times—and sometimes today as well—persons with leprosy were banished from the healthy community until they either got better or died. No one in biblical times would knowingly touch a leper for fear of contracting the disease, but notice this encounter in Matthew 8: *When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”*

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately, he was cleansed of his leprosy (Matthew 8:1-3).

In the last story, a Roman officer whose rank was approximately that of a Captain or a Major today, came to ask Jesus to heal one of his servants who was “*paralyzed and suffering terribly.*” This was as unusual a request then as it would be today for a similar officer to visit an itinerant healer and ask for healing for one of his troops.

Whereas Jesus touched the man with leprosy, here the Centurion, recognizing Jesus’ amazing authority over Creation, humbly said, “*Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.*” And Jesus, amazed at the faith

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on August 19, 2012.

of a Gentile, said, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment (Matthew 8:8, 13).

We could add to these stories accounts where the Bible tells us that Jesus healed *every disease and sickness among the people*” (Matthew 4:23), and *the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them* (Luke 4:40). Or simply, Jesus *healed all the sick* (Matthew 8:16). As J. R. R. Tolkien put it, “The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.”²

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 those realities, these stories seem to have as much power to *quench* hope as to *quicken* it, and it is that perplexity to which we bend our minds this morning.

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 natural consequences of human choice. You and I live in a sin-shattered world. On the other hand, when Time is complete, God is going to 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 banishment therefrom. 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 do all we can to work against them. Jesus spoke appreciatively of the healing work of physicians, for example, and clearly allied Himself with them, though as their Sovereign, not as their equal (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31).

While there were occasions when Jesus 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 Hezekiah, the man with leprosy, and the Centurion’s servant are exceptions, not the rule. God does heal in extraordinary ways, but such healing is “extra-ordinary” by definition—not how God usually works.

The popularity of Bruce Wilkinson’s book, *The Prayer of Jabez*,³ notwithstanding, I think Jabez was an extraordinary case as well. It really is not in our best interest for God to “keep us from all trouble and pain.” Let’s think together about why this is true.

While Jesus was THE Healer, we know that He himself was most certainly not spared all trouble and pain. 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*

² J. R. R. Tolkien, spoken of Aragorn, but also with symbolic reference to Christ, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 169.

³ Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Multnomah, 2000).

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 we 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.”⁴ 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).

Every need around us constitutes a test, and we are the ones being tested. As I’ve suggested before—and often—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 that you will not get well until this illness has accomplished its purpose in your life.”

In this sin-shattered world, every last one of us is going to die, 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).

⁴ Rabbi Paysach Krohn, “God’s Perfection,” www.truthorfiction.com.

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.”⁵

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 very nicely: “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.’”⁶ 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 absolutely immune to every disease—well, actually, every disease except one: Sin.

Our real need is to be healed from Sin. The only prayer for healing that really matters when all is said and done is the prayer for God’s forgiveness and spiritual healing, purchased on Calvary’s Cross and available for the asking at this very moment.

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. If and when disease or other suffering attacks my body or someone in my family, I’m going to pray shamelessly for God’s healing of that pain. I’m going to pray for a miracle.

But while I’m praying for a miracle, I’m also going to 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

⁵ Larry Dossey, M.D., *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 27).

⁶ Tony Campolo, “Year of Jubilee,” *Preaching Today* #212.

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).

Our prayers for healing are generally focused on living long and well, but our prayers are generally also woefully 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.

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!**"