

HAVE YOU EVER HUNGERED FOR WHOLENESS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Last week, a woman from another city came to see me at my office. She was well groomed, very pleasant, and in full control of her emotions. She put me on notice that she had a bad taste in her mouth regarding religion, but because of a wedding ceremony I had performed some time ago for a friend of hers, she felt led to seek me out. "You are the first male minister I have ever spoken to," she told me. Because I so identified with her early years, and I felt that her story would be encouraging to many of you as it was to me, I telephoned her and asked her permission to share part of her life story with you. She granted permission but desires to remain anonymous.

After a few more minutes of small talk I asked her how she thought I could be of help. For more than an hour she shared her background with me. As I listened, I was amazed that this woman was able to maintain her composure. She was born out of wedlock, placed in a foster home, and abused as a child. At 15, she was put on the streets by her guardian. She enlisted in the military, where she encountered serious problems. She said she was married several times. Her first husband left her with three children to raise on her own. Since that time she has been divorced and widowed. She remarried and remained married for 20 years until her husband died. Several months ago she married again and then realized she needed some outside help to strengthen this new relationship. Thus the visit to me.

On the surface, as I said, this woman was well groomed, very pleasant, and in control of her emotions. Inside, however, she was filled with grief over broken relationships and feelings of abandonment and isolation at work and at home. As a result of her terrible past and current situation, a history of trying to survive all by herself in a fallen world, she told me this stress was producing physical and emotional pain. She felt helpless, isolated, and at times unclean, she said. This woman was an excellent example of what the apostle Paul calls "the living dead," those who are dead in their trespasses and sins. My heart went out to her in love and compassion, but I felt helpless because she did not appear to be open to hear about the wholeness that would be hers if she would throw herself at the feet of Jesus and say in faith, as the leper says in our passage from the gospel of Luke today, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Lord, you and only you can make me whole."

How many of you can identify with this dear woman? How many of you can remember when you hungered for this same sense of wholeness? How many of you at this moment hunger deeply for physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness? Is there any hope that this woman, coming from such a broken, isolated, unclean and hopeless world, can become whole? As we prepared to end our meeting, I felt helpless. Her heart seemed closed. Yet the answer to all her problems was on the tip of my tongue: "You could be made spiritually whole in a moment if you would by faith ..."

I. Turn to Jesus in your uncleanness, Luke 5:12-13

And it came about that while He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man full of leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand, and touched Him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the leprosy left him.

Having spent his first year of ministry in Judea, our Lord is now deeply involved in his Galilean ministry. In this incident to which we now come we see another pearl being strung, as it were, on the divine string of redemption. Luke quotes Jesus himself in this gospel as saying, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance" (Luke

5:31-32).

Our text begins, "And it came about that while He was in one of the cities, behold there was a man full of leprosy" (see Matt.8:2-4; Mark 1:40-45). William Hendricksen writes the following concerning the disease of leprosy in his commentary on the gospel of Luke,

The disease which we today call leprosy generally begins with pain in certain areas of the body. Numbness follows. Soon the skin in such spots loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy, and scaly. In fact, the affliction is called leprosy because it makes the skin scaly (the Greek word lepos, meaning scale). As the sickness progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears, begins to bunch, with deep furrows between the swellings, so that the face of the afflicted individual begins to resemble that of a lion. Fingers drop off or are absorbed. Toes are affected similarly. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop off. By this time one can see that the person in this pitiable condition is a leper.

There is disagreement in the medical field as to whether the leprosy referred to in the Bible was contagious or not. Some believe that once a man was declared a leper by the priest (Lev. 13), placed outside the camp and isolated from the "people of covenant," that was proof that the disease was contagious. But the scripture does not deal with whether leprosy was contagious or not, but rather that it rendered the afflicted person ceremonially "unclean," and thus he was shut off from social and religious contact with his own people.

In the Scriptures, we discover that God often uses an individual's physical ailments to illustrate mankind's spiritual problems. For instance, a person who is physically blind could be used as a symbol of the spiritual blindness of an individual, a nation, or a church. The dumb, the deaf, and the lame likewise are used to illustrate spiritual truth.

The physically impaired are often used among us by God as walking bulletin boards, in a sense, to challenge our spiritual walk. In our society, however, we try to hide away everyone who is stricken by disease, the homeless, etc. We don't want to be reminded by walking bulletin boards that everyone in California isn't healthy and fit. But if you visit the countries of the Third World, you will not only see these walking signs but thousands of others lying in the streets, suffering from various diseases, malnutrition, homelessness, etc. We don't know what to do about our homeless in this country, but a visitor from one of these other countries would feel quite at home among our homeless.

Listen to the apostle John's words in Revelation 3:14-17: "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth.' You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Several times in his discourses, Jesus said to his listeners, "You have eyes but you see not. You have ears but you hear not. You are like the blind leading the blind."

In the Old Testament, leprosy was viewed not so much as a symbol of sin as it was the judgement of God for sin and its consequences; sin which produces uncleanness, separation, decay and, for most, a painful and untimely death. Thus, leprosy was an outward sign of the death that sin produces in people's lives. When a person was cured it was seen as a symbol of the resurrection of that person from the dead and his reinstatement into the land of the living.

In Moses' case, leprosy was clearly seen as a sign of the power of God who was able to afflict a person with leprosy as well as cure it. In the case of Moses' sister, Miriam (Numbers 12), and later King Uzziah (2 Chron.29), who both rebelled against God, leprosy was a judgment of God. Miriam was cured by God because of the prayer of her brother Moses, but King Uzziah went to his grave as a leper.

According to Leviticus 13, once a person had a swelling, a rash or a bright spot on his skin, one that might become an infectious skin disease, he had to be brought to the priest to be examined. If the priest declared the person to have contracted leprosy, his clothes were to be torn and burned, his head was to be uncovered. He

was declared "ceremonially unclean," and was asked to move outside the camp. When anyone approached lepers or their dwelling, lepers were required to cry out, "Unclean, unclean," so that all who heard or saw them could pray for them as well as avoid them. In Israel, the leper was the symbol of both the spiritually and the morally dead.

This leper who approached Jesus was a constant reminder to everyone of how God viewed mankind: they were "dead in their trespasses and sins." Sin has terrible consequences. It cuts us off from the presence of God who is life himself. It also eats away our soul and spirit, leaving us with a sense of uncleanness and unwholesomeness. But we are not only cut off from God but our unwholesomeness, sin has a way of isolating us from family and friends. In reality we find ourselves in our aloneness living "outside the camp" of fellowship. We sense death in our spirit; we feel we will never be whole again. In Psalm 32, David described his living death outside the camp because he sought to hide his sins of adultery and murder from the people of Israel: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer."

The word of God continues, "Now this man who was full of leprosy [greatly affected all over his body; in the advance stages, as diagnosed by Dr. Luke] and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him saying, "Lord, if you are willing, You can make me clean." The Lord had moved to one of the Galilean cities, and yet this leper, who should have been living outside the camp, heard that Jesus was in town so he boldly entered the city looking for him. This man knew that the Pharisees threw stones at roaming lepers, but although he knew he was breaking the Mosaic law he was willing to face their wrath if there was the remotest possibility that he might be healed by this rabbi named Jesus.

As he approached the Lord he recognized his own uncleanness and unwholesomeness. Helpless, he fell to the ground at the feet of the Savior, crying, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." "Lord," he is saying, "I have heard of your teaching and healing ministry. Your fame has spread like wildfire in these hills. People say that you have cast out demons, that you have cured many diseases. No one has told me that you cured people with leprosy, but, based on what people are saying about you, that you are the Messiah of Israel, I believe that if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Some Christians today believe that God has not only forgiven their sins, but that he has promised to make them healthy and wealthy into the bargain. Others believe that the full gospel includes not only holiness of heart and life, but healing of the body as well, based on Isaiah 53:3-6 and 1 Peter 2:24, "surely He took up our infirmities and carried away our sorrows...by His wounds we are healed." They believe that this physical healing will occur, based on the faith of individual, and that every Christian should "claim his or her physical healing."

The key to understanding this passage is seen in the statement of the leper, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." The man is saying, in effect, "At this moment in history, according to the Law of Moses, I am ceremonially unclean. I know that I have nothing within myself to change the situation, but I have faith to believe that you can rid me of this uncleanness. I also realize that even though you have the power to heal me, what is really necessary is your willingness to do so."

A study of the scriptures reveals many occasions where it was God's will that one of his children become sick and remain sick, to his honor and glory. Sickness, as well as healings, are used to carry out God's greater purposes on this earth within his plan of redemption.

For example, think of Paul and his "thorn in the flesh." After the apostle's vision of the heavenlies, when he saw things that no man had ever seen, he received from the Lord a thorn in the flesh so that he would not exalt himself. Three times he prayed that the Lord would remove it but it remained to badger him. But in 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul tells us that the risen Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." That was when Paul stopped praying for God to heal him and instead accepted his burden as a "thorn of humility."

Our second illustration is Moses and his experience at the burning bush, recorded in Exodus 3-4. The Lord God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and asked this former Egyptian prince and murderer, who had by

this time become a shepherd in the wilderness, to be his instrument to deliver the people of Israel from 400 years of Egyptian bondage. Moses said he would like to do all of this, but he was handicapped. "Please, Lord," he said, "I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since thou has spoken to Thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." And the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go [even as you are, without any healing of your impediment] and I, even I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say."

Finally, we can give the example of the sinning Corinthians who were sick and weak (and some even died), because of their sin in taking the Lord's Supper: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord...for this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep," says Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:27-30. Where do these examples fit in the health and wealth theology which we hear so much about today? At times God uses sickness to teach humility and dependence. At times he will use sickness as a form of judgment. The leper's theology was right on the mark: "Lord, you can make me well, if it is your will to do so."

Can we come by faith to our Lord at any time and ask him to make us whole by healing us spiritually, emotionally, and physically? Yes! Can the Lord heal all of us spiritually and emotionally, as well as physically? Yes! He is always ready to heal us spiritually by offering us salvation. But is he always willing to heal us emotionally and physically? Sometimes yes, sometimes no! At times, as in this case with the leper, we have to put ourselves in a "holding pattern of faith," as it were. The leper said, "Lord, If you are willing, you can make me clean." He knew that healing was in the hands of our Lord, not in his own.

"And, moved with compassion (Mark 1:41), He stretched out His hand, and touched him, saying, 'I am willing: be cleansed (a command), and immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.'" "He stretched out His hand, and touched him..." Jesus was willing to touch the "untouchables." Jewish tradition demanded that one abstain from any contact with a leper, but Christ actually touched this man, not as a doctor would in a physical examination, but with compassion and love. And immediately the leprosy left him.

We can imagine what this leper felt like as the leprosy disappeared. The scales dropped off his skin and it became like a child's skin. His sores disappeared and the foul odor was no longer present in his nostrils. His eyebrows and eyelashes returned. His white hair became pitch black. His hoarse voice replaced by the strong vocal chords of his youth. The numbness and pain was replaced by the rush of blood throughout out his body. The fingers and toes that had dropped off in days gone by were restored. The face of an old lion now turned to that of newborn lamb. The deep sorrow was replaced by joy. His isolation was replaced by a return to fellowship. "I'm healed! I'm clean! I'm whole!" he cried in joy and amazement. All this happened through the compassion and the touch of our loving Physician's hand.

Several times each year our elders are asked by members of this body who are physically or emotionally sick to pray for them that the Lord will heal them. The elders have always complied, with the spiritual motivation that if it is the Lord's will, the individual in question be healed. Over the years they have had the privilege of seeing the Lord say yes as well as no to such requests. At no time have they ever felt that the Lord would stop them from coming into his presence to ask him for healing on behalf of the sick. The sick person comes to the Lord and to the elders by faith; the elders come to the Lord in faith on behalf of the sick; but the bottom line always is, "Lord, if you are willing..."

Have you ever hungered for wholeness, for physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness? Our wonderful Lord is always willing to bring spiritual wholeness in the form of salvation to all who place their faith in him as their Lord and Savior. Our Lord also has encouraged us to come to him in faith concerning our physical and emotional problems with the same faith and humility of the leper: "Lord, if you are willing, You can make me clean." Once the Lord rewards your faith with spiritual, emotional or physical wholeness, you need to,

II. Testify of Jesus in your cleanness, Luke 5: 14-16

And He ordered him to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering, for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, for a testimony to them." But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and great multitudes were gathering to hear Him

and to be healed of their sicknesses. But He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.

Why did Jesus warn this man to tell no one? It is obvious that our Lord had a very clear motive for healing this one leper. Jesus intended this to be a testimony to the priest in Jerusalem that he was the Messiah. According to the Law of Moses (Lev.14), if a leper were healed in Israel, he or she had to go to the temple in Jerusalem and present themselves to the priest. The priest was to examine the person and if the healing was genuine, that person was to be declared physically and ceremonially clean before all the people.

The priests had no history of a Jewish man or woman being healed in over 2000 years, ever since the healing of Moses and Miriam. The last recorded healing which Jesus mentioned to the Jewish leaders in his home town of Nazareth (Luke 4:27) occurred some 850 years earlier in the time of Elisha. Our Lord reminded them that "...there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." So this man whom Jesus had just healed was the first recorded Jewish leper healed since the Gentile Naaman. After his healing, Naaman gave testimony, "Now I know there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel" (11 Kings 5: 5).

The priest would have to investigate this man. Had he been a leper? Yes! Had he been healed? Yes! Once this cleansing was verified, the question then would be, How was he healed? The answer, of course, was, by a man in Galilee named Jesus who was claiming to be the Messiah (Luke 4), and was proving it by healing the lame, the dumb, the deaf, the blind, the downtrodden, and now this leper. The evidence would then be submitted to the Sanhedrin for its investigation and final declaration. Jesus was generating an investigation of his person and power. He did not need any more testimony of his Messiahship in Galilee. He had had enough. But after the Galilean ministry, he would head south to Jerusalem and he wanted the religious leaders to know he was coming back to city as their Messiah.

But in his excitement, the man who had been healed did not quite carry out Jesus' instructions. According to Mark 1:45, "he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere." Luke says, "But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and great multitudes were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sickness. But He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray." The disobedience of the cleansed leper hindered our Lord's ministry and eliminated the testimony to the priest. In reality, the man was not clean in the eyes of the Jewish people until he was ceremonially declared clean by the priest in Jerusalem. He may have gone to the priest at a later date, though nothing is recorded of such an event.

This story of a leper made whole should encourage us that our loving and compassionate Lord can bring spiritual, emotional and physical wholeness to our lives when we place our faith in Him.

For those of you who have not yet invited Jesus to be your Lord, please know that he is waiting and willing at this moment to heal you spiritually. He will save you from your sin, guilt and shame and give eternal life, which is his life now.

For those of us who are believers, suffering with emotional and physical ailments, we are encouraged to come to the Lord with the same humble attitude of the leper, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean (physically and ceremonially)." At that point the faith we had to approach Jesus must be the same faith to wait upon him, knowing whether the answer is yes or no, everything will work out as a testimony to his glory, and our spiritual maturity, as we tell others, of the wholeness, peace and joy that he has placed in our hearts by his Holy Spirit.

Have you ever hungered for physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness? We need to turn to the Lord Jesus in our uncleanness, and then testify to the love of Jesus in our cleanness.

Last Wednesday, a woman from another city came to see me at my office. She was a very pleasant, well groomed person. After she had shared her story with me she was ready to leave in the same helpless, isolated,

broken and unclean condition she had come in. When it was time to end our conversation, she asked if I would answer one last question. She told me that last year, when she was under great stress while in the military, she visited with a woman chaplain. After listening to her story the women told her to "Let go and let God." She felt loved and accepted by this woman, and those words were always on her heart, she said, especially in times of stress. Her question to me was, "What did that statement, 'Let go and let God' mean?" Ten minutes later, this woman from another city who was starving for wholeness, bowed her head and, with her broken heart, asked Jesus to come into her heart as her Lord and Savior, to forgive her whole lifetime of sins, and cleanse her and make her spiritually, emotionally and physically whole.

Based on her faith in Jesus Christ, this once illegitimate, homeless, abandoned, rejected, deserted, broken woman was, by the Spirit of God, "born again" at 2:50 p.m. August 9, 1989, and adopted by our Heavenly Father into his spiritual family forever. I asked her, "Who do you want to tell first about this new life you are just beginning in Christ?" "I'm going to call my middle daughter and tell her everything," she replied. Jesus said, "Every one therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt.10:32).

Have you ever hungered for wholeness? Come to Jesus. He and only he will make you whole.

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