

### ***Jesus Reached out His Hand and Touched the Man***

*"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 cured of his leprosy." -Matthew 8:2-3*

Of all the things that attract people to Jesus, perhaps it is his compassion that is most compelling. He showed it to the woman caught in adultery when he said "Neither do I condemn you" (Jn 8:11). He extended it to those who crucified him when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34 KJV). And here in Matthew 8, we see Jesus reaching out to touch, and to heal, the untouchable—a leper.

Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 speak of how an outbreak of leprosy in the nomadic camp of the Israelites was to be dealt with: *The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp (13:45-46).* What a dreadful existence.

My wife was telling me how, when she was in elementary school, some of the kids had stigmatized a classmate. "Mary" was said to have fleas and if anyone touched her they were heckled as having caught fleas from Mary. The only way, it was said, that you could prevent yourself from catching Mary's fleas was to mark an "X" on your hand. So, for literally months, most of the class would come to school with the "X" as a sign that they didn't want Mary's fleas. Imagine the trauma and the sense of rejection that that little girl must have felt.

Imagine, as well, the man with leprosy who approached Jesus. Imagine the courage that it would have taken for this social outcast to come among the large crowds that were following Jesus (v.1) and kneel down before him. The one who was required by the Law to shout "unclean, unclean" wherever he went came and said, *"Lord if you are willing you can make me clean."* Jesus' response was unthinkable. It was a direct violation of the Levitical commandment. He reached out his hand and touched the man. And with a word, the man was cured of his leprosy.

Jesus didn't have to touch him, you know. But it wasn't just about healing the man's leprosy; it was about healing his soul. It was about mercy triumphing over the law. It was about how those who have been rejected by society should be treated. It was about reaching out to touch a man who bore the wound of being untouchable. And every bit as important as the command to heal the leprosy was the touch to heal the man.

### ***The Lord Needs It***

*'Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you doing this?" tell him, "The Lord needs it..."'* -Mark 11:1-3

Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. As he approached Jerusalem, he sent two of disciples ahead to a village on the outskirts of the city. He said that they would find a colt that no one had ever ridden at the entrance to the village. They were to untie it and bring it to him. If anyone were to stop them and ask, "Why are you doing this?" they would explain to them that the Lord needs it.

Does the Lord ever need anything? Does he need us? Good questions. The answers would give us insight into the very nature of God. First of all, God would not be God if there was any insufficiency about him. The Lord is totally self-sustaining and never deficient in any way. But Jesus became "needy" when he became human. He "needed" air to breathe, food to eat and clothes to wear. When it came time for Jesus to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah, he "needed" a donkey colt in order to do it. Luke's gospel (19:34) tells us that when the owners of the colt asked the disciples why they were untying it and they told the owners exactly what Jesus had instructed them: *"The Lord needs it."*

And he did need it. The divine plan written from eternity for the salvation of the entire world needed that donkey to proceed. Jesus could have flown into Jerusalem like Superman, but that wasn't part of the plan. Jesus needed a humble beast of burden to portray the manner in which he would conquer the enemy. There was a reason that he wanted—yes needed—that colt. That donkey was in his purposes.

But you say, "Really now, God doesn't need anything or anyone." Agreed. But in his sovereignty, it seems that God has chosen to "need" us—like Jesus needed that donkey—to do his bidding. It is not that God is unable to get along without us or that he couldn't have found another way to get the job done. But he needed that donkey and he needs us.

The Lord needs you. You are part of his divine plan for the ages. So, when the Spirit of God comes by and starts untying you for his purposes, don't say, "Why are you doing this?" The answer is clear. The Lord needs you.

### *The Cowardly*

*"He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."*  
-Revelation 21:7-8

Revelation 21:8 gives a litany of persons who will face the judgment of the "second death" in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. As you read through the list you come across the characteristics of those whom you would typically suppose to be liable to the judgment of the Lord: Liars, idolaters, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, murderers.... But included in the list are those whom you would not necessarily think would suffer the wrath of God: The cowardly. Why are the cowardly included in this list of infamy?

Where the King James Version of the Bible talks about "*the fearful*" in this passage, the NIV and the NASB are more specific in translating the word, "cowardly." The Greek word is "deilos," which means timid. It is the same word Paul uses in 2 Timothy 1:7 when he says that "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."

That the timid are listed among the terrible evildoers of Revelation 21 gives you an idea what God must think about cowards. Hebrews 10:38 says, "*My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.*" God hates timidity. His people are to be nothing but. They are to be bold and full of faith. God honours those who have initiative and take action. Jacob was blessed for his tenacity despite his duplicity. Joab was no angel, but got to be general of David's army because he didn't have a timid bone in his body. And despite his impulsiveness, Peter was given the honor of being the lead apostle. Why? 'Cause he was the kind of guy who was willing to step out and walk on water.

Nobody likes a coward—especially not God. God gives grace to the humble but none to the timid. Timidity is not a virtue. Humility, yes; timidity, no. *The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it* (Mt 11:12). Despite the overzealousness of a very few, the church is generally much too passive. And that's got to change because heaven wasn't made for the cowardly.

### ***A Hundred and Eighty-five Thousand Men***

*"Then the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning--there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew." -Isaiah 37:36-37*

Sometimes the nations and the kings spoken of in the Old Testament are obscure. The Hivites, Perizzites, Gergashites, Amorites and Jebusites are a little tough to track down in the annals of antiquity. They were very ancient peoples and they didn't exactly become glorious empires in their day. Not so with Assyria. When king Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem faced off with Sennacherib and the Assyrians, they were dealing with the greatest empire the Middle East had seen until that time. Historical references to Sennacherib and the Assyrian Empire abound. The Assyrians were anything but obscure.

Hezekiah and the residents of Jerusalem had reason to fear the impending siege of this great empire and its army. The cockiness of the Assyrian commanders was reasonable. The army had been a juggernaut from the north, toppling every nation and mocking their gods as they advanced. They had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in the process and had taken over most of Judah before Hezekiah found them at his doorstep. In the natural, he's toast. So Hezekiah lays it out before the Lord and God answers dramatically. The angel of the Lord goes out to the Assyrian camp and in one night 185,000 men are put to death. The great Assyrian army breaks camp and withdraws.

So how does antiquity deal with this small detail of 185,000 men being killed and the great Assyrian army retreating? Did the people of the world hear about it? Is there an extra-biblical record of it? According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Assyrians were wiped out by the bubonic plague. Yes the world heard—and they found out that Yahweh is God.

More than the corroboration of a biblical story by an ancient historian, I am encouraged by the unmitigated deliverance of the people of God from the hand of a dominant world power of its time. Hezekiah's prayer, *"O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God"* (37:20), was answered. We tend to view the biblical narrative outside the context of the real world. To do so misses the eminent point that the God who took out 185,000 Assyrians in the year 701 B.C. is the same God who acts on our behalf in the very certain reality that we call our own.

### ***There I Buried Leah***

*"Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron... There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah." -Genesis 49:29,31*

I don't know about you but I always felt kind of sorry for Leah. She was the oldest of the two daughters of Laban, but she wasn't the prettiest. We are told that her sister Rachel was *lovely in form and beautiful*; while Leah's distinction is that she had *weak eyes* (Ge 26:17). It seems also that their names didn't help matters. Rachel means "ewe" while Leah probably means "cow."

Jacob comes on the scene, falls for Rachel, offers to work seven years for her hand in marriage, and is so taken with her that the seven years seem like only a few days. Leah would never know what it would feel like to have a man want her like that. By the time the seven years are up no one has come knocking on Laban's door to ask for Leah's hand, much less offer to work seven years for her. When the wedding night comes, instead of sending Rachel into the darkened bridal chamber, Laban sends Leah. Jacob thinks he is making love to Rachel, when it is actually Leah. Never mind Jacob reaping the duplicity that he has sown in his life, how do you think Leah feels? How would you feel knowing the one who was making love to you was not really making love to you. How would you feel in the morning when your new husband is sick to find out you are his new wife?

The Lord saw that she was not loved so he gave her children. But the names that she gave her children reflect the deep and abiding pain that was hers because she had a husband who did not love her (see Genesis 29:32-34). When Leah gave birth to her last son she named him Zebulun which means "honor." She said, *"This time my husband will treat me with honor because I have borne him six sons"* (Ge 30:20).

And in the end, Leah was honoured. The burial ground of the patriarchs contained the bones of Abraham and his wife Sarah, Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and Jacob and guess who? Leah, not Rachel. And more significantly, it was Leah, not Rachel, who was honoured by God to become the mother of both the Levitical priesthood and the line of the Messiah.

I still feel sorry for Leah. She no doubt bore the emotional scars of her rejection into the burial cave of Ephron. But if the Lord is the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, then he is also the God of Sarah, Rebekah...and Leah.

### ***Do Not Make Any Oil with the Same Formula***

*"This is to be my sacred anointing oil for the generations to come. Do not pour it on men's bodies and do not make any oil with the same formula. It is sacred, and you are to consider it sacred. Whoever makes perfume like it and whoever puts it on anyone other than a priest must be cut off from his people." -Exodus 30:31-33*

For too many people, the form becomes the object. I'm glad that the Lord gave instructions that the formula for making the fragrant anointing oil used for consecrating the priests was not to be reproduced for any other purpose. It is not so much that I have some supreme reverence for the ancient oil. No. What relieves me is that we have been spared, at least in part, from a proliferation within the church of "anointed anointing oil." What I mean is that we don't need any more encouragement for well meaning enthusiasts to look for and rely on that specially anointed whatever from the Holy Land that will bring down the favour of God for that extra edge in ministry. Just think how much money someone is not making because of the prohibition on the sacred recipe. God knows that there are plenty of Christians who would buy the stuff and treat it as magical.

I'm convinced that the reason the Lord Jesus didn't give us more ordinances than he did is because of the widespread parochial fixation on what Paul calls the *weak and beggarly elements* (Gal 4:9 KJV) of religious observance. Not that the Lord's Supper or baptism or anointing with oil in their proper function are lifeless in nature—but for too many people, the form becomes the object. And when it does, ritual takes the place of faith and superstition takes the place of worship.

And before we smugly judge the "formal" churches guilty of such heinous crimes, maybe we should take a look at some of our forms and how they too can subtly or overtly supplant true worship. For example, a man once said to me, "When you blow the shofar, it really brings the anointing." Wow—I didn't know that. Another fellow said to me after a performance (and I do mean performance) of southern style music, "Now, that's gospel music." Really? As if nothing else could be?

The superb worship leader, the great preacher and the powerful minister can become a substitution for God. We worship the worship, bow down to the sermon and venerate the anointing. And if someone offers to sell us that special oil from the Holy Land, we just might buy it.

### ***Sing to the Lord a New Song***

*"Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints." -Psalm 149:1*

If your church experience has been anything like mine, you have seen some controversy over worship music. Though musical style is often at the forefront of the contention, the dispute usually comes down to those wanting to sing the old song versus those wanting to sing the new song. I have always been an advocate for singing to the Lord the new song.

First, let me acknowledge that the Psalm from which I take this commentary is an old song. The psalms which made it into the songbook of Israel got there, humanly speaking, because they were tried and true. They were the "great hymns of the faith." They were familiar to Israel and provided a sense of continuity with the historic faith of their ancestors. For me to sit before the Lord with a hymn book in hand and sing the old familiar songs Zion has been one of my most fulfilling forms of personal worship.

There is one thing to remember though about those old songs that we love so much: At one time they were new songs. At one time they were fresh from the heart of a worshiper—newly inspired by his or her communion with the Lover of their soul. Even more importantly, remember this: The word of God says, "*Sing to the Lord a new song.*" I wonder if the reason that we like the old songs so much is because we like them so much. Does the inspiration to sing them come from the Spirit who leads us into true worship or from somewhere else?

Can we safely say that the Lord prefers to hear the new song rather than the old one? Yes! The Lord looks at the heart when we worship, but, all things being equal, he desires a fresh creative expression of our worship. You may love your wife sincerely, but it is probably safe to say that she would prefer not to receive the very same anniversary card every year. She desires to regularly hear a new expression of your love. She wants you to sing her a new song.

Granted, we all like our particular styles of music, and some styles are "newer" than others. But the question here is not about style. It is, "Are we going to sing old songs or new songs?" God has created us to pursue newness. Things naturally go "out of style." But singing the new song only because you like the new style is just as much "not about God" as preferring the traditional hymns because they remind us of the good old days.

Will we sing to the Lord a new song? Every Spirit inspired movement has, does and will continue to do so.