

Jesus and Healing

Mark 1:21-45

John Breon

John Wimber was a pastor and author who had been teaching his church about healing and praying for people to be healed. He tells about almost a year of preaching and praying and not seeing results. Then one morning a member of the church called. This man had a new job and had to be at work that day. His wife was sick with a fever and they had no one to take care of their children. He asked if Wimber could come and pray for her.

Wimber thought, "God, look what you've got me into this time. This guy really believes this stuff. He's going to lose his job or I'm going to have to take care of his kids today."

When Wimber got to the house, the man took him to their bedroom. There was his wife, her face red and swollen with fever. "Oh no," Wimber groaned inwardly, "this looks like a hard one." He laid hands on her, mumbled a prayer, then turned around to explain to her husband why some people don't get healed. He was well into the explanation when the man started grinning. Wimber turned around to see the wife out of bed, looking like a new person. "What's happened to you?" he asked her.

She said, "I'm well. You healed me. Would you like to stay for some coffee or breakfast?"

Wimber said he couldn't believe it. She was well! On the way to his car, he realized what had happened. All his emotions from the past ten months washed over him. Then he yelled at the top of his lungs, "We got one!" (*Power Healing* 51-52).

Mark offers many examples of Jesus' healing people as part of his ministry. Because Jesus is our Lord and Leader, his ministry is the model for the church's ministry. Jesus embodied and proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom. The kingdom continues to advance. One of the signs of the kingdom's presence is healing. Jesus shared with his disciples his own power and authority to heal. Through the Holy Spirit, he continues to share his power and authority with us.

This section of Mark includes some healing stories. As we look at it, we want to learn about healing. But, above all, we want to learn about Jesus. We see who Jesus is and that tells us why he's significant. There are two main accounts of healing here. Between them we find Jesus getting with God the Father in prayer.

First, Jesus and the disciples leave the synagogue and go to Simon Peter's house. Today there's a church built over the ruins of Peter's house. It's about eighty feet from the ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum. When they get to the house, they tell Jesus about Simon's mother-in-law who is ill with a fever. Earlier we saw Jesus' power and authority over the demonic as he delivered a man during public worship in the synagogue. Now we see Jesus' power and authority over illness as he heals a woman in a private home. This account shows one of the ways Jesus healed. He took her by the hand and lifted her up. And she was well. Sometimes healing comes instantly like this.

We also see that we're healed for a purpose. When Mark says that she began to wait on them or serve them, that's a picture of discipleship. Touched by Jesus, made well and whole by him, we're to serve each other, to serve in God's kingdom. We'll continue to see this emphasis on disciples as servants who follow Jesus the Servant.

The deliverance of the man in the synagogue and the healing of Simon's mother-in-law happened on the Sabbath. Then, when the sun went down, people from all over town come to the house, bringing the sick and demon-possessed people to be healed and delivered. They waited until after sundown, because that was the beginning of a new day. The Sabbath was over and they could move freely and carry their sick family members and friends to Jesus. They crowded around the door and Jesus healed all kinds of diseases and drove out demons.

The next scene shows us the source of Jesus' power: Prayer. Prayer is at the center of Jesus' life and ministry. In prayer we refuse to let the world around us squeeze us into its mold and we make contact with God and draw on God's resources.

In the mystery of Incarnation, Jesus, the Son of God, was fully human. And he was totally dependent on the Heavenly Father. He needed to pray

to stay clear about the mission the Father gave him and to have the power to carry it out. If Jesus needed to pray, don't you think we do too?

Jesus went out early, before daylight, to a lonely place or the "wilderness place." Earlier, the wilderness was the haunt of the devil where Jesus faced temptation. Now it's the place where Jesus finds the Father in prayer. Redemption is on the move and it's moving into all kinds of places. Creation is being transformed (David Smith, *MARK. Wesley One Volume Commentary*).

Also in that wilderness place, Jesus transforms loneliness through prayer. Loneliness was almost epidemic in our world even before COVID-19. Now, because of distancing and quarantine and so many other precautions, for a lot of people loneliness is more intense. We're cut off from each other in many ways.

Henri Nouwen was a priest who wrote many books on spiritual life. In one he talks about making the move from loneliness to solitude, or transforming loneliness into solitude. He says, "To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent effort into a garden of solitude" (*Reaching Out* 34). In solitude we're still alone, but we don't have to be lonely. Solitude is a spiritual discipline that opens us more to God. As we recognize God's presence and communicate with God in our lonely places, we find that communion with God transforms our loneliness and transforms us.

Simon and the others hunted for and found Jesus. They told him, "Everyone's looking for you!" Was it tempting to stay in Capernaum and enjoy being so popular? If so, Jesus resisted that temptation. Through his time of prayer, he's confirmed his mission. So he says, "Let's go to the other villages around here so I can preach there also. That's why I've come."

Do you know what you're here for? What your purpose, your mission is? In solitude and prayer your purpose can be clarified and confirmed.

In the next scene (40-45), a man with leprosy comes to Jesus. The word in the Bible translated "leprosy" refers to a variety of skin diseases. They made a person ritually unclean. If you had this kind of disease you couldn't go to the temple or other place of worship. And they made a

person a social outcast. If you touched someone who had leprosy, you became unclean. So lepers had to signal their approach by ringing bells and shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!" And often they were confined to some place away from the city.

The skin diseases included in the term leprosy might disfigure people. They were seen as possibly contagious. For sure, the ritual uncleanness was seen as contagious. Leprosy in those days conveyed more horror and despair than many illnesses did (Joe Dongell, *The Gospel of Mark. The Biblical Journey* DVD, week 3).

There's a description of this kind of disease in Numbers 12. Aaron and Miriam, Moses' brother and sister, got jealous of Moses and started talking against him. The LORD showed up and confronted them. Then it says,

When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous—it became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, and he said to Moses, "Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away."

Moses prayed for God to heal her, but she still had to remain outside the camp for a week to be cleansed (Numbers 12:1-15).

Lepers symbolically represented death. They were removed from the community of life (Dongell). Rabbis of that time said that healing a leper was as hard as raising the dead.

This man ignores all the rules and comes right up to Jesus. On his knees, he says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." We see Jesus' *compassion*. He touched the man no one had dared to touch since he developed this disease. A lot of people these days miss human contact. This adds to the loneliness and separation we feel. Imagine being cut off from all human contact for no telling how long. Jesus reached out and touched this man. We see Jesus' *willingness* to heal. He says, "I am willing. Be clean!" And we see Jesus' *power*. He wasn't made unclean by the leprosy. Instead, the leprosy left the man and he was clean. Through the touch of Jesus his

power and authority, his holiness and health, overcame sickness and uncleanness in the man.

One summer during college I toured with a music group called Master's Touch. The group got its name from the old song about *The Touch of the Master's Hand* making all the difference. One day at a church camp, I was back at the sound board while the group sang and then I would go up to preach. Our director was leading the kids in some praise songs and fun songs. There was a chorus that went "A-la-la-la-le-luia." Then in the different verses, you'd sing things like "Shake another hand, shake a hand next to you" and so forth—and everybody would do whatever the verse said. We started singing, "Scratch another back, scratch a back next to you." I reached over to a kid near me and scratched his back. He yelled, "Ow! My sunburn!" Mine was not a healing touch that day.

But the touch of Jesus is always healing. Power and grace flow from him into us when we receive his touch.

Jesus warned the man not to publicize the miracle, but to go to the priests and let them check him out as the law prescribed and to offer the appropriate sacrifices as a testimony to the priests.

One way for us to let healing be a witness is to remember that the doctor who prescribes medication or treatment is the one who takes us off the medication or treatment. You don't stop taking medicine or take a child off their medicine because you believe a healing has happened. You go back to the doctors and let them verify it. And pray that they'll recognize God's hand in the healing.

God can heal in lots of ways. God uses medical science. God uses counseling and therapy. Sometimes God heals instantly by the direct touch of his Spirit. God heals gradually through prayer and medicine and forgiveness and any other means we'll let him use.

I heard about a woman who went in for eye surgery. Just as they were putting her under, she said to the surgeon, "There are thirty people [her Bible study group] praying for you right now." When she came out of recovery, the surgeon spoke with her and said, "I was brilliant! You may not even need glasses. You tell those thirty people that I operate every Tuesday and Thursday at 10:00."

So God heals in numerous ways. Or God gives us strength to use the illness. Always God heals through Christian death and resurrection. This is what we call "ultimate healing."

Here's another Bob Tuttle story. He had a friend who used to sit in his classroom and pray for him as he taught. Several years later, he called her one day and she told him she was dying. She only had a matter of days to live. He asked if he could pray for her. She said, "Just don't hold me back." So Tuttle prayed, "God, take away the pain and let her walk with you a little farther each day until one day soon it will be easier for her to go on home with you than to stay here. Amen."

Not long after I first heard that story, my grandmother's health started getting worse. I prayed something like that for her almost every day until she died a few months later. I've prayed like that for other people.

There comes a time when we stop holding on to people and release them to God, entrust them to his care. Hopefully, we've done that long before the time of the final letting go. Remember, God doesn't take people in death. Disease or accidents or age take them. God *receives* them with loving arms.

I was thinking again about my grandma. We called her Mammy. My brother Steve preached at her funeral. One thing he said was that even though we rejoice in Mammy's relationship with Jesus that carried her beyond death and though we were glad she was released from pain and suffering—someone who had always been there for us was no longer there. And because she was no longer in the picture, we felt loss and grief.

There's been a lot of loss and grief in our families and our community in a fairly short time. Nancy and I lost three parents within sixteen months. Nearly all of us know someone who's died with COVID. Others we know have died from various other causes. Grief is something we all experience.

I keep learning that God's healing power and grace come to us in these times. If we let God into our grief, he gives it a cleansing effect and brings us through the loss and sorrow. God fills our emptiness with his own presence and gives us joy. God gives us each other, the body of Christ. All of us together are part of the healing process through grief and whenever God heals.

Mark introduces us to Jesus as the one with power and authority to make known God's kingdom, to confront and overcome the kingdom of sin and sickness, death and evil. I came across a story last week that I didn't get into the sermon. I want to tell it now.

A tourist boat, loaded with cars and travelers, had failed to shut its doors properly. The water began to pour in. The boat began to sink and people began to panic. They were screaming as the happy, relaxed atmosphere of the ship turned in minutes into something worse than a horror movie.

Then a man, not a member of the crew, took charge. In a clear voice he gave orders, telling people what to do. Relief mixed with the panic as people realized someone at least was in charge, and many reached lifeboats they would otherwise have missed in the dark and the rush. The man himself made his way down to the people trapped in the hold. There he formed a human bridge. He held with one hand to a ladder and with the other to a part of the ship that was nearly submerged. And that enabled still more people to cross safely. When the nightmare was over, the man himself was found to have drowned. He literally gave his life in using the authority he had assumed. Many people were saved by that authority. Tom Wright concludes:

Jesus had joined in a struggle against the forces of evil and destruction, forces that, like the dark cruel sea pouring in on top of frightened and helpless travellers, seemed sometimes to be carrying all before them. Jesus came to be the human bridge across which people could climb to safety. And if, in the process, he himself paid with his own life the price of this saving authority, a human bridge with outstretched arms carrying people from death to life, that was simply part of the integrity of his action. The demons had their final shriek at him as he hung on the cross, challenging and mocking for the last time the validity of his authority. On the cross that day he completed the healing work he began that day in the synagogue (*Mark for Everyone* 11-12)—and in Simon's house and throughout Galilee.

The greatest healing is being restored to right relationship with God and restored to the image of God. God can heal emotions and memories. God heals relationships. God heals us physically. God gives hope as we await the ultimate healing in resurrection.