

July 17-21, 2023 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 81

Jesus Heals A Leper:
The Power Of A Prayer
By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we begin a two part lesson looking at the time Jesus met a leper on the road who asked him to heal him. We'll look this week at the power of prayer and next week the contagious power of Jesus to reverse the path of infection (so to speak). But first the power of a prayer:

When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him... Matthew 8:1 (NIV)

This is the beginning of the story we're spending all week reflecting upon. It's the first story Matthew tells after the Sermon On The Mount. Remember the Sermon On The Mount? We only spent 6 months doing a slow crawl through the most influential speech of all time where Jesus discussed what life in His Kingdom would/should look like. Now Matthew picks up the story of Jesus' life with Jesus' encounter with a leper. Why do you think Matthew chose this story to be the first thing he wrote about after the Sermon On The Mount? It's not necessarily because this was the first thing that happened. That used to confuse me but let's spend a few minutes thinking about it.

The gospels are not the exhaustive and complete biography of Jesus. Each gospel writer (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) have differing purposes for writing. Mark is a book aimed at the Romans and gentiles so they can understand Who Jesus is. It's the action gospel and is almost entirely a story of Jesus' deeds on this earth. Luke is the thoroughly researched gospel written after extensive interviews with eyewitnesses:

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. Luke 1:1-4 (NLT)

John says he wrote for one reason- to instill faith in the reader:

The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name. John 20:30-31 (NLT)

John also tells us that there's no way anyone could have written down everything Jesus did while on this earth:

Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written. John 31:25 (NLT)

Michael Card once had a student in a class he was teaching on the life of Jesus who came to him and was ready to drop his class because she was a math major and didn't like writing papers. When she heard that nearly half of her grade would be decided by a paper the students were required to write she decided she'd rather bail even though she was fascinated by Jesus. So Mike gave her a unique sort of research assignment- to go through the gospels and figure out how much of Jesus' life and words are recorded. In other words, Jesus lived about 33 1/2 years. The gospels tell a bit about His birth, even less about his adolescence. Then the gospels pick back up with Jesus' life at the age of 30 and record the last 3 1/2 years

of His life. But even that 3 1/2 years is spotty because more than half of the gospels are devoted to the last week of Jesus' life on this earth. Mike wanted her to go through the gospels and figure out how much of it was repetition (in other words how much of what Matthew writes is the same story as Mark or Luke or John) and then using her mad math skills to report on how much of Jesus' life is actually recorded in the Bible.

Want to know what she came up with? Less than 1% of what Jesus said and did is recorded in the Bible. It kind of puts John's statement that the whole world couldn't contain the complete works of Jesus' life into perspective, doesn't it?

What that means is that each gospel writer has to decide what he will include and what he won't. There could have been (and probably were) other things that happened between the ending of the Sermon On The Mount and this story that Matthew puts immediately after it but Matthew has a story he's telling and this story must have made the most sense for Matthew to include right after the Sermon On The Mount. Why?

Well let's think about it. What did Jesus talk about in the Sermon On The Mount? He talked about the power of prayer and God's care for his children. Now as Jesus comes down off the mountain where He preached His sermon we see a case of His words in action. This man is a child of God and he has approached Jesus in prayer asking for something he desperately desires- to be healed. Tomorrow we'll look at what Jesus' response to this simple prayer was but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on why the gospel writers included what they included in their respective gospels- and why they excluded so many other stories they could have included.

Tuesday Reflection: Ok so this week we're looking at the first story Matthew tells after the Sermon On The Mount- Jesus healing a leper. The Sermon On The Mount is over and as Jesus comes down off the Mount of Beatitudes he is met by a desperate man:

"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 8:2-3 (NIV)

I don't know what you hear the leper asking Jesus here but I always just kind of interpreted this as the leper saying to Jesus, "if you have the power to heal me then would you please heal me?"- but that's not what the guy says. He doesn't question Jesus' power to heal him- the guy seems to be questioning whether Jesus would be willing to use that power to help him. He's pretty much questioning Jesus' integrity. His compassion for someone like him.

And Jesus dispels his doubts by reaching out and touching him. When we read this story it's hard to miss the miracle of Jesus getting rid of this guy's leprosy but we generally miss the other miracle here- Jesus touched the guy. He touched the guy. That was a BIG no-no in first century Israel and ordinarily would have triggered a series of events and rituals that any ordinary Jew would have had to go through to become "clean" again after touching a leper. But Jesus isn't any ordinary Jew- He doesn't go through all the rituals required in Jewish law and next weekend we'll focus on why that is but for today we're just going to sit back and be amazed at what just happened- an answered prayer! Which is interesting when you consider

that Jesus has just finished the Sermon On The Mount where He talked an awful lot about prayer:

Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Matthew 7:7-8 (NLT)

But not only did Jesus talk about the power of prayer in the Sermon On The Mount- He also spoke about how much God cares for His children:

You parents-if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him. Matthew 7:9-11 (NLT)

And now the reader of the gospel of Matthew is inching toward the edge of their seat wondering if Jesus practices what He preaches. Will he give this guy what he's asking for? And what we find is, yes, Jesus does give this guy what he asks for. Now that's awesome and all but if you're like me there's an obvious question- how come I don't get everything I ask for in prayer? Where's my miracle? I've been praying. I've been asking, seeking and knocking. Why haven't I received, found or had the door opened for me? Why this leper and not me?

We'll get to that in the tomorrow but for today can we just sit back and marvel at the miraculous power and compassion of Jesus? We see the obvious miracle here- Jesus healing the leper- but we often miss the un-miraculous miracle that's found in this story- Jesus touched the guy. I know that doesn't sound like much but for a leper who probably hadn't been touched since he got sick this would have been a BIG deal.

This is one of the themes in the gospels- you will never find an instance of someone who is in genuine need and comes to Jesus sincerely and humbly asking for His help where Jesus says "no". Now they may not always get exactly what they want exactly the way they want it but Jesus always helps. Tomorrow we'll look closely at one of those times Jesus helps a desperate group of people but for today let's reflect together on just how far we can take the words of Jesus from the Sermon On The Mount about the power of prayer and how much God cares for His children.

Wednesday Reflection: Ok so we've been reflecting on this story in Matthew chapter 8 where Jesus heals a leper. So far we've focused in on one of more obvious points of this story- Jesus' ability and desire to answer our prayers. To help us when we need it the most. It's one of the things Jesus came to do- to show us that the reality of this world is not how He wanted it to be. When He comes to this earth He initiates an all out war. But not on people. He loves us- what He goes to war against is the impact of sin on this world and those of us who live in it. Every miracle He does is an assault on the impact of sin and death that brought a brokenness to this world that was not Jesus' doing.

So when He sees a leper He can't help Himself- even when it's not in His best interests to heal him. For whatever reason there are many times where after He performs a miracle Jesus tells the person He helped not to tell anyone. This leper in Matthew chapter 8 is one of those:

Then Jesus said to him, "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."
Matthew 8:4 (NLT)

There is SO much going on here and most of it we will get to next week when we talk about the social/religious implications of leprosy in first century Israel but for this week let's focus in on why Jesus tells this guy to keep his mouth shut about the healing. You'd think Jesus would want all the good publicity He could get. So what's with all the secrecy?

Well, the only time you see Him telling people to keep miracles quiet is on the Jewish side of the Sea Of Galilee. On the Roman side of the lake when Jesus does a miracle he tells the people to go blab all about what God has done in their lives. What's the difference?

Expectations. The Romans/gentiles don't have any expectations of what a Messiah or Christ is in Jewish tradition (Christ is just the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah). But the Jews almost universally believed the Messiah would be a military figure that would drive the enemies of Israel into the sea and establish God's throne upon which he would reign for eternity. So Jesus is concerned about something that the Jews will eventually actually try to do- force Him to become their king.

So Jesus tells this leper to keep it quiet. He answers the guys' prayer but He doesn't want it to get around. What do you think happened? Do you think the guy kept his mouth shut? Fat chance, right? Here's what happened:

Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.
Mark 1:43-45 (NLT)

The guy couldn't keep his mouth shut but to be fair, could you? Could I? Probably not. We'd be so happy and excited we'd probably post it all over Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Now as I mentioned yesterday- this story is pretty obviously about answered prayer but if you've done much praying in your life there is another question that pops up as we read this story- what about my miracle? How come Jesus doesn't answer my prayers the way He did this guys?

Well, that's a loaded question, isn't it? So much to discuss and reflect upon and we'll do that in the next two days' reflections but for today let's spend some time reflecting on what we would do if Jesus answered our most desperate prayer and then told us to keep quiet about it. Could you?

Thursday Reflection: So as we think about the gulf between answered prayers and unanswered prayers let me tell you story about a time when Jesus answered someone's

prayer one day but then told them “no way” the very next day when they asked for the same thing again.

The story is in John chapter 6 where we read about what is almost certainly the second worst day of Jesus’ life (other than the day He’s executed). He hears His cousin, John the Baptist has been killed. Then He finds out Herod (who killed John) is turning his attention towards Jesus now. And then His disciples come back after a mission that Jesus sent them out on two by two and as they excitedly tell Him what they learned on this mission it becomes obvious to Him that they missed the point- they still don’t understand what His mission is all about. So Jesus just wants to get away.

But the crowds are there with their hands out and their mouths open. Everybody wanted a piece of Jesus. Everybody wanted Him to do something for them and Jesus was just wiped out so He makes a decision:

Then Jesus said, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn't even have time to eat. So they left by boat for a quiet place, where they could be alone.
Mark 6:31-32 (NLT)

So they climb in their boat and head off to a “remote” place. Now I don’t know what you picture when you hear this story- I always pictured the Sea Of Galilee as a massive body of water that there was no way anybody could figure out where a boat was going and run along the coast and be there waiting when the boat landed. But that’s exactly what happens- the crowd won’t leave Jesus alone (who can blame them? Could you? Could I? Probably not). How does the crowd achieve this? Well, the Sea Of Galilee is only about 11 miles long and maybe 4 or 5 miles across. From any point on the shore of the lake you can see the entire shoreline. And in this instance Jesus and His friends don’t head across the lake but just a few miles to the west of where they were in Capernaum. The area was desolate and deserted in the first century and Jesus would have had no reason to expect that the crowd would follow but then we read this:

Many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. Mark 6:33-34 (NIV)

Now I don’t know how you’d react if you were experiencing what Jesus was and just wanted to get a tiny bit of alone time with your team to grieve and get everybody on the same page but I have a feeling I know how I’d react and I’m pretty easy going compared to some of you reading this right now (insert laughing emoji here). But Jesus puts aside His needs for the day and teaches them and eventually feeds 5,000 of them (probably more like 15,000 because the way they counted in those days was family groups and not individuals so it was 5,000 family groups that were fed that day).

Why does Jesus go ahead and answer their prayers and feed them? Because they were in genuine need. They were far away from any towns and there was nowhere for them to find food. So Jesus fed them. Why? Because of His compassion. This story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is one of only two miracles that are recorded in all 4 gospels (other than the

resurrection) and it wouldn't have happened if Jesus hadn't been willing to have His own plans interrupted but because of His overwhelming compassion He feeds them.

But the next day after Jesus has gotten away on His own to get some rest and some alone time with His Father the crowd finds Him again in Capernaum and demands that He feed them again:

They replied, "We want to perform God's works, too. What should we do?" Jesus told them, "This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent." They answered, "Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do?... "Sir," they said, "give us that bread every day." Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life."
John 6:28-35 (NLT)

Rather than feed them this time He simply tells them that He is the bread of life when they demand more bread. Basically He tells them, "no" when they make this request/demand. Why? Because while Jesus always responds to genuine need and sincere cries for help He never gives in to demands.

Never.

We'll talk more about unanswered prayer tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on why Jesus doesn't respond to demands and what this world might look like if He did.

Friday Reflection: One more look at unanswered prayers. Sometimes I've prayed prayers and they seemed to be the perfect combination of what looked like the right thing for everyone involved and my prayers weren't answered. I have to confess something to you right now, that troubles me. A lot.

I'll never forget Judy's second pregnancy. When we had Jonathan we decided it was time and got pregnant the first month and she delivered like clock work in the ninth month. There were small bumps in the road but overall we got exactly what we thought we'd get (other than the fact that our little girl turned out to be a boy... we were very surprised... it couldn't be a boy... we don't have any boys names picked out!). So we expected the same when we decided to have another kid. I was working full time at a church in Southern California at the time as a youth minister and I was away at a youth ministry convention. Judy called and told me there were problems. She was something like 8 or 10 weeks along and I was in Denver when she called. I can remember clearly thinking to myself, "I'm not worried about the baby but I better go home because this is something that Judy will need me around for so I'll leave the convention early and head home to take her to the Dr."

I'll never forget when they couldn't find a heartbeat. I was stunned. I can remember thinking clearly, "that can't be right... God wouldn't do that to me or Judy. We've dedicated our entire lives to Him. He might let that happen to someone else but not to us. There must be some mistake."

But there wasn't. We had a miscarriage. It was devastating for both of us but I can only speak for myself. I couldn't understand why God hadn't stepped in and done something. I mean, how hard would it have been for Him to fix whatever was wrong? Isn't this the One Who

with nothing more than words created everything around us? Isn't this the God who makes the lame walk and the blind see and the dead live again.

Yes... sometimes. But not always. Why not always? That was my question. At least why not always for me? Why have I prayed at the bedsides of some people and seen absolute miracles occur and other times I've prayed and watched as people (sometimes even children) slip away? I have to admit. It bothers me. It bothers me that I can't answer the question, "why" when I ask it and when people I'm praying with at hospitals ask me.

I have to admit that when it comes to why some prayers seem to get answered with such miraculous energy and some don't the only answer I have is, I don't know. But I do know one thing- at the heart of the gospel is an unanswered prayer.

On the night before He would die Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed the same prayer three separate times:

He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." Matthew 26:39 (NLT)

Isn't that strange? Wouldn't you think Jesus already knew there wasn't any other way? Why then does He pray three separate times for God to step in and do something? Because He's not just fully God- He's fully human too. And the human part of Him can't stand what He's about to have to go through. It's stressing Him out. The Bible says He was sweating drops like blood. And whether that means His sweat was tinged with blood from his capillaries bursting (a sign of EXTREME stress in the human body) or that He was sweating so much it was pouring off Him the way blood pours from a wound the picture is the same- Jesus was stressed out! He prayed three times and all three times the silence was deafening. He knew what it meant but it had to hurt.

Now whenever I struggle with an unanswered prayer (and I still struggle with why we couldn't have another kid... but after two miscarriages we stopped trying) I remember that Jesus knows what that's like. He knows the pain and loneliness and frustration and confusion and surreality of unanswered prayer. And He was willing to experience all of that for me. And now He just asks that I trust Him.

And here is what I've learned over the last 30 years of walking with Him- some days doing a much better job than others- Jesus cares deeply about me. And His plan for my life is always so much more beautiful and generous and meaningful and amazing than anything I could have come up with on my own. And when it comes to my disappointments in this life I know this- we live in a broken world. A world broken by sin and it's effects not just on our spiritual lives but on our physical lives as well. Sin broke our relationship not just with God but with nature as well and because of that accidents, sickness, disease (and miscarriages), and death are a part of this world that were never part of God's plan. I believe with all of my heart that when my heart is broken from the pain and confusion and frustration of unanswered prayer that God's heart breaks with mine.

But I've also learned that if I put the broken pieces of my shattered dreams in His hands He can and will turn the broken pieces into something beautiful. It doesn't mean He makes the

tragedies themselves good- even God can't do that. But He can make something beautiful out of the broken pieces of my life if I hand them to Him and continue to trust and follow Him. And I have watched over and over again as He's done it in my life and the lives of many of you who are reading this right now.

So don't stop praying. That's James' message to the suffering Jewish Christians he was writing to in the first century and I believe that's his message to you and me.

When a believing person prays, great things happen. James 5:16 (NCV)

We don't get to pick what the great things that happen will be, but one thing I guarantee- God will blow you away if you hold on to Him in the midst of your unanswered prayers and suffering and put the broken pieces of your shattered dreams in His hands along with the rest of your life.