

The Healing of a Jewish Leper

The First Messianic Miracle

Matthew 8:2-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16

DIG: What did it mean to be a leper: Physically? Socially? Spiritually? What was significant about the Lord's touch? What was a messianic miracle? Why would the Messiah want the cleansing to be certified by **the priests**? What would that imply for **the priests** about Jesus?

REFLECT: The leper was an outcast in Jewish society. Who are the outcasts in your social network? What kind of a touch are you giving them? What does it mean to you that as a result of His death on the cross, Yeshua has legally purchased your right to the mercy of God so that all your sins could be cleansed? What kind of gratitude would you feel if you were that leper and were cleansed of your disease? Do you feel the same way about being cleansed of your disease of sin? Have you been able to keep quiet about it? Why? Why not?

The problem of **leprosy** was given special treatment under the Torah (**Leviticus 13 and 14**). For example, about the only time you could become ceremonially unclean, other than touching a dead human or animal or by touching an unclean animal, was by touching a **leper**. Under the Torah only **the priest** had the authority to declare someone a **leper**. **Lepers** would tear their clothing, and cover **themselves** from the nose down. If **they** happened to see someone walking toward **them**, they had to warn that person by calling out, "Unclean, unclean," for **they** were untouchable. **They** would be ostracized from the Jewish community and could not live with other Jews. **They** could not enter into the Tabernacle or Temple to offer any sacrifices for **their sins**. As strict as the Torah was, the Oral Law made it even more difficult (see **Ei - The Oral Law**). **The rabbis taught that no one was permitted to pass within four cubits of a leper if the wind was not blowing, and one hundred cubits of a leper if the wind was blowing. The leper was dead in a living body, so to speak.**

Leprosy was the most feared disease in the ancient world, and even today it cannot be totally cured, though it can be kept in check with proper medication. Although some ninety percent of people in modern times are immune, it was much more communicable in ancient times. Although advanced **leprosy** is generally not painful, because of the nerve damage it is disfiguring, debilitating, and can be extremely repulsive. **One ancient rabbi said, "When I see lepers I throw stones at them lest they come near me." Another said, "I would not so much as eat an egg that was purchased on a street where a leper had walked."**

The disease generally begins with pain in certain areas of the body. Numbness follows. Soon the skin in those spots loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy and scaly. 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 begins to resemble that of a lion. Fingers drop off or are absorbed; toes are affected in the same way. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. By this time one can see the person in this pitiable condition is **a leper**. By a touch of the finger one can also feel it. One can even smell it, for **the leper** emits a very unpleasant odor. Moreover, in view of the fact that the disease-producing agent frequently attacks the larynx, **the leper's** voice acquires a grating quality. The throat becomes hoarse, and you can now not only see, feel, and smell **the leper**, but you can hear his or her raspy voice. And if you stay with **a leper** for some time, you can even imagine a peculiar taste in your mouth, probably due to the odor.⁴¹⁴

As Arnold Fruchtenbaum details, **from the time the Torah was actually completed there was no record of any Jew ever being cured of leprosy**. Miryam was cured before the Torah was given (**Numbers 12:1-15**) and Naaman was Syrian (**Second Kings 5:1-14**). **Yet Moses spent two whole chapters, Leviticus 13 and 14, with each chapter being over 50 verses long, giving details of what to do if a Jew was healed of leprosy.**

When **Moses** wrote **Leviticus 13 and 14** the Israelites and the Tabernacle were in the desert. When **Nehemiah** and Zerubbabel came back from the Babylonian Captivity with the Jewish exiles to rebuild the Temple they used details from **Ezekiel's Temple (Ezekiel 46:21-24)** so it would convey a foretaste of the messianic Temple. So the four corner chambers in the Court of the Women were designed on the basis of the cooking stations of the messianic Temple. Each chamber was 30 by 40 cubits, or 45 by 60 feet. One of those chambers was the Chamber of **the Lepers!** How did those four corner chambers function?

First, was the Chamber of the Woodshed in the northeast corner. It was there that the wood for the bronze Altar was stored. **The Talmud contains a rabbinic tradition, which says that there is a secret subterranean chamber built by Solomon for the ark of the Covenant under the Chamber of the Woodshed.** Since 1994 it has been possible to locate the exact spot where the Chamber of the Woodshed stood in the Second Temple. Unfortunately, it is not possible to look for it today since it would be cause for a war with the Islamists. So at the moment there is still a veil of suspense over the location of the ark of the Covenant.

Second, was the Chamber of the Nazirites in the southeast corner. In this chamber there was a special fireplace where men completing their Nazirite vow would go to burn his hair and roast a Peace Offering in a cooking pot hanging over it (**Numbers 6:1-21**).

Third, was the Chamber of the House of Oil in the southwest corner. It was at this place that the oil needed for various purposes was kept. This oil was used, for example, for the golden Lampstand, as well as for the four lamps that lit the Court of the Women, and for the anointing of meal offerings. Wine for the drink offerings was also stored there (**Exodus 29:40; Philippians 2:17; Second Timothy 4:6**).

And fourth, was the Chamber of the **Lepers** in the northwest corner. It was there that a cleansed **leper** washed himself in a ritual bath before presenting himself to **the priest**. This was the last thing he would do after undergoing the purification process described in **Leviticus 13 and 14**.⁴¹⁵ But what exactly did he have to do to be declared ceremonially clean by **the priest**?

If a Jew claimed to be cured of **leprosy**, he would initially bring an offering of two birds on that same day. One bird was killed, the other bird was dipped into the blood of the first bird and set free. After that, **the priest** would have seven days to answer three questions. First, was the person really a **leper** (since only **the priest** could declare a person a **leper** there should have been some record of it somewhere)? If the answer was yes, the second question had to be answered. Was this person really healed of **leprosy**? How would they know? They were supposed to set them outside the camp of Isra'el for seven days to see if the **leprosy** reappeared. If the answer was yes, and they were actually healed of **leprosy**, then the third question would have to be answered. What were the circumstances of the healing? In other words, was the healing legitimate or not?

If all these questions were answered satisfactorily, there would be an eighth day, a day of ritual. On that day there would be four offerings at the Tabernacle or Temple. First, was **a sin offering** (see my commentary on **Exodus Fc - The Sin Offering**). **The priest** would slaughter the sacrifice and place it on the bronze altar. Second, was **a guilt offering** (see my commentary on **Exodus Fd - The Guilt Offering**). **The priest** would take the blood of the sin offering and apply it to three parts of the cleansed **leper's** body: the ear, the thumb and the right big toe. Third, was **a burnt offering** (see my commentary on **Exodus Fe - The Burt Offering**). This process, the ear, the thumb, the right big toe, was repeated with the blood of the sin offering. Fourth, was **a meal offering** (see my commentary on **Exodus Ff - The Grain Offering**). Then he would wash himself in the Chambers of the Lepers. Only then was **the leper** able to return to the Jewish community and the Tabernacle or Temple. **With all this information, the Levites never had a single opportunity to put it into use. No record whatsoever over centuries and centuries!**

While rabbinic writings had many cures for many different diseases, there was no cure for leprosy. **The rabbis taught that it carried with it the concept of divine discipline because God sometimes punished with leprosy. In addition, they taught that leprosy was one of the punishments for violating the Torah.** So any Jew contracting leprosy was viewed as being under **divine discipline** and could not be cured, like King Uzziah (**Second Chronicles 26:21**). In teaching that, they had to, in essence, ignore **Leviticus 13 and 14**. Maybe they did so because no one was ever cured of the dreaded disease.

It must have seemed very odd to **the priests**, especially in **Jesus' day**, that three of the four corner chambers in the Court of the Women (see **Nc1 - The Eastern Gate and the Court of the Women**) were used constantly but one was *never* used - ever. Century after century the Chamber of the Lepers stood empty, waiting for a Jewish leper. They must have wondered why, and eventually the rabbis came up with an explanation (as they always did). **The rabbis taught that when the Messiah came, He would be able to cure a Jewish leper. Long before the birth of Christ the rabbis divided miracles into two categories. First, miracles that anyone could perform if empowered by God, and secondly, miracles only the Messiah could perform. There were three specific miracles in the second category: the healing of a Jewish leper, the casting out of a mute demon, and the healing of a man born blind.**

While Yeshua was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. It was fully developed, meaning the man was almost dead. When he saw Jesus, in an act of complete humility he fell with his face to the ground as he sought help and begged Him: Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean (**Matthew 8:2; Mark 1:40; Luke 5:12**). The man appealed to the tenderheartedness of the **Great Physician**. The reason he came to the **miracle-working Rabbi** was because of his faith. He already believed that **Jesus was the Messiah** and could cure his disease.

The Torah forbid any Jew from touching a leper because lepers were declared unclean: **If a person touches some human uncleanness, no matter what the source of his uncleanness is, and is unaware of it, then, when he learns of it, he is guilty of a sin (Leviticus 5:3 CJB).** This offering required confession and restitution for wrongdoing. But **Jesus touched the man** that no one in Israel would touch. **Saying** (a present participle): **I AM willing.** Filled with compassion, **He reached out His hand** (an aorist participle) and **touched the man** (an aorist verb). How is this possible? Is the Bible contradicting itself? Or even worse, are the Scriptures telling us that **Yeshua** sinned and did not completely follow the Torah? No. **That's unthinkable (Romans 6:2 NWT)!**

The Greek text gives us a wonderful answer. The rule of Greek grammar that governs this construction says that the action of the present tense participle goes on *simultaneously* with the action of the leading verb. So when Jesus said: **Be clean! Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed (Matthew 8:3; Mark 1:41-42; Luke 5:13)**. This means that our Lord did not touch the leper in order to cleanse him, but to show him and the people around that he had been cleansed of his leprosy *before Yeshua touched him*. The Torah forbid a Jew to touch a leper. Messiah lived under the Torah and obeyed it perfectly. So the first kind touch of a human hand that the leper ever experienced (since contracting leprosy), was the gentle touch of the Son of God.⁴¹⁶

When Jesus healed, He healed instantly. There was no waiting for restoration to come in stages. He healed with a word or a touch, without prayer and sometimes even without being near the afflicted person. He healed completely, never partially. He healed everyone who came to Him, everyone who was brought to Him, and everyone for whom healing was asked by another. He healed organic diseases from birth and He raised the dead. Anyone today claiming the gift of healing should be able to do likewise.

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 (Matthew 8:4; Mark 1:43-44; Luke 5:14)**. Normally, before His rejection by the Sanhedrin, Jesus would tell the person that He had healed to go and tell what the Lord had done because He was presenting Himself to the nation of Israel as the Messiah. But here He tells this man: **Don't tell anyone**. Why? Because Yeshua wanted the Sanhedrin to start taking His claims of messiahship seriously. They would have to go through the extensive seven-day investigation and ask what were the circumstances of the healing. At that point they would discover that Jesus healed a Jewish leper, which was a messianic miracle. In this instance our Savior sent one healed Jewish leper to the Sanhedrin, but after His official rejection as the Meshiach by the Sanhedrin, He would send ten more (Luke 17:11-19)!

Instead the cleansed leper went out and began to talk freely, so the news about Jesus spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses (Mark 1:45a; Luke 5:15). Everyone knew what the cleansing of a Jewish leper meant. **It was the first messianic miracle.**

As a result, Yeshua could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places and prayed. Yet the people still came to Him from everywhere (Mark 1:45b; Luke 5:16). *Came* is *erchonto*, an imperfect, indicating continuous action, in other words, *they kept coming*. He prayed about what was to happen next. It was about time for a showdown with the members of the Sanhedrin (see Lg - **The Great Sanhedrin**).

How all this illustrates the old, old story of the Good News of **Jesus Christ**. **Leprosy** is a type of **sin**. As sinners, we come crying: **Unclean, unclean, if You are willing, You can make me clean**. And **Jesus, filled with compassion, reaches out His hand and touches us** saying: **I AM willing. Be clean**. And, as in the case of the leper, **He** cleanses us from **sin before He touches us**. The gospel of **John** gives us clear evidence that justification comes *before* regeneration. Mercy is only given after **God's** righteous anger against **sin** has been totally satisfied (see **Lv - The Second Three Hours on the Cross: The Wrath of God**). That is true: **Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed, He gave the [legal] right to become children of God (John 1:12)**. Therefore, when we recognize the Lord **Yeshua** as the One whose blood was shed on the cross legally purchased our right to the mercy of **God**, *then* we receive eternal life (see **Bw - What God Does For Us at the Moment of Faith**).

Speaking in the name of **ADONAI**, **Ezekiel** prophesied: **I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you (Ezekiel 36:25-26)**.

Oh, the power of a godly **touch**. Have you known it? The doctor who treated you, or the teacher who dried your tears? Was there a hand holding yours at a funeral? Another on your shoulder during a trial? A handshake of welcome at a new job?

Can't we offer the same?

Many already do. You use your hands to pray over the sick and minister to the weak. If you aren't **touching** them personally, your hands are writing letters, typing emails, or baking pies. You have learned the power of a **touch**.

But others of us tend to forget. Our hearts are good; it's just that our memories are bad. We forget how significant one **touch** can be . . .

Aren't we glad **Jesus** didn't make the same mistake?⁴¹⁷