

## **“Light Both Bright and Dim”**

*Reading: Deuteronomy 18:9-22; Mark 1:21-28*

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One of the tests of a person’s character comes when their spouse has a really bad cold. Because let’s face it, some of us are miserable to be around when we’re sick. There have been a couple of times in the last few years when I’ve gotten sick enough to be really down for the count, and Pastor Carey’s character shines through. She checks in on me, and she puts up with my surliness, and she’ll make sure to pick up whatever food or drink I need, and she’ll bring me those Kleenexes with the lotion in them that I never think to use. Pray for Pastor Carey when she’s sick, though, because I’m oblivious enough that she’s usually on her own.

I know that for me, as bad as it feels to be sick with a cold or the flu or something more serious, part of what makes the experience of sickness really bad is that feeling of being out of control. I have to rely on Pastor Carey to bring me those Kleenexes with the lotion in them, because I have no idea where she keeps them the rest of the time. I need her help and her patience. I don’t know how much energy I’ll have to do my job, and I don’t know how long I’ll be out of commission. And it’s all because some critter that is so small that I can’t even see it has invaded my body. Or maybe you got into an accident of some sort, whether through your own fault or someone else’s, and you’re going to be paying for it for a while. Or maybe it’s a relational or family sickness we’re talking about, and the problem isn’t only with you, and so the solution also doesn’t just lie with you, and it seems like everything in that relationship revolves around whatever’s wrong. It’s a miserable feeling to be at the mercy of forces you can’t control. How long will this sickness last? What’s it going to take for things to get back to normal? Is there anything that can be done for this sickness, or does it just have to run its course? As bad as it feels to be sick, what makes it even worse is the lack of control and the uncertainty.

It’s that issue of authority that really gets at the heart of healing from sickness. It’s that question of control. Obviously we want to stop feeling bad when we’re sick, and we certainly pray for that when we pray for healing. But there’s more to healing than just feeling better. We do pray for relief from suffering in the moment, but we also pray for health and flourishing of the whole person, the whole family, the whole community. That sort of flourishing comes not just when a bone is set or a virus is eradicated, but when an entire life is put in a right relationship of love, forgiveness, and generosity in the light and power of Jesus Christ. The antidote to sickness isn’t just no longer being sick, the antidote is health, and health involves being the person or the family or the community that God intended.

One of our readings for today comes to us from Deuteronomy, a book of law designed to give God’s people guidance as they became a nation. It’s full of instructions covering all sorts of things. The passage we read doesn’t really have anything to do with physical healing. It’s addressing a spiritual problem. In those days people would often use all sorts of magical practices to try to hear from the gods, and in this passage of Deuteronomy, God is cutting off the charlatans and shams and saying that no, He will speak to His people, and when He does, His word will be characterized by truth. In response to the sickness of lies and idolatry, God offers the health of a community operating rightly under His authority in His voice.

So that you will see the authority of God and the power of God and the love of God, the gospel is concerned with your immediate needs. God cares about the healing you need in the moment, but His healing does not stop there. You see, the aim of the gospel is both lower and higher than we often think it is. It is lower in the sense that in our holiness tradition, many of us tend to think by default that God's main concern for us is that our souls would go to heaven when we die, and so the work of Jesus is almost entirely geared toward fulfilling this spiritual transaction in which our sin-debts are paid off and we can get a golden ticket through the pearly gates when we die. But in reality, the gospel aims much lower than that, because Jesus spends an awful lot of time meeting people's physical needs. He heals the sick, He casts out demons, He gives sight to the blind, He feeds the hungry. Here we are at the beginning of Mark's gospel, reading about the start of Jesus' ministry when He's setting His course and making it clear to the crowds what He came to do, and from the very start He is casting out demons and giving relief to those who are suffering. The aim for this man tormented by a demon is not immediately for heaven, the aim is that he would be set free from torment.

And so the aim of the gospel is much lower and more immediate and earthly than we often think of it being. The light of the gospel is not, at first, as bright as we might expect. Jesus is not immediately revealed in overwhelming glory; He is revealed as one who heals the sick and casts out unclean spirits. The good news is not just that you can go to heaven when you die, it's also that God's truth and power can meet your needs now. We cannot afford to forget that in the life of the church: Jesus cares about your eternal destiny, yes, but He also cares about your life in the here and now, and His provision and healing and relief in the small things of life point us on to the greatness of His love and majesty and power and authority.

But at the same time, that light is also far brighter than we might expect. Its aim is also higher, in a sense, than just getting us into heaven. The higher aim is enthroning Jesus Christ as Lord of all. He's not just concerned with our health or happiness, and He's not just concerned with our souls, He's also concerned with proclaiming His authority over all of creation. The demon is cast out and the man is healed because Jesus Christ is Lord. It's a message that is so powerful and dangerous that at first, Jesus can't run the risk of the word spreading too quickly, and He tells people *not* to tell others about His lordship. But the message is too compelling, and people can't help but talk about it.

The light is brighter than we sometimes give it credit for, because the healing that Jesus brings involves more than just a removal of sickness or injury, it involves the making right of all aspects of a person's life, or an entire family, or a community's life, as those aspects are brought under the authority of Jesus. The authority of that sickness or demon or guilt or shame is broken, and the authority of the light of Christ is restored. The uncertainty of sickness is replaced with trust in the faithfulness of Jesus.

So when we pray for healing, we pray both lower and higher than we might expect. We pray that the light would be both dimmer and brighter in the life or the situation in need of healing. We do ask God, with the boldness of His beloved children, to grant miraculous acts of healing and restoration to situations of sickness. We pray for healing of bodies and souls and relationships and homes and communities. We pray that people would see that God provides for them, and that He is calling them into right relationship with Him. We pray that enemies would be forgiven and loved and included in the beloved community. We pray that the sicknesses living deep in our communities

would be rooted out and replaced by light. We pray this way because the lordship of Christ impacts our immediate needs and our eternal needs.



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