

Introduction

John Newton, who wrote the famous hymn 'Amazing Grace', wrote a letter to his pastor on the 12 December 1767 saying these words:

I was once visited something in the same way, seized with a fit of the apoplectic kind, which held me near an hour, and left a disorder in my head which quite broke the scheme of life! This was, consequently, one of the means the Lord appointed to bring me into the ministry—but I soon perfectly recovered.

...to myself, these turns were only like the caution which Philip of Macedon ordered to be repeated to him every morning, 'Remember you are mortal'. I hope it will be no more to you—but that you shall live to praise him, and to give many cause to praise him on your behalf.

Blessed be God—we are in safe hands! The Lord himself is our keeper; nothing befalls us but what is adjusted by his wisdom and love. Health is his gift; and sickness, when sanctified, is a token of his love likewise. Here we may meet with many things which are not joyous—but grievous to the flesh—but he will in one way or other sweeten every bitter cup, and before long he will wipe away all tears from our eyes. Oh that joy, that crown, that glory—which awaits the believer! Let us keep the prize of our high calling in view, and press forward in the name of Jesus the Redeemer, and he will not disappoint our hopes.

I love the language and faith of this man, who despite having suffered a stroke at the age of 30 is able to praise God for His healing. I am not quite sure I agree with him that 'sickness, when sanctified, is a token of His (God's) love'. However I do believe that God expects us, His people, to be a token of His love to those who are sick and suffering in this world. This is the motivation behind the work of The Leprosy Mission.

1. God heals because he cares

God heals because He cares and is compassionate. We will take a look at the early verses of a Psalm that David wrote about the Lord. In some ways it is a call to remember and in others a call to worship. We are to remember how God has shown compassion in our lives and to express gratitude to him for that.

I'm struck by how the translations that I read used different words at times to describe the tender mercies/ compassion of God. In verse 4 the first time the word mercy/ compassion is used in the Bible it is the Hebrew word Racham, which means compassion. In fact most modern versions of the Bible translate it as compassion; the older versions tend to use the word mercy.

Then, later on in the chapter in verse 8, the word is used twice. The first time it is Rachuw which means compassionate and then the second time it is Checed which means goodness, kindness and faithfulness. It seems from looking at the original words we see that there is a close link here between the compassion of God and the faithfulness of God.

God expects us to treat one another with grace and mercy also just as He has treated us. God expects us as Christians to have a heart of compassion for those in the world who are marginalised, stigmatised and suffering. God expects us to be faithful to them.

2. The God who heals wants to touch the whole person

The Leprosy Mission often describes itself as having a 'holistic ministry' i.e. that there is more to a person than just the physical body. We minister to the whole person. Verse 2 of Psalm 103 says that we must not forget His benefits. Those benefits affect every area of our lives – the whole person.

I tried to think of some of the benefits that most of us who live in the Western world enjoy; the list could go on forever – but here are just a few:

- When you opened your eyes this morning and could see, that is a benefit. Many people who have leprosy have lost their sight as a result of leprosy and will only regain their sight with corrective eye surgery which we provide.
- If you were able to swing yourself out of bed or walk to the bathroom and take care of your personal needs without assistance, that's a benefit. Many people who have had leprosy suffer from damage such as a dropped foot, or clawed hands which makes it difficult to do everyday things – and surgery is often required.
- If you have food enough to feed yourself and your family, and clothes to wear that's a benefit. Many people affected by leprosy are from some of the poorest communities on earth where day-to-day living is a struggle.
- If you have a roof over your head, that's a benefit. The Leprosy Mission provides low cost housing to those in our care who need it.
- If you are surrounded by a loving community i.e. your church, friends, neighbours or family, that's a benefit. Many people affected by leprosy face terrible stigma and become isolated from their communities as a result of leprosy.
- When you were sick, and were able to get the treatment you required, that's a benefit. Many people who have leprosy depend on The Leprosy Mission for their treatment.
- When you needed God's compassion and got it, that's a benefit. Many people rely on The Leprosy Mission to show them the love of God through practical help.
- When you needed a loan and managed to get it (not everyone does these days!), that's a benefit. The Leprosy Mission provides micro-credit loans to communities that would otherwise be denied credit, so they can set up small businesses and develop livelihoods.
- When you need someone to fight your battles for you, you can call on El Shaddai, the almighty God, that's a benefit.
- When all hell is breaking loose around you and you need some peace, you can call on Jehovah Shalom, the Lord of peace, that's a benefit. We can go on and on, but we learn from this that we do enjoy the benefits of God, and they touch every area of our lives. God in fact wants to touch the whole person – very often He uses the work of The Leprosy Mission to do this.

3. God Heals because He is a God of justice

Verses 3-5 describe God's care and compassion, but verse 6 tells us that He is a God of justice.

Sometimes when we look at the poor of the world, it almost would seem as if there has been a miscarriage of justice. But I believe this unbalanced situation to have arisen as a result of human nature and not God's will.

By saying 'the Lord Works righteousness' in v. 6 the psalmist confesses his conviction that God is just. We may see justice miscarried in our own court system but no one slips through the cracks in God's courtroom. God works to accomplish righteousness.

God also protects the rights of the oppressed. The 'oppressed' are the people in every society who have no one to look out for their welfare and protect their rights. In ancient Israel it was the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner who were usually oppressed. God protects the rights of people who the rest of society turns a deaf ear and a blind eye to. People affected by leprosy today fit into that category.

God cares about us by treating us with fairness. God doesn't have favourites with people, and some people assume that because we in the West have more materially, we are somehow more favoured in the eyes of God. God is no respecter of persons, but he treats everyone with equity.

Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not His justice.

Conclusion

Sahadev* is 17 years old and is studying in class 10 (penultimate year of school).

Last year he had surgery at The Leprosy Mission's Anandaban hospital. He was diagnosed with leprosy three years before.

While in hospital recovering from surgery, he said, 'When I was diagnosed I'd had clawing in my hand for 2-4 months. That was 2006. I went to the Patan clinic [run by The Leprosy Mission] and only then I found out I had leprosy. I was so worried. I didn't know anyone else who had it. My mother was crying. Now she's still a bit worried. I didn't know anything about leprosy before I was diagnosed. Everything was alright with my hand, but it looked strange and I was worried people would realise I had the disease.

No one in my community knows I have it.' Sahadev took multidrug therapy, the cure for leprosy, for 12 months. Two years after that he was recommended for surgery. Surgery is important because it can restore the use of a person's hand and also, without surgery, visible deformity can make them much more vulnerable to leprosy discrimination.

'I was happy when I was told about the surgery,' Sahadev says. 'The operation was on two fingers.

The hand feels ok, it looks better.' Sahadev says that he would like to join his brothers' jewellery business in the future and also be a dancer. 'The kind of dance I like is classical or break dance – I really like Michael Jackson,' he says.

Graham Kendrick in his worship song "Jesus put this song into our hearts" says in the last verse that "Jesus turned our sorrow into dancing".

The God who heals can take situations of sorrow and turn them into stories of courage and joy – and even dancing!

After physiotherapy Sahadev can return to his studies and home with confidence and better use of his hand. This story shows that God still heals today, sometimes using organisations such as The Leprosy Mission to do it.

** Name has been changed*

Suggested hymns

Traditional hymns:

- Praise my soul the King of heaven...
- Great is Thy faithfulness...
- Amazing grace how sweet the sound...
- Lord of all hopefulness...

Modern worship songs/ choruses:

- Be still for the presence of the Lord...
- Everyone needs compassion (Mighty to save)...
- How deep the Father's love for us...

Children's songs:

- Thank you, Lord (for this new day ...)
- When I needed a neighbour