

BUT WHAT IF HE DOESN'T

A Devotional Meditation on Tazria (Leprosy) and Metzora (The Leper)

Leviticus 12:1-15:33; 2 Kings 5:1-19, 7:3-20;

Job 13:15-16; Luke 4:14-30; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28; Hebrews 3:23-28

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My sister once referred to cancer as an insidious disease. We have both known so many friends and loved ones who have wrestled with some form of cancer. Most of them were good people of faith, with prayer warriors around them who continuously approached the throne of grace to ask for healing, and for endurance through the ordeal. Even so, not many or those ordeals resulted in healing, either through conventional medicine, alternative treatments, or divine intervention. Almost all ended in tearful farewells, followed by a memorial service with varying degrees of grief and eternal hope on display. Then life returned to normal, until the next onset of the insidious disease.



Derek K. Miller (1969-2011) shared with the world his fight with cancer. Photo taken by his father, July 23, 2007, [via Flickr](#).

Enough repetitions of this cycle can cause even the most faithful to question whether our God really does heal. The doubts, anger, frustration, and shattered hopes are enough to drive people away from the Creator, or become so numbed that they simply go through the motions of serving Him. No one seems immune to the insidious disease – not innocent little children, nor young men in prime of life, nor saintly grandmothers.

What do we do when we pray to God, knowing He can answer with healing, but knowing that it's His choice? We know He can, but what if He doesn't?

God's people have been asking that question for a long, long time. It's part of Job's hopeful lament in the oldest book of the Bible:

Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face.

This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him.

Job 13:15-16 ESV

If anyone on earth has suffered, it's Job. His story is there for us to understand that sometimes we must continue living even when death becomes an oasis of hope. We really don't know what lies beyond death. All we have to go on is the testimony of our Creator. Thus we come back to the same question: we know, according to what He says, that He can bring life from death, but what if He doesn't?

We have to ask. There's too much bad stuff happening in the world not to ask, even if the answers are unsatisfying and downright frightening. This is a question that gets to the core of our identity, and the reason for our existence – if there is any reason.

Naaman the Syrian could ask that question. So could four unnamed men of Israel who suffered from Naaman's work as a commander in Syria's army. Their nations were at war,

but they shared the affliction of leprosy. Their leprosy probably wasn't the debilitating Hansen's Disease we know as leprosy today. Perhaps it was melanoma, or some other malignant affliction of the skin. Whatever it was, the disease created a wall of separation between them and their families and communities. Their appearance would have caused others to shun them for fear of infection. Even the great General Naaman wasn't insulated from being a social pariah. The difference between him and the four Hebrew men was that they had no advocate like Naaman's king. He at least knew to send Naaman on a diplomatic mission to Israel to seek help from the prophet Elisha. Naaman's healing spelled disaster for Israel, though, which is how we learn about the four lepers stuck outside the city of Samaria when Syria's army besieged it. They couldn't enter the starving city, so they decided to throw themselves on the mercy of the Syrians – only to find that God had caused the enemy to flee in fear. They took that news to the city, and became the unlikely agents of salvation for Israel's northern kingdom in that crisis. However, as Yeshua points out, neither they nor Israel were cleansed from the plague:

There were many with *tzara'at* [leprosy] in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them were purified apart from Naaman the Syrian.

Luke 4:27 TLV

Yeshua's comment probably caused his Galilean audience to scratch their heads and rethink what they had learned about Israel's God and their relationship with Him. The Messiah was speaking in the context of faith – as in the faith of people in His own hometown who had trouble believing Yeshua just might be the Messiah. He had already worked many miracles in other places, but why wouldn't He do miracles of healing in their town?

But then, it wasn't only a matter of faith. No doubt they, as well as their relatives, friends, and business associates throughout Galilee and Judea, knew of people with debilitating conditions who had languished for years without a touch from God. Were they all faithless reprobates? No, of course not. Most were very good people, faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Some were saintly *tzadiks*, righteous people who did good for everyone around them. Why would they have to suffer from leprosy, or palsy, or an issue of blood, or other afflictions which we might call bubonic plague, smallpox, tuberculosis, Parkinson's Disease, or Multiple Sclerosis?

There are no satisfying answers, not even the one that people of faith have always given: God knows best. We don't know why He heals some and not others, but it might help if we try to take an eternal perspective. There's a clue in Yeshua's comment about Naaman: he wasn't simply healed of leprosy, but purified, or cleansed. That's what the Torah explains about that kind of affliction. It's a kind of living death, causing the leper to be separated from the society of otherwise healthy people.

Otherwise healthy, that is, not completely free of the taint of death. Those who suffer from leprosy and other debilitating diseases remind us that we come into this world with a terminal condition. We are all appointed to death, much though we choose to ignore that truth and fill our days with ceaseless distractions. We are wise to treat these frail physical bodies well, but even the best regimen of diet, exercise, clean food, and fresh air can't insulate us from the plague of death that has gripped this world since the days

of our first mother and father. We can't escape suffering and death, so we might as well learn what we can from it.

The peculiar subject of leprosy has much to teach us. Lepers in ancient Israel might hope to be healed of their disease, but healing did not mean automatic acceptance into society. That's why a priest had to examine them, and why they had to bring sacrificial offerings in a protocol of cleansing. Even so, the former lepers would still die one day – as will those we know who survive cancer. What we need is something, or someone, to deal with the sting and stench of death that separates us from the Creator of Life. That's the mission of our Heavenly High Priest, the Messiah Who presented His own blood in the heavenly temple to open the way for our final cleansing.

Our final cleansing, meaning the last act reversing our separation from our Maker. The last enemy to be destroyed is death, a fact we too often overlook. We're not meant to languish in this half-life of the present shadow world, but to breathe freely in the light of the renewed earth under the rejuvenated heavens. Until then, suffering is part of our existence.

But what if He doesn't renew our lives? Can we really trust Him?

Yes we can. That's why He navigated that road ahead of us. He promises that all our suffering and all the suffering of our loved ones will become joy when we dance in the new life He has bought for us. The question is whether we choose to believe. Our choice won't change the suffering we endure, but it will change the way we endure it.