



## dialogommentary

atonement: the savior's unity and connectedness with us

a man full of leprosy

luke 5.<sup>12-14</sup> (part 2)

<sup>12</sup>\*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

<sup>13</sup>And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, "I will: be thou clean."

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. <sup>14</sup>And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

*To continue Mann's tutorial, Mezaim handed Mann a medical chart that contained Luke's account of Mezaim's leprosy and his encounter with Jesus.*

"You can read it for us. But remember why we are examining my life, Mann. We want, first, to compare Jesus' response to leprosy and sin, as portrayed by the New Testament, with that of God's, as portrayed on the pages of the Old Testament. We want to consider how Jesus' response to me, a leper, and the manner of that response is an act of atonement. Then, we will want to examine what Jesus' response to leprosy means to you. Remember too, that we are trying to discover how the verdict of 'guilty,' 'sinful,' 'unworthy,' 'fallen,' 'hardened,' 'broken,' and 'disgraced,' which was leveled at you in your initial tutorials on the fall, is to be reversed and removed."

Mann read the account, surprised that such a brief narrative could be deemed of such importance as to warrant an entire set of tutorials.

““And it came to pass, when he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.

‘And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will: be thou clean. And immediately the leprosy departed from him.’”<sup>1</sup>

“So tell me, Mann, what lessons do you find in my encounter with Jesus?”

“I think it is important to note, first, that the text doesn’t describe you simply as ‘a leprous man’ or ‘a man of leprosy’ or ‘a man infected with leprosy.’ Apparently, such language wouldn’t have done justice to your condition. Luke describes you, rather, as ‘a man *full* of leprosy.’ ‘*Full!*’ You, Mezraim, were a man *wholly* infected with leprosy, covered with leprosy. ‘Wholly,’ Mezraim, ‘covered’! There was nothing even remotely ambiguous about your case of leprosy. It was a particularly severe case—an extreme case.”

“Yes, Mann. The Greek word that Luke chose to utilize here is *pleres*. It means ‘to be filled or full;’ ‘to be wholly occupied with,’ ‘to be completely under the influence of.’ If you will think back to Nipdeh’s discussion of ‘overwhelming influences,’ you will realize that he and I had a great deal in common. We were overwhelmed by influences beyond our ability to control.”

“I get the feeling, Mezraim, that Luke is not speaking only in physical terms here. You were, of course, physically covered with leprosy. No one could have mistaken you for an, ‘un-leprous,’ man. But perhaps he is referring to your mental state as well; suggesting that you were completely given over to, wholly occupied with and focused on your leprosy—mentally.”

“Well of course! It might seem strange to you, but when I thought of myself I could only see the leprosy. My leprosy defined who I was and dominated and dwarfed all other attributes and aspects. ‘I am a leper,’ was my constant thought. When I looked in a mirror, it was a leper I saw. ‘Leprosies am I.’

“Whatever else I might have been, even whatever positive traits and aspects I might have possessed, disappeared in the face of my defining and defiling leprosy. This wasn’t my own myopic view, either. It was everyone’s. When it came to the question of my being in or out of the camp, connected to or disconnected from God, everyone, myself included, knew ‘out’ and ‘disconnected’ to be the only appropriate answers. My leprosy was all-powerful, determinative,

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 5.<sup>12-13</sup>

and definitive. Nothing else mattered.”

“It doesn’t sound strange at all, Mezraim. In fact, if I remember right, whenever in public lepers were required to call out, ‘Unclean, unclean, unclean.’”

“That’s correct, Mann.”

“And that announcement and warning were based solely on their leprosy. Everything else seems to have been forgotten. You didn’t go around shouting, ‘Kind, kind, kind.’ You know, this is very sad. And it feels very wrong.”

“You’ll get no disagreement from me on that, Mann.”

“And yet, I often find myself behaving in just this way. I have weaknesses, and a liability to sin all too easily. Often, when I approach my God in prayer, it feels as though those weaknesses and sins are the only part of me that God sees. They, solely, define me and determine the relationship that exists between my God and me. It seems to me that they block from God’s view whatever good might also be present.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed this tendency in you and many others whom I have tutored many times.”

“You have? When have you observed it?”

“Well, I hope you don’t grow paranoid or anything like that, but we tutors often do a little reconnaissance before we visit to begin a tutorial session.”

“Really? You’ve been watching me.”

“Sure have. I was intrigued to watch what happens in your prayers. As you consider whatever entreaty you have to make of God, and whether or not it might be heard and granted, your mind seems totally—and I mean TOTALLY, 100%—focused on yourself and your weaknesses. That is foremost in your mind—apparently the sole criteria for God’s response to you. Why, it is your sins that are in complete control. From where I sit and observe, it seems that in your mind your sins are more powerful than God, Himself! God is subject to you (or your weaknesses). He is powerless to move until you give Him leave. God’s faithfulness and power—that is, His part in the request—is diminished to almost nothing.”

“Oh, well, now, to defend myself, Mezraim...”

“There’s no defense for such shortsightedness, Mann. The fact that it is all too common, doesn’t change the fact that such improper single-mindedness can only be called ‘faithless.’ You must come to know, Mann (if you do not, you will be utterly worn out with constant doubt and worry) that God’s vision is not so puny and myopic as yours. He sees you as a whole. He sees

every part of you, the good with the bad. He sees the young man's kind, gentle heart at the same time that He sees his reluctance to serve a mission. He sees the young lady's commitment to tithing at the same time that He sees her struggle with chastity.

"My guess is, Mann, that if you were to tally up the good that you do and the bad that you do, the former would far outweigh the latter."

"Maybe... Probably.. but..."

"Do you really think that God becomes so blinded by the bad that He cannot see the good? Do you really think that He only goes hunting around in your life for the bad to the exclusion of the good? Do you really believe that a little bad cancels out a lot of good?"

"Well, in my defense, Mezriam, that seems to be precisely how God responded to a leper. He could or would only see the leprosy—the sin."

"Yes, well, that's part of Jesus' revelation. To put the lie to it. And you have had the advantage of Jesus' revelation your entire life. Oh, Mann, what great need you have of repentance! For you 'will not understand [Father's] mercies which [He] has bestowed upon [you] because of [His] Son.'<sup>2</sup> God does not, and you must not, judge yourself or others by single standards. One must see the whole package.

"Perhaps the warnings concerning judging others, at least in part, come because of our inability to see every part of an individual's being. And it is God's powerful sense of knowing all that gives hope for those with character flaws, weaknesses, and sins. And whatever weaknesses you struggle with and against, He and His will are sovereign, not you and yours. And He is certainly more powerful than your puny little weaknesses. Paul's encouragement must be taken much more seriously: 'Let God be true though every man be false.'<sup>3</sup>

"I have been hearing this a lot, Mezriam. I need to trust more in God's nearly unfathomable generosity and largeness of soul. In addition, I need to look to God's infinite capabilities and strengths rather than to my own incapacibilities and weaknesses."

"Yes, yes. Very true. But, still, Mann, you're focused on yourself. So, I ask, 'What did *Jesus* do to cleanse me?'"

"Well, Mezriam, he didn't do anything until you made your request, 'if you want to, you

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<sup>2</sup> Alma 33.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3.<sup>4</sup>; Author's translation.

have the power to cleanse me.”<sup>4</sup>

Mann hesitated for a moment.

“A denarii for your thoughts,” coaxed Mezraim.

“I was just wondering about the way you worded your request. You didn’t say, ‘if you want to, you have power to *heal* me,’ as I was expecting.”

“And what do you make of that?”

“I’m not sure. I do know, though, that there are times when, while reading scripture, I am made to marvel. I have learned that such marvel is often ‘given unto us of the Spirit.’<sup>5</sup> If we will stop and ponder, we might receive new and significant insights into scripture and its application to our lives.”

“Well then, consider this, Mann. There are, in Luke, three words that are used for the act of healing: *iaomai*, *therapeuo*, and, in our present passage, *katharizo*. This final word, *katharizo* (your English word, *catharsis*, comes from this Greek word), does not mean so much ‘to heal’ as it does ‘to cleanse,’ ‘to free from stain, guilt.’

Now don’t get me wrong, the physical pains of my leprosy were troubling and restricting. But it was the emotional, the psychological, the social, the cultural, and the spiritual disgrace and alienation—the disconnection and disassociation—that rested so maddeningly heavy on my mind. It was my own emotional and religious sense of uncleanness, guilt, disgrace, and unworthiness—along with the social disenfranchisement and cultural stigma of unworthiness—I wished removed. Above all else, I wished to be viewed as clean and pure, and so acceptable before my God. I wished to reconnect with God. I wanted Him to associate with me once more.

“The truth is, I wouldn’t have cared if Jesus had left me with the leprosy just so long as my alienation with God was removed. I hope you see that in healing my leprosy, Jesus did much more than heal a skin disease. He healed an outcast, downcast soul. He healed, removed, my sin. He repaired the breach that had gapped so wide and firm between myself (and every other leper) and my God for so very long.”

“I do see that, Mezraim,” answered Mann with longing.

“But still, Mann, we are focused on me. I ask again: What did *Jesus* do? How did he cleanse me?”

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<sup>4</sup> Author’s translation

<sup>5</sup> See Doctrine and Covenants 76.<sup>18</sup>

“Why, through faith, of course.”

“Of course, my faith was an important aspect of the cleansing, no doubt about it. But you’re still focused on me. What did *he do* to heal me?”

Mann thought for a moment. Mezraim was obviously trying to make a point. Finally, Mann answered, “Jesus ‘touched’ you. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“Jesus ‘touched’ me. You respond so casually to Jesus’ touching me that I wonder, Mann, whether you appreciate either the radical nature of Jesus’ act or the message his touch sends. Do you see that Jesus—in the eyes of both the Old Testament and the religious and societal etiquette of his day—by a touch, however brief and simple, would himself have become unclean? He would have been thought as disconnected with God. Perhaps his act would even have gotten him excluded from synagogue and temple for at least twenty-four hours—and maybe more, given that it was not an accident, but was performed with such blatant disregard for accepted religious standards.

“But Jesus did so much more than merely and briefly ‘touch’ me, Mann. ‘Touched’ doesn’t even begin to capture the level of Jesus’ engagement, his attachment, his connectedness, his unity—his at-one-ment—with me, an unclean, unholy leper! It is not intimate enough. It is not sustained enough. It is not committed enough. It is not faithful enough.”

Mezraim paused, and Mann, breathlessly hanging on every word, hurried him along. “Yes, yes, go on.”

“‘He extended his hand and *laid hold* of [me].’<sup>6</sup> The word, *apto*, means ‘to fasten onto,’ ‘to engage,’ ‘to take part in,’ ‘to join,’ ‘to set upon.’ This word describes, for example, the ‘touching’ that goes on between two wrestlers. It also describes the touching that goes on between a loving husband and wife during sexual intimacy. Both of these circumstances involve a considerable degree of ‘touching.’ So it is with Jesus’ ‘touch.’ Jesus physically and fearlessly laid hold of me. He embraced me. There was no mistaking, no missing the nature of his contact with me. And I was immediately healed of my leprosy and spiritually cleansed.

“But even more powerful was the emotional and spiritual effect his ‘touch’ had on me. You have no idea how long it had been since I had experienced a loving human touch. As Jesus physically laid hold of me, literally become connected to me, I felt him emotionally take part in and become one with me and my sickness and the attending suffering, guilt, and self-doubt. I felt

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<sup>6</sup> Author’s translation

him join with me, participate with me, become one with me in my leprosy.

“And then, too, I felt him set upon my leprosy, seize it, and remove it. There was a kind of physical and emotional transference, as it were, of my leprosy, my un-holiness to him. He took ownership of my leprosy. He took ownership of my sin and un-holiness. To quote the apostle Paul, he became ‘sin for [me].’<sup>7</sup> It was the most amazing thing. Words really can’t express it. ‘Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel. Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful?’”<sup>8</sup>

“I am reminded, Mezraim, of something Alma taught the people of Gideon during his religious reformation there.

“‘And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and sicknesses of his people....

‘And he will take upon him their infirmities that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.’”<sup>9</sup>

“Yes Mann. A very, very important part of Luke’s testimony is that Jesus came down to take upon him the pains and sicknesses of his people. He came to take upon himself the sins of the world. He came to take upon himself your sins, Mann. And he did so because he is connected to us. This is who he is. This is what he does. *And he does it while the uncleanness and disgrace of sin still rests heavily upon the unclean individual.*

“I must stress this final point, Mann. It is vitally important. Jesus, contrary to all the Old Testament’s expectations, ‘laid hold’ of me and entered intimately into my life—became one with me—*while I was still unclean!* He did not wait, as I had been led to believe God would do, until I was already clean, and confirmed clean through ordinance, before he would enter into fellowship with me—before he would be at-one with me. He took me to his bosom even while I was yet unclean, unholy, unworthy, and sinful—full of sin, full of leprosy, covered from head to

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Alma 26.<sup>16-17</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Alma 7.<sup>11-12</sup>

toe with defiling and disgraceful uncleanness.

“Learn from my experience, Mann, what the scripture means which says, ‘*when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.*’<sup>10</sup> Learn what Paul meant when he affirmed that God ‘justifieth the ungodly.’<sup>11</sup> I am an example of just such an ‘ungodly’ person who was without strength and yet was justified by God.”

“You know, Mezraim, this Pauline passage that asserts that ‘God justifieth the ungodly’ has come up before in the course of my tutorials. I find it, frankly, unsettling. It doesn’t make sense.”

“It may be a passage with which you must come to terms before you can fully appreciate the power of the atonement and apply it to your life.

Mezraim paused and his eyes glazed over as he seemed to listen to some inner voice. “We are coming to the end of our one-on-one time together, Mann. So just let me remind you that atonement is connectedness. In Jesus’ touching me, he literally became connected to me physically. And this physical connectedness of touch was symbolic and indicative of Jesus’ emotional and spiritual connectedness to me, to you, and, indeed, to all creation. He is a being who looks for and takes joy in being connected to others. Jesus’ manifestation of connectedness was meant as revelation of God, his Father’s connectedness to me, you, and all creation.”

It was at this point of Mezraim’s tutorial that the door to Mann’s quarantine room began to slowly open. A single individual, covered from head to toe in a white protective medical suit, entered the room. The door immediately began slowly swinging closed. Just before it closed entirely, an elderly woman slipped lithely through the narrow opening. Although her face was deeply lined, her eyes sparkled and shone brightly. They fairly shouted out, ‘I am wise.’ Mezraim walked to her and took her hand in his. Together, they walked to the white clad figure and began assisting with the removal of the protective medical suit. With the removal of the helmet, Mann let out a gasp. He rushed to take the newcomer into his arms.

“Oh Rachel, why are you here? Please tell me I didn’t infect you with my leprosy!”

Rachel looked down with shame. “No, Cyn. It isn’t your fault. But I too have become unclean.”

“You don’t have leprosy?”

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 5.<sup>6</sup>; emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 4.<sup>5</sup>



“No.”

“What’s wrong with you then?”

“She has an issue of blood.” This startling explanation came from Mezraim.

“An issue of blood?”

“An issue of blood, remember, makes one unclean and unholy just as leprosy does? This woman,” Mezraim said swinging the elderly woman’s hand in his, “will help me as we take the next step in your instruction. Through her, you may more fully appreciate just how utterly new and revolutionary Jesus’ revelation of God is. She can help you see more clearly just who Jesus is.”

“But I know who Jesus is, Mezraim. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Redeemer and Savior of the world.”

“Indeed,” confirmed Mezraim, thinking this sounded more formulaic than heart-felt.

“But there is more,” said the woman, her cheeks flushed with excitement, and her eyes twinkling with joy. “Jesus is more. And this is the key to fully appreciating Mezraim’s experience, which you have already reviewed, and mine, which we must now examine: Jesus is God, Himself.”

“And who are *you*, if I may ask?” Mann said this much more snappishly than he intended.

“You can call me Tehorah. But more importantly, I am one whose ‘soul doth magnify the Lord,’

““And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour....

For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden...

For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;

and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.””<sup>12</sup>

*(edition: December 9, 2024)*

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 1.<sup>46-50</sup>