

# The Healing of a Leper

I want to tell you about the mystery and the power of hope. For that's the only way I can understand what happened to my father. It is a mystery, you know. It always has a question mark, because you never know for sure what will happen, but you keep hoping anyway.

My father had leprosy. A terrible, terrible disease, the very worst kind of disease you can imagine. It eats your flesh. It robs your face of its familiar markings. You lose your identity. Parts of your body rot away.

Toes rot, whole feet disappear. I have seen it, this enemy that will not be defeated.

But it eats more. It eats into your soul. No matter how you try to keep it out, at night, when you close your door and put out the lamp, there is no friendly dark to wrap around you guarding you in your sleep. The shadows march toward you, unseen, unheard, but imagined enemies who are ruthless, mindless, deaf to all pleas for mercy.

Where will they attack me tonight? What new spot will appear, signaling the start of a new invasion? When he first saw the spot at the corner of his mouth, my father let out a moan of grief. There had been so many other spots, his body already a hateful prison to him, a useless fortress of flesh and sinew and bone already breached, helpless against an enemy that never retreated without plans for yet another assault. What use to scream out? Who could possibly listen? What could anyone do.

Even worse was the isolation. What dwelt in my father's body could attack us too if we got close. My mother had fled in terror when it first came to our house. My brothers, brave warriors though they were, also ran away. Our neighbors were quick to learn of the tragedy and closed their windows and doors lest his finger should mistakenly touch them and bring his disease upon them as well.

I alone stayed with him, though not by choice - not at first. I was the ill-favored one, the daughter who was good for keeping house, but scarcely likely to be granted the favor of a husband and children and a home of my own.

What mattered it to them should the disease invade my body? I could tend to my father. I would be useful. Strangers would provide us food and rags to cover our sores.

God was kind. The filthy disease never touched me. But I lived with the fear. Each night I examined my body, searching, searching, searching, on the look out for any sign. None came. But I saw it on my father, in my father, a hopelessness that started as puzzlement, grew to fear and then to rage. By then his family was gone, and their aid as well. I kept us alive with my begging. I could not work. I could not leave my father, and even if I could, no one would risk hiring a girl who lived with a father who was a leper.

Quickly I was labeled a leper too, though anyone with eyes to see could have seen it was not true. We walked alone, my father and I, no friends beside us, shunned by everyone.

Can you understand how remarkable it was that He touched him? The Master? I never expected that. I had encouraged my father to go see the teacher everyone was speaking of. I even urged him to call out to Jesus and ask for help. But not to have the Master touch him. That was unthinkable.

At first father did not want to go. The hopelessness of his illness was too much for him. No one could heal leprosy. Why dare hoping the hopeless? It was a fool's errand. People would be shocked at him. Divine miracles don't happen to sinners. That was senseless; it wouldn't be right. This disease attacked only the most filthy people, people who had transgressed the moral law too grievously. A leper wore the mark of shame where all the world could see.

My best friend — well, my only friend really — asked me how I could bear to live with such a man.

“Zilpah! What are you saying? He is my father.” I cried.

She immediately apologized. But then added, “It must be difficult, you know.

At least it seems that way to me. I mean, he’s your father, but God must be punishing him for something, don’t you think, to make him sick like that?”

“Oh Zilpah,” I told her, “Don’t say that. How could you? It is too awful.”

Then she threw her arms around me and we cried, she for shame and me for fear she might see into my heart and know I could not help but wonder the same thing myself.

“We shall not speak of this, Zilpah. No. We must never speak of this. He is my father, and I love him. If it is true that God hates him for some evil, then God must hate me too, for I shall say to Him, ‘the sin you hate and punish in my father, that is my sin. Give me the same punishment that we may go away together and be hated by all the world.’”

Zilpah was horrified, but she did not turn away from me. She could see my unhappiness and my determination to love my father, no matter what he’d done.

But I wondered. How could I not wonder? Zilpah had only said what everyone said. I had said it myself. It was a truth that could not be argued or denied. And when the leprosy first began on my father’s body, I was heart-broken. I loved him. But he was unclean. He had to be. There was some sin hidden deep inside him the world could not see. Only now we saw it, saw the proof. He would live eternally shamed. He might have our pity, but he would always have our — oh, God forgive me for even thinking the word: our contempt!

It was never spoken, at least not where I could hear the words, but it was in their eyes. The tone of their voices. The way they stood just a little taller, a sign of their superiority over my father. He tried to hold on to his pride, his dignity, but when he did, people shunned him even more. “How dare he?” they seemed to say.

People think we stayed to ourselves out of respect for their purity, that we sought “our own kind,” father and I, because we knew our own place. We didn’t. We stayed away because their goodness pained us.

Only Zilpah seemed to understand, seemed to care.

“I shall pray for you, Hanna” she said. And I think she must have done it, for after that, as hopeless as our life seemed, I found comfort in the thought, if a girl like Zilpah could be my friend, could care about me, could love me, in spite of everything, maybe - just maybe, God could be our friend too. And when we heard rumor that a godly man, a teacher, had been known to bring healing in his touch Zilpah urged me to take my father to see him.

“The people would never let us get near him, Zilpah. You know that!”

“I don’t know that,” she stubbornly insisted, “Where do the holy books tell us we cannot ask for help? How many times did King David cry out for help, do you think? More times than the book tells us, I’m sure. Was he not a man, just like your father?”

I thought of the stories I had heard about David. He was far from a perfect man. His sins were many, and the people knew it. And he was not the only one. Moses, the greatest leader and prophet our people had ever known, he was forbidden to go over the Jordan into the promised land because of his sins. I didn’t understand what he’d done that was so wrong. In fact, I didn’t really know what sin was. I just knew it was shameful and bad.

Stealing, killing, sleeping with someone who was someone else’s wife or

husband: those were all sins and very bad. Even telling lies was bad. I trembled at that thought. I lied all the time.

“Do you say your prayers, my child? Do you love God?” “Oh yes, kind lady, always. I weary the ears of the Almighty with my crying.” Lies, all lies.

Why waste your breath praying to an angry, uncaring God.

Then give up? Is that what we must do? How can you give up? When the sun never gives up. Your pulse keeps beating. Your lungs breathe air. And your heart, your foolish, hasty heart, keeps longing for something better. Perhaps Zilpah was right. If God does not listen to the cries of the needy, the helpless, the sinful, the shameless, then who’s prayers does He hear? It must be a lonesome place, this heaven of His, this place where only the pure, the good, the perfect may enter.

So went my thoughts, and when Jesus came to our village, I begged my father to go see him. I had little hope he would do it, but if something could be done to end the loneliness, the unending shame, surely he could at least try. I was surprised when something stirred in him.

“God is coming here to our village, you say? The Almighty one? The holy one who rescued our forefathers in Egypt and brought us to the promised land?”

“No father,” I explained, “not God, but a holy man whom people say has healing powers.”

“Ha! They say that, do they? Well why not go and see for ourselves?”

He stood up, his sick body barely covered to provide him decency, and he strode out of the house into the harsh light of day. He did not walk humbly, bowing to the dust out of respect for all those better deserving than himself.

He strode quickly, almost as if he had to go quickly or he would not have been able to go at all. I could hardly keep up with him. I had no idea he had that much strength left in him. I wondered what had happened to this man.

This man I called father had grown so strange, I could not even remember his name!

People tried to keep us away from the miracle worker, but my father would not be turned back. They screamed at us, angry that we dared to bring our contagion into their midst. My father paid no attention to them. He’d been screamed at too many times to let them stop him. We’d lived alone, only glimpsing the world through small windows, wondering what real life must be like out there. The loneliness was too much. It was time to use his voice before there was no voice left to be heard.

I was amazed, frightened, shy, curious, anxious, wondering - would the healer see us or turn us away? Would he listen, or curse my father? And as we drew closer, all those emotions faded while a new one grew inside me like the breath of heaven itself, ready to burst my chest. I didn’t know what it was, but afterward Zilpah said simply, “I think it must have been hope. You dared to hope again.”

When we got to Jesus, my father did the unthinkable. I say it was unthinkable, because if he had been thinking, he would never have dared to do it. He fell on his knees before Jesus and challenged him. “If you wanted to, you could heal me.” How he dared to say it I’ll never know. I don’t think he knew. For his words came from the lips of a man who had stopped believing years ago. His disease had not only killed his body, but it had killed his soul as well. That part of him that could still care, still dream, still imagine something better - his soul that had been tramped down inside him, stirred. That had to have been what happened.

Just imagine: a man without hope daring to ask the impossible! That was the miracle. And when Jesus touched him — although the crowd was shocked, frightened, eager to rush forward and snatch his fingers away from contagion, I only watched with awe. Something inside me saw that the miracle had already taken place. Whether those terrible

lesions on my father's body went away or not, he was healed and he was clean and he would never again be shut away in silence and solitude, dead to the world, dead to himself.

You know what happened next. The disease was destroyed. The filth vanished.

He was as clean as a fresh-washed, newborn babe. His skin was so soft. I could almost smell the cleanness in him. I threw myself on him and felt his arms - amazingly strong for arms that had not held me, or anything else in years - gripped me in an embrace that seemed to go on forever and ever. I could hear Jesus saying something to my father about going to the priest and being cleansed there. "Don't tell anyone what has just happened!" As if we could keep such a miracle to ourselves! How could Jesus expect us to do that?

He did tell. Was God angry? I don't know. How could he be? How could he be angry when joy had broken into the life of a man who had all but forgotten what joy could feel like? No, angels danced in heaven. I'm sure of it. And sang. They had to have sung - how could they not?

Zilpah added that last thought - she loves singing. And so do I!

— Rev. Dr. George Miller