



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Facing Our Stuff

By Pastor Bryan Clark

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Many years ago, when our children were small, we as a family were encouraged to adopt an unreached people group. Basically, your commitment was that you would be assigned a people group and were to pray for that group, praying that God would send someone who could present the message of Jesus. So, we thought this sounded like a great thing to do as a family, and we adopted an unreached people group, the Dogon People in Mali, West Africa. We as a family, once a week, would have what we called “family night”, and part of that included time in the Word and a time of prayer. So, during that time of prayer, one of us, and typically it was one of the kids, would pray and ask that God would send someone to reach the Dogon People in Mali, West Africa. Well, we did that for several years with no word, until one day we received word, that God had called a young missionary couple with two small children and one on the way to the Dogon People in Mali, West Africa. It wasn't too long after that we received an e-mail address and were able to correspond with this young couple by the name of Jeff and Faye. This seemed like a fabulous opportunity to talk to our kids about the power of prayer, and that God hears us, and God answers prayer, and we were right on the verge of seeing God do something to reach these people we've been praying for.

Then we received the most unexpected letter. On the day that the house in the village was completed and Jeff and Faye were to move in, Faye contracted a disease and died. She was six months pregnant and the child died with her. Jeff was left with a three-year-old, a one-year-old, and could do nothing but pack up and go home. And instead of it being a moment where we could celebrate that God answers prayer, I was left with questions like, “Dad, why does God do that?” and, “Where is God in those moments?” and, “How do you explain that?” I was left with some of the most difficult questions to explain to our children. To this day I would say, “That makes no sense whatsoever.” Everything about the heart of God is to reach lost people. How could you possibly explain that? I would say day in and day out, week after week, year after year, some of the most difficult circumstances we deal with in ministry are related to the circumstances of illness, physical affliction, death, and disease. And we are constantly faced with the question, “Where is God in all this?” and “What sense could this possibly make?”

This is an issue that runs very deeply for me, having grown up in a home where I watched my dad suffer in a bed for over twenty years. I never knew my dad any way but confined to a bed, totally blind, and in my early twenties, wrestling with the questions of, “Where's God in all this and what sense could this possibly make?”

We want to talk about this as we move through this series of “Facing our Stuff”. There is stuff that gets us caught in life, gets us stuck, and if we don't get unstuck, we start to slip into disappointment and despair. There is no way to answer many of the questions related to the circumstances of disease and illness. But at least we can gain some perspective that might help us to avoid getting stuck and continue to process life, such as it is.

So, if you have a Bible, turn with me to Mark, Chapter 2. Just before we look at that text, keep your finger there, and I want to just remind us of a couple of important things from Genesis, Chapter 3. I feel like, for this whole series, it's important to lay an important foundation that we'll build on. We know in Genesis, Chapter 3, that Adam and Eve sinned against God, and sin separated them from God, and brought forth both spiritual death and physical death. We talked about this. Physical death is all around us. It's very evident; it's obvious. It's a constant reminder that there is yet a greater death, a spiritual death. Physical death, whether you are talking about 20 years, 40 years, 60 years, 80 years of life: we are all in the process of dying. And in the process of dying, we are awakened to the realities of death, in order that we might be awakened to the realities of a greater death, spiritual death, that if it is not dealt with, we will be spiritually dead forever.

In Genesis, Chapter 3, after Adam and Eve sinned and death enters into the picture, God steps forth and makes a promise that one day, through the seed of a woman, would come one who would crush the head of the serpent. In other words, God was saying to the devil himself, "If you think you have won, you're sadly mistaken. At the end of the day, I win. I will do what is necessary to once again bring life out of death. I will make it possible again for people made in my image to dwell forever with me in Paradise-Genesis 2." So, there was the very beginning of a promise of salvation.

It moves then to a discussion related to the consequences of sin to the man and to the woman. Oftentimes people refer to these as "the curse", but interestingly enough, the text never refers to this as part of the curse. I would suggest to you that's not what it is, but rather these consequences are actually an act of God's grace and mercy. The consequences were that, for women, in the process of the conception, the pregnancy, and the birthing of a child, there would be great pain. To the man there was the reality that he is going to have to fight against Creation--the thorns and the thistles and the weeds---in order to bring forth food, in order to sustain life.

Now when you think about the world's problems, let me ask you, "Is that what comes to the top of the list?" Some of you ladies may say, "Yes," but it does raise the question, "Why does God identify those things?" And the answer is this: we know from Genesis, Chapter 3, that our greatest temptation is to believe that we can be our own gods. That was the offer made to Adam and Eve. "You can be your own god. Decide for yourself what's good and evil. Call your own shots; run your own lives, and if you do that, it will be better. You will be happier; you can be your own savior." If we believe that we can be our own gods, if we can believe that we can be our own savior, if we believe that through our religious goodness, we can save ourselves, then we have no hope. God promised to save you; but only those who recognize, "I need a Savior" will experience His salvation.

So, the consequences to the man and the woman were essentially this: from conception to birth, to the sustaining of life, I'm going to make this a battle. I'm going to make it hard. And the intent of the battle is not to punish you, but it is to knock this idea out of your heads that you can be your own god, because if you don't get that idea out of your head and reach a level of brokenness, you will never experience God's salvation and will be eternally lost.

It is not possible to explain all the pain and suffering in the world, but it does allow a framework to recognize that this life is not Heaven. It's not supposed to be. That was messed up in Genesis 3. And God's made a commitment to get us back to Genesis 2, but it's not now. The strategy now is to get us to recognize our desperate need for a Savior, that we might experience His salvation, that we might dwell with Him in Paradise forever. So, life is hard, in order that we might experience His salvation.

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With that as a foundation, let's go to Mark, Chapter 2, and see how this fleshes out in a familiar story. In Mark, Chapter 1, there are a lot of miracles; there's a lot of stuff going on, and it's becoming obvious that Jesus is something more than "just another guy."

Chapter 2:

And when He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. And being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." (*NASB, Mark 2:1-5)

A pretty familiar story: Jesus is at home; the crowd has packed in; there's standing room only in the house and even outside there is no way to get access. Along come these four men with their friend who is a paralytic. They cannot get access to Jesus through the door, so they come up with this plan to dig a hole in the roof and drop him down. Now whether you think that was a good plan or not probably depends upon whether you are the paralytic or the homeowner. But either way that was the plan. And so, they dropped the paralytic down before Jesus, and in this moment, when I'm sure everyone was wondering what was going to happen, Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven". Now imagine the scene! What do you suppose was the first thing that went through the paralytic's mind? And what was the first thing that went through the four friends' minds? I guess it was something like, "How's that again? That's not the point". I'm going to guess that wasn't even on their radar; that wasn't why they were there. They were there to experience a healing, like He had done for so many in Chapter 1. And they had to have looked at each other like, "What?" Jesus understood why they were there, but He also understood that this physical disease was a picture of a greater disease, a disease that would last forever, a disease called sin.

We talked about the idea of physical death being in essence a metaphor for spiritual death. When we say that we are spiritually dead, what does that mean? The only real frame of reference we have is to look around us and get some sense of physical death and dying that provides for us a picture of what death means. Physical death is a reminder there is a greater death that has far more significant consequences. In the same way, physical disease is a metaphor for the greater disease of sin. If you want to know the results of being your own god and running your own show and living your life your own way, just look at what physical disease does to life. Look at what it does to every day. Look at what it does to your body; look at the effects of that and you get some picture of what sin does to our souls. That's part of the point; physical disease is a picture of a greater disease. Now the Bible often relates sin to disease. This metaphor is in both the Old and New Testaments.

Oftentimes you'll hear preachers quote Peter, when they say, "By His stripes you are healed" and they equate that with, "If you have enough faith, you are guaranteed that you will be healed of your physical affliction." And, if you listen, it sounds like what they are saying is that the primary reason Jesus died on the cross is so that your temporary physical affliction will be

healed, which is a total misunderstanding of that text. As a matter of fact, it's quoting Isaiah 53, and, if you go to the book of Isaiah and track all the way back to Chapter 1, in the very first chapter, Isaiah says that the greatest disease we face is this disease called sin. And if we do not experience healing from sin, we have no hope. There's no question that by the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, when Isaiah says, "By His stripes you are healed", he is referring, not to the temporary afflictions of this life, but to the ultimate healing of our souls from the damage, the destruction, of sin.

I'm not an expert in AA (Alcoholics' Anonymous). I do know people who I think are. And in talking to them and trying to get some understanding of what that's all about, in this day and age, when people talk about "Step 2 - that they have to seek a higher power"; in a world of political correctness, that gets defined very loosely: Whatever that means to you- it could be God, could be a tree, could be a door knob, just something. But those who truly understand what the program is about, and take it back to its roots, must understand that was not what was meant. Both Bill and Bob, the founders of AA, were people whose lives had been radically changed by the power of Jesus. They were very clear that the ultimate disease is self, and the ultimate disease is sin, and unless that is dealt with through the power of Jesus, you will drink again. That's what they said. The idea of a higher power was simply to take people who were religiously stuck and get some momentum going. But they would have been the first ones to tell you that if that pursuit of a higher power doesn't end up with a life-changing experience with Jesus Christ, there is no hope. The ultimate disease is sin. And if the ultimate disease is not dealt with, the symptoms will continue to return.

Jesus could have easily healed the paralytic and sent him on his way. I would suggest to you that the paralytic would have gone away worse, rather than better. There was one thing that was driving the paralytic and his four friends to the feet of Jesus and that was his physical suffering. But what drove him to the feet of Jesus resulted in the greatest healing he could have imagined.

Arnie: So, Bryan, when you're actually living in pain, you just want healing. Is it wrong to ask God to heal you?

Bryan: Absolutely not. As a matter of fact, I say that in the message, ask, absolutely, ask for it. But there's a lot of things we don't always understand and one of the things to think about is if you were healed of your disease and somewhere in the process lost sight of God, then you've actually lost more than you've gained. And so, God may be up to something you don't understand, and may answer that prayer differently.

Cara: The one thing you can say for the paralytic and his four friends is, they didn't come through someone's roof during a prayer meeting just for fun. I mean, these guys are like all in on this. They believed Jesus could heal their friend and that's a pretty good starting point.

Bryan: They absolutely did. Their commitment is really impressive. They did believe that, or they wouldn't have done that. But there's also a lot of people that believed Jesus could heal them, and He did, who had no interest in receiving Him as savior. So, you know, it was a unique time, unique place. They were convinced; that's why they did that. But it doesn't always lead people to a surrender to Christ.

Arnie: So, if we understand that life is a battle, then James starts to make a lot more sense when he says, "Count it all joy."

Bryan: So, we think comfort, especially as Americans, but God thinks more conforming us to the image of Christ. And that's back to James: "Count it all joy", because God's up to something and God's going to change us and grow us, and ultimately, that's what matters.

Arnie: Is he saying, "Be happy, count it all joy?" You know, be happy about it?

Bryan: I think you could be happy knowing God's going to use that, [Oh, I see.] to make you more like Christ; not happy about what's happening. [Got it.]

Cara: I know when I was sick, I did not want to pray it away, because it took me so long to find a relationship with God, that I was afraid I was going to lose Him once I was better. And He had already given me so much, that I actually just got comfortable living in that spot, because I knew God was so close to me in it. It took me a long time to pray for Him to take it away, and it was that realization that I'm His child and if there was something wrong with my kids, I would want them to ask me to take it away. That's how I was able to overcome that. But in the physical, I really found Christ.

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's a great perspective. I have no doubt far more people lose their way in prosperity than in pain. That's just the reality of it.

Cara: I found Him in it. I found Him in that. It was amazing. [Wow.]

Arnie: So, Cara, we're talking about disease today. And would you say your struggle has given you a completely new attitude?

Cara: Well, I mean, I found God in it. I'm closer to God in struggles. Not that I want them, but I definitely feel Him more when I'm in that. I rely on him more instead of trying to figure out and fix things on my own.

Arnie: That's awesome.