



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Facing Our Stuff

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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)

Well the story goes on.

Verse 6:

But there were some of the scribes sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” (vs. 6-7)

You can't miss the fact that the text says they were “...sitting”. Imagine the scene where everybody is packed into this house but there is one group who is seated, those of privilege, the spiritual elite. And they were there to check out this movement to see whether they were going to give it a “thumbs up” or a “thumbs down”, and they hear what Jesus says, and they reason correctly. We are going to give them credit here; they are correct. Only God has the power to forgive sins... no pastor, no priest, no church, no religion. The privilege belongs to God alone. So, they are left with two options. Either this guy is a blasphemer, or he is claiming to be God Himself. Those are the only two options.

Verse 8:

And immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Get up and pick up your pallet and walk’? But so that that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – He said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, get up, and pick up your pallet and go home.’” And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone; so that they were all amazed and were

glorifying God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.” And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. (vs. 8-13)

Jesus in essence calls them out; He knows what they are thinking. He says, “Why are you thinking that way? Why are you reasoning that way?” and then asks them a great question, “Which do you think is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Rise up and walk?’ ” Now we know the answer to that don’t we? It’s easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven”. Who can prove that? Anybody can say that. I can walk around all day and say, “Oh, by the way, your sins are forgiven.” How do you know? “Well I said so.” How are you going to disprove that? But it’s in a whole other category when you say to the paralytic, “Hey, get up and walk”. But then Jesus says something very important; don’t miss this. He says, “...in order that you might know that I have the power to forgive sins.” “Watch this!” And He says to the paralytic, “...rise up and walk”.

If you come out of this story saying that the point is, if you have enough faith, you will be healed of all your diseases, you missed it entirely. That is a total miss. Jesus couldn’t have been clearer. The reason He was offering physical healing, was to validate His claim that He came to bring about the ultimate healing for the ultimate disease. That’s what mattered. Physical afflictions are temporary at best. But the death and destruction of sin is forever, unless you experience the healing power of Jesus. I don’t find anywhere in the Bible where God says, “If you have enough faith, He will heal your physical disease”. He may; He may not. But what is all over the Bible is, for those who come, desperately in need of a Savior, and ask God for the ultimate healing, God’s promise is “I will always answer that prayer; I will always give you that healing.”

Verse 14:

And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alpheus sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, “Follow Me!” And he got up and followed Him. And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with the tax collectors and sinners?” And hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (vs.14-17)

We have another encounter with “the older brothers”. Jesus calls Matthew, Levi, the tax collector, to follow him and really, in quite a shocking fashion, He calls him to be one of the Twelve. You couldn’t imagine anyone in the Jewish community more hated than a tax collector. As a matter of fact, consistently in the New Testament, you have two categories. You have sinners and then a sub-category under that, tax collectors. Somehow, they were a category below even the sinners. But Matthew responded. They throw a big party; it’s a great party! The younger son has returned, and the loving father has embraced him. But you have an older brother outside, once again very upset by this party, unwilling to come in: the religious leaders, the experts in self-righteousness, those who were determined to be their own god and be their own savior. They are quite upset that Jesus is dining with sinners and tax collectors and raise the question, as they often did. And Jesus’ answer is profound, “Hey, it’s not those who are well who need a doctor, it’s those who are sick who need a physician.” He didn’t come to call the righteous, i.e. self-righteous, but the sinners who need a Savior.

Throughout the Gospels you have this problem----the problem between those who recognize they are sinners in need of a Savior, who embraced Jesus as the Great Physician, the only one who could bring healing to the ultimate disease, and those who had convinced themselves they could be their own saviors. They could be their own gods; they were good enough. “Thanks, I don’t need a doctor; I’m not sick.” And consistently we see them on the outside looking in, unwilling to embrace the Savior. Jesus was not saying they are good enough; Jesus was not saying they were righteous. Jesus was saying their self-assessment was they weren’t sick; their self-assessment was they were righteous; therefore, they had no need for a Savior.

The greatest temptation all of us face is the temptation to believe we can be our own gods: I can run my own show, call my own shots. I can be my own savior. If ultimately, we don’t reach a point of brokenness and recognize our desperate need for a Savior, we have no hope. And without question, it is the difficulties, the challenges, often the physical illnesses and suffering in this life, which bring us to our knees and cause us to realize we need help.

Physical disease is in essence a metaphor, a picture of the ultimate disease, and the ultimate disease reminds us we need the ultimate healing that can only come through Jesus Christ. So, what are we saying and what are we not saying? Number 1: what we are not saying is if you have a disease, an illness, a physical suffering, it’s because of your sin and God is punishing you. We are not saying that. Nowhere does the Bible say that. What we are saying is because of The Fall, because this is a fallen world, because of sin in the world---and we have all contributed to that---the disease and suffering and physical ailments are part of the journey of this life. Whether you are struggling with those diseases yourself or with someone you love, they remind us that we are not God and that we need help. Is there anywhere in the Bible where God promises that if you have enough faith, your physical disease will be healed in this life? And the answer is, “No, there’s nowhere where God promises that.” Does God have the power to heal? Absolutely He does! Should we ask for that? Absolutely we should! No physical disease is hopeless. At any moment, God may choose to step in and bring about miraculous healing. You have to believe that. But does that mean God always will? No. Sometimes He will and sometimes He won’t.

If the results of pursuing God were always that God heals our afflictions, we would soon all become “older brothers”. At that point we are not pursuing God because we love Him; we’re not pursuing a relationship with our Savior; we’re cutting a deal. We’re cutting a deal: “God, I do my part, and you do your part; let’s work this out!” At that point we’re not pursuing God at all; we’re pursuing ourselves. It’s just a selfish pursuit using God in the process. We have to understand as Christians, there are no deals; it’s not what it’s about. It’s about faith and trust and understanding that oftentimes there will be circumstances we cannot understand. We just cannot explain; they simply will make no sense. One of the trade-offs we have to accept is, if we believe God is big enough to bring about a physical healing, then with that we have to accept that God is big enough to have purposes for that disease, that we cannot possibly understand. If you are going to hold that God is powerful enough to bring about healing, then you have to accept that means that He is also big enough to have purposes beyond your ability to understand. That’s the deal; one goes with the other.

Understanding that God has the power to heal helps me to rightly process the struggles and the afflictions of this life. I don’t believe there has ever been a moment when God looked down from Heaven and saw that we had contracted some disease and said, “Boy I just didn’t see that coming. Wow, I had all these hopes and dreams for Bryan, but now he’s got this disease and we

are going to have to go to plan B; I didn't even see that coming." That's oftentimes how we think though, isn't it? We get into this, "If only...If only...If only. If only it wasn't this way." We have these ideas of what life would be like if we didn't have this affliction, if we didn't struggle with this. But we have to understand, that life has never been; it's fantasy. Your story is your story. The fact that you are struggling with that disease, that isn't an accident. Everything comes through God's filter. Imagining life without that, is a life that never existed, a life that was never on the books. Your story is your story, such as it is. So, I can accept the fact that, on any given day, God could have healed this disease; God still could choose to do that. But if He chooses not to, I accept the fact that for reasons only God can understand, this is my story. This is my life as God has designed it, to fulfill the purpose that God has called me to. It's not a distraction; it's not an interruption; it's part of the story. If you can understand that, the question changes completely. If you think this is an interruption; life could have been this without it; now all the hopes and dreams have died; then the question will be, "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" And I am very familiar with those questions.

In my early twenties I was stuck in the web, and that's the question that stuck me. I can tell you there aren't answers to those questions. It is the question you just have to let go of. But if you can believe that God has created you on purpose for a purpose and that your story is your story by God's design, then the question is, "God, how might you use this today to accomplish your purpose in the world? My story is my story, such as it is, and the question is, "OK, God, how might you use this illness, this physical affliction, this limitation today, to accomplish your purpose in the world?" That's a very different question!

I can assure you that you will have questions with no answers. I can also assure you there will be times where your physical afflictions or the physical afflictions of someone you love, will push your faith to its limit. I know that; I've been there. But I can assure you, at the end of the day, when you get to the other side, you will know that there was only one healing that ultimately mattered the one healing from the one disease that lasts forever. And God's promise to each one of us, no matter what our story, no matter what our past, no matter where we've been, is, "If we ask in faith, God promises your sins are forgiven"!

Our Father, we are thankful that when we were dead and lost in the ultimate disease, you gave us forgiveness, not because we earned it, not because we deserved it, but because we asked in faith, believing that Jesus' death on the cross was payment by which you could offer us forgiveness. Lord, I'm sure there are many who are struggling with the realities of physical afflictions with themselves or people they love. Lord, we know it's hard. We know there are questions that can't be answered. Lord, help us to accept that this is just part of our story; that this life isn't Heaven. It isn't supposed to be. But, Lord, because of your promise of ultimate healing, we have the hope of Paradise to come. Lord, we thank you for that...in Jesus' name, Amen.

Cara: Bryan, ultimately, Jesus wanted people to come to Him for healing from the deadly disease of sin. But is it fair to say that the initial reason that many of these people were coming to Him was for the physical healing?

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's absolutely correct. You know, the story would be once the miracles slowed down about halfway through his public ministry, the crowds really dwindled. And actually, by the last few weeks of his life, the crowds were not that big anymore.

Arnie: Well, I notice as you get older, you have health issues yourself and you have your friends with health issues. And then you see these instances in the Bible where Jesus actually commends the faith of those who came to Him for healing. And what I don't quite understand though, is there's this group of people that think that if they have enough faith, that God will heal them. And if they're not healed, it's really because they have a lack of faith.

Bryan: The Gospels can get a little bit confusing because Jesus is revealing himself as God in the flesh and so identifies people's faith. And that comes out in the text. But that's not the same thing as saying, if you conjure up enough faith, then you can manipulate God and end up with a healing. Because there were many, many others who were healed, who had no idea who He was. One of the great examples of that is in John Chapter Nine, the man born blind, and the religious leaders are pressing him and he's very clear: "I don't know who he is. All I know is I once was blind. Now I see." So clearly faith is not some manipulative way to move the hand of God.

Cara: Well, another point of confusion, concerns to the relationship of sin with disease. So, if you're going to treat your body like an amusement park, you might have heart problems or end up with emphysema or something. But that's not always the case. And we shouldn't go there in judgment either.

Bryan: Right. So that's another one that gets a little bit confusing and can be very hurtful. When my dad was ill at home, we'd have people that would show up at the house and rebuke him, because "God gave them a vision." They didn't even live in the state of Nebraska. But because he was sick, there must be a sin. And they were there to rebuke the sin. So, I'd put it in three categories. There are natural consequences to sin. So, when we abuse ourselves in some way, there's consequences to that, and might show up in physical struggles, or whatever. And then the Bible does teach there's times when God disciplines us through physical disease. And what I would say, just knowing as a pastor, as soon as people hear that, they go into panic mode; if God was disciplining you for some sin, you would not have to search and figure out what sin it is. You absolutely know. And you know you're sinning, and you know you're fighting God. The only question would be whether you're going to give in or not. And the third would be, there's just sin in the world. And because of that, we all experience it. And that's part of the story.

Arnie: So, Bryan, what are some of the best ways we can come around friends and family who are struggling with disease?

Bryan: Yeah, a good question. Obviously, one is to pray, and if you've ever been in a serious health situation, you understand how powerful that is to know people that are praying for you. I think just spending time with them. Disease often isolates and people end up spending a lot of time alone, and that's not good. And then sometimes just practical chores, practical ways to help. People are really good about saying, "If there's anything I can do to help." But sometimes people just jump in and help. So, when I was growing up, there was a lady that lived just a block away. Actually, her husband worked here at Back to the Bible. She just showed up at our house and told my mom every Thursday she was cleaning. [Wow.] And she didn't even ask it as a question. And I remember as a boy growing up, every Thursday she showed up, she cleaned the house from top to bottom, and it was a huge help to my mom. So, there are practical things that can be done.

Cara: It's easy to ask, "Why?" and God is big enough to understand that, but if we trust God's ultimate plan for us, it helps for us to let go that Why question.

Bryan: Yeah, so I understand the Why question too. It's natural, but the truth is we usually don't get answers, and if we're going to hang on to our bitterness until we get an answer, that's usually a downward spiral. But I would also say it takes a pretty mature faith to let go of the Why, and just trust God. I would say from my own story, that's the way out. I didn't get answers. I just had to make a conscious decision to believe God tells the truth.

Arnie: And I notice in my own spiritual journey, that as you become stronger in your faith, the Why isn't even a relevant question anymore. It's just, "Okay."

Bryan: Right. Yeah, I know some people say, "When you get to Heaven, you'll find out", and it's like, "I don't think so."

Arnie: Oh, that just really, [Nobody's going to be asking that question.] bugs me when you say that, because I've got so many questions. And one of them: "Is Bryan right that my questions won't necessarily be answered?"

Bryan: Right. I just say it because it bugs you.

Cara: I just don't even want to take the time. I just want to enjoy being there, then sitting there, [There's a few questions.] worrying about these things that...

Bryan: We'll all be living it up [Yeah.] and I'll say to Jesus, "Where's Arnie?" And He's like, "He's over there asking questions."

Arnie: "He's in the library."

Bryan: Right.