

Prayer

Dear Jesus, Son of the Father, Saviour of the world
You are the source of our greatest joy and happiness
You are the one who brings hope and meaning to all we do
You are the love that brightens our hearts and colours our lives
You are the gift of God to all the world and to all humanity
Dear Jesus, we receive You today with delight and expectation!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

As you eat, remember that most of it has died so that you can live. Ask God to bless it and thank Him for it.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian Aid agencies** *Pray for aid agencies who are struggling to get past bribery and corruption in order to serve those in need*
- *Give thanks to God for the fruitfulness of the world in which we live*
- *Pray for Haiti and for those ravaged by recent storms*

Meditation

What do you expect of life?
What do you expect of the Lord?

Will He fling open the doors of possibility
And lead you on a journey of discovery
As exciting and challenging as it is possible to imagine
To pioneer some new growth within the Kingdom of God ?

Or will He open your cautious eyes
To the call He has already placed in front of you;
The patient and exacting work of being faithful
When all around you are bored and want to be different?

Or will He open up a route for you alone,
Which is not found in drama or in doggedness;
But in daring to touch both the world and the heart of God,
To connect the unsaved world around you with its Saviour?

Whatever you are called to do, it is important.
Exploration, persistence, and unique endeavour
Unite to make the mission of God's glorious church,
When functioning in harmony for the Gospel of our Lord.

Bible passage – Luke 5:17-26

¹⁷ Around then, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby while He was teaching; they had come from all the villages of Galilee and Judea, and from Jerusalem, and the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal. ¹⁸ Then some men brought a paralysed man on a bed. They were attempting to bring him in and set him down before Jesus; ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and together with his bed, they let him down through the tiles into the midst of them, in front of Jesus! ²⁰ When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.'

²¹ Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to think about this and said, 'Who is this man speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' ²² But perceiving their thoughts, Jesus asked them, 'Why are you questioning this in your hearts?' ²³ Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Stand up and walk"? ²⁴ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (he then spoke to the man who was paralyzed) I tell you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' ²⁵ The he stood up before them at once! He took up his sick bed and went to his home, giving glory to God!

²⁶ They were all struck with astonishment; they gave glory to God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen incredible things today.'

Bible Study

Review

This is one of the well known stories of Jesus' healing ministry, and it occurs in each of Matthew, Mark and Luke, roughly in the first part of Jesus' ministry. Our attention is drawn to the story for several reasons. To begin with, this is a dramatic story. Whilst teaching, Jesus was suddenly interrupted by a commotion from above, and a paralysed man was lowered in front of Him from the roof! In addition, the story deals with the difficult subject of sin and sickness in an intriguing way, with Jesus cutting through the religious presumptions of the authorities, leaving the paralysed man both forgiven and healed. We might ourselves finish reading with many unanswered questions about the connection between sin and sickness, but those who were there were amazed, and praised God (5:26)!

Before we go on, it is worth checking out what is happening here in Luke 5. After relocating His ministry in Capernaum (Luke 4), Jesus gathered some of the first disciples and made it clear that His ministry would change people; Peter, James and John left their work and followed Jesus (5:11). Next, Jesus healed the leper (5:12-16) and changed this needy person's life dramatically. Jesus then changed the life of a paralysed man (today's reading), but also made people think, and the Pharisees and scribes were challenged to the core by Jesus. So there is a simple structure here within Luke's Gospel, with chapters 5 and 6 both containing stories that describe the effect of Jesus' ministry on individuals, and these stories then form a backdrop for teaching about the Kingdom (5:33-39 and 6:20-49). We will find that a similar pattern of stories and teaching continues after chapter 7, but with different themes.

The story of the healing of the paralysed man deeply is moving for several reasons. Firstly, we discover here that Jesus was willing to be distracted from his teaching by the needs of an individual. We can imagine the picture. Important people were gathered close to Jesus to hear Him; they were Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, people who were charged with interpreting the Law for people to understand. They needed to know what Jesus taught and they would doubtless tell everyone what they thought about Jesus in due course. They certainly believed they had God's authority!

Into this setting, the fervent faith of a few friends brought a man in dire need, but they had to push the boundaries of possibility to get their friend into Jesus' presence, to see the man who could heal people with a word. Eventually, the man came crashing through the roof in front of Jesus, quite possibly making a considerable mess of mud, tiles and wooden roofing; and in the midst of this chaos, Jesus said '*Friend, your sins are forgiven you!*' We might think Jesus was forgiving the man for his intrusion, except that Luke explains that He said it in response to the friend's faith. The man was healed later because of Jesus ability to forgive his sin, not because of his friend's faith; but their faith was crucial because it brought the man to Jesus.

Jesus intended to heal the paralysed man, but He decided to do so in a manner that would address the complex situation before Him. People in those days had many beliefs about sin and sickness, and we will look at these later (see 'going deeper'). Mostly importantly, they accepted that sin caused sickness (even though not all sickness was caused by sin), but they believed that God alone could forgive, and bring complete healing; however, their narrow understanding of God meant many were left either unforgiven or trapped in sickness. Jesus therefore healed the man and answered the questions of the authorities with one authoritative command. He told the man to walk and go home (5:24); which he did!

Those present were filled with awe. The fact that Jesus healed the man highlighted His authority to forgive, and therefore made them wonder, for they knew this must have been a work of God. Today, people still have many questions about sin, forgiveness and healing, but Jesus still asks, '*why are you questioning?*' and he still heals!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Some further thoughts about Luke's concern for the individual
- What did people believe in Jesus' day about sin and sickness?
- What does forgiveness have to do with healing?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V20 'Friend'

The Greek says literally '*O man, your sins are forgiven ...*' but it was not as formal as this might suggest. I have preferred the translation used by most modern version, '*Friend, your sins are forgiven ...*', though you may well find that some translations still have '*man, your sins are forgiven ...*'. The phrase is merely a colloquial way of addressing someone directly.

Significant phrases

V17 'Around then ...'

Other translations:

'One day ...' (NIV)

'Now it happened that on a certain day ...' (New Authorised Version)

The Greek reads something like this, '*and it so happened that in one of those days ...*'. In reality, this is merely a generality, and to translate all this would be to overplay the meaning of the text. I prefer '*Around then ...*', simply because the extremely shortened translation '*One day ...*' can sound like the beginning of a fictional story. '*Around then ...*' is no better or worse a translation than '*One day ...*' but it correctly locates the story at roughly the same time as the other events recorded in the chapter, and this is clearly Luke's intent here.

V17 'the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal'

Other translations:

'the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick' (NIV)

'the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing' (New American Standard)

The Greek reads most naturally, '*the power of the Lord was present with Him to heal*'. However, in the sentence as a whole, it helps to make it clear that the power of the Lord was specifically with Jesus. Along with one or two other translations, including Today's English Version, I have included Jesus' name.

V24 '(he then spoke to the man who was paralysed)'

Other translations:

'He then said to the paralysed man' (NIV)

I simply point out that this comment is like an added phrase that today we might put into brackets, as I have done here. With this comment, Luke points out that in the middle of His speech, Jesus changes His address from speaking to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, to the man who was paralysed.

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V17 'they had come from all the villages ...'

The Greek sentence says this '*they had come from every village ...*'. This suggests that there were Pharisees and teachers to be found in every village in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem, which is highly unlikely. Some of the ancient manuscripts have been significantly altered because those copying the sentence did not think it right! Instead, I suggest that this phrase of Luke's is regarded as a generalisation, hence my translation.

Going Deeper

Some further thoughts about Luke's concern for the individual

It is hard to define precisely, but when we read Luke's account of the healing of the paralysed man, we can sense that Luke wrote with a degree of understanding and sympathy for the individual who was healed. The other Gospels write about a man being carried to Jesus, but Luke writes about some men who were *'attempting to bring him in and set him down before Jesus'* (5:18). The phrase shows more interest about the particular circumstances. Similarly, when Jesus first addresses the man, Luke reports the words, *'Friend, your sins are forgiven you'* (5:20), but Matthew says *'Your sins are forgiven you'* (Matt 9:5), and Mark says *'Child, your sins are forgiven'* (Mark 2:5). None of these is negative in any sense, but Luke's words indicate Jesus' concern to speak to the paralysed man as a man like any other. It is a characteristic of Luke's Gospel that he presents Jesus in a very 'human' light, and this is reflected in the way he tells the stories.

Some people think of this as insignificant, but we need to accept that the Gospels each convey particular truths about the works of Jesus, and each one can teach us something different, even from the same story. In the healing of the paralysed man, Matthew and Mark (Matthew 9:1-8 and Mark 2:40-45) each convey messages particular to their Gospel; Matthew, characteristically, highlights the regal authority of Jesus. Luke shows Jesus' personal and human interest in the individual concerned.

What did people believe in Jesus' day about sin and sickness?

In Jesus' day, it was quite normal to believe that sin caused sickness. This is reflected in countless Old Testament stories; for example, when King Hezekiah fell sick and was told by Isaiah that he would die, the king immediately set about confessing his sins and those of his ancestors, imploring God to forgive any sin he may have committed so that he might live (2 Kings 20:1f. Isaiah 38:1f.). Psalm 107 says this, *'some were sick through their sinfulness and because of their iniquities endured illness.'* (Psalm 107:17). The ancients were far more attuned to the idea that if you contravened the laws of God in creation (that is, you sinned), then you were likely to pay the price in physical sickness. However, it is quite clear that people did not believe that behind every sickness lay a sin. Elisha, for example, did not berate the Shunammite woman for any sin before going to heal her son when he collapsed (2 Kings 4:12f.).

Throughout the Bible, we find a balance between the assumption that sin will create trouble including sickness, and the compassion of God for those who are ill, not necessarily for their own fault. An example of this is found in John's Gospel, where Jesus dealt with a man blind from birth (John 9:1f.) and had to work against the attitude amongst some that the man was blind because his parents had sinned! In this case, Jesus confronted this attitude by saying that it was false, and that the blindness was not the result of any sin; Jesus said, *'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed through him'* (John 9:3).

It is best to assume that the Old Testament indicates to us that sin will always have consequences and one of these can be the suffering of physical illness. The point is not lost on us, because we too can clearly see that someone who is having relationship difficulties may well get ill with stress, for example. However, we do not like to suggest that someone who is ill might consider that it is right to confess sin as a first step in finding healing. To do this might sound presumptive to us. However, it was not presumptive in Jesus' day, so it was not rude for Jesus to respond to the paralysed man's presence before him and say *'your sins are forgiven'* (5:20).

What does forgiveness have to do with healing?

Some people reckon that Jesus said *'your sins are forgiven'* to the paralysed man, in order to bait the Pharisees and challenge them about their perception of authority. However, I do not believe this was the case. I suggest that the paralysed man may have harboured sin in his life and Jesus dealt with this by offering forgiveness. Forgiveness was necessary in this case, where it was obviously not required for the leper (see 5:12-16). We do not know exactly what sin was involved because Jesus kept the equivalent of what we might call 'doctor-patient confidentiality'. He allowed the man the dignity of not having his personal sins discussed by generations of Christians studying the Bible!

However, in saying this, Jesus faced the difficulty of the presence of the Pharisees, who immediately felt that Jesus was speaking inappropriately. They would have regarded such words as blasphemy, because as Luke reports, *'who can forgive sins but God alone?'* (5:21); they were not about to give Jesus the honour of regarding Him as God. However, Jesus knew what the Pharisees and scribes were thinking, and said *'why are you questioning this in your hearts?'* (5:22), which was a challenge to the Pharisees about their understanding of the forgiveness of sins. The Jewish system of sacrificial worship was designed around the forgiveness of sins, and it was to be available to all (as recorded in the book of Leviticus). However, the way it was managed in Jesus' day meant that only the High Priest in the Temple handled the forgiveness of sins, and he did this once a year, on the day of atonement. This was a long way away from God's original intention, which was that atonement for sin was readily available for all. In this story, Jesus made God's forgiveness available to the paralysed man and cut across two thousand years of tradition to the original wishes of the Father. Could the Pharisees not understand this, he asked?

Jesus went on to ask a question, which appears to be something a trick question to the Pharisees, '*which is easier, to say "Your sins are forgiven you" or to say, "Stand up and walk"?' (5:23)*. But this was no trick question; this is only how it appears to us today. Jesus asked this question to see if the Pharisees would accept that He was right to go to the heart of the man's illness and thus enable him to be set free from his illness. It would have been easy to say '*stand up and walk*', but not deal with the root of the problem, and the Pharisees should have known that. Having made his point, Jesus then said these words, and they were effective precisely because he had earlier forgiven the man's sins.

The overall effect as far as Luke was concerned was to render everyone speechless. Other Gospels indicate that the Pharisees and other religious authorities present were angry, but Luke was not interested to say this. He had yet to begin the theme of the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus.

Application

What does this story tell us about healing ministry? Clearly, there is a connection in this story between sin and sickness; that is not to say that Jesus always linked the two, and we should watch out for the presence of any such connection in other stories still to come in Luke's Gospel. Because of this, we ought to be looking for possible connections between sin and sickness even today, but not presume they exist. Where they do exist they must be taken into account with the love and compassion of Jesus.

Our problem today is that many people are in denial about this connection, for example, those who drink too much tend not to believe that they will have health problems as a consequence. More importantly, if we were to suggest to people who are ill that they should consider confessing sin, even politely and without presumption, then we would be told that this was inappropriate. Certainly, such a question would cause offence; indeed, some believe that to suggest that sin causes sickness implies that God is somehow punishing people for sin. Unfortunately, this attitude displays a rather skewed understanding of the nature of the world in which we live, and does not tie in with what is revealed in Genesis. God made the world good, but we experience it as bad, not because God wants to punish us, but because our world has become separated from God, and 'in Adam', people have chosen to rebel against the ways of God (Genesis 3).

So, Biblical teaching suggests that it is indeed an appropriate question to ask whether sin and sickness are connected. In our own day, it is perhaps only possible to deal with this issue by making a general appeal, as I do here, for people to remember that sin will often cause sickness, so if we become ill, it is at least worth our while examining ourselves before God. We can only answer such questions for ourselves, before God, and sometimes with the prayerful help of others. I write this as someone who has his own chronic illness and who has asked this of himself, and the results of my enquiry are mine alone to handle. If I had not, I would not dare write this.

We can also learn from the story of the paralysed man that real faith in Jesus paves the way for healing, as is shown here by those who brought the man to Jesus. Healing miracles are of course for the individual, but they are also a demonstration of the authority of Jesus and the power of God, and they are a witness given to those who receive them and see them. In our story today, the healing of the man forced people to think about who Jesus was, and in this case, they decided to honour Him, at least, for the moment. In this sense, the healing was 'evangelistic', and it pointed to the person and power of Jesus. Healing miracles will often do this, and they are an important part of the work of God's people, the church.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss the difficult question about the connection between sin and sickness. How would you define this?
2. Discuss the importance of the faith of the friends who brought the man to Jesus.
3. What is more important today, a ministry of forgiveness or a ministry of healing? What is the difference, in practice?

Topics covered by this text

- *The healing ministry*
- *The connection between sin and sickness*
- *The importance of faith in healing*

- *Worshipping God for what He has done*

Personal comments by author

I find it hard to write about this subject because for me, it is close to 'home'. I am someone who is chronically ill, and many people have prayed for my healing. Indeed, I have come across those who have indicated to me that they do not think I have been healed because I have un-confessed sin in my past. I could take great offence at this, but I have chosen to not to be offended. I must answer for myself, to the best of my ability. However, I will not stop writing what I believe to be the Biblical truth, which is that sin and sickness are often connected, even in ways we do not understand, and it is always worth exploring the question in our pursuit of godliness.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Check out your own thoughts about what we have been talking about here. Where do you stand personally on this issue of sin and sickness, and what do you feel has resulted from any sins in your past? I would not presume to suggest further, but ask the difficult question and trust in the Lord your God to guide you as you explore it.*
- *Pray for those who exercise a healing ministry in your church or in other places of ministry with which you have a connection, such as a healing centre.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, we thank You for the amazing grace of God by which we are constantly healed of our sins and sicknesses. We praise You for your forgiving and healing power, and we ask You to make this real in our lives as we confess our sins and appeal to you for healing now. Thank You, Jesus, thank You. AMEN
