

LEPROSY IN THE BIBLE

What comes to your mind when you hear the word leper? Someone who's looking scaly or has limbs or fingers or toes falling off? Someone who is an outcast?

In ancient times leprosy was a feared disease and the Bible speaks quite a lot about leprosy. The reason for this is not just because it was a physical disease that affected people in ancient times but also because it was a very visible type of what sin is and what it does to us as human beings.

In this article I'd like to look at this disease and how it parallels the spiritual disease of sin that we all battle with.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word translated as leprosy is tzaraath. In the New Testament leprosy is translated from the Greek word "lepros" meaning scaly. Leprosy today is known as Hansen's disease and it is an infectious bacterial disease.

Throughout history, few diseases have been as dreaded as leprosy. It was so common and severe among ancient peoples that God gave Moses extensive instructions to deal with it in Leviticus 13 and 14. Biblically, leprosy refers to several skin diseases and even some kinds of fungus, such as those found in the walls of houses and in clothing. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible in its article on leprosy describes it this way:

Leprosy was greatly feared by the Israelites, not only because of the physical damage done by the disease, but also because of the strict isolation laws applying to leprosy, making patients feel like feared outcasts of society...

Leprosy [in the Bible] appears in two principle forms. The first, and by far the more dangerous, is called lepromatous; and the other, more benign type is designated tuberculoid. Both start with discoloration of a patch of skin...

In the lepromatous type of leprosy, the patch may spread widely in all directions. Portions of the eyebrows may disappear. Spongy, tumor-like swellings grow on the face and body. The disease becomes systemic and involves the internal organs as well as the skin. Marked deformity of the hands and feet occur when the tissues between the bones deteriorate and disappear...

Untreated cases may be sick with lepromatous leprosy from ten to twenty years, death occurring from the disease itself...The tuberculoid type is less severe... [It] tends to be limited and even untreated cases heal completely in from one to three years.

This latter type is likely to be the one where lepers heal and then present themselves to the priests to check they are healed as per the instructions in Leviticus 14. Those instructions in Leviticus 14 concerning getting the all clear from the priests are the ones that Jesus referred to when he told the ten lepers he'd healed to go show themselves to the priests.

Leprosy is spread between people. Though only mildly contagious it is believed to occur through a cough or contact with fluid from the nose of an infected person. Leprosy occurs

more commonly among those living in poverty in third world nations and is believed to be transmitted by respiratory droplets. Cases are very rare in the developed world today as leprosy is now curable by antibiotics.

Leprosy vividly illustrates sin and its fruits. The disease's effects on the body demonstrate the effects of sin on the mind. Leprosy represents God's view of sin, as detestable, deforming, and unclean. Both leprosy and sin begin small then grow relentlessly until they infect the whole person and they can be spread to others.

They also both cause heart-rending social problems, as the quarantine laws suggest. Families are often split. Lepers suffer both the disease and being ostracised from society. In the end, they both destroy their victims' lives.

In the Old Testament there are three notable cases of leprosy. The first is the punishment of leprosy that fell on Miriam after she murmured against Moses. Another famous case of leprosy was the punishment on Uzziah after he offered incense in the Temple presumptuously. The third notable example of leprosy is that of Naaman, the Syrian general who was healed after following Elijah's instructions to wash himself in the Jordan River seven times.

In the New Testament there are two specific miracles where Jesus healed people who were leprous. One of those is found in Luke 17 and verses 12 to 19. Ten lepers were cleansed by Jesus and only one returned to thank him personally. The one leper who did thank him was a Samaritan who fell at Jesus' feet to thank him for his healing.

The other specific healing of leprosy noted in the New Testament is found in Luke 5 and we'll pick up the story from verse 12 where we read:

"And it happened, as He was in a certain city, behold, a man full of leprosy! And seeing Jesus, he fell on his face and begged Him, saying, Lord, if You will, You can cleanse me. And stretching out the hand, He touched him, saying, I will! Be clean! And immediately the leprosy departed from him. And He commanded him, Tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a testimony to them."

Jesus told after he was healed to go to the priests and give a gift or offering as Moses commanded. In Leviticus 14 after a leper was checked over and given the all clear by the priests he was to offer lambs for a sin offering and a burnt offering and flour and oil. The offering of a sin offering here seems to indicate a typological connection between sin and leprosy which pictures the destructive nature of what sin is like. We also see here Jesus upheld Old Testament laws, even insignificant ones as these, and did not do away with Old Testament laws as claimed by some people.

Let's notice the three actions of the leper in this story. As we go through these three actions consider them in regards to how you view your own sins.

First, he was convinced of his desperate condition. Do we excuse our sins or do we recognise the desperate need we have to be saved from our sins?

Secondly, he humbled himself and cast himself on Jesus' mercy.

And the third thing the leper did was that he exercised faith in the power of Jesus to cleanse him.

If you notice in all the miracles referring to leprosy in each occasion it refers to the healing of leprosy as being cleansed, the same term often used speaking of us being cleansed of our sins which contaminate our minds and our hearts.

Luke in describing the man as "full" of leprosy implies that he was about to die. In this advanced stage of leprosy, he was living apart from other people. According to Leviticus 13:45, he had to wear a cloth over his mouth and cry, "Unclean, unclean."

In this situation, as in others, Christ performs a miracle in which there can be no doubt that God alone healed him. God's healing power is most obviously seen in our lives when He provides deliverance in a "hopeless" situation. He often works this way with us, allowing trials to become increasingly worse before He works His will. Though He seems deaf to our prayers as the situation deteriorates, He may simply be letting the situation progress so that we have no doubt about who has come to our aid and whose power solved the crisis when He does intervene.

During one of our local Young Adults Bible Studies Drew Efimov asked the young ones, "Have you ever considered yourself as a spiritual leper?". I jokingly responded, "Yeah, I often feel like my life is falling apart like a leper."

Now, in addition to the swellings of skin and deformity there is one other symptom of leprosy that imitates what sin does to our hearts. Wikipedia says that it causes "a lack of ability to feel pain and thus loss of parts of extremities due to repeated injuries or infection due to unnoticed wounds."

Further destruction follows solely because the warning system of pain is gone. Interestingly, the Bible tells us that sin makes a person unfeeling as well. We are told in Ezekiel 36 that when God will convert the nation of Israel that he takes out their heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh. They go from having an unfeeling heart to a living, pulsing, feeling heart.

In Ephesians 4:18-19 Paul speaks of the "hardness of men's hearts, and that they have become callous and have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness."

Let's look at a related verse over in 1 Timothy 4:2. The apostle Paul here writes: "speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron."

If we are not careful we can easily sear our consciences if we keep doing sins over and over again. God has given us a conscience that when properly educated to what is right and wrong is our internal warning system to stay away from sin which can harm us and others. If we ignore our conscience and keep on sinning we can sear our conscience and lose all feeling of guilt.

I have seen this in my own life. I can think of a couple of sins that I have particularly struggled with over the years. With one of them whenever I gave in to it I felt dirty and guilt-ridden afterwards. With the other which is just as bad if not worse I had little feeling of guilt

when I gave in to it. In each case I would repent afterwards but the lack of the feeling of guilt for the second sin was due to the much higher frequency that I had committed that sin.

That said, even people in the church can go to the next stage Paul spoke about here where they become deliberately hypocritical to the point where don't even recognise what they have done is sin. They think they are OK with God but are blinded and have no sense of feeling or guilt over their own sins. If we ever reach this stage with any sin we are in deep trouble.

We need to have an educated conscience and know from the Bible what is right and wrong and not lean on our own understanding. And we need to have a soft and tender conscience where we can recognise quickly when we have sinned and turn back to God.

We shouldn't be blissfully unaware of sins and problems we have that our spouses and those close to us can all too easily see.

James in his epistle tells us that godly wisdom is "willing to yield". When others close to us point out things to us are we willing to yield and change or do we change the subject and do nothing about the problem?

In conclusion, leprosy is a contagious bacterial disease that deforms and causes loss of feeling. The disease's effects on the body demonstrate the effects of sin on our hearts and minds. Let's be mindful of guarding our hearts and minds against the destructive effects of the spiritual leprosy of sin and seek the cleansing from sin offered by God through the sacrifice of Christ and the washing of the Word and the Holy Spirit.