

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE MIRACLE OF THE TEN LEPERS

The Apostle Paul in describing the condition of lost, unregenerate people twice declares that one of their disgusting traits is *ingratitude* or *unthankfulness* (Romans 1:21 and 2 Timothy 3:2). “Ungrateful! John Milton spoke of *base ingratitude* (*Comus*, line 776). William Shakespeare wrote, ‘Blow, blow thou winter wind; thou art not so unkind as man’s ingratitude’ (*As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7). The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky said of man, ‘If he is not stupid, he is monstrously ungrateful! Phenomenally ungrateful. In fact, I believe that the best definition of man is the ungrateful biped.’”¹

This miracle, Bock observes, “appears to be a simple healing account. But this miracle is not like most other miracles, since the healing itself is not emphasized as much as the reaction to it. As with all five miracles in the journey section, the miracle is less important than its results. Jesus heals as he continues his journey to meet his fate in Jerusalem. Luke often notes the journey’s progress, but the notes become more frequent as Jerusalem nears (9:50-52; 13:22, 33; 14:25; 17:11; 18:35; 19:1, 11, 28, 41, 44). Jesus is passing between Samaria and Galilee. Moving east to west, his journey of destiny continues. That he would meet a Samaritan in this setting is not surprising.”²

I. **THE SETTING.** From the border-land Jesus struck into Samaria, and, following the preconcerted route, reached a Samaritan village. It had already been visited by two of His seventy forerunners, and He expected as the result of their ministry to find a welcome for Himself and His message. His expectation, however, was disappointed. The inhabitants, apprised of His approach, were up in arms against Him and refused Him admission, *because*, explains the Evangelist, *His face was in the direction of Jerusalem*. It is evident that their unfriendliness was more than the habitual antagonism betwixt Jew and Samaritan, and a reasonable explanation lies to hand. When the Galileans went up to the Holy City at the festal seasons, they travelled through Samaria, and their passage was resented by the populace and frequently occasioned hostile demonstrations. At length Jesus reached the borders of Samaria, that despised and hostile territory. His coming was expected, since the Seventy had gone two by two before Him, preparing His way; and, as He approached a certain village, He found a company of ten lepers awaiting Him. They knew that He would pass that way and had stationed themselves there in the hope that He would heal them. *Jesus, Master*, they cried when they espied Him, standing in their uncleanness afar off, *have pity on us!* And it was indeed a piteous spectacle. In ordinary circumstances *Jews had no dealings with Samaritans*; but in that company there was at least one Samaritan. Partners in affliction, Jew and Samaritan herded together in a brotherhood of misery.”³

II. **THE EVENT.** Written stories in English seldom begin sentences with a **conjunction**, so it is entirely appropriate that the NIV begins only two sentences with one. The story begins with “now” (11a), which can be thought of as an actualizing reorienter; there is some relation to what happened before, but there are also a number of changes in the scene as

the new episode begins.⁴ Luke's language reflects his medical background.⁵ He calls them *leprous men*. The Greek reads *leproi andres*. The word leper is used as an adjective describing the men. The NIV and ESV miss this, but the NASB reads "leprous men," and the CSB has "ten men with leprosy." This dreaded skin disease had not only physical but social implications because it meant complete isolation from society. The leper lost all contact from his community. His only companions were other lepers. "The miracle before us has its own peculiarities. Ten lepers bound together in a common misery forgot their national differences. Although one was a Samaritan and the other nine Jews, they were poor outcasts with one common need (2 Kings 7:3). Together they formed a *piteous group, with clothes rent, heads bowed, and hair disheveled, a cloth bound strangely on the lower face and upper lip*. A common disease put them all on one level, and they were only too conscious of their need. The great leveler of all is sin, of which leprosy, as we have seen, is in Scripture an expressive type. *There is no difference, for all have sinned* (Romans 3:23)."⁶

III. **THE MIRACLE.** Trench, in his classic work on the Miracles of Jesus, paints this scene: "And when He saw them, He said unto them, *Go, show yourselves unto the priests*. Most instructive is it to observe the differences in our Lord's dealing with the different sufferers and mourners brought in contact with Him; the *manifold* wisdom of the great Physician, varying his treatment according to the varying needs of his patients; how He seems to resist a strong faith, that He may make it stronger yet (Matt. xv. 23-26); how He goes to meet a weak faith, lest it should prove altogether too weak in the trial (Mark v. 56); how one He forgives first, and heals after (Matt ix. 2, 6); and another, whose heart could only be reached through an earthly benefit, He first heals, and only then forgives (John v. 8, 14). There are here, too, no doubt reasons why these ten are dismissed as yet uncleansed, and bidden to show themselves to the priests; whilst that other, whose healing was before recorded (Matt. viii. 2-4), is first cleansed, and not till afterwards bidden to present himself in the temple. These reasons I think we can perceive. There was here, in the first place, a keener trial of faith. With no signs of restoration as yet upon them, they were bidden to do that which implied that they were perfectly restored – to undertake a journey, which would prove ridiculous, a labour altogether in vain, unless Christ's word and promise proved true. In their prompt obedience they declared plainly that some weak beginnings of faith were working in them: the germs of a higher faith, which yet in the end was only perfectly unfolded in one. So much they declared, for they must have known very well that they were not sent to the priests for these to heal them. That was no part of the priest's office; who did not cure, but only pronounce cured; who cleansed, yet not as ridding the leper of his disease, but only as authoritatively proclaiming that this had disappeared, and restoring him, through certain ceremonial observances, to the fellowship of the congregation (Lev. xiv. 3, 4). Then, too, as there was a keener trial of faith than that to which the leper of Matt. viii. 2 was exposed, so also there was here a stronger temptation to ingratitude. *It came to pass, that as they went, they were cleansed*. When these poor men first felt and found the benefit whereof they were partakers, it is little likely that they were still in the immediate presence of their benefactor; more probably, already out of his sight, and some way upon their journey. It was not therefore an easy and costless effort to return and render thanks to Him. At all events it was an effort greater than the most of them cared to make."⁷

IV. **REACTION AND RESPONSE.** "The effects," notes Simeon, "however produced upon them were not alike in all – [Nine of them prosecuted their journey mindful only of their own comfort. Having obtained all that they wished, they forgot their Benefactor, nor ever thought of paying the debt which gratitude demanded. One, however was more sensible of the obligations conferred upon him, and burned with a desire to acknowledge the

mercies he had received.”⁸ Quoting Trench again, “All who have studied this terrible disease tell us that an almost total failure of voice is one of the symptoms which accompany it. It is not then for nothing that we are presently told of one who had been restored to health that he returned *with a loud voice* glorifying God; while here the earnestness with which on the part of all the boon was sought, is sufficiently indicated by the fact that they *lifted up their voices*, found such an utterance as it might have seemed beforehand the disease would have denied them.”⁹

CONCLUSION: Laidlaw, in his valuable study, writes: “*And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. And He said unto him, Arise, go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole.* No doubt the nine had a confidence in Jesus’ power which carried them through the test set them. They had that outside faith which sufficed to trust His rod for healing. But they had no regard either to the Divine glory or the redeeming might of Jesus. They took His cleansing of them as a mere common thing. At first the miracles of Christ had been fresh and startling. But now, as His love repeated them, men did with Christ’s miracles as they do with His Father’s bounties – see nothing Divine in them, because they are so common. This their unbelief, their seeing no glory of God in which Jesus did to them, is proved by their unthankfulness: *They returned not to give glory to God.* Jesus Himself, who knew what was in man, was astonished at this instance of ingratitude and irreligion. Unbelief with its baneful blight counterworks the work of God at every point. Times and places there were when Jesus could do no miracle because of men’s unbelief. Then, again, when He wrought them abundantly, there were men who saw His miracles and did not believe. Now it has come even to this: there are men experiencing the miracle in themselves and yielding no homage to their Healer. Thus unbelief brings forth its bitter fruit of ingratitude. Even in Christians it makes melancholy havoc, blinding them to the Divine hand in their deliverances, leading them to cheapen God’s marvelous grace, and coldly trace to second causes the change that once they rejoiced over as life from the dead. Of men at large unbelief and ingratitude make heathens. It is pronounced to be the very sin of the heathen that *when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹As cited by J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary I* (Baker, 1996), p. 162.

²D. L. Bock, *Luke: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (IVP, 1996), p. 281.

³This is adapted from D. Smith, *The Days of His Flesh: The Earthly Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, Chapter 36, “The Journey Through Samaria” (rpt. Baker, 1976), pp. 322-325.

⁴S. H. Levinsohn, “Eight Constraints On the Interpretation of Luke 17:11-19.” This paper was presented at the International Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature held in Vienna, Austria in July 2014.

⁵In Luke 5:2, Jesus heals a man full of leprosy by touching him. The language is slightly different, as Hobart explains, “It would seem that St. Luke, by employing two distinct terms (*plaras lepras* and *lepros*) in his account of these two miracles intended to draw a distinction between the diseases in each case, either that the disease was of a more aggravated type in one case than in the other, or else of a different variety. Now we know that leprosy, even as early as the time of Hippocrates, had assumed three different forms (*halphos, leuka, melas*), and it is probably that in the time of our Lord the disease, as it existed in Palestine, did not differ materially from the Hippocratic record of it.” W.K. Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (rpt. Baker, 1954), p. 5.

⁶H. Lockyer, *All The Miracles of The Bible* (Zondervan, 1961), p. 230.

⁷R. C. Trench, *Notes on The Miracles and Parables of Our Lord* (rpt. Revell, 1953), p. 360.

⁸Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines on The Whole Bible III* (rpt. Zondervan, 1947), p. 11.

⁹Trench, *op. cit.*

¹⁰John Laidlaw, *The Miracles of Our Lord: Expository and Homiletic* (rpt. Baker, 1956), p. 320.