

What is Faith? Faith leads to Restoration

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Date: 26 April 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, very good morning and welcome to our church service this morning. Great to be able to be with you.

We pray that together we would hear God speak in his words and that we would enjoy being able to worship at our homes.

I want to begin with words from a letter that Peter wrote, a friend of Jesus, called Peter, 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 3 and 4.

And here we read these wonderful words. Now we're going to read in our Bibles a short reading today from Matthew chapter 8.

Matthew chapter 8. And we are going to read just the first four verses. And hopefully the words will come up on the screen as well so you can read along if you don't have access to a Bible.

[1 : 26] When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said, be clean. Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, see that you don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded as a testimony to them.

And we'll leave our reading there. So we've been thinking, we started last week thinking, what is faith? And again, we're on that topic this week, thinking about the fact that true faith leads to deep restoration.

And we're going to see that in the life of this man that Jesus meets. I want to begin with a little bit of travel. Years ago, I went with some school friends to Crete.

And we happened to visit an island called Spinalonga. I'm sure that's not how you say it. I'm not sure if any of you have been there. Well, Spinalonga was a leper colony for the nation of Greece from 1913 until 1957.

[2 : 46] At its peak, there were some 400 inhabitants. Those who were suffering from horrible boils and those debilitating nerve conditions.

And so you have the loss of sensation. Those inhabitants had been shunned by their communities, often by their families out of fear as well.

There was a great stigma attached. And so when a Greek contracted leprosy, their property was seized by the state.

Their citizenship was cancelled. They were then transported to Spinalonga. They received no medical care.

And effectively, they were deported there to die. An insight into the fear that leprosy brought. And the tragic life of a leper.

[3 : 49] In our current crisis, I wonder if this is the first time that we've been able to, as in a sense, enter into, even in a tiny part, the life of a leper.

The tragedy and the loneliness of that kind of life. We discovered in the Old Testament and the New Testament that someone with leprosy, they had to wear a sign saying they were unclean. If they were close to someone else, they had to shout, unclean, unclean.

They weren't allowed contact with anyone apart from a fellow leper. They had to live outside the community. They would be avoided to avoid potentially contracting the illness.

So theirs was a self-isolation that lasted until death. And we can begin to feel just something of what that must have been like.

Now, Matthew in his gospel, in chapters 5 to 7 that we didn't read, last week we were in chapter 4, 5 to 7, we're presented with Jesus, the amazing teacher.

[4 : 58] He preaches the most famous sermon in history, the Sermon on the Mount. And now in chapters 8 to 10, he focuses our attention on Jesus with amazing power.

There are 10 miracle stories. And among those miracle stories, we're also going to see evidence of faith. So today, let's see together, how do we see the faith of this leper?

What does faith look like in his case? And what does the restoration of Jesus look like for the leper? And then what does that mean for us? So let's begin with some lessons from a leper on faith.

The first thing to notice is that he is humble. Now, as Matthew tells the story of Jesus, we see the focus changes, as it were moving from a panorama where there are huge crowds who follow Jesus up the mountain and he teaches and then they follow him back down the mountain.

Matthew changes now to a zoom lens, focuses us in verse 2 on a man with leprosy. And just before we move on, that's a helpful reminder of how God sees us and how God deals with us.

[6 : 13] He doesn't see us just as a mass of humanity. He wants to deal with you, to speak with you, to know you personally. Now, what do we learn about this leper?

Well, we're told that this man with leprosy, he came and verse 2, he knelt before Jesus. This is the posture of a lesser before a greater.

As it were, he recognises, I am the servant and Jesus is master, Jesus is king. Notice too, there's no demand on his part.

What does he say to Jesus? In verse 2, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. So he knows that Jesus has the power to heal.

But, he doesn't presume on it. He doesn't stand before Jesus and demand, this is my right that you heal me. He doesn't know, will Jesus be like everyone else?

[7 : 20] If I come close to him, will he body swerve around me? So we see faith is humble in the life of this leper.

And second, it's very basic, but it's very important to recognise that he comes in his need. Now let's just imagine for a moment what is involved in this leper coming to Jesus in his need.

He is going to most likely have to face the stigma and the disapproval of others, perhaps to see the fear in their face as he walks by.

He will need to announce, he will need to shout his uncleanness in order for him to gain access to Jesus. And even while he's on that journey, he knows there is that possibility of being rejected.

So then what is it that motivates him to take this risk? Well, he has leprosy. Leprosy has often been described as the death before death.

[8 : 33] So he knows his great need. And, as his words tell us, he knows Jesus is his only hope of salvation and restoration.

So he comes humbly and he comes in his need. Now let's apply these lessons to our lives for a moment. I wonder if today you find yourself tuning in to this church service, maybe even to other church services out of a sense of desperation.

Where it's not leprosy, but perhaps it's the COVID virus and its impact that's turning your life upside down. And maybe you realise you need help that comes from beyond yourself.

Well, let me say that to come to God to come to Jesus is to come to the right source of help. I was thinking about the FA Cup hymn, Abide With Me.

Some of the words that we find there are helpful. So in the first verse we hear, when other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me.

[9 : 56] And then in verse 2, the prayer continues, change and decay in all around I see, O thou who changes not, abide with me.

When we feel there's no one else that can help us, when we feel everything, it is turning to dust and decay, it is wise to look to the unchanging and good God, to Jesus as the good saviour.

Christian faith is about humble trust and dependence, and not just sometimes, but all of the time.

From the beginning of the Christian life to the end of the Christian life, we never outgrow that need of Jesus, our saviour and elder brother, that need of God, our Father, that need of the Holy Spirit to be working in our lives.

on our daily exercise break as a family, we quite often find ourselves either cycling or walking to one of the places nearby, we're near Blackford Hill and Holyrood Park, and almost without fail, the boys will find some rocks to climb on, and even though they're getting older and more confident, sometimes I'll still hear one of them say, Dad, help me, as they're struggling to get up a particular rock face.

No matter what our age, no matter what our stage in the Christian life, whether we are looking to begin, have just begun or have been a Christian for years, that needs to be our attitude.

[11 : 48] Father God, help me. I need wisdom to know how to live well, I need your peace today, I need your protection today, I need to hear your voice above all the other voices in my life today.

Father God, help me. Faith is humble and dependent all the time. And also, before we move on, leprosy is helpful in providing a picture of our greatest need.

If we want to learn lessons, one lesson that this man can teach is our great need. So the Bible is really clear about the reality of sin, our disobedience against God and against his word, our rejection of his rule in our life, our failure to love God and to love others as we should so that we are by nature without Jesus spiritually dead even while we live.

We find ourselves separated because of sin from life with God, that's how we were made, and we are facing his judgment and the certain reality of eternal separation from God and all that is good. Our condition is serious. And just as it was with leprosy, so with us it will take a miracle to cure us by ourselves.

[13 : 31] We cannot change that condition. And that's where the Bible offers such good news to us, because it presents to us this miracle of God's saving grace.

And we see that at the cross of Jesus, where Jesus will give his own life, he will die so that we might live. He will take on himself our sin and its punishment so that we might be forgiven.

He will face being abandoned so we can be adopted into the family of God, restored to the life that we were made for.

So there is good news even as we see the bad news of our own condition. So having looked at the faith of the leper, it's important that we look at the deep restoration of Jesus.

There are two highly significant details for the leper and for us to take out of this short reading. The first is the touch of Jesus.

[14 : 38] Verse three, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said, be clean. Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.

some of you I know are finding as the days and weeks go by that this is a time of real hardship because you feel starved of company and maybe especially starved of contact.

We have in our own personal experience stories and we know from news reports stories of babies being born and families who cannot visit, loved ones being buried and friends and family members that can't gather.

Friendships are being missed. Important events are being cancelled because we cannot be close together and sometimes that two metre separation can feel like a Grand Canyon, can't it?

I wonder how long had this man been facing the reality of no contact and total isolation.

[15 : 57] Imagine his unending loneliness. We have hope that it will return. This man had no hope outside of a miracle.

So in Jesus' touch there is mercy compassion, there is love and there is welcome.

There is so much going on here and it reminds us that we are made for relationship and Jesus our creator knows that and he lovingly brings restoration.

relationship with God. And what has Jesus come to bring?

Jesus brings to this man's life the very presence of God because he is the son of God and he brings the touch of God, the healing touch of God into this man's life.

[17 : 03] And let me say that Jesus wants to do that for you too. Jesus doesn't change. He is still willing to respond to our need if we come to him in faith.

And so we are invited to ask him for the help that he is willing to provide. The second thing to notice about the deep restoration of Jesus is perhaps the surprising detail of verse four.

when Jesus said to the man see that you don't tell anyone but go show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded as a testimony to them.

So what's this about? You see Jesus could have sent the man on his way as it were saying well go and enjoy your family. That's a wonderful thing. Be part of the community is a great thing. Perhaps find a job.

But Jesus knows that is not enough for true restoration because still when his body is healed still there will be discontent still there would be disappointment and ultimately death would come.

[18 : 13] So verse four is showing us that Jesus wants the man's restoration to be deeper. How do we see that? Because his first priority is that the man go to the temple.

The man offer a sacrifice to God. So here's what's happening. The miracle that Jesus works of healing the man makes praise and worship possible.

In stretching out his hands to heal the leper he is restoring the man to his place among the people of God. Now he can worship again.

And that's the greatest restoration that Jesus can bring. As we bring this to a conclusion let's think about us receiving this deep restoration of Jesus.

It's tempting I think to seek God in a crisis for some kind of boost to see us through and then we'll go back to the way things were.

[19 : 24] But this little story here reminds us that God, that Jesus wants to go deeper. He would change your heart and change your desires, not just in the short term, but for the long term and for all eternity.

He wants to bring a deeper healing, maybe to one that you didn't even realise that you needed. Maybe to help illustrate this, I was thinking about last winter.

So I have had asthma since childhood and last winter, I got a fairly significant chest infection and after a few days I dragged myself to the local GP, effectively because I wanted relief to be able to breathe, to be able to sleep, all those kind of things.

Well the nurse and the GP took one look at me and they said yeah we can do that but we want to go deeper. So I got my antibiotics and some time off work but also over the course of a couple of weeks they did some really helpful things.

They gave me new insight that I never had really about the damage that asthma untreated can do to your heart and to your lungs. They gave me a new inhaler and gave me even a new technique for taking my inhaler.

[20 : 49] I wanted just a bit of short term relief but six months on I am so thankful, so thankful they wanted to go deeper. My quality of life has been enhanced no end.

You might want short term comfort but Jesus would want you to go, would want to go deeper in your life.

Jesus knows your greatest need and mine love and God is going to end our isolation from God. That Jesus would deal with the sin that creates a barrier between us as sinful people and a perfectly holy God.

We were made to know God and his love and his joy but sin is a barrier that isolates Jesus wants to deal with that. That's why he went to the cross and he calls us to faith so that barrier would be removed.

And also Jesus knows where you will find deepest joy. Deepest joy is found in enjoying the glorious love and life of our eternal God.

[22 : 00] Jesus knows that the love and the joy that we are looking for ultimately can only be found in him. Nothing else lasts. Nothing else compares.

So this Jesus who stretched out his hand to restore a leper to community and community with God would stretch out those hands again at the cross so that you and I by trusting in Jesus we could be forgiven we could be made clean we could be given new life.

This story teaches us that it takes a touch of Jesus great love to produce deep restoration. So let me encourage you whoever you are don't settle for less.

We're all searching for a love and a happiness that is real and that lasts for a hope that we can rely on for a peace that is deep and real.

can I tell you that what you're looking for is found in Jesus. This Jesus who is willing and able to heal us and to restore us.

[23 : 21] This Jesus who went to the cross to bring you into fellowship with God. So come to him in your need whatever your need is today.

Come with humble dependent faith and receive his great love.