



dialogommentary

atonement as connectedness

Luke 5.¹²⁻¹³ (part 1)

text

¹²*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

¹³And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, "I will: be thou clean."

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. ¹⁴And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

introduction

In our previous three posts to this page—meditations on Atonement, all—we have examined the choice of the word, "atonement" to represent Jesus' salvific work, the meaning of the word as we understand and use it, and how the word represents the central and eternal character trait of Divinity.¹

In these meditations, we have suggested that atonement is best seen as "connectedness," "attachment," "linkage," and "unity." The word, atonement, reflects God's feelings of connectedness to humans. This divine connectedness to others is central and internal to God's character. It is as eternal as He is. It existed before Jesus' earthly ministry and will exist for all time.

The central purpose of Jesus' ministry was to reveal rather than create Divinity's connectedness to humans. Jesus' revelation of divine connectedness was immeasurably superior to any other ministry, before or after, which attempted or attempts to reveal the true nature and extent of Divinity's connectedness to humanity. Jesus' divine connectedness to humanity was exhibited in his incarnation and in his every word, thought, and action from the cradle to the grave. Having been resurrected, having ascended into heaven, and having sat down on the right hand of God, Jesus, as his Father, continues to feel connected to humans and continues to act upon those feelings for the benefit and advancement of the human race.

If they are to be happy, endure, and progress, human beings must develop the divine character of

¹ "Meditation 2: The Choice of the Word, Atonement," "Meditation 3: The Meaning of The Word, Atonement," "Meditation 4: Atonement as the Central, Eternal and Divine Characteristic of God"

connectedness and act upon that character in this life and on into eternity. There can be no enduring and progressive existence without, first, connectedness to Deity, and then connectedness to all others, indeed, to all that exists in nature and in the cosmos. It is impossible, then, to overestimate the value of Jesus' earthly ministry and the New Testament Gospels that report his lifelong example and revelation of at-one-ment.

In this post, we utilize *dialogommentary*² to examine an example of atonement as connectedness from Jesus' earthly ministry as recorded in Luke's Gospel. As a picture is worth a thousand words, we want to examine atonement as connectedness utilizing scripture passages from the life of Jesus rather than passages that address atonement as connectedness in principle. We will look at passages that describe atonement as connectedness in principle in future meditations.

Dialogommentary

Less than a month after Cyn Phil Mann's last tutorial with the redeemed Nipdeh-Liyshua, Mann went to the doctor's office to obtain a prescription for what he thought was little more than a rather mild skin rash on his arm. But the next thing Mann knew, he was whisked away from the doctor's office and found himself sitting in a sterilized hospital room, quarantined from everyone else in the facility. At first he thought that his wife, Rachel, might be pulling one of her regular practical jokes on him. However, as the hours dragged on, Mann began to doubt his initial assumptions. He also began to grow impatient. Just when he thought he could take no more, and considered leaving the room to search for someone to explain the ridiculous delay, an elderly man stepped into the room.

The elderly man's countenance glowed brightly. His robe was a pure bright white. His hair was pure bright white. But the most striking feature of the man was not his brightness but his eyes. There was an amazing amount of kindness and gentleness in those eyes. Those gentle eyes turned remorsefully upon Mann. The elderly man considered the confused patient for several moments before finally speaking in a slow and measured tone.

² "Dialogommentary" is a word of my own invention. It is a cross between dialogue and commentary. In *dialogommentary*, I use the literary genre of dialogue to offer commentary on scripture. This particular *dialogommentary* is the seventh in a series of twenty-five. In the series, entitled, "Who Could Have Supposed? The Atonement Dialogues of Cyn Phil Mann," various scripture characters visit my protagonist, usually referred to simply as Mann, and offer instruction on the meaning of atonement.

Serious commentary, often, admittedly, somewhat stodgy, is difficult for many. In *dialogommentary*, I try to lighten the mood and add a bit of humor. Teaching and entertaining seem like compatible enterprises to me. If, for some, my *dialogommentaries* seem inappropriately light for the seriousness of the topic, they can always find me saying the same things in my meditations and homilies, more serious fare.

“I am very sorry to be the one to break the news to you, but better me than some others who might not understand so well.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “Cyn Phil Mann, you have been pronounced unclean.”

Notwithstanding the gentleness and sincerity of the older gentleman, Mann let his peevishness get the best of him. With more than a trace of sarcasm, Mann retorted with a, “Well that certainly clears matters up for me!”

“We’ll explain everything, I promise, Mann. For now, we’re just happy to have gotten you somewhere safe.”

“Somewhere safe? What’s wrong with where I was, at the doctor’s office?”

“It’s contaminated, defiled,” he said with sorrow. “It’s unclean, and unholy.”

With what Mann thought was remarkable restraint, he simply responded with, “Excuse me?”

“You should understand, Mann, that this is all normal procedure for cases such as yours.”

Mann narrowly eyeing his visitor. “What’s that supposed to mean: ‘cases such as yours’? Just what kind of case am I?”

“As I said, Mann, you’re unclean. You’re unholy, unworthy, and defiled.”

Mann looked anxiously around him. He didn’t know how to respond to that. He was, of course—unworthy that is, disgracefully, humiliatingly so. But what did his rash and this environment have to do with his spiritual weaknesses?

Sensing his confusion, the elderly man spoke soothingly. “It isn’t, at this point, life threatening, I assure you. But you have been quarantined. And, I’m afraid, you will remain quarantined until you are better; until you are no longer offensive to God and are no longer a danger to others.”

This pronouncement, along with the pressures of his previous quarantined solitude, was finally too much for Mann. He began to weep and plead. “I’m so sorry. I’ve tried so hard to be good. Please, please tell me. What sin, what uncleanness caused God to cast me out? I’ll work on it, I promise.”

“Leprosy,” explained the man with a single word.

Mann stopped weeping abruptly. He wiped his eyes and sniffled. “I must have misheard you. I thought you said leprosy.”

“I did, Mann. Your rash, your sin—it’s leprosy.”

Mann looked down at his arm. “You’re kidding, right.”

“Leprosy is no joking matter, Mann. No joking matter, indeed—very, very serious business, leprosy.” He shook his head sorrowfully. “I can imagine that this must all come as a terrible shock.”

“Can you? I’m sorry, but I don’t think you can. You’ve never been whisked off to some unknown location without wife or friends only to be informed that you are under quarantine because you are unworthy.”

“Actually, I have.”

The man’s sincerity silenced Mann. After a moment or two of profound silence, the elderly man extended his hand. “Perhaps you’ve heard of me. My name is Mezraim.”

Shaking Mezraim’s hand, Mann shook his head slowly. “No. Sorry. I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of you.”

Mezraim took a medical chart from a pure bright white table and handed it to Mann. “This is my medical history.”

Mann looked briefly at the chart and then looked up at Mezraim. “Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴?”

Mezraim nodded, remaining silent as Mann puzzled it out.

Suddenly, Mann brightened. “So, you’re telling me that you are the man “full of leprosy” that approached Jesus?” This came out as half question, half statement of fact. Mann hoped very much that he hadn’t just shaken hands with a leper.

“I am.”

“So, that would make you the leper that Nipdeh said would visit me.”

“Yes. I was the man ‘*wholly* infected with leprosy.’³ Mezraim am I.”

“I take it that your name, ‘Mezraim,’ has something to do with leprosy?”

“Indeed it does, Mann. Mezraim is the plural of leprosy. Because my case of leprosy was so very, very severe, everyone called me ‘Leprosies.’”

“That was rather cruel, wasn’t it?”

“Leprosy is a cruel disease, Mann. Perhaps you have not fully appreciated the power of Jesus’ act in healing me because you have not fully appreciated the significance and meaning of leprosy within my own cultural and spiritual context. I’m here to help you do so. But, before we turn to the New Testament’s account of my leprosy, and Jesus’ response to it, we need to take a look at the Old Testament’s view of leprosy, and how it portrays God’s reaction to those infected

³ Luke 5.¹², author’s translation.

with leprosy.”

“Will it help me with my own infection?”

“That, Mann, is entirely up to you.”

Mezraim paused a moment to collect and order his tutorial on leprosy. “I think I’d like to begin, Mann, by having you consider the life of a leper during Old Testament times. What, for example, was their status in society and religion? And, more importantly, what was their status with God?”

“It wasn’t good, I know that much.”

“Indeed it was not. Here,” he said handing Mann another medical chart, “this might refresh your memory.”

Mann examined the chart for several moments. He moved it closer to his face and squinted. He held it out at some distance from his body and squinted even harder. “I’m sorry Mezraim, but I can’t read this. The handwriting is—I’m sorry to say this—atrocious.”

Mezraim took the chart from Mann and reviewed the entry. “Aaron was an incredibly gifted speaker, but his handwriting, as you say, was ‘atrocious.’ That’s why God wrote on the stone tablets with his own finger, you know. He wanted to make sure it was legible. Men, even the best of them, have a way of making a mess of God’s revelations. Anyway, let me read this description of leprosy for you.

“‘When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, a scab, or bright spot, and it be in the skin of his flesh like the plague of leprosy; then he shall be brought unto Aaron the priest, or unto one of his sons the priest: and the priest shall look on the plague in the skin of the flesh: and when the hair in the plague is turned white, and the plague in sight be deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is a plague of leprosy: and the priest shall look on him, and pronounce him unclean.’”⁴

“Hold up there, Mezraim. Just give it to me straight, in plain English.”

“Sorry. I sometimes forget how technical the book of Leviticus appears to the untrained.”

“It can also be just a teeny-weeny bit boring, if I may speak candidly.”

“There are some very important messages in the book of Leviticus, Mann.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Mezraim.”

⁴ Leviticus 13.²⁻³

After searching around the chart for a minute, Mezraim put his finger on another selection. “Let’s try this.

““And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.””⁵

“I know about that, Mezraim. But we know today that leprosy isn’t all that contagious. Why the quarantine, then? And why declare the leper—why declare *me*—‘unclean’ for a simple skin ailment?”

“Well, it certainly is true that we did not understand the physical nature of the ailment as well as you do today. But are you so sure that the quarantine is the result of our fear of contagion?”

“I just assumed, you know.”

“If ‘*I* may speak candidly,’ you assume too much, Mann. Your scripture reading is a tad on the sloppy side on this point.” Mezraim handed Mann the medical chart. “What is the reason given for the leper being required to ‘dwell alone; without the camp’?”

Mann reread the selection. “Now that you mention it, I’m not sure.”

“Notice, Mann, that leprosy is uncleanness of a class that includes any type of bodily discharge as well as any contact with a corpse.

““Command the children of Israel, that they put out of the camp every leper, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead: both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; *that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell.*””⁶

“Now tell me, why were lepers made to dwell ‘without the camp’? Stay in the text, Mann. Let it do the talking.”

“Because they ‘defiled’ the camp?”

⁵ Leviticus 13.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶

⁶ Numbers 5.²⁻³, emphasis added.

“Correct. And why were the Israelites worried about defiling the camp?”

“Well, apart from the obvious, the suggestion seems to be that it was because God was thought to dwell ‘in the midst’ of the camp.”

“Exactly. And what do you think would happen if God, walking in the midst of the camp, came upon something unclean, including a leper?”

“As far as the Old Testament is concerned, such a scenario is simply unthinkable, Mezraim. The attitude found in the Book of Mormon is certainly influenced by it: ‘I say unto you, the kingdom of God is not filthy, and there cannot any *unclean* thing enter into the kingdom of God.’⁷ I guess that what is true of the kingdom of God is true for the camp of Israel. The camp can, in fact, be seen as a type or shadow of the kingdom of God. And no unclean thing can dwell therein.”

“Very good, Mann. This is very, very important. The text’s stated reason for keeping the leper outside the camp has nothing to do with any supposed physical threat he or she might pose to others. It is not an issue of offending, defiling, or even infecting other people. No fear of contagion is mentioned in the text—and, Mann, it is the text that must guide us. The leper, being unclean, is excluded from the camp because, the text maintains, his or her presence is an offense to God. The presence of such an offensive individual causes God to depart. God cannot remain attached to, connected with, or united with an unclean leper. *It is God’s presence, not man’s that demands the leper’s removal from the camp!*”

“But wait, Mezraim! God certainly can’t contract leprosy. So why would God be offended by and refuse connectedness with a leper?”

“Forget about infection and contagion, Mann. It has very little to do with that. It is a matter of cleanliness. It is about the holy versus unholy. Ancient Israel is to ‘put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean.’”⁸

“I think I see your point, Mezraim. To have leprosy is to be unclean. We have already seen that. Now we see that to be unclean is to be unholy. And to be unholy is to be unworthy of God’s presence, for ‘Man of Holiness is [his] name.’ God cannot associate Himself with or be connected to an unclean, unholy, or unworthy individual.”⁹

⁷ 1 Nephi 15.³⁴, emphasis added.

⁸ Leviticus 10.¹⁰

⁹ Moses 7.³⁵

Mann paused a moment before continuing. “Still, Mezraim, it almost seems like the leper is being treated as if he had sinned. But, the individual can’t control whether or not he or she contracts leprosy.”

“If you don’t mind, Mann, we’ll leave the issue of control for another time. For now, let me remind you that the Old Testament is full of passages that view disease—especially ‘defiling’ disease—as symptomatic of and a proof of sin in the afflicted individual’s life. Sin and disease are so intimately tied together as to become almost inseparable.”

“Could you give me an example or two?”

“Sure. Let’s take the case of leprosy. You might remember how, on one occasion, ‘Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married.’¹⁰ In addition, they felt envy toward Moses because of his prestige in the eyes of the people.¹¹ The Book of Numbers records the Lord’s response to their insolence.

“‘And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous.’¹²

“Now, as interesting as it might be, Mann, don’t become side-tracked by wondering why Aaron too did not come down with leprosy. The point is: Miriam’s leprosy was a result of sin.

“‘And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, *lay not the sin upon us*, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother’s womb.’¹³

“Notice, Mann, how close a connection Aaron sees between sin and leprosy; between sin and illness. And worse still, he goes so far as to liken leprosy unto death itself!”

“So, again, leprosy is indicative of sin and so requires removal from the camp.”

“Yes, Mann. It is absolutely necessary that it be so. Let me call your attention to a common

¹⁰ Numbers 12.¹

¹¹ See Numbers 12.²

¹² Numbers 12.⁹⁻¹⁰

¹³ Numbers 12.¹¹⁻¹², emphasis added.

refrain of the Psalmist as he too links sin and disease.

“O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath:

neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.

For thine arrows stick fast in me,

and thy hand presseth me sore.

There is *no soundness in my flesh* because of thine anger;

neither is there any rest in my bones *because of my sin*.

For *mine iniquities* are gone over mine head: [perhaps the Psalmist is in the ‘depths of humility’ here]

as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me.

My *wounds* stink and are corrupt

because of my foolishness.

I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly;

I go mourning all the day long.

For my loins are filled with a *loathsome disease*:

and there is no soundness in my flesh.”¹⁴

“Actually, Mezraim, such concepts are not limited to the Old Testament. In speaking of the sacrament, Paul warns:

‘He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. *For this cause many are weak and sickly among you.*’¹⁵

“While the notion of a close inter-relatedness between sin and sickness causes some discomfort, and we claim to know better, in our heart of hearts, Mezraim, this is often our first reaction to disaster and trials. When something bad happens—illness strikes, a child goes astray, a failure occurs—our first response is to look for a sin that explains it. ‘This wouldn’t have happened if only....’”

“And of course, Mann, the potential guilty and responsible sins are easy to find. It isn’t even

¹⁴ Psalm 38.¹⁻⁷, emphasis added.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 11.²⁹⁻³⁰, emphasis added.

sport. There are potential candidates all over the place!”

“That’s for sure.”

“So, you see that leprosy, being unclean and unholy, is associated with sin. And, as we have pointed out previously, the text maintains that this notion of the leper being unclean, unholy, and unworthy comes from the Old Testament’s revelations of God, His character, and His unwillingness to be attached to the sinner.”

“But surely, Mezraim, this is only symbolic.”

“Could I say something about this, Mann? I don’t mean to be critical, but I’ve heard you speak glibly about leprosy and its symbolic meaning. But, I ask, do I look like a mere symbol to you? Am I not a real, living, breathing, thinking, feeling person? Haven’t you considered that over more than a millennium there were thousands, tens of thousands of lepers just like me; just as real, just as living, just as feeling? Will you reduce all those individuals to mere symbols whose purpose in life was no more than to instruct you? We too had goals, aspirations, desires, hopes, and loves.”

“I’ve never thought of it like that,” responded Mann, humbly accepting Mezraim’s gentle chastening.

“No, you haven’t. Sometimes, your reading of scripture is more caricature than real. While it is true that Nipdeh, myself, and many others like us, can serve as types and shadows in your life, this ‘symbolism’ doesn’t even begin to do justice to the Old Testament’s lessons. I am not a mere symbol. I am not a caricature. I was and am a real, living, feeling person. And, as with so many others who were pronounced unclean and unworthy by the Old Testament’s revelation of God, I was made to feel no better than—nay, every bit as loathsome and dirty as human dung!”

“Really now, Mezraim. I know that having leprosy must have been horribly trying. But you needn’t resort to gross and offensive language. I get the point.”

“‘Gross and offensive’? Maybe your reading of scripture is a tad prudish as well. I’m simply saying what the Old Testament itself says about the leper and his leprosy.

“‘And thou shalt have a paddle [shovel] upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad [a Hebrew euphemism for your English euphemism ‘going to the bathroom’] thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee: for the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp... therefore shall thy camp be

holy: *that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee.*”¹⁶

Mezraim’s voice trembled with emotion while sharing this final thought. Mann noted that large tears had formed in his eyes. Mann began to sense how disgraceful and humiliating the leprosy had been for Mezraim. But he wasn’t completely sure what this last passage had to do with leprosy. His compassion for Mezraim, kept him from asking.

Sensing his confusion, Mezraim explained. “Don’t you see, Mann? The rationalization of the text does not involve ‘sanitation’ concerns, although that undoubtedly was a side benefit of the ‘policy.’ The text is worried, above all else, about offending God. The language of this passage about human excrement and the language of the passage about the leper are uncomfortably similar. ‘God walks/dwells in your camp,’ the Israelites are told. But he will ‘turn away from thee’ if he sees any ‘unclean thing in thee.’ Human waste is unclean. Its presence in the camp causes God to withdraw. The leper is unclean. He defiles the camp. His presence in the camp causes God to withdraw. God, we are informed by the revelation, has the same reaction to both dung and leper! He is offended and repulsed by both. There can be no contact, no connectedness, no oneness, no at-one-ment between God and leper.

“Oh, Mann,” lamented Mezraim deeply, “Aaron was right. Leprosy was worse than death itself. It was to be spiritually dead to, and cut off from, God. It meant disconnectedness, detachment from God!”

Mann could relate to this. In fact, he was beginning to see how applicable Mezraim’s story was to his own. He had felt this revulsion, this offense, this disgrace, and this death in himself. He often felt that God disassociated Himself from Mann. Became detached.

“I see that now, Mezraim. And I see that for thousands of years, the Old Testament’s teachings gave lepers—real people—every reason to believe that they, being unclean and unholy, were wholly unacceptable to God. And surely the only thing that could make one unacceptable to a just God is unrighteousness—sin. While you’re right to say that all this is much more than symbolic, I am right to see in leprosy, as Nipdeh taught me to do with himself and the palsied man, a symbol for defiling sin and unrighteousness.”

“True enough. But the leper is in far more dire straits than the palsied. Consider that the command, which forced the leper ‘outside the camp,’ affects more than his living quarters. The

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 23.¹³⁻¹⁴, emphasis added.

leper's uncleanness, or sin, brings disenfranchisement with that segment of society that is 'properly religious,' 'righteous,' 'holy,' and 'pure.' Worse still, it must be remembered that the temple and the synagogue are found *in the camp*, in the village, or in the city. The leper is excluded from these places too. These places—synagogue and temple—especially, are places where God might be found; where connection with God can be felt.

“The message, again, is clear: ‘The leper has no business being anywhere even remotely near God.’ Being unclean, he is cast out from the presence of God. God has withdrawn from, disconnected Himself from the unholy one. He is barred from the much desired and cherished intimate communion—at-one-ment, connectedness, attachment, linkage, participation, unity—with his God because God cannot look upon uncleanness with the least degree of allowance.”

“I recognize that language, Mezraim. You have almost, but not quite, quoted a passage from the Doctrine and Covenants.¹⁷ You simply replaced the Doctrine and Covenants' word 'sin' with the Levitical word 'uncleanness.' By so doing, you have declared that God responds to those who have sin in them just as he did to those who have leprosy on them. And by referencing the Doctrine and Covenants, you have suggested that we often feel the same way about God today as the ancient Israelites did.”

“Sin and leprosy represent the same phenomenon. To the Old Testament's way of thinking, Leprosy *is* sin. It is defiling. It makes one unclean, unholy, and unworthy. It brings disgrace.”

“But, Mezraim, once healed, the leper was allowed back into the camp.”

“You're assuming, of course, that all lepers were healed. You should think about that assumption.

“But, yes, once the leprosy had departed, and the leper had been cleansed through offerings, he or she was allowed to enter the camp. First, the priest, taking two birds, killed one and sprinkled its blood seven times upon the former leper. After the leper washed and shaved off all bodily hair, two lambs without blemish were offered—one as a trespass offering and one as a sin offering.”

“Wait, Mezraim. That seems significant. Both a *sin* offering and a *trespass* offering were required of the leper. This indicates, unquestionably, that leprosy, as you have stressed, is associated with sin and transgression.”

“Excellent observation, Mann. After the offerings, blood from the trespass offering was

¹⁷ Doctrine and Covenants 1.³¹

placed upon the right ear, thumb, and big toe of the leper—signifying that they were clean from ‘head to toe.’ Olive oil was then applied to the same locations. Additionally, oil was poured over the leper’s head. Finally, the leper offered a burnt offering. With all this performed, the leper’s uncleanness was “atoned” for. He could reenter the presence of God.¹⁸

“But understand this well: the unclean were not allowed in God’s camp. They were not allowed in his presence. They were not deemed capable and worthy of intimate intercourse, connectedness, or attachment with God. As long as they remained unclean there could be no at-one-ment between them and God. Only *after* they were clean, could God countenance their presence. Only then, could he enter into their life and they into his. Only then could there be at-one-ment.

“Now, Mann, I need to stress this. You might think that the point of this tutorial is to describe leprosy and the leper. But we are not so much interested in the Old Testament’s revelations about the leper as we are about its revelation about God. These passages make claims about God and His character—what kind of a being he is—at least in so far as the Old Testament was concerned. Such passages paint a portrait, to be sure, but it is, above all else, a portrait of *God* not the leper. And it is a revelation that real, not symbolic, people lived with every day.

“This revelation, or portrait, was confirmed over and over again for a thousand years by Israel’s ‘living’ religious leaders. It was a revelation that caused thousands and thousands of individuals who were unclean to live out all or parts of their lives with a continual, depressing, and shattering sense that they were unworthy of God’s lively and loving presence. It was a revelation that taught clearly that uncleanness, unholiness, unworthiness, sinfulness, offends God and causes him to withdraw from the man or woman so infected. It brings the disgrace of God upon the individual so infected. It forbids connectedness and attachment to God.”

“As a symbol, this makes total sense, Mezraim. ‘God cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.’ But surely, just as we know leprosy better today, we know God better. We know that God didn’t really feel that way about the leper.”

“Ah,” nodded Mezraim wisely, “an interesting observation. But I want to make sure you hear what you are saying. When you tell me that this isn’t an accurate portrait of how God responds to *leprosy*, what you’re really telling me is that this isn’t an accurate portrait of God and how he responds to *sin*. You seem to be suggesting that although sin may be found in a camp, a house, or

¹⁸ See Leviticus 14.¹⁻²⁰

even a man, God, under certain conditions, remains. Are you sure you want to go there? Are you sure you want to portray God as one who ‘justifieth the ungodly’? Do you really trust God so far?”¹⁹

“Umm, no, Mezraim, I am not at all sure I want to go there. It sounds like a dangerous place to go. Doesn’t the Spirit withdraw in the face of sin? Again, ‘God cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.’ You make it sound as though he can and does.”

“What do you think that scripture means, Mann? But never mind that for now. Although all we tutors are trying very hard to avoid a confrontation with ‘You-know-who,’ it is beginning to look inevitable.”

“I don’t know this ‘You-know-who’ Mezraim. Who is he/she/it?”

Mezraim shook his head and trembled all over.

Still ignorant of the exact identity of this mysterious ‘You-know-who,’ Mann knew from his tutors’ consistent reactions to the mere mention of him/her/it that he/she/it was not someone/thing Mann wished to meet.

Mezraim, for his part, recovered from his momentary uncertainty. “We have seen how God responds to the leper, that is to say, the sinner, in the Old Testament. Could we look at how he responds to the leper in the New Testament? Something phenomenally interesting and powerful takes place there between God and leper.

“Now, understand, Mann, Jesus healed many people of many things. There was cancer and heart disease, and a whole host of other ailments. It is no accident that the Gospel writers chose to focus on the healing of a *leper*. The authors chose leprosy because of the meaning given to it in the Old Testament. The authors chose leprosy because it signified disenfranchisement, disconnection—an ‘anti-at-one-ment’—with God. It represents something more than physical affliction. It is through people such as myself, and our experience with Jesus, that the world’s image of what kind of a being God is began to change. Let’s have a look at my experience. As we do so, you must keep all that you have learned about leprosy firmly in mind.”

¹⁹ Romans 4.⁵