

Russell Kelfer

In Solitary Places

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Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

In Solitary Places

LIFE'S SOLITARY PLACE

Oh, the pressures and the problems of life
How they cause us to despair;
Till amidst the briars and thorns, at last
Our hearts are driv'n to prayer.

When at last, in desperation,
We've exhausted all man's powers,
Only then will we appropriate
The strength that's rightly ours.

Only then, when all else fails,
Will we on sinking sod,
Seek out life's solitary place
To find the heart of God.

Then, only then, when the sky is overcast with clouds of anguish and hopelessness will most of us acknowledge that we are helpless apart from the divine intervention of a holy, sovereign God. Only then, when friends seem to have forsaken us, or success seems to have eluded us; only then will most of us withdraw from the frenzy of life's activities and retreat into the quiet place to be alone with God.

Invariably, however, when we do, God opens unto us totally new horizons of spiritual insight. He reveals yet more and more of Himself, until the curse becomes a blessing and the mourning turns to joy as we and God, and no one else, join hearts together alone in solitary places.

It is a lesson usually learned in the crucible of testing, but often forgotten in the throes of victory. The lesson is this: life's great insights do not normally come from our Damascus-road experiences. No, those high points, those mountaintops serve only to call attention to themselves. It is while we are dwelling interminably in the valley, huddled for protection under His wings, confident that although we cannot see them, underneath are the

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everlasting arms. It is then that our great God sings His love songs to us and opens finite eyes to see that infinite grace bestowed upon us in eternity past.

It is in solitary places, then, that God and man most often conduct business which is eternal. Today's story, the next episode in the life of the Son of God on earth, tends to highlight that truth and give us by divine example a pattern to follow when the temperatures of life rise above what we construe to be the boiling point. "In Solitary Places" is the title for this lesson.

Our outline:

I- The Legend of a Leper

II- He Touched Me

III- Tell No One

IV- In Solitary Places

Our story is found in Matthew, chapter eight, Mark, chapter one; and Luke, chapter five. We will be studying from the combined accounts of those passages as they are recorded in The Life of Christ In Stereo.

³ And it came to pass, that while he was in one of the cities, behold a man who was full of leprosy, when he saw Jesus, ² came to him, beseeching him; and kneeling down ³ he fell on his face ¹ and worshipped, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, you *can make me clean.*" ² And Jesus, moved with compassion, reached out his hand and touched him, saying to him, "*I am willing; be cleansed.*" And the leprosy instantly left him and he was healed. Then he sternly enjoined him and immediately dismissed him, saying, "See that you tell no one; but go and *show yourself to the priest*, and for your cleansing make the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to *them.*"

But when he went out, he began to tell it freely and announce the news far and wide. ³ So Jesus' fame was spread abroad all the more, ² so that he could no longer go openly into a city, but remained out in solitary places. ³ And great multitudes were gathering ² from every quarter ³ to hear, and to be healed of their infirmities; but he himself kept withdrawing into the wilderness and praying."

(¹ Mt 8:2-4, ² Mk 1:40-45, ³ Lk 5:12-16, LOCIS)¹

¹ The Life of Christ in Stereo: The Four Gospels Speak in Harmony; by Johnston M. Cheney; © 1969 Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon

And so unfolds...

I - THE LEGEND OF A LEPER

Simon and the others had left everything to follow Jesus. No doubt they envisioned fellowship with Israeli religious giants and Roman politicians as they, his inner circle, negotiated the terms of His kingdom with those who had been in power before King Jesus came.

As usual, they were wrong. Instead of fellowshiping with Prime Ministers and Princes, Jesus is mingling with the masses. Instead of controlling the crowds with a scepter and a sword, the crowds were, to a large degree, seemingly in control. And much of the Master's time was spent retreating to desert places where He could find solitude, and where the crowds could not find Him.

In addition, Jesus chose, in His mingling, to touch life's outcasts rather than fellowship with life's greats. This story describes it perfectly. The Creator God, Maker of heaven and earth, the One who laid the foundations of the world, "while the morning stars sang together, and all the angels jumped for joy," this same God stopped to listen when a leper spoke.

It would have been an easy confrontation to avoid. The man was an untouchable. Just a word and the authorities would have rebuked him and taken him away. But Jesus had come to seek and to save those who knew they were lost. This man knew. Not only was his visage marred; not only was his face, in all likelihood, grotesquely disfigured; his spirit was broken. His heart was in pieces. His self-image was a minus ten. No one dared touch him. No one dared befriend him. No one dared love him, because he was seemingly unlovable.

Then Jesus came. And this leper came. Jesus was his last hope. That didn't bother Jesus. The Kingdom of God is an army of men and woman who had no hope till Jesus came. The passage reads: "this man was full of leprosy". He was a man destined for death. Ah, but when he saw Jesus, he came to Him and He begged Him. "He fell on his face and worshipped Him." He assumed his rightful place in the presence of a holy God. And he uttered those memorable words, "Lord, if you are willing, you can."

Here is God's prescription for prayer: a man on his face, bowed to the ground, crying, "Lord if you are willing, you can." That is the Christian's position before God. Some, God healed. Some, he

didn't. But there were none beyond His power to heal. The issue was, "what would bring the most glory to God? A miraculous healing? Or miraculous grace?" One would magnify the Master's power in the physical realm; the other would magnify His power in the spirit realm.

At this point in His ministry, physical signs were all man would believe, so God complied. But one thing we often forget is how many New Testament miracles were performed only for unbelievers to give them the faith to trust Jesus with their lives. That was the case here. But don't you love his prayer? And doesn't it perfectly mirror Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane? He prayed: "Lord, I don't know if it's your will or not, but Lord, I know one thing; it's well within your power."

What faith! Medical science then had no physical cure for the leper. Society had no social remedy for the leper. Mankind had written him off as a petty nuisance to be given handouts until he finally went the way of all lepers and died a miserable death.

II- HE TOUCHED ME

But something supernatural happened that day to this unlikely candidate for God's Hall of Fame. In many ways, he was no different from all the other lepers who sat huddled and rejected throughout the countryside, except that one fateful day in his life, a life filled with misery and agony, Jesus passed by. (At some point in every one's life, Jesus passes by.) And as Jesus passed by, this lowly leper, who could not boast of his own goodness nor rest in his own achievements, saw in Jesus his only hope. So he did what all men will one day do. His knees bowed before the Son of God, and His tongue confessed that the Son WAS God. In his state of utter helplessness and utter hopelessness, he reached out in faith, and the instant he did, Jesus touched him.

Heaven touched earth. Eternity touched time. Life touched death. And as a physical symbol of a spiritual miracle, his leprosy vanished along with every sin he had ever committed. The Scripture reads "And the leprosy instantly left him and he was healed." Immediately, he was a new man. He didn't become healthier; he became whole. He wasn't helped; he was healed: all because when the clouds that darkened the skies above his life became so black and so bleak that there was no hope, Jesus passed by and touched him.

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Even today, 2,000 years beyond that moment, there reside in the archives of eternity, the living legends of millions of men and women who, like that leper, found their souls totally racked by the deadly disease of sin. They, like this man, fell at the feet of Jesus and cried out for mercy. They felt the tender touch of the hand of God upon their hearts, and instantly the leprosy of sin fell victim to the hand of the Great Physician. They were healed.

He touched me. He touched many of you...and made us whole. That, my friend, IS the gospel. It is not committees and meetings and agendas and programs. It is not seminars and seminaries and theological ideologies. It is sin-scarred men and women in desperate need of a Savior, men and women who reach out and are touched by the Master's hand and are never the same again. That is what changed your life! That is what changed my life! Not a church program, a living God! Not a knowledge of doctrine, a knowledge of sin, and surrender to a Savior! That is the gospel. He touched him and made him whole.

Perhaps you have not yet given your life to Jesus. You, like this leper, must recognize that apart from a supernatural, divine transformation, you, too, have no hope, no help, no life. Then do what he did. Fall down before Jesus in your heart right now and cry out to Him in your spirit, "Lord, I need to be healed from the disease of sin. I am destined for an eternal death unless you save me. Lord, if you will, you can." Quietly reach out to him right now. Immediately, He will touch you. He will whisper to you, "I am willing; be cleansed." And the power of life will instantly cast out the power of death. Light will cancel darkness, and you will be born again. He'll touch you if only you'll ask Him.

III- TELL NO ONE

Now we come to perhaps the most unusual statement in this passage. It comes from the lips of God Himself as He turns to the man He has just healed and gives him his first instructions as a believer. And what unexpected instructions they are. He says, "Tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest."

Tell no one. This is a hard instruction for many to fathom. Can you imagine how you would have felt if you were this man? Your life had been lived in the prison-house of a debilitating terminal disease, and you faced day after endless day of torture and pain and rejection. Then God touches you! The disease vanishes, and God tells you, "Tell no one."

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What a test of obedience! But Jesus knew the heart of man. He knew that man would tend to glorify the miracle and miss the meaning. He also knew that He could break all kinds of attendance records by sending out pamphlets that advertised, “Lepers Healed! Come see this amazing healer!” But Jesus wasn’t out to break records. He was out to touch lives. So He commanded the man to savor for himself this miracle of miracles and to give the glory to God by showing himself to the priest. His salvation needed to be shared with the spiritual authorities. So does yours. But sometimes the physical miracles God performs were meant to be quiet love letters from God that never find their way to life’s front pages.

Sometimes God does want us to tell the world when He miraculously intervenes in our lives, for He knows at that particular time it will bring glory to His name. But at other times, He seems to be quietly saying, “Don’t rent a billboard this time. Sharing this will only bring glory to you.”

Many so-called “faith healers” miss this point. God does not heal to glorify healing. God heals (when He does) to glorify His Son, and often He whispers “tell no man”. But this cleansed leper was so overwhelmed with joy he chose to disobey his first instructions as a believer. The result? The work of God was hindered rather than helped, and Jesus had to retreat to a solitary place. His very success drove Him to the desert.

IV- IN SOLITARY PLACES

But all things work together for good, for Jesus did perhaps His greatest work “in solitary places”. You ask, “But how can that be? The people He came to minister to could not be ministered to when He was in seclusion.” True. But His ministry was not His greatest work. His fellowship with the Father was His greatest work. His great ministry was prayer. Healing men and making men whole was what the Father did as Jesus set Him free to do so. His task was to stay in perfect harmony with the Father. Then the ministry became the Father’s responsibility, the natural outworking of God being God in Him.

And so it is with us. God still does His greatest work when you and I, often retreating from the press of the ministry, retire for a time to solitary places. Sometimes we are driven there by circumstances. Sickness intervenes and unwinds the tightly wound spring of endless activities until we, with no other choice but to sit still or lie still, find ourselves captive to our circumstances, all

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alone in solitary places.

We can fret and we can murmur, or we can do what Jesus did. He kept withdrawing to be alone with the Father, and once alone He prayed. Do you have trouble sleeping at night? You have a choice. You can complain and be anxious, or you can turn sleeplessness into a solitary place. You can turn the curse into a blessing, and discover that time you thought you never had to be alone with God.

You may suffer with an illness that takes from you your natural strength, your supply of energy, your pathway to activity. While others are enjoying sports and recreation, you are restricted to quietness. You can fret, or you can pray. You can shake your fist at God for taking away your strength, or you can turn your heart towards God in praise for giving you time (when you thought there was no time), to appropriate the kind of strength that lasts.

Those divine interruptions in our lives were meant by Satan to be stumbling blocks to distract us from the mind of God by using the circumstances man deems important and interrupting the process that man deems vital. Ah, but our precious God takes and uses those very same interruptions meant by Satan to be a stumbling block and refashions them into polished gems of spiritual treasure. He takes the very things the enemy uses to slow us down, and while we are slowed down, He uses those things to draw us to Himself. Be creative in using life's divine interruptions! Jesus was. As the crowd pressed upon Him, He retreated to the solitary place. Ah, but what a place to be!

Man in our age has no time for the solitary place, no time to recharge the batteries of his spirit apart from the drain of daily activities. What a pity. Jesus had to have it. And now Jesus lives in us. Therefore, He, in us, demands it if we are to maintain that level of fellowship with the Son that the Son had to have with the Father.

In closing, I would like for us to concentrate on two issues for application. First of all, unless you and I purpose before we rush back into the whirlwind of daily living to carve out an appropriate amount of time to be alone with God, in all likelihood, we won't do it. I do not mean just a quiet time in His presence each day, although, of course, that is essential. I mean a time each month, or every few weeks, when we simply retreat from the pressurized routines of life into a solitary place with no other purpose than to fellowship with God, a time when neither man nor circumstances can come between us and what we consider the number one priority of our

lives: time with the Father.

You object, “what about the ministry?” I say this is your ministry. If you spend more time with God, the time you have to minister will be wrought with power, filled with purpose, and characterized by direction and authority and fruitfulness. Will you minister less? Jesus didn’t. He simply made sure that it was the Father doing the ministering, not Him. Many of us live as though the ministry depends on us. If it does, it’s not God’s ministry, it’s ours, and it is doomed to failure. Jesus, more than any other man who ever lived, could have ministered effectively on His own. But He stated simply and clearly, that if He did, it would bear no fruit at all. Of His own self He could do nothing.

So again and again He retreated to the quiet place, to the solitary place. Again and again He seemingly turned His back on the multitudes who were clamoring for His attention just long enough to be sure that He never got in the Father’s way or missed the Father’s will. The time He did spend ministering was characterized by such multiplied fruitfulness that He accomplished in three years what no other man has accomplished in 3,000 years. Why? The Father did it. And Jesus made sure that it was the Father doing it by constantly retreating to be alone in His presence.

I wonder if it wouldn’t be appropriate for our churches occasionally to shut down all their activities for a week, and ask the people to take that week just to be alone with God. Instead of another retreat to hear another speaker, maybe we need a retreat to hear from God, to be with God, to sit at the feet of God and pray. Maybe some of our Bible Study Groups need to cancel a study or two and turn that time into time alone with God. Maybe our musical groups need to cancel a practice or two and practice making melody in their hearts to the Lord.

Go back and re-read the biographies of that handful of men who have changed the course of spiritual history. They will be from every conceivable walk of life, from every conceivable educational strata, from every conceivable economic group, racial group, denominational group. They will seemingly have nothing in common until you pry open the pages of their lives and peer cautiously into their private worlds. There you will find the common denominator. They all took time to slip quietly and regularly into life’s solitary places. They all gave a high priority to being alone with God. Then their God took these ordinary men and women and made them into

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extraordinary vessels of His Grace. Purpose in your heart today to make the time (for you will never find the time) to regularly visit life's solitary places.

Secondly, may I suggest that we more consistently take advantage of life's divine interruptions and thus turn life's unavoidable frustrations into life's solitary places. Had we been in the Master's shoes, we would have been angry at this man we had told to tell no one, for spreading our name and our fame in such a way that we could no longer effectively minister for the moment.

Not Jesus. He understood the sovereignty of God. He understood that the Father had all the time He needed. He understood that if the Father, through circumstances, drove Him to the quiet place, then the quiet place was where He needed to be. Our problem is that our lives are filled with many divine interruptions that we often are not spiritually sensitive enough to recognize.

That red light that's stuck on the way to work causing us to cool our heels and bite our tongues is a divine interruption. What a great time to pray for the people in the car behind you or for your boss or for your family. What a great time to meditate on the faithfulness of God or the grace of God or the love of God. What a great time to quietly sing hymns of praise to the Father for His divine patience, thus appropriating that patience experientially into our own lives. Just a simple thing—a stuck traffic light. It can either be a frustrating nuisance or a divine opportunity. Satan wants it to be a time when you lose your perspective and erupt in anger or impatience; God wants it to be a solitary place.

That extra hour's wait in the doctor's office can be a solitary place. It can become a place to meditate on Scripture or review your prayer list, or read and re-read passages of praise you keep on 3x5 cards in your pocket or purse. That wait in the airport for the plane that's always late can be a solitary place. That fifteen minutes while you're waiting for someone to call can be a solitary place. That six months in the hospital you never would have allowed to happen if you were God, can be the turning point in your walk with God: hour after hour of fellowship uninterrupted by the bells and whistles and pressures and problems of twentieth century life. No, you don't want to be there, but you're there. Like the Master, why not turn the curse into a blessing, the testing place into a solitary place?

Let's make a covenant with God today to recommit ourselves

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to the most important ministry He has called us to, the ministry of worship and the ministry of prayer. Let's reset the second hands of the clocks of our lives in such a way that we never get too busy to be alone with God. Let's ask God to awaken our hearts to recognize that many of life's seemingly unavoidable interruptions are only His loving hand slowing us down long enough or waking us up long enough to remind us that there is enough time (if we but recognize it) for the one thing that must come first—the solitary places of life.

IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD'S DEAR SON

Once in a while, unexpectedly,
You just may find yourself there
Nothing to do; no place to go
Time for nothing but prayer!

Two possibilities beckon
Frustrating anger is one.
The other option is time alone
In the presence of God's dear Son

One will equip you with faithlessness
The other will open your heart
As a gentle God says, "Listen, my child,"
I have you still; that's My part."

And as the clock seems frozen,
And all life stands still
You find yourself with nothing
But time to learn God's will

Don't move, beloved, (and please don't fret)
Stand still, till God is through
You're in a solitary place,
And God's pouring His life into you.

When He's finished, you'll know for sure
And back to the race, you'll go
But until then, just be still
And into His likeness, you'll grow!

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