

Aspects

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Still Within His Arms

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." *Matthew 11:28*

The moment has occurred in the cool stillness of a sylvan glen and on the blistering sands of a windswept desert. It has occurred at my desk, while working outside, and upon my bed. It has even occurred in public, when standing in a room crowded with people. The most profound instance occurred in the stifling cloister of a beat-up bread truck, while on a missionary trip in Mexico, but it has also taken place in a boisterous airline terminal in Las Vegas, Nevada. More often, however, the moment has occurred when alone and on my face on the floor of my reference room.

In a house already whisper quiet by most standards, this room is the one *most* quiet to which I retire to get serious with the Lord. It is to this room I go when the heart is heavy and when it is weightless with joy. It is in this room I prostrate myself in embarrassed humility and dance before Him clothed in the rainbow cloak of His mercy. It is here that my praise and rejoicing take wing, and fly the fastest up to His lofty throne.

When burdened with the weight of sin, unsettling events, or seeking God's counsel for any of life's quandaries, this room becomes my sanctuary against the world's distractions. Its comfortably familiar walls lined with books and magazines and maps offer a close shelter in which I am able to more tightly focus my thoughts and petitions.

Countless times I have entered the throne room of God flat upon that room's carpet and, like Isaiah¹, have been overwhelmed by Jehovah's holy majesty, convicted of my own impurity and failings before the One who holds my life in His hands. I have wept at His feet, pouring out my soul, laying bare my feelings of inadequacy.

But each time, God the Father's mercy and forgiveness have been expressed in the loving, understanding arms of His Son, Jesus. It is *Jesus* who gently lifts me by the shoulders, envelops me in His peaceable warmth, and quietly whispers, "Yes, I understand. I love you, my brother."

And His peace and reassurance wash over me. I am restored by His compassionate grace. He wipes away the tears, He answers the deep longing. He replaces confession with dignity and a new found strength.



The gospels are not dead history, but a living testament to the way God still works today. They speak not only of Christ's behavior some two thousand years ago, but of His essential personality today. If He did it then, and if He still lives, then He is *still* doing it today.

There is only one thing Jesus cannot do. Jesus cannot be anyone but who He truly is, and the record shows that Jesus is a caring, forgiving friend who feels compassion for those in His family who are hurting. Jesus Christ *does* still live, so He does still minister His comfort to those who call upon His name.

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
Too deeply for mirth and song;
As the burdens press, and the cares distress,
And the way grows weary and long?

Does Jesus care when my way is dark
With a nameless dread and fear?
As the daylight fades into deep night shades,
Does He care enough to be near?

Does Jesus care when I've tried and failed
To resist some temptation strong;
When for my deep grief I find no relief,
Though my tears flow all night long?

Does Jesus care when I've said 'good-by'
To the dearest on earth to me,
And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks,
Is it aught to Him? Does He see?

O yes, He cares! I know He cares,
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
I know my Saviour cares.

Frank E. Graeff

Inside

A Mother's Life Back

Luke 7:11-15

Collecting New Friends

Luke 19:1-10

Shown a Better Way

John 8:2-11

Within Reach

Mark 1:40-45



A Mother's Life Back

She faced a life on the streets, of destitution. She had never asked for much, and had been content with the little she had, but now even that been taken away.

Her town was just a day's walk from Nazareth, lying up against the Hill of Moreh, which separated it from the village of Shunem, where the ancient prophet Elisha had given back life to a woman's son. But now, as she plodded wearily through the streets behind the coffin of her only son, the widow knew that this time there would be no prophet to raise *her* child from the dead.

She glanced up, wincing from the brilliant Galilean sun, to look again upon the rows of tombs and caves carved out of the hillside that overlooked her city. And she felt their gape-toothed grin laughing at her, mocking her for expecting a life without so much pain and death. First her husband, and now her only son, and she was left alone, to fend for herself. If life before had been miserable, it would now quickly become desperate. Without her son, she would be consigned to a life in the streets. The procession continued, slow and heavy, toward the city gate, and the tomb outside the walls where her son would be buried.

The man blended in so well with the rest of the people milling about the gate that she didn't notice Him at first. She only made mental note that there appeared to be an extraordinary number of people in the city today — then was swallowed back into her grief. But then she felt His voice carry over the funereal din. She heard it, yes, but more than that, she felt the warm peace of His voice envelop her, cushioning her from the pain and despair of the moment.

"Don't cry," she heard Him say. How many times had she heard others say those words — those meaningless, trite words of artificial sympathy muttered in her presence by friends and neighbors unsettled by her grief. But this voice was different. This time the words carried to her were not only sincere, but seemed to hold the power to actually remove any reason for the tears. They were spoken by one who was not powerless against the grave.

Then she saw Him, and in His face she recognized one who was participating in her grief — not expressing the hopeless sorrow mirrored by her closest friends, for He had already dismissed that cause, but expressing instead a deep compassion for her and what she was being made to experience.

"Don't cry," He repeated, then suddenly turned away from her, toward the litter that bore her son. Astonished that someone would risk ritual defilement by touching what touched a dead body, the bearers stopped in their tracks. The stranger reached out and touched the coffin, gently, yet with a quiet assurance.

A hush fell over the crowd. It happened so quickly, the widow could only stare, astonished. With a steady voice, as if He were only waking someone from a nap, the gentleman said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!"

Some in the crowd tittered nervously, amused by the brash temerity of this stranger. Others frowned, and muttered their displeasure that this solemn occasion had been made even more painful by the antics of a street magician. But all were silenced when the corpse raised up by itself and began to speak. His mother, feeling herself slipping into a dream, her sorrow meeting with stunned disbelief, swooned, and her friends eased her down to the ground.

But then the stranger who had lovingly told her not to cry was kneeling beside her, shading her from the intense sunlight. Next to Him — standing straight, blinking in the brilliance of the day — was the son she had thought was forever gone from her life. As she looked up and finally understood that it was true, her grief suddenly vanished, to be replaced by overwhelming relief and joy. "Woman," the man said, "here is your son." And He was gone.



Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. *Luke 7:11-15*

Within Reach

There are a number of ways that a family of cats is like a family of children, and one way is that they understand the different behaviors of the human male and female. When the members of our family want to play, they come to me, but when they want to cuddle, they go to Linda. Similarly, when they've misbehaved, and Linda yells at them to stop, she is mostly ignored. But when my voice rises to the occasion, they know I mean business.

When I was a kid I always knew that my dad loved me, but when I wanted affection, I went to my mom. Dad earned the money in the family, and he taught me many practical things that I would use for the rest of my life. And, compared to a lot of men, Dad was affectionate, but, well, he wasn't Mom.

I know that God the Father loves me; His love for me is sufficient for Him to have sacrificed His own Son for my benefit. I know His love is real, and that it is timeless, and constant.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things. *Psalms 107:8-9*

I know my heavenly Father loves me — but He is not Jesus. God the Father's love for me may be just as real, but He is far distant. Jesus is God's love come down to my level; Jesus is God's love in the flesh, and as such, it *seems* more real, more tangible.

God the Father is the one I bow to. I know His ankles well, but cannot describe the rest of Him, because I am always knelt at His feet with my face to the ground — not in trembling fear, but out of respect for His utter holiness.

But my Lord Jesus I can describe to a tee, because He has dwelt for awhile beyond the level of spirit to acquaint Himself with my weaknesses.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

When I am scanning the empty road for a friendly face; when I am feeling tired and alone in a crowd of strangers; when I feel like giving up, and can't think of anyone else who can help — when I need consolation, I am looking for Jesus. Jesus is just as holy, just as righteous as the Father, but He is within reach.

Collecting New Friends

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." *Luke 15:3-7*



It was a lucrative, if vulgar, occupation, and Zacchaeus consoled feelings bruised by the scorn of his countrymen with the extravagant lifestyle the profession bought.

In a word, he was rich, and his wealth provided the means by which he and his family could insulate themselves from the hatred of their fellow Jews. Their opulent home, with its thick walls and cool, shaded courtyard, afforded them a life which, if socially restricted, was at least pleasantly comfortable.

Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector — the one in charge of all the tax gatherers in the Jericho area. As such, he enjoyed not only his own personal profit system, but received a percentage from every other collector in the area. Geographically he was in a prime spot; Jericho was a trading and customs hub, where there were more than the usual taxes required. Yes, he could put up with a lot of unpleasantness from his fellow Jews with the heavy counterbalance of his wealth.

Word had come to Zacchaeus, through one of the few citizens who would still speak to him, that the popular new rabbi was passing through the area. Much like he had collected his wealth, Zacchaeus had little by little gleaned bits of information about this prophet who healed the sick and spoke such marvelous new wisdom. He was both interested in learning more about Him, and in finding a way to make His acquaintance. It never hurt to have influential friends.

The day of the rabbi's arrival dawned bright in the ancient city, but no amount of clear sunlight would help the tax collector see His arrival. The crowd was overwhelming — more than he could remember ever seeing turn out for even the most important dignitaries — and Zacchaeus knew that he would never be able to see over the heads of those lining the road. One thing his wealth could never purchase was physical stature; Zacchaeus may have been mighty in mind, but he was small in body. Put plainly, he was short, and no amount of bribery would buy him a place in the front.

Knowing this, he had come with a plan. He knew there was a stout sycamore — a tree almost as ancient as the city itself — near the road by which the rabbi would enter the city. Zacchaeus would use the extra height of the tree to peer over the heads of his unfriendly countrymen.

Perched in the branches of the tree, Zacchaeus was one of the first to see Him approach. Even though he had been told what to expect, he was still a little disappointed to see that Jesus was such an ordinary-looking man. There were no trappings of fame or advantage; He had not yet learned how to cash in on His notoriety, and the tax collector thought he might have some counsel to offer in that area. If only he could catch the young rabbi's attention, have a word in private with Him, it might work to their mutual benefit. With the hundreds of people in attendance, however, he realized his chances were slim.

"Zacchaeus! Come down from there!"

Lost in his intellectual machinations, the diminutive tax collector at first thought someone from his city was ordering him to the ground. He glanced at the people immediately below, but none were looking up at him.

"Zacchaeus!" The voice repeated. "I must stay at your house today."

To his astonishment, he suddenly realized that the one addressing him was the rabbi Himself. He had stopped before the sycamore tree and was looking directly at *him!* But embarrassment quickly turned to joy, and Zacchaeus clambered down, eager to speak to this stranger who, curiously, had chosen to stay with him, of all people.

The evening had passed all too quickly for Zacchaeus. He would have wished for Jesus to stay forever. But in the morning He was gone, and the tax collector's life had been changed forever. Over and over Zacchaeus replayed the speech he had delivered to his guests at the close of their meal . . .

"My friends and guests. You bring honor to this house by your presence. Most of us go back many years. Ephraim, my brother, it was you who brought me into this lucrative business — and I am grateful.

"We have shared times of pleasure, opulence . . . prosperity. We have drunk old wine and squandered new money. Tonight we have all shared good company, but now I must tell you — and believe me, no one could be more surprised than I — I tell you that this part of my life is to be drawn closed.

"You see, this day — tonight — I have made a new friend. This afternoon I met Him and He has brought me wealth far surpassing what I have already. The riches He brings are difficult to bank — but, oh, so easy to spend. My friend's treasure is not in a currency recognized by our leaders, or even our gracious, Roman benefactors. No, He has bestowed upon me . . . well, *light*, where once there was only darkness. He has opened my mind to truth where before was only greed and deceit.

"My friends, we are a close fraternity and tonight the gates are shut against our detractors. Tonight let us be honest with each other — just as my new friend has taught me to be honest with myself. We have taken freely from our countrymen! Under pretense of tax-increase we have systematically stolen — yes, *stolen* from our brothers. And it is to our shame that we get away with it.

"Let me tell you something my new friend told me: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store your treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal.'

"As you might imagine, His words puzzled me at first. When I found my tongue, I told Him I was a man of reason and logic. I told Him what I understood best were figures on a balance sheet —

not poetry. Would He kindly explain the procedure for storing one's treasures in heaven?

"There was kindness in His eyes when He answered: 'What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world . . . yet forfeits his soul?' It was then I realized — for the first time — how I had sold my soul for these worthless baubles! Thieves could clean me out and I would be left with nothing. Nothing! But Jesus offered me something far more valuable — priceless, really: eternal life — with *Him*. My friends, I chose *His* riches over mine. I have transferred all my precious possessions to His storehouse: my spirit, my devotion . . . my love.

"The rest I leave to you! Now I belong to Jesus. I don't know why, but He wants me. He has decided to include me on His balance sheet. But, my friends, *I* will be the one to profit."



Jesus my Lord will love me forever,
From Him no pow'r of evil can sever,
He gave His life to ransom my soul,
Now I belong to Him;

Refrain

Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me,
Not for the years of time alone, but for eternity.

Once I was lost in sin's degradation,
Jesus came down to bring me salvation,
Lifted me up from sorrow and shame,
Now I belong to Him;

Joy floods my soul for Jesus has saved me,
Freed me from sin that long had enslaved me,
His precious blood He gave to redeem,
Now I belong to Him;

Norman J. Clayton

Personalized Attention

The affection and compassion Jesus displays toward us is not always of the warm and mushy kind. He need not always weep with us to express His understanding concern. The world has tricked us into thinking that love and compassion should only be expressed with soft huggies and tender, "There, there, you poor thing."

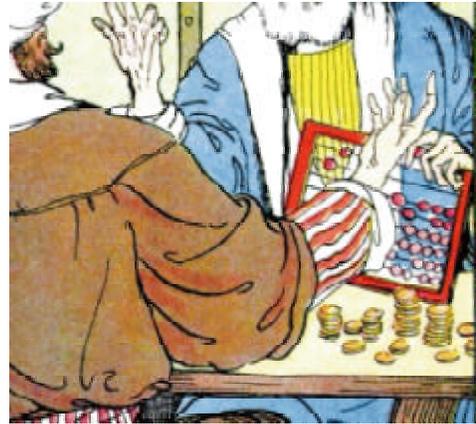
But Jesus is a *personal* Savior, which means that He deals with each of us individually, in the appropriate way for each person and situation. Jesus does not modify His standards of integrity just so we can feel better about ourselves. He knew that the most loving thing He could do for Zacchaeus was to point out the error of his ways, and He did this by pointing to Himself as a superior alternative.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." *Matthew 11:28-30*

Sometimes I need His strong arms about my shoulders, drawing me tightly into His protective warmth.

Sometimes I need His 2x4 up side my head.

Both are expressions of His love for me.



Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." *Luke 19:1-10*

Shown a Better Way

If a man commits adultery with another man's wife — with the wife of his neighbor — both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death. *Leviticus 20:10*

If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death — *Deut. 22:23-24a*

She was guilty. As much as she loathed the self-righteous fools conducting her down the street, they were right: She was guilty.

But what business was it of theirs anyway? Why should they care? And besides, how did they know to be there, sniffing around her business like a pack of wolves? Who tipped them off?

She smelled a setup, and if she could prove it, she'd make sure their condemnation stuck in their throats like a dirty rag. After all, what did she have to lose? She'd make so much noise that surely *someone*

would take notice, and get her off the hook. Then these miserable hypocrites would be forced to crawl back into their empty temple holes.

She was no angel. Didn't pretend to be. But she certainly didn't deserve *this* sort of treatment; her actions didn't warrant this sort of public humiliation. They were taking her to the temple, and a man on either side gripped her arms firmly, making sure she didn't bolt — which she would if she found an opportunity. The hour was so early that most of the streets were silent and bare. A thin mist still hung over the city, like a thin veil masking the ugliness on the other side. A damp chill ran down her back.

In the large Court of the Gentiles a group was seated around a teacher. Even at this early hour, they listened intently, held by every word the man spoke. It was toward this group that her captors moved. Just why, she didn't know. The men rudely interrupted the teacher's instruction. Setting her in the middle of the group, before the teacher, they loudly demanded His attention.

"Teacher," one of the leaders said in a voice as cold and damp as the still morning air, "this woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. The very act! The Law of Moses commands us to *stone* such women. What do *you* say?"

She knew a challenge when she heard one, and she knew enough of politics and temple intrigue to know that this bizarre scene had nothing to do with her — and everything to do with the hatred her captors held for this teacher. But none of that mattered, since she was the pawn in this dark cat-and-mouse game. It was her life on the line in any case.

The teacher said nothing, but leaned down and made some marks in the dirt and gravel covering the stone pavement. From the movements of his hand it seemed that he was forming letters, but, upside-down to her, she was unable to tell what was being written. His appearance was unremarkable except for its quiet calm before the challenge of these powerful, influential men. She had never seen Him before, and there was little about Him that would have caught her attention on the street. Even so, she sensed a peaceful strength in Him.

In the middle of this group, she was surrounded by an awkward silence. A few of the teacher's students whispered nervously to each other behind her while her accusers shifted uneasily, waiting for some answer to their challenge. Finally one of the men broke the silence. "Well," he stammered impatiently, "what have you to say?"

Reluctantly the teacher straightened and turned his gaze on them. In a firm, steady voice He answered, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

She recoiled when a few of the younger of her accusers quickly grabbed some small stones lying at their feet and clenched them defiantly in their fists. They shifted forward, as if to say, 'Give us the chance. *We'll* lead the way.' And she saw her death approaching.

But before the headstrong could act, some of the older men silently turned and walked away. Then more followed. With relief she realized that this was sapping the blood-hungry energy from the group, and before long even the younger members of the pack turned away from her and walked away. She suddenly realized that they were all gone, sliding back into the damp morning chill from which they had come. And she was left with the teacher who had, by His words, obtained her release.

When she turned her face up to offer her gratitude, He was looking at her. She had no idea what to expect from Him. Would *He* now turn on her, point a long bony finger in her face and denounce her for her immoral acts? or at least for interrupting his teaching?

Instead, in a voice that was neither accusing or forgiving, He said, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?"

"No one, sir," she answered, mystified by her unexpected good fortune.

"Then neither do I. Go on your way, and from now on, sin no more."

With her eyes locked into His, she rose to her feet. Was this man a prophet? Was He just a wise teacher? Did He actually hold the power to change her life? Or was He simply a quick thinking rabbi who could outfox the Pharisees and scribes. She didn't know. She didn't even know His *name*. But somehow she felt different — different from even a few moments earlier. She knew that for some mysterious reason this bizarre episode had become a turning point in her sorry life.

As she left the courtyard, lost in her thoughts, the sun broke through the gray mist and bathed the temple in its warm, golden light. The street outside was coming alive, the beginning of a new day. She smiled, and turned toward home.

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." *John 8:2-11*

Compassionate Correction

Because words today have been discounted to the point of meaninglessness, people are in the habit of offering absolution where none is deserved, typified by the following exchange:

A man shows up thirty minutes late for a scheduled appointment. As he slides in the door, he grins and, with a dismissive toss of his head, announces, "Sorry I'm late. Lost track of the time."

The woman with whom he had the appointment, not wishing to make a scene (which would result in even more of her valuable time being wasted), swallows her irritation, smiles weakly, and says, "That's all right."

Well, the man who was late wasn't *really* sorry, and his indifferent tardiness was certainly *not* 'all right.' But our society's sense of acceptable behavior has become such a bland pot of wallpaper paste, that people expect to be excused for their behavior without bothering to first apologize.

Jesus never winks at sin. The broad reach of His love for us does not include casual dismissal of our transgressions. But God's wrath was quenched at the cross, so His correction is expressed through a compassionate Savior, rather than through the condemnation of a stern taskmaster.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:1-2

Jesus did not declare the adulteress innocent; she neither confessed or repented before Him. Instead He demonstrated for her what life was like in His Kingdom, where wrong is not excused, but dealt with in a loving, respectful way. Shown a loving alternative to the condemnation of the Pharisees and scribes, she was given the opportunity — and incentive — to turn her life around in Christ.

Within Reach

No one would come near him. He could not approach anyone else. Most of his adult life had been spent outside the city, isolated from family, friends, all the rest of society. Even others of his own kind would not touch him — as he would surely not touch them. He was unclean, an outcast. He was a leper.

His illness marked him. It was impossible to convince anyone standing before him that he was anything but an incurably diseased man. The skin across most of his body was covered with sores, misshapen by the voracious pestilence devouring it. By law he could not live with the rest of society. By law, he would never again know the touch of a friend.

But if he has a reddish-white sore on his bald head or forehead, it is an infectious disease breaking out on his head or forehead. The priest is to examine him, and if the swollen sore on his head or forehead is reddish-white like an infectious skin disease, the man is diseased and is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean because of the sore on his head. The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp. *Leviticus 13:42-46*

Endless days of self-pitying despair; one endless hour after another, the droning boredom of his alienation; anger and frustration, but above all the sheer loneliness — all served to drive him mad with the desire to be once again whole, to again be among *healthy* people, rather than those like himself.

Then one day a rumor passed through the dirty little colony in which he lived. There was a new prophet traveling about the area who could do miracles and heal. And the rumor had it that He was something more than the typical charlatans who plied their craft among the unsuspecting. He truly was sent by God. Part of the leper wanted to rush to the man immediately, to plead his case for healing. But he had been disappointed so many times before, that *this* time he decided to err on the side of caution. This healer sounded *so* good, that he would first prove to himself that He really was what others claimed.

The prophet came into the area, and the leper observed His manner, His way with the people. From far outside the crowd of people who accompanied Him — so far he could barely hear what was being said — the leper listened to the prophet's words, watched in amazement as He effortlessly healed those who were sick and lame. He was convinced the man could heal him, but how to get to Him? He couldn't just pass through the crowd; the people would never permit it. How could he get close to this healer?

The problem was: Even if he could get near Him, there was no guarantee the man would agree to heal him. Maybe it took connections. He had never seen Him heal other lepers; maybe there was a limit to His powers — or His inclination. But then he realized he was just fooling himself — creating excuses for putting off what would surely be a risky confrontation. He had never seen the prophet do anything but display tenderness and compassion to those he healed. His

hand had never been extended to receive payment — only to minister to those who needed Him. In fact, by now he believed the man was more than a prophet or teacher, more than a healer of broken bodies. He didn't know how, but he was convinced the man's powers were a demonstration of God.

The next day he saw his chance. He had spent the night tucked back in the bushes along the main road into the city, expecting the prophet to pass by, and his scheme had paid off. There were fewer people with the prophet this time, just His immediate band of followers. They were in no hurry, talking amongst themselves, at this start of the new day.

Before anyone could stop him, he rushed to the prophet, dropped to his knees in subjection and pleaded, "Please Lord, if You are willing, I know You can make me clean!"

Would His disciples drive him away with sticks? Or would they simply ignore him, and walk on by? Would the prophet be so revolted at the sight of his corrupted body, as so many others had before, that He'd pull away in disgust and refuse to help him? He knew in his ugliness he couldn't expect the healer to come near him, but if He would only say the *word*, he could be healed!

There was an awkward moment of silence. His face in the dirt, the leper could only wait. Then he felt a gentle hand on his head — not the angry shove of the fearful, or even the rough, businesslike touch of a physician, but the tender touch of someone who loved him. *Loved* him.

"I *am* willing." The warm, gentle voice brought comfort in itself. But then He said, "Be cleansed." And immediately a rushing wave passed through him — as if the entirety of the sea had passed through his body in a moment. It felt as if his body, in the blink of an eye, had grown new skin from the inside out, sloughing off the old like a snake shedding its scales. He was not simply healed, but *renewed*. He was whole again!



A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

Mark 1:40-45

Do You Love Me?

It's so much easier for us to believe in Christ's deity than in His willingness to love us. The comfortable detachment that exists between heaven and earth makes it easy to worship an all-powerful God of the universe, and to believe that there is a second, mysterious member of the Godhead who is equal to Him in power. But believe that He would love *me*? Small, insignificant, sinful *me*? That's a tough one.

From our earliest days in Sunday School, seated in a semicircle on tiny chairs with short legs, we've sung

Jesus loves me! this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me –
The Bible tells me so.²

From the beginning that truth has been drummed into our ear, and we can believe it intellectually — of course He loves me; 'the Bible tells me so' — but too often in the heat of living it's easier to believe the lie whispered into our other ear, that surely a holy God could never love *me* — me who thinks those terrible thoughts, who fudges his taxes, who's too quick to yell at her kids, who gets angry when people don't give way on the freeway. With the leper we say, "You have the power to heal me, but *will* You? You have the grace to love me, but *will* You? Will You love even *me*, Jesus?"

Perhaps we can better understand His steady love for us if we remember that it is not simply a small thing tucked into the back pocket, or even a wonderfully grand thing too overwhelming to hold close to frail flesh, but is something that totally *envelops* each of us. His love follows behind us:

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Psalm 23:6

and it goes before us:

for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth. *Psalm 26:3*

Indeed, we are totally surrounded by it:

Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD'S unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. *Psalm 32:10*

Believers walk about in an enveloping bubble of love. Every good and pleasant experience coming our way is enhanced by its passage through God's love before it reaches us. Every hard and unpleasant experience is filtered and modified by the supernatural love that surrounds and protects us. Jesus never needs to renew His love for us; our behavior never causes Him to recheck His commitment to our well-being. It is permanently, and irrevocably, there. Always.

But he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about.

Faith in God is the great charmer of life's cares, and he who possesses it dwells in an atmosphere of grace, surrounded with a bodyguard of mercies. May it be given to us of the Lord at all times to believe in the mercy of God, even when we cannot see traces of its working, for to the believer, mercy is as all-surrounding as omniscience, and every thought and act of God is perfumed with it. *Charles Haddon Spurgeon*



Life passes at a blinding pace. Even when lived at a speed others might find perfectly tranquil, days pile upon each other until they lose all shape and form. And in this condition, we can easily forget the work Jesus does on our behalf. We can forget His steady, unflagging intercession, His advocacy, and His tender compassion brought down around us.

But there is a gentle sweetness added to each day that draws upon His love and consolation. No matter the circumstances, no matter how pleasant or tough life gets, Jesus is there, beside us, wrapping His strong arms about our insecurities and woes. He understands our plight; He's been there. He's suffered more than we can ever imagine: the full force and weight of the earth's transgressions. He knows our frame, and He is quick to come to our rescue when sin has brought us to our knees, on our face before the Father.

And what would life be without Him?

"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Matthew 7:22-27

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace.

My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad,
The honors of Thy name.

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.

He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.

Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come;
And leap, ye lame, for joy.

Charles Wesley

Notes:

1. Isaiah 6.
2. Anna B. Warner.

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