



God has placed each part in the body just as he wanted it to be.

— 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NIRV)



Adult Bible Study: Part 2

Last session we discovered that the Bible does have a lot to say about disability and disease. We learned that the Old Testament attributed all human difficulty and suffering to the presence of sin in the world. We also discovered that, in general, the Hebrew worldview included a close connection between spiritual and physical well being, and the belief that healing was based on God's blessing. It was also closely connected to the coming Messianic age, or what we call the Kingdom of God. We then dug into a passage in Leviticus 21 that, at the outset, appeared to degrade disability. Yet when considered within its proper context, its implications were limited and practical in nature.

"I was never allowed to see my sister. They said that I would hurt her. I had to live at the hospital."
—Andrea

Events of healing were a rarity in the Old Testament, a sharp contrast to the passages that we will consider in today's study. In the Old Testament the emphasis on prevention, usually through the isolation of the individual with disabilities or disease, a tendency that will be reversed in the actions of Jesus.

Let's look at some of the examples of Jesus' healing and see if we can discover a common thread or theme and possibly gain a better understanding of the Biblical view of disability.

Jesus' healings can also be found in Matthew 9 and Mark 2

Read Matthew 8:14–15, Mark 1:29–31, and Luke 4:38–39.

1. What and who do these passages have in common? How do the gospel writers present this story differently? Luke was a physician and yet he tells us that Jesus "rebuked the fever." What does this seem to suggest?

Read Luke 5:17–26, one of the renditions of the healing of a man's paralysis.

2. The man's friends believed that Jesus could heal his paralysis, but what does Jesus do before he heals him?

Jesus' forgiveness of the man causes a stir among the religious leaders. What is the basis of their objection?

Jesus then uses the man as an object lesson for the religious leaders. How does he accomplish this? Jesus' question to the Pharisees in verse 23 is obviously meant to get them thinking. How would you answer his question?

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One of the most compelling examples of a culturally created disability is seen in how persons with leprosy were treated. Because certain strains of the disease were both contagious and incurable, all unusual skin conditions were viewed with suspicion. Leviticus 13, an entire chapter of the Bible, is devoted to instructions about leprosy; it even addresses “leprous” diseases in clothing (mold and mildew). The Old Testament inclination toward prevention led to the isolation of anyone who had symptoms that remotely resembled leprosy. This Levitical attitude was obviously carried over into the New Testament period. Jesus’ contacts with these social outcasts are among the most moving healing episodes in the gospels.

Read Luke 5:12–16. Then read Leviticus 13:45–46.

3. In what ways were the Levitical guidelines violated... by the individual? and by Jesus?

Parallel Passages:
Mark 1:40–44, Matthew 8: 1–4

What part of the Levitical code did Jesus uphold?

What other populations have been labeled “outcasts” by society?
What were the reasons for this label?

Leviticus 14 will help with this answer.

Before we continue our study, we need to acknowledge that the Bible never specifically mentions either intellectual or developmental disabilities.

In fact, it does not even allude to them. There are a few cases where mental illness is portrayed, most notably when King Nebuchadnezzar “ate grass like oxen” in the fourth chapter of the book of Daniel. David “pretended to be mad” out of fear of King Achish (1 Samuel 21:13), and Saul exhibited symptoms of depression in 1 Samuel 16. While mental illness can certainly be a disability, it is not the same as either intellectual or developmental disabilities. We must make a similar distinction in the following passages.

Read Mark 5:1–13.

4. What is different about this healing? How were the demons made manifest in the life of this man? Would you consider this a disability?

Some scholars say that the New Testament uses demonic activity to explain actions and events due to a lack of scientific knowledge. Many even say that this is the Bible’s way of portraying mental illness or even intellectual and developmental disability.

You will notice that most of the Biblical translations still refer to people with leprosy as “lepers” or individuals who are paralyzed as “paralytics,” etc. These remain labels and only serve to identify people by their traits or by their disabilities, in effect dehumanizing them. “People First” language assures that we see the person before we acknowledge their disability, whatever it may be.

In Mark 5:1–13, and other times when Jesus cast out demons, what evidence do we have that Scripture is referring to intellectual or developmental disability?

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“There are still times when I have something bad happen in my life, that I wonder what it was that I did wrong. Does that ever happen to you?” —James

Earlier, we noted that the Old Testament often viewed disease and disability as direct retribution, or punishment, for a specific sin. This attitude was exhibited by some of Jesus' disciples.

Read John 9:1–7.

5. What does the disciples' question tell us about their attitude toward disability? What does Jesus' response say about this specific occasion?

Are we to assume that all disability is given by God to display his works? Why or why not?

Today's lesson has centered on the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. We have seen some dramatic events and familiarized ourselves with some of the prevailing attitudes of his time. Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies regarding healing. There was not a disease, infirmity, or a disability that he could not cure or remove. However, he did more than just cure. He exhibited the love of God through acceptance and inclusion. Just as there was no physical condition that he could not overcome, there was no group of outcasts he would not embrace. He touched men covered in leprosy prior to their healing, he confronted demons, he accepted the Gentile. Jesus paid little attention to the social behaviors and attitudes of his day. He was about restoration.

“I want to be fully included. I don't want to be excluded. I don't like when people stare at me and look at me like there is something wrong with me. I want to promote a positive outlook. When I come to this church I get a warm feeling and people don't stare and look at me funny.” —Paris

Next session, a look at the early church and the Apostolic age.