

FOURTEEN

*THE TENTH LEPER*

SHOULD YOU EVER CHECK IN AT ROCK-BOTTOM HOTEL, BE PREPARED. Because at rock bottom, you feel no need to communicate with others. The depression wants you to watch episodes of *Dexter* till three in the morning. The depression convinces you to eat plates of take-out Thai food every night. The depression tells you to drink until you pass out. And all you really want is a good friend to shut up and sit Shiva with you in your deep-sea diving rig at the bottom of your abyss while listening to submerged versions of Radiohead songs.

Still, I needed my routine. My enemas. My saunas. My pills. My body was being detoxed to such a degree that I was actually wasting away due to an undiscovered sodium deficiency, which turned me into a hospital regular. I visited the ER four times in four months. Extreme depression can actually affect your health and, in my case, it increased my seizures. By now I was such an ER regular that at one point, after understanding the natural progression of my seizure symptoms, I drove myself over to the ER, valet parked, tossed my keys to the attendant, walked in, threw my insurance card on the desk, told them I was moments from having a seizure and needed an IV of sodium chloride STAT. I've never seen so many shocked eyes staring back at me.

I finally found a friend to sit Shiva with me in 2012. His name was Ed Dobson. He has a long grey beard, and he's far ahead of me on this lonely road. My friend Ed has lost the initial purpose he had for his life, he's lost his health, including parts of his physical and mental function. Ed Dobson has MLS or Lou Gehrig's disease. He has written several books and is also featured in a series of films called, *Ed's Story*. He was a pastor of Calvary Church here in Grand Rapids, but he chose to retire after receiving his prognosis.

Ed's life has changed a lot since he was the pastor of a right-wing fundamentalist megachurch. It's amazing what a change in circumstances can do to the way you view God. Calvary Church was a massive church where Pat Robertson would come and shake hands as the conservative wing would descend around him in an attempt to win over the red-ish state of Michigan. Ed was their guy, their go-to. He did everything right. Raised his kids right. Presided over the church right. Led an amazing family. He pursued his calling as a pastor with such fervor that when he stepped down due to this illness, he was shocked to see that his phone had stopped ringing. Eventually, he told me he felt as though he was never even a pastor.

From a spiritual perspective, Ed had seen it all. He was embraced by those who embrace, and he was disdained by those who disdain. He was tired, realizing that much of his work as a pastor would one day be turned to dust. Our mutual friend Steve, from a company named Flannel, had introduced us to each other. Lou Gehrig, meet Oligodendroglioma. It's always an awkward introduction, but we were both used to it.

We went to The Sparrows coffee shop and sat just across the room from where I had my first Arcade Fire premonition that something intense was on my horizon. We got some coffee and sat down by the front window. Ed takes his time. On one hand, it's because he has to, but it's also because he sees the world differently from the rest of us. He is no longer in a hurry. He knows that this moment, this coffee, this conversation, is the only thing that matters. There are no congregations to worry about. There are no church fans to corral or promote to. We are two men, each with different stories, and each with different expiration dates.

Neither of us cared for small talk, so I asked the question that had been haunting me. Eager to hear his response, I asked Ed, "Do you still believe you can be miraculously healed?"

This, of course, was a blunt question, posed to a man who knew the scriptures to such a degree that I honestly didn't know what to expect. I felt as if I had just wandered up Mount Everest to ask a dying kung fu master one simple question. I wanted to ask the man who had seen it all, been on top of the pile of success, experienced earthly suffering, and visited the bottom of the ocean, about his specific thoughts on miraculous healing.

I should have known the answer would be quite different from a what I was hoping. Like a good Jewish teacher, he knew better than to quickly respond with a yes or no. Without a doubt he knew I was wringing my hands under the table to hear his response. Ed slowly and shakily took a sip of his espresso, using two hands to make use of his remaining working fingers to hold the cup steady. His voice is high and crackly, and you can barely see his mouth moving from behind his giant beard.

"Well, David, that depends. Do you want to be healed or do you want to be cured?"

I had never really thought about the difference. I smiled, knowing his Jewish strategy was to ask me a good question in response to my question. "Umm, both I guess," my best German response requesting the most efficient answers in return. I sat quietly and asked, "Is there a difference?"

Ed paused, smiled, looked back at me and suggested a story. He told me of what Jesus did in Luke 17:11-19. The story goes...

*It happened that as he made his way toward Jerusalem, he crossed over the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men, all lepers, met him. They kept their distance but raised their voices, calling out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"*

*Taking a good look at them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." They went, and while still on their way, became clean. One of them, when he realized that he was healed, turned around and came*

*back, shouting his gratitude, glorifying God. He kneeled at Jesus' feet, so grateful. He couldn't thank him enough—and he was a Samaritan.*

*Jesus said, "Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?" Then he said to him, "Get up. On your way. Your faith has healed and saved you."*

I realized Ed was showing me there were two separate things happening in this story. He explained that Jesus sees a difference between curing and healing. Jesus can cure anything. In fact, in this story he goes on to cure ten people who, as far as we can tell, had very little faith outside of, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Yet one, almost as if he had mentally put the pieces together while walking, turned around, and returned to give thanks and glory to God. This man was cured with the others, but Jesus then says, that since his response to the curing was giving glory to God, his *faith* was the source of his healing. The others were cured. But this man, in addition to being cured, was healed. He had found peace with God.

Ed continued, "Through conversations over the past few years, it seems most people, mainly Christians, like to define healing as the opposite of being sick. But the opposite of being sick is having a cure. We've all visited the doctor when we were sick who says, 'Take this prescription, it will cure what ails you.' This is merely a physical issue, whether God is involved or not." Ed paused his small, slow voice as he used his two shaky hands to take another sip. "I know many people who have been cured but have not been healed. And I also know many people who have been healed but have not been cured."

I started to catch onto what he was saying. The primary desire of a sick person is to be physically cured, much like the nine men cured of leprosy. The primary desire of a spiritual person, or a person aware of their sin, is to be healed, like the tenth leper. The difference between the two words was starting to define itself in my mind. Maybe I'd been barking up the wrong tree, feeling continually let down by a God who "promised" me healing, when in all reality, I had little idea of what healing actually meant.

I believe I will die one day. I believe I will go to Heaven and will no longer have cancer. I believe that my spirit and my soul, regardless of my body, has already been cured of this disease. Cancer may or may not take my life, but I already believe I have beaten death. Cancer has been defeated in my future. I am eternally cured of cancer because I believe that Jesus Christ is who he says he is. So, the question is, why am I so concerned about being "cured" right now?

I realized that over the past few years I had wanted my life to be a beacon, a lighthouse, a city on a hill, and in order to do that I needed to be cured—physically rid of cancer—to show that God is who He says He is. However, I was using the word "healing" as a remedy for the physical disease of cancer. But it's not the right word. Ed was pointing at something entirely different. Healing, the way Jesus referred to it,

was about my relationship with God. It also included the relationship I have with myself, with others in my life, and with the circumstances in the world around me. But I realized that, in 2012, the most important relationship in my life was broken.

I was trying to figure out who God had become to me. I was still full of shame and guilt about how my relationship with Amy had turned out. I was struggling to figure out how to “beat cancer,” to pray the right prayer, to go to the right workshops to learn how to be cured. But there is no point focusing on curing cancer, a disease I now believe I have eternally defeated, when I truly should be determined to find healing in this life here on earth.

I believe that conventional medicine, alternative treatments, diets, exercise, mystical pendants, healing oils, and Vitamin C supplements all have the capacity to “cure” you, with varying degrees of effectiveness. In fact, I truly believe the human body has the capacity to cure itself on nearly any physical level. But Ed was referring to healing as something entirely different. He is referring to true healing as peace with God, through Jesus. That is true shalom.

Ed told me that those who believe in the peace of Jesus Christ believe they have already been *eternally* cured, no matter what illness befalls them. They believe the sicknesses of this world will be left behind when we reach heaven. So, it really doesn't matter what you die from, be it MLS, cancer, or a plane falling from the sky. Yes, we all die, but by believing we are eternally cured from all sickness, from all disease, from all sin, we no longer are afraid of death. In fact, we sing, “Death! Where is your victory? Where is your sting?” There is none. Jesus has already taken care of our death penalty. So why are we so afraid of illness and death?

“However, while on this earth,” Ed explained, “it seems like very few people care to pursue true healing. People go to church, worship a God they barely know, then return home to their broken understanding of how God views them. They sing praises to God while worrying about their social media. They declare their love for Jesus while ignoring their neighbor. They worry about every aspect of their life while never actually believing that God has promised to offer them peace in all of their circumstances.”

True healing is "True Shalom." True shalom is what allowed Stephen in the New Testament to forgive those who stoned him. True shalom is what allowed the three being thrown into the fiery furnace to say, “But if we aren't saved...” True Shalom was the fuel for Paul as he struggled through his life.

“True Shalom,” Ed said, “is our greatest goal. Death just happens to be a minor detail in each of our eternal stories. Not being sick isn't much of a long-term goal. It's a physically oriented circumstance, driven by fear, with the capacity to keep you from finding shalom. However, by dealing directly with the cause, by finding internal peace with God, it's amazing what the physical body can do. When you deal

with the original cause of the disease, be it physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual, the physical symptoms seem to fade away.”

I had been practicing this through alternative medicine, using enemas and the Rife machine to get rid of the junk in my body that was allowing the cancer to continue living. I was so focused on the actual symptoms that I'd lost track of what the true, root causes were on the spiritual level. A cure is what a doctor can offer. True shalom—healing—is what God offers. There comes a point when you realize that it is only God who not only eternally heals but also has the power to cure at the precise moment when it will be fully returned for His glory. That may be right now or ten years from now. Only He knows. But it also means that He may or may not offer this cure while you are alive on this planet, but it definitely, without a shadow of a doubt, includes the promise of an eternal cure upon your entrance to heaven.

Ed tells me to pursue peace with God above all else. He tells me to pursue peace and love with myself and with others. He tells me to pursue peace by getting rid of my fear in all of my circumstances. I'm not sure I ever was afraid of cancer. Maybe in small moments when I was in pain, or in moments of high anxiety, doubled over the toilet before vomiting or entering a seizure. But I don't think I have ever been afraid of the oligodendroglioma, the actual tumor inside my head.

But I am scared of God. I often doubt whether or not God can love me. I'm scared of the deep recesses inside myself, the places I don't want to face, fearful of what I might find. I'm intimidated by others and the power they seem to have over me. I am terrified of Amy. I am certain I am not seeking shalom. I am just looking for a quick fix. I just want to tell everyone that God showed up, healed me, and now everything's cool again. What I didn't know is that I needed deep-seeded spiritual healing.

To be brutally honest, I understand why God has not healed me yet. He knows I'm not ready for it. If I were miraculously “cured,” I would have so quickly forgotten about these moments when my heart was so open to God. I'm glad I wasn't healed on stage in Uganda, where no one I knew would be a part of it. I'm glad I wasn't cured by Tina, crazily yelling at me just before trying to push me over. I'm glad the end of my story isn't being cured by the hands pressed all over my body as I'm sitting in the middle of a dog pile. I'm glad I wasn't cured in a weekend healing session lead by a skeezy televangelist. Now I can see there has never been any peace in those situations.

God knows the timeframe for me to heal, to be transformed, and to find true shalom. And I should know that during this time, I would make a variety of mistakes, choose wrong treatment plans, believe horrible theology, and numb myself to near non-existence. But God has yet to give up on me.

Ed helped me realize I wanted healing much more than I wanted curing. I realized I've already got cancer licked in the long term. But I wanted healing right now—in my relationships, in my family, between God

and myself. I wanted peace with Amy. I wanted to live my life with no fear despite the ridiculous scenarios I find myself in. This will feel like living, despite whatever cancer does to me. Now that I have chosen to pursue healing, I realize the choice of if or when I will be physically cured is no longer up to me.

Having understood the difference between the terms “healed” and “cured,” I asked Ed again, “So, as you pursue your eternal healing, do you also ask for an earthly cure from God? Have you given up or do you still pray for a cure?”

Ed raised his eyebrows, not showing focused determination or a desire to control his Maker. His response rolled off his tongue as though he had said it a million times before. He repeated the prayer of Blind Bartimaeus, who, I imagine probably looked and sounded a lot like Ed with his shaking hands and raspy voice, *“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”*

I wanted easy answers. I wanted a cure right away. I hated waiting, so I had wanted it to happen and, if possible, look fancy so I could get paid to keep talking about it. I’ve learned there are all sorts of tricks you can use if you ever do get sick. You can play worship music all the time. You can repeat prayers of healing to yourself or download a track of healing verses and put it on repeat throughout the night. You can buy bottled water from around the world that’s been proven to heal. You can always have your healing napkin on you, not unlike the one I just received in the mail that was apparently blessed by someone important. You can have the elders lay hands on you, or you can step up onto a stage and, before a crowd of rowdy witnesses, have a spiritual breakthrough, fall over, and start shaking. But I’m starting to think that when a person is pursuing healing through seeking True Shalom, the only prayer they need to repeat is, *“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”*