

AN ACT OF DIVINE HEALING

By Charles C. Ryrie, Th. D., Ph. D.

For some reason mothers-in-law seem to be notoriously infamous. However, in the two instances in the Bible where they are mentioned, just the opposite is true. In the Old Testament the fragrance of Naomi's character permeates the Book of Ruth, while Peter's mother-in-law was the subject of one of our Lord's miracles (Matt. 8:14-16; Mark 1:28-30; Luke 4:38-39).

The setting of this second incident was Peter's house in Capernaum and the occasion was the first-century equivalent of Sunday dinner. But on that Sabbath day when the Lord and Peter returned from the synagogue (where He had cast out the demon) no sumptuous meal awaited them. Jewish custom made the Sabbath not only a day of rest but also a day of joy, not the least reason for which was the festive meal. Christians are inclined to call to mind only the thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath by the Mishna and thus to forget the fact that it was expected to be a day of delight (cf. Isa. 58:13 and Prov. 10:22, which were applied to the Sabbath; also cf. Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, II, 52). Three meals of the choicest available food were prescribed for it along with regulations as to how that food could be kept warm, since no fire could be kindled on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:3; cf. Sabbath, VII, 2; Luke 14:1, which was one of these Sabbath meals).

Sickness had overtaken one member of that household, an illness which became the occasion for another of the Master's miracles as well as an opportunity to learn from this mother-in-law and her experience

A LESSON ABOUT SICKNESS

Unfortunately, the people of God are not exempt in this life from illness, and until we are free from the very pres-

ence of sin it shall be so. The Scriptures assign a number of reasons why people become sick. Sometimes, as in the case of Lazarus, sickness comes solely for the purpose of glorifying God (John 11:4). God is glorified when His character is displayed, and certainly God was displayed in Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead. Difficult as it may be for us to understand, it is nevertheless true that there are times when the glory of God is best seen through the medium of sickness, suffering, and even death. Undoubtedly, one of the chief reasons why Christians cannot ascribe to God full sovereignty in the design and execution of His purpose is that we cannot understand the inclusion in His plan of things which to us seem out of place. But such things, including sickness, work for His glory (Eph. 1:11-12).

On several occasions during the Lord's earthly ministry He came upon cases of sickness which He healed in order that men might believe. Indeed, in the case of the man born blind (John 9) the manifestation of the works of God (v. 3) eventuated in the conversion of that man (v. 38). In another instance, sickness was evidently allowed to sadden the home of the nobleman of Capernaum in order that the Lord might heal the afflicted son so that the whole household would believe in Him (John 4:53). Thus we may conclude that sometimes sickness is permitted for the particular purpose of bringing men to Christ.

Another reason for illness is the activity of demons. The gospel records abound with evidence that demons can inflict both mental (Mark 5:4-5; Luke 9:37-42) and physical disorders (Matt. 9:33; 12:22; Luke 13:11, 16). Of course, not all illness is due to demon possession but some certainly is. A physician's diagnosis in Acts 5:16 clearly distinguishes between demon affliction and other illnesses.

Although we realize that the ultimate reason for the existence of sickness is sin, nonetheless it is sometimes true that the experience of sickness is due to some specific sin in the life of a believer. A clear example of such illness is found in the inspired diagnosis of Paul concerning the physical difficulties which some members of the Corinthian church

avoiding contact with people.

Furthermore, our Lord's actions show us that selflessness means a ready and eager willingness to serve. According to Luke, request had to be made only one time to the Lord on behalf of Peter's wife's mother ("besought" in Luke 4:38 is in the aorist tense). Then the response was immediate. This is one of the constant characteristics of our Lord's life--the eager, willing response to the needs of others. Little wonder that Matthew reports this day of such totally selfless ministry to others as the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4a (Matt. 8:17). Since Isaiah 53:1-4a speaks of the life sufferings of Christ, our Lord's bearing of sickness is not related to the realm of expiation but to the realm of His infinite compassion toward men. These are nonvicarious life sufferings which were prophesied by Isaiah and fulfilled on this day of healing. Thus Isaiah 53:4a "was fulfilled by Christ when He, moved by this boundless compassion, healed those who came before Him" (L. S. Chafer, Systematic Theology, III, 39). Many interpreters do not find the solution to Matthew's quotation of Isaiah's prophecy in the distinction between the life sufferings of Christ and the expiatory sufferings of His death. Such ones usually believe that "the true relevancy of the prophecy is to be sought by regarding the miracles generally to have been, as we know so many of them were, lesser and typical outshewings of the great work of bearing the sin of the world, which He came to accomplish; just as diseases themselves, on which those miracles operated, are all so many testimonies to the existence, and types of the effect of sin" (Henry Alford, The Greek Testament, I, 74-75). Surely such compassion stemming from infinite perfection is beyond human measurement. Yet, though our comprehension may be small, our imitation of the compassion of Christ ought to be great. The world says "get"; Christianity says "give." Give continuously, and give eagerly.

A LESSON ABOUT SERVICE

As soon as our Lord healed Peter's mother-in-law she

arose and ministered to them. The cure was instantaneous, and the response in service immediate. So it should be on the part of all of those who have been healed spiritually by Christ. Forgiven sins should result in faithful service.

Evidently Peter's father-in-law was dead, and that is the reason why his mother-in-law made her home with Peter and his wife. There can be no doubt that this was his mother-in-law, for the Greek word is regularly used to designate such a relationship, and there is another common word for step-mother. We know from 1 Corinthians 9:5 that Peter's wife accompanied Peter on his preaching missions. Clement of Alexandria says that Peter's wife helped him in his ministry by ministering to the women (Stromata, III, 6). Thus we presume that the mother-in-law was present in the home because her husband, not Peter's wife, was dead. Her presence there surely was a blessing and help to the home, and her response to the healing touch of the Lord by serving teaches us several things about service in general and women's ministry in particular.

All of the evangelists use the same word to describe her ministering. It is the word from which we get the English word deacon. The verb means to execute the commands of another and evidently comes from two words which together mean to raise the dust by hastening. One who serves, then, is one who speedily does the bidding of his master (cf. Walter Bauer, Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch, p. 333). The use of this word in all its forms in connection with Christ in the gospels is very strange. A glance at a concordance will show that whenever ministry is spoken of as being rendered directly to the Lord Jesus, it is the ministry of angels or of women. After the temptation angels came and ministered to Him (Matt. 4:11; Mark 1:13). Every other use of the word in relation to the Lord is of the ministry of women to Him. Of no man is it recorded that he ministered to Jesus, but on two occasions it is recorded of Martha that she served Jesus; mention is made of a band of women who ministered to Him of their substance; and there is this occasion when Peter's wife's mother served the Lord (Luke 10:40; John 12:2; Luke

were experiencing. The reason, he declares, why some of them were weak and sickly was to be traced to their previous behavior at the Lord's Supper. They had partaken of the sacred remembrance with definite unconfessed sin in their lives, and God had punished some of them with sickness.

Not every illness, however, can be said to be primarily for the glory of God or the salvation of someone; nor can it be attributed to demon possession or persistent sin; one may become sick from overwork. Such was the experience of Epaphroditus who nearly died because he had worked so strenuously (Phil. 2:25-30). This killing work was not what usually makes most folks sick today--it was not that which advanced him up the business or social ladder; rather, it was various sorts of personal ministry to the Apostle Paul during his imprisonment. Is it Scriptural to be sick because of overwork? Yes, if the work is the work of Christ. It is interesting to note that although Paul had and used the gift of healing, such was not the means of recovery in this instance or in the case of Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20) or even in his own case (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

But none of these reasons for sickness seems to include the case of Peter's mother-in-law. Her fever was chronic and severe. "Was taken" in Luke 4:38 is an imperfect periphrastic which denotes a chronic state, and the word great is a Lukan medical term which is regularly used to distinguish severe illness (cf. A. T. Robertson, Luke the Historian in the Light of Research, p. 93). The cure in this case seems to have been for the purpose that she could serve God. A seemingly similar purpose in the case of unbelievers occurs in Acts 28 where God through Paul raised up the father of Publius as well as many others in the island of Melita in order that, out of grateful hearts, they might minister to the temporal needs of Paul and Luke. Though there doubtless was a spiritual ministry on the part of Paul, only the physical ministry is mentioned in the record, and the only response recorded on the part of the people was of material things. But in both these examples--Publius' father and Peter's mother-in-law--sickness is connected with service. In the

case of a believer, we may surmise that the Lord might allow him to become sick in order that he might realize that his life and strength must come from God and that the purpose of God's giving life and strength is that he might serve Him. This is the lesson Paul had to learn in all the circumstances of life (Phil. 4:11-13), and it is not unlikely that this is the lesson we are meant to learn from the sickness of Peter's mother-in-law.

A LESSON ABOUT SELFLESSNESS

The sick mother became the object of the second lesson while the teacher and example of the lesson is the Lord Jesus. It is the lesson of selflessness which is the very essence of Christianity. It is taught by the One who "made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7), and it is being taught to those (for Peter, Andrew, James, and John were present in the house that day, Mark 1:29), who are not greater than their Lord. It is the lesson for all followers of Christ; it is the lesson of selflessness.

The teaching method the Lord used on this occasion is a most effective one. It is teaching by actions. His actions that day show us that selflessness includes the idea of hard work. It had already been a busy day for the Lord before He arrived at Simon's house. He had been to the synagogue service and taught those there gathered. He had entered into conflict with demons and cast them out of the possessed man in the synagogue. It would have been only right that He be allowed to rest at Peter's house that afternoon, but there was a need there which He gladly met. In the evening when the day's work might be thought to be done the whole city was gathered in front of Peter's house, many of whom needed help from the miracle-working Master. So again the Lord ministered tirelessly to the multitude at the end of that busy day. What a lesson there is in this for ministers and servants of Christ who, impressed with their own importance, are always "saving themselves" for important activities by

8:3). Thus in the life of our Lord women had a very special place as ministers to Him in a sense in which no man was His minister.

The exact nature of this service of women is seen in the miracle before us. It consisted in ministering to the physical needs of the group gathered in the house. This is the same kind of ministry Martha performed as well as the band of women who evidently provided money for the material needs of the band of disciples (cf. Josephus, Antiquities, XVII, 2, 4; Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke, p. 215). Peter's mother-in-law doubtless helped with the preparation of the Sabbath meal in the home that day. Years ago Spurgeon wisely commented on this passage as follows: "But notice that what this good woman did was very appropriate. Peter's wife's mother did not get out of bed and go down the street and deliver an address to an assembled multitude. Women are best when they are quiet. I share the apostle Paul's feelings when he bade women be silent in the assembly. Yet there is work for holy women, and we read of Peter's wife's mother that she arose and ministered to Christ. She did what she could and what she should. She arose and ministered to Him. Some people can do nothing that they are allowed to do but waste their energies in lamenting that they are not called on to do other people's work. Blessed are they who do what they should do. It is better to be a good housewife, or nurse, or domestic servant, than to be a powerless preacher or a graceless talker. She did not arise and prepare a lecture, nor preach a sermon, but she arose and prepared a supper, and that was what she was fitted to do. Was she not a housewife? As a housewife let her serve the Lord" (C. H. Spurgeon, Sermons on Our Lord's Miracles, II, 225-26).

It is not within the scope of this study to show that the remainder of the New Testament does not depart far from the picture of the ideal ministry of women in this miracle. Her service is primarily, if not exclusively, related to the home, and the exercise of that service is private, not public. This

is not degradation but distinctiveness; it is not inferiority but exaltation in the sphere in which God created women. In the gospels the service of women to Christ specifically consisted in caring for His physical wants by providing hospitality, by giving of money, and in His death by the preparation of the spices for the body. Our Lord's response to this was significant, for He allowed women to follow Him; He taught them; He honored them with the first announcement of the resurrection. But, equally clear is the fact that He limited their activity by not choosing one of them for the official work. The incarnation was in a Man. The Lord's Supper was instituted in the presence of men only. The New Testament was written by men. Little weight is given by scholars to Harnack's suggestion that Hebrews was written by Priscilla ("Probabilia uber die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebraerbriefs," Zeitschrift fur die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, 1:16-41, 1900). Even less attention can be given to Benjamin W. Bacon's conjecture that Revelation was written by one of the four daughters of Philip ("The Authoress of Revelation--A Conjecture," Harvard Theological Review, 23:235-50, July, 1930). Yet the ministry of women is clearly defined in the New Testament and superbly illustrated by the actions of this mother-in-law on that Sabbath day. Thus the lesson for women is that their service is chiefly related to the home and that it often consists of ministering to physical needs. This is the true diaconate of women.

These are the lessons of the miracle of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. And yet the lessons are but one lesson--the lesson of service. There seems to have been no other reason for the illness of this woman than that she might realize that her strength came from God and that with that strength she could serve Him. Further, she saw that all service for the Master should be like His--unceasing and eager even at the end of a long day which had already been filled with good deeds; and that such service of women is something peculiarly exalting to them when performed in accordance with the pattern which God Himself has revealed.