

# Leprosy / All things made new

**Carol:** Hello and welcome to Women of Hope. I hope you're well today!

**Tammy:** Hello, from me as well. I'm very well, thank you, Carol. And I am glad you asked, because today we're going to hear about a disease that many people are frightened of. It's called leprosy. Have you ever met someone with leprosy?

**Carol:** I am glad we are talking about this – because there are lots of fears and stories about leprosy and often they're not really correct.

**Tammy:** In some places, people with leprosy used to have to ring a bell and shout, 'Unclean, unclean' to warn people they were coming. Isn't that horrible? Well, let's listen to this story together and find out what *is* true about leprosy. (Producers- introduce the storyteller)

**Storyteller:** One morning a nurse from the health center came to school. Sometimes she would give all the students immunization injections. And sometimes she would check everyone's teeth or their skin. But today Mrs Mina was only going to talk. She gave them all a big smile and said cheerfully, "Good morning, children! Is there anyone here who doesn't need any friends?" What a strange question! No one raised their hand.

Mrs Mina smiled and said, 'Well, I want to ask all of you to be real friends to someone who badly needs some friends. Let me tell you his story...

Last week, a new family moved into this town. I met them when they came to the health centre for some medicine. They have only one child, who's the same age as *you*...his name's Tony. Unfortunately, both Tony and his father had leprosy several years ago.'

Some of the children gasped, and whispered to each other. But Mrs Mina continued, 'You've all heard about leprosy, but I think there's a lot you don't know about it. It's a nasty disease, but it's not caused by a curse, or because the person is bad or dirty. No! Leprosy is caused by a germ, or bacteria, just like a cough or a stomach infection, only it's a different bacteria. It's not even very infectious; you're not very likely to catch it, even if the person hasn't been treated.'

Anita asked 'How would you know if you had leprosy? Does it start with your fingers and toes falling off?'

'Oh no', said Mrs Mina. 'The first sign is often a patch of skin that is pale and numb. It looks like a fungus, but you can't feel a light touch on it, and you can't feel whether something is hot or cold. If you find a patch like that, go straight away to your health worker; if it's treated right away there won't be any more problems.'

Every child was paying very good attention. If it were true that the dreadful disease of leprosy was only caused by a bacteria, the same as other infections, they would be very wrong to be mean to someone just because they had leprosy. But people who had leprosy were scary because sometimes their hands and their feet were such strange shapes, with bleeding, smelly wounds.

The children were confused by what the nurse had said.

Mrs Mina showed them a medicine card with tablets in it.

'Look at this,' she said, as she held the card high so everyone could see it. 'I told you that leprosy is caused by a type of bacteria. Leprosy can be cured by taking antibiotic medicine, which kills the bacteria. Yes! And this is it! These antibiotics can kill the leprosy bacteria, so that the leprosy disease is stopped, and the person is totally cured. And this medicine is free, too! Isn't that wonderful? You can't catch leprosy from a person who has had this treatment.'

'But unfortunately, not everyone who gets leprosy gets this medicine quickly enough. If they wait too long before taking this medicine, their nerves can be damaged. Does anyone know what a nerve is?'

Benjamin's favorite subject was science, so he quickly raised his hand and answered, 'Nerves are like telephone wires in your body, taking messages between your body and your brain at a very fast speed. For example, your hand tells your brain it feels hot so your brain tells your arm to quickly pull away from the fire.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Mina. "That was a very clear answer. Nerves can be damaged by the leprosy bacteria. You can have the medicine to kill the leprosy bacteria, but if you don't get the medicine quickly enough the nerves could become permanently damaged. Now, try to imagine what happens if one of your nerves is damaged and doesn't work any more. What would happen if the nerves in your hands were damaged?" she asked.

Anita thought about it for a minute, then said, 'You wouldn't feel the heat from the fire, so your brain would not tell you to pull your hand away and you would get burned.'

'Yes, that's right.'

Mrs Mina stood behind the teacher's table and pretended she was cooking in the kitchen. 'And if someone couldn't feel anything in his hands, he wouldn't know if he burned them on the hot cooking pot...or if he cut them with the knife...or if he got blisters from using garden tools. In the end, his hands would get very badly hurt, wouldn't they?

But does he still have the leprosy disease after he has the antibiotic medicine? *No*. This person would already be cured because he wouldn't have the leprosy *bacteria* any more. But his damaged *nerves* would be dead for the rest of his life, and he could badly injure his hands if he wasn't very careful indeed.

Then Mrs Mina held out her hands. She bent her fingers back and curled them up. 'This is what can also happen to a person with leprosy, and after a while they can't move their fingers properly. If I couldn't move my fingers, it wouldn't be long before they got permanently stiff like this, and looked like claws. So, don't be afraid of someone who has hands like this. Just help them so that they don't damage their hands.'

The children in the class understood what Mrs Mina meant. Then she asked Benjamin to come to the front of the class.

She said to him, 'Benjamin, put this sharp little stone inside your shoe. Now, please walk to the back of the room and see what happens.' After a moment, he started limping, not putting any weight onto his foot. The other children all laughed at the way he was walking.

'It hurts doesn't it!' said Mrs Mina. 'Now take the stone out but imagine the stone is still there and you've lost all the feeling in your foot. Children: if Benjamin had a big, sharp stone in his shoe, but he couldn't feel anything, how would he walk?'

The children shouted advice to Benjamin, and he walked normally, putting his full weight on the foot. Mrs Mina smiled again.

'Yes! You're right!' she said, 'If he can't feel anything in that foot, he will keep stepping on that sharp stone until his foot is badly cut!

If Benjamin's foot were numb, he wouldn't even need to have a stone in his shoe to damage it. If he just stood on his foot for too long, or squatted for a long time, or walked or ran too far, his foot would become blistered or bruised from the pressure. It would form an ulcer or pressure sore. It could get infected and become more damaged. It wouldn't heal, because he stepped on it all the time. He wouldn't have leprosy any more, he just couldn't feel anything in that foot.

'Now, will you be afraid of someone who has had leprosy but has already had the medicine?'

'No!' answered the children, 'because they don't have the leprosy germ any more and we can't catch it.'

'And do you understand the problems that they have if the nerves in their hands or their feet are damaged?'

'Yes' said Benjamin... 'they can't feel anything so they can very easily cut or burn themselves, or get blisters. The wounds get worse and worse because they can't feel them.'

'We all understand,' said the children.

'Then I want to ask for your help. Tony can't feel anything in his feet. He has a nasty wound on one of his feet, and his wound won't heal because he keeps stepping on it. He hasn't been to school because he has no friends. Will you be real friends to him, so that he wants to come to school?'

'Yes,' they all answered.

'And will you think about ways that you can help him?'

'Oh yes,' they said.

**Tammy:** Here on Women of Hope, we've been hearing about leprosy, and how it can easily be cured with medicine. And we also learned that it's just a bacterial infection like many others. And the warning sign?

Yes, a patch of skin that's pale and numb. But what happens if the infection isn't treated?

**Carol:** We also learned that it needs to be treated. And here's the scary part- without treatment, the nerves get damaged, the person can't feel parts of their body, so they keep hurting themselves. It's much better to go and get medicine right away if you find a numb patch. Don't wait!

**Tammy:** And we shouldn't be frightened of people who've had leprosy. We should be friends with them. Another time we'll look at ways that a person with leprosy can look after themselves so that they don't damage their hands and feet.

**Carol:** We have a special friend with us today from Australia. Naomi worked in a hospital with people who had damage from leprosy, and many of them became her friends. Naomi, It's good to have you with us again today. I'm looking forward to another one of your great stories.

**Naomi:** We've just heard that leprosy is a disease spread by bacteria. If it's not treated it damages the nerves in your arms and legs...and face, which means you can't feel anything in those areas. If you can't feel, you often hurt yourself very easily. At the hospitals where I worked in Nepal, I looked after leprosy patients who had lost fingers and toes. Sometimes their limbs were quite deformed and they needed to learn to walk again, and learn how to do ordinary things again, and especially, how they could avoid causing more damage to the parts of the body that couldn't feel. At the time I was working there, people with leprosy were often hidden away, living alone in caves because they had been forced out of their villages. Once people begin taking medicine for leprosy, they are no longer infectious. So it is safe for them to be with other people, as the disease won't get passed on. Most people don't know this, so leprosy sufferers are often treated very badly. No-one wants to be near them in case they catch the disease.

I worked at a hospital in Nepal called Green Pastures. Patients would travel for many days to reach the hospital. For many patients, it changed their lives to arrive at the hospital...to get medical care and not be rejected. One young man told me, 'No one has ever loved me. Now all I have to do is walk in the doors of the hospital and I know love.'

That man's name was Shankar. He had grown up in a village six hours walk from the hospital. When he was a baby, his mother had run off with another man. She left his father to care for the young family. When Shankar was eight his father died, and then Shankar started showing some of the signs of having leprosy. The village people had been looking after the family, but now they didn't want to be near them. The children were no longer given a place to live. They were not given any food. They were told to leave the village. How does an eight year old live without food? Not very well.

Shankar's story would have ended there. But a person in the village told him about the hospital that helped people with leprosy. So Shankar and his brother started walking towards this place. They had no money and no idea what to expect.

It was a journey that changed their lives. Shankar had never seen a road. He had never seen a car or a bus. When he arrived at Green Pastures, he knew he had come to a place where he was accepted, a place where people are valued because they are made by God, and like God in some ways. Shankar knew love for the first time. He filled his empty stomach with good food. He filled his empty soul with the words of Jesus and the love of the people he met. He learnt to read and write. The medicine stopped his leprosy. He was content.

When I first met him, Shankar was working at Green Pastures, teaching other patients how to read and write. He lived in a tiny room not far from the hospital. One hook on the wall held his change of clothes. One wooden bench was his bed. "Look at all this," he said to Darren, my husband. "I have been so blessed! God has been so good to me and I am full of thanks. You know, I am even glad for my leprosy, because if I had never had leprosy, I would never have known Jesus. I would never have known of God's love for me; God's love for me that changed my life."

**Carol:** Oh Naomi, that's wonderful. He really knew what was most important, didn't he?

**Naomi:** Every Tuesday morning at the hospital there would be a time of Bible study for any of the patients who wanted to go. The patients would come in slowly, take a seat on tiny stools and look at the floor. The leader was Chandra. He had also been a victim of leprosy but he was cured and now he worked at the hospital. He would lead a few songs praising God and then pick up his well-used Bible. One morning he said, 'Today we are going to read from a book at the end of the Bible. It's about what is going to happen at the end of time.' Chandra started reading from Revelation chapter 21. This is what he read.

'Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ...And I heard a loud voice from God's throne saying, "Look! God's is going to live now among the people, and he will stay with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'"

The words sank into the heart of that small group on that morning. They were hearing them for the first time. Maybe you're hearing them for the first time too. They slowly raised their stumps of hands with most of their fingers missing and stared at them. They tried to imagine being made new...a new hand with fingers. Tears fell and hope began again. To these people who had no hope, it was a precious thing. For years they had known they were not important. Sent away, not wanted, starved. They believed they were not important, with no hope of finding a job, a friend or a marriage partner.

Now suddenly there was hope for an eternity with God. No more tears. These people looked at their deformed hands, missing fingers, missing toes, broken feet. All of these would be made new. Hearts would be made new. Hope began that day. Until we have known how it feels to be hopeless how can we know hope?

As I watched this group, I began to read the Bible as they read it. I had never read those words from the Bible from the point of view of people with leprosy, people who had no hope. I started

thinking about what it would be like with a new earth, like Revelation 21 describes. At that time people from every nation, tribe, clan and language will stand before God's throne, bowing down and singing praise songs to Him. Songs that say how amazing God is. Songs that describe how God is wise, powerful, strong and holy. We will all sing praises to God together with one voice. I thought, 'Our voices will join Chandra's and Shankar's voices, because we all love God and follow Jesus Christ, God's Son. We will all be together with God, the one who has always loved us.'

This is the God who has always watched over you. The God who is at work in the world he made. God loves you. He made you. His love for you is never ending and he has a wonderful plan for your life, and forever.

**Tammy:** Naomi, that really touched my heart. Whatever disability we have now, whatever hard things we face, it's so good to know God loves us and we can look forward to being with him forever.

**Carol:** I'm looking forward to singing with those men and women, and I pray that you will be there too, my friend. It's time for us to go now. But I would like to encourage you to tell us about your life, and how we can pray for you? We do hope you will be with us again. Have a great week filled with God's blessings.

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