
Luke, the beloved physician

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— Keith R. Blades

It is only natural that the Apostle Paul should have great affection for Luke. Ever since teaming up with Paul at the time the Lord directed him to go into Macedonia, Luke has pretty much been Paul's constant companion. As the saying goes, they have been through thick and thin together, including the tempestuous ship voyage to Rome recorded in Acts 27. Little wonder, therefore, when Paul makes mention of Luke in his epistles, he often does so in a way that conveys not only great love, but great consolation as well. This, in particular, is done when Paul writes about enduring the most arduous situations. A prime example of this is found in II Timothy 4. Few words are so expressive of Paul's aching heart over the capitulation of many, and at the same time so expressive of his great consolation over the selfless, uncompromising loyalty of one, than those five words in II Timothy 4:11 — "Only Luke is with me." It is a gross understatement to say that Luke's loyalty meant much to Paul. It was an exceeding great comfort to him. One which could be matched only by Timothy's own coming to be with him.

Though Paul highly valued Luke's almost constant companionship, his unflagging loyalty, and the like, there is one particular way in which Paul loved Luke that is often times overlooked. In Colossians 4 Paul expresses this by referring to Luke in a very special way.

14 Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.

(Colossians 4:14)

Paul calls Luke "the beloved physician." But this is much more than simply an acknowledgment of his profession in order to identify him. Paul does

not say, 'Luke, the physician,' but "Luke, the *beloved* physician." Hence, Paul is expressing his appreciation for Luke as a physician; a medical doctor. Yet, in truth, he is expressing much more than that. By calling Luke "the *beloved* physician," Paul is declaring that he "loved" Luke as a physician; he highly valued and esteemed Luke as a physician, needing his medical skills and benefiting from them.

A Puzzle

Why would it be that the Apostle Paul would value Luke as a physician? Why would he need to benefit from Luke's medical skills? Is not this the man who, being the Apostle that he was, wrought on a regular basis "mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God," including miraculous physical healing? Sure it is! Is not this the man of whom it is written in Acts 19,...

11 And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul:

12 So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them.

(Acts 19:11-12)

Was it not Paul who "felt no harm" on the island of Melita, when the venomous viper "fastened on his hand" and "he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly"? Yes, it was!

Why then would he have need of a physician? In view of who he was and "the power of the Spirit of God" manifestly working through him, it seems most unusual that Paul would express his appreciation for Luke as a physician.

The solution to this puzzle lies in recognizing the significance of where it is in Paul's epistles that we find him making this declaration. Notice that he does not say this about Luke in Romans, I or II Corinthians, or Galatians. These are epistles Paul wrote when, as described in I Corinthians 12-14, a number of time-limited operations of God were in effect. Nor is Paul's statement about Luke recorded in the book of Acts as something he said about Luke during that same period of time. Instead, Paul declares this about Luke in Colossians, one of his later epistles. What is so significant about this is that Colossians was written at the time when two of those particular time-limited operations of God had successfully been accomplished. Consequently, the temporary validating function of miraculous signs and wonders associated with them were no longer needed, and they had ceased.

These two particular time-limited operations were the Divine validation of Paul's special Gentile Apostleship, and the special testimony of God's grace given to Israel outside of their land. During the opening stage to this dispensation of grace when these two operations were being performed, numerous sign-type evidences were given by God attesting to their reality, including miraculous physical healings. However once they were successfully accomplished, there remained no further need for the sign-type attestation. For not only had God given adequate testimony to validate these two matters, but more importantly He had replaced the sign-type attestation with the greatest form of attestation God ever gives for the validity and reality of anything — i.e. putting it into His written word.

With their temporary validating role fulfilled, performing miraculous physical healings ceased to be an operation of God in this dispensation. Consequently, in Paul's later epistles not only is their function not mentioned, but instead being sick, needing a physician, and taking medicine, is set forth as the norm for us.

To better understand and appreciate this, let's briefly consider the role given to miraculous physical healings.

The Natural Place for Miraculous Physical Healings

It is in God's program with Israel that signs, wonders, and miracles, (including physical healings), have their natural place. This, in particular, is because God had made a covenant with Israel to do such things among them. For example, in Exodus 34 God declared to Moses,...

10 And he said, Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation: and all thy people among which thou *art* shall see the work of the LORD: for it *is* a terrible thing that I will do with thee.

(Exodus 34:10)

On the basis of this covenant Israel could not only expect God to do "marvels" among them and for them to "see the work of the LORD" in their very midst, but the performing of such marvels even served as signs to Israel regarding how they fared in God's program with them. In view of this, for example, Israel could read the signs of their national circumstances, compare them with what God set forth to them in Leviticus 26, and know just how they stood with God. In connection with this, particular times of national distress would have them crying out with Gideon,...

13 And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where *be* all his miracles which our fathers told us of,...

(Judges 6:13a)

Or with Asaph,...

We see not OUR SIGNS: *there is* no more any prophet: neither *is there* among us any that knoweth how long.

(Psalm 74:9)

Hence, the overall issue of signs, wonders, and miracles, is clearly not only a natural part of God's program with Israel, it is also integral to it.

Miraculous physical healings were a special part of the covenant of marvels God had with Israel. As Jehovah-ropheka, ("I am the LORD that healeth thee"), God would put this aspect of His "Jehovah-ness" into effect for Israel, healing both their land and their physical infirmities. This was particularly evident during the climactic stage in Israel's program, as set forth in the Gospel accounts and the opening chapters of the book of Acts. At that time, with the Lord in the land and the "last days" of Israel's time schedule in effect, miraculous physical healings abounded. This was especially so because physical healings were one of the two hallmark signs of the kingdom,¹ and as such they validated the fact that the kingdom of heaven truly was "at hand," just as began to be proclaimed to Israel beginning with John the Baptist. Hence, as the Gospel accounts describe, the Lord went about "preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people." (Matthew 4:23) In so doing He was "preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God." (Luke 8:1)

The miraculous physical healings that were performed by the Lord, His 12 apostles, and others of the remnant of Israel during that time were signs of the kingdom and "signs of the times," (Matthew 16:1-4). They were the "powers of the world to come" that Israel tasted during that time, (Hebrews 6:4-5).

The Great Dispensational Change

When events in Israel's program had advanced on to the point that God was ready "to shew his

wrath, and to make his power known" and thereby bring in the kingdom, something completely unexpected happened. Instead of commencing His day of wrath as anticipated, God suspended His program with Israel and brought in this present dispensation of His longsuffering and grace to the Gentiles in which we live today. Raising up the Apostle Paul as a brand new apostle, God revealed to him "the mystery of Christ" that He had kept "hid in himself" since before the world began. (Ephesians 3:1-12)

With the suspension of Israel's program, the signs of the kingdom ceased to be given to them. Instead, God gave evidence particularly designed to manifest the great dispensational change He had made.

The Temporary Role of Miracles in this Dispensation

In accordance with bringing in this new and unprophesied dispensation of His grace to the Gentiles, God began performing a number of operations that both confirmed the reality of what He was doing, and also provided for the partial-knowledge situation in existence at that time. Of the operations that confirmed the reality of what He was doing, both the validation of Paul's special Gentile Apostleship and the special testimony of God's grace given to Israel outside their land involved the use of miracles, including physical healings.

In Romans 15, for example, the Apostle Paul describes the validating role belonging to miracles in his ministry.

15 Nevertheless, brethren, I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind, because of the grace that is given to me of God,

16 That I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost.

17 I have therefore whereof I may glory through Jesus Christ in those things that pertain to God.

18 For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ hath not wrought by me, to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed,

19 Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

(Romans 15:15-19)

Through the testimony of such “mighty signs and wonders” God unquestionably validated Paul’s special Gentile Apostleship and message. He made it evident beyond a shadow of a doubt that His program now involved the “offering up of the Gentiles.”

However, it was actually God’s operation of giving Israel a special testimony of His grace outside of their land that made specific use of miraculous physical healings. Yet, not just any kind of physical healing, but a particular set of specified healings that were very significant to Israel.

The “Gifts of Healings”

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He began to educate them in the meaning of His “Jehovah-ness” and grace. At that time, as part of that education, He spoke to them very pointedly about the diseases of Egypt.

26 And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I *am* the LORD that healeth thee.

(Exodus 15:26)

These specific diseases were to have a special role in Israel’s education. As they learned the hard way the meaning, necessity, and application of God’s “Jehovah-ness” and grace, these diseases would come into play. In view of Israel’s failure to comply with the Law contract, these diseases of Egypt were brought upon them, just as called for in Deuteronomy 28.

27 The LORD will smite thee with the botch of Egypt, and with the emerods, and with the scab, and with the itch, whereof thou canst not be healed.

59 Then the LORD will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, *even* great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance.

60 Moreover he will bring upon thee all the diseases of Egypt, which thou wast afraid of; and they shall cleave unto thee.

(Deuteronomy 28:27, 59-60)

As Deuteronomy 28 testifies, these diseases (of which Israel could not be healed except by the grace of God’s “Jehovah-ness”) would be especially experienced by Israel *outside their land*.

It was the healing of these specific diseases that God used as a sign to Israel outside of their land when He testified to them of His grace at the beginning of this dispensation. These are the particular miraculous healings performed by members of the body of Christ to whom was given “the gifts of healings” cited by Paul in I Corinthians 12 and 13. In Jewish population centers outside of their land, like Corinth, the testimony of God’s “Jehovah-ness” and grace to

Israel was validated before their eyes by those with “the gifts of healings.”² By such healings, along with other signs like tongues³ that were also used in this particular operation, God gave testimony of His grace to His nation outside their land.

However this particular operation of God, like all the gift-supported operations of God cited by Paul in I Corinthians 12-14, was time-limited. It, and the others, ceased when it was replaced with God’s “more excellent” testimony — His completed written word.

Your Physical Health in this Dispensation

In Romans 8:18ff, the Apostle Paul makes it clear to us that for as long as this dispensation of God’s longsuffering and grace is in effect, we are subject to “the sufferings of this present time.” With the suspension of Israel’s program, the “bondage of corruption” continues in effect. This means, therefore, that we not only can, but will, experience sufferings in our lives. And especially so will this be the case with our physical health.

In fact, to put it bluntly, because of the “bondage of corruption,” the status of our physical health is going to constantly vary. We are going to be in and out of sicknesses and infirmities. Moreover, as the dispensation of grace continues on, the frequency of experiencing sicknesses, weaknesses, painfulness, and the like, will increase. Indeed, if this dispensation continues on long enough, our health will deteriorate to the point that our bodies will succumb to the “bondage of corruption” and we will die.

In view of this, 3 particular verses in Paul’s later epistles set forth issues that are very instructive to us. The first one is the issue with which we began this article.

Colossians 4:14 “*Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.*” — As it was with the Apostle Paul, so does it need to be with us. Find yourself a “beloved physician.” You are going to

need one.

I Timothy 5:23 “*Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities.*” — As with Timothy, take your medicine.⁴

II Timothy 4:20 “*Erastus abode at Corinth: but Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.*” — As with Trophimus, recognize that it may be that there is nothing any physician, or any medicine, can do for you. Indeed, the time will come when that will be the case.⁵

In view of the “sufferings of this present time,” our physical health will often have us groaning and travailing in pain. There is, however, a permanent healing for our bodies to which we eagerly look forward. It’s “the redemption of our body” at our rapture/resurrection. At that time, when God ends this dispensation, we will put on either incorruption or immortality “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump.” Yet until then, for as long as we are in these mortal bodies, we will need to benefit from a “beloved physician.” — *Keith R. Blades*

¹ The other hallmark sign of the kingdom is casting the unclean spirits out of Israel’s land.

² It is instructive to note that “the gifts of healings” is not only described by Paul in the plural, but he cites it as distinct from “miracles” in general. The one possessing this gift at this time, had a specified set of healings to graciously give to ones to whom it had been told that they had diseases of which they could not be healed except by God’s gracious gift.

³ Cf. I Corinthians 14:20-22.

⁴ It was more than likely Luke himself who prescribed this medicine for Timothy.

⁵ In citing these 3 verses, the situation concerning Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25-30 is not being overlooked. The things pertaining to Epaphroditus, and God’s mercy on him, will be considered in a future article of *The Enjoy The Bible Quarterly*.