

I come from a colony of lepers in a place that has no name. If people ever asked my brothers and cousins where I was, I told them to say, "Somewhere between Samaria and Galilee." It was what some may call a "no man's land." There were women in our colony, but they kept to themselves. Still we lived in a place where no one else wanted to leave because we were there. Every week, kind people came and dropped baskets of food and fruits and bread and jugs of water at our gate. We came covering up our faces, our eaten away hands and limbs to drag the baskets back to where we could share the food. Leprosy has an odor about it. It is despicable. Clearly, we were outcasts. No law abiding Jew would come our way. According to Leviticus, we had been cursed by God. Everyone knew that! Everyone believed that! We were cursed and somehow still alive.

I am here today to tell you my story. It still amazes me. I stand before you whole and healed. I was not that way for most of my life. I was a leper. You do not know the horrible effects of this disease. Somehow my poor mother developed the disease at the end of her life. I am glad my father never saw her that way. Since I was the child who lived with her, I guess I caught the disease from her. When she died, I had nowhere to go. I had already lost all my fingers on my right hand. The disease was spreading up my arm, to my left hand, to my toes and feet. The village put me in an ox cart and two of the men hauled me off to the colony where I lived for what I thought would be the rest of my life.

The colony was a miserable place. There was only a muddy well in the middle of our lean-to huts. When it rained, there was nothing but mud and we all got completely soaked. There was no scratch of grass or bushes or anything. It was a colony of outcasts, of sick people with diseases no one wanted. We were the cursed of Israel. Depression and anger ruled us. No one of us wanted to care about the other. We were all miserable and sick and cut off. We were all lonely. We were starved for what you know is real life.

One day, someone heard that the Nazarene was coming. Even we had heard tales about his abilities to heal. His group of men and women were walking down the path that we could see from the far end of our compound. Two of the women and seven other men and I stood up and dragged ourselves quickly toward that gate near the path. My friend called out to them, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." We had cried out to so many who had gone down that path before. "Have mercy on us." So many times people shouted back. You wouldn't believe the things we were called; maybe you would believe it. Not this time. This time there were no names, no language, no curses. This time Jesus came and stepped out in front of his followers. He moved towards us. He was not inside our gate. He was just beyond it and he spoke to us and said, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Not all of us heard what he said. We stood there a moment not believing that he was speaking... to us. Someone said, "What did he say?" I told them. I told them, "He said, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.'" No one has ever said anything like that to us, to me or anyone of us.

My friend said, "Let's do what he says." Immediately, all of us...even the women headed in the opposite direction back through our little compound towards the village of Nain. We knew there were some rabbis living there in a home together with their families. Those were the closest priests somebody said.

As we got outside our fences, we were hurrying in the way we drag ourselves around. We started laughing. We were beginning to run as we were laughing. Somebody got winded and slowly down. We started walking. That is when I realized that something had happened. I pulled back my bandages and realized that my foot had new skin...and not just new skin; there were toes. I hadn't had toes in years. I screamed. Suddenly, we all stopped. You have never heard such screaming and shouting in your life. We were like crazy people. We were taking our clothes off there on the road and looking at hands and feet and faces. "What does my nose look like?" And someone said back to her, "You have a nose. It is not that hole that used to be there. You have a nose; you look beautiful." "Someone else said, 'I have a hand again. Look at my hand.'" Someone else said, "Look at

my arms. They are not nubs anymore.” Just like that, everyone left their rags right there and headed off to villages where their families lived. Most went towards Galilee. Some went in the direction of the Jordan River. A few headed back towards Samaria. Everyone was running. It was the happiest I had ever seen those people in my whole time at the colony. No one said “goodbye.” We just started running. That’s when it hit me.

I had this desire to go back, to go back and find this Jesus. I stood there filling my lungs with the sweetest air I had ever smelled in my life. I remember turning around. I thought of my brothers and my family. But I decided they could wait. So...I turned around. It was one of the best things I have ever done in my life. I wanted to go back and say to this dear man that he had done something only God could do. I didn’t even believe God could do what he did. But he did. I started running. I was not dragging anything. I was running and laughing and crying and shouting and running. You see, we had gotten but a short distance from where we lived when all of this happened. So...I wasn’t that far away.

So I saw the group of followers. And I saw him too. I called out to him. “Jesus...Jesus,” I shouted as loudly as I could my praise of God. “Please stop.” I saw them just beyond that old miserable gate. He walked slowly towards me. I have never seen a kinder face in all my life. As I got near to him, I could see God in his eyes. He was looking straight at me. It was God. I never thought I would see God. In that moment, I felt I was looking into the face of God. I was so overcome with emotion I fell down at his feet and sobbed. I touched his sandal and I grabbed his foot. He must have leaned down and put his hand on my shoulder. I told him, “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.” I must have said it fifty times. I have never been so grateful for anything anyone has ever done for me as what he did to me that day.

He said something when I stopped blubbering. He said, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” Then he seemed to speak to his followers. “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Somehow he knew I was from Samaria. He was no ordinary Jew. No ordinary Jew would have stood there with his hand on my shoulder. He knew who I was and he healed me and loved me and accepted me. You know I could not answer him. I do not know why those others did not come back. I just know how I felt. I felt good down to the depths of my new feet.

And then he said to me, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” He wasn’t being cruel. He was directing me in a way I never thought I would be able to go again. He was giving me a blessing. I got to experience Jesus’ blessing because I turned around. I am convinced to this day that saying, “Thank you” puts a blessing in your life from God. I turned around and it was the right turn for me. Saying “Thank you” put me in front of Someone who put me on a new path. It wasn’t me; it was him. I will thank him the rest of my days. I wanted you to know this.