

Lessons from Matthew 8

By Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 8 begins a two-chapter sequence of miracle stories in groups of three, organized topically rather than chronologically. In the first group, Jesus cleanses a leper, heals the servant of a centurion, and banishes the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, followed by a brief summary of further healings that evening (Matt 8:1–17; cf. Mark 1:32–34). The central section is about discipleship with Jesus, confronting two wannabe disciples (Matt 8:18–22). Chapter 8 concludes with two spectacular miracles: the calming of the storm (Matt 8:23–27) and delivering two demoniacs by sending the demons into a herd of pigs (Matt 8:28–34).

Interpretation of the Chapter

Verses 1–17

- The healing of the leper, the first detailed miracle account in Matthew, is analogous to Jesus' work of cleansing people from sin (Matt 1:21), a work all His healings broadly illustrate. Touching a leper would normally defile, but Jesus reverses the equation, imparting purity and healing. Matthew emphasizes the idea of cleansing by mentioning it three times in just two verses (vv. 2–3).
- We see three evidences of the leper's faith: 1) he worships Jesus, 2) he believes Jesus can cleanse him and only wonders about His willingness, and 3) he calls Jesus "Lord."
- After he is healed, Jesus tells the man to go to the priest to verify that he was cleansed, and then go to the temple to offer the requisite sacrifices. Thus Jesus' practical instruction reinforces His earlier assertion that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). Jesus directs the man to the temple not only for his own benefit but also "as a testimony to them." He sought to reach all levels of society, from leper outcasts to the priestly elite and even Gentiles.
- Excavations at Capernaum, where the next miracle occurs, have revealed a Roman garrison with a Roman bath. Like the leper, the centurion shows his faith in Jesus by calling him "Lord." He also shows respect for the Jewish purity laws by asking Jesus not to enter his house (cf. Acts 10:28).
- According to Luke 7:5, the centurion built the synagogue in Capernaum, so he probably attended it as a God-fearing Gentile and was familiar with the Scriptures. He believes that Jesus need "only say the word" (Matt 8:8, ESV), thinking perhaps of the power of God's word active at creation (Gen 1:3, 6–7, 9; Ps 33:6, 9). Healing from a distance is rare in Scripture. Interestingly, though, it is usually associated with Gentile requests (2 Kgs 5:9–14; Matt 15:28; cf. John 4:49–53).
- The centurion's reference to his own chain of command to understand Jesus' authority is surprising in light of His calling Jesus "Lord," because that was a title for Caesar. Yet his words suggest that Jesus' authority is superior to and qualitatively different from that of Rome, which of course it is (cf. John 18:36–37). The word is used by the crowds to describe Jesus' authoritative teachings (Matt 7:29) and His authority to forgive sins (Matt 9:8).
- Through faith (one of the "weightier matters of the law," Matt 23:23), the centurion was enabled to understand Jesus' identity and mission more clearly than those who styled themselves "sons of Abraham," and he would sooner find a place at the messianic banquet with Israel's patriarchs. This centurion illustrates why Jesus' mission, as Isaiah describes, was not just to gather the descendants of Jacob, but also to be "a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isa 49:6).
- The third healing miracle occurs at Peter's house, known from excavations. Just one block south of the synagogue, it was large enough to accommodate the extended families of both Peter and Andrew (cf. Mark 1:29). Within a few decades, the center room walls were plastered and Christian graffiti appeared. This suggests its use for Christian gatherings, perhaps making it the earliest known Christian church.
- Peter's mother-in-law, as with the leper, is healed by Jesus' touch. The fever leaves as soon as He touches her hand. The completeness of her recovery is shown by the fact that she immediately

begins serving them (Matt 8:15).

- Throughout this chapter, Matthew shows the effortlessness of Jesus' healings. He casts out demons "with a word" (v. 16). No incantation formulas, magic names, or elaborate gesticulations so common to ancient exorcists are needed. God's word has within it the power to accomplish the work (Isa 55:11), not as a kind of magic formula but because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21) and used by Him to impart spiritual life and direction (Ps 119:105; Eph 5:26; Jas 1:21; 1 Pet 1:23).

Verses 18–22

- These verses on discipleship help us understand more about what is involved in following Jesus. The first prospective disciple, described as a "scribe," addresses Jesus as "Teacher." Equivalent to "Rabbi" (Matt 23:8) it sounds respectful, and Jesus is certainly characterized as the preeminent Teacher in Matthew. But such an address also suggests a more distant relationship than discipleship. Usually in Matthew it is those lacking faith who address Jesus this way (Matt 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 22:16, 24, 36), whereas those who call Him "Lord" are the true believers. In fact, near the end of Jesus' ministry, Judas Iscariot twice addresses Him as "Rabbi" (Matt 26:25, 49). So, at this early stage, it seems that this scribe is actually Judas, with high hopes of a prestigious position in the new kingdom—hopes that Jesus seeks to correct by His reference to having "nowhere to lay His head" (v. 20; cf. DA 293).
- The title "the Son of Man," appearing most frequently in Matthew (here is its first occurrence), is used in all four Gospels only by Jesus and only as a reference to Himself. In the Old Testament it is an idiomatic expression that means "human being" and stresses human frailty (e.g., Num 23:19; Ps 144:3). In the Gospels, however, it refers not only to Jesus' humanity and role as a servant (Matt 11:19; 13:37; 20:28), but also to His authority as Lord (Matt 9:6; 12:8). It is even used in connection with His return in glory (e.g., Matt 16:27; 24:27, 30), a view similar to that of Daniel's heavenly Son of Man figure pictured in connection with the judgment and God's kingdom (Dan 7:13–14).
- Another prospective disciple asks permission first to bury his father—a seemingly urgent and reasonable request, as this was one of the most important responsibilities imaginable in Israel. However, it may refer to a secondary (ossuary) burial of the father's bones, which could be up to a year in the future. Jesus' response, to let "the [spiritually] dead" attend to his father's burial, demands from His closest disciples a level of commitment to the gospel proclamation that surpasses all earthly considerations.

Verses 23–27

- After Jesus and His disciples leave Capernaum by boat, a storm arises on the Sea of Galilee that shakes the boat violently (described by the Greek word *seismos*). Winds descending from the eastern mountains to the sea can produce waves of more than seven feet and these experienced seamen fear for their lives. Only when realizing they are unable to save themselves do they cry to Jesus for help. Both in this case and later, when Peter cries for help as he sinks beneath the waves (Matt 14:30–31), fear short-circuits faith. But Jesus responds immediately. "Never did a soul utter that cry unheeded" (DA 335).
- Interestingly, before calming the storm, Jesus confronts the real problem of doubt, fear, and faulty faith. The word used to describe the disciples' fear is very rare, occurring only in this story (v. 26; Mark 4:40) and in reference to "the cowardly" who suffer the second death (Rev 21:8). The only real solution to our fears is a faith that exceeds the "little faith" shown by the disciples in this and other situations (Matt 8:26; 14:31; cf. 2 Tim 1:7).
- The question of the disciples, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" furthers the purpose of Matthew's Gospel in hinting that Jesus as the Messiah has powers like God, who "rebuked the Red Sea . . . and dried it up" (Ps 106:9).

Verses 28–34

- Chapter 8 concludes with a miracle that takes place in "the country of the Gergesenes" (v. 28). Its precise location has been debated since ancient times, but recent excavations have established the presence of a sizeable town and enormous harbor at Kursi on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus and the disciples could have moored the boat. Even more significant is the discovery of an inscription in Hebrew and Aramaic, showing that Jews lived there.
- It is surprising that the herd of swine were in such close proximity to a Jewish village. The owners of the pigs no doubt belonged to this community, but were more interested in material prosperity than piety. Jesus "allowed the evil spirits to destroy the herd of swine as a rebuke to those Jews who were raising these unclean beasts for the sake of gain" (GC 515).
- Matthew has two demoniacs approaching Jesus while Mark and Luke mention only one, apparently because of the one man's desire to follow Jesus and his subsequent witness "throughout the whole city" (Luke 8:39; cf. Mark 5:20).
- The brevity of Matthew's account highlights Jesus' authority over the powers of darkness. He is fearless and totally in charge, whereas His disciples, who go unmentioned, have apparently fled in fear (see DA 337).
- The identification of Jesus as the "Son of God"

by the demons is not really welcome in view of the source of the confession, but Jesus seems to see beyond the demoniacs' appearance to discern their desire for deliverance. The reference to torment is to the executive judgment of the wicked, including the devil and his angels, which takes place at the end of the thousand years (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:1–3, 9–10). Their destruction in the lake of fire is perhaps foreshadowed in the drowning of the swine in the waters of Galilee.

- Perhaps fearing more misfortune, the residents of the city urge Jesus to leave their region. Although He drove out the demons and restored the men to their right mind, now He is driven away. But the seeds sown will bear fruit upon His return (Matt 15:29; cf. Mark 7:31).

Application of the Chapter

Important lessons contained in this chapter include:

1. Just as Jesus ministered to all levels of society, so we are called to reach “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (Rev 14:6).
2. We must be careful not to repeat Israel's mistake of trusting that our knowledge of Scripture is adequate, or being proud of the light we have received. This increased understanding makes us

more accountable before God (Luke 12:47–48) and obligates us to share it with others (cf. Matt 5:14–16).

3. Jesus' words to the centurion about the power of faith (Matt 8:13) are just as applicable to us today. The unusual command form, “Let it be done” echoes the creation account (Gen 1:3, 6, 14, LXX), reminding us that “with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26). God may not always grant what we want. But if we ask in accordance with His will we can be assured of a positive answer in His time and way (1 John 5:14–15).
4. Jesus' healing ministry fulfills another of Isaiah's Servant Songs (Matt 8:17; cf. Isa 53:4). The biblical concept of healing, like that of human beings, is wholistic. Jesus came to heal us completely—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Like Jesus, we are called to minister to the whole person.
5. The fact that Jesus urged the disciples not to fear before rebuking the storm suggests that the real issue is not the circumstances themselves, but whether we look at them through the eyes of fear or faith. We should look at people the same way—with a view to their potential in light of God's power and grace.
6. Even when we meet with rejection, we may plant seeds for the gospel that will eventually result in a harvest of souls saved for God's kingdom.

“Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness” (1 John 2:9 NRSV)
