

Matthew 8:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew 8 verses 1 to 17 When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, Lord, my servant is lying paralysed at home, suffering terribly.

And he said to him, I will come and heal him. But the centurion replied, Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.

For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, go, and he goes. And to another, come, and he comes. And to my servant, do this, and he does it.

When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, Truly I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And to the centurion Jesus said, Go, let it be done for you as you have believed. And the servant was healed at that very moment.

[1 : 40] And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her. And she rose and began to serve him.

That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. He took our illnesses and bore our diseases. Matthew 8 begins with Jesus descending the mountain. This descent from the mountain bookends the entire Sermon on the Mount.

It began with Jesus ascending the mountain, and now he descends. And perhaps it's also important for framing what happens next. It begins a series of ten actions in chapters 8 and 9.

Cleansing a leper. Healing the centurion's servant. Healing the fever of Peter's mother-in-law. Calming the storm. Casting out two demons. Healing a paralytic.

[2 : 40] Raising the dead girl of a ruler. Healing a woman with the issue of blood. Giving two blind men sight. And casting out a demon from a dumb man. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that there is a rhythm to the stories, with three sections, each containing explanations of Jesus' ministry, punctuated by reflections on or calls to discipleship.

We can see those calls to discipleship in verses 18 to 22 of chapter 8, verses 9 to 13 of chapter 9, and verses 35 of chapter 9 to 42 of chapter 10.

And as we go through this series of events, there's also a movement towards greater opposition. These are signs of the new life of the kingdom. Outsiders and those excluded are coming into the kingdom.

Lepers, Gentiles, demon-possessed people, the woman with the issue of blood. Jesus is overcoming death and disease, these causes of exclusion from fellowship.

And as he heals these people, he is bringing them into fellowship once more. He's bringing people who would have been outsiders into the enjoyment of the benefits of the kingdom. Gentiles, in that case.

[3 : 50] And restoring faculties to those who lack them. These are all things that are spoken of in the Old Testament prophecies of the kingdom. This series of events begins with the healing of the leper.

And the fact that Jesus touches the leper is a matter of importance. We can think also of the presence of touch in the healing of the woman with the issue of blood. This is probably not what we think of as leprosy.

It's a different sort of skin ailment. It is, however, something that would have excluded the sufferer from the enjoyment of full fellowship with the rest of the people of Israel. And so healing a person from this condition would allow them to once more enter the fellowship and community of Israel.

Jesus touches this man, but he does not contract defilement. Rather, he communicates health and life. This is a reversal of the usual direction of movement, where usually if you touched a leper or someone who is unclean, you would become unclean.

Jesus does not become unclean. Rather, he communicates life, a life that is stronger than defilement. And this is a secret sign. It's one that the leper is not supposed to spread the word concerning.

[5 : 01] Rather, it's like the turning of the water into wine. There are only a few people who know about this. And the people who know, it is a sign to them. For everyone else, they don't recognise what's taking place.

The next healing is the healing of the paralysed servant of the centurion. And the centurion is possibly the highest military officer in Jesus' base town of Capernaum.

He's an important figure. He has power and influence and authority. And Jesus is asked to perform a healing from a distance. A healing that will demonstrate the authority of his word.

This isn't magic tricks. This isn't something that can be done using sleight of hand. Jesus is healing from a great distance. It's similar to Jesus' second sign in the book of John, in chapter 4, where Jesus heals the official's son.

Once again, he's demonstrating his authority at a distance. And the centurion recognises this. Jesus is someone who has authority like he does.

[6 : 01] He can say, go, and someone goes. He can say, come, and they come. In the same way, Christ can speak with authority into the world. And the nature of his authority is that of the authorised servant.

It's the authority of his word that he can use to heal the servant of the centurion. And once again, this is a sign of the future of the kingdom. A sign of bringing in someone who is an outsider.

Of blessing someone who is a Gentile, not a Jew. Verse 7 is translated here as, I will come and heal him. But it could also be read as a question. You want me to come and heal him?

A challenge to the faith of the centurion. To which he responds with a recognition that he's not worthy for Christ to come into his house. But Christ's word alone is enough to perform the great act. And Christ's discussion of the faith of the centurion would seem to give weight to this particular reading. He declares that the faith of the centurion exceeds that which he has encountered in Israel itself.

[7 : 03] Indeed, people like the centurion will find their way into the messianic feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. And yet, those who would seem to be the heirs will find themselves cast out into outer darkness with wailing and gnashing of teeth.

This speaks of the later Gentile mission, for instance. Numerous sons of the kingdom finding themselves outside and the people who would not seem to be the true sons finding themselves within.

The faith of the centurion is seen in this practical request for healing. A recognition in the power of Christ's word that he is one with authority. And on the basis of that, Christ can declare that he is one who is of the type that belongs to the kingdom.

He's not just going to enjoy the crumbs. He is going to recline at the table. The third act in this chapter is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Peter's house in Capernaum may have been the base from which the disciples were working at this time.

Once again, Jesus proves his power to heal, this time the mother-in-law of Peter, with a single touch. And that evening, many more come who are healed with a word.

[8 : 14] Once again, the power of Christ's speech is underlined here. In the previous chapter, we were told that he spoke with authority and not as the scribes. And now we're told that he is one who can cast out demons with a word, who can heal with a word.

And in these respects, he's fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. He took our illnesses and bore our diseases. In the context of Isaiah chapter 53, many have seen these things as referring to the cross.

But yet, Matthew presents Jesus' life and ministry fulfilling this prophecy also. Jesus, perhaps, should be seen as taking these things upon himself. He is not just removing it.

He's taking it upon himself. The death of the world, the sickness of the world, the demonic possession of the world. He's taking it upon himself, all in preparation to deal with it finally at the cross.

A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament are we alerted to the fact that Peter has a wife?