

# Matthew 8:18-34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 21 February 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Matthew chapter 8 verses 18 to 34 Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to him, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.
- And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Another of the disciples said to him, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.
- And Jesus said to him, Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead. And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves.
- But he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, Save us, Lord, we are perishing. And he said to them, Why are you afraid, O you of little faith? Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.
- And the men marvelled, saying, What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him? And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way.
- [ 1 : 1 5 ]     And behold, they cried out, What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time? Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them.
- And the demons begged him, saying, If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs. And he said to them, Go. So they came out and went into the pigs. And behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters.
- The herdsmen fled, and going into the city, they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.
- Matthew 8 begins a series of dramatic actions that Jesus performs in healings, exorcisms, and other wonders. Here we have an interruption of that narrative with a message concerning discipleship.
- And we've seen something of the order of these miracles and signs and actions, where Jesus will perform three things, and then there's a message concerning discipleship. Three more, another message.
- [ 2 : 2 4 ]     This message underlines the difficulty of discipleship, both in the fact of not having somewhere to lay your head, and also having to leave things behind in a radical way.
- Jesus' statement concerning the foxes and the birds of the air might be a subtle reference to rulers within the land, and to Gentile rulers more generally.
- The foxes are those like Herod, he's described as a fox in Luke chapter 13 verse 32, and the birds of the air are people like the Romans and others. This is the first use of the expression, son of man, in the gospel.

And this expression brings back the background of places like Daniel, the references to the suffering of the son of man, to the heavenly authority of the son of man. This is an expression that Jesus uses of himself, particularly when speaking to people outside of the immediate disciple group.

The term is a somewhat enigmatic one, and perhaps it's a challenge not just to slot Jesus into an existing slot. There is a slot called son of man that you find within the prophets, like Ezekiel and Daniel, but it's not clearly defined.

[ 3 : 30 ] And so you have this one character that's a bit mysterious, and Jesus can define himself relative to this character, but also fill out a picture that has surprising elements to it, such as the son of man who's rejected, who's not received, who has nowhere to lay his head, presenting the starkest contrast with the rulers of this age, who, unlike the one who has all kingdoms and authorities given to him by the ancient of days, dwell in mighty palaces and beautiful houses.

The final statement that Jesus makes here is perhaps the most arresting. In response to a disciple who asks first to bury his father and then to follow, Christ says, follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead.

It's surprising break with what we'd expect of filial piety, that the son has to be loyal to his father and bury him. Elsewhere, Jesus teaches against the teaching of the Pharisees, who allowed people to be absolved of their responsibility to their parents.

So presumably that's not quite what Jesus is saying here. However, Jesus' statement still should shake us. The statement, let the dead bury their own dead, suggests that there's a cycle of death that's playing out.

That generation after generation, the dead are burying their dead, and these people are walking dead. There's no actual life that's taking place. The cycle is one of death.

[ 4 : 52 ] And Jesus, throughout this chapter, has been introducing a cycle of life. He's been dealing with people who are dead, dead in the sense of being outside of fellowship with God and other people, or dead in the sense of experiencing deep sickness and approaching death.

And then we'll see other forms of death as we go through. Jesus has come to break this cycle. And those who want to follow him must recognize their loyalty to this cycle of life and not just perpetuating the cycle of death.

There is something that must take precedence over that. Now, it's worth bearing in mind that this father had presumably not died yet. Rather, the man is waiting for his father to die and then going to follow Jesus.

But by that point, it will be too late. This mission has an urgency to it. There's only a few years before Christ will die. And if he's not on board at that point, he may miss the boat.

And the urgency with which Jesus presents his call to discipleship starts to sharpen the distinction between the following crowds and the committed disciples. That distinction becomes much clearer.

[ 5 : 59 ] Jesus is followed by his disciples into the boat and out into the sea. And we might think about the story of Jonah as there's this storm that rises up and the people on deck are frantic and trying to deal with the situation, whereas Jonah is asleep in the hold.

Here, Jesus is asleep. But the situation changes when he rises up. The storm rises and Jesus is asleep. Then Jesus rises and the storm sleeps.

There is a quaking of the waters. Now, there are three earthquakes in the book of Matthew. The quaking of the sea here. There's a quaking at the cross. And there's a quaking at the resurrection. And I think this should be a clue that there's something more going on here.

Jesus is asleep in the grave. And then he rises up and he delivers his people. The time will come when the disciples feel that they're left all alone, that Jesus is asleep, that he's not helping them.

He's gone from the scene. And they face this great storm around them. And then Jesus rises up and delivers them and stills the waves. That will happen at the resurrection.

[ 7 : 02 ] And this is a preview, as it were, of that pattern already taking place. The little faith of the disciples contrasts sharply with the great faith of the centurion earlier in the chapter.

Jesus is in control of the situation. He's able to rule over the waves in a way that causes the disciples to marvel. They don't know who this person could be.

This shouldn't just be presumed to be a proof of Jesus' divinity, but rather of the prophetic authority of an appointed man, a man who has had incredible authority vested in him.

And we'll see as we go through Matthew that actually Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth invested in him. An authority that only God himself can enjoy. But at this point, they're wondering whether this is a great prophet.

A prophet greater than all the other prophets. At the other side of the sea, they arrive at the country of the Gadarenes. There they encounter a sort of trifecta of extreme impurity.

[ 8 : 01 ] Demonic possession, tombs and pigs. Why are there two demoniacs here? It's not the only time that Matthew has two of some people, or two of some things, where the other gospels only have one.

We see two sets of blind people in chapter 9 verse 27, and in chapter 20 verse 29 to 34. And then also a donkey and a cult in chapter 21.

You can see pairs of persons healed. Two demoniacs, a woman and a girl. Two blind men. Pairs are more common within the book of Matthew than in some of the other gospels.

We see the pair of thieves at the cross. We can see the pairs of brothers in chapter 4. And so maybe Matthew's making a broader point about pairings here, as witnesses perhaps, or something else.

It's quite possible to harmonise these accounts with the accounts that we find in other gospels. Perhaps Matthew has less of a scenic immediacy than Mark does, and so focuses upon the numbers of people, more than the specific engagements that Jesus has, in which one of the demoniacs would have been the lead figure.

[ 9 : 08 ] Another possibility to consider here is that Matthew is consciously collecting a series of miracles in a way that highlights numbers. So you have 12 people that are delivered in some way.

The leper, the centurion and his servant, Peter's mother-in-law, two demoniacs, paralytic, a woman and a girl, two blind men, and a mute man. And putting all these together, it's a sign of a new Israel perhaps.

The demoniacs address Christ as the eschatological judge, as the son of God, as the one who will torment them. We've already seen Christ presented as the eschatological judge at the end of chapter 7, where Christ is the one who will judge people, who come and say, Lord, Lord, and he will say, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of wickedness. Elsewhere, we've also seen Satan recognising Christ as the son of God. The use of such a title underlines the fact that Christ's identity was known to spiritual beings.

He is not just a mere man. He is one who has come from heaven to act in a decisive manner. Many people reading Matthew's Gospel, or the Synoptic Gospels more generally, can suggest that they have no concept of Christ's pre-existence, that Christ is one who has come from heaven, but yet has always existed before that, thinking of Christ just as a great man, perhaps.

[ 10 : 32 ] But passages like this suggest that even in the Synoptics, there is a concept of pre-existence. The demons beg that if they are to be cast out, they be cast out into the herd of pigs.

The pigs then career down the steep bank and are drowned in the waters. It's similar to the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the sea. Christ is the son of God who binds the strong man.

He is the one with the power to exorcise the demons, to drive them out, to deliver people that have been held in bondage. But yet there's a twist in this story. We might expect it to end with the deliverance of the demoniacs and then the rejoicing of the people of the town, but that's not what happens.

The Gadarenes beg that Christ would depart from them. Much as the demons begged, there's an association between the demons and the Gadarenes. Now one interesting thing to observe is that these men were cast out of the town.

They were dwelling among the tombs. They were in many ways like scapegoats of the town. And now the demons are cast out of them and the demons enter into a herd of pigs, a great many of them, according to the Gospel of Mark.

[ 11 : 40 ] This is not the way such scenes usually go. Usually you have the one or two being cast out by the herd. But now the one or two are delivered and the multitude of the herd rushes into the waters.

So there's a reversal of the scapegoat pattern. René Girard has argued that within this story we're seeing a reversal of the scapegoat pattern. And in the scapegoat pattern typically, a few people are cast out by a larger group as a sort of lightning rod for the problems within their community.

And perhaps that's what happened to the Gadarene demoniacs. Perhaps all the demons and issues of the community were being cast out into them. And they were the ones dwelling among the tombs, holding all these demons of the community.

And then Christ deals with those demons, releases the demoniacs from that oppression. And those demons then go into the herd, which represents the people of the town.

The herdsmen run into the town and tell the people and they beg Christ to depart. Christ upsets the social order. Christ ends up being the one who is cast out, not just the demons from the demoniacs.

[ 12 : 50 ] I've commented upon the patterns of threes within these signs. And here I think we've seen a movement from more private miracles in the first three signs of chapter 8 to more dramatic signs of authority, causing people to fear with an emphasis upon reaction.

So the first one is, what sort of man is this that even wins and see obey him? And the second reaction is that of the people of the Gadarene city who beg Christ to depart from them.

In these reactions we're seeing some of the options that people have in their response to Christ. Will they seek to drive him out as their fear leads to a rejection of Christ? Or will they be people who marvel at his works and follow him?

A question to consider. Within these verses we see that Christ is one who shakes things up. Christ is one with great power and authority. Christ is one who upsets the social order.

responses to Christ in our day and age?