

For some time now we've been looking at a section of the gospel of Matthew where Jesus performs several miracles—ten in all in chapters 8–9. All but one of the them are miracles of healing or exorcism. We've seen these miracles point to the authority of Jesus; not just his authority to heal but his spiritual authority to forgive sin. In fact, in one case, Jesus said his authority to heal proves his authority to forgive.

And one of the things we've seen repeatedly in these miracle stories is the importance of faith. Matthew says Jesus was amazed at the **faith** of a Roman soldier who said, "Just say the word and my servant will be healed." He rebuked his own disciples for their lack of **faith** in the midst of a raging storm. Later, when some men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus, it says he saw their **faith**.

All this begs the question, What is faith? There's a lot of different answers to that question floating around these days. People talk about faith today like it's nothing more than having a positive attitude. No wonder in the scientific community faith is often seen as the antithesis of reason and logic. One scientist says, "There's an essential difference between reason and faith. In reason, one accepts only conclusions one can prove to be true—conclusions based on sensory evidence and logical inference from such evidence. Faith, on the other hand, is belief unsupported by facts or logic—the blind embrace of ideas despite the absence of proof."

This view of faith has even made its way into our humor. Maybe you've heard about the kid who was asked by his mom what he learned in Sunday School that day. He answered, "We learned that faith is believing what you know ain't so." Or, as the notorious sitcom character Archie Bunker said, "Faith is believing what nobody would believe if it weren't in the Bible."

But this view of faith really isn't a laughing matter because, according to one biblical writer, without faith it's impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). So it's really important we search out what faith is and how it manifests itself in our lives. With that in mind, we're going to look at four more miracle stories of healing and the role faith played in each.

A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman

While he was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples.

Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."

Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed at that moment.

When Jesus entered the synagogue leader's house and saw the noisy crowd and people playing pipes, he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region. (Matthew 9:18–26).

The first two miracles are contained within one story. Here we meet two very different people, but they both demonstrate genuine faith.

First, there's a synagogue leader who comes to Jesus. The other gospel writers tell us his name was Jairus. He's part of the religious establishment, which is surprising because Jesus didn't get along very well with those folks. As the chairman of the board in the local synagogue, Jairus would want to stay in good with the Pharisees. But pain has a way of changing our thinking. Jairus' daughter has just died. If there ever was a hopeless situation, this was it. She's gone. I can only imagine his pain; the kind that never really goes away. It's like the light of his life is gone, and she'll never come back.

But in his desperation he overcomes his own pride and prejudice and comes to Jesus, even kneeling before him. He begs him: "put his hand on her, and she will live." You can sense his desperation and his faith. But his faith isn't exactly mature. This is like a last ditch effort: "I've tried everything. Nothing worked. Now she's dead. Why not try Jesus?" And he's not like the Roman centurion we met in chapter 8 who told Jesus, "You don't have to come to my house. Just say the word and my servant will be healed." Jesus said **that** is strong faith. But Jairus is different. He says, "No, you need to come to my house and lay your hand on her. My daughter has just died." It's interesting in Mark's gospel he says somewhere in this exchange Jesus looked at Jairus and said, "**Don't be afraid; just believe**" (Mark 5:36).

But then we meet someone very different from Jairus—a woman who'd suffered from a menstrual disorder for twelve

years, which by the way was the same age of the girl—twelve. If Jairus had to overcome his pride as a synagogue leader, she had to overcome her shame. Her illness rendered her “unclean” by OT standards. She was a social outcast; walking pollution. Jairus is a synagogue ruler, but she’s not even allowed in the synagogue. She has no family, no money; it’s all been spent on the latest remedy. She’s tried everything, but this thing just hangs on. She’s supposed to keep her distance from everyone, but she slips through the crowd and comes to Jesus from behind. “No one will see; no one will even know I’m there. I’ll just sneak up behind him and touch his cloak.” Again, you see desperation.

But it’s important to understand her faith is a bit misguided at this point. Like many in her day, she believed a person’s power was transferred to what they wore. She’s superstitious. It’s like a person today who thinks rosary beads will help in prayer. But this woman comes, despite her shame, desperate for help, with her misguided faith. Jesus could have just let her slip away. But he wants her to know it wasn’t magic that healed her, but him. He wants her to know more than just healing; he wanted her to know **him**. So he turns, sees her, and says, “Take heart, daughter...” Those are comforting words, the kind she probably hadn’t heard for years. Then Jesus says, “Your faith has healed you.” Literally, “Your faith has saved you.” And it was done; at that very moment, she was healed, she was clean, she was saved.

Meanwhile, Jairus is waiting. One of the other gospel writers says he waited as the woman told him her whole story! I imagine Jairus is frustrated by the delay. It’s like, “Wait a minute, Jesus, I was first in line!” But Jesus knows what he’s doing. Besides showing his concern for the woman, maybe this big shot synagogue official might learn something from this unclean woman. His own faith was being tested; so was hers. Maybe he’d learn something from her about that. It’s interesting, she was considered unclean according to OT law. If anyone made contact with her, as Jesus did, they’d become unclean as well. But when Jairus’ daughter dies, her corpse is also unclean. OT law forbade touching a dead person. Would that keep Jesus away? It didn’t keep him away from her. So, maybe her story gave Jairus hope.

Finally, Jesus arrives at Jairus’ house. The place is surrounded with professional mourners. It was customary back then to hire people to mourn at a funeral. There would be flute players, people chanting, wailing and clapping their hands. Jesus sees them and says, “You can go home. The child isn’t dead, she’s asleep.” He’s not saying she’s alive, but her death is like “sleep” because it’s temporary; he’d soon raise her up. But look how these professionals respond—they laugh at him. It’s the laugh of cynics. They know what death is. They do this all the time. By the way, there’ll always be people in our lives who laugh and scoff at faith. Some of them will be so-called experts. A group of scientists tell us that they can explain how life came into existence; therefore, creation is a myth. A doctor tells us we can pray all

we want but when it comes to cancer nothing will help but chemotherapy. This doesn’t mean we ignore the experts, sometimes we need them; but when their counsel runs counter to God’s promises, who will we listen to?

So Jesus clears everyone from the room, takes the girl by the hand, and she gets up; she’s raised up. Jesus doesn’t just heal the sick, he raises the dead! There’s nothing more hopeless than death, but Jesus is bigger even than that!

Both of these stories show us quite simply faith means coming to Jesus in utter desperation. It doesn’t matter who you are. You can be as much of an insider as the synagogue official, or as much an outsider as this unclean woman. But what they had in common was in desperation they turned to Jesus. In fact, when ancient writers translated the Bible into Latin, they called these two stories *desperation in extremis*. Both of them had a need, and both of them were powerless to meet that need. So they ran to Jesus believing he could help them. Their faith certainly wasn’t polished. If Jairus’ daughter hadn’t died, he may never have come to Jesus at all. And the woman—not only was Jesus her last resort, but she cared more about getting healed than getting to know him. She’d have been quite content to just touch his cloak, get healed, sneak away, and never see him again! But in both cases, Jesus meets their need. He not only heals, but he raises the dead.

Almost 45 years ago I, too, was in a desperate state. It wasn’t physical healing I needed, it was spiritual healing. I needed forgiveness. I needed grace. I needed unconditional love. And it’s almost like I looked everywhere before I finally turned to Jesus. And when I turned to him, I really had no idea what to say or what to do. My faith was far from polished. I’d never even read the Bible. I just knew I couldn’t go on like this and I needed help. But when I turned to Jesus and cried out to him, he met my need. I was unclean, and he made me clean. I was dead, and he raised me up. That’s what Jesus does. He responds to faith, and faith is nothing more or less than turning to Jesus in desperation.

But now, 45 years later, I tend to deny my own desperation. Why do I do that? Why do **we** do that? As flawed and prideful people, we’re ashamed of our struggles, assuming if others really knew us with all our needs and wounds and sins, they’d flee. So we try to prove we’ve moved beyond *desperation in extremis*.

Two Blind Men

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!”

When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?”

“Yes, Lord,” they replied.

Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith let it be done to you”; and their sight

was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, “See that no one knows about this.” But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region. (verses 27-31)

In the next miracle story we see the same desperate faith. Jesus leaves Matthew’s house and two blind men begin to follow him. In that day blindness usually led to poverty. Most blind people were beggars. Blindness also had a stigma attached to it. In OT times, every example of people becoming blind is a result of them being judged or punished for some sin. The Sodomites were struck with blindness as they knocked on Lot’s door (Genesis 19:11). When the Syrians tried to attack God’s people, Elisha prayed, “*God, strike them with blindness,*” and he did (2 Kings 6:18). The point isn’t these men were blind because of their sin, but there was a stigma attached to this illness.

Perhaps this sheds light on why they begin to follow behind Jesus and cry out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David.” Why do they say that? What are they really asking for? In calling him “Son of David,” they’re using a messianic title. The Messiah would be a descendant of King David. And the OT Scriptures said the messianic age would be a time when “*the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped*” (Isaiah 35:5). So they’re thinking, “If Jesus is the Messiah, he’ll have mercy on us and maybe even open our eyes to see!” Just like Jairus and the woman, they’re desperate. And that’s seen not just in what they say but how they keep saying it as they follow him into the house.

Then Jesus speaks to them. He doesn’t ask what they want; that’s taken for granted. Instead he asks whether they believe he can heal them. We see again how faith is the issue here. And they don’t hesitate to answer, “Yes, Lord!” It’s not, “Yes, Sir.” It’s, “Yes, LORD,” and all that word implies. Their faith is impressive. Think about it. They couldn’t see the miracles Jesus had done. They had to rely on what people told them. But they believed and so Jesus touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith let it be done,” and it was done.

Once again, we see faith coming to Jesus in utter desperation, despite the obstacles placed before us. Once again, we see *desperation in extremis*. Both of them had a need, and both of them were powerless to meet that need. So they ran to Jesus, believing he could help them.

And, once again, their faith certainly wasn’t polished. You see that in what happens next. Jesus says, “Don’t tell a soul about this.” He warned them sternly. This was a big deal to him. He doesn’t want the fanfare that would come with the power to heal; he doesn’t want people to misunderstand his mission. He came to save people from their sins, and for that he’d have to die. But they disobeyed him. They blabbed about it everywhere they went and news spread about Jesus. Once again we see a faith that isn’t perfect or polished. Faith should result in obedience.

The Bible talks about “the obedience of faith.” But, still, Jesus met their need, and they could see, and their newfound sight wasn’t just of a physical nature. In John 9 after Jesus heals another blind man he said, “*I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind*” (John 9:39 NLT). You see, there’s something worse than being physically blind—it’s being spiritually blind. You can see physically but be blind to spiritual reality. And the sight these men were given was the ability to see who Jesus really is.

A Dumb Demoniac

While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”

But the Pharisees said, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.” (verses 32-34)

We get an example of that in the next story. In some ways, this healing seems out of place because nothing is said about faith. Of course, being demon-possessed he’s probably unable to have faith. And there’s no interaction with this man as we’ve seen in the other stories. He couldn’t talk; many believe he was also deaf. I suppose we see faith in whoever it was that brought him to Jesus, but nothing is said about that. So what’s the point of this story?

I believe the point here isn’t the faith of the demon-possessed man or his friends, but the lack of faith of the Pharisees. The focus isn’t on the miracle, but the reaction to the miracle. The crowd marvels, “Nothing like this has ever happened in Israel.” The crowd sees; the crowd believes. But what do the Pharisees do? They don’t marvel. They don’t believe. They’d seen with their own good eyes all these miracles Jesus had done: the leper, the paralyzed man, the centurion’s servant, and so on. But instead of believing they said, “This man is doing the devil’s work.” They knew the Scriptures. They knew Isaiah said the Messiah would heal the blind, the deaf and the lame. But they were blind to God’s word and blind to God’s Son. A synagogue ruler could see, but they didn’t see. An unclean woman could see, but they didn’t see. Two blind men could see, but they didn’t see. They’re too blind to see Jesus.

So what have we learned about faith? We’ve learned faith is coming to Jesus in desperation, believing he’s able to meet our need. It’s not necessary to have a polished faith, but Jesus hears our cry for help and responds. And this isn’t something that just happens at the start of our life in Christ, but the process of following Christ will be one where he develops and matures our faith.

One of the things we wonder about today is why doesn't he always respond to our desperate cries the way we think he should? Let's face it, he doesn't always heal us. Sometimes he does, but not always. Why is that? Some people say it's because we don't have enough faith. But that's not true. Jesus said if you just have faith the size a mustard seed, you can move mountains. The issue is never the **amount** of faith you have, but the **object** of faith. You can have a lot of faith in the wrong object, and nothing will happen. You can have just a little faith, an imperfect faith, like these people we've seen today, but if your faith is in the right object, lots will happen.

Instead, I believe the answer to this question is that what we have in the ministry of Jesus is what we might call a preview of the kingdom of heaven. Remember, that's what Jesus said when he first started preaching, "***The Kingdom of heaven has come near***" (Matthew 4:17). So, while Jesus was on earth, he was giving a preview. Do you want to know what the kingdom of God is like? Here's a trailer: The lame can walk. The blind can see. The unclean become clean. This is what will happen when the Kingdom comes. These stories can seem crazy to us. But think about it: If there's a Creator out there, and if he decided to come to the planet in the person of Jesus, and if part of his mission was to give a preview of what God's reign in a broken world would look like, I'd expect some lame people walking, some blind people seeing, and some demon-possessed people freed. With each of these stories Jesus says, "I want to give you a preview of what's to come. And I want to know if this is something you want to be a part of." And we say, "Yes" and then we pray, "Your kingdom come; your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

But the problem is, it's just a preview. We don't get to experience the fulness of the kingdom yet. We live in between the ages. We live in the already-but-not-yet. The old age is passing away, but it's still with us. So we still have sickness and disease that isn't healed. We still live in a world filled with injustice. But, at the same time, the new creation is here but not in fulness. When it does come in full, there will be lots of "no more's"—"***no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away***" (Revelation 21:4b). Sometimes the new creation does break in, and people do get healed.

A few months ago I'd just finished preaching and was standing in the lobby at our Foster City campus. A woman I recognized but

don't know very well approached me and said, "I'm supposed to pray for your knee." I was taken back because she had no way of knowing the knee I had surgery on years ago was acting up. I said, "Sure! I'd love you to pray for my knee," and she asked the Lord to heal me. I didn't think much of it. In fact, I forgot about it until a few days later when I was walking down some stairs. I stopped and suddenly realized the pain in my knee was gone. And then, and only then, I remembered—she prayed for that. Talk about imperfect faith! Honestly, I don't understand why God would care about my sore knee when so many greater illnesses go unresolved. But part of my faith is to believe that one day all our sore knees, all our cancer, and all our injustices will be healed.

Another way we see the new age of the kingdom breaking in is when people experience what we call "salvation." James Boice says this about all these miracles in Matthew 8-9, "Matthew selected these specific stories to show that Jesus came not so much to heal us of our physical diseases but to cure us of our sin, our far more serious malady, and to set us on the path of useful service to him." Remember how in chapter 8:17 Matthew quoted Isaiah to explain all these healings, "***He took up our diseases and bore our infirmities.***" He didn't come just to cure them, he came to **bear** them. Ultimately this looked forward to the cross, where he'd bear not just our infirmities but our sin. So Paul can describe salvation like this, "***Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone, the new is here!***" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Do you see what he's saying? When we come to faith in Christ, the new creation breaks into the present age.

And how does that happen? How do we receive that? By faith! I like how John Stott puts it, "Faith is the hand Jesus gives us to grasp the new things present in Jesus." Faith that comes to Jesus in desperation for forgiveness and grace only he can give. Faith that may not be polished or perfect, but faith centered on him as the only one who can meet our greatest need: *Desperation in extremis.*

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