

Meaning in the Miracles: Jesus Defeats Disease 1

Matthew 8:1-4

January 7, 2018

Dan Hoffman

Please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or open the one on your device to Matthew chapter 8. We are starting a new series today looking at Jesus' credentials for being the Saviour of the world.

So, when you apply for a job you need a resume. And on a resume there are a few sections that need to be there. You need a section on education. So this will tell your prospective employer whether you've got the knowledge to do the job. And then you need a section on experience. This will let people know whether you've figured out how to put some of that knowledge into practice. And then you need a section on references, or people your employer can talk to about you behind your back. And then you should put this in a fancy plastic report cover to make it pop.

Well, as far as we know Jesus never put a resume together, but He was asked to give evidence to back up the things He said about Himself. Which makes sense. I mean if you bumped into someone at Walmart and they told you they were the Saviour of the world I suspect you might have a few questions for them – I hope you would.

And it was exactly the same in the first century. When Jesus claimed to be the Messiah people were suspicious. "Is He crazy? Who says these kinds of things?" And so people were interested in checking out Jesus' credentials.

Now everyone agreed that Jesus had incredible knowledge. He could teach like no one else anyone had ever heard. He said stuff like:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. (Matthew 5:21-22)

So Jesus talked like He was the boss. But lots of people can talk big, and so just talking isn't enough to prove you are the Messiah. Indeed the bigger a person talks, the more evidence he needs before you should believe him. And it's helpful if there is someone you trust who can vouch for them.

But the references section on Jesus' resume was difficult to follow up on. So when people asked Him who could back up what He was saying He responded:

I am one who testifies for Myself; My other witness is the Father, who sent Me. (John 8:18)

Great, but the Father doesn't use Facebook, so that doesn't work. So there was a problem. Jesus talked big, and the only person who could back Him up was God, so He needed some other way to prove who He was. And miracles were this way. Jesus

performed all kinds of miracles and Matthew records nine for us in the section of text we are going to look at over the next few weeks. And these miracles are signs that point to the truth of His words.

So in another place in Scripture Jesus was challenged:

“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in My Father’s name testify about Me...I and the Father are one.”

Again His Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone Me?”

“We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

Jesus answered them... “Why then do you accuse Me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? Do not believe Me unless I do the works of My Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:24-38)

So Jesus didn’t just expect people to believe Him. He expected people to look at His works, His miracles, do the math, and conclude that He was the Son of God. His miracles were His credentials. Only God can do this kind of stuff.

That makes sense, right? I mean if you saw someone walk on water, bring someone back from the dead, instantaneously cure a leper, and then claim to be God you would take them seriously... right?

...

Or would you? Maybe you’d be skeptical. Maybe you’d be suspicious. Just be honest with yourself for a second. Look into your heart, and imagine how you might respond if you heard of someone, or thought you saw someone, do the things Jesus did. Would you believe in them?

However you think you might respond, we know how the people in Jesus’ day responded. In Matthew 12, not long after Jesus performs a bunch of miracles, the religious people respond:

“It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” (Matthew 12:24)

So after seeing Jesus' miracles, their consensus was disbelief. Now this doesn't mean Jesus failed to give enough evidence to back up what He was saying – He did. Rather it means two miracles are required in order to encounter God.

So first, something external needs to happen. We aren't talking about blind faith – as though God expects us to believe something outlandish like if I said "I have a dinosaur in my basement." You shouldn't believe me. Blind faith is naïve.

Something real has to happen. And Jesus was this real thing. Jesus was a historical person who talked huge, and then performed miracles including dying, and coming back to life. And thousands of people witnessed His miracles. But seeing is not believing.

A second miracle is needed, and that is the miracle of the renewed mind and transformed heart. God has to put a heart in us that is able to respond. Without that it doesn't matter what you see, you can't encounter God.¹

...

And so for the next several weeks we are going to look at some of the miracles Jesus performed. But this isn't going to just be a history lesson, my hope is that the miracles of Jesus won't just get into our heads, they will transform our hearts. And we will leave here with soft hearts, having fallen more in love with the God who put on skin to win our affection. That's a miracle.

Now let me define "miracle" so we are all on the same page. Webster says a miracle is "a marvellous event manifesting a supernatural act of a divine agent." So it is something awesome and impossible that only God could do. So the Northern Lights aren't miracles. And it's not a miracle when a baby is born. A miracle is God stepping into creation and doing something impossible and supernatural.

If you've got your Bibles open, look with me at Matthew 8 starting in verse 1.

[Read Matthew 8:1-4]

...

Just a word of context as we get started. Verse 1 tells us Jesus came down the mountain. He was up the mountain because He was giving the Sermon on the Mount. That's what comes immediately before this. And so there are lots of people coming down the mountain with Him. And they are curious, and suspicious about what is going to happen next. And that's because Jesus has been talking big.

And then all of a sudden, a man with leprosy came and knelt before Jesus. Now don't just read this and keep going, get stuck here, because lepers don't come. They don't approach. If you were a Jew in the first century this would sound a bit like the start of a joke – "A horse walked into a bar..." Everyone knows a punchline is coming.

¹ John 6:44

And that's because leprosy in the first century was the worst thing that could happen to a person. It was worse than death. It was death while you were still alive. And so no one with leprosy ever came around anyone.

Now leprosy still exists today,² but it is very rare, and can be managed by drugs so the symptoms aren't nearly as noticeable. But in the first century leprosy meant the end of life as you knew it. It meant you were completely cut off from everyone you loved. You were banished to lonely seclusion until you died. So nobody wanted to catch leprosy.

And because of how dangerous it was, in Leviticus 13 God laid out some rules for how to treat people with leprosy. We read:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall look at the mark on the skin of the body, and if the hair in the infection has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is an infection of leprosy; when the priest has looked at him, he shall pronounce him unclean. But if the bright spot is white on the skin of his body, and it does not appear to be deeper than the skin, and the hair on it has not turned white, then the priest shall isolate *him who has* the infection for seven days. (Leviticus 13:1-4 NASB)

So there are all sorts of gross skin diseases a person can get, but some are worse than others. And there is a protocol for figuring out what is what. And if you get leprosy it's bad. And then Leviticus 13 goes on for 46 verses telling you how to identify leprosy. So if the rash spreads and breaks out all over the body, it's leprosy. Or if you get a sore on your chin and it's more than skin deep, and the hair in it is yellow and thin then it's leprosy. But in contrast, if the sore gets better and doesn't spread then it isn't leprosy.

As an aside there is also a verse in this chapter that will be a great comfort to some of you. Verse 40 says:

A man who has lost his hair and is bald is clean. (Leviticus 13:40)

So don't worry, some of you – no names – you don't have leprosy. But the main reason I'm telling you this is because at the end of the chapter it tells us what they did when someone was found to have leprosy.

Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45-46)

² Today it is called Hansen's disease

Social death, while you are still alive. But there was good reason for the harshness of the rule. And that is because leprosy was contagious. The Jews had a tradition that said: "You can't get any closer than six feet from a leper, and, if there's a wind blowing, 150 feet is the limit."³

So if you were a leper you didn't approach, you didn't come close. Leprosy meant you were so broken that you just wanted to crawl into a corner and die or hide. To be in public was to be on display – everyone could see you were a leper.

Here's what leprosy does to you. It starts out like a rash on your skin. But then this starts to fester into deep white sores that puss and ooze – that's the visible part. But what's going on under the skin is an attack on the nervous system which essentially anesthetizes the limbs.

Some people think that leprosy causes your limbs to fall off – not quite. What's actually happening is that you lose the ability to feel your limbs and so you literally rub them off. So a person with leprosy might have shoes that are a bit too small, but they can't tell. And so they actually rub their toes off. Or someone who works with their hands can actually rub their fingers off. And this happens on your face too. Lepers literally scratch their noses and ears off.

And as this is happening your bone marrow begins to be attacked which infects your blood supply. And as your bones shrivel they draw the skin back so that your fingers and toes look like claws.

And all the while there is puss and infection and tumorous, spongy swellings all over your body. It isn't particularly painful – all your nerves are shot – but it is perhaps the most disgustingly ugly way to die.

Now this is, I think, about as bad as is imaginable. But in the first century it was even worse than this. Lepers were not just physically unclean, they were ceremonially unclean. That meant they couldn't come to the temple. They couldn't come to God. And so leprosy became a spiritual illustration of sin.

Sin defiles you. It's ugly. It's incurable. It is contaminating. Sin separates you from people. And ultimately it separates you from God. And so lepers weren't just disgusting, they were despised as walking blobs of sin.

Now nobody here has leprosy. But maybe you've got some brokenness in your life that you're ashamed of. Really we all do. Perhaps your brokenness is physical. But maybe it's emotional or psychological. Maybe it's relational. Perhaps everything you touch breaks whether that's friendships, or finances. Maybe your brokenness is hidden to most people, but you know it's there. And you are mortified by the idea that people might find out just how unworthy, how messed up you are.

³ As referenced by John MacArthur <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2257/jesus-power-over-disease-part-1> (Accessed January 3, 2018)

...

If that's you there is an incredible challenge, and some beautiful grace in this text.

It is just this kind of broken person who shows up in verse 2. This is who comes up to Jesus. A leper came to Jesus. But lepers don't come. It wasn't just forbidden; it wasn't just against the law, it was absolutely unthinkable. Yet this leper comes. And he doesn't sneak; he doesn't try to stay under the radar. He comes. There is a bold desperation in his move. He's so broken he's got nothing left to lose.

I imagine the people in the crowd of people just splitting as this man approaches. They can't believe they are in the space as a leper. They can't stand to be anywhere near him. And they can't believe he is heading to Jesus – poor Jesus! Maybe the leper can't believe he is doing this either. But he comes.

Here's the challenge, when you realize you are broken, let your brokenness spur you to come to Jesus. This is what brokenness is designed to do. But don't we usually do the opposite? Have you ever sinned and then felt like you needed to play spiritual for a few days before praying, just to show God you mean business? Have you ever felt like you weren't worthy to take communion because you were a sinner? This is like a person dying of thirst refusing water because they couldn't believe how thirsty they had let themselves get. They would totally be missing the point of thirst.

The lie of sin, which always results in brokenness, is that because you aren't worthy to come to God you shouldn't come. Now the truth is you aren't worthy. You really are a leper. But the lie is that this means you should get your life together before you come to Jesus. That's not only impossible, it's sinful to even think. The fact is you are never going to get your life together. No leper heals themselves.

And this leper knows this and so he comes. And he doesn't just come, he worships. The word "knelt before" is the same word used to describe what people do before a king or before God. So the broken leper knows how disgusting he is, he knows what everyone thinks of him, but he falls before Jesus and says "Lord." He worships. He exalts Jesus. Even though his brokenness is primary in his experience – we all see our own problems as a big deal – but this leper recognizes that his reason for existence is to worship God. And so he does.

...

Coming to Jesus in worship is more important than your biggest problems. God loves to help His children, but we exist for His glory, He doesn't exist for ours. And so this leper comes and puts God first in his life. Is God first in your life? Or are you preoccupied with your problems?

And the leper comes humbly. He doesn't demand Jesus' help. He says "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." He doesn't speak about his will, he seeks Jesus will. He doesn't come with a list of reasons for why Jesus should heal him. He doesn't come complaining about how he doesn't deserve what has happened to him.

He doesn't talk about his rights. He doesn't even say "I'd like to be healed." He is detached from needing to get the results he wants. He just tells Jesus something that is true about Jesus. "If You are willing, You can make me clean."

There are two parts here. First this man is affirming that it is Jesus' will that matters, not his own. And second he is stating his faith that Jesus is able to heal. You *can* make me clean. The word "can" here is the Greek word *dunamis* which means power. It's the root of the word dynamite. Jesus is able to do anything. But this leper recognizes that just because Jesus can do something doesn't mean He has to. His power is controlled by His will. Jesus is sovereign. Jesus is God. And as God He is worthy of our worship, but in return He owes us nothing.

This is a far cry from how people often come to God today, demanding healing or wholeness. Demanding that God change their circumstances. Naming and claiming. This man has no claim on God, he just worships. The implication in his statement "If you are willing" is that if Jesus is not willing to make him clean, that is okay with him.

The parallel is Job's words:

Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him (Job 13:15 KJV)

...

So think about the brokenness in your own life. It would be great if Jesus took it away. And He can. But are you willing for Jesus not to change your circumstances? Will you still do what you were created to do? Will you still bow in worship?

...

Now here's the grace, Jesus loves it when we humbly acknowledge our unworthy brokenness, and yet worship. God loves to save sinners. He is provoked to passion when lost sons and daughters come home acknowledging their need.

And so look what Jesus does. Verse 3. Jesus touches the leper.

No one else would ever touch a leper because there was a good chance that you would become an unclean leper too. Their physical and spiritual sickness was contagious.

But Jesus is different. When Jesus comes in contact with brokenness, it isn't our brokenness that's contagious, it is Jesus' wholeness that spreads.

So Jesus isn't surprized by how much of a sinner you are. He isn't shocked by where your thoughts go. He isn't caught off guard by how easily you can destroy relationships. And He isn't afraid that you are going to screw up His kingdom. He knows you are a mess, but if you will come, and if you will bow and acknowledge your need, Jesus is willing, He will touch you.

And when Jesus touched this leper, instantly his leprosy was gone. His fingers fleshed out and straightened. His odor went away. His nose regrew. His skin cleared. He was instantly healed. When Jesus heals you it is immediate and complete. With Jesus

there was never any “You are healed, now go away and say ‘you are healed’ to yourself in the mirror every morning for two months and it will gradually happen.” Jesus’ miracles happened in a way that only God can do.

And so here is the important thing to understand when it comes to the miracles of Jesus: they are not promises that Jesus is going to miraculously change your circumstances. There is no promise in the Bible that Jesus is going to take away your pain and your problems.

The promise of scripture is that when Jesus put on skin, and went to the cross He died to make a way for you, a wretched and decaying sinner, to come into the perfect relationship with God that you were designed to enjoy in the beginning. Jesus is the One who brings us back to God. And the miracles of Scripture are the evidence that Jesus can do what He says.

And so Jesus has a miracle for you today. Can He change your circumstances? Yes. He has the *dunamis*, the power. Will He? I don’t know.

But the real question is will you see your brokenness for the ugliness it is, and instead of hiding, come. Will you allow your heart to be softened so that you fall in love, maybe again or maybe for the first time, with the God who went so far as to put on skin, and die for your sin, to win your affection. God loves you that much. Will you bow at His feet and say: “If You are willing, you can make me clean”?

If you will, Jesus’ promise is that He will heal your heart and make you into a new creation. That is the miracle He has for you today. And He will walk with you through whatever leperous brokenness you face.