

## **5. Faith in the Face of Death**

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Matthew 9.18-34

7 March 2021

As a teenager, I spent a lot of time rock climbing, and I had the privilege of travelling to lots of very beautiful places all over Australia to climb. It was great fun and teaches you a lot about responsibility. You have to look after your gear because your gear is literally what prevents you from hitting the ground when you fall from a long way up, which happens regularly.

But there's a funny catch 22 that happens with climbers. Even though you know the rated strength of the rope, and your harness, there is always this moment when you fall that you wonder if the rope will really hold you...

C.S. Lewis said:

You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death.<sup>1</sup>

Using the example of the rope, he said it's easy to say you believe a rope is strong when you're using it to tie up a package. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Only then do you find out if you truly trust it.

Our Bible stories today ask us whether we trust in Jesus, and whether we are able to trust him even in the face of death.

So stick around and we'll find out exactly what God says in his word in just a moment.

### **Intro**

Well good morning and welcome to Yountville Community Church Online. My name is Dan Bidwell, Senior Pastor here, and as always it is a pleasure to have you join us today. We'd love to know that you've been here, so fill out a Connect Card at our website **[INSERT YOUNTVILLECHURCH.ORG HERE]** and let us know what God is doing in your life.

Earlier this week we had our monthly Prayer Meeting and there was some exciting news about the reopening date of our historic church building here in Yountville. To find out the details and see some pictures, you'll have to sign up to our e-News. But that news in a nutshell: we look forward to seeing you in person in the Napa Valley really soon.

Because we're keen to continue the mission that has been the heart of Yountville Community Church since 1874. As a church, we have a mission to share the hope of Jesus in the Napa Valley and beyond. And we want you to partner with us in that mission.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

So if you're in the Napa Valley and you're not currently part of another church, come and join us. If you know people who are not currently part of a church, invite them to come and check us out. You can send them a link to our online sermons so they get to know us online first, and then in a few months maybe they'll be ready to join us in person.

Because we trust that God is at work here in the Napa Valley, changing lives as people meet Jesus, just like happens in our Bible passage today.

So why don't we pray, asking God to do that work of changing us, and changing the lives of those around us, as we hear him speak today?

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the way that he heals, and restores, and does what seems impossible. Give us faith to hear and believe. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Just before we open the passage today, it's always helpful to remember where we are up to in the story. We are working our way through Matthew 8-12, and here in chapter 9 Jesus has returned to his hometown. A great crowd is gathered to see Jesus, partly because of his amazing teaching but also because of the miracles that accompanied his teachings.

Healing after healing, the paralysed man restored to full ability. Those on death's doorstep made well again. Those forgotten or ignored or shunned by society... given back their dignity.

People wanted what Jesus was offering. They were people just like you and me, hoping for something better than the slow, grinding, wearing out of our bodies...

## **The Daughter**

But what about when death has already claimed the life of your loved one? That's how our passage today starts, with a father who has just lost his daughter.

<sup>18</sup> While [Jesus] 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." (Matthew 9:18)

I can only imagine how sad the father must have been. It was probably one of the worst days of his life.

In Mark and Luke's accounts of this story, we read that Jairus, the synagogue leader, had first come to Jesus while his daughter was still alive, but then men from his home came to tell him that his daughter was dead. Why bother the teacher anymore, they asked?

Matthew cuts to the chase again, he leaves out those other details. Because what is most important is the intensity of the request from the father:

"My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live."

What would it take in that moment to trust Jesus to do what is humanly impossible? Who would even ask such a thing? To ask Jesus to undo death. Or as one of our kids Bibles said – *to make death come untrue*.

It's a shocking request.

But not for Jesus. He gets up (v19), and he and his disciples go with the man.

## The Interruption

While Jesus is on his way to Jairus' house, his journey gets interrupted.

This time it is someone not brave enough to come face to face with Jesus. It is a woman, a poor woman who has been subject to bleeding for twelve years. In Luke's gospel (ch8) we read that she had spent everything she had trying to be cured, but without success.

And it wasn't just the physical symptoms that caused her distress. Her bleeding made her 'unclean' according to Jewish religious laws. People who were 'unclean' with a skin disease or discharge had to separate themselves from the rest of the people (Numbers 5). And so just like the leper from chapter 8, this woman had been an outcast in society for 12 years. Alive but she might as well have been dead. The sort of woman that people looked past as if they didn't even notice her there. She was invisible...

So this woman comes to Jesus after 12 years of living as an unclean person. An outcast. Powerless. And she is so used to being powerless in society, that she doesn't even have the courage to look Jesus in the eyes.

So she sneaks up behind Jesus... (v20)

<sup>20</sup> Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. <sup>21</sup> She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."

She shows amazing faith, doesn't she? Just like Jairus whose daughter had died, this woman knew that Jesus was powerful to undo the illness that had taken her life from her.

And so she touched the edge of his cloak...

Here's a question for you. Do you think the woman was healed right away, as soon as she touched Jesus' clothing? You know, the way some people believe that if they touch a religious artifact, it will have some miraculous effect on them. Like drinking from the fountain at Lourdes, in France, or bathing in the Ganges for Hindus. Do you think the woman touched Jesus' cloak with that idea in mind? Do we need Jesus' physical touch to be healed? Do we need to touch something that Jesus has touched? Is that how it works?

Listen to what Jesus says is the cause of her healing:

<sup>22</sup> Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed at that moment.

Jesus focuses on the woman’s faith as his reason for healing her, not the fact that she had touched his clothing. And after Jesus spoke to the woman, she was healed at that moment.

The other surprise in this story is that Jesus is not angry, as we might have expected.

The woman hasn’t somehow sneakily stolen some of Jesus’ secret healing power. No, she has trusted in Jesus to heal her. And so Jesus turns around and speaks to her with tenderness...

Take heart, daughter...

It is extraordinary, isn’t it? In the midst of a bustling crowd, clamoring for Jesus’ attention, an invisible woman perpetrates an invisible act, just touching the edge of Jesus’ clothes. But she is not invisible to Jesus. He turns around and sees her. And he tells her to take heart, to have courage... That she would no longer be the shell of the woman she had once been, but instead that she would now be whole and well and able to participate in society once more.

And instead of being nameless, a nobody, Jesus calls her, *Daughter*... Jesus restores not just the woman’s health but her dignity as a human being and a child of God, something which had been lost to her for 12 years...

Back in Sydney I worked in an inner-city church for 3 years while I was at Bible college. This particular morning a woman walked up to the pulpit while the minister was giving the church notices. From her appearance, she was clearly a prostitute, both she and the woman who had walked into church with her that morning. She asked if she could say something to the church. This was unusual, even in our inner-city church. She said she wanted to thank Jesus and the church, because she had never felt so loved, or accepted or forgiven.

Here was a broken woman who had come face to face with Jesus as she heard him speak to her through the Bible. She met Jesus and found wholeness... That morning Jesus healed her of all that hurt her and left her feeling less than human. She left having been given dignity and made clean again by the forgiveness of Jesus. Her faith in his ability to forgive her life choices brought her healing.

Life is messy and she only turned up from time to time at church over the next few years. I don’t know for sure, but I assume she remained entangled in the lifestyle that had brought her to church that morning.

She is not so different from any of us. Though we turn to Christ, we continue to live entangled in a world that tempts us with many of the temptations we knew before we became a Christian. Even if we have always followed Jesus, there are parts of our lives that we know are inconsistent with our faith.

We all sin. We all render ourselves unclean before God each and every day of our lives. And we all need Jesus to make us clean again...

And that’s where the second half of the story about Jairus’ daughter comes in. Because Jesus doesn’t only make us clean, he brings us new life.

## The Daughter (part ii)

Jesus, you remember was on his way to Jairus' house because the synagogue leader's daughter had died.

When Jesus gets to the house, the house is full of professional mourners – flute players and women wailing, as was customary. It is noisy and chaotic, and in a sense hypocritical. Shouldn't the mourners be members of family, those who loved the girl, rather than a rent-a-crowd? And surely when Jesus turns up, shouldn't they, like the girl's father, be anxious for Jesus to perform a miracle?

But Jesus exposes their hypocrisy.

"Go away," [Jesus said,] "The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. (Matthew 9:24)

The mourners' attitude is contrasted starkly with the father's here, isn't it? The father came to Jesus holding onto hope that Jesus could raise his daughter to life. The mourners, however, just laugh at Jesus.

You go outside and tell the world that Jesus has the power to raise the dead, and they'll laugh at you too. You tell the world that you believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and you'll be branded a fool. In fact, these days we'll be ridiculed just for believing that God exists, let alone believing that he has the power to bring people back to life.

But Jesus doesn't let the critics bother him. Because to Jesus, the real death of this girl was not as final as the mourners thought.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>25</sup> After the crowd had been put outside, [Jesus] went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. (Matthew 9:25)

Simple as that, Jesus gets the little girl up as though she had merely been asleep.

Jesus makes death come untrue. What is impossible is made possible in the power of Jesus. And of course we see that in Jesus' own resurrection, where sorrow gives way to joy as Jesus rises to new life. And his resurrection points forward to the new life that each of us will experience on the other side of our mortal death, when we put our faith in Jesus, just like Jairus did.

Just like we go in and wake our kids up from sleep, one day Jesus will tenderly wake us up from the sleep of death.

But the mourners, they missed the chance to see this miracle, although I'm not sure they would have believed in Jesus any more if they had seen it. They had already made up their minds about Jesus, and so they ended up sent outside.

And what happened to the mourners is a parable about what will happen to all who ridicule Jesus, and to all who doubt his ability to give life. Like the mourners, all of Jesus' opponents will be *put outside*, put

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<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, *When Jesus Confronts the World*, p97

outside the kingdom of God, they will be sent away. Jesus' words to the mourners remind us of his word of judgment in chapter 7:

"I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers." (Matthew 7:23)

But those who have faith will be welcomed, forgiven, healed, made whole again. And those who have faith in Jesus will enjoy life with him that extends beyond this physical death that we will all know.

## **The Messiah Revealed**

Because what this section of the scripture reveals is not just Jesus' power to heal.

That power was real in the past, and it's real today. Although it's interesting to note that Jesus didn't go through the countryside back then healing every illness and preventing every death. He didn't magically zap everyone into their resurrection bodies never to be ill or die again. Yes, he healed some. And even raised others from the dead. But it wasn't universal. It was more like a window into what the forever kingdom of God will be like. These healings were a preview, and a promise of more to come.

Because the last two miracles in our chapter today reveal something about the identity of Jesus, or at least confirm something that we already know. It's the identity of Jesus that Matthew revealed right back in chapter 1 verse 1 of this gospel. He says this:

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1)

When Jesus heals the two blind men in v27 of our chapter, and when he goes on to heal the demon possessed man who had been mute but now was able to speak, Jesus is completing the set of miracles that confirm him as the long-awaited Messiah. The King who would usher in the eternal Kingdom of God.

Listen to these verses from Isaiah, which contains signs pointing to the Messiah.

<sup>5</sup> the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

<sup>6</sup> The lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy...

(Isaiah 35:5-6)

We've seen three out of four of those fulfilled in the miracles in chapters 8-9. And in just a couple of chapters (Mt 11:4-5) Jesus will refer to these very verses from Isaiah making it perfectly clear to John the Baptist's disciples that he is the one they were expecting – the Messiah.

The kingdom is coming. We know what it will be like – Jesus has told us, and Jesus has shown us. And it is up to each of us to decide if we are in or out. Whether we will trust him for this lifetime and the next.

Because many people watched on as Jesus performed miracles, healing the blind, deaf and lame, even raising the dead and yet they did not recognize him as the Messiah.

Others came to him broken, in desperation, knowing that Jesus was their only hope for life.

They came with faith that Jesus could change what they were unable to change. They came with faith that Jesus could fix their broken lives. They came with faith that Jesus could give them new life...

And so I want to leave you with the words that Jesus spoke to the two blind men before he healed them... The words of Jesus to two blind men, and words of Jesus to us here today:

Jesus said: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

[Pause]

"Yes, Lord," they replied.

(Matthew 7:28)

Will you pray with me?



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