Demonstrations of Deity
Matthew 9:1-8
(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh.)

1. Opposition By the Leadership of Israel
2. Multiple Accounts of the Healing of the Paralytic
3. Friends With an Unshakable Commitment
4. Unshakable Faith in Christ
5. Sins Are Forgiven by Christ
6. Christ’s Proofs of Omnipotence
7. Responding Is a Personal Responsibility

In chapters 8 and 9, Matthew has pulled together some of the miracles Christ performed offering them as evidence that He is indeed the Messiah of Israel. These miracles are not presented in chronological order. Rather, Matthew has arranged them to suit his purpose to prove that Christ is the Messiah. Chapter 9 is crucial, not only because of the miracles that are presented, but also in it are the first indications of official opposition to the ministry of Jesus Christ. The responses of the leaders of Israel in this chapter provide the initial evidence that the leadership is unalterably opposed to the message and ministry of Jesus Christ.

1. Opposition By the Leadership of Israel

The first miracle recorded in Matthew 9, the healing of the paralytic and the forgiving of his sins, brings the charge of blasphemy against Christ. That is the very charge that will be offered at His crucifixion in Matthew 26:65. The leaders will conclude that on the basis of these events, they need no further proof that Jesus is a blasphemer and worthy of death.

Some commentators have noted that there are four charges made against Christ in Matthew 9. The first one, in verses 1 through 8, is the charge of blasphemy. “And some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This fellow blasphemes’”(v.3). The second charge, verses 10 through 13, is a charge of immorality. Although not accused of sexual immorality, the Jews are saying that He is associating with tax-gatherers and sinners, the scum of the earth. As a result of these associations, they say that He does not lead a devout life. This serious charge will also be considered in the context of their charge of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The fourth charge, made in verses 31 through 34, is that Christ is in league with the Devil. “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons” (v. 34).

As these charges are mounting, a more solidified opposition to Christ is building. It is significant that in the face of His mightiest miracles, the opposition against Him intensifies. Many of those in leadership positions in Israel are in His presence, not to evaluate whether His teaching fits the Old Testament, but merely to see if they can find something wrong with what He does. They are looking for ways to criticize Him and ridicule His ministry. They are going to attempt to undermine His ministry by making these four specific charges against Him.

The enemies of the prophet Jeremiah attempted to oppose his ministry in a similar way. Those who opposed him said in Jeremiah 18:18, “Come on and let us strike at him with our tongue, and let us give no heed to any of his words.” The leadership of Israel is basically doing the same thing to Christ. They are trying to find something they can criticize Him for and as a result will decide not to pay any attention to what He says.

2. Multiple Accounts of the Healing of the Paralytic
In Matthew 8 Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee and performed His miracle of calming the storm. As Matthew begins reporting the events in chapter 9, he notes that Christ returns across the Sea of Galilee to the town of Capernaum where He lives, “Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over the sea and came to His own city."

Since Matthew’s purpose in reporting the healing of the paralytic is to demonstrate that Christ has the authority to forgive sins, Matthew simply says that a paralytic was brought to Christ, and Christ forgave his sins, thus answering the opposition of the scribes who charged Him with blasphemy. He then healed the paralytic man. Matthew says that Christ has the authority to forgive sins and demonstrates that authority by healing the paralytic.

Mark and Luke give more complete accounts of the healing of the paralytic than Matthew does. Matthew is concerned only with the highlights and does not give much detail. Mark and Luke supplement Matthew’s report with some added details which are helpful in understanding these events. As a result, each writer gives balance to the total picture.

Luke gives the circumstances surrounding this event: “One day He was teaching; and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing” (Luke 5:17). A crowd encompassing some of the leadership of Israel was present on this occasion. The teachers present were the scribes. They had gathered from all over Israel, particularly from Jerusalem. They had come to hear the teaching of Christ and to see the mighty miracles He was performing.

Mark also records this event in chapter 2. He begins by telling that Jesus is back at Capernaum, either at His own residence there, perhaps where His mother lives, or possibly at the home of Peter. The specific location is not significant, but the important fact is that these events occurred at a home. Mark says in verse 2, “And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them.” So Jesus is in this home with prominent individuals seated around Him. People have packed into the house so that there is no longer room for anyone to come in the door.

Into this scene come four men in verse 3 carrying a paralytic on a cot. These four individuals, apparently each at a corner of the cot or pallet, bring this paralyzed man to Jesus. They have heard that He is in the area and their desire is to bring their friend to Christ so that He might heal him. The many people who are in the house have pressed around Christ and these men cannot get near Him with their friend. Verse 4 says, “Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying.”

3. Friends With an Unshakable Commitment

We need to appreciate the ingenuity of these men. Since the house is packed with people and they cannot get in the door, they could have taken that as a sign, as some of us do, that it is obviously not the Lord’s time for the man to be healed. After all, if it would have been the Lord’s time, He would have had the crowd dispersed and they would have been able to get to Him easily. Or possibly the Lord would have commanded the people that they open up a way for these men to bring their friend to Him. They could have concluded that there was no hope of getting him to Jesus and simply gave up and went home.

But these men have an unswerving, unshakable commitment to the fact that Jesus Christ has the power to make this paralytic well. They know it is of overwhelming importance that they get this man into the presence of Christ. They do not ponder why they cannot get him into Christ’s presence, but rather, they plan how they can accomplish their goal. So they took him to the roof of the house.

As would have been common there, this was evidently a one-story dwelling with stairs going up on the outside to the roof of the home. The roof probably was made of tiles and sealed with mud to make it waterproof. Luke indicates that these men removed the tiles from the roof in order to get their friend to Jesus.

It doesn’t take much of an imagination to picture the scene as they clamored up the steps with the paralyzed man on the pallet, located just where Jesus was in the house, and proceeded to take the roof apart. Imagine the eminent scribes and Pharisees seated around Christ among the mob, then all of a sudden debris starts shaking down on their heads as the
men pull up the tiles of the roof. The scribes and Pharisees were probably quite surprised as the dust started filtering down on their heads and they looked up to see light shining through a hole in the roof. Pretty soon another portion of the roof would move and more mud and dust would fall down. The men have to get this opening wide enough to lower the bed through it, so it has to be a big hole. Keep in mind that this is not their home or their roof. They have not even been invited to the party! Yet here they are tearing this poor guy’s house apart.

These men are unshakably committed so that no matter what else is done, they must get their friend into the presence of Christ. This could have become a tremendously embarrassing situation for them. The owner could have called out to them asking what they were doing to his roof. Or the indignant scribes and Pharisees could have created a scene. With all the people of the community there and the prominent people from Jerusalem visiting as well, it is no small matter for the men to start taking the roof apart and lowering their friend to Christ. But this is their goal. Their friend must be brought into the presence of Christ, so that fact controls everything they do.

A writer from the last century, Alexander Maclaren, commented on this passage: “We can fancy the blank looks of the four bearers, and the disappointment on the sick man’s thin face and weary eyes, as they got to the edge of the crowd, and saw that there was no hope of forcing a passage. Had they been less certain of a cure, and less eager, they would have shouldered their burden and carried him home again. They could well have pleaded sufficient reason for giving up the attempt. But ‘we cannot’ is the coward’s word. ‘We must’ is the earnest man’s. If we have any real consciousness of our need to get to Christ, and any real wish to do so, it is not a crowd round the door that will keep us back. Difficulties test, and therefore increase faith. They develop a sanctified ingenuity in getting over them, and bring a rich harvest of satisfaction when at last conquered.”

We need to be consumed with the same kind of passion for our friends that these men had for theirs. The thing of overwhelming significance for them is the fact that they must bring their friend into contact with Jesus Christ; he must be exposed to the truth. If our great concern were exposing our friends to the finished work of Christ, that would resolve many conflicts we face in sharing Christ with them. We would not have to decide if it were time to turn back or give up. We would simply have to decide how to overcome the obstacle.

4. Unshakable Faith in Christ

Matthew jumped right to the contact point in Matthew 9:2: “And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, ‘Take courage, son.’” I assume that the faith referred to here is the faith of all five, the four men carrying him and the paralytic on the bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said, “Take courage.” Those words in the original mean to have courage or not to be afraid. That helps me because I see that it is possible to have faith in Christ and still to have fear at times. Apparently there was nervousness on the part of the men and the paralytic. Surely all other activity ceased as the man was lowered through the roof. These men had an unshakable confidence in Jesus Christ and His power, but that did not mean that they were not nervous or fearful of the circumstances they were in.

We need to remind ourselves of that as we serve Christ. We can have unshakable confidence that Jesus Christ is able and willing to forgive and cleanse anyone who will believe in Him. We can proclaim that message with full confidence, but sometimes we are afraid when we do it. We are not afraid that Christ cannot heal, cure or cleanse, but the circumstances surrounding us sometimes make us nervous. Our courage gets a bit soft. But in these circumstances, Jesus encourages them not to be afraid.

The expression, “take courage,” occurs at other times in the New Testament, usually spoken by Christ. In Matthew 14, the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee as the boat again was being tossed around by the waves. Verse 26 says, “When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear.” Then notice Jesus’ response: “Do not be afraid” (v. 27). In the context of this passage, when the disciples are shaken, Christ tells them to have courage, to be confident.

In John 16, Jesus is preparing His disciples for His departure from earth. He tells them in verse 33 what they can expect: “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” Tribulation and difficulty will come their way, but He
promises His peace and tells them, “take courage.” Sometimes the circumstances surrounding us press in and cause us to be intimidated, fearful or shaky. But that reminds us that we can have courage because our faith is in Him.

These examples show that even in the presence of Christ, there is nervousness. That can encourage me. When I share the gospel with someone and am nervous, I do not have to conclude that my nervousness is because of a lack of faith or that maybe this is not the right time for me to be witnessing. Maybe it is exactly the right time. But I need to have courage realizing that Christ is able to meet my needs in that situation.

5. Sins are Forgiven by Christ

Consider the remainder of Jesus’ statement in Matthew 9:2. It is remarkable that after telling him to take courage, Jesus says to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven.” He does not tell the man to get up off his bed and walk, but rather, “Your sins are forgiven.” This is a remarkable statement which draws attention to the fact that Jesus Christ is the One who has the power and authority to forgive sins.

This statement immediately causes a reaction in the minds of the scribes. “And some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This fellow blasphemes’” (v. 3). Verse 4 continues, “And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, ‘Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?’” In his account of these events, Mark says the scribes were reasoning in their minds. Jesus’ knowledge of their thoughts is another clear testimony of His deity. As Jesus declares, “Your sins are forgiven,” the scribes remember the teaching from the Old Testament that only God can forgive sins. Thus they conclude that Jesus is a blasphemer.

However, there is a breakdown in their syllogism. They know that the Old Testament says only God can forgive sins. This man forgives sins. Therefore, they conclude that this man is a blasphemer. There is another possibility available to explain these events. Since they know that only God can forgive sins, and since this man forgives sins, they could, therefore, conclude that this man is God. But they were not willing to consider that possibility.

The Scripture is clear that forgiveness of sins is a prerogative that God reserves for Himself. We forgive on the human level, but sin is ultimately transgression against God. Only He can forgive in the final sense, cleansing you from your sins. I can forgive you for the wrong you do against me, but I cannot cleanse you from the guilt of your sin before God.

Several Old Testament passages emphasize that only God can forgive sins and provide insight into what may have been in the minds of the scribes as they considered these events. For Christ to claim the authority to forgive sins, He is, in effect, claiming deity for Himself. In these passages, note that a connection is made in some of them between the forgiveness of sins and the healing of sickness. These passages imply that God is the one who does both.

The psalmist said in Psalm 103:2 and 3, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons all your iniquities; who heals all your diseases.” In these verses the psalmist is saying that the Lord is the one who takes care of sin as well as the one who takes care of sickness. In verse 12 he tells us that the Lord is the one who removes our sins: “As for as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

The Lord tells us in Isaiah 43:25, “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins.” God says He is the one who does it. Where else could you go for forgiveness but to God?

Isaiah also wrote in chapter 55: “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (vs. 6,7). We must come to God for the pardoning of sins. The scribes of Jesus’ day were right from the standpoint that only God has the power to forgive sins. But they did not consider who was speaking.

In chapter 33, Isaiah is describing the glorious kingdom Jesus Christ will eventually rule over on the earth. He says in verse 24, “And no resident will say, ‘I am sick’; the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.” This verse connects the healing of the body with the power to forgive sins.
Another Old Testament prophet wrote, “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity?” (Micah 7:18). Obviously, God is the only one who pardons iniquity. So when Jesus stands before these scribes in Matthew 9 and says to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven” (v. 2), He is claiming the power to pardon sin.

The scribes were right when they remembered that the Old Testament informs us that the power to forgive sins resides only in God. The scribes were also right in concluding that Jesus claimed for Himself the rights of deity. But they were wrong when they said He was blaspheming, because they had not considered whether He could be God in the flesh, the Son of God. They were jumping on something for which they could accuse Him and were not open to consider the possibility of His being the Messiah of Israel.

6. Christ’s Proofs of Omnipotence

After indicating in Matthew 9:4 that He knows their hearts, He asks them in verse 5, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, and walk’?” In this question, Jesus is pointing out that both the power to forgive sins and the power to raise a paralytic are the signs of omnipotence. Either one demonstrates Him to be the Messiah of Israel, the Son of God. After all, which is easier to do, forgive sins or heal a paralytic? Both require omnipotence.

I do not have the power to forgive your sins, because only God can do that. I can tell you whether you are forgiven or not, because God tells us that those who have trusted Christ are forgiven and those who have not trusted Him are not forgiven. But only God can do the forgiving. Only He has the power as well to restore the paralytic to health. So Jesus is making the point that both actions are displays of omnipotent power. If He can do one, He can do the other. As was made clear in Isaiah 33:24, the Messiah will both heal the body and forgive sins. So from Jesus’ perspective, it is just as easy to do one as the other.

However, from our perspective, it is easier to say, “You are forgiven,” than to tell someone he is healed. If you think about it for a moment, the reason for that is obvious. If we were to line up four people and have them smile at you, you would not know merely by looking at them which ones had been forgiven by God and which ones had not. You might hear their testimony and know that if they trust Christ, they are forgiven. But merely to look at them, you cannot tell who is forgiven and who is not. Forgiveness is an intangible of the immaterial realm. You can see the results of the forgiveness of sins, but you cannot see forgiveness of sins.

How do you know that when Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2), they are actually forgiven? Jesus tells us: “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—then He said to the paralytic, ‘Get up, pick up your bed and go home’” Matthew 9:6. In other words, how do you know if the man’s sins are forgiven? Just watch him get up and walk! If Jesus has the power to give the man his health, He also has the power to forgive his sins. The fact that the man is healed is the demonstration that he is also forgiven. The two concepts are joined together. The people could not deny the power of Christ in the paralytic’s physical body, but they were unwilling to consider what that meant in relation to the forgiveness of sins.

In verse 6 Jesus refers to Himself again as “Son of Man.” The scribes would recognize that statement immediately from Daniel 7:13 and 14 as relating to the One to whom authority has been given over all creation. They would understand Christ to be saying that He is deity, the Son of God Himself. Christ’s claim to authority means power, but it goes beyond meaning simply power. There is also the moral right to exercise that power. I have the power to kill someone, but I do not have the authority to do that. Christ has not only the power, but the authority, the moral right, if you will, to forgive sins. The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins because the forgiveness of sins on earth centers in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The visible evidence of His power to forgive sins was that after He told the paralytic, “Get up, pick up your bed and go home” (Matthew 9:6), then verse 7 adds, “And he got up and went home.”

The response of the multitudes when they saw this miracle is recorded in verse 8: “But when the crowds saw this, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” Matthew does not record what the scribes did, but from the way the situation develops, it seems to indicate that the scribes and Pharisees were simply
antagonized by these actions as Jesus proved that He could forgive sins. You must understand how crucial this point is.

Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.” One of the unchanging characteristics of Jesus Christ is His ability, power and right to forgive sins. He is the only one who has that authority on earth. This means that if I tell you that you can be forgiven by attending church, I am lying, because God says that is a lie. If I told you I could personally forgive your sins, it would be a lie, because that is contrary to what God says. He says that only His Son, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, has the authority on earth to forgive sins. Anyone anywhere who is going to receive forgiveness of sins must find it in the person of Jesus Christ. Acts 4:12 says, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” That makes it as clear and as strong as possible.

7. Responding Is a Personal Responsibility

It is a tragedy that as simple and clear as that message is, there are people today who are going to church because they think that by going they will be more acceptable to God. Some are being baptized because they think that will help cleanse them from their sins. Others believe that going through religious rituals and routines will, with the help of God, forgive them of their sins. Some churches teach that salvation is found only in their church. But the Scripture says that there is salvation in no one else but Jesus Christ. He is the only One under heaven in whom salvation and forgiveness of sins can be found. That is not true because I said it, it is true because God said it. If I say something different from what God says, then I am wrong.

The issue was the same when Christ raised the paralytic as it is today. We confront the same tensions that the scribes and Pharisees confronted. Some people say, “My church is as good as your church.” I do not have any question about that at all. But the issue is: Where can you be forgiven your sins? Christ claims that He alone can forgive sins. You cannot be forgiven by going to a church. Neither can you be forgiven by being baptized. You can only be forgiven by believing that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins. When you believe that, you are forgiven all your sins. Until you do that, no matter what you do, you are not forgiven.

In Colossians 1:14, Paul writes that Jesus Christ is the One “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” That is the point being driven home in Matthew 9 with the healing of the paralytic man; Jesus Christ has the power to forgive sins. He demonstrates that by the manifestation of His power in healing the paralytic’s physical body.

Just as people in that crowded house were confronted with the power and authority of Jesus Christ, so you have been confronted with that. You are now face to face with the issue of whether Jesus Christ is who He claims to be. Is He God in the flesh with the authority to forgive sins or is He a blasphemer? Many so-called theologians and religious people today think they can take a middle ground and say that Jesus Christ was merely a good man. But the scribes had it right--only God can forgive sins. If Jesus Christ is not God in the flesh, He is a blasphemer and not worthy of our respect, worship or honor. But He has demonstrated that He is who He claims to be: the Son of God in the flesh with the authority to forgive sins.

Matthew has demonstrated beyond a doubt that Jesus Christ is who He claims to be, the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. If you will believe in Him as the One who died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins and was raised because the penalty had been paid, you can experience salvation. The moment you believe in Him, you will be forgiven of your sins, cleansed and made pure before Him as His child for all eternity. What an exciting opportunity for you!

This message deserves proclamation over all the world to everyone we come in contact with. The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. There is not a person you will come in contact with who ought not hear this message. If you are one who has faith in Jesus Christ, are you consumed with a passion to bring others to Christ as these four friends were to bring their paralytic friend to Him? They saw him without hope, helpless apart from Christ. Their driving goal was to bring him to Christ whatever the problem, whatever the potential for difficulty or whatever possible embarrassment they might experience. None of those obstacles really mattered to them. They had one goal and were blind to everything else--their friend must be brought into the presence of Jesus Christ. They knew they might make fools of themselves and be known all over Galilee and the surrounding region as the fools who tore the roof off the
House and interrupted an important meeting. But it did not really matter to them.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:10, “We are fools for Christ’s sake.” The reason Paul and the other apostles were so effective in their ministries was because they were willing to be fools for Him. Others may think we are fools if we are zealous in proclaiming Christ. But does that really matter? Even though there may be prominent people around, does that keep us from telling others about Christ? Will we be intimidated if they overhear our conversation? This paralytic’s friends could have been intimidated by the important people in their presence. After all, there were scribes and Pharisees there from Jerusalem. They could have concluded that this would not be the appropriate time to tear the roof off of someone’s house, shake dust and debris on the people inside, then lower their friend into the presence of Jesus Christ interrupting an important meeting. They could have concluded that it would be better to go home and wait for a more appropriate time. But there was no better time than right then to deal with his need.

There is no better time than now for you to confront those around you with Jesus Christ and share with them the good news that He has the authority on earth to forgive sins and to provide salvation. Oh that we were fools for Christ’s sake, unashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, unreservedly committed to the truth that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. Even if others think we are fools, we must recognize that the gospel is the power of God that changes lives. No matter what the obstacles, difficulties or problems associated with it, we must have one consuming passion—that men and women must be brought face to face with Jesus Christ and the truth that He is the Savior of the world.