



Defining Moments in the Life of Jesus: Healing

Matthew 8:1-4

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Have you ever felt like it was all over for you—like you had gone as far as you could go, and there was just nothing left? Maybe you were dealing with something disastrous in your chosen path, or a level of failure in your career that knocked you on your heels, or the loss of a significant friendship you thought would always be strong. Maybe your marriage fell apart, or your kids were hurting, and you hurt so incredibly deeply for them. Perhaps you were facing a diagnosis, or battling a disease, or maybe even dealing with the death of someone you loved so very dearly. Sometimes life is really hard, and it hurts. Sometimes, the reality of living in a fallen world becomes all too real and all too inescapable. Things don't go as we planned. People don't do what we hoped. Our own bodies betray us. Sometimes, life really hurts.

God didn't create the world—or us—to dwell in brokenness. It wasn't part of His good design. He designed the world to be a place of delight (that's what "Eden" means) in which human beings created in His image would live with Him and each other in peace and harmony. But that's not our reality. What happened?

The Fall happened. When Satan approached Adam and Eve in the Garden, tempting them to disobey God's single prohibition by questioning God's Word, God's truthfulness, and God's character, he was launching an all-out attack on the goodness of God's creation. When Adam and Eve yielded to His temptation and broke God's only rule for them, brokenness entered human history.

Since that point, we have dealt with tension, sorrow, difficulty, suffering, pain, and ultimately, death. We live in a world in which things are not as they should be, and we know it. We feel it. We watch the news or scroll our newsfeeds, and we shake our heads. We see the continuing and relentless unrest, turmoil, injustice, and suffering around us, and our souls ache. Surely there's something better. There's too much sickness, too much hurting, too much pain, too much brokenness...

Thank God, Jesus came into our broken world. He didn't come to a nearly perfect world to make it better. He came into an utterly broken world to heal it and make it whole. He came to utterly broken people to heal us and make us whole. He's still healing us today.

In this session, we're going to look at the world's brokenness manifested in the longstanding physical difficulty of someone who thought his life was effectively over and who was desperate for mercy. We're going to watch Jesus respond compassionately to a man who had been debilitated for a very long time, love him, and mercifully heal him. So often, Jesus meets us right at the place of our deepest despair—and He breathes new life into us. Today, we'll see how Jesus brings healing, even when things look really, really bad.

1. Jesus meets us in our brokenness (8:1-2).

¹ When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. ² And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean” (Matthew 8:1-2).

Contracting leprosy was one of the worst things that could happen to you in the ancient world. “Leprosy” was a blanket term for a host of contagious skin diseases that rendered the afflicted person incredibly dangerous to the rest of the community. Because leprosy could quickly destroy an entire population, extreme social distancing and quarantine were essential:

Leviticus 13:45-46 - ⁴⁵ “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ ⁴⁶ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

This man had been stricken. Somehow, in some way, he came into contact with an infected person, and he contracted the disease. He was now a pariah. He had to quarantine, but his quarantine was much worse than anything we might have to endure because of the COVID pandemic. He didn’t have to wait until the health department cleared him; he had to wait until he could show himself to the priest and have the priest attest that the disease had left him and he could return to society after a series of sacrifices and religious rituals to cleanse him. For many lepers, that day never came. Once they contracted the disease, life was effectively over. They had to wear torn clothes. They had to let the hair of their heads hang loose. They had to cover their upper lip and yell, “unclean, unclean” when they got close to anyone. They had to live alone. They were exiled from the community.

When Jesus came down from the mountain, this leprous man met Him with a simple prayer that was utterly desperate but nevertheless filled with incredible faith: “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean” (Matthew 8:2 NIV). Consider his words in a different order:

“Lord” – You, Jesus, are worthy of my respect and honor. You, Jesus, are worthy of the title, “Lord,” for you are God over all, forever praised.

“You can make me clean” – I believe that you have the power to overcome my disease. I have no doubt in my heart or mind that you can cleanse me of this horrible condition and bring me back to life. You can restore me, Lord.

“If you are willing” – My healing is contingent—not on your ability, for you are able—but on your willingness to heal me. I do not understand Your wisdom or Your plans for my life, but I trust You. If you are not willing to heal me at this time, I understand that you are doing something greater. Nevertheless, I confess my full affirmation that, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

What an amazing prayer of amazing faith. Contrast his prayer with that of the father whose son had an unclean spirit who said to Jesus, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us” (Mark 9:22). Jesus replied, “‘If you can!’ All things are possible for one who believes” (Mark 9:23). The man replied, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

What’s the difference in the men’s prayers? A posture of doubt versus a posture of faith. How do you approach Jesus: “If You can” or “if You are willing, you can?” Be assured, He can.

2. Jesus has compassion for us (8:3).

³ *And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed* (Matthew 8:3).

This man was untouchable. He was unclean. Anything with which he came into contact immediately became unclean. He had to announce his uncleanness loudly before him wherever he went. He couldn't be around other people. He couldn't stay in the community. He was defiled. He was untouchable. He was unclean.

But Jesus touched him.

In a moment that had to send shock waves through His disciples who were descending from the mountain with Him, Jesus met this unclean man who shouldn't have approached Him anyway. Likely over the objections of His companions—who would rightly have been worried that Jesus would Himself become unclean and diseased in this encounter—Jesus stretched out His holy hand, and He did the unthinkable. He *touched* the man, and as He touched him, He said, "I am willing... Be clean!" (Matthew 8:3 NIV).

Jesus is illustrating His power over the physical realm. The One who is able to calm the storms around us is also able to calm the storms within us. He is Lord over all, and He is Lord over us. He has full ability to intervene and heal anything that is hurting us in any way—physically, mentally, emotionally, situationally, circumstantially. He is able.

Because He is able, our faith must compel us to approach Him with the same sort of prayer that this leper prayed. We come to Him humbly, not saying "if You can," but rather saying, "if You will."

There have been so many times when I have used this leper's prayer as a model for my own words to Jesus. I have prayed this prayer when I have faced times of physical illness myself, or when I have had people I love endure physical difficulties. I have prayed this prayer over people whose situations looked hopeless, and I have prayed this prayer when my own circumstances didn't leave a lot of room for hope. I have prayed this prayer with a heart overflowing with faith, and I have prayed this prayer with eyes overflowing with tears. I have prayed this prayer when I felt it deeply, and I have prayed this prayer when I was doing my best just to say the words.

The point is that we learn something so deeply important from the prayer offered by this leprous man. We must go to Jesus. He is able. If He is willing, He can fix it. If He delays, there's a reason. If He is not willing in this moment, we keep trusting Him and keep praying.

One of the principles that Jesus teaches us about prayer is that we should persist in it. In Matthew 7, He tells us to "ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). He commands us to ask Him to meet our needs, to seek Him in our needs, and to knock—meaning to persist in our prayer. Sometimes He delays in answering because He is teaching us to persist in prayer. Sometimes He delays to differentiate to us the difference between the serious and the curious. If ever He delays, it is because He has a better answer. In any case, we can and must trust the heart of our Savior.

3. Jesus calls us to a greater healing (8:4).

⁴ And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them" (Matthew 8:4).

I'm going to ask that we allow God to elevate our perspective for just a moment, for that line between Heaven and earth to be blurred more than we typically let it be in our minds. What has God promised for those who trust and follow Jesus Christ as Lord, whose sin has been forgiven and whose eternity has been secured in Christ? Eternal life. Not death. Life. What does that look like?

It looks like rest. It looks like joy. It looks like peace. It looks like Home. God will fulfill His every plan for your life in the most glorious way. Nothing is lost for those who are in Christ Jesus. It may be deferred, but it can never be lost. God has not left your life to chance. He is working. Here's proof:

Psalm 139:13-18 - ¹³ For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. ¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.

God made you, and He already knows the number of your days. Nothing that will happen to you will come as a shock to Him.

Jeremiah 1:5 - "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Just as God knew Jeremiah before He formed him in his mother's womb, He also knew you before He formed you in your mother's womb.

Jeremiah 29:11 - For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Just as God had plans for His people who had been exiled to and held captive in Babylon, He also has plans for you: "plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

John 13:7 - Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."

Perhaps most importantly, God is actively working in your life right now. He is accomplishing His plans for you. One day, you will see. One day, you will understand. That day may not be today, but one day, it will all be okay.

Final Challenge

What the leper spoke to Jesus in this passage has become a prayer that I have prayed many times in my life. Sometimes I pray it more urgently than other times, but God has made this passage precious to me and invites us to come to Him in the same way as this leper came to Him: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” What a prayer of faith and deep understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus can do.

As you celebrate this victory in his life, you may be wondering why God doesn't physically heal everybody who suffers from a physical struggle. Or maybe you're wondering why God doesn't heal everybody who suffers from a mental or emotional struggle. Why do some people experience miraculous healing, and others don't?

The answer is that we don't know. We don't know why some people get better this side of Heaven, and others don't. Since we don't know—and likely won't know until we get to Glory—we can focus on what we do know...

- 1) We know that God has so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). We know that God desires all people to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). We know that the suffering we must face on this earth will be eclipsed by the glory to be revealed in us in Heaven one day (Romans 8:18). We know that, in Christ, this world is not our home (2 Corinthians 5:6-8), and our suffering is not forever (1 Peter 4:12-19).
- 2) We know that our affliction is light and momentary in comparison to eternity with God, and we know that our light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that we will assuredly receive in Christ (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).
- 3) We know that even in the face of suffering, God's grace is sufficient for us, for His power is perfected in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).
- 4) We know that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20), and we know that even Jesus and the Holy Spirit are interceding for us (Romans 8:26-27, 34). We know that God knows what we need before we ask Him (Matthew 6:8), and we know that we can boldly approach His throne of grace with our request (Hebrews 4:16). We know that we can cast our anxieties on Him, because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7), and we know that He is willing to receive our requests and guard our hearts and minds with His peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:6-7).
- 5) We know that God is with us always (Matthew 28:20), even in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4), and that we can therefore be strong and courageous in the face of adversity (Joshua 1:9).
- 6) We know that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love, and self-control (2 Timothy 1:7).
- 7) We know that, in Christ, we are more than conquerors, and we will never be separated from the love of God (Romans 8:31-39).

8) We know that we are in the grip of our Savior and of our Heavenly Father, and we will not be let go (John 10:28-30).

9) We know that, in Christ, God is for us and not against us (Romans 8:31).

10) We know that God will bring to completion the good work He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6).

11) We know that God is working all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, and we know that “all things” means “all things” (Romans 8:28).

12) We know that God is our good Father who gives good things to those who ask Him (Matthew 7:11). He will supply our every need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

13) We know that every day ordained for us was written in God’s book before one of them came to be (Psalm 139:16).

14) We know God knows us intimately (Psalm 139:1-6), and that God’s eye is on us to protect and sustain us (Luke 12:6-7).

15) We know that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33), and we who trust and follow Christ will overcome the world in Him (1 John 5:5).

In the face of what we do not know, we focus on what we do know. While we don’t know everything we want to know, we know so many things we need to know. We don’t always know what God is doing or when He will do it, but we know His character, His heart, and His love for us. We can find rest in those realities, even as we wait for other prayers to be answered.

Where do you see yourself in the story of the leper in Matthew 8? If you are a human being, you face brokenness in some way. Maybe you’ve been dealing with it for some time, or maybe it’s an issue that’s relatively new for you. Perhaps you’re praying desperately for healing, or maybe you’ve started to slip into bitterness that your healing hasn’t happened yet.

Look to Jesus. Trust in Jesus. Pray. Persevere. Focus on what you know in Christ. Keep doing what you’re able to do while you wait on what only God is able to do. Don’t lose heart. Don’t slip into bitterness. Fight the good fight. Run the race. Keep the faith. God is moving in ways you cannot now perceive to bring healing in your life, and He will bring to completion the good work that He has begun in you in Christ Jesus. Be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go!