

With chapter 8, Matthew begins to tell the stories that illustrate Jesus' initial claim that the kingdom of God has come near. Kingdoms were identified with their rulers, and so the designation literally means "the rule of God." At this initial stage, the rule of God, God's power, wisdom, and authority is present in the ministry of Jesus.

The people of Israel believed that when God's kingdom came, life for them would improve. This was the litmus test for identifying whether or not the Messiah had come. And so, during Jesus' lifetime on earth, he would improve life for the Jewish people as a whole. Moreover, because of this, they were not expecting a suffering Messiah—a Messiah whose suffering and death would become an atonement for their sin. Rather, their idea was that of a figure who would forcefully change things for the better.

We will see this expectation played out in the behavior and attitudes of his disciples during his ministry. This also must certainly have played a role in his rejection, both during his trial before Pilate and after his death. Even Paul, when he was still known as Saul, rejected the idea that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah to the point of persecuting the apostolic church. It was not until Jesus appeared to him, and after he received the Holy Spirit that he was convinced that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah.

In any case, during his ministry, we will see illustrated in many ways how the power of God's rule was present in Jesus of Nazareth, later to be known as Jesus the Christ, the anointed one, and therefore the king of the Jews. That the power of God was present in Jesus was hard to deny as we saw in the story of Nicodemus from the gospel of John. The issue became how that power was used. It was precisely how Jesus used his power—what he did with it—that revealed who God is and how God sent salvation to ~~his~~ people. ^{his}

Matthew 8:1-4 is the first miracle story recorded in this gospel. After coming down from the mountain from which he had taught the meaning of the law, crowds were following him because they clearly perceived the authority with which he taught them. This was a sign of God's presence and rule, and so their expectations of his identity begin to rise.

From the crowd, a leper comes to him, kneels before him, and confesses that he believes Jesus can heal him. People with a variety of skin disorders were labeled "lepers." So while it may not have been Hansen's disease, nevertheless these people were excluded from normal society and marginalized into groups that were forbidden to interact or live with others. The concern was not only the spread of disease. They were considered "unclean" before God and others. They were only allowed back if and when they were cured, and this required making an offering according to the laws of Moses and authorization from the Priest. Apparently, even in those days, the authorities had burdensome rules and regulations which, like today, make things more difficult especially for the poor and those dealing with unfortunate circumstances.

However, Jesus himself requires no payment, paperwork, doctor preauthorizations, or even proof of residency, to say nothing of a social security number or proper ID. The man simply acknowledges Jesus' power to heal him—if he chose to do so. This is clearly an act of faith on his part. Faith involves two things. First, it trusts in Jesus' power to heal. It accepts the fact that God's power resides in Jesus. Only he can do this. There is no human power over this illness. Either he is cured by divine power, or he is not cured at all.

Secondly, he accepts the fact that Jesus uses this power by his choice alone. No one can make him choose to do so. There are no magic words, rituals or incantations by which someone else can harness this power. This would be magic. Magicians tap into supernatural power by doing some secret ritual, or saying some secret words such as "abracadabra." Jesus is not a magician. He is the Son of God.

Moreover, one can extrapolate from this and point out that religious works, good deeds, special prayers, nor anything else of a religious nature can somehow convince God to do something he is not already inclined to do. The healing is purely a matter of divine choice. He either wills it or he doesn't. Nothing we do matters except that we have the faith to receive it. Matthew is very careful in making sure that we understand that the power and the decision reside in Jesus, whose presence is also the presence of God.

He does so choose, and the man is healed. However, he does not want him to go out and blab about this willy nilly. Rather, he wants him to observe the rules of making an offering and received the blessing of the priest. And this he desires for two reasons. First, Jesus is a Jew, and like all Jews, he remains faithful to the existing laws. Secondly, this is the only way this man will be accepted back into normal society. If he didn't do this, those who knew him would continue to exclude him, and the healing would not have gotten him his life back. Notice that Jesus uses the word "testimony." This was the only way he would be allowed back.

This healing is the first illustration of the fact that the rule of God brings healing and salvation to those who receive it by faith. That's not to say that the rule of God doesn't include judgment for sin. It will indeed include that. However, the judgment against sin will, like everything else Jesus does, become manifest in divine love. The punishment for the sin of the world will be endured by the very one who is God's rule in our lives, namely, Jesus himself. But that's a story reserved for the future. For now, Jesus is confronted by yet another request for healing, this time by a Roman Centurion, a commander of 100 soldiers stationed to keep the peace and enforce Roman law, not a likely candidate for help from a Jewish Messiah.

The scene is set in the village of Capernaum, a small settlement on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, a village from which Cephas (in Greek, Peter) originated. In fact, this village was considered to be the place from which Jesus' ministry was centered.

By and large, Roman officers and soldiers dislike the Jews, and considered Palestine a terrible place to be stationed. Most people throughout the Roman Empire shared the culture of "Hellenism" due to the fact that Alexander the Great had spread the Greek

culture far and wide in the 4th century BC. However, the Jews were known to be stubborn in this regard. They believed only in the God who revealed himself to the patriarchs and Moses. All other gods were dismissed as “idols.” Moreover, their ethical standards differed significantly from those of Hellenistic background. In matters of sex, observing their laws, and even the practice of participating in athletic activities without clothes on—in these matters, the Jews were non-conformist. This created resentment on the part of some gentiles because the Jews came across as people who considered themselves “holier” than others.

Moreover, there were some gentiles who admired the Jews’ belief in one supreme God who was transcendent to all things earthly. Also, the idea that this God required his followers to observe the higher standards embodied in the Ten Commandments made sense to them. This was a God who was “set apart” from human ways, a God who was sacred and not created in the image of human beings. The Greek gods were often depicted as conducting themselves even worse than human beings in their behavior.

Gentiles who were so inclined were called “God fearers.” They were allowed to come to synagogue gatherings and listen, but they were not allowed to participate. The Centurion depicted in Matthew 8:5-13 was clearly a person who was sympathetic to Jewish religious beliefs. More than that, he is a person of great faith in Jesus himself. That’s what this and all the stories in this section of Matthew are about, namely, faith.

The leper’s faith was characterized by an unwavering belief that Jesus had divine power. Also, in his approach to Jesus, he demonstrated humility and devotion by kneeling. And he acknowledged that his possible healing was a matter of the choice and decision of Jesus. It was worshipful and based on a request for divine grace. All of these things point to an authentic encounter between the human and the divine.

The Centurion demonstrates similar characteristics. He humbly admits that he does not deserve the grace for which he asks. He admits that his request can be answered in the affirmative only on the basis of Jesus’ decision. And, he acknowledges Jesus’ authority to do what he asks—that Jesus has the power to accomplish it. Jesus is so impressed by his faith—his belief and trust in Jesus’ divine power—that Jesus turns to his fellow Jews and observes that he has never seen such faith among them.

He then uses this as an example of something that will take everyone by surprise. Many gentiles, people who were considered excluded from fellowship with God, will come to the eschatological banquet at the end of time and eat with the Patriarchs. At the same time, the very descendants of the Patriarchs will be excluded—“thrown into the outer darkness.” This is a way of describing life apart from the presence of God’s rule. This would have sounded outrageous to those who considered themselves members of God’s people in virtue of their birth as Jews. It was the norm to never sit at table with gentiles.

Jesus then tells the Centurion that it was done according to his faith. God hears and answers the prayers of faith as faith is illustrated by these two people. Not only that.

Becoming a member of the people of God depends upon faith. This turns the world upside down for Jesus' contemporaries.

In verses 14-17, Matthew tells of how Jesus cured Peter's mother-in-law by simply touching her hand. This leads to others healings and exorcisms because people of faith brought the afflicted to Jesus. This ends the first healing stories by way of a general statement concerning Jesus' power and how he was that power. That is, his power is divine, and it's used for the sake of redemption and works of love. The revelation of the presence of God coming as a human being so as to reveal who God is--this is now becoming clear not only in Jesus' teachings (chapters 5-7) but in his deeds.

In verses 18-22, Matthew inserts two short insights regarding discipleship. There were a lot of people following him around, suggesting that many were desirous of becoming his disciples. Perhaps he needed rest, or perhaps he was tired of dealing with all these people, or perhaps he wanted time with his disciples. Whatever his concern was, he instructs his disciples to go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But before they can get into the boat, two would-be disciples show up and declare their desire to follow him. The first is a scribe--an interpreter of the law--so he calls Jesus "teacher." We will see this throughout Matthew's gospel. Some will call him "teacher" while others will call him "Lord." This says more about the person using the term than it does about Jesus. A teacher was just another expert in the law. There were many teachers, and many schools that trained teachers. Nothing unusual about this.

However, what it tells us concerning the scribe is that he--the scribe--does not yet understand who he is prepared to follow. Jesus is a teacher, but only because his primary identity is that of Messiah. Moreover, this Messiah is of divine origin. He is the very presence of God. This the scribe does not understand, and we know that because he calls him "teacher."

And so Jesus' response to him is going to have to be worded such that the scribe comprehends what he is getting into as a disciple of the Son of God. This is not a relationship that is like a teacher to a student. Here, the only concern is learning what the teacher has to say. If he is going to be a disciple of Jesus, he will be giving up his life to do so. He will be putting his whole being and future in the hands of Jesus. Therefore, Jesus expresses what is called for here by telling him that he will be following someone who does not have a home in this world. Even foxes have homes. But not the Son of Man. So, he will have to trust him totally to lead him to where he does not know in advance. This requires total faith.

Yet another who wants to follow Jesus asks for reprieve to first bury his deceased father. Not an unreasonable request as far as things go in this world. In fact, this would be considered a major responsibility for the deceased loved ones to properly care for the body. However while this person calls Jesus "Lord" instead of "teacher," and while this indicates that he knows the relationship is one that requires one's whole being and devotion, nevertheless his focus is on the cares of life in this world. As important as it is, he is giving this task priority over Jesus.

The opportunity to embrace the life-saving grace of God in Jesus Christ does not come always at just any time. It's the same with us in terms of the Holy Spirit. When the door is opened, you enter. Nothing is of more value than coming to know Jesus and the salvation he brings. Without Jesus, we are the walking dead, for our lives, short and sometimes very painful with the threat of death being present at all times, last but a moment. Jesus offers everlasting life. Is there anything more important than this? For the person of faith, holding to the presence of Jesus becomes the meta priority. Nothing else gets in the way. Therefore, "Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead."

That Jesus is fully divine is emphasized in some stories, that he is fully human in others. Matthew 8:23-27 is a story that illustrates the former.

After getting into the boat, a typical storm for that region blew in and caused the boat to be tossed around by the raging water. Their boats were not particularly large, built mostly to fit around twelve people. Since they were far from the shore with no chance of getting there if the boat capsized, it's not hard to imagine the fear they might have felt. Jesus, on the other hand, is sleeping. The disciples, scared to death, wake him up saying, "Lord save us! We are perishing!"

They were doing nothing of the sort. Their problem was not real danger; it was the perception of danger. When we are called to believe in Jesus, this includes the trust that acknowledges Jesus as divine and therefore capable of divine protection. This is a matter of the heart. When, therefore, we become so focused on the possibility of danger in the external world, we lose touch with the trust we may have in our hearts. From a spiritual point of view, we move internally from our trust in Jesus as our divine savior to whatever is going on in the world. Faith doesn't just hope for miracles. It expects them because our trust is in the One who has the power to perform miracles. That is why faith has the power to overcome fear and anxiety.

Jesus therefore has one question: "...why are you afraid, you of little faith?" This was a test of faith and the disciples failed. However, they did see Jesus' power to still the storm, and this experience could have possibly strengthened their faith in Jesus as a miracle worker in terms of preserving them in the face of danger.

The last verses of chapter 8 consist of Matthew's version of the Gadarene demoniac, only Matthew adds one so that there are two instead of one as in Mark's version. The outline of the story is the same otherwise. Jesus travels to the gentile side of the Sea of Galilee for reasons not disclosed. There, among the tombs, two demoniacs, said to be so frightening that no one ever came that way, met him, saying, "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come to torment us before the time?"

There is much to unpack here but I will keep it to a minimum. First, the evil Jesus came to confront was so overpowering that no mere human could deal with it. Perhaps this can be compared to the fact that, in order to deal with the Nazis, the Allies had to conduct "total war." There was no way to defeat this evil without the willingness to bomb German

cities into oblivion. The same was true in the Pacific, and the same was true in the Civil War.

In any case, this is meant to be a picture of how powerful evil can be. Only Jesus, the Son of God, could defeat it because he had divine power. The demons knew that. In fact they recognized who he was before any of the disciples, or any other person. Moreover, they acknowledged his power over them. "Before the time" is a reference to the last judgment. Indeed, the presence of Jesus can, in fact, overcome any evil at any time. That is the promise conveyed in this story. There are forms of evil—forces that are bent on extinguishing that which is good, namely, God's good creation—powers of non-being that are present everywhere in this world.

Again, evil is not a thing. It is a flaw. It is like a hole in your pants. It is like anything that leaves us less than whole and healthy. In its wake therefore, it leaves nothingness. Evil destroys not only that which is good. It destroys itself as well so that there is nothing left in its wake but a void.

The presence of God excludes evil because God is the fullness of being. God overflows with life and creativity. His Spirit heals, makes whole, and even overcomes evil permanently. This is the promise of the Kingdom of God.

That evil eventually destroys itself is illustrated by the fact that the swine, in which the demons dwelt after Jesus cast them out, all drown themselves. They were overpowered by the force that leads to death, and so they rushed into the water, never to be seen again. This is what evil would do to all God's creation if left unchecked.

Thus endeth Chapter 8