

Matthew 9:1-8

Introduction

We remember that chapters 8-9 of Matthew are a collection of nine miracle stories in three sets of three with two teaching interludes. Mark and Luke have almost all of these same stories, but in a completely different order and spread out over a much larger amount of material (see the second Comparison Chart at the end of this study). So today we will study the story of Jesus' healing of the paralytic, though it does not follow chronologically after the story of the two demon-possessed men. I believe Matthew includes this story here because it is a fitting climax to this second set of three miracle stories – much like the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the summary statement that Jesus took our illnesses and bore our diseases was a fitting climax to the first set of three miracle stories.

Verses 1-2a – And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed.

As usual, Matthew's account of this story is substantially shorter than Mark and Luke (see the first Comparison Chart at the end of this study). Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus was preaching the word (the message of the kingdom) in a house that was so packed full of people that there wasn't anymore room, even at the door. Because Jesus could not be reached through the door, the four men who brought the paralytic went up to the roof by the outside staircase, made an opening, and then lowered him down through the tiles before Jesus. Matthew doesn't include these details because he wants to keep our focus squarely on Jesus. (Mark and Luke draw more attention to the demonstration and outworking of the men's faith; cf. the demon-possessed man in Mark and Luke.)

Now at this point in the story, we may not even feel like we need to read the rest. We don't know how it will happen, but we know what will happen. Jesus will heal the paralytic, probably with a word, and the paralytic will get up off his bed and walk. Right?

Verse 2b – And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

Let's look first of all at the faith of the paralytic. On the one hand we could ask: What was the paralytic *hoping* for? And I think we can assume that the paralytic was hoping to be healed of his paralysis! On the other hand, we could ask: What was the paralytic *expecting*? What was this *faith* that the paralytic had, and that Jesus saw? Well, I think we can safely say that it was *saving* faith – no more, no less. Yes, the paralytic came to Jesus with the hope that he might be physically healed. But his *hope* for physical healing is not the same thing as his *faith*. Because by faith, what did the paralytic receive? He received *not* physical healing, but rather the forgiveness of sins! The paralytic's faith was a humble faith that did not assume any entitlement to be healed. It was a sober-minded faith that did not assume what Jesus would do. In the Gospels, it is almost always the sick person or his friends who take the "initiative" in an encounter with Jesus by *asking* Jesus for healing (cf. Hendriksen). But in this story, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree: The paralytic and the four men who carried him are all silent. They ask for nothing, and they assume nothing. They *come* to Jesus, and that's all. And yet their coming speaks volumes. The heart of this paralytic's faith was simply a trusting and humble confidence that Jesus was truly

sent from God and that He had the power to accomplish the will of the One who sent Him. The paralytic's faith was not tied up with what he "*expected*" Jesus to do, but with who he believed Jesus to be. He *hoped* that Jesus would heal him. But he *knew* and *believed* that Jesus was sent from God. The paralytic came with *faith*, therefore, not knowing for sure what he would *get* – *if anything*. And what he received was *not* the healing of his paralysis, but the forgiveness of his sins.

Thus far, I think we are actually meant to assume that the paralytic *remained* a paralytic. But what were we *expecting*? Had we already begun to think of faith as a magic formula to get what we want? Or did we remember that for the paralytic, true faith was simply a trusting and humble confidence that Jesus is truly sent from God, and that Jesus has all power to accomplish the will of the one who sent Him? This is the kind of faith that moves mountains. This is the kind of faith that is rewarded with the display of the mighty deeds of God. Faith is not *ultimately* tied up with what we expect Jesus to do, but with who we believe Jesus to be. And this is why the paralytic's faith was so "versatile." This is why the faith that entertained hopes of physical healing actually gained instead the forgiveness of sins. This is why by faith he received what he wasn't even asking for! May we never think of faith as a magic formula for getting what we want – or even what we think God wants. May we instead be a people who *believe* what God has revealed about His own attributes and character and purposes – so that as we then come to Him, we may see and experience the mighty deeds of God on our behalf!

Now that we have looked at the faith of the paralytic, let's look at the tender assurance of Jesus' word. We'll see in verse six that Jesus actually forgave the paralytic's sins (He didn't just announce that they were forgiven as though He Himself hadn't had anything to do with it). So then why doesn't He say to the paralytic, "Be forgiven", like when He said to the leper, "Be clean" (8:3)? Why doesn't He say to the paralytic, "Let your sins be forgiven you", like when He said to the centurion, "Let it be done for you as you have believed" (8:13)? Why doesn't he say to the paralytic's sins, "Go", like when He said to the demons, "Go" (8:32)? Why not issue an authoritative word of command? Well, when Jesus said to the leper, "Be clean", anyone with eyes could *see* that "immediately his leprosy was cleansed" (8:3). When Jesus said to the centurion, "Let it be done for you as you have believed", it was easy for anyone at the centurion's house to see that "the servant was healed at that very moment" (8:13). When Jesus touched the hand of Peter's mother-in-law, it didn't take a professional doctor to know that "the fever left her" (8:15). When Jesus rebuked the winds and the sea, it didn't take a meteorologist to know that "there was a great calm" (8:26). When Jesus said to the demons, "Go", any person with eyes could be 100% confident that "they came out and went into the pigs" (8:32). And so in all of these instances, Jesus issues the word of command, and then Matthew announces the results.

But can you imagine Matthew announcing: "And immediately, his sins were forgiven"? This would imply that Matthew saw something happen! This would imply that the forgiveness of the paralytic's sins had some immediate physical or visible effect. But there was nothing for Matthew—or anyone else—to *see*! There was nothing even for the paralytic to see, or perhaps even to feel. And so instead of issuing a word of command, Jesus graciously announces the results. Instead of "Be forgiven", we hear these words: "Your sins are forgiven." You can feel the difference, can't you? Imagine that you were the paralytic, and Jesus said to you: "Be forgiven." What would you do? Wouldn't you immediately wait for something to happen – for some sign, or proof, or evidence that something had actually happened? But what if Jesus said to

you: “Your sins are forgiven.” *Now* what is there to wait for? The paralytic would have been no less forgiven if Jesus had simply issued the word of command. But to experience the full assurance of this mysterious and invisible “spiritual healing”, the paralytic needed more than a word of command. He needed the *announcement* that it was *done* – that it had actually *happened* according to Jesus’ word. We can see just how much Jesus understood this when He said: “*Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.*” “We witness here the warmheartedness and tenderness of the Good Shepherd. He dispels the sick man’s embarrassment and gloom and as it were embraces him with the arms of his protecting love and care” (Hendriksen). Be fully assured, let all doubts vanish completely, enter into the full joy and bliss of this certain knowledge... your sins are forgiven. And I believe that this is just what the paralytic did. And it’s just what *we* ought to do! Right then and there, the paralytic took heart, because he *knew* that *right then and there*, his sins—all of them, from the least to the greatest—had been *forgiven*. But the scribes *strongly* disagreed.

Verse 3 – And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.”

Let’s think about this. First of all, Jesus has never met this paralytic, and yet apparently He knows all about this man’s sins. For Jesus to forgive the paralytic’s sins, He must have an intimate knowledge of the deepest thoughts of this man’s heart. When Matthew mentions the fact that Jesus “saw their faith”, we think of the external evidence of coming to Jesus and all the pains that they took to gain an audience with Jesus. We think like this, because this is how *we* “see” faith. But we know from experience that this doesn’t *necessarily* tell us anything about the paralytic’s *heart* condition! Jesus saw the same evidence that everyone else saw, but he had to see more than the evidence. For Jesus to *see* their faith, He had to see what no *man* can see. He has to see something that is spiritual, and invisible, and secret, and hidden. And He has to see it with such certainty that he need not worry about granting the forgiveness of sins to the wrong person. Who can possibly *see* faith? Certainly, this can *only* be true of God!

✓ 1 Kings 8:39 – For you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind.

For that matter, who can possibly forgive sins – with the *result* that those sins are *really* and *actually* forgiven?!? Do we take this for granted? Mainline Bob has a problem believing that Jesus can calm a storm, but he claims not to have any problem believing that Jesus can forgive sins. This is because for Bob, the forgiveness of sins is just an existential, therapeutic, and psychological boost in self-esteem. The forgiveness of sins is the experience of God’s love – a love that always graciously affirms me, though I be less than perfect. But *we* know that the forgiveness of sins actually means the wiping away of everything in us that is constantly *demanding* the holy wrath and judgment of God. We know that the forgiveness of sins means the taking away of *guilt*. We know that the forgiveness of sins requires a change in God’s disposition toward us – from one of *righteous* anger and fury to one of *undeserved* mercy and grace! So which is really harder to believe – that a man should calm a storm, or that a man should forgive sins? The scribes conclude that Jesus is guilty of blaspheming because they know that *only God* could possibly know this man’s heart, and *only God* could possibly forgive this man’s sins.

✓ Daniel 9:9 – To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him

- ✓ Psalm 130:3-4, 7-8 – If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared... O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

In the Old Testament, it is only Yahweh who can forgive sins, and yet here is Jesus standing in a crowded house in the city of Capernaum, forgiving sins! Or is He just *pretending* to forgive sins and actually blaspheming?

Verse 4 – But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts?”

So while the scribes inwardly accuse Jesus of not being able to see the paralytic’s heart, Jesus confronts the scribes with the evil that He sees in their *own hearts*! What if Jesus *does* have authority to forgive sins? Can you imagine how evil it would be, then, to charge *Him* with blasphemy? “But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’”

Verses 5-6 – For which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Rise and walk”?

It is easier to *say* “your sins are forgiven” because there is no *physical or visible evidence* that the sins have or have not been forgiven. The paralytic believed that his sins were forgiven without needing this evidence. But for the scribes, as long as there was no evidence, they could simply accuse Jesus of speaking empty words. “Oh that’s easy for Him to *say*, because He’s talking about things that no one can *see*! Why don’t *we* just start telling people that their sins are forgiven? What would be the difference?” So Jesus, knowing once again exactly what the scribes are thinking, says to them in effect: “You think I’m speaking empty words. You think that I said his sins are forgiven just because it’s easy for *anyone* to say. So let me ask you this – How hard do you think it would be to say to the paralytic: ‘Rise and walk?’” It’s as though Jesus challenges the scribes: “You think it’s just as easy for *you* to tell this paralytic that his sins are forgiven as it is for Me. Well then, are there any among you who would like to tell this paralytic to get up and walk?” And, of course, not one scribe who was present would have *dared* to say any such thing. And they wouldn’t dare, not because it would be blasphemy, but because they would be utterly put to shame and humiliated. Which of *us* would have said to the paralytic in front of all those people, “Rise and walk”?

Verses 6-7 – “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And he rose and went home.

“When Jesus commands the paralytic to rise, in front of everyone, eternity hangs in the balance. If the man rises, Jesus is Lord and has the power to forgive sins. If not, Jesus is a blasphemer and deserves the full punishment of the law. If this were a movie, we would now have to suffer a dramatic pause. But Matthew simply says, [‘And he rose and went home’]” (Dorioni). *He rose and went home!!!* And what does this tell us? The Son of Man has authority on earth to *forgive sins*! We need to understand that when Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Man, this is in some ways actually a stronger clue to His deity than when He refers to Himself as the Son [of God].

- ✓ Daniel 7:13-14 – Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a *son of man*, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And *to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

So God shows Daniel a vision of *Jesus* coming with the clouds of *heaven*. This one like a son of man, “whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Mic. 5:2), is now in a great mystery actually presented before the Ancient of Days. And *to this one like a son of man is given authority* – dominion, glory, and a *kingdom* which shall not pass away. There are other prophets who tell us that the days of this everlasting kingdom will witness an unprecedented pouring out of the forgiveness of sins.

- ✓ Jeremiah 31:34 – And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.
- ✓ Isaiah 33:20-24 – Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken. But there the LORD in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass. For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our lawgiver; the LORD is our king; he will save us... Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided; even the lame will take the prey. And no inhabitant will say, “I am sick”; the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.

Now in Daniel, this kingdom – and the forgiveness of sins that comes with it – is associated with one like a son of man who comes with the clouds of *heaven* and is presented before the Ancient of Days. But what about Jesus? Here in this crowded house in Capernaum stands one who has taken the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7), one who has “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is. 53:2). So what does it mean, then, when this Jesus *forgives* the paralytic’s *sins*? It means that the kingdom is already here. It means that the joys and blessings of the future consummated kingdom have broken *already* into the *present* age! It means, as Jesus says, that “the Son of Man has authority *on earth* to forgive sins” – not just when He comes with the clouds of *heaven* and the kingdom is consummated, but even *now* in the days of His earthly humiliation. When Jesus forgives the paralytic’s sins, it’s as though we are given a clear vision of His true majesty and glory. When the paralytic’s sins were forgiven, he entered at that moment into the joys of the Messiah’s kingdom. He began to experience in that moment the blessings of the age to come. And if that was true for the paralytic, how much more is it true for us – who stand on the other side of the cross? *We* have entered into the joys of the Messiah’s kingdom. *We* are experiencing today the blessings of the age to come.

Jesus said that He healed the paralytic “that you may *know* that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” He said this to the scribes, and His purpose was not to comfort them with this knowledge, but rather to leave them without excuse for their unbelief. The paralytic, on the other hand, already knew and believed *without* the proof. But I’m almost 100% positive that as Matthew recounts the events of this day for his church, he meant for them to *know*—if possible even *more* fully and *more* joyfully than ever before—that *their sins were forgiven*. If anyone has ears to hear and eyes to see (he already believes), then let him *know* beyond even a shadow of any doubt that the Son of Man has authority on earth to *forgive sins*! Let him hear Jesus saying

as it were brand new and fresh and for the first time – “Take heart, my son (my daughter); your sins are forgiven.”

Verse 8 – When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

Obviously, the crowds’ understanding of Jesus was still very deficient. Somehow they still saw Jesus as *only* a man – *just* a man, but one who possessed great powers given to Him by God. But as Matthew writes to the church, he obviously means for us to see that the crowds were actually saying much more than they knew. Yes, God *has* given to a man the authority to forgive sins by *Himself becoming* that man. Hendriksen writes: “Was it not exactly this granting of pardon [to the paralytic] that required all the suffering [Jesus] endured during his earthly sojourn, climaxed by the bloody sweat of Gethsemane, the scourging of Gabbatha, and the cross of Golgotha?” It was the cross that enabled Jesus to proclaim the arrival of His kingdom and to manifest its arrival with the greatest kingdom blessing of all – the forgiveness of sins.

Conclusion

Who is this man that the winds and sea obey Him? *Who is this man* that He casts out a legion of demons with a single word? *Who is this man* that He even forgives sins?

Teaching our Children

For this study, the “Teaching Children” format is a little different and requires a little more work on the parents’ part. Below are some questions designed to provoke general discussion (without specific answers being given). I would encourage you to refer to the notes above as a helpful guide for discussion.

1. Matthew says that Jesus saw the paralytic’s faith. What was this faith? What did the paralytic believe? (Discuss especially what the paralytic *initially* received *by faith*. Is this what we expected?; see bottom of page 1 and top of page 2)
2. Why did Jesus make an announcement (“Your sins are forgiven”) instead of giving a command (“be forgiven”)? (Reflect especially on the words “take heart, my son”; see bottom two paragraphs of page 2 and top of page 3)
3. Who alone can forgive sins? (See Scriptures on bottom of page 3 and top of page 4)
4. Why is it that only God can forgive sins (discuss what forgiveness means; see bottom par. of page 3)
5. If Jesus can forgive sins, then who must He be?
6. Which is easier, to *say*, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to *say*, “Rise and walk”? (See comment on verses 5-6; page 4)
7. Read Daniel 7:13-14 (top of page 5). Reflect on the fact that if the Son of Man (Jesus) has power *on earth* to forgive sins (contrast with Daniel), then that means we are experiencing *today* the blessings of the age to come! (See last full paragraph on page 5)
8. Rejoice with your children in the forgiveness of sins that comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Mark 2:1-12

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them.

And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men.

And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay.

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts?"

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."

And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all,

so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

Matthew 9:2-8

And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed.

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming."

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts?"

For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home."

And he rose and went home.

When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

Luke 5:17-26

On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed,

and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus.

And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."

And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts?"

Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home."

And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God.

And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today."

Matthew

Luke*

Mark*

Three miracle stories

- 1.(2.) Jesus heals a leper (8:1-4)
- 2.(5.) *Jesus heals a centurion’s servant (8:5-13)*
- 3.(1.) Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law (8:14-17)

Teaching interlude

- 4.(9.) *Jesus rebuffs a scribe and calls a disciple (8:18-22)*

Three miracle stories

- 5.(6.) Jesus calms the storm (8:23-27)
- 6.(7.) Jesus casts out demons (8:28-34)
- 7.(3.) Jesus forgives and heals a paralytic (9:1-8)

Teaching interlude

- 8.(4.) Jesus calls Matthew (9:9-13) //
New wine and old wineskins (9:14-17)

Three miracle stories

- 9.(8.) Jesus resurrects a girl and heals a woman (9:18-26)
- 10. Jesus heals two blind men (9:27-31)
- 11. *Jesus heals a mute man (9:32-34)*

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Underscored – Found only in Matthew

*Italicized* – Found only in Matthew and Luke

Numbers in Parentheses (1.-11.) – Represent the order in Mark and Luke

**Matthew’s collection of miracle stories with two teaching interludes is spread out in Luke and Mark and in a completely different order.**

- 3. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law (4:38-41)

✓ Luke 4:42-5:11

- 1. Jesus heals a leper (5:12-16)
- 7. Jesus forgives and heals a paralytic (5:17-26)
- 8. Jesus calls Matthew (5:27-32) //  
New wine and old wineskins (5:33-39)

✓ Luke 6:1-49

- 2. *Jesus heals a centurion’s servant (7:1-10)*

✓ Luke 7:11-8:21

- 5. Jesus calms the storm (8:22-25)
- 6. Jesus casts out demons (8:26-39)
- 9. Jesus resurrects a girl and heals a woman (8:40-56)

✓ Luke 9:1-56

- 4. *Jesus rebuffs a scribe and calls a disciple (9:57-60)*

✓ Luke 9:61-11:13

- 11. *Jesus heals a mute man (11:14-15)*

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Italicized – Found only in Matthew and Luke

Numbers (1.-11.) – Represent Matthew’s order

✓ Intervening material (contrast with Matthew)
* Notice that Luke and Mark share the same order

- 3. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law (1:29-34)

✓ Mark 1:35-39

- 1. Jesus heals a leper (1:40-45)
- 7. Jesus forgives and heals a paralytic (2:1-12)
- 8. Jesus calls Matthew (2:13-17) //
New wine and old wineskins (2:18-22)

✓ Mark 2:23-4:34

- 2. -----

✓ -----

- 5. Jesus calms the storm (4:35-41)
- 6. Jesus casts out demons – (5:1-20)
- 9. Jesus resurrects a girl and heals a woman (5:21-43)

✓ -----

- 4. -----

✓ -----

- 11. -----

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Numbers (1.-11.) – Represent Matthew’s order

✓ Intervening material (contrast with Matthew)  
\* Notice that Luke and Mark share the same order.