

The Great Physician

DAVE BAST

During his earthly ministry, Jesus showed great sympathy for sick and suffering people. Many of the wonderful stories in the New Testament Gospels are about his healing of lepers, his giving sight to the blind, his curing of insufferable diseases. If Christ had that much compassion on people while he lived on earth, can we still believe in his power to heal? What about when he doesn't heal us like we think he should? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, we are going to talk in this program about Jesus' healing ministry, from Matthew Chapter 8 in particular; and I think of one of the powerful experiences that I had a number of years ago now. The first time I ever went to India, the first place I visited was the city of Calcutta. We were taken on kind of a whirlwind tour of the city. I was dead beat, you know, from jet lag, and overwhelmed with sensory overload from this cultural milieu; talk about a cross-cultural experience; and right near the end of the day we went to visit the shrine of the goddess, Kali, for whom the city is named; and it was just really a terrible experience. It felt dark and it literally was...

BOB HEERSPINK

Spiritually oppressive.

DAVE BAST

Spiritually dark, yes; and it literally was getting dark; and then we left this area, and right on the edge of that our host took us into this other building and said: I want you to see this. We walked through the doors; it was Mother Teresa's hospice for the dying – the first place that she established.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right next to the temple; very close.

DAVE BAST

Right very close to the temple; and here we walk into this entirely different atmosphere. It was a room filled, literally, with dying people, because she would gather the folks off the street who had been left there in their terminal illness; and yet, inside there was peace, there was quiet, there was cleanness, and all around these staff people, nuns some of them, others volunteers – Christians – were caring for these dying people; showing the compassion of Christ to the lowest of the low. It was something I will never forget.

BOB HEERSPINK

And how you hang in there in that kind of situation, I mean, where there is so much oppression and so much suffering. I was in Haiti a few weeks ago with ministry planning, and you know, talking to staff people there who have been for twenty years working in an environment that goes through crises every six months. You know, I thought to myself: How do you hang in there. You know, after a week it is like, wow, I am just

overloaded emotionally. You have been doing it for twenty years.

DAVE BAST

We talk about compassion fatigue, don't we?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

I am tired of caring; let somebody else care for a while when we've done a day or two or a week or something. But, you know, I think that these are wonderful examples of folks who are simply trying to walk in the footsteps of their Master, because Jesus himself showed that same kind of persistence in caring; and these wonderful stories that we read in Matthew 8 are examples of that. It is interesting, as we have been kind of working our way through these early chapters of Matthew, we saw that Jesus' ministry is described as having three main emphases: He preached, and he taught, and he healed, says Matthew; and in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, there is the Sermon on the Mount – the teaching...

BOB HEERSPINK

The teaching part.

DAVE BAST

Now we get to Chapter 8, and it is all about healing.

BOB HEERSPINK

And there are ten miracles there. I mean, in those next chapters, it is like here they come, and Matthew is not going to let us get away from the compassion that Jesus shows in his ministry.

Let me just read that first miracle:

8:¹When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; ²and behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." ³And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will. Be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

DAVE BAST

It says he came down from the mountain, first of all. What mountain is that? Well, I think it is the mount – the Sermon on the Mount, because this is the immediate transition. As soon as Jesus sort of comes back into the world of everyday life, he is met with this terrible example of suffering and need – a leper.

BOB HEERSPINK

A leper. Lepers were the outcast of society. The very fact that this leper approached Jesus is an incredible statement of his boldness. I mean, lepers were to remain beyond arm's length, and here he is coming right into the presence of Jesus to make his need known.

DAVE BAST

There were even provisions that said lepers had to warn people to stay away, because of course, in some cases that disease is communicable, and they had no option, really, except strict quarantine in order to prevent leprosy from spreading throughout the population; so there are even laws in the Old Testament about expelling lepers from the city or the community, and they had to remain off to themselves; so here is this man coming up to Jesus, approaching him; maybe not daring to get too close; and he says to him something very significant: Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

BOB HEERSPINK

See, now, I think that really speaks very powerfully even to the way we today ask God for healing. You know, he really affirms two things. he says, "Lord, you have all the power..."

DAVE BAST

I know you can do it.

BOB HEERSPINK

I don't doubt that. He has faith in the power of Jesus Christ; but he still recognizes that there is a choice that God is going to make – that Christ is going to make: If you will. Is this healing something you wish to give me at this point in my life?

DAVE BAST

If it is your will, he is saying; in a sense, the way we sometimes pray: Thy will be done.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think some people, when they come to healing, say: Well, God has the power, and if I just have enough faith in his power, he is going to heal me; but that is not what you see on display with this leper.

DAVE BAST

Or how could he not want to heal me? Isn't sickness bad? Isn't suffering something against the will of God? It gets kind of mysterious in a hurry, doesn't it, when we ponder that leper's combination of faith and yet humility, in a sense.

BOB HEERSPINK

That's the balance. That is the balance, I think, the leper puts on display here that we need to have as we approach God, too, with our needs; but there is another very powerful thing in this passage, and that is the touch. You said lepers stayed back because who wanted to touch them? In fact, to touch a leper was to make yourself unclean; and here Jesus reaches out and he touches him; and he doesn't have to touch him to heal him. It is a deliberate decision on Jesus' part, not just to heal, but to touch; and this man probably has not been touched with a touch of compassion for years.

DAVE BAST

I find that little element in this story wonderfully moving. Jesus says, "I will," to him. I do want to heal you. I am willing; but he accompanies those words with his touch. He lays his hand on the leper. You know, he didn't have to, as you say. This is not therapeutic, this touch. He is not trying to diagnose the way doctors or nurses have to touch us, you know, when they are trying to determine what is wrong or manipulate us in order to make us well in some way. Jesus could, and often did, simply heal with a word. He was God, after all; so his touch is clearly intended to reinforce his willingness – his love for this guy. He is willing to get his hands dirty, you know. He is not afraid of being contaminated by the leper's disease; and it was an ugly disease. In the Bible, it stands for sin, often. It is often used as a symbol for sin.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I think of being with people who are ill, visiting folks in the hospital, and how often we want to hold back from touch. You know, we don't want to be contaminated; and here is Jesus saying: Let me show you how you show compassion. You do it with the words you speak, but you also do it with a touch that conveys love and community.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is another story of healing that comes right after this one, and we want to dig into that after this break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back. This is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with Bob Heerspink; and Bob, here is the second story of healing from Matthew Chapter 8. We are looking at Jesus' healing miracles in this section. The first one, he touches a leper and cleanses him, then next as he is traveling through Galilee another person

comes up to him:

⁵When Jesus had entered Capernaum (we read), a centurion came to him asking for help. ⁶“Lord,” he said, “My servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?” ⁸The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof; but just say the word and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I myself am a man under authority with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” ¹⁰When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹²But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Dave, as I hear that story, I am starting to pick up the same themes that were in the healing of the leper. There is humility here and there is confidence that Jesus really can heal. It is the same two dynamics coming into play in the life of the centurion.

DAVE BAST

I love this guy. He is one of my favorite New Testament characters. I especially love his comment: I myself am a man under authority. This was a soldier. He knew how it worked. He knew how to give orders and he knew how to take orders, and when he looked at Jesus he recognized a natural commander, that is what I think.

BOB HEERSPINK

And he took orders from the top; and he looks at Jesus and says: You are in this world and your authority just isn't of your own. It is from God; and that means you don't have to even be present to do a healing. You know, a command comes from Rome, I receive it, it is done. You can give the word, it happens.

DAVE BAST

And I wonder how this guy ever came to know that and see that about Jesus. Jesus himself, Matthew says, was astonished at this guy. Very few things ever took Jesus by surprise, as we read the Gospels, but here is one of them. This Roman centurion – hard-bitten soldier – tough guy – probably a twenty-year veteran who has this incredible faith in the person of Jesus; and where did he get it? He didn't know the Bible. He wasn't a Jew.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you see, here is where you begin to sense in these miracles that there is a theme that is unfolding, and it really gets into who is in and who is out, because the person you would think would come for healing is a teacher from one of the synagogues or a Pharisee with great faith in the religious traditions; but first of all we get a leper; the ultimate person outside because of illness, now you get a Gentile who has come...

DAVE BAST

Another outsider.

BOB HEERSPINK

Another outsider; and the outsiders are coming and they have this incredible faith in Jesus; and what happens is, the outsiders have now become insiders.

DAVE BAST

And of course, Jesus heals. That is almost incidental in this story. There is very little emphasis on it. The servant is simply healed and Matthew doesn't even describe it. Jesus doesn't go there. He acquiesces to the centurion who says, “Lord, I am not even worthy for you to come under my roof. Just say the word,” and presumably Jesus does say the word. It doesn't even describe that. So it is a healing story where the healing is not even mentioned. It is almost incidental; but what Jesus does do is talk about that question of in and out.

Of outsiders coming in and those who *should* be there maybe being rejected ultimately.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, you know, as I read this I think of how we treat people who are in need of compassion, and how sometimes we are tempted to save our compassion for people who we think deserve it, earn it; people that are already inside; but I think we are being challenged here to look beyond, and to say: Okay, who are the untouchables in our society that really need to be shown compassion, because those are the folks, this passage is saying, that God is wanting to draw into the kingdom. You know, I think of AIDS victims. You know, the lepers of today. We keep them at arms length. Jesus says: What about compassion for them? Or people who don't have the right nationality or ethnicity? We rank people today according to where they come from in the world, whether they are our friends or enemies. Jesus is saying: Get over it.

DAVE BAST

It is also to me quite encouraging, I think, this story of the Roman centurion and the comment that Jesus makes: Many will come, he says, from the east and the west, and they will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God – that wonderful image of the feast of the kingdom of God; and he is suggesting that there will be lots of surprising people there. Sometimes I think we can get the feeling that things are going rapidly against us. The Church is going down the tubes. Our culture is sort of post-Christian and has abandoned God and all that; and Jesus reminds us that there are always surprises in the kingdom of God, and surprising people; and if one door is slammed shut against God, he is going to go through another one. So, don't be so discouraged, I think he is saying.

BOB HEERSPINK

And we see that in the world today. You know, if you look at where the centers of Christianity are developing, they are in the global South. The West has often shaken Christianity off, and then we think, living in the West as we do, well that means Christianity is just fading from view, but God says: You know, if that door closes, I am walking into Nigeria. I am walking into South America. I am walking into China. I can build the Church there that overwhelms the size of the Church of the West; and that is happening.

DAVE BAST

Yes it is; there is also, finally here, I think, a word of warning to us if we are hardening our hearts; if we don't have the kind of compassion Jesus has; especially if we are just sort of casually assuming we are the in group. Jesus says: Be careful; beware of that. You know, he spoke more about hell than anyone else in the Bible, but what is less often observed is that he usually directed his warnings to religious people – to the people who assumed they were the in crowd. He rarely said to outsiders: You are going to hell. It was always to the insiders that he said: Be careful; watch out; because this is an upside down thing, this kingdom of God; and many who think they are out are in and many who think they are in may be out.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, there is one more outsider that Jesus is going to heal in this series of miracles, and we will look at that when we get back.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, we have been talking here about the miracles that Jesus performs; miracles of healing, and how those miracles deal with people who are on the fringes, who are outside the normal social circles. We have talked about the healing of a leper, the miracle of healing given to a centurion; there is one more miracle of healing in this series of three, and it deals with someone who is an outsider, too. We might not think of them in that way, given our own culture, but let me read it and what we find here is the healing of a woman:

¹⁴And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. ¹⁵He touched her hand and the fever left her; and she rose and began to serve him. ¹⁶That evening, they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. ¹⁷This

was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.

DAVE BAST

I think this one is really interesting because while the other two stories do have a key element on the faith of the sufferer in the first case or the master of the sufferer in the second, a faith that is both confident in Jesus' power to heal but humble in the sense of would he be willing; now Jesus comes at the end of the day, he is tired, he walks into the house of Peter where he is going to stay, and there is no faith mentioned at all. He sees the mother-in-law lying there sick. He just picks her up and heals her; and then people start flocking to the door, and he walks out and heals them. It is such a different scene from what we think of in some ways as faith healing today, you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, it means that a person can be healed by Jesus and it is not dependent on faith.

DAVE BAST

On their faith in his power to heal.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; so many people say: It's all about...

DAVE BAST

If you believe.

BOB HEERSPINK

Really, you've got to believe so hard and then you are going to be healed; and that is not the way it works here.

DAVE BAST

There is no showmanship here; there is no staging of an effect; most of all, there is no doubt whatsoever about whether healing actually occurred or whether it was just a psychological thing going on.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, she gets up and starts serving.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; typical mother, huh? There is a sovereignty here that Jesus displays. He is the Great Physician; you know? He is the Lord of health.

BOB HEERSPINK

And again, to someone on the outside. You know, women were not in the inner circle. They could only come so close in the Temple courts.

DAVE BAST

But the struggle we have is, why didn't he just heal everybody? Why only those who came to the door that evening? For that matter, why doesn't God wave his hand across the world and cancer goes away and no more car crashes and no more sick children... no more children's hospitals; why?

BOB HEERSPINK

I don't think we have all the answers to that, but I do think there are some hints of answers that help us to sustain our faith and our discipleship today. I think one thing we have to recognize is that God uses suffering in redemptive ways in our lives. That is what the Father did with his Son. I mean, he didn't take away the cross.

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

I look at my own life and I say some of the harder things I have gone through, even illnesses, have more shaped my maturity in Christ than all those easy times.

DAVE BAST

Well, we tend to focus on short-term gain and short-term pain, don't we? I am sick; I am suffering; I've got this problem; I may be facing death. God, deliver me. Fix it. Get me out of here. And certainly God's purposes with us are longer term in building holiness into our lives, in forming us into the character of Christ. So, yes, that is not an easy answer, but I find that I am often most motivated to pray for physical sickness when it is someone I love or care about or when it is me; and God may be much more interested in my conformity to the likeness of Christ, and he can use sickness or pain or suffering to help that happen.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think, too, if we look at the role of the Church today we are the hands and feet of Jesus; and you go back to that story about Mother Teresa. She and those who worked with her become expressions of the compassion of Christ today; and Jesus is saying to his Church: I will give healing; I will give comfort, but I am going to do it through you.

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, if you look around and say: Why doesn't God do something about all the suffering in the world, Jesus says: Why don't *you* do something about the suffering in the world?

DAVE BAST

Good point; and then there is this wonderful, sort of wrap-up quote from Isaiah that Matthew cites. Matthew is the great Gospel writer of fulfilled prophecy, and more than any other Gospel he is always drawing attention to how Jesus fulfills all these prophecies from the Old Testament; and here is a great one from Isaiah 53:

8:17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: He took our illnesses and bore our diseases. So Jesus takes more than just our sins upon himself...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

He takes even our sickness, our disease, our infirmity; he takes Alzheimer's and AIDS and cancer and he bears those as well.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; Christ takes upon himself our guilt and the whole brokenness of the world; and there is a sense, Dave, now... He says: Okay, now you go out as you carry your cross. You take those things to yourself, too, and in whatever ways I empower you to be my hands and feet of healing in the world today.

DAVE BAST

And there is still a mystery here, because he takes them up, but he doesn't heal them always immediately; but someday he will, and that is our confidence. That is why we pray: Come, Lord Jesus; Thy kingdom come; because in that day these things will all be gone, finally and forever.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today, and don't forget, when you ask questions and participate that helps us keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing. Send us an e-mail and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future programs. Just visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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Printed on September 5, 2025