

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 10, Matthew 8-9

Podcast Audio Overview

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Hey everyone, and welcome back. Today we're going to be diving into the Gospel of Matthew chapters 8 and 9 specifically. I'm excited to unpack these stories with you, especially all the miracles that Jesus performs.

I mean, we've got a Roman centurion whose faith really surprises Jesus, some interesting teachings about what it really means to follow Jesus, and we'll even take a look at how Jesus uses everyday objects like wineskins to explain some pretty deep spiritual truths. Yeah, there's definitely a lot to unpack in these chapters. They're just full of these encounters that show us not just the power of Jesus, but how those miracles help us understand his message, you know? Right, exactly.

So let's jump right in. This lecture kicks off with the story of a Roman centurion who approaches Jesus to heal his servant. And what's fascinating to me is that this isn't just any Roman soldier.

Right, exactly. Yeah, a centurion was a figure of authority in the Roman army, right? He was used to giving commands and having them obeyed without question. So when the centurion seeks out Jesus, and he's so humble asking for healing, it really speaks volumes.

You know, he understands that Jesus has a different kind of authority, a spiritual one. And that makes me think about the centurion's line: I too am a man under authority. He's drawing a parallel between his position in the Roman military and Jesus's power, almost like he's saying, just as my soldiers obey me, even sickness has to obey you.

That's a great observation. And, you know, this story really reveals a deeper truth about authority. It's not about wielding power over others, but about using it to serve and to heal.

And Jesus really challenges that traditional view of power by demonstrating that true authority comes from humility and compassion. Okay. And you know, the lecture notes point out that Jesus is so impressed by the centurion's faith, even saying that it's greater than any he's seen in Israel.

That's a huge statement. I mean, this is a Roman soldier, someone you wouldn't expect to be so in tune with Jesus's message. I wonder if this encounter hints at the idea that God's kingdom is open to everyone, not just a select few.

Yeah, it definitely foreshadows the inclusion of Gentiles into God's plan, which becomes a major theme throughout the New Testament. It's like this story cracks open the door to a more inclusive understanding of faith and salvation. Okay.

So we see Jesus challenging assumptions about authority and expanding the boundaries of who belongs in God's kingdom. Now things get even more intense when we look at those stories about the cost of discipleship. There are two instances where people want to follow Jesus, but they have other obligations.

One asks to bury his father, and the other wants to say goodbye to his family. And at first glance, Jesus's responses seem a bit harsh, like he's dismissing their requests. But I know there's a lot more going on here, culturally speaking.

Yeah, you're absolutely right. We need to consider the cultural context of burial practices in ancient Jewish culture. Caring for the deceased was considered a primary duty, an act of honor and respect.

And to neglect this duty, it would bring immense shame on the family. So when they ask to bury his father, he's not just asking for a rain check. He's talking about fulfilling a deeply significant obligation.

But Jesus still says, let the dead bury their dead. That's a powerful statement. Yes.

And it really emphasizes the radical nature of Jesus's call. It's like he's saying, following me demands a complete shift in priorities. The kingdom of God takes precedence over even the most deeply ingrained cultural and familial obligations.

But isn't there some debate about whether the man's father was already dead? I remember the lecture mentioned something about a secondary burial that took place a year later. That's right. Some scholars believe that the man's father was still alive and that he was asking to stay with him until his death.

Others think this is a figure of speech referring to the secondary burial where the bones of the deceased were gathered and placed in an ossuary after a year. So depending on how you interpret it, the man is asking for either a short delay or a delay of up to a year. Either way, Jesus's response seems to highlight the urgency and all-encompassing nature of his call.

It makes me wonder if he's drawing a contrast with the Old Testament story of Elisha being called by the prophet Elijah. That's a very perceptive connection. Remember, Elisha was plowing a field when Elijah called him to ministry, and Elisha asked to say goodbye to his family, and Elijah allowed it.

But Jesus doesn't offer that concession. It seems he's demanding even greater commitment from his followers. So Jesus is raising the bar, showing that following him requires a complete reordering of one's life.

That must have been pretty intense for the people who heard him say these things. It's almost like he's weeding out those who are half-hearted. He wants disciples who are all in.

Exactly. Jesus wants followers who understand that following him means putting him above everything else. He's not looking for casual observers.

He's looking for those who are willing to make radical sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom of God. It makes you think about our own commitments today, you know? What are we willing to give up for Jesus? What truly takes priority in our lives? Those are important questions for each of us to consider. You know, this isn't just about ancient customs.

It's about the heart of discipleship. Are we willing to make the sacrifices necessary to truly align our lives with the values of the kingdom? Now, these next stories are some of the most dramatic in Matthew's gospel. They show Jesus confronting forces that seem completely beyond human control.

Let's take a closer look at how he handles these encounters. First up, the calming of the storm. This one always stands out to me because it so vividly portrays Jesus's power over nature.

But to really appreciate it, we need to consider the setting, right? Absolutely. We need to understand the geography of the Sea of Galilee. It's actually a lake, but it's situated about 600 feet below sea level and surrounded by mountains.

This creates a sort of wind tunnel effect where sudden violent storms can whip up out of nowhere. So the disciples weren't just overreacting. They were facing a legitimate danger.

And yet, in the middle of this terrifying storm, Jesus is sleeping soundly. I'm struck by how calm Jesus is in this story. What does this tell us about his relationship with God? Is this kind of peace something we can experience too, even in our own storms? That's a great question.

You know, the story definitely points to Jesus's deep trust in God, even in the face of danger. And it does suggest that this kind of peace is available to us as well if we can cultivate a similar trust in God. Okay.

So the disciples wake Jesus up terrified, and he simply rebukes the wind and the waves, and everything goes calm instantly. Now, calming storms wasn't a completely new idea in ancient stories. But what sets Jesus apart is the direct personal way he commands the storm.

It's not just a natural phenomenon subsiding. It's a demonstration of his unique authority over nature. That's an important distinction.

The lecture notes compare this miracle to other ancient stories where storms simply cease on their own or where deities from the distant past are involved. But here, Jesus is actively engaged in the present moment, exerting his authority over the elements. And there's a sense of immediacy to his actions.

He doesn't hesitate. He simply speaks, and it's done. It's a powerful image of his divine power.

It makes me think of that line from Psalm 107: He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. That's a beautiful connection. The psalmist is describing God's power over nature, and here we see Jesus, the Son of God, exhibiting that same power.

The calming of the storm shows Jesus' authority over nature. But his power doesn't stop there. We see another dimension of his authority in the encounter with the demon-possessed men.

Yes, this encounter takes us to a region known as the Decapolis, a predominantly Gentile area. Matthew's account clarifies some details from Mark's version, probably because he's writing for an audience more familiar with the area. Okay, what are some of the differences in Matthew's account? For one, Matthew specifies the location as Gadara, which is closer to the Sea of Galilee than the Gerasa mentioned by Mark.

He also doubles the number of demon-possessed men. Instead of one, there are two. Why do you think Matthew makes those changes? Well, there are a few theories.

It could be that Matthew wants to emphasize the sheer number of people Jesus healed, highlighting the extent of his power. Or maybe he's drawing a parallel between the two demon-possessed men and the two disciples he'll later send out to this same region. That's interesting.

It suggests a connection between the healing of these men and the mission that Jesus will entrust to his followers. But let's talk about those demons for a moment. The lecture notes point out that they recognize Jesus's authority immediately, even calling him Son of the Most High God.

It's pretty ironic considering there are demons. It is. They seem to understand who Jesus is even better than some of the people he encounters.

They plead with him not to torment them before the time, acknowledging his ultimate power over them. You know, they know their judgment is coming, and they fear him. And then there's that whole incident with the pigs.

The demons asked to be sent into a herd of pigs, and Jesus allows it. Then the pigs rush headlong into the sea and drown. What do we make of that? Well, we have to remember that pigs were considered unclean animals, according to Jewish law.

This detail adds a symbolic layer to the story. The demons, representing unclean spirits, are driven into unclean animals. So there's a kind of poetic justice at play.

You could say that. And the fact that the pigs drown could also be symbolic. You know, in Jewish literature, there are accounts of demons being bound or rendered inoperative beneath bodies of water.

So it's not just about the physical destruction of the pigs, but also about the symbolic defeat of the demonic forces. What strikes me is the contrasting reactions of the people. The townspeople, more concerned with their property than with the healing of the men, ask Jesus to leave.

It's like fear and self-interest trump compassion and gratitude. But the healed man, experiencing true freedom, wants to follow Jesus. You've put your finger on a crucial point.

The reactions of the townspeople and the healed man really highlight the different ways people respond to Jesus's power. Some are afraid, some are grateful, and some are indifferent. It makes you think about how we respond to Jesus today.

Do we welcome his presence in our lives, even when it disrupts our comfort zones, or do we push him away because his demands are too challenging? That's a powerful question. I think we'll have to leave that for our listeners to ponder. Welcome back to our deep dive into Matthew chapters 8 and 9. We're exploring the many ways Jesus demonstrates his authority.

And in this section, we're focusing on his power to heal and forgive. It's interesting to me how these stories often intertwine, you know, physical healing with spiritual restoration. That's a great observation.

The gospel writers, it seems like they're trying to show us that Jesus cares about the whole person, not just their physical ailments. Right. And I think one of the best examples of this is the story of the paralytic man who's lowered through a roof by his friends.

I mean, can you imagine the determination it took to get him to Jesus? It really speaks to their faith and their desperation to see their friend healed. But what's fascinating is that before Jesus heals the man, he says, take heart, son, your sins are forgiven. Now to the religious leaders, this was a shocking claim.

Oh yeah. To them, only God had the power to forgive sins. By claiming this authority, Jesus was essentially claiming to be God, which is why they accused him of blasphemy, speaking against God.

But instead of getting defensive, Jesus uses the situation to teach a profound lesson. Exactly. He challenges the assumption that the man's paralysis was a direct result of his sin.

This is a reminder that while sin and suffering are often connected, they're not always directly linked. And, you know, the lecture points out that this really gets to the heart of the conflict between Jesus and their religious authorities. They saw forgiveness as something that could only be granted through elaborate rituals and sacrifices.

But Jesus is showing us a different way, a way that flows directly from his relationship with God the Father. So he's not just challenging their theology; he's challenging their whole system of religious power and control. And to prove his point, he heals the man right then and there.

It's such a powerful moment. Jesus demonstrates that his authority is real and that it extends beyond words to tangible actions that transform lives. It makes me think about how we often try to compartmentalize things in our lives.

You know, we separate the physical from the spiritual, but Jesus shows us that they're interconnected. True healing involves addressing the whole person, not just their symptoms. But, you know, this isn't the only story where Jesus heals someone who's been ostracized or considered ritually unclean.

You're right. The next story about the woman with the flow of blood is equally powerful. For 12 years, she had suffered from a condition that, according to the book of Leviticus, made her ritually unclean.

So she was excluded from religious and social life. I can only imagine the isolation and shame she must have felt. But then she hears about Jesus, and she decides to take a huge risk.

She's so desperate for healing that she pushes through the crowd just to touch his garment. And her faith is rewarded. Jesus senses her touch and immediately acknowledges her.

He could have easily ignored her, but he stops and addresses her with compassion and respect, even though her touch, according to the law, would have made him ritually unclean. It's a beautiful moment that reveals Jesus' heart for those who are marginalized and overlooked. It also shows us that faith isn't always about grand gestures or theological pronouncements.

Sometimes it's about a simple, desperate grasp for hope. A willingness to reach out even when we feel unworthy. Exactly.

And it's interesting to contrast this story with the one that follows immediately after, the story of the synagogue leader whose daughter has died. That's right. We have this prominent figure in the community brought low by grief and this ostracized woman both coming to Jesus in their need, both demonstrating faith in his power.

And in both cases, Jesus defies social conventions. He touches the woman with the flow of blood, risking ritual impurity, and he enters the house where the dead girl lies, a place also considered ritually unclean. It's like he's deliberately challenging the boundaries that society has set up, showing us that compassion and love transcend these human-made rules and regulations.

And he doesn't just heal from a distance. He engages directly with those who are suffering, offering them both physical and emotional comfort. You see, these stories reveal a consistent pattern in Jesus' ministry.

He's not just interested in performing spectacular miracles. He genuinely cares about the people he encounters. And then Matthew adds these brief accounts of the two blind men and the mute man who are healed.

It's like he's giving us a glimpse into the sheer volume of miracles that Jesus performed. It must have been incredible to witness these events firsthand. Absolutely.

These stories, though shorter, further emphasize the variety and extent of Jesus' healing power. It's almost overwhelming to consider the sheer amount of need that Jesus encountered and the compassion with which he responded. It makes you think about the universality of human need, doesn't it? Whether it's physical illness, spiritual brokenness, or social isolation, we all experience moments of profound need.

And these stories, they offer hope that even in our darkest moments, there's a power greater than ourselves that can bring healing, restoration, and new life. It's a reminder to

not only recognize those needs in ourselves, but also to see them in others and to extend compassion and support, just as Jesus did. Beautifully said.

You know, it's interesting that Matthew includes these healing stories alongside accounts of Jesus calling and equipping his disciples. That's true. In fact, Matthew chapter 9 ends with Jesus observing the crowds and feeling compassion for them because they are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

And then he tells his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. It's like he's recognizing that he can't do it all alone.

You know, he needs others to join him in this work of healing and reconciliation. And that's a crucial turning point. Jesus isn't content to simply perform miracles himself.

He wants to empower others to share in his mission. He sees the vastness of the need and the importance of having others join him in meeting that need. So he's not just a miracle worker, but a teacher and a mobilizer equipping his followers to become agents of change in the world.

It's an invitation to participate in something much bigger than ourselves. But I think we've covered a lot of ground in this section. We've seen Jesus heal the sick, forgive sins, and challenge the religious establishment.

And we've seen him reach out to the marginalized and empower his followers. It's been an incredible journey so far, but there's still more to explore. In part three of our deep dive, we'll delve into the final section of Matthew chapter 9, where Jesus sends out his disciples on their first mission.

Welcome back to our deep dive into Matthew chapters 8 and 9. We've covered a lot of ground, haven't we? It's amazing how much is packed into just these two chapters. We see Jesus heal people, forgive sins, even confront demons, and it's challenged how we think about authority and discipleship. It really has.

These stories, they really pack a punch. And as we move into this final section of chapter 9, we see Jesus taking another big step in his ministry. It's not just about performing miracles anymore.

He's starting to equip his followers to carry on his work. Exactly. We left off talking about Jesus sending his disciples out on their first mission, right? Right.

He gives them authority to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, and cast out demons. This feels like a major turning point in the story. It really is.

It's kind of a shift from Jesus being the sole actor in these miracles to empowering others to participate in his ministry. Like he's saying, look, the need is so great, and I can't do this all alone. I need you to join me.

And it's interesting that he sends them out with these specific instructions, almost like a job description, you know? Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. It's a

pretty intense to-do list. Yeah, and what's striking is that he doesn't just send them out with instructions.

He also gives them the power to carry out these tasks. Right. And this raises an important question for us.

If Jesus gave his disciples this kind of authority, does that mean it's available to us today? Do we have the power to heal, to cast out demons, to impact the world in these ways? Those are big questions. And honestly, we could probably spend a whole other deep dive exploring those. But for now, let's focus on what this moment means for the disciples.

I mean, they're going from being witnesses to Jesus's miracles to being the ones performing them. That must have been both exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. Oh, I can only imagine.

It must have felt like this mix of excitement and fear, and maybe even a bit of, are we really equipped for this? Right. But Jesus seems confident in them. He even tells them to go without money, extra clothes, even sandals.

He's basically stripping them of all their earthly security and sending them out to rely completely on God's provision. It reminds me of the story about the man who wanted to follow Jesus, but asked to go bury his father first. Jesus emphasizes that following him requires this radical trust and a willingness to let go of everything that holds us back.

You know, it's about prioritizing the kingdom of God above all else. So it's not just about performing miracles, is it? It's about complete surrender to God's will, a willingness to embrace vulnerability and dependence. And you know, it's interesting that Jesus compares the crowds to sheep without a shepherd.

It's like he sees their vulnerability, their need for guidance and protection. That's an important point. It reveals Jesus's compassion for humanity.

He sees the brokenness, the lostness, all the suffering, and he's moved to act. And he's calling his followers to share in that compassion, to be shepherds to those who are lost and hurting. So as we kind of wrap up our deep dive into Matthew chapters eight and nine, what are some key takeaways for us? What can we learn from these stories about Jesus, about ourselves, and about how we're called to live in the world? Well, for me, one of the biggest takeaways is this invitation to experience the power of Jesus in our own lives.

Just like the people in these stories, we all come to Jesus with our own needs, our own brokenness, our own longings for healing and wholeness. Yeah. And these stories encourage us to believe that those needs can be met.

You know, Jesus has the power to heal, to forgive, to deliver, and to empower. Exactly. But it's not just about receiving from Jesus.

It's also about participating in his mission. You know, he's calling us to be agents of his love and grace in the world, to extend compassion to those who are hurting, to speak out against injustice, to work for the restoration of all things. And it's a challenging call, but it's also incredibly exciting.

If we're willing to step out in faith, to surrender our own agendas and to rely on God's power, who knows what we might accomplish. We might even find ourselves doing things we never thought possible, just like the disciples who were sent out on their first mission. That's right.

And, you know, I think that's the perfect place to kind of leave our listeners. With this sense of wonder and possibility and a call to action, what needs do you see around you? How is Jesus inviting you to participate in his work of healing and restoration? That is a great question for each of us to consider. And that wraps up our deep dive into Matthew chapters 8 and 9. Thanks for joining us.

We'll see you next time for another fascinating exploration of faith, life, and the world around us.