

“DO YOU BELIEVE I AM ABLE TO DO THIS?”

Matthew 9:18-34

Key Verse: 28

“When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ they replied.”

What is faith? Today’s passage looks like just four stories of healing. But Matthew focuses on the faith of those who were healed and how Jesus helped them to grow in faith. It makes us think about a very relevant issue, how is it that some have faith and are healed and others have faith and are not? Sometimes we wonder “do I have enough faith? do I have the right kind of faith? how can I have faith that brings healing?” Since Jesus spent most of his time helping people grow in faith, clearly it is what he is doing in our lives as well, and it is of supreme importance to him. I pray today’s passage may help clarify some of the pitfalls of faith healing and at the same time challenge us to believe that God can do anything.

First, God is always working to help us grow in faith (18-26)

This passage begins with the words, **“While he was saying this...”** From the beginning of chapter 9, we see the intensity of Jesus’ ministry in Capernaum. From the moment he stepped out of the boat onto Capernaum’s soil, people came to him one after another. The healing of the leper and the centurion’s servant along with the throngs in the house of Peter had given the people hope. They were not lost sheep, wandering among many wolves but they felt that on those living in darkness a bright light had dawned (4:16). As this hope dawned more and more, amazingly it reached the heart of one very desperate synagogue leader.

Verse 18 says, **“While he was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him and said, ‘My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live.’”** Matthew, we immediately notice, gives us a very simplified version of the account compared to Mark and Luke. This is to simply draw out the point: this father believed Jesus could actually raise the dead! What an amazing faith, how could he believe in something so impossible? As human beings under the curse of sin, we cannot overcome the power of death by our own effort of will. Death is the one medical condition that we cannot get a second opinion about. Yet, he saw beyond the reality of the situation to see something that no one else could see. It was a miracle of faith that could only come when he fixed his eyes on Jesus. Jesus was moved by such faith and got up without a word and went with him, and so did his disciples (19).

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Through these two accounts, and in fact all Jesus’ healings, Matthew has been highlighting the great importance Jesus places on faith. Since faith is so important to Jesus, we should try to learn some principles of faith through these healings. **The first principle, is that faith gives us hope in a hopeless situation.** Verses 20-21 say, **“Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.’”** There seems to be a theme in this passage of people with impossible problems who found unimaginable hope through Jesus. When this bleeding problem started the woman may have imagined that it would be easily cured. But after 12 years of constant suffering, she would have been forced to accept the fact that this was going to be a life problem and there was no hope. In fact, Mark tells us that **“She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse”** (Mk 5:26). Luke adds, **“no one could heal her”** (Lk 8:43). How wonderful it is to know, that when we’ve reached the end of all hope, we can find hope through faith in Christ. Are you in a hopeless situation? Do you feel you’ve tried everything else and there is nowhere else to turn, let’s turn to Jesus.

The second principle, is that faith is not an exercise of our will and effort but is from God.¹ **“She said to herself ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.’”** Where did she get such a specific inspiration and belief? In these two cases, the synagogue leader and woman had a clear assurance before they came to Jesus. Was it their own idea? Is faith just making up anything that I wish and by claiming it and believing strongly enough, I can have whatever I ask?

The so called “name it and claim it,” “prosperity gospel” or “Word of Faith Ministry” teaches that if you believe, you can get whatever you want: just name what you want and claim it by faith and God will be forced to give it to you. This heretical teaching exalts man to the same level as God and faith as a power that can control God.² For years, faith healers used a narrow interpretation of select passages like this one to get rich, making people believe that any illness can be healed if only your faith is strong enough. These charlatans make people live in doubt of God’s love and goodness, because no matter how hard they try to believe, healing doesn’t come. Does Jesus who said even a mustard seed of faith can move a mountain, really examine each person’s level of faith to see if they are worthy to

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-has-allotted-to-each-a-measure-of-faith>

² <https://www.gotquestions.org/name-it-claim-it.html>

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be healed? “Sorry Mr. Paralytic, your 4 friends have faith but yours is not enough. I’m not going to be able to heal you today.” No, of course not.

Hebrews 11:1, as we all know well, defines faith as **“confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”** And it says, **“This is what the ancients were commended for.”** So what was the faith of the ancients? God gave them a promise that was according to his plan and will, he sustained them, he helped them, he carried them in the palm of his hand and their part was just to believe what God had given them. John 6:44 says, **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them.”** Again when Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus replied, **“...this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”** Again 1 John 5:14 says, **“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”** Romans 8:26 and 27 say, **“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us...the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”** So, faith is not naming and claiming a blessing but struggling to find what is God’s will and promise to me, very personally in this situation and then absolutely trusting what God gives.

When I had flunked out of college and had no hope for my life God gave me his word, **“[The body that is sown] is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness it is raised in power.”** (1 Co 15:43) I immediately saw that the only hope for my life was Jesus and I accepted him from this moment. That faith was foreign to me, it was God’s gift, I only believed because he suddenly flooded my heart and took me by the hand—it was really a surrender more than an effort. When I was going to enter college again, I was gripped by fear. But in a time of deep, struggling prayer, God gave me his word, **“I am your shield your very great reward”** **“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.”** (Gen 15:1; Php 1:6) Then I got up without fear and went back. But at no time was it my effort or my great faith. I clung to that word because I trusted the one who gave it to me every day, sometimes moment by moment and it was that word that sustained me. We would like it if faith were just a principle that applied universally to all people in all situations—“believe hard enough and you will be healed”—but in reality we must struggle with God to find his will in every situation. The father and the bleeding woman found God’s clear word to them and trusting in this they received what he had given them. May we do the same.

The third principle, is that God chooses to work through our faith.
Verse 22 says, **“Jesus turned and saw her. ‘Take heart, daughter,’ he said,**

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‘your faith has healed you.’ And the woman was healed at that moment.” Jesus didn’t say “God has healed you” though this was certainly true, but **“your FAITH has healed you.”** Why? We can understand this through the example of prayer. When we pray and God miraculously does something, we don’t say “God solved my problem” but we say “God answered my prayer!” We understand that it was not God acting on his own to solve our problem but the great mystery always is that God chooses to work through our prayers. It creates relationship between us and God and really encourages us and makes us want to pray more. In the same way, God could do everything in the world on his own before we ask or believe, but he chooses to work through our faith. This cooperative effort makes us feel connected to God and makes us want to grow in faith and see God do great things.

The fourth principle, is that God is not a genie who exists to solve all our problems; rather, HE gives or allows problems in our life because he wants to grow our faith. This woman wanted to use Jesus to get a quick physical healing and then run away thinking that she had gotten all she needed. But God had a greater purpose he was working out in her life and so Jesus turned and caught her. For twelve years this woman had been bleeding—twelve years! During that time was God really deaf to her pleas? Did he really have no compassion to answer her many prayers? God had his own plan, healing her was not what was most important. Imagine if she had gotten away with her hit and run healing. She would have gone home elated and thanked God but it would have faded away. Still in her mind would be a bitterness toward God for twelve years of meaningless suffering. So Jesus caught her and said, **“Take heart daughter, YOUR FAITH has healed you.”** Imagine what these words did to her heart. She had been an outcast but now she knew that she was God’s precious daughter. For twelve years she thought God doesn’t care, but Jesus told her that HER faith is precious to God. Her faith would have become the greatest treasure. She would want to spend the rest of her life growing in faith in the Son of God who healed her, who loved her and called her his daughter. Taking away her bleeding may have made her life easier but giving her faith was totally life-transforming.

Solving people’s problems would be too easy for God but he uses problems to help us grow in faith. God could have given Abraham a son at any time but he waited 25 years so Abraham may learn faith. In 1 Samuel, the Lord had closed Hannah’s womb (1 Sa 1:5) and though she cried and prayed year after year, he did not open it till HIS time and in fact she was full of praise to Lord as a result. Jesus’ friend Lazarus was dying but Jesus purposely waited 3 more days until he died saying, **“Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”** (Jn 11:14-15) So much of the confusion in our modern world

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comes from the idea that God exists for the pleasure of man or that God exists to solve all mankind’s problems; when in fact, man exists for the pleasure and purpose of God. If we understood that God is always trying to help us grow in faith, we could have a different perspective and avoid a lot of doubt, bitterness and false expectations of God.

In fact, God always, ALWAYS hears our prayer and answers but perhaps not in the way that we expect. Three times Paul came to God asking him to take away a thorn in his flesh—some physical problem he suffered from. But God said, **“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”** (2 Co 12:7-9) Perhaps the best example is Joni Eareckson Tada. She was an active, athletic teenager. But at the age of 17, she broke her neck in a diving accident and she became paralyzed from the shoulders down. She tried every faith healer, guru, prayer meeting, always looking for the magic formula that would bring healing. “I just prayed for healing, and for me, it was always physical” she said. But this train of thought made for some big disappointments. She went on an exhaustive search for answers in the scripture and her breakthrough began in Mark chapter 1. After a long, tedious day of healing various infirmities, the next day Jesus just said, **“Let’s go somewhere else...so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”** She remembered laboring over that statement and it slowly began to dawn on her that it wasn’t that God was unconcerned for her physical need. “It was just that his priority was for my soul’s need, which was far deeper and more profound.”³ The same God who healed the eyes of the blind also told us to pluck the eyes out if they cause us to sin—his priorities are surely different than ours! She realized that when healing is the only goal, it’s a problem. “I believe I have been healed” she said, “just not in the way that others expect.”⁴ “It is because of this healing that I got to a point to where I can earnestly say, ‘I would rather be in this chair knowing Jesus than to stand on my feet without Him.’”⁵

The final principle, is that by faith we can see beyond the reality of the situation to see God’s reality. Verses 23-26 say, **“When Jesus entered the synagogue leader’s house and saw the noisy crowd and people playing pipes, he said, ‘Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.’ But they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region.”** People thought Jesus was a fool for what he believed. But when he took the girl by the hand and she got up it was clear that what he believed was the truth. This world

³ <https://mschristianliving.com/2014/covers/joni-eareckson-tada-his-grace-is-sufficient/>

⁴ <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2016484,00.html>

⁵ <https://billygraham.org/story/a-journey-beside-bethesda-joni-eareckson-tada-on-healing/>

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looks very real to us, but Jesus sees a reality that is more real than and is beyond this world. Nothing in this world is as permanent and impossible as it seems. From his perspective it is an easy thing to solve even death (2 Ki 3:18). Like the father, we only need to follow him by faith. Lord, please give us faith!

Second, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” (27-34)

Verse 27 says, **“As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David!’”** This is the first time in this passage that someone expressed faith in Jesus as the Messiah. It seems that Matthew brings out the healing of the blind and deaf to give us echoes of Isaiah 35:5-6, the signs of the Messiah.

It says that the men were calling out **“Have mercy on us, Son of David!”** (exclamation point!) Surely, their faith in him as the Messiah was very pleasing, just as much as Jairus or the bleeding woman. Yet, Jesus does not stop to help them; rather, verse 28 says he waited till he had gone indoors. Healing them on the road would just create a sensation and make them feel like superstars. Jesus wanted them to focus on faith not healing. **“He asked them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you’; and their sight was restored.”** (28b-30a) His question is central to this passage. Each person had an idea in their heart, **“Come and put your hand on her she will live,” “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed,” “The Son of David, the Messiah can open the eyes of the blind.”** But having a prayer topic is not enough, asking is not enough. Jesus asks, **“Do you believe that I am able to do this?”**

Actually, many of us come to Jesus in desperation because we have nowhere else to turn, but how often do we really believe that he is going to show up and do the impossible? In preparing for this message, this week I read the book *“Your God is Too Small”* by J.B. Phillips. The first words in the book are *“The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs... It is obviously impossible for an adult to worship the conception of God that exists in the mind of a child of Sunday-school age, unless he is prepared to deny his own experience of life... And it will always be by such an effort that he either worships or serves a God who is really too small to command his adult loyalty and cooperation.”*⁶ He goes on to present 17 *“Unreal Gods”*, such as *“Resident Policeman,” “Managing Director,” “Grand Old Man”* or *“God-in-a-*

⁶ J.B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike* (New York, Touchstone 2004), pg1

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Box” believing we can actually fully define who the immeasurable God is to fit our particular doctrine. As a result people follow a very small God who does not really inspire them to faith and awe and are content to just “do church” on a very superficial level. However, he says God showed us how big he is when he came in the flesh as Jesus. He was radically different than what they were expecting and called them to live radical, dynamic powerful lives totally against the flow of culture. When he showed up, people expected power, miracles and change. And those who truly followed him changed the world in their time. If we follow such a big God who is powerful, moving, unpredictable, living and active we live in constant awe and expectation, that when God shows up amazing things are going to happen.

This word is really convicting, **“Do you believe that I am able to do this?”** I think of people like my mother who almost died of alcohol poisoning, spending two weeks in the hospital writhing on the bed out of her mind. She said she would never go back, that God saved her life but she is again drinking more than ever. I think of Eddie Ramos, the guy who keeps robbing our church. Wednesday God wanted me to struggle more with this word, so Eddie broke into my office and stole my laptop containing the Sunday message. Thank God, I chased him down and he told me “I’m sorry pastor, I don’t know what I’m doing, I’m drunk, I won’t do it again”—but he will. I’ve had at least 3 times including Wednesday where I could have sat him down and shared the gospel, figured out what his problem is, but I felt it was a waste of time, “he’s just a drunk,” I said to myself, “he won’t change.” Or the homeless people who keep coming to the church everyday, “what’s the point of trying to help them,” I think. I hear God saying, “Do you really believe alcohol is bigger than me? Do you believe I am able to do this?” Whether he does or not doesn’t really matter, but do you believe he is able? I thank God for P. Kevin who is helping one young man struggling with drinking, yet said, “I believe God is going to do something great with his life.” Oh, Lord, grant me such faith!

So many are like the demon possessed man in the end of this passage, helpless to speak or cry out to Jesus on their own (32). Jesus was happy to drive out the demon (33). Jesus loves to free those in bondage (Heb 2:14-15; Lk 4:18). The people were amazed by God’s compassion and power. But the Pharisees who cared nothing for the lost and broken committed the unforgiveable sin of calling God’s work the work of Satan (Mt 12:32). Let’s not be like them but come to God, find what he is doing, and believe. I don’t know what God is doing in our lives only God can tell us each that one by one, but I pray that each of us may struggle deeply with God to know his word to us and then hold onto it for dear life. May

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God drive out all demons from among us and give us true healing in our soul.
Amen.