

The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law
Matthew 8:14-17
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Matthew 8 begins a new section of Matthew's Gospel that focuses on the miracles of Jesus Christ. These miracles served to validate the authority of Jesus (cf. Matthew 8:9; 9:6-8). Matthew described ten specific miracles, with the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (9:20-22) embedded within the story of the healing of the synagogue official's daughter (9:18-26). These are organized into three groups, interspersed with an interaction with Jesus that showed His authority:

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
 - Jesus' authority over His disciples (8:18-22)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
 - Jesus' authority over His opponents (9:9-17)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

In all, there are ten miracles that Matthew recorded in these two chapters. The story of Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law completes the first section of three healings.

It must be recognized that the order of these miracles in Matthew's Gospel is thematic, not chronological. This is Matthew's style as he builds the narrative of Jesus' words and works to present Christ as the Messiah of Israel. Based upon the other synoptic Gospels (Mark and Luke), some of these miracles very likely occurred prior to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 8:2-4; 8:14-17; 9:2-13) and some events well after (Matthew 8:18-22). Matthew arranged these miracles topically in order to further his focus on the life of Christ.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15)

Matthew 8:14-15 tells the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law who is bedridden with a fever. This is the shortest of the first set of miracles that Matthew 8 records. Like prior healings of the leper and the centurion's slave, this person was from what the society considered a lower class, a female. However, unlike the prior healings, no one asked Jesus to perform this miracle but rather He did so on His own initiative.

The woman was Peter's mother-in-law, which obviously informs us of Peter's marital status. This is also seen in the other synoptics (Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38) and in 1 Corinthians 9:5, "*Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?*"

In spite of this biblical evidence and in spite of extra biblical accounts such as Clement of Alexandria in *The Stromata* (c. 200) and Eusebius in *The History of the church* (c. 323), the Roman Catholic Church holds that Peter was not married. This is based upon their doctrine of the celibacy of priests. They argue that Peter's wife must have passed away before he was called as an apostle, even though there is no supporting historical evidence for this view and 1 Corinthians 9 says Peter's wife was "taken along" with him (i.e. as an apostle). This is the exegesis that occurs when we put more authority in our religious traditions than we do in the Scripture.

In Luke 4:38-39, this healing follows the casting out of a demon on the Sabbath in a synagogue in Capernaum. Luke's chronology puts this miracle likely on that same day in Capernaum. Peter and his brother Andrew had apparently moved from their hometown of Bethsaida (see John 1:44) to Capernaum. This was likely done in their following of Jesus.

The mother-in-law was bedridden with a fever. Fevers in New Testament times were considered to be the disease itself, rather than the symptom of an underlying physical condition (cf. John 4:52 and Acts 28:8).

Fevers are caused by our body fighting off infection. When viruses or bacteria enter our body, our immune system acts to repel the infectious agents by raising our body temperature. This makes the body less hospitable to bacteria or viruses and thus, fevers are important for the fighting of infections.

Of course, bacteria and viruses were unknown to the New Testament writers. Bacteria was not discovered until 1676 and viruses not until 1892. Since then, we have needed medical advancements to understand how to treat such infections to save countless people who would have otherwise perished. It is quite possible that the body of Peter's mother-in-law would be unable to fight off this infection and would have died without the miraculous intervention by Jesus. Certainly, the people of Jesus' day would have been very aware of the danger that high fevers posed to a person's life.

The means by which Jesus healed this woman is significant since Jewish rabbinical law instructed those with fevers to not be touched by healthy people. Jesus certainly did not consider the traditions of rabbis as important to consider since He opposed how they used their traditions to supplant the word of God (cf. Matthew 15:7-9). Therefore, He touched the woman to heal her.

The touching of the woman by Jesus is emphasized in the chiasmic structure of Matthew 8:14-15:

The woman is seen by Jesus
The woman is sick in bed
The woman has a fever
The woman is touched by Jesus
The woman no longer has a fever
The woman is no longer in bed
The woman serves Jesus

As in the instance of Jesus touching the leper in Matthew 8:3, the woman was immediately healed. Jesus did not become defiled by touching the leper and he did not become ill by touching this woman with the fever.

The full healing is demonstrated not only by the words “*and the fever left her*”, but by her actions, as she “*got up and waited on Him.*” The end of the fever proved the healing and that she was able to arise and serve proved the completeness of the healing.

Even with our modern medicine, fevers do not end immediately nor are people able to quickly arise and serve others. Even with effective antibiotics to combat bacteria, there is a length of time necessary for the bacteria to be overcome. The body is weak even as the infection is eradicated and takes time to regain strength. That this woman was able to arise and serve Jesus was noted by Matthew. This sudden change in condition is done only by a miracle of God by means of the touch of Jesus Christ.

Jesus healed effectively, immediately, and completely. He healed those looked down upon by the religious leaders, from lepers, to Gentiles, to women. He healed without regard to religious traditions. He was compassionate and merciful to those in need. His miracles demonstrated His power and authority over disease in ways that had never been done before. This miracle further proves that Jesus had authority as no one else.

The healing of the demon-possessed people (8:16)

Matthew began the account of the demon possessed people with the phrase “*when evening came.*” Because the miracle of the healing of the mother-in-law occurred on the Sabbath (c. Mark 1:32-34; Luke 4:40-41), the detail of the evening indicates that the people waited until the Sabbath ended at sundown before coming to Jesus with the sick.

These people came to Jesus based upon their awareness of His miraculous work. Even though Jesus warned the leper not to tell others of the healing (Matthew 8:4), the news spread anyway, “*But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses*” (Luke 5:15). News of what Jesus was doing spread rapidly, resulting in the people coming to Him in Matthew 8:16.

As occurs often in Matthew, the healing of the demon-possessed people occurs in the context of when Jesus “*healed all who were ill.*” This puts the casting out of the spirits as one of the healing works of Jesus. Jewish people considered those demon-possessed as ill. Jesus healed all who were ill and in the case of the spirits, He cast them out “*with a word.*” This phrase was used by Matthew to again show Jesus’ authority, this time over the demonic agents of illness. His power over demons and to heal all who were ill served to prove who Jesus was.

The fulfillment of prophecy (8:17)

The fulfillment of what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet was “*HE HIMSELF TOOK OUR INFIRMITIES AND CARRIED AWAY OUR DISEASES.*” This is a reference to Isaiah 53:4:

*Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.*

Matthew understood that all the healings Jesus had done were a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4. Yet in spite of modern translation placing quotation marks around the phrase from Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:17, the Gospel writer did not make a literal translation of Isaiah but he gave a more interpretive paraphrase. He took what in context was related to Christ’s crucifixion and applied it to Christ’s miracles.

The specific differences between what Matthew wrote and what Isaiah wrote are (1) changing the word grief in Isaiah to the word “infirmities” and (2) changing the word “sorrows” in Isaiah to the word “diseases.” Clearly, Matthew interpreted Isaiah as referring to our physical griefs and the sorrow that comes from physical ailments.

The basis for Matthew’s perspective is multi-faceted. First, the transitions of Isaiah 53:4 follow the Greek translation of the Hebrew text. The Greek Septuagint uses the words “grief” and “sorrows” because the context of Isaiah 53 is the suffering of the Messiah for the sins of man. It is common that the New Testament quotes the Septuagint, but in Matthew 8:17, the Hebrew text is translated directly.

For example, the Complete Jewish Bible translates Isaiah 53:4 based on the Hebrew text as:

*“In fact, it was our diseases He bore,
our pains from which He suffered;
yet we regarded Him as punished,
stricken and afflicted by God.”*

So Matthew did not actually alter the Old Testament text to fit his agenda. He rather selected the Hebrew text to translate into Greek. Matthew made his own translation of the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:4 into Greek.

Secondly, Matthew could not have used the Septuagint as the basis for his citation because it would imply that Jesus’ miracles during His earthly ministry was the basis for the atonement for our sin. He was theologically forced to use the Hebrew text rather than the more spiritualized Greek translation in the Septuagint. Not that the Septuagint was poorly translated, since Peter used the Septuagint when he connected Christ’s death with the healing of our sin when he wrote, *“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed”* (1 Peter 2:24). The context of Isaiah 53 points to Christ bearing the penalty of our sin through the substitutionary atonement.

Also, it is important to remember that all physical ailments are the result of sin, either directly or indirectly. Apart from the fall of Adam, mankind would know no sickness or disease. Leprosy, paralysis and fevers came about because of the fall of man.

Christ's healing of our infirmities and disease will be a part of the remedy for sin when we are glorified. We will receive imperishable bodies, "*So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body*" (1 Corinthians 15:42). We will no longer suffer physically, "*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away*" (Revelation 21:4).

In Matthew's rendition of Isaiah 53:4, he faithfully includes "*He Himself bore*" and places the word "Himself" in the emphatic position. Thus, Matthew retains the element of Christ's bearing the sin of man in His death. He did the same by including the phrase "*carried away,*" which alludes to the removal of our sin in the atonement. Those phrases are in the original Hebrew text, Matthew's Greek translation and the translation of the Septuagint. Thus, the healing of physical disease was accomplished ultimately for all who are in the kingdom of heaven through Christ's substitutionary death on the cross.

Isaiah 53:4 is then fulfilled in part through the healing ministry of Christ because the healing ministry of Christ was a precursor to the final removal of all pain and death in the new heaven and the new earth (cf. Revelation 21). The ultimate healing ministry of Christ lies in the future. The healings of Christ's earthly ministry did not remove all the future diseases of the leper, the centurion's servant or Peter's mother-in-law, just as Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead did not mean that Lazarus did not eventually pass away. These healings were a harbinger of what will be the complete removal of all infirmity and disease.

These miracles prove the basis for Christ's authority, and Matthew's presentation of the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4 supports the identification of Christ as the coming Servant Messiah. Christ served many who were healed, showing that He had power over all disease and infirmity. Matthew ascribes Isaiah 53:4 to Christ, further emphasizing His authority in the role of the coming Messiah. The healings of Jesus did more than show His power over disease, but they linked Him to the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.

Furthermore, Isaiah 53 depicts the Messiah in His humility, bearing the sorrows of others. Jesus demonstrated this same humility by who He served in His healing ministry, namely the outcasts of Jewish society and not those in positions of great power. In His humility, He touched the leper and went to the Gentiles.

There must be no expectation of healing on demand, as many who hold to Charismatic theology may advocate. Jesus did not promise healing in this life. While Matthew 8:17 links physical healing to the atonement of Christ, it does not lead us to the belief that physical healing would be guaranteed in this life.

Jesus at times “*healed all who were ill*” (Matthew 8:16) but this was localized to those who were brought to Him in Capernaum. Obviously there were still those remaining to be healed, as well as those who were never healed by Jesus during His life on earth, such as the man who had been lame from birth who sat every day at the gate of the temple (cf. Acts 3:1-10).

In many Charismatic churches, there is the implication that those who suffer physical infirmities lack faith for healing. But the instances of healing in Matthew 8:1-17 do not show the faith of those who are healed. The one description of great faith is that of the centurion (Matthew 8:10), not of the man that Jesus healed. There is no indication of faith at all with the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law.

The healing of all believers in Christ awaits the resurrection of the dead and the new heavens and the new earth. We should have great hope that our pain and suffering will be carried away by Christ’s sacrifice. But in this lifetime, we cannot influence whether God will bring physical healing based upon our faith or any other act of righteousness. We must trust the Lord for His sovereign plan for our life, knowing that His goodness is everlasting and His providence is full of wisdom. True faith does not expect God to do what He has not promised or place God upon our timetable. True faith rests in God’s will.

Conclusion

The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law was the third of three miraculous healings of people who were without standing in Jewish society. Matthew’s selection of these three cases points to those who were excluded from the center of Jewish worship.

The leper was not only excluded from Jewish religious functions but also from all social interaction. The Gentile servant of the Roman centurion would only be allowed in the outskirts of the temple area, which was the outermost part known as the court of the Gentiles. Women were likewise excluded from the center of worship, only allowed as far as the court of the women, just beyond the court of the Gentiles. All three people healed were limited in the Jewish temple worship.

Those excluded by the Jewish traditions were a focus of Jesus' ministry. Jesus came as Savior of the world, not just to the privileged. This was one of the most astonishing things about His ministry.

His example should instruct our ministry as well. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must seek to serve outsiders as He did. We ought not give preferential treatment to those with power and influence. *“My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism”* (James 2:1).