

**The Healing and Forgiveness of a Paralytic**  
**Matthew 9:1-8**  
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Matthew 8-9 provides us with the account of ten miracles that serve to prove the authority of Jesus over all. Matthew has organized these miracles into groups for the purpose of presenting Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

The first group of three miracles all involved physical healing, showing Jesus as having authority of physical ailments. The second set of three miracles involves Jesus' power. Matthew 9:1-8 is the third miracle in the second set of miracles that involve Jesus' power. His power is not only seen in the healing of the paralytic, but more significantly, His power is seen in the ability to forgive sins.

The story of the healing of the paralytic is also recorded in Mark 2:1-12 and Luke 5:17-26. We know from the other gospels that this healing chronologically occurred prior to the story of the deliverance of the two demon-possessed men in Matthew 8:28-34. Matthew constructs his Gospel thematically.

**The return to Capernaum (9:1)**

When Matthew wrote that Jesus "came to His own city," we know that he was referring to Capernaum (not Nazareth) based on Mark's account of this same incident (Mark 2:1). Capernaum was where Matthew 4:13 tells us that Jesus "settled." It is implied that the disciples would also have returned with Jesus.

It is possible that Matthew 9:1 connects to Matthew 8:34 rather than Matthew 9:2. The chapter divisions that we used were added in 1205 by a Roman Catholic cardinal named Stephen Langton. This is significant because Matthew is not chronological and Mark 2:2-12 and Mark 5:1-20 shows that the story of the paralytic occurred prior to the driving out the demons into the pigs.

We know from Luke 8:40 that Jesus "returned" after He sent the demons into the pigs. Yet Mark 2:1 shows that healing of the paralytic occurred in Capernaum. Therefore, Matthew 9:1 could legitimately be connected to either 8:34 or 9:2.

## **The paralytic is forgiven (9:2)**

Mark 2:2 and Luke 5:17 describe Jesus teaching a large group of people, likely in a synagogue. There was a group of four people (Mark 2:3) who brought a paralytic to Jesus in hopes of being healed. News of Jesus' ability to heal had been spread far and wide and people had brought paralytics to him earlier and Jesus had healed them (Matthew 4:24). It would be expected that a paralytic would seek out Jesus to also be healed.

The friends brought the paralytic to Jesus on a bed. Paralytics needed to be carried because the wheelchair would not be invented until fifteen centuries later. The life of one paralyzed was much more difficult and dependent upon others than we see today. Being able to walk would have been even more life changing in the first century.

Due to the crowd, there was no room for these men to gain access to Jesus. They were so intent on bringing the paralytic to Jesus that they removed the roof, dug a hole in the ceiling and lowered the fellow on his bed through the opening (Mark 2:4). This was a significant effort on the part of these four men to bring their friend to Jesus.

In spite of their reason for bringing the paralytic to Jesus, He did not initially respond as they had hoped. Rather, He saw their faith—the faith of both the friends and the paralytic—and spoke only to the paralytic, “*Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven.*”

Only Matthew's account supplies the words, “take courage” or “take heart” (ESV). This is the encouragement of Jesus to be strong in faith, even though the hoped for healing did not materialize. Matthew has Jesus addressing the paralytic as “son” (TEKNON), which implies a child or at least is an affectionate term that an older person would use toward a younger person. This also explains the need for encouragement.

This passage connects the problem of paralysis with the problem of sin. All physical maladies derive ultimately from man's fallen state. While Jesus taught that there is no direct necessary relationship between physical defect and the practice of sin (cf. John 9:2-3), there are the lasting effects of the fall upon our physical bodies. The paralytic not only had a physical problem, he also had a spiritual problem. He was in need of forgiveness.

In pronouncing forgiveness, Jesus prioritized the fellow's greater need over his lesser need. While paralysis greatly hindered his life, being able to walk does not prevent other physical issues, nor does it delay his death. Truly, forgiveness of sins was the far greater blessing, stretching to eternity.

### **The scribes object (9:3-4)**

The scribes (and Pharisees, Luke 5:21) were not happy with this pronouncement by Jesus, but they did not speak up in objection. Rather, they reasoned to themselves and Jesus knew what they were thinking. It is unlikely that their thinking was expressed among themselves and Jesus overheard them, since Luke records Him saying to the scribes, "*Why are you reasoning in your hearts*" (Luke 5:22). Later in Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus also knowing the thoughts of others (Matthew 12:25, 22:18). This was possibly as result of Jesus' deep knowledge of the scribes and was certainly evidence of the ministry of the Spirit of God who had descended upon Him (Matthew 3:16).

This doesn't need to be a supernatural knowledge. Most Greek manuscripts, including some very old ones, have the word "seeing" rather than "knowing" in Matthew 9:4. Since Jesus would be expected to "know" their thoughts (hence most translations follow with the translation of "know"), it is unlikely that copyists would replace "knowing" with "seeing." By understanding Jesus as "seeing" or "perceiving" their thoughts, we are led to understand that there was some evidence for Him to see that led Him to His conclusion. Of course, they would later make a habit of objecting to what He said and did.

These scribes concluded that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy. The reason they would arrive at this conclusion was that He was blaspheming was that He was taking upon Himself a role that was only God's prerogative. Luke's account makes this clear, "*The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, 'Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?'*" (Luke 5:21).

The reason that they were correct in stating "*who can forgive sins, but God alone*" was because it is ultimately God that people sin against. "*Against You, You only, I have sinned*" (Psalm 51:4). This is why the Old Testament describes God as the one who forgives sin, "*I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud and your sins like a heavy mist*" (Isaiah 44:22). God does so, not out of obligation to anyone, but rather for the sake of Himself, "*I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.*" (Isaiah 43:25).

There is no doubt regarding how the scribes understood the statement "*your sins are forgiven.*" They clearly saw that Jesus was ascribing a divine characteristic to Himself, thus making Himself out to be God. Those who view that Christ is not God fail to see what even the evil scribes could see. Just as there is great significance in their understanding, there is even more significance in that Christ does not correct their reasoning. The reason He was willing to allow them to draw this conclusion is because the conclusion was accurate. It is ironic that the scribes would think that "*this fellow blasphemes*" when they themselves were guilty of blasphemy by failing to ascribe honor to Jesus.

### **The paralytic is healed (9:5-7)**

Jesus' rhetorical question "*Which is easier to say, 'your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Get up, and walk'?*" is left unanswered but the intent is clear. The evidence of His ability to forgive sins is directly related to His ability to heal their physical body. He proved His authority to forgive sins.

The actual answer to this rhetorical question depends upon one's perspective. From a man's earthly perspective, it is much easier to say "your sins are forgiven" because there is no objective evidence that validates whether such a statement is true or not. Anyone can say such a thing because it is unverifiable. In contrast, to say "get up and walk" brings the necessary expectation of healing to the paralytic. In this sense, it is much more difficult to say "get up and walk" for there is an ability to verify whether such a statement is valid or not.

Conversely, it is truly much more difficult to say "your sins are forgiven," since only God is able to truly make this statement. No mere human can possibly forgive sin since all sin is against God Himself. From the actual, heavenly perspective of God, it is much easier to say "rise and walk" for this is a mere temporal improvement compared to the eternal value of forgiveness of sins. Those who are healed physically will one day face their physical demise.

God's power to forgive sins is unmatched by anyone else. Satan may empower people with false signs and wonders to lead people to deception and falsehood (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10). But the true forgiveness of sin is unique to God alone.

Jesus stated His purpose for His healing ministry when He said, "*But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.*" The healing work of Jesus was for the specific purpose of revelation and instruction. This authority existed in Christ even while He was "on earth."

This included the revelation of who He was. He was the “Son of Man,” the Messiah of Israel. As Messiah, He had authority on earth to forgive sin. This had been evident back in Matthew 1:21 where the angel of the Lord told Joseph, “*She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*” This authority was derived from His essence as the Son of God, given by His Father (Matthew 28:18).

We can lose perspective on the reason for miracles by focusing on only the earthly blessing. This is at the core of the problem with the popularity of alleged miracles within the Charismatic Movement. People flock to those who offer some hope of physical healing without understanding the necessary connection between miracles and the revelation of God.

When the Lord brings revelation to mankind, He validates His word with undeniable miraculous evidence. Just as anyone can utter the words, “your sins are forgiven,” anyone can utter the words “thus says the Lord.” To prove that God has truly spoken, He provides evidence. When people put forth dubious claims of healing, they undermine the very purpose of God’s miraculous work.

Jesus healed the paralytic with the words “*Get up, pick up your bed and go home.*” The emphasis was on the completeness of the healing. He was now able to arise as a dramatic evidence of his healing and the miraculous power of Jesus. There was no partial or progressive aspect to this healing.

He was also able to carry the bed he had been lying on. He no longer needed the help of his friends to move about and was even able to perform tasks such as picking up his bed, which required normal leg strength. This testified to the fullness of the healing.

Jesus also told him to go home. This directive was more gentle (HYPAGE) than stronger “Go!” that Jesus used to order the devil to depart from Him in Matthew 4:10. The significance was that the now former paralytic would be able to continue with his life without the concern of a relapse. This points to the finality of this miracle.

The fellow responded to Jesus’ words by getting up and departing. Luke adds that this response was immediate, in front of everyone including the scribes, and that he left giving glory to God (Mark 2:12; Luke 5:25). His dramatic ability to now walk home did not deter the scribes in their growing opposition to Jesus.

## **The crowds react (9:8)**

The reaction of the crowd is described differently in various English translations. The King James Version says they “marveled.” The New International Version says they were “filled with awe.” The English Standard Version says they were “afraid.” The New American Standard Bible says they were “awestruck” but includes the literal translation of “afraid” in the margin.

The root of this discrepancy lies in later copies of Matthew using the word “were amazed” rather than “were afraid.” There is very strong manuscript evidence in support of “were afraid” but there is the outstanding question of the reason why the crowds were afraid. The confusion in understanding why the crowds were afraid has led to not only the errors in later copies (hence the KJV translation), but also in the softening by the use of “awestruck.”

While it would be expected that the crowds would marvel at this miracle, it is not unexpected that they would be struck with fear as well. The Scripture is filled with references to fear of God. “*Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling*” (Psalm 2:11, ESV). This is reflected in the New Testament, “*work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12).

When the crowds observed Jesus healing a paralytic and forgiving his sins, which is the prerogative of God alone, they rightly feared this manifestation of God’s power. This type of fear could best be understood as “reverence” (which is the translation used by the NASB in Psalm 2:11). Our great reverence for God should be overwhelming. This is something that we should grow in our understanding of, as we see in Psalm 34:11, “*Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD*”

We also observe that the crowds responded by glorifying God. Matthew is the only Gospel that adds the reason the crowds glorified God, “*who had given such authority to men.*” This informs us of how the crowds understood Jesus. They saw Jesus as a man who was able to raise the paralytic, and by inference, was also able to forgive sin. They acknowledged that God had given Jesus this authority but they did not view that authority was specific to Jesus, but that it was given to men. Therefore, they failed to see this evidence of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, uniquely different from all other men. They simply saw a man exercising authority from God and they reacted with fearful awe and glorified God for the blessing of the healing, much like people today who love what God does more than who He is.

## Conclusion

Jesus captures this opportunity of the bringing of the paralytic to Him for healing to forgive sins. This forgiveness was based upon faith in Jesus and demonstrated His authority to forgive sins on earth. While this was not the reason why the paralytic was brought to Jesus, certainly it was a far greater blessing than being physically healed.

This brings attention to the relationship between spiritual sickness (sin) and physical sickness (paralysis). The reason physical infirmities exist is because of the fall of man (Genesis 3). Sin produced many results, but ultimately it brought spiritual and physical death.

Although all physical difficulties are essentially sourced in the sin of Adam, this does not mean that physical problems are necessarily the direct result of a person's sin. John 9:1-3 makes this clear, *"As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'"*

Mankind does not possess the full insight to be able to determine the relationship between an individual's physical sickness and sin. We ought to be reticent to draw conclusions on such matters as many sins do not produce direct consequences that can be immediately observed and many suffer physically for the sake of righteousness (cf. 1 Peter 2:20).

Matthew's focus was not on the reason for the paralysis but on the authority of Jesus to forgive sins. Our forgiveness will culminate in our final deliverance from sin's presence, including its effect on our bodies. One day our present perishable body will be replaced by an imperishable body (1 Corinthians 15:35-57). Death will be conquered through our Lord Jesus Christ and all physical defects will be eradicated.

This is one reason that the forgiveness of sins is by far the greatest need of man. While physical healing brings a momentary blessing on earth, forgiveness brings eternal blessing in heaven. This eternal blessing is not only everlasting but will also include a remedy for all the effects of sin, including physical pain. *"He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and 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 21:3-4).