

Who Is This Man? : The Healer
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 53:1-5; 1 Peter 2:21-25; Matthew 4:23-25

Today's final Scripture reading is Matthew 4:23-25. May God's blessing rest on the reading of His holy and perfect Word. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him."

The Lenten season is a great time for answering questions about Christianity. In Detroit at this time of year, many people start doing things differently for six or seven weeks. There are a lot of specials on fish. People go around for a day with ashes on their foreheads. Some stop eating sweets for a time or stop posting on Facebook. And this makes people ask questions – why do you do all that? Or, if you're like me, a more traditional Presbyterian who doesn't make much over Lent, the question becomes, why don't you do all that? Hopefully, someone who knows you are a Christian might stop and ask you about it in the next several weeks.

But the question then becomes, what to say? For our small band here, almost all of us call ourselves believers; we love Jesus, we want to follow His ways, we want to serve Him by serving others, we care about our relationship with God. But sometimes it is hard to articulate what we believe. We might try to memorize the words of something like the Apostles Creed, which I did as a teenager. That's the core of faith. But it's still hard to understand the meaning. It's hard to understand the Trinity. It's hard to understand deep theological concepts. We want to do that, we are committed to coming and hearing and understanding, but it's not easy.

So, for the next seven Sundays, we're not going to focus on explaining our faith. Every religion has its own codes, beliefs, practices. But Christianity goes far beyond religion. It is a relationship with the Father through Jesus the Son. We talk about relationships differently than we do beliefs. When I talk about my relationship with Catha, I might say I believe she's great. But I'm going to want to tell you about her in such a way that you'll want to meet her yourself.

In the same manner, you can talk about your beliefs, the way you live because of Jesus, the stances you take on certain issues, that's good. But we Christians are in a relationship with Jesus, and we want to know Him, and we want to facilitate His introduction to other people. So for the next seven weeks, we're going to focus on who Jesus is, what He did and does, in such a way that we can remember. We're also going to focus on objective things first – who is Jesus? What can we know about Him that goes undisputed? What groundwork do we have in historical fact? Then we'll move on to the harder stuff that we believe by faith.

We're also going to look at Jesus through the lens of the broken human condition. Everything that Jesus was and did historically counters the fall of humanity into sin. So we'll look at what was broken, and how Jesus went about fixing it.

Perhaps the first thing we think of when we think of the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 is death. Death enters the world due to Adam and Eve's rebellion against God's only negative command to them. Because of their disobedience, all of us are born into disobedience, and so we too are going to die. But that's not the extent of the problem. If we're honest, we don't fear death nearly as much as we fear pain. And that's a huge part of the curse.

When God turns to Eve and Adam, in that order, about their sin, the very first thing God tells Eve is that she will have exceeding pain in childbirth. The verbs in Hebrew are literally something like, "I will greatly make great your pain." Then God turns to Adam and says there's a curse on the ground, and that "in pain you will eat of it all the days of your life." Only after these two declarations does God confirm the penalty that He had warned them about before – that they would die, that they would return to the dust they came from.

Since that point, pain has been a defining part of life. Everybody knows there are two absolutes in life: death and taxes. Well, even before there were taxes, there was pain. There's the physical pain that comes from the body wearing out, from hard work, from age and wear and time. But that's not the only pain we find. In God's curse on Eve, God mentions that there will be pain in relationships, mental and emotional pain – that she will "long" for her husband, and he will rule over her. That wonderful relationship meant to be a blessing will always be in some ways broken, causing resentment and personal torment.

Throughout the Bible, everybody's woundedness is on full display. Nobody gets through without scars. Humans are nasty to one another, inflicting pain. And then there are simply the problems that come with being in a broken world – disease, disfigurement, suffering. From the first pages to the last, the Old Testament reveals that pain can drive us into sin, it can separate us from other people, and we need healing on every level. Not just physical healing but emotional and spiritual healing.

When Jesus arrives, He comes to reverse the effects of the fall. He doesn't eliminate them, but He proves He has mastery over all of them and their power and will eventually destroy them. The first way He shows His power and approval from the Father is through healing.

Now we might say, "Jesus' healings were miraculous, so can anyone still believe they occurred?" The answer is yes. Contemporary non-Christian sources mention Jesus, and that He was well-known for His deeds – healing primary among them. His enemies attributed His healing power to the devil, but the fact that they still agree that He did these things give us little reason to doubt He did, in fact, heal folks just as our passage from Matthew 4 says.

There are several things that make Jesus stand out as a healer. First is that there never seems to be anything He can't cure. Matthew says He heals "every disease and sickness." From Matthew's description, Jesus' preaching and teaching aren't what draws in crowds from throughout Israel and even the Gentile regions. It's His healing abilities that draw people to Him. They follow because first, they came for healing. Then they stay for the message.

Jesus has power in and of Himself to do this work. There were other Jewish holy men at the time who called upon the name of God for help, who ask God for rain, who ask God to drive out demons, but they did not have the authority to do it themselves. Jesus merely says the word and people are healed.

And Jesus heals things never before healed. In John 9, the disciples come and ask Jesus if a man born blind had sinned in the womb, or if his condition was passed on by sinful parents. They ask because it's such a grievous condition, one that would not go away because they thought it was based on disobedience. In John 9:32, the man himself says that no one since the foundation of the world has heard of a man born blind being healed. And yet Jesus does it. Jesus can cure things considered completely beyond reach.

And while Lazarus is the most famous example, Jesus raises the dead multiple times. He brings back to life the daughter of a synagogue ruler. He gives a widow back her son who recently died. Lazarus himself is a special case. There's a reason why Lazarus was dead in the tomb four days. Jewish folklore stated that the soul stayed around the body for three days to see if it might possibly be revived, but on the fourth day, it went to Sheol and judgment. Jesus not only breaks the superstition, He has power over all things in His own way and timing. Jesus was healing right up until the point of His death, as Lazarus' revival was shortly before Jesus entered into Jerusalem for the last time.

In a time of social and ethnic strife, Jesus' healing power brought down cultural walls. When a centurion's servant is gravely hurt – paralyzed and suffering, Matthew 8 says – he approaches Jesus for healing. A Palestinian woman, a Canaanite, comes to ask for help for her demon-possessed daughter. Samaritans are willing to be cleansed by Him. In healing them, Jesus displays that God's Kingdom is wide and broad, open to any who would come.

In fact, Jesus gives the outsiders and foreigners the most praise. When Jesus tells the centurion that He will come and heal his servant, the centurion says he's not worthy to have Jesus in his home – but he knows what authority is like, because he has it as a centurion. He tells Jesus, “Merely say the word and it will be done.” Jesus is astonished and says, “I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel!” He compliments the Palestinian woman who shows her faith in Him even when He challenges her at first.

But here's the thing that's most fascinating to me: Jesus never heals anyone because they deserve it. Many are profoundly ungrateful. In Luke 17, a group of ten lepers calls out to Jesus for mercy. Jesus says, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” That's because priests were the ones who could declare lepers healed and able to rejoin society. As they head to the synagogue, they're cleansed. When one saw he was healed – a Samaritan man – he turned back before doing anything else to thank Jesus. None of the Jewish lepers offered Jesus a word of gratitude.

In John 5, Jesus goes by a pool called Bethesda in Jerusalem. It was a popular place because there were rumors (maybe true?) that sometimes an angel stirred the waters and the first one into the pool when it happened was healed. A man who had been paralyzed 38 years was there, and when Jesus heard how long he'd waited, he asked, “Do you want to get well?” And the man kind of made excuses.

Truth is, he was well known; it's quite possible he made a living begging there, and being healed would take away his livelihood. Jesus does restore him, and when the man is confronted by the Pharisees for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he makes more excuses. Jesus later catches up with him and says, "See? You're well. Stop sinning so that nothing worse happens to you." Then the guy goes and rats Jesus out to the Pharisees!

But this shows us the character of God. God's healing isn't based in our goodness but His. It's not based in who we are but His lovingkindness. It's not based in our desire to please Him or our deep understanding of Him but His concern for us and His desire to undo all the damage that has been done.

From what we see in Jesus' deeds, there is nothing Jesus can't heal. And while we've focused on physical healing, it was spiritual healing Jesus was most concerned about. Time and again, He told those coming to Him, "Your faith has made you well." They often came about a physical problem, but they left having been restored to the community of believers and brought into relationship with God.

This is where the faith part begins. What we've discussed so far isn't really up to much debate, even with skeptics and cynics. But how it applies to us now is where our trust begins. Because everything we're going to talk about now relies on Jesus still being alive and still working as He did in the past. We are going to move from historical fact to reliable faith.

First, Jesus still heals when we ask. Healing isn't the primary reason for prayer. If all we ask for is physical healing, even for others, our prayer life isn't very mature. God wants us to talk to Him about everything and not to limit ourselves to asking for people to get well. And yet, it is always appropriate to ask for healing. God has shown us through Christ that He is a healer, that He cares about our physical pain, and that He is willing to heal. So ask, and ask often!

When you pray for healing, remember God's glory. Jesus told the disciples that the real reason the man born blind had that condition was so God's power and glory would be displayed through his healing. The leper who was truly made well inside and out was the one who gave glory to God. I am convinced that we don't see more healing because we rarely give the glory to God. We thank doctors, we praise medicines, but God makes healing happen; with all our medical knowledge, we're still infants at healing. Ask for God to be glorified. It does not *make* God move, but it puts our hearts in the right place to see healing for what it is.

Second, Jesus wants to heal us spiritually even more than He wants to heal us physically. Nobody is going to argue that physical healing is a relief, right? There are some people who God reaches spiritually because they hear His voice in their physical healing. But God is more interested in healing us spiritually. Jesus is far more concerned about the man at Bethesda's spiritual life than his recovery from paralysis. In Matthew 12 and Luke 11, Jesus warns that those who are healed from possession are worse off if the spirit returns to their former home and doesn't find it occupied by the Holy Spirit.

How often do we pray for our friends who are spiritually blind, whose hearts have suffered spiritual cardiac arrest and are dead to the gospel? We might see them on the outside and they're fit as a fiddle. But inside, they need revival and resurrection. Let's be praying for them! If God is our healer, then let's ask Him for healing that really matters!

Because let's be frank. I am not grieving for the faithful Christian who suffers for a time with physical pain and anguish and then dies to go be with the Lord forever in glory and has an end to their suffering. I am grieving for the unbeliever who lives thirty years longer than that faithful person, who experiences little physical pain, and then at the end of a long life winds up eternally separated from the Healer of Souls. Ask for the healing of your family and friends, but ask for complete healing – mind and body and spirit.

Third, not all suffering needs to be healed. Sounds bizarre, right? We want our pain to be gone. And God promises that for all believers, in the age to come, according to Revelation 21, there will be no more mourning or crying or pain. But for now, because the fall still affects us physically, we die, we hurt, and we suffer. And yet not all suffering needs to be healed.

Suffering can be a good thing. Suffering can make us more like Christ, who Himself suffered. Suffering refines our faith and proves its worth and character, says Peter in 1 Peter 1 – a faith that holds true in the midst of suffering is real. Paul was given a thorn in his flesh that God did not take away so that God's power would be shown to be perfect in Paul's weakness. Suffering often causes us to rely on God in ways we never would before. No one ever lifts weights or exercises without some form of pain or exhaustion – but that feeling confirms that our body is working, that our muscles are growing, that we've done good work. Some suffering – not all, but some – is the pain of spiritual growth happening.

When we see our friend George in hospice, when faithful people have headaches and arthritis and depression, we sometimes wonder – why doesn't God heal everything we ask for? In this life, we cannot know. I'm not sure if knowing would help. That's where faith comes in.

I truly believe that when faithful believers ask, God will remove suffering when doing so will draw us closer to Him. And because He is good, even when we ask, because He knows all things, He will not remove suffering that is ultimately for our spiritual and eternal benefit. Sometimes He won't remove it because our suffering is for the benefit of others. Sometimes God uses our suffering to grow faith in others. When I think of Joni Erickson Tada and the tens of thousands of people around the world who have heard the gospel through her accident that left her a quadriplegic, I think, "The Kingdom of God has spread through her suffering." When we don't know what God is thinking, trust in Him. He is faithful to us, even in our suffering.

As we end today, think on this: Jesus is a healer. If you've never experienced His healing, if you've never given your life to Him and asked Him to forgive your sins and bring you into His Kingdom, turn to Him, trust in Him, and He will heal your soul. And if you have, then when someone asks you why you believe what you believe, you can answer, "Jesus healed me – and He can heal you."