

## Lessons from Matthew 9

By Clinton Wahlen

**M**atthew 9 concludes the two-chapter sequence of miracle stories. The chapter begins with the healing of the paralytic, but the story is more about forgiveness than healing (Matt 9:1–8). It is followed by the call of Levi (Matt 9:9) and three parables of Jesus illustrating His kingdom-based ministry (Matt 9:12–13, 15, 16–17). These parables were given in response to two questions, the first directed to the disciples and the second directed to Jesus Himself (Matt 9:10–11, 14). Then, in quick succession, Matthew narrates the raising of a ruler’s daughter from the dead and the healing of a woman with a flow of blood (Matt 9:18–26); the giving of sight to two blind men (Matt 9:27–31); and the casting out of a demon from a man unable to speak, which leads to the charge that Jesus casts out demons by the ruler of the demons (Matt 9:32–34). The chapter closes with Jesus preaching to large crowds who are as sheep that have no shepherd, and His instructing the disciples to pray for more laborers to be sent to gather the harvest (Matt 9:35–38).

### Interpretation of the Chapter

#### 1. Verses 1–8 (Healing of the Paralytic)

- The trip by boat from Gergesa on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum on the western shore is about six miles. The paralyzed man had to be carried to Jesus. The recognition of “their” faith may suggest that the man’s friends encouraged him to seek healing from Jesus.
- The assurance to the man that his sins were forgiven is highly significant as indicative of Jesus’ divine claims. Some of the scribes considered this statement to constitute blasphemy because Jesus was arrogating to Himself a prerogative belonging only to God (Mark 2:7).
- Jesus calls the scribes’ thoughts “evil” (Matt 9:4),<sup>1</sup> showing openly that He knows the heart. All four Gospels describe Jesus as having such knowledge that normally would be known only to God (Matt 12:25; Mark 12:15; Luke 9:46–48; John 1:48). Implied, perhaps, is

that Jesus could also read the paralytic’s heart and thus be aware of this deeper need.

- Any doubts about Jesus’ authority to forgive sins should be dispelled by His ability to heal the man, seemingly harder than for Jesus to assure him of forgiveness. The latter, though, implies a change of heart that Jesus would have been powerless to accomplish without the man’s consent.
  - As the Son of Man, Jesus’ authority to forgive is predicated upon His coming sacrifice on the cross and His subsequent ministry as High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 9:14–15, 23; 1 John 1:9; 2:1; cf. Dan 7:13–14).
  - Throughout Matthew 8–10, the Greek word translated “power” is *exousia*, which indicates that Jesus and the disciples not only are able to heal, but have authority to do so as emissaries of the kingdom of heaven. In both word (Matt 5–7) and act (Matt 8–9), Jesus demonstrates His divine authority (cf. Matt 7:29; 28:18).
- #### 2. Verses 9–17 (Call of Matthew and the New Wine)
- In the other Gospels, the tax collector called to be one of the twelve is named Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). Several people in the New Testament have more than one name (e.g., Simon Peter, John Mark) and so this apostle has traditionally been known as Levi Matthew.
  - While Matthew appears in the other listings of the twelve (Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), only here is he called “the tax collector” (Matt 10:3). Probably, he collected customs duties for Herod Antipas on goods transported into Galilee and Perea. The reality that Rome controlled Israel’s borders and levied taxes was a sore reminder of their lost independence. Unsurprisingly, tax collectors like Matthew were despised as traitors and apostates (cf. Matt 5:46; 18:17).
  - As in many cultures, eating together in Israel was deeply significant. The Pharisees were scrupulous about eating meals in a state of ritual purity, but those in attendance would probably not care about this. The real concern, then, in Jesus’ eating with them meant that He also disregarded these traditions (Matt 15:2; cf. Mark 7:1–4).

- Jesus, responding to why He would eat with such people, likens Himself to a physician. Placing this dialogue among the many healing miracles underscores their role of illustrating Jesus' work of salvation in calling sinners to spiritual healing.
  - Having been acknowledged as Teacher (Matt 9:11), Jesus now addresses the Pharisees as students needing more study. He says, "Go and learn," quoting Hosea 6:6, which prioritizes the knowledge of God and His merciful character over burnt offerings (Matt 9:13). Thus He implies that He knows God better than they do.
  - Pious Jews in the time of Jesus fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12; cf. Matt 6:16–18), and also at other times in remembrance of the exile. But these fast days were to be turned into days of "joy and gladness" at the time of Israel's restoration (Zech 8:19). Jesus may be alluding to this time of fulfillment in His parable of the bridegroom (cf. Jer 31:13).
  - John the Baptist likens Jesus to a bridegroom and says this was to be a time of rejoicing (John 3:26–30). The feasting that Jesus took part in, as well as His reference to foreigners sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt 8:11–12), points to the messianic banquet that God "will make for all people" (Isa 25:6).
  - The connection between the parables of the new patch and the new wine is obscured in many Bible translations. In both, Jesus contrasts the gospel of the kingdom, which is new and fresh, with the "old" Pharisaic traditions that carry no divine authority and, like old clothes, should be discarded.
  - The word *oinos* can refer to both fermented wine (Matt 27:34; Eph 5:18) and unfermented or "new" wine—that is, fresh grape juice. Jesus' message, bringing the fulfillment of new covenant promises (Luke 22:20; cf. Jer 31:31–34), is like new wine that cannot be put in old wineskins because it cannot be received by the Pharisees whose traditions were at odds with it.
3. Verses 18–26 (Healing a Woman's Flow of Blood and Raising a Dead Girl to Life)
- Matthew's account of these two miracles is forty percent shorter than Mark's, and highlights the role of faith. The ruler's faith is shown first by the description of his falling down at Jesus' feet as an act of worship (Gk. *prosekynēi*). Also, Matthew begins his account after the girl has already died, and describes the ruler as confident (perhaps in view of 1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:32–37) that all Jesus needs to do is touch his daughter and "she will live" (Matt 9:18; cf. Mark 5:35–36; Luke 8:49–50).
  - Jesus' describing the girl as "sleeping" is in harmony with death's representation throughout the Bible (1 Kgs 2:10; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor 15:20) as a state of unconsciousness (Ps 146:4; Eccl 9:5–6, 10) from which a person can be "awakened" back to life by the power of God (e.g., Matt 27:52; John 11:11–14; 1 Cor 15:51–52).
  - Regarding the woman with a flow of blood, Matthew specifies that she touched the *hem* of Jesus' garment (Matt 9:20). This seems to refer to the blue tassel that served as a sign of redemption, holiness, and obedience (Num 15:37–41). Her touching this symbol of redemption seems to show faith in Jesus as the Redeemer of Israel.
  - Jesus, by drawing out the woman's testimony, excludes the possibility that her healing was due to some magical power in the garment itself. Instead, He points to the woman's faith (Matt 9:22).
  - The Greek word translated "made well" (*sōzō*) is first used in Matthew with reference to Jesus' work of salvation (Matt 1:21). Because the woman's malady rendered her ceremonially unclean and thereby excluded from worship in the temple and the synagogue, Jesus' healing touch would enable her to rejoin Israel's religious life. This effect, together with Jesus' reference to His work as a physician for "sinners" (Matt 9:12–13), suggests these healings as parabolic of Jesus' work of "healing"—that is, saving people from sin.
4. Verses 27–34 (Healing Two Blind Men and a Mute Demon-Possessed Man)
- The title "Son of David," by which the blind men addressed Jesus, shows their faith in Him as the messianic King of Israel (cf. its only previous occurrence in Matt 1:1 and also later in Matt 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42). Persistence in following Him into the house is further evidence of their faith—as is their affirmative answer to the question of whether they believe, and their address of Jesus as "Lord" (Matt 9:28).
  - The wording of Jesus' response, "According to your faith let it be to you," recalls the language of the Genesis creation account with its frequent use of the imperative form of *ginomai* ("come into being"). The other two times that Jesus heals by using this command is at a distance, which emphasizes even more strongly the power of His word (Matt 8:13; 15:28).
  - The healing of the mute and demon-possessed man is unique to Matthew, but the charge that Jesus casts out demons by means of the ruler of the demons will be repeated (Matt 12:22–24) in connection with a story found also in Mark (3:20–22) and Luke (11:14–16). Reference to a supernatural "ruler" over the demons suggests the existence of a rival kingdom to the king-

- dom of heaven being proclaimed by Jesus.
5. Verses 35–38 (Workers Needed for the Harvest)
    - The two summaries of Jesus’ work, showing it centered in preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing (Matt 4:23; 9:35), bracket the chapters that describe these two elements in detail (Matt 5–7; 8–9) and show that Jesus ministered to the whole person (spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally).
    - The description of Jesus having compassion on the multitudes, because they were “like sheep having no shepherd,” is similar to Moses’ plea that God appoint someone to succeed him as Israel’s leader. At God’s direction, Moses laid hands on Joshua (Num 28:17–23), who as a prophet “like” Moses prefigured Jesus (Deut 18:15–18), the New Testament “Joshua” (their names are the same in Greek; cf. Heb 4:8–11).
    - Jesus prepares the disciples for their upcoming mission by directing their attention to 1) the plentiful “harvest” of those in Israel ready to follow Jesus. 2) the shortage of workers, and 3) the need to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest” (Matt 9:38, ESV) for additional workers.

#### Application of the Chapter

Important lessons contained in this chapter include:

1. It is just as important to act on our faith as it is to believe. Thus we may encourage others’ faith, just as the

paralytic’s friends did. Furthermore, if we fail to act on our faith we might legitimately question the strength of our faith and even whether we, in the biblical sense, really believe at all.

2. Since Jesus already knows our thoughts, we should not hesitate to share them honestly with God in prayer and trust in His willingness to help us be of greater usefulness in His service.

3. In light of Jesus’ gentle rebuke to the Pharisees for not knowing the Scriptures well enough, what might He say to us as pastors, teachers, or church members regarding our knowledge of God and the Bible?

4. Jesus’ ministry to the whole person is an example for Adventists to follow His method in all aspects of our labor for Him, whether in pastoral, medical, educational, or other lines.

5. Jesus encourages us not only to pray for the lost but also to pray for additional ways of reaching out to them, both as a church and as individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise indicated.

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*No man can have the spirit and mind of Christ without being rendered better by it – in all relations and duties of life.*

*Ellen G. White, 4T 347*

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