

HEALING FOR THE HARASSED AND HELPLESS

Ben Janssen | **Matthew 9:35–10:15** | December 13, 2020

³⁵ And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” ¹ And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. ² The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ And proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. ⁹ Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, ¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. ¹¹ And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. ¹² As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³ And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴ And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

Joy to the World is one of the most well-known Christmas hymns. But some have said that it is not a Christmas song at all but rather a song about the Second Coming of Jesus. The third verse seems to have the end times in mind:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

The hymn’s writer, Isaac Watts, didn’t indicate whether he meant the song to be sung in celebration of the first or second coming of Jesus. But surely that’s because to say it is either a Christmas song or a song of eschatology is to present a false dichotomy. Christmas is eschatology. The birth of Jesus means that the long-awaited eschatological kingdom of God had come.

So if *the King* has been born, and if his kingdom has come and is really here, even if not yet in its fullness, then why do sins and sorrows still grow? Why do thorns infest the ground? What difference does it make to say the kingdom is now here if there are still sins and sorrows? What difference does it make in how we live our lives whether or not the kingdom of God is now here? In this passage, we get answers to these types of questions as we consider the true human condition, the kingdom of God as cure for that condition, and how it is that the kingdom of God advances today.

THE TRUE HUMAN CONDITION

First, if we're going to see the difference that the King and his kingdom makes, we have to see the helpless state we are in apart from it. Here in verse 36, we are told that Jesus "had compassion" on the crowds of people that had gathered around him. He had compassion because he saw the true human condition.

Diseased and Disabled

Now if you skim through the last couple of chapters in Matthew, you'll find story after story of Jesus healing people of diseases and disabilities. He heals a leper and the paralyzed servant of a centurion (Matt 8:1-13). He cures Peter's feverish mother-in-law (Matt 8:14-15) and later that evening he "healed all who were sick" in the region (Matt 8:16). He casts out demons from two men (Matt 8:28-34), heals another paralyzed man (Matt 9:1-8), and restores life to a ruler's daughter (Matt 9:23-26) after healing a woman who had suffered from a disease for twelve years (Matt 9:20-22). He restores sight to two blind men (Matt 9:27-31), gives speech to a man who was mute (Matt 9:32-33). His activity is so extensive that the crowds proclaimed, "Never was anything like this seen in Israel." (Matt 9:33).

And then verse 35 tells us that "Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction." So the crowds who were coming to Jesus were not primarily healthy people who were merely captivated by Jesus's teaching. At least, Matthew doesn't paint the picture that way. He shows us crowds of people coming to Jesus and then receiving some sort of physical healing.

Harassed and Helpless

But now notice what verse 36 goes on to say. When Jesus saw the crowds, "he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." That's not exactly the way sick people are usually described. *Harassed? Like sheep without a shepherd?*

The word *harassed* ("distressed" in the CSB; "bewildered" in the NET; "confused" in the NLT) refers to the act of bothering or annoying someone. And the word *helpless* ("dejected" in the CSB) comes from a verb that in classical Greek means "to throw down" or "to throw away" or to "scatter." When Jesus saw the crowds, he saw that they were "not only exhausted but also abandoned, without resources, scattered and dispersed."¹

Yes, they were sick, physically diseased and disabled. But they were also oppressed, impoverished, unable to get the help they truly needed.

Needing Physicians and Pastors

Jesus sees the human condition differently than we do, and thus he sees the human need differently, too. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus is having a meal with a bunch of hated tax collectors and well-known sinners, and the Pharisees are scandalized that Jesus would hang out with such riffraff. But Jesus's response is interesting. He says, "Those who are well have no need of a

physician, but those who are sick” (Matt 9:12). Why is Jesus hanging out with such immoral people? Because they are sick. Sinners need physicians.

And now here in this passage we see Jesus hanging out with ill people, and he is moved with compassion because they are shepherdless. Sinners need physicians, and the sick need pastors.

Or, to put it another way, sin is never only a spiritual problem, and sickness is never only a physical problem. The Bible makes it plain that the consequences of sin are very much seen and felt in the physical universe, starting with multiplied pain in the labor of childbearing (Gen 3:16) and in the labor of survival (Gen 3:17-19). But the Bible also makes it plain that where we see physical brokenness, we should see a spiritual explanation for it. The answer to the question why there is pain and suffering, disease and disability, is because there is sin.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS CURE

When Jesus saw the crowds, he saw their true condition, and he “had compassion for them” (v. 36). The verb here means more than just “to have compassion.” Jesus does not merely look on the crowds and say, “Oh what a pity!” He is so deeply moved that he cannot help but respond. He goes into action. And his actions prove that he is the king, that his kingdom has come, and that the kingdom is the true cure for the human condition.

The Promise of the Kingdom

The Bible’s solution to sin and sickness is the kingdom of God. When the kingdom of God comes, the Bible promises, we will have all the help we need to be cured of both sickness and sin. Indeed, since the Bible claims there is a connection between them, then if there is a cure for one—I mean a real *cure* not just a masking of the symptoms—then there is a cure for both.

This is the great promise of the Bible. According to the prophet Isaiah, the day is coming when God “will swallow up death forever” and God “will wipe away tears from all faces” (Isa 25:8). That’s the Old Testament promise that is fulfilled in Revelation 21:4 which says that God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

The Power of the Kingdom

Now how can that be? What kind of a kingdom is this? What kind of a world would it be where there is no sorrow, no regret, no remorse? What kind of a world would it be where there’s no death or pain? Just think of it!

Skeptics will point out that this kind of a world can’t be the same one we live in today. They will tell you that this world depends on things like pain and even death. Isaiah famously speaks of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the leopard lying down with a young goat, the calf and the lion getting along together just fine (Isa 11:6). But this would require such a dramatic transformation of the biology of a wolf, leopard, and lion that we could hardly call them the same creatures any more.

Yes, there are mysterious here that we cannot yet explain. We do not yet know what the kingdom of God in its fullest display will look like. But we get a glimpse of the power of the kingdom when we see the activity of Jesus. The power of the kingdom is evident in the authority its king possesses.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the crowd expresses astonishment at the teaching of Jesus because he taught “as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:28-29). After Jesus calms the storm in Matthew 8:26, the disciples marveled, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?” Jesus has the authority to command nature. And then you’ve got all these accounts of Jesus healing people. Miracle stories are everywhere in the four Gospels; as much as one-third of the content of Mark’s Gospel is comprised of such accounts.² Clearly, Jesus has the authority of the King needed to bring about the promises of the kingdom.

The Miracles of the Kingdom

And it seems that one of the major burdens of the four Gospels is to show that these miracles of Jesus are there not so much to prove that Jesus is God but to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. He is the King who brings with him the promised kingdom of God (Jn 20:31).

Thus the miracles of Jesus are the miracles of the kingdom. They are meant to show us something about what life is like in the kingdom of God. But *miracle* is not the word they use, and the English word is fraught with misunderstanding. We should probably avoid it. N.T. Wright has pointed out that the English word *miracle* or even words like “natural” and “supernatural” carry meanings that are not intended by biblical authors when they write about such things. The words they use are usually translated “extraordinary things” or “powers” or “signs,” and do not carry “overtones of invasion from another world, or from out space.” Rather they intend to communicate

that something has happened, *within* what we would call the ‘natural’ world, which is not what would have been anticipated, and which seems to provide evidence for the active presence of an authority, a power, at work, not invading the created order as an alien force, but rather enabling it to be more truly itself.³

So Jesus was not, and God, for that matter, is not a miracle worker, if by *miracle* we mean something bizarre and random and devoid of meaning or purpose. Jesus refused to do “signs” merely to perform or to entertain (Jn 6:30).

Instead, the “signs” that Jesus did do are indications that he is the king of the promised kingdom, that the kingdom of God had come when he came, and that, as the prophets had predicted, the world that is begins to look like a new world in which things seem to work as they were always meant to work in a material, physical, “natural” universe.

THE ADVANCE OF THE KINGDOM

Now, what has happened to the kingdom, we might ask? Did it come with Jesus and then go away with Jesus? Did Jesus leave this world as a failure, retreating to heaven but with a promise to come back and finally win this time?

The Crushing Blow

We could only conclude this by ignoring the significance of the cross and resurrection for the kingdom of God. The Bible says that on the cross Jesus dealt the decisive blow to the god of this world. When Jesus died on the cross, God “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col 2:15).

And this crushing blow to the head of the Serpent, the victory of Jesus, is also our victory over Satan. God has delivered us from the power of the devil (Heb 2:14).

The importance of Christ’s cosmic victory must not be underestimated in the Christian life. Many of Jesus’s “miracles” involve casting out demons. The stories show us “the hideous ways that Satan endeavors to create misery and suffering in the lives of people.” But they also show us the mercy and compassion of Jesus and his power to bring deliverance from Satan.”⁴ Because Jesus has crushed the enemy, the kingdom of God has not been in retreat but is advancing.

Workers Needed for the Kingdom

Thus in our text this morning we find Jesus looking over the crowds, seeing their true condition, and moved with compassion. So he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matt 9:37). The implication is that the kingdom of God has come, like a field ready to be harvested.

All that is needed are workers. The workers do not create the harvest; they do not bring the kingdom of God or cause it to grow. But they are needed to bring in the harvest.

The image again is a harvest of souls, of human lives. There is sickness and harassment, but the kingdom of God is the good news that is needed. We just need workers. Pray for workers!

A text like this is often used as a “missionary” text. But it is no “missionary” text unless by that we mean that all citizens of the kingdom should see they are all missionaries in their good works of vocation coupled with pastoral ministry, leading people to Jesus who alone possesses the goods and services we really need.

Delegated Authority

What happens next in this passage is that Jesus sends out his twelve disciples to do the same work he did. He told them to “proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons” (Matt 10:7-8). The same kind of activity that Jesus himself had done.

How is it possible for the twelve to do what Jesus had done? According to verse 1, Jesus gave them “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.” The authority over unclean spirits could only be the authority of the Holy Spirit. By being given the Holy Spirit, the disciples possessed an authority over the demons and were able to drive them out.

The authority of the kingdom of God is the fulfillment of the new covenant that God has made with all his people in Christ, promising to pour out his Holy Spirit upon every last one of them. Thus, this authority is not relegated only to the twelve, but includes you and me as well (see Matt 28:18-20).

This authority entails representing Jesus in the world, not only in carrying the message of redemption and making disciples, but also in carrying on the works of Jesus as they fulfilled this task of building the church. This authority is passed on to all believers.⁵

The burden of the Gospel writers is to convince us of that, to convince us that the kingdom of God has come and with it the authority to reap the harvest of human persons for the King.

But what about those “miracles”? Why doesn’t God give the same miraculous powers to his people today? Well, sometimes he does do the unexpected through them, so we ought to pray with confidence in a God who is able to heal any sickness or disability. But the kingdom of God is a “miracle” itself, that is, a power whereby God can accomplish his work not only from some outside demonstration of power, but even through the ordinary work of God’s people. These ordinary works are miraculous insofar as they point people to the king and his kingdom.

This is the good news. This is joy to the world: that in Christ we find the cure for our sins and sorrows.

¹ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (TLNT), translated and edited by James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), [3:223](#).

² Clinton E. Arnold, “The Kingdom, Miracles, Satan, and Demons,” in *The Kingdom of God*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [153](#).

³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), [187–188](#).

⁴ Arnold, “The Kingdom,” [165](#).

⁵ *Ibid.*, [167](#).