

## Salvation for Desperate People (Matt. 9:18–26)

*By Jacob D. Gerber*

After Jesus first demonstrated his authority as a teacher (Matt. 7:29), Jesus has continued to demonstrate his authority in a variety of ways. Additionally, Jesus has shown his authority to cleanse the unclean, to heal the sick, to call disciples, to calm the storm, to cast out demons, and to forgive sinners. Only when Jesus ate and drank with the tax collectors and sinners, though, did we catch a glimpse of Jesus' willingness to do all this, when he said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). Still, does this mission straddle Jesus with a burden that he would prefer not to carry? In Matthew 9:18–26, we catch our fullest glimpse (so far) of the eager love of Jesus. In three compassionate interactions, we see that *Jesus came to save desperate people*.

### Jesus Saves the Humbled (Matt. 9:18–19)

The connection between this story and the previous one is tight: "While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in..." (v. 18). That is, while Jesus was talking about mourning while the bridegroom is present, sewing unshrunk patches on shrunken garments, and procuring fresh wineskins for new wine (Matt. 9:15–17), a ruler came in to talk with Jesus. There are parallels to this story in Mark 5:21–43 and Luke 8:40–56, and in both of those Gospels we learn the name of this ruler: Jairus. As to the nature of a "ruler," Grant Osborne offers this thorough explanation:

Normally an ἄρχων [*archōn*] was a civil community leader (there were seven of them) and the ἀρχισυνάγωγος [*archisynagōgos*; "ruler of the synagogue"; Mark 5:22; Luke 8:41] was the president of the synagogue (one of three officers), but often the same person held both offices. He would be a wealthy patron and member of the synagogue board who was responsible for the order and progress of worship. He apportioned tasks in it like the reading of Scripture or giving of the homily and was in charge of finances as well as of maintaining the building. He may have been elected to a term of office, though at times the office remained in a family for generations.<sup>1</sup>

This description is important, since it demonstrates the fact that the Jewish church (the synagogue) "was ruled by a board of elders."<sup>2</sup> Jairus was one of those elders/rulers, as was Nicodemus (John 3:1). As Presbyterians, we do not believe that the office of a Ruling Elder emerged brand new for the New Testament church. Rather, we see the office of Ruling Elder as connected directly to this

---

<sup>1</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 348.

<sup>2</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 430.

practice of the “rulers” of the Jewish Church, like Jairus.<sup>3</sup>

What this ruler asks for is extraordinary in two ways. First, he asks Jesus to give life to his daughter who has “just died” (v. 18). The miracles that Jesus has performed so far have been extraordinary, but nothing would compare to raising a dead person back to life. Where Mark and Luke write much longer versions of this story, Matthew’s is much shorter, so that “Matthew at once lets us learn the essential fact from Jairus, namely, that his daughter was actually dead.”<sup>4</sup> Second, by asking Jesus to lay his hand on her, he is asking Jesus to violate the prohibition against touching anyone or anything that is ceremonially unclean—including (and especially) a dead body.

In this story, we cannot help but to think back to the story about the centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant (Matt. 8:5–13). There, Jesus offered to come and heal the servant, but the centurion refused, declaring that Jesus need “only say the word, and my servant will be healed” (Matt. 8:8). In contrast, this ruler’s faith is smaller, since he asks Jesus to come with him to touch his daughter. We should remember that the centurion was a Gentile, and the ruler was an officer in the synagogue, which underscores the accuracy of Jesus’ astonishment that he had found in the centurion such faith as he had otherwise found “with no one in Israel” (Matt. 8:10). We may wonder how, then, Jesus will respond to the demonstrably weaker faith of this man who had more knowledge, covenant privileges, and official position, and, therefore, should have had stronger faith. Will Jesus scold him, send him away, and tell him to come when his faith is stronger?

Instead, the response of Jesus underscores his immediate reaction: “And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples” (v. 19). The word “rose” here does not necessarily mean that Jesus was sitting or lying down and needed to stand up before moving. Rather, this is more like our expression, “he up and went”—again, the emphasis is on immediacy.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, we should note that Jesus is here the subject of the verb “followed,” whereas in every other case in the Gospel of Matthew this word describes how others were (or should be) following Jesus (Matt. 4:20, 22, 25; 8:1, 10, 19, 22–23; 9:9, 27; 10:38; 12:15; 14:13; 16:24; 19:2, 21, 27, 28; 29:29, 34; 21:9; 26:58; 27:55). Finally, the tacked-on addition of the last phrase, “with his disciples,” almost suggests that Jesus’ abrupt movement caught the disciples off guard, so that they followed him only after they realized that their Master was on the move.

What all of this emphasizes is the extraordinary compassion and readiness of Jesus that leaps to help at even the weakest faith. John Calvin has a beautiful passage about this point:

Yet Christ yields to his prayers, and encourages him to expect a favorable result, and thus proves to us that his faith, however small it might be, was not wholly rejected. Though we have not such abundance of faith as might be desired, there is no reason why our weakness should drive away or discourage us from prayer.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier, we noted that Jesus not only had the sole authority to forgive sinners, but that he *wanted* to

---

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1832), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 372.

<sup>5</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 430.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:410–11.

do so as his mission and mandate into this world (Matt. 9:6–13). Here again, we see not only that Jesus is capable of saving this man’s daughter, but that he is eager to do so, at even the smallest faith that seeks his favor. Even so, we should not overstate the weakness of this man’s faith. Lenski writes, “To be sure, this is less faith than that of the centurion (8:8), yet when Jairus says, ζήσεται [*zēsetai*], “she shall live,” he shows that his faith is by no means insignificant.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas Jairus’s faith is less than the centurion’s, all too often our faith is less even than Jairus’s, and Jesus’s eagerness to help Jairus gives us confidence that he will also rise to help us.

### Jesus Saves the Hopeless (Matt. 9:20–22)

As Jesus is on with way with Jairus, the same word used to narrate Jairus’s interruption of Jesus (“behold”) now appears to tell us that another person enters the scene: “And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, for she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his garment, I will be made well.’” (v. 20–21). As this woman interrupts Jesus’s mission to raise Jairus’s daughter, Hendriksen makes an important observation about how frequently Jesus is interrupted:

Again and again during his earthly ministry Jesus was interrupted; namely, in his speaking to a crowd (Mark 2:1ff.), conversing with his disciples (Matt. 16:21ff.; 26:31ff.; Luke 12:12ff.), traveling (Matt. 20:29ff.), sleeping (Matt. 8:24, 25), and praying (Mark 1:35ff.). The fact that none of these intrusions floor him, so that for the moment he would be at a loss what to do or what to say, shows that we are dealing here with the Son of man who is also the Son of God! What *we* would call an “interruption” is for him a springboard or take-off point for the utterance of a great saying or, as here, for the performance of a marvelous deed, revealing his power, wisdom, and love. What for us would have been a painful exigency is to him a golden opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

Once again, the compassion and eagerness of Jesus to serve the suffering comes to the foreground. We ought not miss it.

According to the book of Leviticus, a woman’s normal menstrual cycle rendered her unclean for seven days, and required certain rites of purification before she would be counted clean again (Lev. 15:19–24). Beyond this legislation, there was a special provision for if “a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstrual impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness. As in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean” (Lev. 15:25; see also vv. 26–30). Thus, this woman had been unclean for twelve years. Although she would not have been as separated from Israelites as lepers, her condition would no doubt have been a source of “embarrassment, humiliation, and degradation.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1943), 372.

<sup>8</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 431.

<sup>9</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 395–96.

More than that, the impurity of her condition directly threatened the holiness of Jesus. As the Gospel of John makes clear, Jesus is the Word of God who “tabernacled” among his people (John 1:14). In Leviticus, immediately following the passage that dealt with a woman who had a discharge of blood for many days, the law explains that separating people with various impurities served an important role in preserving the purity of the tabernacle: “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst” (Lev. 15:31). By touching Jesus, she threatened to defile God’s ultimate tabernacle: Jesus Christ, in whom God dwelt among his people bodily. It is possible, then, that she sought to touch his garment in order to avoid touching Jesus himself, in the hopes that even a small degree of separation would avoid contaminating Jesus with her uncleanness.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless, we must also consider this woman’s faith. She goes through the trouble of touching Jesus with the thought that, “If I only touch his garment, I will be made well.” The phrase “be made well” would more literally be translated “be saved” (σωθήσομαι; *sōthēsomai*). Jesus then uses the same word when he turns to her and says, “Take heart, daughter, your faith has *saved you* [ESV: ‘made you well’]” (v. 22). Almost certainly this is meant to echo a meaning that extends beyond the bleeding issue this woman has, as Craig Blomberg notes: “The NIV rendering [‘healed’] fits the situation in the life of Jesus, but Matthew’s church undoubtedly could see implications for the woman’s spiritual state as well.”<sup>11</sup>

Jesus’ response to this woman echoes what he had said to the paralytic; in both places Jesus recognizes the individual’s faith and encourages the individual to “take heart,” and where Jesus had earlier said “child,” he now says “daughter” (Matt. 9:2, 22). There are also close connections between the healing of this woman and the healing of Jairus’s “daughter” (v. 18), since each narrative “is concerned with a woman (though of very different ages), and each raises the issue of ritual purity, since both a woman with a discharge of blood and a dead body rendered unclean anyone who touched them.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, Jesus does not suggest here that the woman’s faith served as the power that saved her, but only that it was through the woman’s faith that God’s power broke through to heal here: “as...the hand that received the gift.”<sup>13</sup>

## Jesus Saves the Helpless (Matt. 9:23–26)

After healing the woman with the bleeding, Jesus continues on to Jairus’s home. The flute players and the crowd “making a commotion” (v. 23) would have been common—and, even expected—at the home of a family mourning the death of a loved one: “The Mishnah lays it down that ‘Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman’ (*Ketub.* 4:4); for the daughter of a ruler there would be much more than that. Matthew is referring to professional mourners who were on the job very promptly (cf. Jer. 9:17–18). But relatives and friends would join in with their loud wailing (the *noisy crowd*).”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 431–32; Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 396.

<sup>11</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 361.

<sup>13</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 374.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 231.

When Jesus tells the crowd to leave, “for the girl is not dead but sleeping,” they laugh at him in response (v. 24). By laughing, the crowd gave “an indirect confirmation of the actuality of the girl’s death.”<sup>15</sup> When Jesus raised Lazarus, he also used the metaphor for sleeping: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him” (John 11:11), and then confirmed the true meaning of the statement: “Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus has died...’” (John 11:14). Certainly, Jesus does not mean that the girl is sleeping (i.e., as in a coma), but only that he has come to “awaken” her by bringing her to life again. In any case, Jesus puts the crowd outside according to a rather forceful description: “‘Put outside’ seems too mild a term for *ekballō*, which can be translated *throw out* or even *exorcise!* Jesus evicts the mourners probably to regain some calm and decorum inside.”<sup>16</sup> Then, Jesus went in, took the girl by the hand, and she arose (v. 25). Unsurprisingly, “the report of this went through all that district” (v. 26).

## Discussion Questions

1. What is Jesus doing when the “ruler” comes to him (v. 18)? What kind of position would this ruler have held? How has his daughter’s sickness and death humbled him from his high position? What clues does Matthew give us to evaluate the faith of this ruler, especially in contrast with the faith of the centurion (Matt. 8:5–13)? What speaks positively, and what negatively? How does Matthew characterize Jesus’ response to this humbled man?
2. What is Jesus doing when the woman with the discharge of blood touches him (v. 20)? What did the Law say about a woman who suffered this kind of medical condition (Lev. 15:25–30)? What warnings did the Law give concerning the implications toward the tabernacle (Lev. 15:31)? How, though, does Jesus respond to this hopeless woman? How does the faith of this woman relate to the salvation that she receives?
3. When Jesus finally arrives at the home of the ruler, who else is there (v. 23)? Why does Jesus tell them to leave (v. 24)? What does Jesus mean when he says that the girl is only sleeping (v. 24)? How does the laughter of the mourners confirm that this girl is truly dead (v. 24; cf. John 11:11, 14)? Why does Jesus touch the girl to raise her from the dead, when he previously praised the centurion for believing that he could heal someone from afar?
4. What do we learn here about the eagerness and willingness of Jesus to save desperate people? Are you more prone to doubt the ability or the willingness of Jesus to save you? How has Matthew demonstrated Jesus’ competence and compassion so far? Would you characterize yourself as humbled, hopeless, or helpless, or in another position entirely? How do you think that Jesus relates to you where you are right now?

---

<sup>15</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 250.

<sup>16</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 161.