

# The Great Harvest

Matthew 9:18-38

“Faith is the substance of the things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.... But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:1-2, 6). Jesus dealt constantly with the ugly realities of this world—tragedy, isolation, disability, cruelty, hypocrisy, slander—all things done by and to sinful people. But because He trusted a good and sovereign God, He was moved with compassion and brought the transforming power of God’s kingdom.

## Dead & Unclean

The events in this passage of Matthew’s Gospel follow a similar pattern to what happened after the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus cleansed a leper who believed He could do it (“Lord, if you are willing” 8:2), restored the centurion’s servant who had greater faith than Israelites (8:11), touched Peter’s mother-in-law to heal her fever, and then ministered to the multitudes (8:18). Now He is touched by an unclean woman (v. 20), raises the daughter of an official who knows He can (v. 18), touches the eyes of the blind men and casts out the demon that made the man mute (v. 33), and then has compassion on the multitudes (vv.35-36). The first two healings are paired or intercalated in a sandwich story where the first event is interrupted by the second, and then finished. A ruler falls down before Jesus saying his daughter has just died, but if Jesus will come lay His hand on her, she will live (v. 18). As Christ and the disciples are on their way to her, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years suddenly comes up from the behind and touches the hem of His garment, believing it will heal her (vv. 19-21). She’s right: “Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well” (v. 22). He arrives at the ruler’s house to find the musicians and mourners who were likely hired (v. 23). The crowd ridicules Him when He says she is sleeping, but when they are put out, He takes the girl’s hand and raises her (vv. 24-25). News of this spreads throughout the region (v. 26). The woman’s bleeding doesn’t just make her sick, but ceremonially unclean and estranged from the people and worship of God (Lev. 15:25-31). She has been bleeding for twelve years, and twelve is the number of Israel, indicating she represents the nation—an unclean and estranged people from God, longing to be restored. Mark tells us that she has spent all her money on doctors who only made it worse (Mk. 5:26). Israel is plagued by death and uncleanness, but Jesus comes to heal the daughter of Zion: “Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst, says the Lord” (Zech. 2:10). The woman’s uncleanness and the impurity of the dead girl do not spread to Jesus; His holiness and life spread to them, restoring and healing. He dwells among us to heal and restore regardless of who scorns. These acts seem small, but word gets out (v. 26).

## Blind & Mute

Matthew introduced Jesus as the Son of David (1:1). The two blind men who follow Him are first to call Him this: “Sons of David, Have mercy on us!” (v. 27). Like the blessed who have not seen Him but believe, the blind men know about the things Jesus has been doing and recognize Him as the true king of Israel. He comes to their house and He heals according to their faith (vv. 28-29). Matthew emphasizes the faith of those who are healed. In contrast to “faith healers”, there is no presumption that Jesus will heal, only the faith that He can. We believe that He can and sometimes does, which is completely different than falsely prophesying that He will. Jesus is not a sideshow wonder worker. He heals in private, commanding them to “See to it no one knows about it” (v. 30). They disobey and make Him known throughout the

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region. The gospel is not a spectacle or self-improvement program to heal all of our physical or emotional maladies now. Jesus came to die for our sins and teach us to trust God until we are dead. The mute, demon-possessed man is healed, and again the crowds marvel: “It was never seen like this in Israel” (v. 33). The Pharisees conclude the opposite: “He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons” (v. 34). Isaiah prophesied that this day would come: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing” (Is. 35:5-6). As the dead, unclean, blind, and mute are healed and restored, the Pharisees see demonic activity. Some of them know it’s a lie, but there’s no reason to think many are not genuinely convinced. This is what it means to call good evil, and evil good, to put darkness for light, and light for darkness, bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter (Is. 5:20). The more goodness is done before their eyes, the blinder they become. And the more we know our need of God’s grace, the clearer we see. It’s the third time that the news goes out and many people hear about what Jesus has done (vv. 26, 31, 33). He has become a real threat to their power, and He tries to limit His exposure until it’s time to go to the cross.

## Weary & Scattered

Jesus travels through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every sickness and disease among the people (v. 35). His kingdom is not about sitting on a throne in a palace, but actually changing lives. The portrait Matthew paints leaves no doubt that Israel is a mess. If you took a tour of Canaan before the conquest, you’d expect to see demon possession, injustice, oppression, warring factions, and all that comes with the absence of God’s peace and blessing. *But this is Israel.* It’s not supposed to be this way. Jesus’s verdict leaves nothing out: “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (v. 36). The prophet Micaiah said the same thing when Ahab ruled in Israel (1 Kgs. 22:17). Ahab filled the land with idols and listened to his wife Jezebel’s counsel to steal people’s land and kill the prophets. Ahab called Elijah “the troubler of Israel” (1 Kgs. 18:17) much as the Pharisees slander Jesus. But it’s Ahab and the Pharisees who actually trouble Israel. Herodias convinces her husband Herod to murder John the Baptizer who came in power of Elijah. When Jesus sees Israel this way, and Matthew tells us He does, all this background informs and shapes our understanding of what’s going on. Israel is weary and scattered, vulnerable and clueless. “Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest’” (vv. 37-38). Jesus Christ looks out on *this mess* and sees people ripe for harvest, ready come into the kingdom He relentlessly preaches. He is not like Elijah lamenting his loneliness and getting told there are 7000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Things have to get really bad before we will finally stop trusting in ourselves. This works on an individual level where, generally speaking, people do not have perfect and blissfully happy lives and then one day decide to become Christians. Things fall apart and then we stop trusting in ourselves. God opens our eyes and then we see the depth of sin in our hearts and lives. This happens to tribes and nations as well. Jesus had this hope even while knowing where His nation was headed, and where He was going—to the cross. There is no place for cynicism and despair in Christ’s kingdom. See the weary and scattered, and have compassion. See the fields ripe for harvest, and pray to the Lord of the harvest to send laborers.