

# Many healings

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[0:00] I'm calling you from HMRC, that's the tax office. Legal proceedings have been started against you.! To avoid these, please call this number.

! You had that phone call? I've had it two or three times. Not that one, but there are plenty of them, aren't they? Well, perhaps it's the police investigating a fraud on your bank account and you need to hand your cash over to a courier or move it to a safe account.

Perhaps you've had that one instead. I can tell you that while I was in the process of... Perhaps they think I'm a sucker, I don't know.

While I was in the process of preparing this sermon, I got a call from somebody claiming to be phoning me about my Windows laptop. Well, she was on to a loser there because I don't own a Windows laptop.

So I didn't have much difficulty in rejecting that call. But there's a long history of these scams, isn't there?

[1:06] It goes back to the Nigerian scam in the early days of the Internet where somebody from Nigeria emailed you and said, Well, an almost uncle has left you a million pounds or whatever it was.

You just need to send some money to this account and then that will organize it all and you'll get the money. But actually, this is just the fraudsters getting up to date, isn't it?

There have been fraudsters and con men. I'm sure Huckster's selling snake oil just as long as there have been fools able to part from their money. I imagine that as long as there's been money, there's been con men.

And what's the remedy? The only remedy is really a healthy skepticism, isn't it? To ask, is this person who they really claim to be?

And some of them can be very convincing. That HMRC one I didn't find very convincing. But some of them are more convincing.

[2:15] Stop and think. Are you being had? Check the facts carefully before you act. Is this person who they claim to be?

Is this call authentic? If a policeman turns up on your doorstep unexpectedly and starts asking intrusive questions, asks to see his warrant card.

That's not being rude or mistrusting. It's simple common sense. But of course, what makes these scams plausible is that sometimes the scare is genuine.

Sometimes you do get a real letter from the tax people saying that you do owe them money. And if you ignore that, you do it at your peril.

Of course, if the fraud people from the bank actually do discover that somebody has hacked your bank account or stole your identity for a credit fraud, then you do need to know about it.

[3:26] And you do need to take effective action. And that, of course, is what makes these scams work at all because they're plausible because they're possible. So what's the key issue here?

The key issue, isn't it, is to say, is this authentic? Sorry, I'm still on that slide. Is this authentic? Is this person who he or she claims to be?

Does this claim make sense? How can I check it out before I dive in and before I do something foolish? Is it authentic?

That becomes the key issue for us, doesn't it? Does this person have the authority to take the action that they're proposing? Or are they simply having us on trying to part us from our hard-earned cash?

Authenticity is the issue here. Let me just say briefly that we're looking at these passages in Matthew's Gospel.

[4:36] Everything in Matthew's Gospel is about the kingdom of heaven, one way or another. That's his great theme. But in this section, he focuses particularly on the king, the Messiah, the anointed king, great David's greater son.

I've just put the structure of these chapters up on the screen there. This is based on a handout that Phil gave those of us who are working together on these passages.

But I actually edited it slightly to bring out even more clearly some of the parallels there. But I'm not actually going to go through this structure thing. It'll be up on the website if you want to look at it.

But it does emphasize that these first three scenes are meant to be taken together. The let for see, the centurion and what happened at Peter's house.

I think are meant to be taken together. So here we're just going to look at the first group. And when you read these Matthew descriptions of the miracles, you find that they're very terse.

[5:39] There is very little here about the symptoms of the suffering and the suffering of the victims. The other Gospels go on at some length about some of these miracles, explaining the symptoms and the struggles that the victims were having.

But Matthew's descriptions are very short, very terse. He says almost nothing except that this person was ill with this particular disease. Instead, Matthew focuses on the authority of the promised king and on the relationship between the king and the subjects of the kingdom.

And one thing we see straight away is that this relationship, verse 10, is based on faith. But it's not blind faith. On the contrary, it's a faith that is based on knowledge.

Faith, in fact, that proceeds from a healthy skepticism and that steps back and say, what's going on here? How can we recognize the authentic king is what Matthew wants to tell us.

And who are, anyway, the loyal citizens of the kingdom? So that's why I read, or rather got Jerome to read, chapter 7, verse 29, which of course is the end of the previous section.

[7:01] The end of the previous section is the Sermon on the Mount. And what's the reaction to the people who heard the Sermon on the Mount?

Well, it says they were amazed because Jesus taught with a note of authority, not as their scribes and teachers. But that raises the question, doesn't it?

It's all very well to teach with a note of authority, but is that authority justified? Is that person really, does a person really have that authority to say that?

And of course, later on in his ministry, the Pharisees and the chief priests will come down with a very firm no. They would say he doesn't. He's claiming an authority that he doesn't have.

So Matthew wants to convince us that Jesus does have the authority that he claims. Of course, Judea at this time, if you know a little of the, even a little of the secular history, you know it was, Judea was rife with teachers and sects.

[8:09] And each sect claimed to be the authentic voice of Judaism. You meet several of them, the Herodians, the Pharisees, the Sadducees. There were plenty of others. The Zealots.

Each sect claimed to be the authentic voice of Judaism, the true heirs of the covenant promises, the one true way, if you like. And each teacher had his band of followers and his distinctive teaching.

Some of them, it seems, were in it for the money and power and fame. I don't doubt that others of them, genuinely, were seeking a renewal of spiritual life of the nation.

But they didn't have the authority to do it. Some, and it's not that many, but as Ben reminded us last week, some even claimed to be the promised Messiah.

So how was the poor punter supposed to navigate the chaos? How was the man in the pew, as it were, to sort out the truth from the fiction?

[9:18] The authentic warning from the scams and con men. This Jesus of Nazareth seemed at least to have a different teaching style. That's a positive beginning.

He claimed spiritual authority and that attracted notice. But, was this authentic? Was this claimed authority genuine or just some new kind of scam?

And this is the issue that Matthew leads us on to confront. Let's look, just acknowledge briefly that these very signs which Matthew describes for us in the 21st century are a problem. We look at, point our telescopes to the heavens and as far as we can tell, same physical laws apply everywhere. How can, does it make sense to believe in this sort of healing miracle? isn't it easier to believe that this stuff was made up by Matthew to prove his case? Now, I don't have time to deal with this issue really in detail here but let me just say that this stuff was public knowledge.

[10:32] Nobody really disputed that these events had happened at the time. There were vastly different interpretations as to what the events meant but if Matthew had made them up it would have been easy for his opponents to disprove them, wouldn't it?

Conspiracy theories, generally speaking, are not too hard to debunk. The conspiracy theory requires, first of all, the testimony of a few dubious, perhaps not very neutral witnesses and then there has to be some sort of official cover-up by the ruling authorities.

You get that in all the conspiracy theories if you look at them on the TV, don't you? NASA is covering up they never really landed on the moon or the FBI is covering up the true facts about the assassination of President Kennedy notwithstanding the fact that practically half the people in the world saw it on their TV screens but still they cover it up.

But notice that here an official cover-up was exactly what the authorities failed to achieve. This was all done in public in spite of the command to the man with leprosy to tell no one and in spite of the fact that Peter's mother-in-law was healed in a private dwelling this all became public knowledge. The answer to John the Baptist's query in chapter 11 when he says are you the one to come he says well just look all this stuff is well known it's in the public domain. Nobody disputes it's happened you can dispute what it means but you can't dispute that it's happened there were multiple witnesses and these witnesses may not have been 21st century skeptics true but they were people of common sense people who saw that something extraordinary was happening that's why they turned up.

[12:25] It makes sense to believe these witnesses if we understand that something of ultimate significance was happening here. We may not understand the biochemistry of it but that doesn't mean it didn't happen.

400 years ago if I turned up to give a sermon with this device in front of me I probably would have got myself burnt as a witch. there's nothing natural about a computer or iPad because it obeys the laws of the universe but it's not in an obvious way and just because we don't understand the biochemistry doesn't mean it doesn't happen it can't happen.

So let's take it that these things did happen that the witnesses were not stupid or blind but they understood something that was extraordinary was happening and after all that's why they turned up.

It says that people came from all over the region to Peter's house because they'd heard and they didn't go away disappointed. So in detail then how does Matthew deal with these issues of authentic the authentic gospel and the authentic king.

First of all I'd like to draw your attention to the actual citizens of the kingdom as opposed to those whom one might have expected. We find this in verses 11 and 12 of chapter 8.

[14:00] Ben so graphically described last week the first person healed was a man with leprosy a social and spiritual outcast and then from the Pharisees point of view it goes from bad to worse because the next person is a Roman officer a Gentile a foreigner and the third person healed was a woman and not even the mistress of the house she was Simon's mother-in-law presumably widowed as she was living with Simon Peter living in the granny flat not anybody very important perhaps but she was the one who Jesus came to who would be regarded as a man were the people of limited spiritual importance if not outright

Gentile dogs so Jesus asked the question doesn't he who are the true inheritors of the promised kingdom those who take their place with Abraham Isaac and Jacob to relate to the king I don't know why the NIV has translated the word subjects in the NIV in verse 12 it talks about the subjects of the kingdom but actually that's not really what the Greek says the AV is more accurate I think in this case the Greek word is hios which I'm told means children of the kingdom in other words those who

are expected to inherit I don't know whether you've got a lot of money in your bank account but if you have doubtless your children are hoping that when you've gone they're going to inherit it but you might have cut them out of your will and then they won't inherit it

I hope you haven't but this is what Jesus is saying here isn't it that the ones who will come to the banquet the ones who will be inheritors of the kingdom it seems will not be the natural children at all because they've forfeited their right to inheritance by their unbelief the ones who will inherit are the ones who seem to be not the natural children of the kingdom at all largely the leper the cursed one the Roman the Gentile dog and the women and children who are not thought of as very important relationship of natural descent from the father will not ensure their place in the kingdom of heaven rather it's those whom Jesus invites from the east and the west those whom Jesus declares as the true citizens and as we see from these signs this relationship with

Jesus requires obedience and service but faith is the key so let's look at this in a bit more detail as Ben very ably told us last week the first healing emphasizes Jesus' ability in verse two are you able to do this job and the sick man has come to the right person and Jesus doesn't want to make the man a public spectacle but he does say that there should be proper authentication for the healing that the priest should say yeah there's no doubt about this this man was sick but now he's healed he was unclean but now he's clean it's noticeable isn't it that the first and third of these signs the man with leprosy and Simon's mother-in-law both include a touch we're told in verse three and verse fifteen that Jesus touched them

Jesus is prepared to touch that which is unclean or unhealthy again Ben touched on this last week the Pharisees priests wouldn't have done that because it would have made them richly unclean but Jesus is not made unclean by touching that which is unclean or unhealthy the general rule from Leviticus is that if the unholy touches the holy then the holy is contaminated but here Jesus is not made unholy instead the cleansing power of God makes the unclean clean and the touch makes the recipient empowered to serve verse fifteen which the disease was preventing the touch is not an essential feature of the healing instead it's a sign of grace that Jesus is prepared to touch which is in need of healing and cleanliness why do I say it's not an essential feature because Matthew gives us this second healing doesn't he by contrast not only does

[19:21] Jesus not touch the patient he's not even physically present the touch is a sign of grace but it's not a limitation of Jesus's power if the emphasis on the first healing is on Jesus's ability to help and the second and the third is a sign of Jesus's empowering grace then the second deals with that central issue of authority does Jesus have the authority to do what he claims the centurion spells it out for us who has a better grasp of authority than a military officer verse 9 a commander expects to be obeyed doesn't he he expects his troops to do what he says if not if they don't the battle is likely to be lost and so he understands that if Jesus says it will be done verse 13 that it is indeed going to happen but we shouldn't lose sight of the fact also that this second sign is still about relationships with Jesus in this case it's not the relationship with the actual person healed but the relationship that Jesus has with the centurion and in fact we're given most detail of this particular healing we're given the interaction that does mention the servant's profound suffering something that really needed compassion and for which the centurion obviously had compassion for his servant but also his relationship with Jesus that he realised that he wasn't worthy to come to

Jesus but that he had to come to Jesus because he was the only one who could help so to sum that up what are the marks the true marks of the true citizens and as I've already said the first sign shows us that the need is for obedience verse 4 the third shows us that the need is for service verse 15 but the central issue is one of faith and we have to envy this Roman his faith don't we doesn't Jesus himself find himself astonished and comment on its extraordinary nature it seems to be strange that Jesus could be astonished but there are a few cases in the scripture where it says Jesus was astonished he was astonished by this man's faith where and how is such faith to be found the word of command is alone alone is sufficient to cure the problem but not enough perhaps to strengthen our faith the reality of it is that most of us need the touch of Jesus to reassure us that

he is there and that he cares but this man's faith is so extraordinary that it's worth examining it a little bit because he's a Roman he doesn't have the covenant promises of the Old Testament to fall back on all he has is the spectacular but not very helpful background of the Roman gods who are entertaining you can't deny that they're entertaining but they're not great help in time of trouble so what does he fall back on he doesn't have those covenant promises of the Old Testament but instead he falls back on his experience as a soldier and yet what would that experience as a soldier tell him first of all well I mean his job was to approach the world through violence and conflict wasn't it that was what a soldier does he's there to fight his experience of the word must be one of violence and conflict and for those who have been in a war tell us that you just cannot imagine it often people who have been in a war won't talk about it because it's unimaginable it's too difficult to describe and this would have been this

Roman soldier's experience of the world and he understands suffering and he's observed the suffering of his servant at first hand verse 6 the man obviously was not just a servant but someone to whom he has a great affection and he's seen this man and he's suffering terribly and so what is the only rational reaction you might think surely it would be to despair and yet this officer's faith is not a matter of hoping against hope it's not a matter of believing six impossible things before breakfast his faith is not based on ignorance instead his faith is based on knowledge and reflection and understanding he observes what's going on gets the intelligence that he needs doubtless somebody's reported to him what Jesus has been doing and then he reacts accordingly and what does he conclude he sees that the suffering of his servant is real but it's not the whole of reality he sees that the evil in the world there is evil in the world that is a truth there is much evil in the world but that's not the whole truth and as a military man he understands doesn't he the chain of command and he knows that if you want something done beyond your own competence what do you do you send a signal to headquarters you go to the one who has authority someone who has the ability to do the job to be effective a soldier has to trust doesn't he that in the fog of war there is someone who knows what's going on who has a plan who is in control now unfortunately in real battles that may not actually be the case and that the commander on the ground may indeed say I desperately need reinforcements but they may not arrive because the general or field marshal may not indeed have the ability to give the help that is needed he may find that he can't do it but this man comes to the one who he knows can help him his spies have been out and said this is the man you need to talk to with this problem this is the man who can help you this is the man who has the authority to help you that's what he says isn't it and so in this case his plea doesn't go unanswered Matthew wants us to see that in spite of appearances in spite of the fact that all the political power seems to be Roman this guy is a Roman officer surely he is the one who has the state the power behind him and Jesus should be glad to go to his house be invited to his house but the officer says exactly the opposite I'm not worthy to have you in my house but I don't need to this man understands that it's not the emperor who has ultimate authority but it is indeed Jesus who has the real authority so then we come to this concluding very brief sorry oh dear sorry about that oh dear we come to this very brief conclusion that

[27:44] Matthew gives to this passage but I'm afraid I'm going to spin it out a bit I'm not going to be as brief as Matthew is I think we need to look at this in some detail because Matthew wants us to understand doesn't he what these signs are really about he wants us to point us away from the immediate medical issues and he points us to Isaiah 53 verse 4 part of that great servant song which describes the promised Messiah if you'd like to turn to it that would be quite useful he wants us to understand that Jesus is not just some random teacher who might have a few good and useful insights but they have to be measured against the other insights of the other scribes and teachers and it certainly isn't the establishment of a Judean national health service that's not what Jesus is about come everyone and be healed there's something actually much deeper and more profound going on and actually

Matthew's quotation here it's Isaiah 53 verse 4 the first part of it his quotation is a little odd the translations of the original verse vary the old NIV says surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows the new NIV says surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering and if you look at the other translations you find they're all a bit different the text is actually a bit difficult to translate

but most New Testament writers when they quote the Old Testament use the standard Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint and quote from that that was the accepted practice but Matthew doesn't actually do that here instead he goes back to the original Hebrew and gives a more direct translation because in fact that Hebrew of the verse is somewhat ambiguous so is

Matthew telling us then that the translators then and now have got it wrong I don't think he is because if you examine the Isaiah passage actually the method the meaning becomes clear so bear with me while I read some of it so I'll read actually from Isaiah chapter 52 verse 13 which is the beginning of this actual passage I'll read through until I stop and then I'll say a few things and then read a bit more so this is the great servant song several servant songs in Isaiah but this is the one that everybody knows the greatest of them perhaps see my servant will act wisely he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted just as there were many who were appalled at him his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness so he will sprinkle many nations and kings will shut their mouths because of him for what they were not told they will see and what they have not heard they will understand who has believed our message to whom has the arm of the

Lord been revealed that's the crucial question that Matthew is asking isn't it who has believed our message to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed he that is the person that Isaiah is writing about the servant grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him nothing in his appearance that we should desire desire him he was despised and rejected by men a man of sorrows familiar with suffering like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not and then we get to the couplet that Matthew actually quotes surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows and how does Isaiah go on yet we considered him stricken by God smitten by him and afflicted so why is all this happening well Isaiah tells us it's because he was pierced for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquities the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed so these healings

I'll go a bit more in a minute but let me just say a few words about this part these healings that Matthew records do indeed show us that Jesus is the one who was promised that's why Matthew quotes it but they tell us far more they tell us to look below the surface appearance the servant is not some great general who will overthrow the Roman rule in fact on the face of it he's rather unattractive and yet he will bless the nations and that includes the Romans Isaiah tells us and the first fruit of that as it were was this Roman officer he will bless the nations he may seem actually unattractive and ineffectual but actually he's the real thing the true servant the real servant that the Jews had always failed to be and they tell us about something about Jesus' healing ministry it tells us that although it was apparently effortless in actual fact that was far from the case

[33:58] Isaiah 53 verses 4 and 5 shows us that it is Jesus' own suffering and wounding that provides the basis for healing that he was the one stricken by God the one who took our punishment Jesus is a king but not like a king like the Roman emperors he's the servant king the one who suffers and dies for his people now let me tell you that every one of those people who Jesus healed is now dead I think I can safely assert that if there were not I'm sure we would know about it some doubtless were healed and lived on to a good old age others perhaps got sick again and maybe died not that long after we don't know but I can assert certainly that they're all dead now at the end of 2

Timothy we find this verse one that you can easily just notice or not notice rather but you can just skip over and this is Paul writing remember Paul the great apostle who once raised somebody from the dead himself but Paul writes Erastus stayed in Corinth and I left Trophimus sick in Myeletus for some reason and we don't know what it is Paul or the Lord perhaps did not choose to heal Trophimus of his sickness and so Paul had to leave him behind and acknowledge the sovereignty of God so should we pray for the sick to be healed well James certainly tells us to do so but I would suggest that doesn't always mean we should expect that healing to take place sometimes God's sovereign will is something different he's telling us something different it seems

Trophimus was left ill let's think of some other examples Peter escaped from prison twice told that in Acts and yet the secular histories tell us that the tradition that the Romans got him in the end they

managed to imprison him and execute him Paul escaped shipwreck twice but he didn't do it by walking on the water neither for that matter was there any big fish involved Paul we know ended his life in prison because in 2 Timothy he talks about it that's why he was sad that he had to leave some people behind Joshua's first battle involved a spectacular intervention by God but the rest of his battles were carried out with normal military tactics and knowledge and yet that didn't deny and refuse to acknowledge the faith that Joshua had that God was with his people quite the reverse he trusted when he went into battle that God was with him and let's face it if we're going to work by statistics many people were healed we were told but I would suggest to you that 21st century medical science has healed far more sick people than

Jesus ever did if it is the healing of the body that is the primary issue here then we should stop to think we should give thanks indeed that we do now have the medical tools that enable suffering to be relieved and healings to be done and if they're not always successful then again that is what we find that sometimes the Lord's will is different and in fact I would suggest to you that Jesus' compassion for those who are suffering and sickness should be translated today in actually making sure that not just in the rich nations but that all the people in the world those benefits of 21st century medicine should be made available that I would suggest to you might be the path of faith in this particular issue of healing of sickness but there are some things that medical science can't cure it can't cure the diseases of the soul and the spirit it can cure perhaps even the diseases of the mind but not the diseases of the soul and the spirit we shouldn't conclude I would suggest to you that God will always heal the sick in this age because that's for the age to come these were just signs of the coming age as Phil was reminding us this morning that it is in the age to come that every tear is wiped away the bitterness of death is turned aside and so what do we pray for we pray that whatever the prognosis God's will should be done it's right to pray that the sick right to us to pray that Chris may be healed it's the right thing to pray for I think but we should also as Chris reminded us last week say nevertheless your will be done Jesus went to death after all the real healing that Jesus tells us is to bring to the nations is that of discipleship teaching them to obey his words Jesus once said to a woman I am the resurrection and the life he who believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die do you believe this that's the crucial question isn't it he who believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die do you believe this can we answer yes to that question well can we

[40:54] I hope we can but it's not an easy answer to give is it so Matthew and Isaiah and Jesus himself are telling us that at the deepest level our problem is not leprosy our problem is not paralysis quadriplegia our problem is not malaria which is what most people think Simon's mother-in-law probably had our real problem is none of those things if we might be suffering from them but Jesus will later go to a say to a man who is also suffering paralysis son your sins are forgiven our real problem is none of those things our real problem is the sickness of our own hearts and spirits and souls and that's something that can be cured that can't be cured with a touch or a word of command so easily in fact scripture tells us that a death is required because justice must be served and yet that death is not the end as Matthew will go on to tell us later in his gospel that the lamb was sacrificed but that wasn't the end of the story but actually if the crowd had really studied Isaiah they wouldn't even have needed to read through to Matthew to the end of his account because he's all there back in Isaiah 53 so let me read a little more of this passage from Isaiah starting now at 53 verse 8 by oppression and judgment he was taken away and who can speak of his descendants for he was cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of my people he was stricken he was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death though he had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering he will see his offspring and prolong his days an extraordinary claim

Isaiah makes there he will see his offspring and prolong his days and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand after the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life and be satisfied by his

knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities therefore I will give him a portion among the great and he will divide the spoils with the strong because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressions for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors there is an authentic king that is what Matthew really wants us to see here but this is precisely the servant that Isaiah was talking about that Jesus' authority is real Jesus is truly the anointed king not just some teacher who may have a few great insights but there is a solution to that Roman centurions problem but more to those greater problems that all of us suffer the problem of sin in our hearts and minds and souls sorry I didn't mean to do that but let me just say one more thing before we stop Isaiah claims that he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors Jesus bore the sin of many but not everyone Matthew tells us that many were healed not the whole population of Judea what made the difference well it was those who came to Jesus who were healed wasn't it like the Roman officer we must first acknowledge that there is a problem we can't handle and that to get something done you have to apply to the person who can really help and Jesus tells us that he is in fact our only access to God's favour so don't look anywhere else don't listen to the scammers and the con men listen to the one who has true authority the one who can really help the one who can yes if he chooses heal our physical sicknesses but much more he's much more interested in healing our spiritual sicknesses that which separates us from God one of the martyrs

I think it's recorded in Fox's book of martyrs if I remember correctly a friend asked him somebody was about to be burnt at the stake are you sure you want to go through with this because life is sweet and death is bitter and the person replied before he was burnt true but eternal life is more sweet and eternal death is more bitter so not deny that death is bitter it is it causes us grief it causes us separation but that is not the most important thing the most important thing is that eternal life is more sweet and eternal death is more bitter so we need to get our mind in the right place ending