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## *The Arrival of the King: Defeating Death*

Matthew 8:1-22


When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. <sup>2</sup> And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” <sup>3</sup> And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. <sup>4</sup> And Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” <sup>5</sup> When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, <sup>6</sup> “Lord, my servant is lying paralysed at home, suffering terribly.” <sup>7</sup> And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” <sup>8</sup> But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>9</sup> For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” <sup>10</sup> When Jesus



heard this, he marvelled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. <sup>11</sup> I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, <sup>12</sup> while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." <sup>13</sup> And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment. <sup>14</sup> And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. <sup>15</sup> He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him. <sup>16</sup> That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. <sup>17</sup> This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases." <sup>18</sup> Now when Jesus saw a great crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. <sup>19</sup> And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." <sup>20</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." <sup>21</sup> Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." <sup>22</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

On July 7, 2005, Al-Qaeda bombed London. The evening after the bombs went off, I was outside one of the Tube stations involved. I was there in my capacity as a clergyman and I spent the time speaking with emergency workers who had been dealing with the carnage in the tunnels below. Death was nothing new to them. They face it daily.

During a break, I went into one of the churches nearby. In the entrance to the church was the bust of Robert Drew, a famous city merchant of the seventeenth century, who died in 1612. Robert Drew had obviously been something of a big-wig in the city; his bust was dressed in all the finery of a London city dignitary. In those



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days the great and the good of the City wore wigs and ruffs around their necks! However it wasn't what he was wearing that caught my attention, it was what he was holding. In his hands was a skull. It was impossible to miss the point: all of us will die one day.

Our culture in the West today likes to bury death. That wasn't the case either in the seventeenth century or the centuries surrounding it. The church building where I work was built in the thirteenth century, and all around it are memorials and tombs to people who have died over the last 800 years. Time and again the monuments carry reminders of our human mortality. One has an hour-glass above it, in which the sand has almost finished passing through; its message is clear – 'time is running out'. Many of the monuments include skulls, emphasising the message – 'you too will die one day'. I once saw a monument with a skeleton carved into it, conveying the unmistakable message – 'this is how all mankind will end'.

The Bible depicts death as a sheet, or a shroud, that hangs over all humanity.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations (Isa. 25:7).

Just as a spread-out sheet completely covers everything below it, so the fact of death is an all-encompassing shroud that envelops mankind. Physical death is an inevitable consequence of our spiritual rebellion against God. This rejection of God's authority, which is what the Bible means by 'sin', demands God's judgment on us all and so, cut off from the author of life, we will surely die.

Matthew chapter 8 presents us with four instances of sickness, death and decay. It is not that any individual's sickness or death is necessarily the direct result of something they did wrong against God. It is rather that Matthew is determined that we should not

live with our heads in the sand. He wants some realism about the universal human condition, so he begins this section of his gospel with a stark reminder that death and the certainty of God's judgment awaits every person.

You may feel that this analysis is desperately bleak, and you may object to such a starkly negative opening to this book. However, Matthew's aim in this part of his gospel is that we should come to understand the days in which we live. It is only as we open our eyes to analyse honestly the true condition of our world that we shall be able to make sense of the world and of what Jesus came to do in it. By contrast, our culture would have us play the ostrich and bury the reality of death and God's judgment, with the result that our culture sees little value either in Jesus or in his work. We would much rather not talk about death, or at most we would prefer only to mention death hand-in-hand with the kind of sentimental platitudes that we hear in songs like 'The Circle of Life' in Walt Disney's *The Lion King*, which speaks of '*great and small on the endless round... on the path unwinding in the circle of life*'. Matthew wants his readers to be realists who face up to the facts and certainties of this world, rather than sentimentalists who turn a blind eye to them. It is only as we come to terms with death and God's judgment that we shall begin to grasp just how significant and universally vital Jesus and his work are.

### **Sin, God's judgment and the shadow of death**

In the first scene of chapter 8 (verses 1-4), we meet a leper. In Jesus' day, leprosy was a catch-all medical term for a number of skin conditions, some more serious than others. However, those with more developed forms of the disease were considered to be as good as dead already. The medics tell us that as a patient's condition deteriorates, the skin becomes scaly and white, and the sufferer takes on the appearance of a dying man. In the first

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century, leprosy was feared as much as cancer, AIDS or Avian flu is today. A man with leprosy had the appearance of death; he carried the stench of death; and he was quite clearly under the sentence of death. Leprosy was no 'man flu'.

The seriousness with which leprosy was regarded is illustrated by two Old Testament examples. When Moses' sister Miriam was struck down with leprosy, Aaron said, 'Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half-eaten away' (Numbers 12 verse 12). When Naaman sought healing from King Jehoram, Jehoram complained, 'Am I God to kill and make alive?' (2 Kings 5 verse 7). Clearly, in both cases, to have leprosy was regarded as a death sentence.

However, Matthew has more than simply physical death in mind when relating this story. Since the leper was as good as dead, he would have been seen in Israel as a living embodiment of God's judgment, for physical death in the Bible is a consequence of spiritual death. We die because we are cut off from God, the author of life, and physical death in the Bible is a sure sign of judgment to follow.

Just as it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment (Heb. 9:27).

As a result, it is not surprising that lepers were regarded as unclean. They were excluded from the people of God, they were shut out from his presence in the temple, and should a leper be healed, he had to make a sacrifice of atonement for his spiritual cleansing if he was to be readmitted amongst God's people<sup>1</sup>.

This view of leprosy and other sickness and disease ties in with the promise of blessings and curses made to God's people in the Old Testament (see Deuteronomy 28 and 2 Chronicles 6). Positively, the land of Israel was intended to be like Eden, a place of blessing and bounty, so that as the people of Israel lived perfectly

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 14:2 – 32

under God's rule in the land they would be a beacon, holding out the offer of life and light to the nations around them. Negatively, if they rejected God, they would become like any other nation – subject to God's judgment and condemnation. These judgments included the skin diseases known as 'leprosy', which were a living symbol of spiritual and physical death.


So then, the presence of this leper in God's promised land was a painful picture of God's nation and world out of relationship with the life-giving creator. Each and every human being across the globe has engaged in his or her own personal rebellion against God and so each and every human being is touched by sin and God's judgment and is covered by the shroud of death. (See Preacher's Note 1 at the end of the chapter)

We have no idea in this case whether leprosy was a direct result of the leper's particular sin or not. Sometimes in the Bible sickness clearly is the result of specific sins; more frequently it is not. Whatever the case in this instance, all people had to do was catch a glimpse of him, or hear the rattle of his warning bell, or a snatch of his cry, 'Unclean!' and they were reminded of the universal condition of humanity, just as I was at the tomb of Robert Drew.

Although this study concentrates on the story of the leper, the same theme runs right the way through the next three scenes from verse 5 to verse 17. Each one is a picture of the sickness, suffering and death that flows from living in a fallen world under God's judgment. Once again, it must be stressed that it is not necessarily any individual, personal sin that is the cause of sickness. The centurion's servant was paralysed and 'suffering terribly'; a painful, lingering death was the most likely outcome. Peter's mother-in-law had a fever<sup>2</sup> which, without penicillin, was

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<sup>2</sup> Peter G Bolt has demonstrated the close association between fever and death in the ancient world in his book *Jesus' Defeat of Death: Persuading Mark's Early Readers*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 125, Cambridge University Press, 2003. He lists



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life-threatening in the first century. These two scenes, together with the sick and demon-possessed of Capernaum, present a grim picture of God's land and serve as a reminder of the death, the decay and the inevitability of God's judgment that we all face.

In so-called sophisticated London, at the heart of one of the world's most vibrant financial sectors, where people are so clued up about so many things, we are desperately naïve when it comes to death. We have health plans and pension plans and holiday plans, but my experience is that people rarely pause to consider the reality of our human condition. As I think of just one small community with which I am familiar, it occurs to me that, without exception, every family is touched by some form of physical, emotional or psychological suffering. One has a life-long debilitating illness to cope with, another a child facing decades of disability; others have to cope with serious mental illness or deep and desperate depression, whilst others have the problems and burdens of approaching old age – weakness, dementia and increasing dependency. All of us are touched by the reality of an imperfect world. All of us face disease, decay and death. In one three-month period recently I was involved in the funerals of three City business people. One was aged 53, another 43 and the third was only 30. (Preacher's Note 2)

When I'm speaking on a Sunday at St Helen's or at the lunchtime City services, I sometimes suggest that we would be wise to make a computer screen-saver with a picture of ourselves in a coffin – just to remind us of our ultimate destiny. We are told that people on death row notch off the days to their death, but there is in reality little difference between those who know

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various sources such as Epictetus: "What do the swords of tyrants do? They kill. And what does fever do? Nothing else." (p. 80), and Philo: "Fever... generally reaches the crisis on the seventh day; for this day decides the struggle for life, bringing to some recovery, to others death." (p. 82).

the total and we who don't. Our days are still numbered. After death, we will face God and his judgment, for we too have lived with God our creator pushed to the fringes of our lives. To use the spiritual imagery of the leper, we too are unclean, we too live in a world under judgment, and outside of Jesus Christ we are spiritually dead. It is the universal condition of humanity from London to Lima, from Sydney to Siberia and from the Arctic to the Antarctic.

Matthew chapter 8 verses 1-22 introduces us to sin, God's judgment and the shadow of death. However, whilst Matthew wants us to come face to face with these facts of life, he also wants to introduce us to the solution in these verses.

### **Jesus, God's King, and the reversal of death**

The aim of this section of Matthew's gospel is to show us that Jesus has arrived as God's King and Saviour and that he has come with all of God's authority to satisfy God's judgment and to reverse the reality of death and judgment for his people. This means that now, as then, we live in a day when God's solution for death and judgment, for sin and condemnation, is open and available to all who will submit to the divine authority of God's chosen King, Jesus Christ.

Matthew's gospel can be divided into 5 major sections (Preacher's Note 3). Each section is made up of a 'narrative' followed by a 'discourse'. In each case the narrative describes the actions of Jesus, whilst the discourse contains teaching which explains those actions. The section studied in this book is the second one, running from chapter 8 through to chapter 10, which might be titled *The Arrival of the King*. Chapters 8 and 9 contain the narrative, and chapter 10 the teaching-discourse with Jesus' disciples. Matthew's third section begins in chapter 11 with a summary of this key lesson of section two, as John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus the burning question: *are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?* (11 verse 3) Jesus answers





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John's disciples: *go and tell John what you hear and see*. Jesus then runs through everything that has happened in the narrative section of chapters 8 and 9:

the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

In other words, yes, I am the one who is to come. I have arrived. The King is here with all of God's authority to provide God's solution to the universal condition of humanity. The point had been clearly demonstrated by Jesus' healing of the leper, Peter's mother-in-law and the demon-possessed and sick of Capernaum, and through his dealings with the centurion. *The Arrival of the King* certainly seems an appropriate title for this section of Matthew's Gospel.

As chapter 8 opens, Jesus is surrounded by people. However, even as the 'vast crowds' swarm around him, Matthew wants to focus our attention on one individual.

Behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."

This leper would have known no human contact for years. He would have lived life shut off from his loved ones. He would not have hugged his wife or played with his children. He may have caught a glimpse of them as they drew near from a distance and left a token of their affection, but then they would have backed off. As the leper approached Jesus, we can imagine the crowd stepping aside, mothers pulling back their children, on-lookers covering their mouths and noses for fear of contamination. Then the leper literally threw himself on the ground before Jesus, and uttered his desperate plea:

"Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."



Matthew says that the man '*knelt before*' Jesus, and the word translated in this way is the same as the word used for the Magi in chapter 2 verses 2 and 11, where it is translated '*they worshipped him*'. The leper was recognising the divine authority of Jesus even as he made this amazing statement. Notice that he said not, 'If you *can*' but 'if you *will*'.

The split-second pause between verse 2 and verse 3 of chapter 8 must have appeared as an eternity to this poor man. But it was not only the leper whose future was dependent upon Jesus' answer. As we wait for Jesus' reply, it's as if eternity hangs in the balance for the whole human race as well. For if Jesus *will* reach out and touch this unclean man under the shadow of death, then there is hope for humanity enveloped, as we are, by the shroud of death; if not, then Jesus has no solution to the human condition. How does Matthew continue his account?

And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean". And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

We are introduced to Jesus. He is God's long-awaited King; he has come with all God's power and authority to deal with sin, death and God's judgment; he has the power to reverse the sentence of death.

Jesus' encounter with the Roman centurion in verses 5-13 takes things one stage further. When God promised the arrival of his great rescuing King in the Old Testament, the day of his coming was explained using the language of a great and glorious banquet. Perhaps one of the clearest passages that spells out the promise is contained in Isaiah 25 verses 6-9:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away

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tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

The food on the menu at this banquet seems to be a combination of Jamie Oliver and Marco Pierre White! The wine is the finest vintage from the vineyards of Bordeaux. The benefits of this banquet include the removal of '*the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations, he will swallow up death forever. And the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces and the reproaches of his people he will take away from the earth.*' The people of Israel were waiting for God's long-promised Messiah, who was going to come with all of God's divine authority to overthrow the effects of human sinfulness (including God's condemnation, judgment and death) and institute this glorious banquet. It is particularly significant that those who benefit from this banquet include those from '*all peoples*' and '*all nations*'.

This background knowledge makes Jesus' words and their effect of immense universal and eternal significance. The centurion recognised the sovereign authority of Jesus. He saw that Jesus had all of God's power to overthrow and reverse the universal condition of humanity. This centurion was a foreigner to Israel and yet in response to his trust in Jesus, Jesus promised him that '*many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven*'. Jesus had come not just for the Jews, but for people from every nation. The announcement of the arrival of God's kingdom on earth was as relevant for the Roman centurion as for the Jewish leper.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law, in verses 14-15, makes it clear that Jesus' conquering authority extends to women too, a revolutionary message in a society which regarded women as property, and where a woman's word counted for little in legal

terms. It is significant that Matthew tells us that '*Jesus touched her hand*'. Just as he had publicly demonstrated the leper's restoration to society by touching him, Jesus showed that this woman was a precious member of his people. As Jesus went on to heal people possessed by demons and with diseases which made them ritually unclean (verse 16), the same point is made, and the message is reinforced that Jesus has come as God's long-awaited King with divine authority to give hope of rescue to every manner and condition of humanity.

I recently flew from London to Sydney. The route is fairly direct out of Heathrow, heading south across the Channel and down across Europe. As we flew, it was possible to follow our progress on a monitor on the seat in front of me. As we flew over Europe, I was reminded of the truth of this study, namely that below us were literally tens of millions facing the universal condition of humanity – sin and God's judgment. As we made our way across the top of India and Pakistan and over the Bay of Bengal, I could not help thinking again of the millions more men and women – each one destined to die and to face God in judgment. We continued around the edge of the South China Sea into Indonesia, aware of innumerable others in the same predicament. But Jesus Christ has arrived as God's King with the solution to the universal human condition. He has absolute authority over each and every one of them. Christ alone holds the key to the reversal of death and the solution to each one's greatest need.

It is possible sometimes to forget the sheer scale and the scope of the gospel claims. No one is excluded from the universal condition of humanity. Everyone is included in God's offer of hope and of salvation. The gospel is for the centurion, for the leper, for Peter's mother-in-law and for the '*many who will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*'. Jesus has arrived. He has all of God's absolute power to provide the solution to the universal condition of all mankind.

### **The cross, Jesus' death and his payment for sin**

This brings us to the final point, as we ask ourselves: 'How then can Jesus do this?'

Matthew gives us the answer in at least two places. In verse 4, Jesus said to the leper:

“See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded for a proof to them.”

It may be that Jesus sent the leper to the priest simply to fulfil the requirements of the law, for if a person did recover from leprosy, he had to go to the priest to show that he had been cleansed (Leviticus 14). Once he had made his sacrifice for atonement, then he could be accepted back amongst God's people. If that is the sense of the verse, then the word 'proof' would mean that the leper was to show himself to the priest and to offer his sacrifice as evidence that he was now better. However, the word 'proof' could just as easily relate to Jesus, his identity and work, as to the leper and his healing. If that is the case, then the leper's appearance in the temple, healed, would have functioned as a proof to the priest of the identity of Jesus as the long-awaited one who had come with all God's authority to deal with the problem of sin, death and judgment.

This reading of the verse makes all the more sense when we consider where Matthew 8 verses 1-4 comes in the overall context of the gospel. The leper's healing comes immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus had been announcing his kingdom standards. Part of his announcement of the kingdom was a spelling out of the law and of the requirements of the law. In his restatement of the law, Jesus showed how absolute are God's demands for perfect living if a person is to be fit for God's kingdom. It is impossible to come away from the Sermon on the Mount without a deep sense of one's own personal failure and spiritual inadequacy, as God's law condemns. Starting with the beatitude '*blessed are the poor in spirit*', Jesus went on to say:

“I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5 verse 20);

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (verse 48)




“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” (verses 21-22)

I can remember only too well being taught the Sermon on the Mount over an eight-week series as a young Christian back in the 1980s. For those eight weeks we almost crawled from our pews as we heard the perfect requirements of Jesus for those who would live in his kingdom. Yet as we come to the end of the Sermon and start this new section of the Gospel in Matthew chapter 8, what is the first thing we are confronted with? A leper! Here is a man who is a powerful and clear symbol of rebellious Israel still in exile under the shroud of sin, death and God’s judgment. As the leper turned up in the temple, his healed existence announced to the priests that they were redundant, that the long-promised King had arrived, with all God’s power and authority to reverse the effects of the Fall by satisfying God’s judgment on sin. It was the law of God that pronounced the sentence of spiritual death and separation on the leper. But by telling this man to show himself to the priest at the temple (verse 4), Jesus at least hinted at his intention to fulfil the atoning sacrifices of the Old Testament and provide God’s long-awaited solution to the wretched condition of our fallen world which stands condemned under God’s law.<sup>3</sup>

However, if we are not convinced by this reading of verse 4,

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<sup>3</sup> We shall see more about this in chapter 3 as we come to the end of the narrative section of these chapters.




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that Jesus' authority and power are being vindicated, then by the time we get to verse 17 we find Matthew concluding this group of healing stories with a quotation from Isaiah 53 verse 4. This chapter of Isaiah is one of the most significant of those passages in the Old Testament which look forward to the cross. By quoting from it in chapter 8:17, Matthew is saying to us that this is how Jesus is going to achieve what he promised – to reverse the effects of this fallen world. God's King has arrived with all of God's authority over death, disease and decay, but he is not only the King, he is also the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

The relevant passage in Isaiah chapter 53 (verses 4-6) is full of the language of sin, of punishment and of substitution:



Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.



The language of sin and rebellion is contained in the words '*transgression*', which speaks of wandering from God; '*iniquity*', which speaks of falling short of God's standards; and '*turning to our own way*' rather than God's. The language of substitution is contained in the repeated insistence that it was not for his own sin that the servant was suffering, but for ours: '*he was wounded for our transgression; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace*'. The language of punishment is contained in the words '*wounded*', '*crushed*' and '*chastisement*'. Right up front, as Matthew announces the arrival of God's King, he insists that God's King will rescue God's people by paying the satisfactory price for our sin. The *fulfilment* of all of this is seen at the end of the gospel as we see Jesus hanging on the cross, being

punished for our sin, in our place, so that we can walk free. The *anticipation* of this is found right at the start of Matthew's gospel as the angel tells Joseph:

“you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (chapter 1 verse 21)

I love it that Matthew includes this foretaste of the cross right here in chapter 8 as he announces the arrival of God's King. It is highly likely that for the vast majority of us reading these words, our response to the matchless majesty of Jesus' character and to the perfect demands of his law is that of the Roman centurion in verse 8:

“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.”

We have no idea what had gone on in this man's house, but as he considered Jesus' perfect character and absolute demand for holy living, he was quite clear that he fell far, far short of the perfection Jesus required. You might say, using the language of the Sermon on the Mount, that he saw that he was *'poor in spirit'*. It is this poverty of spirit – or rebellion against God – that is the cause, ultimately, of everything that is wrong with our fallen world. At the final count, it is our personal sin that cuts us off from our creator and demands his final judgment.

We have been reminded all too powerfully of this universal condition of humanity in these four scenes. However, we have also been shown God's glorious solution. Wherever we go across the globe, it is Jesus, God's King, who has come with all of God's authority to deal with death, the single most desperate fact of human existence. He has come to satisfy God's judgment at our sin through his death on the cross. As he pays the punishment for our rebellion, he satisfies God's just demands and enables us to walk free into a relationship of loving acceptance with God our



Father. Every one of us reading this chapter lies under the shadow or shroud of death and judgment. Jesus' authority and Jesus' offer extends to every one of us: he is God's long-awaited saviour.

### Counting the Cost

In conclusion, then, how should we respond? We will have to wait until chapter 9 and verses 9-13 to see the model positive response that Jesus demands. For now, in chapter 8 verses 18-22, Matthew follows the quotation from Isaiah with two examples of inappropriate responses.

Two men came up to Jesus in quick succession, one a scribe, the other a disciple. The first offered too much too soon: *'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go'*. He had not yet realised that Jesus is *'the Son of Man'*, with all God's authority over his kingdom; nor had he realised that Jesus was not only going to forgo his human rights, but even abandon the creature comforts that we assume normal for foxes and birds as he made his way selflessly to his sacrificial death. This first man warns us against promising to do too much too soon for Jesus; to follow him will mean total surrender to his authority, even as we benefit from the glorious promise of his new creation banquet.

The second man, described as a *'disciple'*, offered too little too late. Like many Christians today, he didn't see the urgency of what it was that Jesus had come to do and so he thought that he could simply tack his discipleship on to all the other seemingly important and vital priorities of the day. There can be no human responsibility that is greater for a man than to oversee the death and burial of his father. In demanding instant obedience, Jesus used a deliberately shocking teaching technique in order to emphasise the absolute priority of following him as we come under his kingdom rule. He had come to deal with all the effects of this fallen world as he ushered in his new heavenly kingdom through his death on the cross. Discipleship, for those who understand the times, will require radical action and a wholehearted response that puts following him ahead of every other priority and commitment in life.

**Questions:**

1. Do you think that suffering, sickness and death preoccupy us as much in our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture as they did in the 1<sup>st</sup> century? Why do you think we are so loath to talk about these things today?
2. Verses 1-17 are full of examples of the authority of Jesus. Over what does Jesus demonstrate his absolute authority and how is that authority shown? (Look up Numbers 12 verses 12-15 and 2 Kings 5 verse 7 for an understanding of leprosy).
3. Look up Isaiah 25 verses 6-9. These verses speak of God's promise of rescue from judgment for his people. What do we learn about the rescue that God has promised?
4. In what different ways do the events of Matthew 8 verses 1-17 fulfil the promises of Isaiah 25?
5. Turn to Matthew 11 verse 2-6. This is the start of the next major section of Matthew's gospel. What does Jesus tell us we should have learned from Matthew chapters 8-10?
6. How does chapter 8 verses 1-17 teach us these lessons?
7. Verse 17 is a quotation from Isaiah 53 verse 4-6. What does this suggest to us about how Jesus will accomplish the rescue that God promises?
8. What do we learn from each of the characters: the leper, the centurion, Peter's mother-in-law?
9. What mistake does the scribe of verse 19 make? What about the disciple of verse 21? How might we make the same mistake?

### Preacher's Note 1

You will notice that I am making two assumptions here. The first is that Matthew treats Israel at the time of Jesus' arrival as if they are still experiencing the effects of the Exile. Although the people of Israel may have returned to the land under Ezra / Nehemiah, the effects of God's judgment are still being experienced in the land. This way of handling the material is consistent both with the muted end of Ezra / Nehemiah and with the introduction to Matthew's gospel. Chapter 1 verse 17 suggests that we are correct to read it this way: *'So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.'* Matthew does not mention the return to the land of Nehemiah's day. He skips straight to the coming of the Christ. The second assumption is that Israel and her exile exhibit in microcosm the pattern of humanity and the Fall. This explains why we have taken the lessons concerning God's judgment and salvation for Israel and applied them to all of humanity.

### Preacher's Note 2

Following the ideas introduced in Preachers Note 1, you will notice that I have taken a Biblical Theological approach to sickness, death, and natural disasters, understanding them to be the result of human sin and God's judgment. The presence of these things in the Land of God's Promise makes them even more theologically offensive. Whilst this approach involves obvious pastoral 'risks', it is vital that we pursue it, for it enables us to make clear the impact of sin and its consequences in our world. Our world is fallen, and the results of human sin and God's judgment are to be seen everywhere we look. Once we are bold enough to point out the effects of human

sin in terms of sickness, death and disease, the universal need for a saviour becomes abundantly clear. Too often the evangelist is left searching for a 'hook' with which to 'make our gospel relevant' to his listeners. Once we tackle the reality of sin and its effects head on, the way Matthew does, there are 'hooks' everywhere; what is more, they are biblical 'hooks' and not the inappropriate hooks alluded to in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 2.

### Preacher's Note 3

I am following the traditional understanding of the structure of Matthew's gospel, namely that he marks the divisions of each major section of his gospel with the concluding phrase: *'when Jesus had finished all these sayings'* (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). This structure suggests that there are five major sections to the gospel with a prologue in chapters 1 and 2 and a conclusion in chapters 26 to 28. Once we have grasped the key issue being addressed in each section, each one makes a 'preachable unit' and can be taken and used in appropriate circumstances. I tend to give each section a title and thus would argue that the gospel can be broken down as follows:

1:1 – 2:23	Prologue
3:1 – 7:29	Announcing the Kingdom
8:1 – 10:42	The arrival of the King
11:1 – 13:52	The advance of the Kingdom
13:53 – 18:35	Assembling the Kingdom
19:1 – 25:46	The authentic King
26:1 – 28:20	Conclusion