

**Key idea:** Jesus is the only One who can restore our whole humanity – if we trust him.

## **PRAY...**

### **1. The backstory of sin**

I am reading a biography of J.R.R. Tolkien at the moment. He is famous for his trilogy – ‘The Lord of the Rings’ – and ‘The Hobbit’. In both, he paints a picture of a huge world, ‘Middle Earth’. The thing that I am starting to realise is that this whole world is the backstory to his development of a new language. Put simply, he created a language. To make sense of the language, he created a massive series of stories that painted a backstory, an explanatory story, for this language. The backstory is crucial for understanding the language – the irony of the backstory becoming the main event, and the language being lost – well, that’s another story.

To understand what Matthew is doing here, we need to get the backstory – what is the explanatory account that helps us understand these three double-miracles that we have in front of us?

Unlike Tolkien, this backstory is very simple – it is the backstory of sin.

Sin, as we have said time and again, is ‘the attitude and action that says, ‘I am God and God is not’ (REPEAT).

Sin is the universal human condition in this world – every human being is sinful. Now that is a bold assertion, and I do not have time to map out the defence of such a statement. However, this is the

diagnosis of God himself – in places like Romans 3:10-12 – and it is a statement that accords with the fact of our existence and knowledge of history.

What does sin do?

Sin **deludes** humans. It is the lie that humans can be more than they are. Instead of being the image-bearers of God, they think they can be God. Just listen again to the lie that brought sin into the world – **Genesis 3:4-5... READ.**

Sin not only **deludes** humans about who they are – it also deludes humans about who God is – it persuades humans that God does not have the best interests of humans at heart, and we would do a better job than him.

Sin **disobeys** – it leads humans to turn away from God's word and design, and create their own. Listen again to the original question of the devil to Eve – **Genesis 3:1... READ.**

In deluding humans into thinking that they can do a better job than God, it leads humans to disobey God, to disobey his very clear word, to disobey his very clear design and plans.

Sin **deviates**. In deluding and leading to disobedience, sin deviates – it turns the world on its head. Listen to how Eve considers the fruit that she had been forbidden to eat – **listen to Genesis 3:6... READ.**

The very thing that was forbidden is now regarded as desirable. The very thing that as off limits is now seen as accessible. The very thing that is described as leading to death is now seen as needed for life. Sin deviates – it leads away from God, and leads away into the alternative to God.

Sin **degrades**. Sin never creates, it just degrades and breaks down what has already been created. Sin is never positive and always negative. **Listen to Genesis 3:7... READ.**

The very open and transparent relationship between Adam and Eve is now degraded to be one of covering and shame. It is extended even further under the judgement of God in the rest of Genesis 3, where the very fibre of the world is now damaged, the relationship between man and woman is now degraded, and the whole of creation now moves towards death, instead of life.

This leads to the fact that sin **destroys**. God warned of such a consequence in **Genesis 2:15-17... READ.**

To be deluded into thinking that God was mean and stingy, to be deluded into thinking you could do a better job than God, to actively disobey God and to deviate from his clear and true word, to submit to the degradation of that delusion – well, that only leads to the destruction of death. It leads to the opposite of what God created – which is his image-bearers resting with him.

In this sense, all sin **dehumanizes**. That could be the summary description of sin – it dehumanizes. It takes any human that sins and makes them less than human, by deluding them into

disobedience, by degrading them through deviation into destruction. All sin dehumanizes, because it makes all humans less than what they were created for – to reflect God to the world.

This truth applies to all humans because all humans sin – the very fact of universal death testifies to that truth.

We know this truth personally, don't we? We know this truth in our persistent ailments, our damaging illnesses, our broken relationships, the hurt caused by lies, and slurs, and angry words, the way in which we can feel ostracized and alienated and overwhelmed.

God commits to doing what he said – he brings the very judgement of death to sin, and sinners, just as he promised. But more than that, God commits at the very same moment as being just, to being merciful – he came and found Adam and Eve in their sin, he removed them from eternal sin, and he provided for them in his judgement. God committed, through the family of the childless and idol-worshipping Abraham, to deal with the sin of this world, to roll back its dehumanizing impact, and to bring his approval again.

I think, at times like this in Matthew – in any Gospel, we need to be reminded of this backstory so that we understand what Matthew wants us to grasp.

This backstory drives everything that Matthew writes here, because he wants us – his readers – to know that the commitment that God made has come good. Remember the first verse of Matthew's good news about Jesus? Remember the way in which Jesus' birth is

described in Matthew 1:21? Remember the way in which we have seen the identity of Jesus revealed as he has worked, preach/teaching/healing? Remember what we have seen of Jesus – as Preacher, Teacher, Healer, Saviour, Lord, God-in-the-flesh, the One with the power to put the natural, supernatural and whole human right?

As Matthew draws this section of miracles – Jesus at work – we would do well to remember this backstory so that we can see what Jesus is doing in these final miracles...

## **2. The good doctor in action...**

Last week, in a wonderful image, we saw Jesus as ‘the Good Doctor’, come to deal with our universal human sickness of sin. He is the fulfilment of God’s commitment to deal with human sin – and it blows all our man-made structures out of the water!

Now, in these final three miracle vignettes of this section, we see the good Doctor in action. As the scene showing Jesus as the good doctor closes, the next section Matthew compiles begins – **look at verses 18-19... READ.**

This approach by the leader of the local Jewish synagogue (we presume this is what ‘leader’ means) opens up a set of three miracles. These three miracle events are doubles – in each two people/problems are dealt with by Jesus – two women, at opposite ends of life, two men blind in life, and a man struck down by two problems in life. In each instance, the people afflicted are people who are completely marginalized from society, and completely beyond all physical aid. The young daughter is dead, which is the most marginalized from society any person can be, and the farthest

from physical aid anyone can be. The older woman has had period bleeding for twelve years, an affliction beyond the healing hand of anyone and which had rendered 'unclean' in society. The two blind men were suffering an ailment that left them in the dark, physically and socially. And the final man, with no ability to speak and possessed by a demon, was beyond any aid and any human society.

(i) In obvious ways, these people were all **dehumanized**. They are images of what it means to be totally affected by sin – their affliction shows the obvious dehumanizing effect of sin. The bookends draw this out – there is nothing more dehumanizing than death, and the affliction of dumbness removes the key aspect of exercising our humanity as God's vice-gerents – our words and voices. Moreover, both show the debilitating damage of sin – one in death, and the other in residence taken by a demon. The woman bleeding is removed from all society, regarded as totally unacceptable because of her uncleanness. And the two blind men cannot operate in human society in the way they were designed.

In saying this, I am NOT saying that these afflictions make these people less than, or that they are less human than, you or I. What I AM saying is that these people are indicative of what happens to every human through sin – we are made less than what God designed us to be – sin deludes, degrades, destroys our humanity as we strive to be God instead of God. These five people show this in a particularly sharp way.

(ii) In each of these moments there is '**faith**'. Now, that is a word we use often in our circles, even our world. Sometimes it is used in

a magical sense – as a kind of key that seems to be used to unlock something special. Sometimes it is used in a way that is general – you just need it and things go well. Sometimes it is derided as something that is brainless and foolish. None of those meanings are associated with the word/concept in the Bible. A rough definition of ‘faith’ is ‘taking God at his word and living like it’. Faith has a direction, an object – God. It is established on evidence and substance – the words of God seen in day-to-day human existence. And, it creates a response – it changes lives as people live in light of God, and his word.

All of those aspects are evident here. The leader in the local community displays faith – **look at verse 18... READ**. He has obviously heard of Jesus, even watched Jesus, and he lives in light of what is displayed and revealed – it is a remarkable statement of faith. The bleeding woman displays faith – **look at verse 21... READ**. She has obviously heard of Jesus, even seen him from a distance, and she acts – however dangerously in society at this time – based on what she has seen and heard. The two blind men identify Jesus – **look at verses 27-28... READ**. Confronted by Jesus’ question, they state their faith – they call him ‘Lord’, they acknowledge his kingly role, they desire deeply for this authority to work for them, as their understanding of the Old Testament prophets had fostered in them. And, whilst those who bring the demon-possessed dumb man to Jesus obviously display faith (albeit, unmentioned), it is the reaction of the Pharisees at this point which is the ‘faith’, or ‘lack-of-faith’ moment – **look at verse 34... READ**. They hear everything Jesus says, they obviously observe the goodness of his impact, they know the events that surround him

– they dismiss it completely and live in light of that rejection: they regard him as the enemy of all humanity!

(iii) The faith aspect of these scenes shows their **connection** to Jesus, as the good doctor. In the instances where there is faith in Jesus, then Jesus displays that he can deal with their dehumanized state – put simply, the doctor restores people to whole humanity (REPEAT).

In the case of death, Jesus brings life. In the case of unclean social isolation, Jesus brings healing and restoration into the community. In the case of isolating blindness, Jesus brings sight and joy. In the case of demon-possession that leads to dumbness, Jesus asserts his authority and restores this key human faculty. In each instance, we are confronted by the One who CAN do these things – and he is worthy of our trust because he can.

It is important to note that in each instance of faith, it is an expression that Jesus CAN do this work, not that he MUST because there was/is faith. This is important for our understanding of so much about relating to Jesus, but it is at least this – real faith trusts that Jesus CAN, it does not demand that he MUST. It does not treat faith as a bargaining chip, or a magic key, or a special way of gaining access – faith is an expression that we trust that Jesus can – his is the decision to act.

The backstory of sin held up behind these events helps us to see what Matthew is revealing at this point. This is the good doctor at work, restoring humans broken by sin, dehumanized, to whole humanity (REPEAT).



Matthew has flagged this truth from the very beginning, from the very first verse, where he places Jesus as the climax of God's commitment to deal with sin. This backstory is there as the angel talks with Joseph (Matthew 1:21). This backstory is there in the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus declares that he is the fulfilment of God's plans (Matthew 5:20). The backstory of human sin is there right through this section of Jesus at work.

In this sense, this set of three miracles forms a bookend with the three miracles that kicked this section off, in Matthew 8:1-17, and a climax to the portrayal of Jesus' identity by Matthew. Frederick Dale Bruner makes this comment, in his commentary on Matthew 1-12:

*'In ch.8 Jesus reaches out; in chap.9 he reaches down; in ch.8 he embraces those whom nobody else would touch; in ch.9 he rescues those whom nobody else could touch'*

(The Christbook: Matthew 1-12., (Eerdmans: 2004), p.428-9)

The picture of Jesus at work is unavoidably clear. He is the One promised by God to deal with human sin, and its consequences. He is willing to bring outsiders in. He is the only one who can bring humans back to their true humanity. He is the One promised by God to deal with human sin.

### **3. Lessons learned...**

Just as Tolkien's backstory helped him understand his invented language, so the backstory of sin here helps us grasp key lessons about Jesus, as we finish this section of Jesus at work.

**(i) The identity of Jesus: the One who will, and can, deal with sin.**

Matthew wants us to see the good doctor at work: Jesus is the One who has come to deal with the dehumanizing effect of sin by dealing with sin itself. Again, as the Gospel progresses, we will see more and more of what this means. But at this point, Matthew wants us to know who Jesus is: the One promised by God to deal with sin.

**(ii) The work of Jesus: he deals with sin so that humans are whole again.** I think, as we see the consequences of sin on these people – they are dehumanized, removed from community – we are meant to see that Jesus CAN make people fully human again. On the one hand, his miracles here are just physical; on the other hand, they display what Jesus can do: he can make people whole again, because he has come to deal with sin.

**(iii) The nature of our response...**

Let me finish by drawing our attention to what Matthew desires – he wants us to consider our reaction to Jesus as he is.

One response is very clear – the response of faith. In the leader, and the woman with bleeding, we see a very clear statement about being connected to Jesus through faith. If you hear Jesus, see Jesus, and take him at his word, and live like it – this is how you are connected to Jesus (remember Matthew 5:10-11 from last year?). To have faith in Jesus is to acknowledge that he can deal with our dehumanized natures, our natures damaged by sin. It is to come to him with complete trust – and life displaying that trust – and to submit to his identity as Lord and Saviour.

To come to Jesus in such a way is to acknowledge the backstory of your sin – our sin, and it is to accept that only he can make you truly human as God designed.

If you have not met Jesus like this, let me invite you to come and trust him.

If you have met Jesus like this – you trust him, living like it – then let me encourage you: he has dealt with your sin, he has humanized you, he has dealt with your greatest problem. Rest deeply in that great restoration.

There is another realm of faith reaction to Jesus – I think it is captured there in the blind men and the Pharisees. Both of these reactions are a flawed faith reaction. The blind men show the failure to have faith expressed in obedience – it is to trust in Jesus for the good stuff, but to refuse to obey him in his Lordship. The Pharisees show the wicked nature of rejecting Jesus – the ‘anti-faith’ response. I mean, how, in any way, could you regard the healing of a demon-possessed man, who could now talk, as something ‘of the devil’? Not only that, but consider the ramifications of accusing the very one who was promised to deal with sin as being in league with the devil – it beggars belief!

But there is a warning here for those who dismiss Jesus outright, or who want the ‘good’ parts of Jesus without the ‘hard’ parts.

As we move into the next big teaching chunk from Jesus, this much is clear. First, Matthew wants us to meet Jesus as he is: the Preacher, Teacher, Saviour, Lord, God-in-the-flesh, good doctor,

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who has come to deal with sin and make us whole again. And, second, what do you make of that?