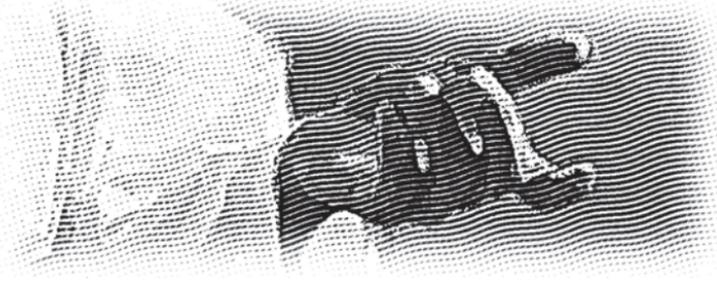


The Wonder of His Works



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 4:23–25; 8:25–27; 11:2–6; 12:22, 23; Acts 3:19–21.*

Memory Text: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (*Matthew 9:36, NIV*).

Even the most cursory reading of the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospels reveals an interesting fact: With the exception of the amazing events surrounding His birth, very little of Jesus' childhood and early years are recounted. This gap has led to all sorts of speculation through the centuries about what Christ had done during all those lost years. Nothing, though, comes close to what Ellen G. White wrote in *The Desire of Ages* (“As a Child”).

Instead, the Bible focuses on His adult life, specifically the three and a half years of His ministry. What a three and a half years they were!

The world has experienced nothing like it. His works, always for others, and completely without capriciousness, are presented as evidence of a new day dawning, the birth of the kingdom of God. The moment the Sermon on the Mount ended, the scene changed abruptly, with Jesus immediately plunging Himself into the needs of the people (*see Matthew 8, 9*). For Jesus it was not just words. He had the works to more than back up the words.

The kingdom of God had arrived, and Jesus was there to inaugurate it.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 3.*

What Kind of Man Is This? (Matt. 8:25–27)

Read Matthew 8:1–4. What do you find significant about these verses in regard to the reasons for Jesus' coming into the world?

The way Matthew tells it, the healing of the leper takes place as soon as Jesus comes down from the mountain. Fresh from delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus runs smack into the furrow of human need in the valley. And the first challenge He confronts is leprosy, a symbol of our sinful human plight. Jesus touches the leper (what to make of that?), and the leprosy is gone! Such is the power of our Lord.

In what follows in the rest of Matthew 8 and in chapter 9, Matthew would depict Jesus as having *power over nature*: He calms the storm (Matt. 8:23–27); *power over demons*: He frees the demoniacs (vss. 28–33); *power “over sickness, disease, and infirmity”*: He heals the paralytic and the woman with a hemorrhage (vss. 1–9, 20–22); and *power over death*: He brings Jairus's daughter back to life (vss. 18, 19, 23–26). Making it personal, Jesus has power over the storms of our lives, over the demons in our lives, and over the disorders (of whatever description) that plague us.

What lessons can we learn from Matthew 8:23–27?

In certain ancient mythologies, water was regarded as a foe that God overcomes. “To Israel, the raging, unruly waters symbolized the powers which are opposed to God's sovereignty.”—*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. R–Z, p. 809. The reaction of Jesus' disciples should be ours, as well: “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (Matt. 8:27, NIV). In a way, their exclamation recalls a statement in the first chapter of Isaiah, where God calls heaven and earth to witness the rebellious determination of His people. “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isa. 1:3, NIV). Of all creation, His people are the only ones disloyal. So here we may well ask whether we are the only entities of nature to stand in resistance to Jesus. The winds and the waves obey Him. What about us?

The Sheer Marvel of It

It is not often that one pays attention to the paragraph headings in those modern versions of the Bible that have them. But one in Matthew 9 in the New International Version comes close to a comprehensive description of the wonder of Jesus' works of healing, mercy, and power. "A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman," it says. The words depict the challenge constantly confronting the Savior during His time with us; not the kind of challenge one could bluff one's way through. Yet, Jesus confronted it all. That day, the dead girl came back to life, and the bleeding woman, after 12 years of misery, got a brand-new start.

Reflect on the following passages (or at least on as many as you are able). Do not write anything. Just simply be amazed by the sheer marvel of it all, at the wonderful Savior we have. (*Matt. 9:27–34; 12:22, 23; 14:25–31, 34–36; 15:29–31; 20:29–34; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 6:19*).

To grasp the full power of these passages, one must take them slowly, trying to recapture their original setting. In Matthew 12:22, 23, for instance, the man brought to Jesus is both blind and mute. Close your eyes and put a finger over your lips for a while, and try to imagine the condition of that unfortunate soul. In that state you do not know what is around you, and you cannot ask. But the man meets Jesus and leaves His holy presence with eyes wide open and with his tongue unsealed in praise!

Then how about Matthew 15:30, 31: "Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel!" (*NIV*).

It even got better. Matthew 14:34–36 and Luke 6:19 tell us that people pressed forward to touch the Savior "because power was coming from him and healing them all" (*Luke 6:19, NIV*).

Jesus promised that His followers will do greater things than He did. What does that mean? Why are we not seeing such marvels of healing and restoration today? Or, in some places, are we seeing it? How does the church's healing ministry today compare with the example that Jesus set? How can you as an individual in modern times help continue Jesus' healing ministry?

The Motive Behind It *(Matt. 4:23–25)*

Back in the 1980s, undercover investigators conducted a sting operation on certain American televangelists. Noticing that these preachers would invite people to send in their personal prayer requests to the broadcast, with urgent appeals that they enclose a gift “to keep the program on the air,” the investigators wanted to know what happened to those donations and prayer requests. What they discovered shocked them. Staffers for the televangelists would go to the post office, collect the letters sent in by listeners, open them on the spot, fish out the donations, then dump the prayer requests right there in the post office trash bins.

In the key passage above, we read of Jesus traversing the entire area of Galilee, with huge crowds following Him from all across the region. And when Matthew returns to that same theme in chapter 9, he adds a critical dimension that forever distinguishes the motives of Jesus from that of these charlatans of the airwaves.

Read Matthew 9:35, 36. How does it describe the motive that propelled Jesus’ ministry?

The word *compassion* comes from a Greek word (*spilagchnon*) that refers to “the inward parts,” “the bowels,” considered the seat of the emotions in the ancient world. Compassion goes beyond sympathy (which merely can be intellectual). Compassion comes from the inside, from the heart and even the very gut.

That is what Jesus had. For Him, grabbing people’s money and dumping their heartrending prayer requests into post office garbage bins would have been inconceivable. Again and again in the Gospels, the quality of compassion describes His attitude toward the people. A leper begs Him: “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus, “filled with compassion,” reaches out to him: “I am willing. . . . Be clean!” (*Mark 1:40, 41, NIV; cf. Matt. 20:29–34, Mark 10:46–52*).

If you can imagine someone doing all this with never a thought of personal gain, never a thought that what he is doing will be picked up by the press, or at least will look good on a résumé—with absolutely no thought of personal gain whatsoever—then you are thinking about Jesus. The single force that moved Him was love, love from the belly, love from the gut. The Gospels call it *compassion*. To what extent does compassion like this undergird your feelings and actions toward others?

Sign of a New Day *(Matt. 11:2–6)*

From his prison cell, John the Baptist sent an urgent message to Jesus: “‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” (*Matt. 11:3, NIV*). For the reader of the Gospels, it is a surprising and unexpected question. Was this not the same John who so confidently announced the Messiahship of Jesus at the Jordan (*John 1:29–36*)? And why would he raise the question precisely after he had “heard in prison what Christ was doing” (*Matt. 11:2, NIV*)? What is important for our study here, however, is Jesus’ response: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (*vss. 4, 5, NIV*).

Jesus’ coded message to John was that His ministry was the sign of a new day dawning; the Messiah had, indeed, arrived. Surely in the back of Jesus’ mind as He spoke were the glorious Messianic prophecies in the book of Isaiah, among others.

Read Isaiah 29:18, 19; 35:5, 6; 61:1–3. How do these passages relate to Jesus’ ministry? Why do you think John and others were so slow to catch on?

The idea of Jesus’ ministry as a fulfillment of prophecy and the dawning of the Messianic age comes through clearly in Matthew’s own interpretation of events, in the way he anchors Jesus’ activities in the broader, Messianic context: “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases’” (*Matt. 8:17, NIV; citing Isa. 53:4*). We see this same idea playing out in Matthew’s summary description of Jesus’ overall ministry: “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (*Matt. 9:35, 36, NIV; see also Matt. 4:23–25*).

Looking back, we marvel at how John and others could have been so slow to see who Jesus was. Of course, hindsight is always very clear. What about us today? How might we be just as blind to what should be obvious truths? More important, how can we change?

Sign of the Final Restoration *(Acts 3:19–21)*

The marvelous healing of the demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, rather than bringing shouts of Hallelujahs from the Pharisees, brought instead a charge: “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons” (*Matt. 12:24, NIV*). Thus was Jesus prompted to give an instructive explanation of the meaning of what was happening: “‘But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God,’” He said, dismissing the Pharisees’ inference, “‘then the kingdom of God has come upon you’” (*vs. 28*).

The statement is important, since in the teaching of the Gospels, the kingdom of God is not only a present reality (as evident most directly in the above statement) but also a future reality (*see Matt. 26:29, Luke 23:42, John 18:36*).

What this means is that the works of Christ also look forward to the final restoration. When Jesus applied the pivotal prophecy of Isaiah to Himself during the reading of the scrolls in the synagogue at Nazareth (*Luke 4:18, 19*), He was proclaiming much more than would happen within the brief three and a half years of His own earthly ministry. “The year of the Lord’s favor,” harking back as it does to the ancient Jubilee, was an announcement of the inauguration of the kingdom of God, beginning with the coming of the Messiah, and reaching all the way down to the final consummation, when all prisoners will have been set free, all sight restored, all oppression removed, and when joy will pervade the entire cosmos.

What do the following passages teach about the relationship between Jesus’ ministry and the final restoration? (*Mark 5:35–42, Luke 7:11–15, John 11:38–44, Acts 3:19–21*).

The most powerful sign of the reign of sin is death. And the restoration of life by Jesus during His ministry pointed forward to that final day when death will be no more. “I am the Living One,” says the resurrected Christ in John’s apocalyptic vision, “‘I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever . . . ! And I hold the keys of death and Hades’” (*Rev. 1:18, NIV*). Those whom Jesus restored to life during His ministry all succumbed to death again. But Jesus looked beyond that, to the final restoration, when “the trumpet will sound, [and] the dead will be raised imperishable” (*1 Cor. 15:52, NIV*).

How crucial is the hope of the resurrection? What do we have without it? What reasons do you have for trusting in God’s promise to one day destroy, forever, death?

Further Study: Examine the following statement. How does it relate to the overall lesson for this week? Do you see areas of tension? Or does it make the same general point in a different way? Here it is: “The Gospels are filled with accounts of Jesus’ miracles, but it would be a mistake to place our emphasis there. For one thing, Jesus did not himself emphasize them; almost all of them were performed quietly, apart from the crowd, and as demonstrations of the power of faith. We get a better perspective on Jesus’ activities if we place the emphasis where one of his disciples did. Once, in addressing a group, Peter found it necessary to epitomize Jesus’ life, and said, ‘*He went about doing good.*’ Moving easily and without affectation among ordinary people and social misfits, healing them, counseling them, Jesus went about doing good. He did so with such single-minded effectiveness, that those who were with him constantly found their estimate of him modulating to a new key. They found themselves thinking that if divine goodness were to manifest itself in human form, this is how it would behave.”—Huston Smith, *The Illustrated World’s Religions*, p. 210.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Ellen G. White said that “the great work of the gospel is not to close with less manifestation of the power of God than marked its opening.” She spoke of a vigorous, worldwide thrust as the end approaches, and said that “miracles will be wrought, the sick will be healed, and signs and wonders will follow the believers” (*The Great Controversy*, pp. 611, 612). How do you see this prophecy coming to pass? How do you visualize your own participation in it? What role does your local church have in all this? What things can we do to prepare for this time?
- 2 Suppose someone appeared who did many amazing miracles, as did Jesus, miracles that testified to what was clearly supernatural. How could, should, you respond?
- 3 Bring to class your answer to Monday’s question about modern miracles, and discuss your answers and the reasons for them.

Thrown Into the River: Part 1

by SUNIL BIKAS TRIPURA

I am from the hills of Bangladesh. From my childhood I was devoted to several gods. I attended festivals, offered gifts to the gods to whom I prayed, and went on pilgrimages, all to receive the blessings of the gods.

On one religious pilgrimage I was dismayed to find the priests asking pilgrims for money to forgive their sins. I could not believe it when I heard them say that the more a poor pilgrim gave, the more surely their sins would be forgiven. *Can I buy forgiveness with money? I wondered. If so, then the rich can be forgiven. But what about the poor?*

I climbed the mountain to the holy place, but when I reached the top, I found drunken priests and pilgrims. Some declared themselves gods in their own right and asked other pilgrims for money to be forgiven.

I knew that these priests and pilgrims were violating the holy writings—and on temple grounds! I thought about it and realized that one god I worshiped had committed at least three of the five forbidden sins. How could a human be expected to stay pure if a god cannot? I wondered who could save me if not these gods.

I began to question my faith. *Is my god the true god? Or is there another God, more powerful, more perfect, One who can overcome sin and take us to heaven?* As I pondered these questions, I determined to start searching for the answers.

One day I met a man who said he is a Christian, a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. When I asked him about sin and forgiveness, he told me that everyone is a sinner, and that Jesus is the only Savior. Only Jesus lived a perfect life, and only Jesus can save us from sin.

I asked the man for a Bible and started reading it. I compared Jesus with my god and discovered that Jesus truly is the only righteous being, the true Savior. I surrendered my life to Jesus, trusting Him to save me.

But my aunt and uncle, who were my guardians, were angry that I had forsaken their gods. They forbade me to touch the food or to drink from their cups, saying it would make them unfit for use. But even worse persecution was to follow.

(continued next week)

SUNIL BIKAS TRIPURA has completed his religion degree in Bangladesh Adventist Seminary and College and is working among his tribal group in Bangladesh.