

In the Valley, You Are With Me

Matthew 9:35-38

I've loved our time in Matthew 8 and 9.

And as I've been reflecting on these verses before us today, and looking back over the last several weeks, I have found Psalm 23 to be a lens that helps me to see what these chapters say about who we are, and who Jesus is, and what it means to live as his disciple.

So let's finish off Matthew chapter 9:

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

1. In The Valley of the Shadow

As we come to the end of Matthew 9, we find ourselves once again as members of the great crowd that has been following Jesus since his Sermon on the Mount. We've heard about the amazement and excitement of the crowds as *they* look and listen to Jesus.

But now we finally hear *Jesus'* perspective of the crowds. Jesus looks upon the crowds – he looks upon the world – and sees people as *harassed and helpless*, like sheep without a shepherd. Or through the lens of Psalm 23, Jesus sees that crowds are *in the valley of the shadow of death*, with no one to protect them, no one to guide them, no one to feed them and to nourish them.

And this is a fitting summary of all those how have come to Jesus in these chapters: the lepers, the gentiles, those possessed by demons, or put on the outside of society, there are the diseased and the dead. This was human life in the 1st century, death cast a long shadow over every aspect of life. And so it is in the *twenty-first* century. We try to drive it back by turning up the brightness of our iPhones, but our lives too are lived in the valley of the shadow. We are not exempt from the universal pain of cancer diagnoses, of mental health struggles, of betrayal by friends or breakdown in our families, of disappointing jobs or abusive bosses, or a hundred other adversities. But there's even more to it than that. As one writer says, there is

something beneath all of these concrete examples of adversity.

There is, for all of us living between the first two chapters of the Bible and the last two, a pervasive futility shot through everything – our minds, our hearts, our consciences, every thought and word and meeting and exam and email and rising to another day

– there’s something hard to articulate that infects it all. A sense of loss, of frustration, of non-flourishing, of shutdown, of daily grinding aimlessness, of spinning our wheels, of constantly hitting a wall.¹

We have this funny feeling because our lives are lived *in the valley of the shadow of death*. The valley is not a place we visit occasionally as we dip down into suffering from our otherwise smooth existence. The valley is our home address.

As we hear the repeated joyful refrain that life will soon be “going back to normal”, the gospel writer is gently reminding us that the normal place of human existence is one shot through with frustration, with broken bodies, and broken relationships, and broken hearts.

We’re alienated from each other, often even alienated within ourselves, and at the heart of all this is our alienation from God. Matthew doesn’t pull any punches in depicting the realities of human suffering, nor is there any doubt that all that suffering is deeply tied up with human sin. We’re in the valley because we’re far from the love of God. We’re in the valley of the shadow because we’ve run from the light of God. We’re in the valley of the shadow of death because we’re cut off from the life of God. Without God, there’s no one to guide us, and to protect us, to feed us and to nourish us. We’re harassed and we’re helpless.

Behind all our false-bravado and face-saving, Jesus’ can see exactly what we are like. And wonderfully it’s in the that helplessness that Jesus moves out to meet with us.

¹ Dane Ortlund, *Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners*

2. Jesus, Lord and Shepherd

For if Matthew 8 and 9 vividly depict the beginning of Psalm 23 verse 4, they also gloriously describe the fulfilment of the second half of that same verse:

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
**I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.***

Week by week we have heard the things that Jesus said, in both his words of teaching, and his words of healing. We've seen what he has done: Calming the storm, casting out demons, healing the sick, raising the dead, forgiving sin. These things are all summarised again in Matthew chapter 9 verse 35:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

And all of these words and actions are building up an unmistakable picture of *who Jesus is*.

He is the creator who has become a part of his creation.

He is the Son of God with all authority over all spiritual evil.

He the long-awaited King in the family line of David.

Or as we look through the lens of Psalm 23, Jesus comes into focus as *our Lord and Shepherd*, who joins us in the valley, not only to be with us in it but to lead through it.

And so for those who need guidance he speaks the truth of God. To those who need protection he casts out demons and stands against self-righteous religious leaders.

To those wandering in sin he clearly calls them to repentance; to those mired in suffering he tenderly carries them to safety.

This is what Jesus does, because that is who Jesus is.

But Matthew 9 takes us deeper still into uncharted territory. For now we are not only hear of Jesus' actions and identity, but also of Jesus' heart. How does Jesus feel as he looks out over the helpless crowds? Or to bring it even closer to home, how does Jesus feel about *you*, as he sees you dealing with sin in your life, and the challenges of suffering in your life? Is he indifferent towards you? Is he disappointed in you? Is he losing patience with you? Does he maybe even feel contempt for you?

Look again at verse 36:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Later in Matthew's gospel Jesus will teach us that all of our corrupt words and actions flow out of our sin-corrupted hearts. Matthew 8 and 9 teach us the glorious opposite to this truth. Everything Jesus says and does in these chapters is the natural overflow of his gentle and humble heart that goes out in love for us. Jesus does not keep his distance from us in our suffering, and he is not even repulsed by our sin. In Jesus we see the goodness and love of God in flesh and bone, following us into the valley of the shadow, chasing us down, even to the point of death.

As one poet says, he looks down on this sick and suffering world, and says to his Father. "Let me go there." Let me be with them. Let me heal them. Let me forgive them. Let me die for them. Let me bring them home.

3. The Heavenly Feast

See here's the thing: Jesus doesn't just come to fix our problems, and he doesn't just come to forgive our sins, as wonderful as that is. He comes to carry us into his Kingdom.

Again we see this as we look through the lens of Psalm 23:

Our Lord and shepherd doesn't just wipe our slates clean, he sets table for us in the presence of our enemies; he clothes us in his very best and welcomes us to the heavenly feast. To all who come to him, in the pages of Matthew 8 and 9, and in every page of human history, Jesus leads us to the green pastures of the presence of God the Father, to the soul-refreshing still waters of the Holy Spirit, to the right path of following him, and to dwelling in his house forever.

And so the abiding image from these chapters is right at the centre. It's that meal Matthew hosts with all of his sinner friends. I was speaking with someone from church this week and we were saying how it can sometimes be hard to be excited about heaven, it can feel so abstract, so fuzzy compared to the concrete realities of life in the here and now.

But these chapters fill out our naturally fuzzy imaginations. What is heaven but a feast, face to face with Jesus. And I can get excited about *that*: talking and eating and drinking and laughing, in the company of fellow forgiven sinners, with the commanding and captivating presence of Jesus right at the centre of it all.

But that is not only a future hope, but a present reality! We get a foretaste of that heavenly feast in the honest fellowship that we share together in the here and now. I can think of no better image of what our church fellowship should be like than that dinner party full of sinners.

There's no false bravado at that meal is there? No one is saving face, or keeping up a squeaky clean facade. Everyone is enjoying the freedom that comes from the fact that Jesus knows exactly who they are, and is basking in the wonder of his free and full forgiveness. And Jesus promises that to us too: "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." He promises his disciples in Matthew 18.

As we look forward to resuming our face to face gatherings in the months ahead, wouldn't that be a great thing to pray together. That we will not only see each others faces when we return to church, but that our community will be marked by the freedom and grace of Jesus. That there will be a beauty in our relationships that could only be explained by the fact that Jesus is among us. That our honest fellowship would be a foretaste of the heavenly feast.

4. The Harvest Field

Those are bold prayers aren't they? That sort of aspiration seems a long way removed from the reality we began with, that we live our lives in the valley of the shadow of death. How can we live with that sort of hope and joy in the face of all life's funny feelings?

At this point we launch out from Psalm 23, to a new and different image of life.

And so chapter 9 ends with Jesus describing the world to his disciples not as a dark valley, but as a field ripe for harvest. "The harvest is plentiful", he says, "but the workers are few."

Jesus' disciples really can fear no evil because he is with them, and in following his right path they can be *fruitful* instead of frustrated.

And in case you think this is all out of left field, (pardon the pun) this is actually how Matthew introduced us to the ministry of Jesus. Way back in Matthew 4, we were told that Jesus came to fulfil an ancient prophecy: *the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of shadow of death, a light has dawned.*

Light has dawned, everything has changed! The presence of Jesus doesn't just help us cope with reality, but it completely transforms reality: We are no longer spiralling down towards death, rather we're set on a new trajectory. Jesus' trajectory of death and then life, suffering and then glory, of hard work now, and sometimes painful waiting in anticipation of a glorious harvest.

We are set on a new path, with new power to live as Jesus calls us to live.

And when we look again, we can see this thread running all through Matthew chapter 8 and 9.

The leper was made clean and then sent to the temple to *obey* the law. Peter's mother-in-law was cured from her fever and up she got to *serve* Jesus and his friends.

The blind we healed and so they could *see*.

The mute had their lips loosened so they could *speak*.

The paralysed man had his sins forgiven *and* he was given the power to pick up his mat and *walk*. And so it is for us.

We are made clean from everything that defiles us, and sent out into the world to live the law of love to which Jesus has called us. In all our frailty and frustration, Jesus makes it possible for us to serve him and his people.

We too have new eyes to see the world differently, to look upon the world with the same compassion and care that Jesus had for the crowds. And our mouths are opened so that we can speak. Not first of all to people around us, but to Jesus, the Lord of the harvest. Chapter 9 ends with the encouragement to *pray*, "Ask the Lord of the Harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

And then Jesus speaks to us as he did to that paralysed man, "Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven. Now pick up your mat and walk. And *Work* so that others too might come to me."

Jesus gives complete forgiveness for our past. Unshakeable hope for the future. And purpose and power for the present.

And so whœver we are, and wherever we are, we can say with the Psalmist: *The LORD is my shepherd, I lack **nothing**.*