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Matthew 14:34 - 14:36



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg delves into Matthew 14:34-36 and how Jesus' miraculous healing of the woman who touched the hem of his garment relates to modern-day beliefs in astrology and faith healing. He argues that the constellations and zodiac signs have been paganized and turned into idols, while physical healing through faith in Jesus is important for the person's belief and not simply a matter of releasing faith for a touch. Gregg also cites the biblical story of Elisha's bones remaining dead and questions whether simply touching an object can result in healing.

Transcript

As we continue our study in the Gospel of Matthew, we turn to Matthew 14, beginning at verse 34, and the last three verses here in this chapter. This is after Jesus had walked on the water, and Peter had walked on the water somewhat too, but had failed to continue. Finally, Jesus got back in the boat with the disciples, and it says when they had crossed over, meaning the sea, they came to the land of Genesaret.

And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent out into all the surrounding region, brought to him all who were sick, and begged him that they might only touch the hem of his garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well. Now Matthew leaves out of the story some things that John in his gospel includes, and that's fairly characteristic, of course, of the differences between John and the other gospels.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tend to include many of the same stories and many of the same details as each other, but John's gospel supplements by giving many details that were not in the other gospels. And we have just, in the context here, been looking at Jesus having fed the multitudes, the 5,000, on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is also called the Sea of Genesaret. And having done so, the crowds were very much inspired by seeing a miracle, and they were beginning to make rumblings about making Jesus king forcibly and staging a revolution against Rome.

Well, to prevent this, Jesus dispersed the crowd and sent his disciples ahead of him across the sea on the boat and remained where he was to pray for a while. And he was

there all night praying, and sometime before six in the morning, he came to the disciples who were in the middle of the sea trying to row against the wind. To get to the other side, he came walking on the water.

And by the time he was in the boat, they got to the other side. Now, this is where our story picks up today. But in John's gospel, we have some detail in John chapter 6 of this next day, the day after Jesus fed the multitudes and when he had walked on the water to meet the disciples out on the boat.

What we read in John's gospel that we don't see here is that the crowds who had been fed the day before regathered on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus had done the miracle. They thought he'd be there because they had seen him send his disciples off in the boat to the other side of the sea, but they had seen that he didn't go with them and that there were no other boats available for him to go across. So they assumed he had remained all night and would still be found on that shore.

And so they gathered there looking for another meal, really, but Jesus wasn't there. And so they didn't know what to think of it. And finally, they just made their way around the north end of the Sea of Galilee back to Capernaum on the west side, and there they found Jesus.

And they said to him, Lord, when did you come here? And instead of answering them, he said, well, you're not coming here because you've seen the miracle and understand the meaning of who I am, but you're coming here because your bellies were filled and you were fed. And he says, do not seek the food that perishes, but seek the food that endures to everlasting life. And he began to have an exchange with them where they began to say, well, you know, Moses gave us manna in the wilderness, gave our fathers manna.

What are you going to give us? And Jesus said, I am the true bread that comes down from heaven, and you need to eat my flesh and drink my blood. And they began to be offended by the way he was talking because they took him quite literally, just as some people do today somewhat about those words. And he didn't stop.

He kept saying to them, you know, you need to eat my flesh and drink my blood, and if you don't, you have no life in you. And finally, he offended so many people that they deserted him. The multitudes deserted him, and it would appear that not many remained except for the disciples themselves.

And Jesus said to the twelve, will you also go away? And that's the occasion when Peter said, Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of everlasting life. So that is the sequel that John gives us in his gospel in John chapter 6 to the story of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water. Matthew leaves out all of that.

Matthew simply tells us that when they arrived on the other side in Capernaum, that certain men of the place recognized him. Okay, well, they certainly did. These were the people, some of them were the people who had been fed the day before.

And it says, and the word went out to all the surrounding region that he was there. And so, once again, the activity that he had left that region earlier to avoid, because it was incessant and he had no time for solitude, began again. Namely, they began to bring to him the sick people, especially, it doesn't mention the demon possessed in this particular place, though usually when it mentions that all the town sick came to him, also the demon possessed people came to him.

And it says, they brought all who were sick and begged him that they might only touch the hem of his garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well. Well, this business of touching the hem of his garment and being healed, we've run into this before, haven't we? There was the woman who had the issue of blood, that is a woman who had internal bleeding that had continued for many years and the doctors could not help her.

She heard that Jesus was going through her town, so she snuck up behind him and her resolve was that if she could just touch the hem of his garment, that she would be made well. And sure enough, she did. She touched the hem of his garment and her bleeding stopped immediately and permanently.

And we remember that Jesus on that occasion felt power go out of him when she was healed and turned around and said, who touched me? Now, she was afraid and she did not immediately fess up to it. Now, Jesus was not angry, but she thought he might be. And the reason was because since she was a woman with an issue of blood, she would be under the Jewish ceremonial law unclean.

An issue of blood would render somebody defiled and therefore not capable of having any contact with people. Anyone that she would touch in that condition would also be unclean according to the law. Now, she had touched Jesus, you see, he touched his garment.

And under ordinary circumstances, under the law, that would make him unclean. And she thought, well, maybe he's going to be upset with me because I touched him as an unclean person. But he was not.

He said, woman, your faith is healed. You go in peace. And so she was made well.

Now, the point about that is that it was the first time and a very unique situation, obviously, where somebody had it in their mind that if they could touch the hem of Jesus' garment, they'd be well. But now there came many others who perhaps had heard that story from her. And therefore, they thought, well, maybe we could just touch the hem of

his garment and be well.

And so all the sick were brought. And it's not so much that, I mean, they didn't want to impose on Jesus much. They weren't asking him to pray individually for each one and lay hands on him.

They begged him that they might only touch the hem of his garment. And he apparently allowed it. It says as many as touched it were made perfectly well.

Now, what would it be about the hem of a garment that someone wanted to touch? We might think that a reference to if I could only touch the hem of the garment, it might simply have the effect of a very modest proposal. You know, I don't want to trouble you at all. Just let me brush against your clothes there.

You know, I don't want to. I don't want to. I'm not asking for much here.

Or it might even be that they're expressing that their confidence in Jesus is so great that it would not even be direct contact with him in his physical body. That would be necessary. Even just the edge of him, of his clothing, would be enough.

Stating that, you know, his power is so great in their estimation that even to come that close, just as close as the edge of his clothing, would be enough to transfer the power for healing. The hem of the garment in the Jewish law of a male Jew was to be bordered with a blue hem, a blue ribbon of some sort around the hem. This was something that the law of Moses said the Jews were supposed to have on the bottom of their garment.

It would appear that the purpose of that law was that every time they would look down and see their clothing, they would see that blue hem and it would remind them of something. It would remind them that they were dedicated to God, that they belonged to God. And it's sort of like tying a string around your finger, you know.

The string itself doesn't communicate any information, but it reminds you that you're supposed to remember something. And hopefully, once you remember that there's something you're supposed to remember, you will also remember what it is you're supposed to remember. And likewise, the Jews were to wear this blue hem around the bottom of their garment and that was to remind them of something.

And what it would remind them of, if they remembered, was that they were God's people and they belonged to him. So, in a sense, the hem of the Jewish garment with the blue border there would be something of a symbol of dedication to God or belonging to God. And it's possible that in the popular imagination of the Jewish people, you know, it began to have certain powers.

I'm not saying there really were powers in the hem of it, but, you know, the Jewish people had a tendency toward idolatry, just as most people do. And that tendency was

manifested, for example, in the Old Testament when, in the book of Numbers, many of the Jewish people who murmured against God were bitten by poisonous snakes in the wilderness and were dying. And God provided a remedy when he told Moses to make an image of the serpent out of brass, put it up on a pole, and if anyone would look at it, they would be healed.

Well, they did that. But we later read in the reign of Jehoshaphat, or not Jehoshaphat, but Josiah, that that brass serpent that Moses had made had been kept by the Jews, and it had even become an object of worship. They were beginning to burn incense to it.

And that being so, of course, it had to be destroyed by Josiah in the course of his reforms and trying to get idolatry out of the nation. But here's a brazen snake that doesn't have any power in itself, but because it was symbolic of something, and because it had some significance in an earlier day, the Jews tended to idolize it and worship it as a thing in itself, began to attribute powers to it. You know, people have done that with the stars, too.

You know, the constellations in the heavens, the Bible indicates God has put them there to communicate with us. In Genesis 1.14, it says, He made the stars for signs and for seasons and for days and years. And we won't go there now, but there's much to suggest that the constellations God put in the heavens are there to communicate the actual gospel message, if you know how to decipher them.

And I'm not going to take time for that right now, but the point I would make is that the recognition of these constellations and these so-called houses of the Zodiac has been paganized, has turned into an idolatry, so that the stars, which were there to declare the glory of God and simply to communicate the glory of God to man, have now been attributed powers that they don't have, and they've been made into something like lesser gods, because, you know, modern astrology assumes that if you're born under a certain house of the Zodiac, you know, that determines your personality and your fate and your destiny and all kinds of things. Well, none of that, of course, is true, but what it does is it takes something that God did to communicate information or something like that, and it attributes to it supernatural powers. Now, what I'm getting at is that the Jewish people may have begun to think that way about the blue hem of the garment of the Jew, that God had ordained that the Jewish men would have this blue border on their garment in order to remind them of their dedication to God and that they belong to God.

In the Jewish mind, it may be that some of them had begun to think of it as sort of a magic thing. Now, there are, before we blame the Jews too much for this, Christians often have the same superstition. And, for example, there was a time when I was younger that there was a famous radio evangelist, a lady, who healed people, and she would tell people listening on the radio, if you want to be healed, just put your hand on your radio right now.

And when they touched their radio, they were given to expect that they would be healed. There are a number of ways in which contact, even a remote contact, with someone who is believed to have the power to heal, has resulted in healing. For example, we have the case of, in Acts chapter 5, of the people who heard that Peter was coming down the road, and Peter was known to have tremendous power to work miracles in the name of Christ.

And the people who had sick people brought them out to the road and had them sit by the side of the road, hoping that the shadow of Peter would fall across them as he walked by and heal them. Likewise, in Acts chapter 19, verses 11 and 12, we read that similar confidence was put in Paul by the people, that if people received a handkerchief or a napkin from Paul, or an apron, that they would be healed of their sicknesses. Now, what I want to point out here is, first of all, that in all these cases I've mentioned in the Scripture, it worked.

It really worked. People did get healed in this way. It's not clear entirely why it was that they chose this particular way to be healed or why it would work, but I think probably in each case it is because God wished to confirm the authority of his messengers.

The Bible says in Mark chapter 16 that God worked with the disciples, confirming their words through signs following. And he certainly did that in the life of Jesus, too. It says in Acts chapter 10 that Jesus was a man attested by God with certain signs and wonders.

And so we can see that God wanted to confirm the special rank and authority of his messengers by doing miracles in any way associated with them. And so it was enough if somebody wanted to have the shadow of Peter fall across them or received a handkerchief from Paul, or if they wanted to touch the garment, the blue hem of Jesus' garment or whatever, that whatever superstition might have been attendant in the people's minds did not change the fact that God wanted to show them that this messenger, Jesus in this case, was truly of God. And so God allowed the miracles to take place.

Now some people have said that this business of touching the garment or getting a handkerchief from Paul or having hands laid upon you for healing or whatever, that the value of this is as what they call a point of contact for faith. Here's how the argument goes. They say, you know, many of us have sort of a vague faith in God, sort of a belief that God can heal, that God can do things.

But we don't really expect him to do anything particularly right now. You know, it's not that we think God can't do it. It's just that we have very little reason to believe that it's going to happen at this moment as opposed to some other.

And therefore, we never really release our faith fully to receive a miracle from God because it's always sort of a vague, you know, I hope God will heal me sometime or I

know God can heal me and maybe he will someday. It never really seizes upon the faith that is required for the supernatural to occur, for healing to occur. And therefore, it is argued, to have some kind of a physical sign, put your hand on the radio, let me lay my hands upon you, get this handkerchief from this preacher, you know, touch the hem of this garment.

You know, whenever there's some kind of a physical thing, that's a point in time that someone can do and they can see it happening and they can relate with it, that that often allows people to release their faith and say, well, if I believe that when I put my hand on the radio, I will be healed. That in fact, when they put their hand on the radio, that belief springs up in them. It really causes them to believe in a way they didn't before their hand touched the radio because of their expectation in the matter.

And therefore, they get the healing because their faith is released at that moment. Now, that is one explanation I've heard from people as to why these physical things, touching this or touching that, in order to get healed, worked in the Bible times and may work even today. I suspect, though, that that is not the right explanation.

I would like to have a sure explanation and I would be happy if that was the right one, but I suspect that it doesn't really fit the biblical data accurately. For example, we have a story in 2 Kings chapter 13 in which Elisha the prophet had died and was buried. And in fact, he not only was buried, he was decomposed.

There was nothing left of him but his bones. And there was a war going on in Israel and two Israelite men were carrying a dead companion who had been killed in battle. And they saw some of the enemy coming and they wanted to hide themselves, but they wanted to put the body somewhere out of the way.

So they just tossed this body into a nearby cave in order to dispense with it so they could hide from the troops that were coming. Well, according to the story, again, this is 2 Kings chapter 13, it says that this dead body touched the bones of Elisha because the cave they threw it in happened to be the place where Elisha had been buried. And when this dead body touched the bones of Elisha, the dead body sprang to life again.

Now, Elisha didn't. Elisha's bones remained dead bones, but the man who had been thrown in there became alive. Now, in some respects, that's very much like these other things.

Contact with God's anointed man, but not really directly. Here the man's dead and it's merely his bones. But it worked.

Something supernatural happened. Just like when people had Peter's shadow fall across them or Paul's handkerchief brought to them. Something supernatural happened.

In my mind, the resurrection of this man or the reviving of this man whose body touched

Elisha's bones is very much of the same character as these other miracles we've been talking about. And yet, it is impossible to say that this was a case where a faith release took place. In other words, the man who was dead, when his corpse touched the bones of Elisha, it didn't cause his faith to spring forth.

He was not expecting anything because he was dead. And therefore, it raises serious questions as to whether it really is a matter of simply releasing the faith with a touch. I think that God, who likes to do things His own way and often unpredictably, has used a variety of ways of performing His miracles.

Including, for example, when Jesus healed the blind, sometimes He'd spit on the ground and make clay and put it in their eyes and tell them to wash it out. Or He'd just spit right in their eyes or do something else. I think God did all kinds of unusual things probably simply to associate the result, namely the healing, with the messenger to whom it was done.

I mean, if Jesus healed somebody, or the apostle did, and there was nothing that directly contacted that healing to them, it would not serve as a confirmation that their words were true or that they were men of God, which is the very thing I think God wanted to confirm through these miracles. And therefore, by doing something that was a little bit attention-getting, by doing something that was directly associated with the man of God, whether it was his bones or his handkerchief or his shadow or the hem of his garment, God chose to work miracles through these men so that the result, the miracle, would be immediately and unmistakably associated in the minds of the persons who received it and of onlookers as being from this person or through this person who is thereby credentialed as a man who's got God's message. And remember, God's concern, more often than not, is not so much to work the miracle, but to establish faith in the messenger.

It's not that God doesn't care enough to work miracles to heal people just because they're sick. He does, but there's more to it than that. More important than the physical healing is the fact that the person comes to believe in Jesus and receives more than a physical healing.

Hopefully, they receive eternal life through believing in him. And that's really why the miracles were done more than any other reason. There is, of course, the element of God's compassion on the sick, but more importantly, he's got compassion on souls that are lost and are heading to an eternity without God.

And therefore, when he worked these miracles, he was hoping to remedy that situation as well as the sickness, namely, that their faith would be put in Christ so that they would recognize he was the Son of God and be saved. I hope you may do the same.