

How God Decides

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Let's say I'm sick.

Do I ask God to heal me? Sure.

And if I do ask him, does he heal me?

Well, all right, let's say he does.

Then if he heals me, *how did he decide* whether to heal me or not?

Let's say I've got a terrible problem with my job. Do I ask God to solve it? And if I do ask him, does he solve it? And if he does solve it, *how did he decide* whether to solve it or not?

Or let's say I've got a heartbreaking relationship problem. Or I've got a personal financial crisis. Or I've got a devastating habit that's eating away at my quality of life. Do I ask God for help? And if I do ask him, does he give me the help I need? And if he does help me, *how did he decide* whether to help me or not?

What is it about a person that gets them an answer to prayer when I don't get an answer to prayer? What about them was the thing that made the difference for God? And what stuff about them didn't make any difference at all?

As Jesus returned to Capernaum, some time after Matthew's party (which we looked at in our last session together), he performed a pair of intertwined miracles — and the intertwining reveals *what doesn't really matter to God* when I come to him for help. (The Bible scholar Warren Wiersbe has written about this in his *Bible Exposition Commentary*, and I used his work as a launch point for my own studies.)

The Capernaum crowd welcomed Jesus — as usual. But according to **Luke 8:40-55**, Jairus, the ruler of the local synagogue, burst through and fell at Jesus' feet, "pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying."

The ruler of the synagogue had huge clout. He was responsible for the public services. He appointed people to offer the public prayers, read the Scriptures, deliver the sermons. He was chairman of the board of elders. He was in charge of the physical facilities. In a lot of local churches, it takes at least three people to do all of that!

So Jairus was a powerful man in the institutional church of his day.

He had gone to Hebrew school as a child, just like all the boys in his neighborhood, but when he came of age, he didn't peel off into carpentry, or banking, or some other career; he stayed in the ministry. He climbed the ladder in the hierarchy of organized religion. He may have come from very humble beginnings; his family may have been quite poor. But by the time he found himself groveling at Jesus' feet, he had achieved real power and success. Jairus was well off. This was a

good-paying job, and it came with a ton of status and prestige.

But then, as Jesus heads toward Jairus' house to heal his daughter, there's an interruption. A woman turns up who has suffered from hemorrhages for 12 years. She's a medical nightmare — someone who has gone to doctor after doctor without success.

Luke, writing this account (**Luke 8:40-55**), was a doctor by profession. Throughout his unique account of Christ's life, Luke seems to be fascinated by the miracles of physical healing that Jesus performed. But at the same time, he must have hated to see his fellow members of the medical profession taking these kinds of public relations hits; so Luke doesn't give us the detail that Mark gives us, in **Mark 5:26**: "She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse."

This woman, financially speaking, was going in the opposite direction from Jairus. She seems to have been quite well off — Mark tells us that she had enough money to go to "many doctors." In other words, she had spent a pile of money — and when it was all gone, it was a lot of money to have squandered. It was significant in that culture for a woman to have any serious money at all; so either she was wealthy in her own right, or she had a wealthy husband. In either case, here was a woman who had been wealthy and now was financially depleted. She was broke. She was needy.

Yet Jesus met her need. She was healed.

And Jairus' daughter — in the very next scene — will be raised from the dead.

Both people experienced miracles. What do the intertwined miracles show me? Some crucial truths.

First — *Jesus can meet my need regardless of my "station in life."* Regardless of my income level, my social status, or where I stand in my career path.

Oh sure, you say to yourself, come on. I never let my station in life keep me from believing God to meet my need.

Maybe not. But how do you regard the other guy?

Somebody says, "I've got a need. Pray with me." But they're wealthy. Do you find yourself saying, at least subconsciously, *Oh, come off it. How bad a need could they have? God's already blessed them like crazy!*

Or let's say someone expresses a need and they're poor. Or maybe they're unemployed. Maybe they blew their last big job opportunity. Maybe they were stupid. Maybe they got in over their head. And now they've got a need. Do you find yourself saying, at least subconsciously, *Oh, come off it. If they would help themselves a little bit, they wouldn't HAVE such a need! God's not going to respond to that kind of prayer!*

But Jairus and the sick woman show us that Jesus isn't looking at our station in life when we bring our need to him. He's not running a background check to see how wise or foolish we've been in the past. He's not impressed by how much we've gained in life, and he's not turned off by how much we've lost.

I need an attitude check when I hear people expressing their needs. I need God to give me the compassion of Christ — because *all Jesus says* about someone in need is what he said in **Matthew 11:28**: "Come to me, all you who are weary and

burdened, and I will give you rest.”

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Jairus and the sick woman were also on opposite ends of the spectrum with regard to their religious life.

Jairus was as high up as you could go in the local church. He was Organized Religion personified. He observed every detail of the religious rituals required by the religious traditions of the day. He wore the proper clothing, he lived by the proper schedule, he spoke the proper prayers. He was totally “correct” with regard to religious rituals and regulations.

But the sick woman was totally on the outside of the life of the church. Under Jewish law, according **Leviticus 15:19-22**, a woman was regarded as ceremonially unclean during her menstrual period. If she was bleeding at all, she was not allowed to come into the synagogue. That means for 12 solid years, this woman had been an outcast in her own church family. She was as “incorrect” as could possibly be when it came to religious traditions.

What does this tell me?

It tells me that *Jesus can meet my need regardless of my position in the church, and regardless of whatever kinds of religious rituals I am observing or not observing.*

Do you feel like you can't really ask God to meet that need in your life because you forgot your daily Bible reading this morning?

Do you feel as if you haven't been quite faithful enough in church attendance lately, and because of that you can't really expect God to work in your life?

That's not what Jairus and the sick woman discovered.

The spiritual life that God calls you to live — the habits of a Christian lifestyle — are for *your* benefit. They're not a scale by which Jesus judges whether you're fit to have your prayers answered. They're *helps* designed for *your* sake.

Maybe the Christian education director of my church comes to me this week and says, “Hey, would you be willing to serve in our junior high area?” And I say, “Well, I'll think about that and pray about it.” I go home and I say to myself, “Ack! That's the most horrifying thing I could ever imagine!”

So I go back to the Christian ed director and say, in those smooth, round tones intended to make me sound as if I've been closeted away in prayer for a long, long time, “You know, I just don't feel the Lord leading me in that direction at this time.”

Then the next day I lose my job.

Now I have a huge need.

Do I find myself feeling that I can't expect God to meet my need — in fact, I can't even really *pray* about this — because I didn't take that ministry position?

If that's how I feel, then I haven't learned the lesson of Jairus and the sick woman.

Jesus doesn't distinguish between church insiders and church outsiders. He just loves people.

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But what if it seems to take *forever* for God to meet my need?

Luke tells us that the sick woman's bleeding stopped “immediately.” But while Jesus is chatting with her, someone shows up from Jairus' place with the terrible news:

it's too late. His daughter has died.

“Don't bother the teacher any more,” they say.

The woman gets instant results — and she has prayed just about the most *invisible* prayer a person could pray. Jairus, on the other hand, gets *negative* results. Here he's risking his career, he's giving Jesus all the glory he can give, he's doing everything he knows to do, and in the middle of it all, his little girl dies. God fails him. Jesus has let him down. It's a nightmare.

But what's the *first* thing Jesus says to him?

What's the one thing Jesus pushed back on the most?

What's the most debilitating emotion we can experience as God's children?

What's the weapon that Satan loves to use the most on us to keep us from accomplishing what God has called us to accomplish, and to keep us from becoming what God has called us to become?

Fear.

So of course that's what Jesus addresses first. The bad news arrives, and Jesus immediately says to Jairus, **“Don't be afraid....”**

When I take my need to God, if he doesn't see fit to answer my prayer immediately, or answer it the way I *expect* him to answer it — if God happens to have a better idea than to give me *what* I want *when* I want it in the *manner* I want it (I can't imagine God having a better idea than me, can you? But sometimes he does!) — If God has a purpose for delaying the answer to my prayer, my most natural response is to be *afraid*.

I'm afraid he doesn't love me.

I'm afraid he doesn't hear me.

I'm afraid I'm not good enough to have my prayer answered.

Or I'm afraid of what's going to happen if I don't get what I asked for.

I'm afraid of what alternative God might have planned for me.

I'm afraid of what God might consider to be best for me, compared to what *I* consider to be best for me.

I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I'm afraid.

And Satan *loves* this.

I'm functioning perfectly according to Satan's plan.

I'm contributing *beautifully* to *his* purposes!

I've played *totally* into his hand.

I am now of limited use to God.

I am now growing spiritually in only a very limited way, if at all.

Fear has done a number on me.

Satan wins.

But Jesus says, **“Don't be afraid.”**

Between the two of them, Jairus and this sick woman demonstrate that *Jesus can meet my need even after it looks like it's too late*.

You think you've lost that job opportunity forever — but Jesus still has a miracle up his sleeve.

You think you've lost the fight with that disease — it looks like it's all over, but Jesus says, "Wait, I'm still going to work a miracle here."

How many married couples today are living demonstrations of the fact that Jesus can work a miracle even after it looks like it's too late?

How many parents of teenagers can tell you, It looked like it was too late for my kid, but Jesus worked a miracle?

Jesus says, "It looks like it's too late, but don't be afraid."

He is still working.

He still has a plan for your situation.

He still has a way to grow you.

He still has a way to provide for you.

He still holds the future.

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I want the ending to be inspiring.

I want an emotional high.

I want something that will inspire me to believe God for absolutely anything.

Well, okay, that would be legitimate. We can indeed believe God for anything.

But we also have to keep in perspective the reality in which we live — and that's a somewhat different message. Here it is:

Whether Jesus meets my need exactly the way I want him to, or whether he keeps growing me and growing me by *not* giving me what I ask for, or whether he takes some completely different approach that I don't expect or understand at all, the truth is — no matter *how* he meets my need — *life goes on*.

I still have to grow in Christ.

I still have work to do.

I will still have new problems.

I will still have to trust God in other ways.

So, relatively speaking, getting Jesus to meet the need I'm facing today is not the foundation of my faith.

Jesus didn't say to the newly healed woman, "Congratulations! You now have everything you need."

He said, "**Go in peace.**" You have a road to travel. You have a spiritual journey to continue on. Sure, you got your miracle today, but you will need my peace in the days to come, because you are going to have other struggles. He says again, in no uncertain terms, in **John 16:33**: "**In this world you will have trouble.**"

After Jairus' daughter has been raised to life, Jesus does something distinctly boring: he tells them to give her something to eat. She has just experienced the most dramatic miracle possible, a resurrection from death to life — and Jesus just says, *Okay, somebody grill 'er up a burger.*

Life goes on.

Everything this side of heaven is still just *this* life. It's just temporal. It's still just physical.

I counseled a woman who had put her wedding on our church calendar. There was a fracture in that relationship. The wedding suddenly was not going to happen. The bride-to-be was shattered. But I was deeply proud of her, because her faith in Christ was still intact. She said, “This really hurts, but Jesus is still my King. And someday I will be with him. That’s my major focus. Everything else, everything in *this* life, is secondary.”

No matter how God meets my needs, whether he seems to answer every prayer exactly as I request it, or whether he seems to be growing me through constant suffering and I *never* seem to get what I ask for, I need to keep eternity in perspective.

The day will come when, even if Jesus has raised me from the dead as he did Jairus’ daughter, I am going to die. Anything God does for me here and now, in this life, is a blessing, but it’s not essential.

On the other hand, anything God does for me that influences eternity — anything he does for me that somehow draws other people to faith in Christ and leads them to eternal life — *that* is what’s important.

There’s eternity, and then there’s everything else. Nothing that happens here on earth is really worth more. If God answers my prayer the way I hope he will, what a blessing! But if God answers my prayer in some other way — maybe by saying “No” or “Wait a while” — or even if he seems to remain strangely silent, I can still lean back and trust his love. I can still know that **“in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).**

When I have a need, I can look to Jairus and the sick woman for a faith-check:

- Am I reluctant to bring this need to Jesus?
- Do I feel I have to get into a different place spiritually before I can ask him to move in my situation?
- Do I think I have to “get more faith” before I can ask him for help?
- Have I let myself get discouraged? Am I so tired of the burden that I’m not even asking him for help anymore?

Jesus doesn’t have any of our hang-ups.

He’s ready to hear from us — right now.

What’s your need?