

**“Leaning In”**  
**Matthew 9:18-26**  
**January 14, 2018**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

In Matthew 8-9, Matthew is not just randomly picking miracles to report on, but grouping them with a purpose. The miracles of chapter 9 seem to me to be focused on faith. Today’s passage is unique in that Matthew manages to put two miracles within one story. One miracle is about a powerful man, a synagogue ruler, who encounters a desperate need. His daughter has died. While accompanying the ruler to his house, where his recently deceased daughter is lying in bed, Jesus encounters a person with no power, a woman who has been rendered ritually unclean as a result of years of hemorrhaging. She too is desperate. Jesus heals her and then resumes his journey to the dead daughter, raising her from the dead.

As different as these two individuals are, the ruler and the hemorrhaging woman, they are united by their desperation. And in their desperation, they lean on Jesus and he brings life. These two miracles teach us that faith means to lean in. To lean in means to draw closer rather than withdrawing. My wife has been suffering from a bad case of laryngitis for the past two weeks. Though she’s tried to be as quiet as possible and not even whisper, there are times when communication simply must happen. On such occasions, I find myself leaning in toward her to hear her whispering voice. Faith requires that we do the same, and there are three things we must lean in to: desperation, Jesus, and life. Let’s look at those now.

**I. Leaning in to Desperation**

What is desperation? It is the combination of an absolute need with no ability to meet that need. I get hungry multiple times each day, but my hunger doesn’t rise to the level of desperation because, with rare exceptions, I have always had food available to me. But if I am both hungry and without any ability to find food, I am desperate. The ruler was desperate because his daughter had died, and no mere mortal can do a thing about something as final as death.

This man was an important man, called a “ruler” by Matthew. Luke tells us his name, Jairus, and clarifies that he was the ruler of a synagogue. When you hear that, don’t think of something like a pastor. Remember that Israel was a theocracy and that spiritual leaders were also civic leaders. He would have been something of a combination between a pastor and a mayor. Such an important man would not be well-acquainted with desperation, but that has all

changed now with the death of his daughter. Being such an important person, he would be well-informed about the events surrounding Jesus. He had likely witnessed some of Jesus' miracles. So in his desperation, he does something he may not have done otherwise and approaches Jesus with a seed of faith. He was aware that Jesus had done things no mere human could do, and bringing life to the dead certainly fit in that category. So he asks Jesus to come and lay hands on his daughter in order to restore her life.

Jesus agrees to do so and follows the man to his house. On the way, something unexpected happens. Their journey is interrupted by a second desperate person, a woman who had suffered for twelve years from a discharge of blood. Luke adds that she had spent all her money on physicians, but none were able to help her. So this woman was on the opposite end of the social spectrum from the synagogue ruler. She was woman in a culture that gave second class status to women. She was also poor. And since Old Testament law said that those with such a discharge were ritually unclean, she would have been isolated. Touching someone such as her would make the other person ritually unclean. So we can easily imagine her desperation, which was an old, familiar enemy to her. For twelve long years she had suffered. The fact that she had seen multiple physicians meant that she had frequently had her hopes raised only to see them dashed again when the bleeding persisted after the treatment. Such a pattern would have served to increase her desperation. She did the right thing with her desperation, taking it to Jesus, touching the fringe of his garment and immediately experiencing healing. What no other physician could do, Jesus was able to do immediately.

Imagine the effect of this interruption on the ruler. Jesus didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, taking time to engage this woman in conversation. Such a delay would have served to increase the ruler's desperation, and I think that's part of what is happening. Jesus often wants to increase our desperation in order to increase our faith.

I think something else is happening here, though. Jesus is also building the faith of the ruler by showing him another person with a desperate situation who comes to Jesus. Isn't your faith encouraged when you see others clinging to Jesus in difficult circumstances? Joni Eareckson Tada has been a quadriplegic for fifty years after a diving accident in her teens. In a recent article describing what she has learned over these fifty years, she wrote, "It sounds incredible, but I really would rather be in this wheelchair knowing Jesus as I do than be on my feet without him."

One of the ways you can lean into desperation is to get to know others like this woman, those from less advantaged circumstances. I have mentioned before that for the past few years I have been involved in a preaching cohort with other preachers from diverse backgrounds. There is racial, denominational and economic diversity. One of the African-American pastors there once

remarked to me, “When people in your church get sick, you pray for wisdom for the doctors. When people in my church get sick, we pray that they would be able to find a doctor who will see them, because most of them have no health insurance.” He wasn’t saying it in a resentful or angry way; just stating a fact. And yet he was trusting God for those in his congregation. I wonder if the ruler experienced something of that as he saw that much less privileged woman with a long-term desperate need coming to Jesus and trusting him.

So our need is to lean in to desperation, not to run from it. In a sermon he preached on this passage, Dan Doriani reminds us of an account from C. S. Lewis’ Narnia tales. A girl named Jill is a new visitor to Narnia and she is wandering around lost and very thirsty. She finally finds a stream but finds that it is guarded by the lion Aslan. She doesn’t know Aslan and is so terrified of his presence that she will not approach the stream to drink, even though she is desperately thirsty. Also because of her thirst, she will not leave the stream. Finally, Aslan breaks the silence when he says in his deep voice, “If you’re thirsty, come and drink.”

Fearful, Jill hesitates, so Aslan asks, “Are you not thirsty?”

“I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill.

“Then drink,” said the Lion.

“Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?” said Jill.

“I make no promise,” said the Lion.

“Do you eat girls?” Jill asked.

“I have swallowed kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion.

“I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion.

“Oh dear!” said Jill, “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” said the Lion.

Like Jill, we have a reticence to come to God in faith. Our reticence is so strong that it is usually only when we grow desperate that we will do so. How is God calling you to lean in to desperation? One of the ways I’ve observed people running away from desperation instead of toward it is in avoiding any ministry in the church where they might feel overwhelmed or inadequate. The truth is that those involved in ministry are supposed to feel overwhelmed and inadequate, in order that our desperation might drive us to Jesus. I feel that way on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Embrace desperation and let it take you to Jesus, which brings us to our next point.

## **II. Leaning in to Jesus**

In their desperation, both the ruler and the woman come to Jesus, which is the heart of faith. Faith is not about getting everything right, but about coming to the right person. In other words, the important thing about biblical faith is

the object of our faith, not the size of our faith. It has been pointed out that there is just a little superstition in the faith of both the ruler and woman, seen in their emphasis on touching. The ruler wants Jesus to come and lay hands on his daughter. But couldn't Jesus speak the word from a distance and bring life to her corpse? The hemorrhaging woman believes it necessary that she touch some part of Jesus. It is not. Jesus' healing power is a matter of Jesus' mere willing of the healing.

But even though they get some things wrong, they get one big thing right. Jesus has the answer and they must come to him. We need to learn the same. When we come to Jesus, he doesn't scrutinize our lives to find a reason not to give us what we need. He doesn't criticize, even though the truth is he wouldn't have to look very hard to find something worthy of criticism. The important thing is to come to him. Remember the words to the hymn, "If you tarry 'til you're better, you will never come at all."

Jesus even stoops to their desire for touch. He allows a bleeding woman to touch him, though doing so would normally bring ritual uncleanness. And he does touch a dead corpse, though again doing so brings ritual impurity. But that is the heart of the gospel, isn't it? Jesus receives uncleanness from us in order to bring his cleanness to our lives. The important application is to come to Jesus as a present tense act. In our desperation, we merely come to him.

### **III. Leaning in to Life**

When we come to Jesus, he brings life. Let's look at the life he brings, beginning with the woman. Jesus doesn't let her have what she wants, which is an anonymous, healing touch. He gives her the healing part, but not the anonymous part. She wants to remain an unseen, unnoticed part of the crowd, but Jesus will not allow it. Why not? I think there are two reasons, and both are part of the abundant life Jesus wants to bring, giving us more than we can ask or imagine. First, he wants to reassure the woman, and us, that we are not lost in the crowd. Jesus doesn't compare our difficulties with those of others and then set about to deal with them in order of severity. He doesn't say to this woman, "You've been living with this for twelve years; I've got a much more pressing case of a very important man whose daughter has died." Her need was real, and Jesus wants her to know that she is not lost in the crowd. He values her and attends to her in her neediness.

A second reason he will not let her remain anonymous is that he wants to restore not only her health but her social standing as well. She has been avoided for twelve years by now, out of fear of ritual impurity. Now she has been cleansed, and Jesus wants everyone to know it so that she might be fully welcomed back into community.

Jesus also restores life to the ruler's house. Upon arriving, he finds the professional mourners already present. Funeral custom in this day was to hire musicians and mourners at the funeral of a loved one. There was no delay in these matters, because of the speedy decomposition of the body. So by the time Jesus and the ruler arrive back at his house, the mourners have already begun. When Jesus finds them there, he chases them all away and announces that the girl is only asleep. They laugh at him. They are professionals, and they know a dead person when they see one. Jesus, of course, is speaking figuratively. He knows she is dead. But he also knows that with him everything broken by the fall is only temporary, just like sleep. He brings life.

Think with me about all the occupations Jesus will one day ruin. Entire industries are wiped out by him. We could start with the funeral industry. Then we could add all jobs in the medical field, 18% of our economy in America. Law enforcement and military personnel will no longer be needed. The criminal justice system, including courtrooms and prisons, will go away, never to return. Locksmiths, computer security people, everyone involved in insurance, and so many others will have to learn new careers.

The Bible says the last enemy to be defeated is death itself. When Jesus said the girl was only sleeping, the gathered mourners laughed at him. I wonder what they said when they saw that same girl walking around again right after that. Jesus always gets the last laugh. Psalm 2 says that the Lord laughs at his enemies when they conspire against him and think that they can defeat him (Ps. 2:4). Their efforts are laughably inadequate. No enemy can stand against the determination of Jesus to defeat that enemy.

I can think of three Gospel stories in which Jesus raises the dead. There is this one, and then the account of the raising of the widow's son as the funeral party is parading down the street (Luke 7:14). Then, finally, there is the raising of Lazarus, dead for four days. Each of these three would seem to be more difficult because of the length of time since death. But that is no obstacle for Jesus. The Bible teaches that at the second coming of Christ, he will descend from heaven, speak a command, and the dead in Christ will be raised and given incorruptible and immortal bodies (1 Thess. 4:16). Those whose bodies have been in the grave for thousands of years will be raised. Those whose bodies have been incinerated through cremation will also be raised. It will be the death of death.

## **CONCLUSION:**

All will enjoy this miracle of Jesus making all things new who have learned to be desperate for Jesus and who look to him in faith. You don't have to get everything right, but you do have to trust the right one, our Lord Jesus.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
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1. Can you think of a time in your life when you have been desperate for something? Describe that. What was it like?
2. Is there a difference between being desperate for something and having a strong desire for something? The answer to that question can be found in asking another. How does desperation encourage our faith?
3. Note that Jesus seems to deepen the ruler's desperation through pausing to take care of the hemorrhaging woman's need. Does God sometimes seek to deepen our desperation? How does he do that?
4. Jesus is encouraging the faith of the ruler by this pause with the bleeding woman. She has lived on the opposite end of the social spectrum from the ruler and has a different level of desperation than him, due to her long-term suffering as a powerless, isolated woman. Yet she too looks to Jesus. Have you ever been encouraged by someone who has endured great hardship and yet has remained steadfast in trusting Jesus? Describe that. How did it help your faith?
5. What are some ways Jesus might be calling you to greater faith through greater desperation? Are there some ways you are perhaps running from desperation instead of leaning in to it? That is, are there some things Jesus might be calling you to do that you either avoiding doing or try to move forward in doing through self-trust that are actually opportunities he has presented to you to deepen your faith through deepened desperation?
6. Neither the ruler nor the woman had perfect faith, but they did have true faith. True faith is not about getting everything right, but about coming to the right person. That is, the important thing is to place your faith in the right object, in Jesus. Are there ways you have seen a misunderstanding about this in your own life or in the lives of others?
7. In many ways, the world laughs at us because of our hope in bodily resurrection. We are told that this is a belief that is merely for weak people who need that kind of comfort. Are you affected at all by this kind of cynical, unbelieving attitude?
8. What goes on inside of you when you think Jesus one day speaking the word of command and your body being raised from the dead?