

Matthew 9G

- Over the past few months, we've studied through Jesus' miracles in the Galilee
 - And last week, we ended that study looking at a complex connection linking the final three miracles of chapter 9 with events in chapter 12
 - In order to understand the final miracle of chapter 9, we had to reconstruct a timeline from the events of chapter 12
 - It may have been a bit confusing at moments, but things will become increasingly clear as we move toward chapter 12
 - And that's one of the benefits of verse-by-verse study of Scripture...as we move steadily, our questions get answered
 - As we studied that connection, I told you that in chapter 12 something happens to change Jesus' approach to ministry
 - Something big, something pivotal disrupts everything Jesus was doing and it set His earthly ministry in a new direction
 - What is that big "something?" It is Israel rejecting of Jesus' claims to be their Messiah
 - Once Israel had turned down Jesus' offer of the Kingdom, everything Jesus did and said changed from that point forward
 - The full story of how and why Israel rejected Jesus awaits us in chapter 12
 - But even before it took place, that moment cast a shadow over the events of chapters 10 & 11
 - Jesus knew beforehand that He would be rejected by His people and He knew it would force Him to change His style of ministry
 - So as He approached that moment, He began preparing His disciples and the crowds for what would follow
 - That process of preparation is the subject of Matthew's 10th and 11th chapters, which is our next area of study
 - It actually begins at the end of chapter 9, where we ended our study last week

- So let's pick up in v.35 of chapter 9 as Jesus starts His course of preparation

Matt. 9:35 Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.

Matt. 9:36 Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.

- Matthew summarizes Jesus' time in the Galilee in v.35m, saying Jesus moved around the 240-odd cities and towns in the area proclaiming the Gospel and healing
 - The point is that Jesus was opening sharing the truth of His identity and His purpose for coming to Earth
 - And He backed His claims with displays of power that could only mean one thing
 - Jesus was the promised Messiah sent with the authority and power of God Himself
 - You may remember that shortly after Jesus called His first disciples in chapter 4, Matthew summarized Jesus' Galilean ministry in a similar way

Matt. 4:23 Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.

- Now we see Matthew repeating virtually the same thought, word-for-word, as we leave chapter 9
- Back in chapter 4 Matthew used that statement to introduce his record of Jesus' miracles and teaching in the Galilee
- And now he repeats it again to indicate the conclusion of this section of His gospel
- So these statements serve as bookends marking the beginning and end of Matthew's record of Jesus' time in the Galilee
 - Of course, Jesus said and did many more things that those Matthew chose to record, some of which we find recorded in the other Gospels

- And as John says at the end of his Gospel, there aren't enough books in the world to record all Jesus did in His earthly ministry
- Therefore, like all the Gospels, Matthew's account is a representative sample of Jesus' work, and now that record has come to an end
- So at this point in his narrative, Matthew begins to chronicles Jesus' shifting priorities in view of His approaching rejection by the leaders and people
 - Beginning in v.36 where Matthew says Jesus looked upon the crowds with compassion, or in Greek the word could be translated pity
 - Thousands of people had been drawn to Jesus' ministry in the Galilee, and His heart feels pity for them
 - But Jesus wasn't feeling pity because they were sick or needy
 - Matthew says Jesus' pitied them because they were distressed and dispirited
 - This is profound statement, and one worth some attention this evening
 - Distressed means troubled or worried, which is an odd thing under these circumstances
 - That's not the response we would expect to see, is it?
 - After at least a year or more of Jesus teaching and healing, you would expect the opposite response, wouldn't we?
 - We expect the people to be overjoyed at the arrival of their Messiah, the Good Shepherd, and the coming of the Kingdom
 - Yet Matthew says Jesus observed that the people remained troubled and discouraged...why?
 - We get our answer in the comparison Matthew offers at the end of the verse
 - Matthew compares their distress to that of a sheep being without a shepherd
 - Shepherding is common biblical metaphor for pastoral care
 - Because shepherding is an excellent illustration of the relationship between church leadership and those they lead

- We remember Jesus told Peter feed and tend My sheep, which was Jesus' way of reminding Peter how to care for those in the church
- Now when we talk about shepherds, obviously, Jesus is THE Shepherd of God's people, the Good Shepherd
 - But we also know the Lord raises up leaders over the congregation of His people
 - And these leaders are also called shepherds (or under-shepherds)
 - Which means we are the sheep
 - But unfortunately, the metaphor isn't necessarily complimentary, because sheep are notoriously dim-witted
 - They move about with their eyes down, blindly focused on satisfying their hunger and oblivious to where they are going
 - Which means sheep are prone to wandering away
 - They inevitably get separated and lost, ending up in dangerous situations before they know it
 - And sheep are virtually defenseless when left to themselves
 - So sheep need the watchful care of a shepherd to guide them
 - With the emphasis on "guiding", because sheep cannot be driven from behind like cattle...they must be lead from the front
 - So sheep instinctively look to a shepherd
 - They expect to be led, and they trust the shepherd to point out danger and lead them to good pastures
 - But if sheep are without a shepherd, they quickly become distressed
 - They can get confused and begin to feel vulnerable
 - They may begin to follow other animals or their own shadow
 - They may panic and stampede or the flock simply scatter
- Matthew compares the situation Jesus witnessed in Israel to that of sheep left without proper supervision and care

- The people were distressed, they were wandering away, unsure of where to go
 - Yet their religious leaders were all about, directing their every move
 - And even more puzzling, their Good Shepherd stood in their midst
 - So how can it be that the sheep of Israel are distressed being without a shepherd?
- To understand what Matthew means, consider that the effects of Jesus' ministry in the Galilee were impossible to ignore
 - A Jew could either love Jesus or hate Jesus for what He was saying and doing, but he certainly couldn't ignore Jesus
 - His words were too provocative, and His powers were too impressive to overlook
 - So everyone had to come to some decision about the meaning of Jesus' ministry...His impressive work demanded a verdict
- And there were several verdicts being debated among the people
 - Later in Jesus asks His disciples to tell Him what explanations the people were offering to explain Jesus' power

Matt. 16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Matt. 16:14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

- The disciples say various explanations were floating around
- But notice that the disciples didn't offer the most obvious explanation...that Jesus was the Messiah
- So even after a year or more of Jesus opening proclaiming the Kingdom of God and that He was the Messiah, the people didn't believe it despite His powers
 - Most of the "sheep" were confused, and the reason for that confusion was the influence of the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees
 - The people looked to these so-called shepherds seeking asking them to render a verdict concerning Jesus

- And these corrupt men told the people that Jesus *wasn't* the Messiah
- As we saw last week, they told the people Jesus wasn't the Son of David...He was merely working with the power of Satan
- Naturally, those lies left the people distressed and troubled
 - The crowds must have been so disappointed to hear that what they so desperately wanted to be true was just a facade
 - For a moment their hearts leapt in anticipation of seeing the long-awaited Kingdom arrive, but then their dreams were dashed
- And if it was true that Satan could mimic the powers of the Messiah, then how could Israel ever know for sure who the Messiah was?
 - How could they avoid being misled by such power?
 - Which led to the second outcome...they were dispirited
- Dispirited means to be downcast, discouraged spiritually
 - Israel was discouraged thinking that had come so close to having their Messiah only to be duped by the enemy once more
 - They felt like the villagers fooled by the boy who cried wolf...
 - After too many false alarms, you just stop listening and give up caring
- So when Matthew says the people were without a shepherd, he means it in a two-fold sense
 - First, they were without a shepherd in the sense that the people didn't embrace their Good Shepherd, though He was standing in their midst
 - Israel longed for their Messiah, and to get so close only to fall short (or so they thought) was incredibly discouraging to the nation
- Secondly, Israel missed their Messiah because they were also without earthly shepherds, who would lead them properly in spiritual matters
 - In fact, their evil religious leaders were stumbling blocks who steered the nation *away* from their Messiah,

- Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus says this about these men:

Matt. 23:13 “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

- When sheep lack a caring shepherd, they are in a world of hurt, and that is just a true today as it was in Jesus’ day
 - The influence of corrupt leaders, especially those who engage in false teaching, will cause believers to adopt wrong thinking and behavior
 - The consequences of that wrong thinking and behavior eventually come to rest on the believer, causing distress
 - And over time, the believer becomes dispirited, discouraged, or cynical
 - To the point that the person comes to view the pursuit of Christ and His word to be a waste of time
 - Over time the person gives up on church or discipleship altogether
 - And at worst, we conclude that even God’s word itself is useless or irrelevant
 - And when we give up on the word of God, where else can we turn to know the truth about God?
 - If we turn away from Jesus and His Church and His word, all we have left is the wisdom of the world
 - And what good are all books of wisdom in the world? Can they tell us about a God Who can only be known by what He chooses to reveal to us?
 - Does the internet understand God? Does Dr. Phil? Judge Judy?
- The Lord appoints shepherds over His flock for good reason
 - Because leaders are crucial to keeping the Lord’s sheep together, in safety and nourished by the word of God
 - But for the same reason, bad shepherds have the potential to completely sabotage our spiritual journey

- Like Israel, mistreated believers are like sheep wandering without a shepherd
- They are lost, starving for lack of spiritual nourishment, and in danger of various threats
- We need to submit to the leaders over us, as Hebrews obey our leaders and submit to them, as Hebrews 13:17 commands
 - But at the same time, we must remain discerning for who leads us and who teaches us
 - And when our leaders reveal themselves to be ungodly or unable to divide the Scriptures rightly, we need to look elsewhere
 - Because if we remain under such men, we are like sheep without a shepherd and we're headed for trouble
- But here's the good news: even when we lack good shepherds in our congregations, our Good Shepherd in Heaven never forsakes His sheep
 - The Spirit of God living inside every believer continues to minister to our hearts even when no one else will
 - So when a child of God comes under the influence false teaching and evil leaders, the Spirit will alert him or her to the dangers
 - The believer will sense a growing dissatisfaction, a sense that something is missing, something isn't right
 - And the Spirit will drive that person to seek for better pasture
- That's what's happening here...the Lord was moved to compassion for the people of Israel because they were without shepherds
 - He felt pity for them knowing they were being misled by the very leaders appointed to steer them toward the truth
 - And naturally, He wanted to solve the problem by giving His flock proper, godly leadership who would bring people to Christ
 - And then having brought them to know their Good Shepherd, these leaders would guide and feed and guard the flock
 - So the Lord's compassion for His people displayed in v.36 leads us into the next phase of Matthew's Gospel

- In this new section Jesus begins to prepare His disciples for Israel's coming rejection of Him and the Kingdom
- He works to instill in their hearts an awareness that they must become a new generation of leaders over God's flock
- That after Jesus departs the earth, these men and those they train must assume the shepherding duties for the people of God
- And as they assume these responsibilities, they must not look to the Pharisees as their models for how to lead the people
 - Jesus must establish an entirely different example
 - Beginning with the very notion that there is work to do in recruiting leaders to lead the flock

Matt. 9:37 Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

Matt. 9:38 "Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

- Everyone has probably heard this passage repeated at some point
 - The metaphor of harvest is well-understood in the church
 - The world is the field, and grain represent hearts of the lost in the world
 - The Lord does the hard work of prepare those hearts by His word and through the Spirit
 - And He calls His Church to go out and seek the lost
 - But if you can, step back from what you know in this regard, and try to think like a first-century disciple in Jesus' day
 - To that audience, Jesus' words are revolutionary
 - First, Jesus said that there is a harvest to be sought
 - Again, we take this for granted, but that was not conventional thought in that day
 - Israel was God's people, and there were no others to seek
 - But Jesus is saying the Kingdom citizens must be sought

- There is no automatic membership...you won't enter the Kingdom simply because you're born a Jew
- Furthermore, those who will enter the Kingdom must be recruited by workers who are specifically seeking to recruit these citizens
 - This is a program of preparation for the Kingdom that no one in Israel had ever considered before
 - And truly, the Lord had never asked this of Israel before, but in light of Jesus' coming rejection, this would now become God's program
- In centuries prior, Israel waited for their Messiah to appear with the Kingdom, as God's word promised would happen
 - But now that this promised was being fulfilled yet the people rejected their Messiah, the Lord's program was about to change
 - There would now be a program of Kingdom work, where God's people would work for Him, seeking for more disciples in the field
- This is something entirely new, something radical, and it would require that Jesus' disciples cultivate within themselves an attitude that was radically different than that of Israel's current leaders
 - Where the Pharisees were self-serving, self-righteous and self-satisfied, now God's workers, His shepherds must be humble
 - They must be self-sacrificing, focused on Jesus' priorities with a heart for the flock
 - And these kinds of leaders were not common in Jesus' day, and they are still relatively rare today
 - Which is why the Lord advised His disciples, the future leaders of the early church to beseech (or we could say beg) the Lord for help
 - Anyone called to shepherd God's people knows what Jesus is talking about
 - The kind of humble heart I just described doesn't come naturally...people aren't naturally inclined to think and act in those ways
 - Yet that was the kind of heart you need to seek for lost sheep, to feed them properly and to guide them into spiritual maturity

- All around the disciples were examples of men who loved power and money and the praise of people
 - The impact of such leadership for the people was distress and discouragement
 - And ultimately it resulted in that generation of Israel losing the Kingdom which is the ultimate price anyone could pay
- But that's wasn't the model Jesus wanted for His first disciples, and it can't be our model today
 - We should ask, beg, the Lord to raise up men and women who will work on His behalf with the right heart
 - It's not just a matter of needing help...it's needing the right kind of help
 - Because the wrong kind of shepherd will do more harm for a body of believers than no leader at all
- Having said that, there is an obvious corollary to this command, one we can't ignore
 - While we're praying for the Lord to workers to assume the work of building God's Kingdom, we need to consider whether the Lord is preparing our heart to do that work
 - Everyone is supposed to make this request a part of their prayer life, especially those who are already at work and in need of help
 - But if everyone in the church is called to pray for workers, then obviously whoever answers that call was themselves praying for it
 - Maybe that someone is you?
 - One of the major reasons we pray about anything is to allow the Lord to work on our own heart in regard to that prayer request
 - We may pray for the Lord to give us something or to take something away
 - And as we pray, the Lord works through our prayers to help our understanding
 - So that over time our desires will align with the Lord's will

- To the end that no matter how those situations turn out, we gain an understand and peace about why it was the best thing for us
- Similarly, as we obey this command to pray for workers to accomplish the work of leading God's people, we may find our hearts encouraged to take up that work
 - In time we begin to see ourselves as the worker, and the Lord opens doors to allow us to answer that call
 - Jesus saw His people wandering, confused, deceived and defenseless, so He told the new generation of leaders to get ready...it's your turn to lead My people
 - And that process of preparation began with those very men praying for workers
- Remember, these are the future apostles and leaders of the first century church
 - And Jesus begins their preparation for leading by calling them to pray for leaders
 - Little did they know they were paying for themselves
 - I wonder if those men, as they struggled to manage the fast-growing first century church, looked back to this moment and chuckled
- The church always needs more workers, more leaders, because there are always more sheep to shepherd
 - Pray for those future leaders, because they will make the difference in your own spiritual growth
 - And don't overlook the possibility that the Lord is using your prayers to prepare your own heart to assume that role