

THE LORD'S MINISTRY

Matthew 8

In a brief course such as a Sunday school course must necessarily be, it is impossible to take up all the Lord's work of preaching, teaching, and healing. This chapter has been chosen as showing the variety of the acts of the Lord in His ministry and something of their significance. With the classes from the Juniors up the discussion of miracles in general is perhaps of primary importance. Doubt of the miracles is so prevalent that even the children will inevitably meet it occasionally, and they should understand as clearly as possible why the miracles were necessary and how it was possible for the Lord to perform them. They can be shown that the ground of doubt of the miracles is not reason but unwillingness to believe. A very general statement of the spiritual meaning of the various miracles in this chapter will be enough to show them the importance of the miracles to the writing of the Word. Questions of disease and healing may be raised even by the Juniors, and the effort has been made in the notes to suggest the basis for answering such questions.

Doctrinal Points

All healing power is in the Lord.

The miracles teach what the Lord can do for our souls.

Every disease in the Word corresponds to some weakness or deformity in the soul.

Notes for Parents

The Lord's ministry consisted of teaching, preaching, and healing. We have chosen chapter 8 for our lesson today because it contains so many examples of His healing.

Today we read and hear and see on television a great deal about "faith healing," and many think that because the Lord healed and

commanded His Apostles to heal, every Christian church should undertake this work.

In the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg we have very clear and reasonable teaching on this point. He tells us that all healing power is in the Lord. This does not mean that we should never go to a doctor or take medicine. Many ailments result from our misuse of the gifts the Lord has given us in the natural world and can be corrected by changing our bad habits to good ones or by the help of various products of nature which the Lord has created for this purpose—this is the field in which doctors work. But we all know that doctors cannot always cure, and also that people sometimes get well whom the doctors have “given up.” The final healing is always under divine providence.

Why then does the Lord not always cure us? We know He loves each one of us and does everything that is best for us. It is because the Lord is primarily concerned with the health of our souls, and a well body does not necessarily mean a healthy soul. If we and everyone else loved the Lord and the neighbor and always knew and chose to obey the divine laws, both spiritual and natural, there would be no sickness, no accidents, no insanity. But we do not. And we often need to be allowed to suffer the consequences of our ignorance, selfishness, and disobedience before we even stop to think. And often innocent children must suffer before the world wakes up to the evils it is committing.

When the Lord was in the world, people had fallen into such depths of ignorance of the Lord’s laws and of any world higher than the material world that only physical proof of the Lord’s power could open their minds. But that is not true today. We are able to think about the Lord and heavenly life whatever our physical condition may be, and when some handicap takes us for a time out of the activities of our ordinary life, we are often led to do this kind of thinking.

We all naturally like to be well, but physical health is not of first importance. Many of the world’s most useful men and women—like Helen Keller, for example—have grown fine and strong through

meeting physical handicaps bravely. We shall all lay these physical bodies of ours aside at death, and the really important thing is the kind of spiritual bodies which will be revealed when we wake in the other world, for we shall live in them to eternity. We are building these spiritual bodies day by day as we choose good or evil.

Primary

Tell the children first the different kinds of wonderful things the Lord did while He was on earth. Go through the various miracles in the chapter in some detail. Be sure the children get the point that it is always the Lord who heals.

Our lesson is about some of the wonderful things the Lord did as He went about among the people. These wonderful things are called miracles.

We do not any of us like to be sick, do we?

When we are sick, the doctor comes and tells us what medicine to take.

But it is really the Lord who heals us by means of the medicine.

Health, like all good things, is a gift from the Lord.

But we all know that some sick people do not get well, however hard they try. It is always the Lord who really does the healing and makes us well, and He always does it if it is best for us. But sometimes He sees that we need some of the lessons that being sick teaches us. See if you can think of some of these—things you find out when you are sick that you would not think of if you were always well. And sometimes, of course, the Lord sees that it is time for a person to be taken to his home in the spiritual world.

Often when the Lord was on earth sick people were brought to Him to be healed, and He did heal many of them. But He knew their hearts and whether it would be best for them to be healed. They also had to have faith in His power to heal them. Those who believed He was the Messiah had this faith.

Can you tell some of the afflictions which the Lord healed?

And our chapter tells us about another wonderful thing the Lord did. (Read Matthew 8:23-27.)

What happened to the ship in which He was sleeping?

What did He say when His disciples woke Him?

Then what did He do?

Have you ever been frightened in a storm? This story shows you that you need not be frightened, for the Lord is always near us and ready to help us if we ask Him. Even though we cannot see Him, we can trust Him always to do what is best for us.



Junior

Stress the need of faith in accomplishing anything, and what true faith in the Lord is. Have the children look up and read Matthew 13:54-58. Try to show them also what our attitude should be toward the problems of physical health—that it is a great blessing if well used but never of first concern.

The Lord's ministry consisted of teaching, preaching, and healing. Our chapter today describes several of the Lord's miracles of healing.

What is a miracle?

How many miracles can you find in this chapter?

Which one of them is not a miracle of healing?

The Lord healed people on one condition. See if you can find out what it was by reading verses 2-3, 10, and 31. All these people believed that the Lord was able to heal them. This meant that they believed He was the Messiah and so had divine power. But not everyone who saw the miracles believed this. Read Matthew 9:34.

There are two kinds of reasons why people are sick. One kind is natural: we know that many diseases come from not keeping clean and from bad eating and living habits, and of course there are accidents. But even in these there is something involved which we cannot see. When the measles are "going around," do all children catch them? Or do accidents happen to everyone? People who obey the laws and who try to be careful of other people seldom cause accidents. Obedience and thoughtfulness are qualities of the mind and heart; that is, they are spiritual qualities. In the case of diseases we often cannot even guess at the spiritual cause, but

there is always is one, and the Lord knows what it is.

When the Lord was in the world, He could act into nature directly and so He could cure the diseases of people whose hearts were good. But He did not do this merely to make their bodies well. He always taught that the soul is more important than the body. He performed miracles for two reasons: to strengthen the faith of those who wanted to believe in Him, and for the sake of the Word. For each miracle is really a parable teaching us of some good work which the Lord can perform in our souls if we believe in Him and ask His help. See if you can think what spiritual weaknesses can be pictured by leprosy, palsy, fever, and possession by devils. When we are not honest and sincere, when we just don't seem to be able to do right even though we want to, when we are "burning up" with resentment against someone, when we seem to be "possessed," as our mothers may say, to get into trouble, we have these afflictions spiritually. And we sometimes say, "I can't help it, I was born that way." We are all born that way, but we can change ourselves with the Lord's help if we ask Him to help us, and do as He tells us.

The miracle of the stilling of the storm also showed that the Lord had complete power over the world of nature. To His disciples this miracle seemed even more wonderful than His miracles of healing. This was probably because they knew even men had some ability to heal disease, but they thought of storms as events about which men could not do anything. We should learn from this miracle that what we call the laws of nature are really God's laws for nature, and that He is always in control. And this miracle has a meaning within it, too. Remember what we learned about the parable of the house on the rock and the house on the sand.

What did the storms picture in that parable?

The storm in our lesson today has the same meaning. When we ask the Lord to help us in our temptations, He will always still the storm for us.



Intermediate

The correspondence of various diseases is important for this class. Discuss examples of spiritual leprosy, palsy, fever, and possession by devils. Lead the young people to think of their faults as spiritual diseases to be brought to the Lord for healing.

We have chosen this chapter because it contains examples of several kinds of miracle. The stilling of the storm shows the Lord's power over inanimate nature. We should remember that the Lord has this power always, and that today it is He who determines what "the weather will be." We are all in the habit of thinking of the weather in terms of our own convenience and pleasure. But the Lord has the needs of all people in mind. He uses nature as one of His tools. The healing of leprosy, palsy, and fever shows His power over the body, the casting out of devils His power in the mind.

We note that the condition of healing was always faith in Him. Even on the natural plane we can see that this must be so: unless we believe that a thing is possible, we do not attempt it. But it is equally true on the plane of our affections and thoughts. One of the commonest mistakes we make is to say, "I can't help it," and "You can't change human nature." The Lord tells us, "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

Every disease in the Word corresponds to some particular weakness or deformity of the soul. Spiritual leprosy is "profanation of truth," which means knowing the truth at heart but rejecting it because we do not want to live according to it. Palsy stands for the inability to carry out our good intentions, to walk steadily in the right way. Fever pictures the burning of inner wrong desires. Possession by devils denotes evil thoughts and passions. All these are results of the natural selfishness into which we are born, and that is why they seem too much a part of us to be overcome, but the miracles teach us that with the Lord's help they can be overcome. And they teach us the orderly way in which to set about it. First we must believe that the Lord is God and able to heal our spiritual ills. Then we must go to Him and ask His help. And finally

we must cooperate by obeying His commands.

Many people, looking upon physical health as essential to happiness, think that physical miracles should be wrought today. It is true that forgetfulness of self and trust in the Lord will do much to keep us in good health both physically and mentally. But Swedenborg tells us that the Lord does not perform miracles today as He did when He was in the world, not because of lack of faith on our part but because miracles today would force men to believe in Him when they did not want to follow Him, and this would do more harm than good. We are in an age of reason, and the Lord wants us to choose freely to believe in Him and do His will. In the Lord's time miracles could be performed because the people were so worldly and materialistic that even miracles could not make them believe. Read Matthew 9:34. The Lord's miracles strengthened the faith of those who already believed in Him, but did not convince others.

The Lord performed miracles principally so that they could be recorded as part of the letter of the Word and through their correspondence teach people in all times what the Lord is able to do for their souls. Each miracle is a study in itself, and their importance is in their spiritual meaning.

Basic Correspondences

- leprosy = the profanation of truth
 - fever = the burning of inner wrong desires
 - possession = slavery to evil thoughts and desires
-

Senior

The nature of true faith, the two reasons for the miracles, and the reason why miracles are not desirable today may all be discussed with this class. The young people should be led to see that belief in the miracles is rational and is essential to our understanding of the Bible and of the Lord's operation in the world.

Throughout the three years of His public ministry the Lord performed miracles. Each one is a study in itself, and we are not able in Sunday school to take up even all the afflictions healed in our

chapter for today. But we need to know that all the miracles were performed by means of correspondence, thus according to divine order and not contrary to it. Any claim that the miracles are “contrary to nature” overlooks the origin of natural law. The laws of nature are the Lord’s laws for nature and all nature is perpetually under His control. The study of medicine is the attempt to learn the natural causes of disease and to overcome it by the use of natural means. It is a right and useful study. Yet we know that many lose the fight against disease “in spite of all the doctor could do,” and we know that many recover whom the doctors have “given up.” The Lord is always the source of health, both physical and mental, whether He works through doctors and medicine or independently of them. When He was in the world, divine power was immediately present and effective with those who came to Him in faith.

Faith in the Lord’s divine power was a prerequisite for healing in all His miracles. This faith was and is essential to the establishment of that inner conjunction with the Lord which enables Him to act directly into the human soul. It is the opening of the door to the Lord of which He speaks in Revelation 3:20. Genuine faith also means that the person will cooperate with the Lord by obeying His commands. If we have this faith, the Lord can do many things for us, even physically, which He cannot otherwise do. We know that many physical and mental ills are the direct result of evil passions and of fear and worry, things which are rejected from the heart and mind of one who trusts in the Lord and obeys Him.

The miracles of the Lord were not performed to convince the unbelieving. Read Matthew 9:34 and 13:54-58. Indeed, the miracles would not have been performed except among people of such a character that they could see such things and if they wished attribute them to other than divine power. For the Lord forces no one to believe in Him. The miracles strengthened the faith only of those who already believed.

But the deeper reason for the miracles was that they might be recorded in the Word and by their correspondence teach us what

the Lord will do for our souls. Divine providence looks always to our spiritual rather than to our physical health. To seek to believe in the Lord in order that we may be physically well is an inversion of true order. Physical health is a blessing only to those who will be better off spiritually with than without it. We know that with many men and women, physical disability of one kind or another has been a spur to efforts which have resulted in greatness, and we know that many healthy persons are neither good nor useful members of society.

Each miracle in our chapter points out to us some spiritual failing which by the Lord's power we can recognize and overcome. Leprosy is a picture of hypocrisy, of what Swedenborg calls "profanation of truth." The skin of the leper was very white, but there was disease within, which gradually destroyed the tissues and eventually rendered the person's appearance horrible. So a hypocrite may at first impress people as an exemplary citizen, but when they come to see what he is within, they are deeply repelled by him. We should try to think whether or not we are doing good deeds only "to be seen of men," and should set ourselves with the Lord's help to make our goodness genuine and sincere instead of sham.

Palsy is the inability to control the muscles, to walk and act firmly. It pictures the inability to carry out steadily in our acts the good intentions of our hearts. In this chapter the palsied man was the servant of a Roman centurion, a Gentile. The Lord often contrasts the hypocrisy of those who had the law with the humility of the Gentiles and their genuine desire to learn how to live rightly. It was the centurion's complete reliance on the Lord's power which enabled the Lord to heal the servant without even entering his home.

Fever is a picture of being "burned up," as we often call it, by resentment or some other wrong feeling. The hand is the symbol of power in action. The Lord can take us by the hand and give us strength to put away such feelings, if our desire in life is to minister to others.

The stilling of the storm teaches us that the Lord's spirit in our hearts can quiet all the adverse winds and waves which threaten to overwhelm us. The Lord is never really asleep—it is we who are asleep to His presence.

The casting out of devils is the symbol of the Lord's power to cleanse our hearts of evil passions and our minds of false thoughts if only we will look to Him for guidance and strength. Swine are the symbol of bodily appetites, and we should be able to see that our evil passions actually make us animals instead of men, and destroy us. Notice that the inhabitants of the city cared more for their swine than they did for the healing of their sick brothers.

As New Churchmen we should be able to answer the common question, "Why, if we have faith, should we not expect miracles today?" One of the clearest answers in the writings of the church is found in the passage quoted at the end of this lesson.

Adult

The teacher should read, if possible, *Divine Providence*, nn. 129-133, but in any case the quotation from n. 133 which is printed at the end of the lesson. Adult discussion should center on the nature and purpose of the Biblical miracles and why miracles are not orderly today. This is information found only in the writings of the New Church and much needed today. If there is time at the end of the class period for discussion of particular miracles in the chapter, the teacher will find their basic correspondence developed in the Senior notes.

Many people do not believe in the Biblical miracles, even some who profess to follow Jesus Christ. This is not because the text of Scripture—the only source of our knowledge of the Lord—leaves any room for doubt, but because they are unwilling to believe in what they call the "supernatural," and so reject all evidence of it. This rejection should be recognized for what it is: a purely arbitrary act of will, not based on knowledge or reason. There is ample evidence of the existence of the supernatural in everyone's experience if he is willing to recognize it.

If we believe in God, we must believe that He is the creator of

the universe and everything in it, and that He has power to act in it and to control it. To give the name of God to the forces of nature is not to believe in God. There are many things, even in the natural universe, which we do not understand although we know they exist and even make use of them in our everyday life—electricity, for example. These forces have been in the world from the beginning and have affected men's lives, but it is only recently that men have known enough to make any intelligent use of them. We do not know enough even about the laws of nature to have any rational ground for denying the possibility of the miracles. In the growth of a seed into a tree, in the preservation of life through the dormant winter states, in the knitting of a bone, in countless daily happenings we see the Lord doing things which we do not understand and could not do ourselves. The Lord made the world, the laws of nature are His laws for nature, and He alone fully understands them. The laws of nature were not broken in the performance of the miracles. Divine power, immediately present in the world, simply operated in nature in ways which we are not prepared to understand. And it was the same divine power which operated through the disciples when, at His command, they also performed miracles. All healing today, by whatever instrumental means, is wrought by the Lord.

Yet there is a difference between the miracles of Scripture and those which the Lord is constantly working today. Scripture miracles were performed more rapidly—some of them instantaneously. Why should not such things happen now? It is because the Lord had a special purpose in performing His miracles. He had but a limited time to be present to the sight of men on earth. He had to crowd into that time acts which should teach for all time His power over every type of affliction. Because the people he ministered to were a wholly external people, they could not be impressed except upon the most external plane. It is not so with men today. The Lord's resurrection set men free from bondage to materialistic and sensual thinking. It is possible for us today to understand spiritual things, the realities behind nature, and the Lord wants us to

come to Him because of these realities and not merely for bodily health, comfort, and success.

Moreover, miracles never really convince anyone. We may think that if we could see a miracle performed we should believe, but this is not true. Many times people who did not wish to believe in the existence of the supernatural have had spiritual experiences so powerful that at the time they knew them to be real; yet as soon as the experience was over, they began to explain it away as hallucination or dream. The scribes and Pharisees were not convinced by the Lord's miracles, although they witnessed many of them. Read Matthew 9:34.

The Lord did not perform His miracles for the sake of convincing those unwilling to believe. He never seeks to force belief in Him. He performed miracles only for those who already believed. The very devils whom He cast out believed in His power before they were cast out. He makes this point very clear, for in almost every account of a miracle in the Word there is some preliminary assurance of the faith of the person involved.

But the Lord had another purpose in performing His miracles. They were necessary for the sake of the letter of the Word, that they might stand forever in the Scripture as the ultimates in which spiritual truths might be contained. In general they teach us that all life and health and power come from the Lord and that faith in Him and obedience to His commandments are required of us. And each miracle also teaches its particular spiritual lesson.

Three general types of miracle are included in our chapter. The stilling of the storm manifests the Lord's power over inanimate nature and should teach us the limitations of natural science. We think we know a great deal about the cause of storms. A pertinent question is, "Why is the weatherman not always right?" He is kept informed of the storms that are coming his way and of atmospheric conditions all over the country. Why should he not be able to predict accurately for his own section? The answer is, because unexpected things "happen." There are factors in the case of which he is ignorant. Something happened to shift the course of

the wind, to dissipate a storm or to bring one about. This happening was not accidental; it was according to law, only the law was too deep or too high for human knowledge. The Lord's will is active in nature today as really as when He stood in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. His wisdom directs nature according to our spiritual needs. It is literally true today that "even the winds and the sea obey him." And this is only the outermost lesson involved in this miracle.

The healing of physical disease manifests the Lord's control over the conditions of our bodies. When a person is ill and recovers, he attributes his recovery to the medicine he took or to the doctor who treated him or to a faith healer or to the prayers of his friends. Yet none of these agents always succeeds, and many recover without recourse to any of them. There are factors in physical health which we cannot understand or predict. It is still the Lord's will which operates and the Lord's wisdom which directs our recovery or our continued trial or our passing into the spiritual world. And again, this is but the outermost lesson.

And the Lord has power today (just as He did when He cast out devils long ago) over mental disorders. There is perhaps no other field in which men feel so helpless, in which prediction is so uncertain. And all efforts to prevent and to cure insanity point to the fact that one of its underlying causes is dwelling upon self. Give the person something to "occupy his mind," "to take his mind off himself," is often the first advice. There is only one course which can really take one's mind off himself, and that is turning to the Lord, choosing the spiritual company of angels in place of that of the devils associated with our natural heredity, and applying our efforts and talents to the service of the Lord and the neighbor. It is the Lord alone who can keep the mind sane.

Each miracle in our chapter has its individual lesson and is a study in itself. Each physical or mental ailment has its spiritual correspondent, and every detail in the Lord's healing of it is significant. Our chapter, like every chapter in the Word, is a challenge to continued study.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Divine Providence, n. 133: “The effect of miracles on the good and on the evil is different. The good do not desire miracles, but they believe in the miracles recorded in the Word. . . . It is not so with the evil. They may be driven and compelled to a belief in miracles, and even to worship and piety, but only for a short time; for their evils are shut in; and the lusts of their evils and the enjoyments therefrom continually act upon their external of worship and piety; and in order to get out of their confinement and break away they reflect upon the miracle, and at length call it a trick or artifice, or a work of nature, and thus go back to their evils. And he who returns to his evils after he has worshiped profanes the goods and truths of worship; and the lot after death of those who commit profanation is the worst of all. . . . Furthermore, if it is needful to work miracles for the sake of those who do not believe from miracles in the Word, they must be wrought for all such continually and visibly. All this makes clear why miracles are not wrought at this day.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What three kinds of work did the Lord do in His ministry? *teaching, preaching, healing*
- P. About which kind is our lesson for today? *healing*
- P. What is a miracle? *wonderful thing done by the Lord*
- J. Can you tell what some of the troubles the Lord healed were? *leprosy, palsy, fever, possession*
- P. What did He do for Peter’s wife’s mother? *cured fever*
- J. How did He heal the centurion’s servant? *by His words*
- P. Where did He go with some of His disciples? *into a boat*
- P. What happened while they were on the sea? *storm*
- P. What did the Lord say when they woke Him? *Why are you afraid?*
- P. What did the Lord do? *stilled the storm*
- I. What do different kinds of diseases represent? *weaknesses and deformities of the soul*
- I. What was the condition which had to be fulfilled if the Lord was to heal a person? *had to have faith in the Lord*
- S. Why did the Lord perform miracles when He was on earth? *to strengthen faith; to record in Word*
- S. Why should we not ask for miracles today? *tend to force belief*