

Jesus Healings in the Decapolis (Jesus – the river of life)

Old Testament Prophecy: Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; ⁴ say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. ⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. ⁸ And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. [Isaiah 35v3-8a]

News reaches the Decapolis

²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis,^[a] Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. (Matthew 4v24-35)

First trip to Gadarenes – Mark 5v20 (Jesus heals the demoniac)

Second Trip to Gadarenes Mark 7v31-37 and Matthew 15v29-31 (large crowds bringing the sick, just before he feeds 4000)

³¹ He left the region of Tyre and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis. ³² And they *brought to Him one who was deaf and had difficulty speaking, and they *begged Him to lay His hand on him. ³³ And Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers in his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; ³⁴ and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He *said to him, "Ephphatha!" that is, "Be opened!" ³⁵ And his ears were opened, and the ^[s]impediment of his tongue was ^[r]removed, and he began speaking plainly. ³⁶ And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it. ³⁷ And they were utterly astonished, saying, "He has done all things well; He makes even those who are deaf hear, and those who are unable to talk, speak." Mark 7 v31-37.

²⁹ Departing from there, Jesus went along the Sea of Galilee, and after going up on the mountain, He was sitting there. ³⁰ And large crowds came to Him bringing with them those who were limping, had impaired limbs, were blind, or were unable to speak, and many others, and they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them. ³¹ So the crowd was astonished as they saw those who were unable to speak talking, those with impaired limbs ^[r]restored, those who were limping walking around, and those who were blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel Matthew 15v29-31

³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' (John 7v38 ESV)

Where is Gadara?

New Testament refer to the "Country of the Gadarenes" or "Gerasenes". Both Gerasa and Gadara were cities to the east of the Sea of Galilee and the River Jordan. They were both Gentile cities filled with citizens who were culturally more Greek than Semitic; this would account for the pigs in the biblical account. Gerasa and Gadara are accounted for in historical accounts (by writers such as Pliny the Elder and Josephus) and by archaeological research. Today they are the modern towns of Jerash and Umm Qais.

Gerasa, and Gadara were counted in the Decapolis, an informal grouping of Greco-Roman cities just south of the ancient city of Caesarea Philippi.

Impatient:

Who is impatient? Hands up.

Who wants things to happen instantly?

I got wondering this week. If God is all powerful, then why do somethings take time. Why can't we just pray for everything we want, according to his will of course, and just see it happen.

Then I thought, though he is all powerful, we are human, and perhaps we are designed more for the journey, than for the destination itself. Perhaps it is better for us if things go slowly in the right direction than we arrive there instantly. Lets hope they don't invent the teleporter like they had in Star Trek – Beam me up Scotty – or we would arrive everywhere instantly and be denied the journey. Sometimes things just take time, and that's okay, as long as we keep going in the right direction.

A picture that I get from the Gospels is of Jesus who is determined, but he is still chilled, he's is not frantically rushing around trying to get things done. When he was tempted in the wilderness the devil offered him a short cut in which everyone would worship him without the effort and without the cross. He wisely chose the longer route. Perhaps he is not in a rush for us to complete our own journey either.

The Isaiah 35 prophecy said that the messiah would have a healing ministry. He would open blind eyes, unstop deaf ears, enable lame men and women to leap like deer, and the voiceless to break into song. He then goes on to say that he will be like a living river bringing new life to desert places.

Isaiah had prophecies of the messiah to come about 750 years before Jesus fulfilled them. That's a long wait. Jesus was prepared for 30 years for his ministry, and then took a 3 year journey to get to the cross.

It took time to happen, but it did and I want to look at how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy gradually during his ministry in one particular province called the Decapolis. I will look at in 3 levels.

Level 1 – The testimony of his miracles goes ahead of him.

Level 2 – He goes there for the one

Level 3 – He returns for the many

The Decapolis

So lets look at where the Decapolis is in comparison to where Jesus lived. After leaving Nazareth, Jesus made his home in the fishing port of Capernaum on the North West Shore of Lake Galilee. On the other side and to the South were two towns or cities Gerasa, and Gadara



that were part of the Decapolis, an informal grouping of around about ten Greco-Roman cities just south of the ancient city of Caesarea Philippi, but to the East of Galilee. These were not on the lake but just a few kilometres from it. So the region by the lake is called both the "Country of the Gadarenes" or "Gerasenes" or, depending on which gospel account you are reading. They were both Gentile cities filled with citizens who were culturally more Greek than Semitic; this would account for them keeping pigs. All the cities were were under Roman rule and dependant upon Rome. Today the ruins of Gadara are by the modern town of Umm Quais in the Northern tip of Jordan.

Gadara was renowned in its time as a cultural centre. It was the home of several classical poets and philosophers, but it also had its problems and would have reason to be fearful of its Roman rulers, who in AD 67 under Vespasian, marched on the city, and killed all the men and youth, then set fire to the city and surrounding villages, taking slaves of many.

LEVEL 1: The testimony of his miracles goes ahead of him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis,²⁶ Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. (Matthew 4v23-35)

So Jesus has moved into Capernaum but is also travelling round Galilee preaching in the synagogues. He has started calling his disciples together, and doing miracles. News of his miracles started travelling around the Roman provinces, and reached the ears of some Jews that lived amongst the Greeks in the ten cities. So without going to the Decapolis, his testimony and reputation reached into the region and some travelled to seek out Jesus and follow him, without him having ever been there.

So Jesus is already reaching out to the Decapolis by reputation alone at the moment, but for men from these Greek cities to travel over to follow this Jewish Rabbi Jesus would have been quite unusual.

So the level 1 outreach of Jesus to the Decapolis, was just to have testimonies of what he had done go before him. So there were people, probably in the cities that had already heard of Jesus before he went there.

Level 2 – Jesus reaches out to the one (in Gadarene country)

The disciples never wanted to cross the lake into Gentile territory. If they could choose they would have kept in safe Jewish territory. Galilee was fine, with a few trips to Jerusalem as long as you didn't return via Samaria. It was a culture of in-groups and out-groups, and the gentiles were definitely an out group and there was no reason in normal life why you should give them any time. I think initially at least, the disciples were happy to avoid non-Jews wherever possible.

But there was this occasion where Jesus had told them to cross the lake, that meant going to the shores of the Decapolis, gentile land. They did as they were told. After all he was their Rabbi. Jesus led down in the boat to catch 40 winks, and a sudden storm broke out, and they thought they were going to die. They wake him up and Jesus miraculously calms the storm, then off the back of this miracle, amazed by what just happened they land the boat on the opposite shore, to the region of the Gadarenes.

On arrival they were challenged by Legion, a possessed man with super-human strength. He may have come from Gadara but was exiled to live in a cave in the countryside out of harm's way. When Jesus and the disciples arrived, the man ran at them naked.

A single Roman legion consisted of 5000+ forces, and the man who was demon-possessed was called Legion because there were so many demons in him. The Jews believed that Satan and his evil force of spirits were intrinsically the same as the Roman Army. This was the human embodiment of the spiritual evil.

Jesus exorcized the demoniac, and on one level this would have been seen as the power of God overcoming the political power of the day. The Legion has been defeated, and the captive set free.

So in the same day, the disciples are witnessing that Jesus has power of nature, and power over the spiritual world.

The inhabitants of the region however saw their business disappear into the sea, as the demons exited into their herd of pigs which all ran off the cliff and died. The farmers and locals, naturally frightened, begged Jesus to leave and not come back.

The man that had been released from all these demons, now in sound mind, wanted to follow Jesus, but was told 'Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.' (Mark 5v19). He went around the Decapolis telling people what Jesus had done for him, and all the people were amazed (Mark 5v20)

So his level two outreach into the Decapolis, was to go and to minister to just one man, set one man free. He only travelled a very short distance into the Decapolis land before he was told to go away. But that is all he needed to do. Because his new witness, now demon free, went throughout the Decapolis spreading the word of Jesus. No doubt it was heard by both Greeks and Jews alike. For some it will be the first time they had heard of Jesus, others the second time, but now it was not hearsay from afar. In front of them, is a man with a personal and powerful deliverance, of being set free by Jesus.

A journey north

A little later back in Galilee, Jesus is attracting bigger and bigger crowds, and he takes some time out for him and his disciples, by going on a 2 day walk northwards into the Roman province of Syro-Phoenicia, to the border region of Tyre and Sidon. A number of races lived there including descendants from the Canaanites. Canaan was the Old Testament promised land which the Israelites had to conquer, and when evicted from their homes some of the Canaanites had moved north and settled there. They were morally despised by the Jews.

Whilst Jesus was trying to rest, a lady wrecked by looking after a demonised daughter was determined to see Jesus, and the disciples were doing their very best to prevent this. Culturally it was all wrong, and they would have looked down on her. For a start most Jewish Rabbis would not talk to women in public, not even their own family. Jesus was different yes, but this woman was a Canaanite, of no greater status to them than the half wild dogs that some people kept for guard duty.

Jesus hears the commotion and agrees to see the woman, and he uses the encounter to teach his disciples about the deep prejudices they have in them. Jesus needs them to drop the racist discrimination from their hearts, that they have culturally grown up with, otherwise there would be no way they could after his death have gone all over Europe, and further to India etc without love for the foreigner, for the Gentiles.

Jesus then shows his love for the woman, by healing her daughter. (Matthew 15v21-28). But of course though he casts demons out the daughter and she stops fitting, it is the anxiety and stress on the woman that is healed too. Her faith has set her free.

But the lesson to the disciples on reaching out to the gentiles, was only just starting.

They expected that they would return to Galilee the way they came, but no Jesus took them East and South, on the other side of Lake Galilee down through the Decapolis.

Level 3: Large crowds bring their sick.

Whilst the disciples may have expected crowds to gather in Galilee on the west of the lake, they did not expect to be swamped by crowds in gentile land on the east of the lake, but they were.

The testimonies of Jesus, and the witness of the healed demoniac, had done a great job. Word was out that Jesus was coming their way, and they were not going to miss out.

As we journey into the Decapolis from Tyre and Sidon we find that the Gospel writers Matthew and Mark that cover this, draw out different stories from the time there. Yet put together we can at last see how Jesus is fulfilling the Isaiah prophecy.

3a. The Deaf Mute

Back through the Decapolis

The Deaf Mute – Mark 7v31-37

*³¹He left the region of Tyre and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis. ³²And they *brought to Him one who was deaf and had difficulty speaking, and they *begged Him to lay His hand on him. ³³And Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers in his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; ³⁴and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He *said to him, “Ephphatha!” that is, “Be opened!” ³⁵And his ears were opened, and the ^[s]impediment of his tongue was ^[l]removed, and he began speaking plainly. Mark 7 v31-35.*

On this journey through the Decapolis, Mark picks out one specific event. It is an interesting one. The crowd bring to Jesus a man who is not only deaf, but has a separate speech impediment not linked to his deafness.

Jesus takes him aside from the crowd to do the miracle. Crowds liked to gather to see magicians do tricks, who would speak in unintelligible words as they did it.

Jesus looks up to heaven and sighs. Perhaps there is a frustration that many in the crowds are looking for healing as entertainment and not as a sign of Gods kingdom coming on earth and there need for repentance. “Show us a trick !”

Interestingly perhaps shielded now by the disciples from the crowd, he puts his fingers in the man’s ears, and spitting out some saliva he puts it on to the man’s tongue. This may have been as a sign to show the man what he was about to do. Jesus speaks out clearly to the ears in his Aramaic language ‘Be opened’. Then immediately the man’s ears could hear, and the speech impediment was simultaneously healed. No doubt the man on getting his hearing and voice back would have broken into song praising God.

There was so much going on when Jesus went on this mission trip to the Decapolis, you have to ask why did Mark single out this miracle. I link it back to the Isaiah 35 prophecy, which includes the two distinct phrases “he will **unstop deaf ears**, and **the voiceless will break into song**”. Both of these are fulfilled in the single miracle.

The other healings -

²⁹Departing from there, Jesus went along the Sea of Galilee, and after going up on the mountain, He was sitting there. ³⁰And large crowds came to Him bringing with them those who were limping, had impaired limbs, were blind, or were unable to speak, and many others, and they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them. [Matthew 15v29-31]

Marks gospel also covers this mission trip to the Decapolis on route back from Syro-Phoenicia, along the east coast of Lake Galilee, and up to a mountainous place where crowds of people come to him. The crowds have brought with them their sick people, probably carrying some of them on stretchers for long distances. Again we have those unable to speak, but we also have the lame, and the blind. All of these people are laid down at the feet of Jesus and Mark quite simply says that he heals them. The implication is that he healed them all. The crowd was amazed as it saw these lame people walking, and blind people seeing etc and glorified the king of Israel, the God of Israel. This implies that these were non-Israelites, that these crowds were mostly the gentiles, the Greeks that were experiencing Jesus.

Some had come a long way to experience Jesus, but it was so worth it. He is so worth it. The crowd had grown to 4000 plus people, and they camped out on the mountain for 3 days to hear his teaching. They were spiritually hungry but now they were also physically hungry, and again the love of Jesus blessed them again with another miracle. He took 7 barley loaves and some small fish, that the disciples had reserved for their own homeward snack, blessed them, and then fed everybody until their stomachs were full. This all happened right there amongst the Gentiles in the Decapolis.

So if we now go back to the Isaiah 35 prophecy of what the messiah will do, it says..

Tell fearful souls, "Courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right And redress all wrongs. He's on his way! He'll save you!"

> *Blind eyes will be opened (tick)*

> *Deaf ears unstopped (tick)*

> *Lame men and women will leap like deer, (tick)*

> *The voiceless break into song. (tick)*

Level 1, the reputation of Jesus goes into the Decapolis and attracts followers probably from the Jews living in the cities.

Level 2, Jesus makes a personal visit to the Gadarene coast, to minister to the demoniac, who then spreads the word much further.

Level 3, having taught the disciples about the need to reach out to gentiles, and not just Jews, he takes a mission trip into the Decapolis. The gentiles are allowed to share in this messianic blessing that Isaiah predicted. Many are healed, and many more give praise to God.

Jesus has taken his time, but he has now brought new hope and new life to the Decapolis.

The Desert Place

The remains of Gadara is now an archaeological site, in North East Jordan at a town called Umm Qais. At Gadara there is 1 day of rain in June, and no rain at for 4 months, July to September, with temperatures up in the thirties Celsius and 90s Fahrenheit. It is hot and it is dry.

Imagine a hot arid place in your mind, a few thorn bushes here and there, and a couple of jackals stalking around. Then imagine in this desert place that a stream arrive running through it, then fountains of water spring up in various places and make pools around them, at which palm trees appear. Then as you look further out you can see expanses of grassland now growing. What a transformation, what a wonderful picture.

When Jesus goes in into the Decapolis there are some physical changes with the healings he brings, but the desert transformation is a really a picture of what is happening in the spiritual realm.

The people in the Decapolis are an oppressed people under the watchful eye of the Roman overlords, some probably living in fear. They are also devoid of a relationship with God, of spiritual blessings, of hope, and spiritual life. It's a wilderness for them, then in comes Jesus and brings them hope and brings them new life. He is the living water in the desert place.

In the Old Testament Moses takes the people across the desert wilderness to find the promised land, and when they get there, they still have years of battle to make it theirs. **But Jesus does not wander through a desert looking for a promised land, he goes into a desert place and makes it the promised land, makes it a land flowing with his living water.** The presence of Jesus is the promised land.

The Isaiah prophecy continues, and is more than just physical healings, it predicts a transformation of life.

Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness, streams flow in the desert. Hot sands will become a cool oasis, thirsty ground a splashing fountain. Even lowly jackals will have water to drink, and barren grasslands flourish richly. ⁸ And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. (Isaiah 35 v6b-8)

So Jesus completes the fulfilment of the Isaiah 35 prophecy, through adding to the signs and wonders through physical healing miracles, to what he brings to the spiritual wilderness of peoples lives

Finally in your picture you can now see that this desert, already transformed into a beautiful Oasis landscape, now has a road running through it. This leads into the presence of God, and is called the Way of Holiness. People leading righteous and holy lives because of their encounters with Jesus, and now enjoying this new relationship with their God.

I've got a river of life

On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, when Jesus was in the temple, he spoke out to the people, about what would happen when the Holy Spirit came. He said these incredible words:-
³⁸ *Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'* (John 7v38)

Jesus transformed spiritual landscape. Jesus transformed individual lives. It wasn't done overnight. It took 750 years for the Isaiah prophecy to be fulfilled, 30 years for Jesus to get ready for ministry, and 3 years to introduce the Kingdom of God before dying on the cross for us.

But he has ascended to God, and we are living in the days when the Spirit has already been poured out, and we can claim that verse for ourselves. We can take the highway of holiness into the presence of God, because we are forgiven, and set free by the blood of Jesus. The presence of God is now open to us.

Having accepted Jesus into our lives, we can invite the Spirit each day to fill us and flow through us, so that now we can bring new life and new hope to others. We can have that river flowing with living water flowing out of us to others.

Whatever age we are at, we are work in progress, and we can still pursue the presence of God and allow the Spirit to flow through us. We can push further and deeper with God and go to new levels, experiencing more of that abundant life of God for ourselves, but also seeing more of God in others as the Holy Spirit flows through us like this river of life. It won't happen overnight, but it doesn't need to. He is patient with us.

Mary Lathbury was born in 1841, the year Crickham Baptist was founded. Her hymn 'Spring up Oh well' captures this sentiment wonderfully

*Spring up, O well, within my soul!; Spring up, O well, and make me whole!
Spring up, O well, and give to me ; That life abundantly.
I've got a river of life flowing out of me!; Makes the lame to walk, and the blind to see.
Opens prison doors, sets the captives free!; I've got a river of life flowing out of me!*

Lets make that song ours today, and let the river of life flow into us and out of us, and impact the world we live in, as we journey through it and go wider and deeper for him. **Amen**