

The Healing of a Centurion's Servant
Matthew 8:5-13
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Matthew 8 begins a new section of Matthew's Gospel that focuses on the miracles of Jesus Christ. These miracles served to validate the authority of Jesus (cf. Matthew 8:9; 9:6-8), similar to His lineage, His fulfillment of prophecies, His baptism, His temptation and His teaching did in the earlier chapters. We also can identify a structural construction that transitions the reader to this next section of the narrative account by the words "*when Jesus had finished*" in Matthew 7:28 (cf. Matthew 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

Jesus' miracles had large crowds that followed Him "*from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan*" (Matthew 4:25). The general description of miracles will turn to a focus on specific miracles, organized in three groups, each followed by an interaction with Jesus that showed His authority:

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
 - Jesus' authority over His disciples (8:18-22)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
 - Jesus' authority over His opponents (9:9-17)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

In all, there are ten miracles recorded in these two chapters, with the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (9:20-22) embedded within the story of the healing of the synagogue official's daughter (9:18-26). It must be recognized that the order of these miracles in Matthew's Gospel is thematic, not chronological. This is Matthew's style as he builds the narrative of Jesus' words and works to present Christ as the Messiah of Israel. Based upon the other synoptic Gospels (Mark and Luke), some of these miracles very likely occurred prior to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 8:2-4; 8:14-17; 9:2-13) and some events well after (Matthew 8:18-22). Matthew arranged these miracles topically in order to further his focus on the life of Christ.

Matthew 8:5-13 tells the story of a centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant who is paralyzed. This continues the theme of ministry by Jesus toward those who the Jews viewed with disdain. Unlike the leper, this man came from a class of people universally shunned, namely the Gentiles.

The request by the centurion (8:5-6)

The second healing in the series of miracles in Matthew 8-9 regards the servant of a centurion. A centurion was a Roman soldier who was in charge of one hundred soldiers (a “century” and hence the title of centurion). This man was in a leading, respected position with power and the privilege that comes with such power.

This is not the only mention of a Roman centurion in the New Testament. Later in Matthew, we will see a centurion make a dramatic declaration of faith at the crucifixion.

“Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”” (Matthew 27:54).

In Acts, we see a centurion coming to faith as the gospel begins to go to the Gentiles.

“They said, “Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.”” (Acts 10:22).

Several times later in the Book of Acts, we see centurions taking an instrumental role in delivering Paul safely from danger.

“At once he took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.” (Acts 21:32).

“When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.”” (Acts 22:26).

“And he called to him two of the centurions and said, “Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.” They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor.” (Acts 23:23-24).

“The centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention” (Acts 27:43).

It is remarkable not only how often centurions are mentioned, but also that every mention of a centurion is a positive one. This points to Jesus as the Savior of the world in that even the enemies of Israel are seen as responsive to the Lord, while the nation itself rejects Him.

The centurion of Matthew 8 is stationed in Capernaum, a trading town which was also an important Roman garrison that housed many soldiers. Luke's Gospel informs us that he was respected by the Jews of Capernaum as one who was responsible for the building of the Synagogue in the town.

"When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored Him, saying, "He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue." (Luke 7:3-5).

Obviously, Matthew's account is a digest of the request by the centurion since Luke included the role of certain Jewish elders that served as intermediaries for the centurion's request. Possibly Matthew did not include the account of the visit by the Jewish elders because the focus in his gospel is the Gentiles, and he emphasizes the faith of this Roman centurion in contrast to the faith of the Jewish leaders of Israel.

That he would be able to enlist these Jewish elders to make this request of Jesus shows the unusually good relationship between him and the Jews, testifying to his character in that he clearly did not take advantage of the Jews through the power of his position.

It is likely that the centurion was aware of Jesus' ability to heal based upon an earlier healing of a royal official's son in the same town of Capernaum. Jesus had also healed paralytics earlier in Matthew 4:24.

The centurion's request is humble, calling Jesus "Lord," which was commonly used by Romans as a term of respect. The care for the servant is seen not only in the request for help from Jesus (cf. Luke 7:3), but also in that the word for servant was PAIS in Greek, which can be translated as either servant or son. We know this was not the centurion's son, since Luke uses the term for servant (DOULOS). But the word quoted by Matthew implies a deeper relationship than that of a common servant.

The response by Jesus (8:7)

Jesus offers not only to heal the servant, but to personally come to heal him. This type of visit would be unexpected since Jewish rabbis did not associate with Romans. This is why Luke included the role of the Jewish elders, for it would have been highly unusual for a rabbi to defile himself by going to the home of a Gentile. They would have believed that it was necessary to vouch for the character of the centurion and his history of helping the Jews.

Because Jesus had just healed an unclean leper in the previous verses, it would be evident to the reader of Matthew's Gospel that defilement was not an issue for Jesus. But that Jesus would go to the man's house prepared the reader for His future Gentile ministry (Matthew 15:21-28) and the coming new covenant that cleansed man's hearts by faith without distinction (Acts 15:6-11).

Jesus' willingness to go to this centurion's home is contrasted with the need for Peter to have to receive a vision from God before he would be willing to do the same thing in Acts 10.

"And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for." (Acts 10:28-29).

The recognition by centurion (8:8-9)

As Jesus was nearing His trip to the home of the centurion, *"the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it" (Luke 7:6-8).*

He became aware that Jesus was intending to visit his home and considered himself unworthy of such a visit. The friends communicated this with the respectful term "Lord", as well as his unworthiness to even come to speak to Jesus personally. The sending of the emissaries was a reflection of the centurion's humility rather than a strategy to get Jesus to come to perform the healing.

The centurion believed that Jesus did not even need to be present in order for the healing of his servant to occur. He believed this even though there is no evidence that Jesus had ever healed from a distance at this point in His ministry. This further demonstrated the centurion's faith in Christ's power.

The centurion attitude of unworthy humility is not based upon his being a Gentile or involving Jewish sensitivities, but solely on who he understood Jesus to be, specifically one who had authority. This man had the ability to order others to accomplish his wishes and he recognized that Jesus had authority over him. To support his request for healing, the centurion made a point to acknowledge Jesus' authority.

The comparison between the authority the centurion had and the authority Christ had requires a sense of the Roman culture under the Emperor. The Roman Emperor had all authority in all lands under Roman occupation. The Emperor's army consisted of 28 legions, each overseen by a legate (similar to a general). Each legion had 59 centurions who ruled the soldiers with stern discipline. It was understood that the centurions carried the authority of the legate, who was the representative of the Emperor. To defy the centurion was to defy the Emperor and was met with merciless punishment for soldiers.

The comparison that the centurion made revealed that he understood Christ had the full authority of God as His representative. Jesus was under the authority of God and had the authority of God, and to resist Jesus was to resist God Himself. This understanding of Christ explains the confidence that the centurion had in Christ's authority over paralysis. All that was necessary was for Jesus to be willing to speak a word. When Jesus spoke, God spoke.

The revelation by Jesus (8:10-12)

Jesus marveled when He heard the centurion's description of His authority. The humanity of Jesus is inferred here as He did not expect a centurion to manifest such an understanding. As was His custom, Jesus turned this moment into an opportunity to instruct those who were following Him (cf. 8:1).

Jesus made a point to commend the faith of the centurion with the words "truly, I say to you," which alerted the hearers to the significance of what He would say. The centurion's faith was so great that it exceeded everyone else in the nation. This served in part as a rebuke of the lack of faith in Israel. The people of Israel responded to the Messiah with no faith, while this Gentile soldier had great faith.

The basis for the centurion's faith was not that he believed Jesus could heal from a distance, but that he understood the nature of Jesus' authority. He grasped the truth of who Christ was without an upbringing in Judaism, without the background of the revelation of the Old Testament, or even being with Jesus.

The centurion was a precursor to the gradual movement of the ministry of Jesus from the Jews to the Gentiles that concluded with Christ's commission to His disciples to go to all people groups. Observing this great faith prompted Jesus to allude to texts from the Book of Isaiah about Gentiles feasting at the messianic banquet with the Patriarchs.

"The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine. And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations" (Isaiah 25:6-7, cf. 45:5-6; 49:12; 59:19).

In spite of Old Testament prophecies regarding the nations, the Jews viewed the kingdom to be Jewish, with the Gentiles excluded. They considered themselves the descendants of the Patriarchs, but John the Baptist taught them not to place their trust in their lineage but to repent in faith.

"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:8-10).

Jesus taught that the Gentiles, such as this Roman centurion, would have a place at the table in the kingdom of heaven alongside the Patriarchs. God will gather not a few, but many people from all over the world ("from east and west") to join Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for this banquet. In contrast, *"the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (8:11). This is a clear depiction of hell that is repeated in the Gospels (Matthew 22:13; 25:30). The description of hell as outer darkness describes the horror of the complete departure of the presence of God, and the phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" with a singular definite article combines the pain and despair that will be experienced.

The restoration by Jesus of the servant (8:13)

After Jesus taught the crowd about the great faith of the centurion, He turned His words toward the centurion with the promise of healing the servant, “Go; *it shall be done for you as you have believed.*” Matthew notes that the timing of the healing was instantaneous, “*the servant was healed that very moment.*” Clearly there was a comparison of the time when Jesus spoke these words to the friends sent by the centurion for “when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health” (Luke 7:10). They would have known the time when Jesus spoke to them of the promise of healing and also when those with the servant observed the end of his sickness and paralysis. This explains why Matthew would describe the servant as “*healed that very moment.*” The timing of the healing and the distance of the healing demonstrate the supernatural authority of Jesus to heal. Unlike fraudulent claims of healing today, divine healings are typically instantaneous and do not require the participation of the one healed.

It is important to understand the meaning of the comparative phrase “just as.” This should not be interpreted that the healing of the servant was produced by the faith of the centurion. Nor should this phrase be understood to be in proportion to the faith of the centurion, as if when we have enough faith then God acts in accordance with the quantity of our faith. Rather, Jesus says that it will be done in the way that he had hoped for. His faith brought him to ask Christ for the healing of his servant and Christ responded that his servant will be healed, just as he had desired and had believed that Christ was able to do.

Conclusion

The section of Matthew describes the great faith of a Roman centurion in order to show the ministry of Christ was not limited to Jews alone. Also, the great faith of this Gentile is highlighted in contrast to the nation that would reject their Messiah. This will be an unfolding theme throughout Matthew’s Gospel.

Faith is seen in partial ways by the centurion’s interest in humbly asking for the healing of another. But this is not any greater than the crowds who followed Jesus in hopes of experiencing His miraculous work. But his great faith was seen in his view of Jesus, recognizing the authority of Jesus and the unworthiness of himself. This is made more impressive by the position of power the centurion enjoyed. He had the power to oppress others, but did not do what other centurions did, which is why his friends who visited Jesus were the Jewish elders who esteemed him according to Luke’s account.

This great faith is regarding the authority of Jesus, not understanding in a general understanding of authority. Some have taught this passage as an example of how great faith is seen in acknowledging authority in general, but this text describes the faith of the centurion as specifically related to his view of Christ's authority. People in positions of authority may seek to bolster their authority by using this passage, but the context is the authority of Jesus Christ.

True faith recognizes the authority of Jesus and no person or institution should impinge upon His authority in any way. When people or institutions elevate themselves and diminish Christ as the authority, those with great faith will observe this and reject their leadership.

Christ's authority is that basis for ministry to the world. This centurion represented the beginning of what would ultimately culminate in the both Jews and Gentiles united in the church. There is a necessary and direct relationship between the authority of Jesus and the mission to reach the world for Christ. When we truly understand Christ's complete authority, we will be compelled to serve Him by going to those who do not know Him.

"And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"" (Matthew 28:18-20).