

The Believing Centurion

Devotional Reading: Acts 10:19–22, 30–35

Background Scripture: Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10

Today's Scripture: Matthew 8:5–13

I. Expressing Need and Faith Matthew 8:5–9

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

⁸ The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

5. *Capernaum* was the town that Jesus chose as the base of his Galilean ministry. It was the home of Simon Peter and probably more of the disciples. The name “village of Nahum” is fitting for Jesus’ ministry. Nahum means “comfort” in Hebrew, and comfort is the very thing Jesus came to bring Israel (see Isaiah 40:1). The village’s name is also a reminder of the biblical prophet who prophesied judgment against Nineveh and Assyria (Nahum 1–3).

A *centurion* was an officer in the Roman army. He led between 60 and

100 troops. Since Rome had no legion in Galilee or Judea at the time, this centurion was probably part of the auxiliary force under Herod Antipas. Auxiliaries were non-citizen troops, mainly recruited from the free population of the empire. This man might have been from Galilee, Phoenicia, or Syria—thus, neither a Roman citizen nor Jewish.

The centurion approaches Jesus as a supplicant and subordinate, *asking* Jesus for a favor. In a parallel account, the centurion does not approach Jesus directly but sends Jewish elders on his behalf (Luke 7:1–10). An indirect approach is another way to emphasize his perceived position as inferior to Jesus.

6. The centurion calls Jesus *Lord*. The title carries some ambiguity in meaning, as it can refer to a human ruler, serve as an honorific title like “mister,” or even represent the name of God. Using the term “lord” or “master” allowed God-fearers (non-Jewish followers of God) to avoid pronouncing the revered name—Yahweh. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, *Lord* frequently refers to God. Only one chapter prior to today’s text, Jesus uses *Lord* as a title for himself (Matthew 7:21–22). Therefore, it is significant that the centurion—an outsider and representative of imperial power—approaches Jesus as a supplicant and repeats this title. At a

minimum, the term bestows honor and indicates authority.

The centurion does not bring his *servant* to be healed. Leaving the servant at *home* indicates the extent of the centurion's faith. His approach presumes that Jesus is capable of healing without even seeing the man.

The word rendered *servant* is ambiguous and could refer to a child or enslaved person. One viable possibility, in this case, is that the "servant" is the centurion's son from a woman to whom he is not legally married—perhaps the child of an enslaved or lower-status woman.

7. Jesus practices what he preaches. During the Sermon on the Mount, he teaches love—even for enemies (Matthew 5:43–44). Since God gives good gifts to the righteous and the wicked (5:45), Jesus encourages his followers that the one who seeks and asks will also find and receive (7:8).

Christ's kingdom differs from the patterns of earthly conquest. Rather than resisting someone who could easily be seen as an enemy or an oppressor, Jesus serves him and offers blessing. In Luke's retelling of the story, Jewish elders testify on the centurion's behalf, showing that he is no enemy or oppressor. They vouch for him, saying he is worthy because "he loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (Luke 7:4–5).

8. The centurion repeats the title *Lord*, which picks up on the emphasis in Jesus' initial reply. The centurion accentuates faith in Jesus' authority, declaring that Jesus *just* needs to *say the word*. From the beginning of Scripture, God creates through word alone. God only needs to say, "Let there be light," and it appears. Thus, intentionally or not, the centurion's faith links Jesus to the Creator, whose voice of authority brings life.

It is often argued that the centurion's

unworthiness—I *do not deserve to have you come under my roof*—anticipates the unwillingness of a Jew to enter the home of an unclean Gentile. However, this idea exaggerates Jewish purity regulations in the first century. Contracting ritual impurity is not sinful; in some cases, it is mandated by the expectations of the Law. Nearly all first-century Jews spent the majority of their lives in a state of ritual impurity. Merely entering a Gentile house, therefore, would be a nonissue.

9. The centurion describes his knowledge of *authority* and experience as a military leader. He knows that soldiers obey his orders, which creates an analogy that explains Jesus' position in the cosmic hierarchy. Jesus has the authority to command the powerful, unseen forces of heaven in the same way that the centurion directs the troops under his jurisdiction.

The centurion uses the phrase *under authority* to describe himself. His commands carry weight because he speaks with the authority of the emperor. Likewise, Jesus' authority over cosmic forces is entirely sanctioned and supported by the Father in heaven (see Matthew 28:18).

II. Instructing Others Matthew 8:10–12

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

10. Jesus expresses amazement at the centurion's *faith*. *Faith* here is more than

mere belief; it includes concepts like “trust” or “fidelity.” The centurion identifies Jesus’ authority and submits himself entirely. He trusts that Jesus can and will respond with favor. And Jesus finds this conviction astonishing—it displays a level of trust and submission that Jesus has not seen, even *in Israel*.

11. Jesus uses the centurion’s faith as an object lesson. He explains that outsiders who submit to Jesus in this manner will be welcomed into *the kingdom of heaven* with the covenantal patriarchs.

The kingdom of heaven refers to the rule of God that is active on earth. It includes the resurrection of the dead and the promised restoration of the people of Israel. Remarkably, Jesus teaches that God includes outsiders, like this centurion, among the faithful. In the new era of justice and life, *many* will be rewarded and treated as heirs to the covenant, even alongside *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*.

The outsiders *come from* places far from Israel: *the east* and *west*. These directional terms depict widespread inclusion. People from nations at the ends of the earth will find a place in God’s kingdom. This is like the psalmist who uses the phrase “as far as the east is from the west” to poetically describe infinite space (Psalm 103:12). Jesus’ words do something similar. They expand his listener’s expectations of kingdom access.

To *take their places* with the patriarchs hints at the image of a banqueting table set for a great *feast*. Jesus pushes his disciples to increase their holy imagination of who will be present at the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6–9).

12. On the other hand, the unfaithful *subjects* will be expelled. Their consequence for disobedience, lack of faith, and apathy is exclusion from the benefits of *the kingdom*: they will be *thrown outside*. Just imagine the shock of Jesus’

comment. Those who expect inclusion as a matter of privilege must beware. Jesus says that insiders who anticipate their family history or religious affiliation as granting automatic entry into the kingdom must watch out—they could find themselves outside the fold, in *darkness*. There are serious consequences for unfaithfulness and infidelity. Jesus’ teaching follows the prediction of Amos 5:18–20, which warns that the day of the Lord’s judgment will be “darkness, not light” for the house of Israel.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth recalls figurative imagery used frequently in Psalms (example: Psalm 35:15–16). There, David describes mockers who conspire against him and gnash their teeth.

III. Healing from a Distance

Matthew 8:13

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.

13. Jesus acts with the divine authority that the centurion expected of him. He proclaims healing to the servant from a distance, which occurs in an instant—*at that moment*. He immediately dismisses the centurion, telling him to *Go!*

Jesus’ declaration, “*Let it be done just as you believed it would*” is especially important. Jesus does not act unilaterally. In Matthew 13:58, Jesus will refuse to perform miraculous healings when his audience is lacking faith. But for the centurion, abundant faith determines what he receives from Jesus. God responds in direct reaction to the centurion’s petition.

Jesus does not respond to the centurion’s outward appearance, social status, ethnic identity, or even membership in the covenant community. Instead, he looks at his faith.

Involvement Learning

The Believing Centurion

Into the Lesson

List common types of appeals. Examples might include a bank loan application, job application, marriage proposal, request for financial assistance, or prayer for healing. Write down appropriate and inappropriate grounds on which to make each appeal.

Today's passage helps us see how God is pleased with appeals made on faithful grounds.

Into the Word

Read Matthew 8:5–13. What was so remarkable about the centurion's appeal to Jesus?

What about the centurion's "great faith" is notable?

How will you practice "great faith" in the upcoming week?

Key Text

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."

—Matthew 5:10

Into Life

Even though the centurion's appeal is not a template for all intercessory prayer, it is instructive as an example of "great faith" that pleases Jesus.

Write a short intercessory prayer using this fill-in-the-blank script that is modeled after the centurion's appeal (Matthew 8:6, 8).

Example: "Lord, my friend is struggling with his mental health. Lord, I cannot alleviate his suffering as much as I wish I could. But say the word, and my friend will experience some relief today."

Thought to Remember

Jesus holds complete authority.