

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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I HAVE NOT FOUND SUCH FAITH IN ISRAEL

Matthew 8:5-13

The Lord Jesus can receive any man who truly trusts Him, no matter how far away the man may be or how many barriers may seem to stand in the way. When a centurion approached Him and asked for help, Jesus received him and commended him for his great faith. This passage in Matthew 8:5-13 is very important for our understanding of faith as well as for our understanding of the person of Christ. We will come to see in this lesson that these two, faith and the Lord Jesus, are one. They cannot be separated. This is what we read in Matthew 8:5-13.

Matthew 8:5. Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, 6 saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented."

7 And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him."

8 The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed."

9 "For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

10 When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

11 "And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."

12 "But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

13 Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour.

A man of outstanding character

Let us look at what is happening in this passage. We are told about a place in Israel called Capernaum. Capernaum was a wealthy city located on the northern side of the Sea of Galilee, right on the edge of the lake. The city housed a contingent of Roman soldiers. And here we meet with a centurion. A centurion was a junior Roman officer in charge of a hundred soldiers. There are several centurions mentioned in the NT and they all turn out to be rather good men. They were often remarkable men because they were chosen according to strict standards.

The centurion of Matthew 8 was no exception. He was truly a man of outstanding character. As we go on in this lesson, we are going to learn many things about what a Christian should be from the life of this Roman officer. Jesus says something very important and unique about this man. This centurion is the only man in the NT of whom the Lord Jesus says, 'The kind of faith that this man has,

I have not found anywhere, not even in Israel.’ Now the question we want to ask is this: What is it about the faith of this man that made Jesus say these words? Why was his faith so remarkable in the eyes of Jesus?

A unique faith

This centurion came to Jesus because he wanted Jesus to heal his servant who was very sick. We have to admit that the fact that he had faith to believe that Jesus could heal his servant is not something that remarkable. Many people before him seemed to have that kind of faith. In the Bible, there are many people who came to Jesus with their sickness or with people who were sick with the hope that a miraculous healing could take place. Obviously they believed that Jesus could heal them. What is so remarkable then about the centurion’s faith?

We notice that he said, ‘All you have to do is to speak a word and my servant will be healed.’ This is certainly an expression of faith but in what way was it so exceptional? In the gospel of Matthew, there are other incidents where Jesus used the power of the spoken word to heal a sick person. For example, in Matthew 9:6-7, we read these words. Jesus *said to the paralytic-- "Rise, take up your bed, and go home." And he rose, and went home.* In Matthew 15:28, the Lord Jesus said to the Syrophenician woman, *O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed at once.* What was it about the faith of this centurion that Jesus said of him, ‘This kind of faith, I have not found anywhere, not even in Israel’?

It is quite significant that Jesus said, ‘Not even in Israel.’ Why did He say that? Because the Israelites were taught the word of God since they were very young. Everyone in Israel was familiar with God’s word. If there is one place where you expect to find faith, it is obviously in Israel. You would hardly expect to find faith among the Gentiles who were not acquainted with the Bible. Yet, Jesus found in this Gentile, this foreigner, this non-Jew, the kind of faith that He could not find in Israel.

A loving person

So what is it that made this centurion’s faith so remarkable? First of all, there is something unusual and exceptional that we can notice right away about that Roman officer. Why is he so concerned about his slave? In those days, a slave was nothing. An owner could do whatever he wanted with a slave without having to give an account. You can treat him like a piece of property. If he is good, you keep him. If he is not good, you get rid of him. This slave, being sick with palsy, would have been completely useless to the centurion. It would have been much less trouble to ignore him and let him die. And yet, the master did not reject the slave. The centurion took care of the sick slave because he loved him. I would like you to notice that this is the only recorded time that a person came to Jesus on behalf of a slave. We normally see parents bringing their children, or friends bringing friends. But this soldier brought his servant. This slave should have been meaningless to him. Yet he cared enough for him that he wanted him to be healed by Jesus. We can say that this centurion is an exceptionally loving and caring person.

The next thing we notice in this man is his love for the Jews. This, again, is very unusual. It says in the parallel passage in Luke 7:5, *For he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue.* It was very unusual for a Gentile, especially a Gentile official, to care for the Jews. The Jews hated the Romans, and the Romans hated the Jews. Jews and Gentiles did not want to have any dealing with one another. But this was not an ordinary Roman. This centurion loved the Jewish nation. His love was so strong that he did what he could to enhance the worship of God’s people by building a synagogue. It must have cost him a lot of money. We can appreciate even more what he did when we know that the one thing why Gentiles often so hated the Jews is precisely because the Jews thought

themselves to be so religiously and spiritually superior to other nations. Very few Jews believed in Jesus. But this centurion, this outsider, was not afraid to confess his faith in Jesus in front of the Jews.

A humble man

Following the centurion's request, Jesus expressed the intention to go to his home and heal his servant. But the centurion did not want Him to. He simply said, 'I am not worthy for You to come to my house.' Notice. He did not say, 'My servant is not worthy to have you come,' but he said, 'I am not worthy.' What does he mean that he was not worthy? Every Jew is subject to the Roman government. And he is a Roman. It is the Jews who are the subject people, not him. And he is not an ordinary Roman citizen. He is a Roman official, a commander of a hundred soldiers. In the eyes of the society, the centurion is much greater than this poor preacher from Nazareth. Yet he saw something in Jesus that made him say, 'Lord, I am not worthy that You should step into my house.'

Then we find this remarkable explanation. The centurion explains what he has seen in Jesus. He said, 'I know what it is to be obeyed. I am a man under authority and I have also under me soldiers who are used to obedience. I say to one 'Come!' and he comes. I say to another 'Go!' and he goes.' He is an officer used to authority. For some who have been in the army for a long time, they get so used to commanding that it becomes part of their second nature. It is all the more remarkable for this official, who is used to give orders on the battlefield, to say to Jesus, 'I am not worthy that You should come to me.'

What did he see in Jesus? He saw in Jesus his superior. As a centurion, he had authority over men. All he had to do was to issue an order and he knows that it will be carried out. And he saw that Jesus also can give orders and everything will obey. This is really amazing. He is saying, 'I give orders to my soldiers and they obey me. But you can give orders to anything, to this disease for example. You command this disease to step back and it will step back. I am in command of soldiers. You are in command of the whole universe. Just speak a word and I know that it will be done.' His servant was dying and he says to Jesus, 'I believe that you can say to death, 'Step back,' and it will happen.' Where did this man get such faith? There is none in Israel who has such great faith!

A man of faith

This man was a man of faith and His faith was centred on Jesus Christ. It says in Hebrews 11:6 that, *Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that (1) He is, and that (2) He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.* The centurion is the perfect illustration of this kind of faith.

He who comes to God must believe that He is. Faith is believing that 'Christ is.' It is believing that He is the sovereign Lord and that all power is subject to Him. Notice what the centurion says. 'I use a word of command and my soldiers obey me immediately, even if it means that they have to die.' The life of every soldier is in his hand. He has the power of life and death over them. Very few men can exercise such power in everyday life. You can say that the power of an officer over his soldiers in time of battle is almost absolute. He is basically in the position of God to his soldiers because he can send them to death. You see the comparison that the centurion is making? He says to Jesus, 'Your authority in this universe is absolute. You speak a word and it will be done.'

He who comes to God must believe that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Faith is believing that Christ is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. The centurion had diligently sought Christ, believing that Christ could meet His need. He was a Roman officer and yet he came to a Jew for help. Approaching a Jew was socially unacceptable for a Gentile and being an officer of Rome made it even worse. It took a great deal of courage and humility to approach Jesus. But he was willing to do all that he could to have his need met. He came to Jesus and trusted Him to satisfy his need. We

do the same thing when we ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’ (Matthew 5:6), when we ‘seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness’ (Matthew 6:33), when we ‘ask...seek...and knock’ (Matthew 7:7), or when we ‘pray and fast’, i.e., we persevere in prayer (Matthew 17:21).

Just say the word

In this story, faith is described as an absolute practical reliance on Jesus’ power. Notice these words: ‘Just say a word.’ The centurion believed not only in the power and authority of Jesus’ word, but also that Jesus’ presence was not required for healing. It only takes a word from Jesus and the problem will be solved. Most people who came to Jesus tried to get close enough to touch Him in order to be healed but this centurion recognized that Jesus’ power has no spatial limitations. ‘My servant is dying. But I have absolute confidence that if you say a word, he will get up.’

This first long-distance healing in the gospel accounts tells us something important about intercessory prayer. The servant is healed by Jesus on the basis of the centurion’s faith, not the servant’s faith. Jesus does not ask the centurion, ‘Does your servant believe in me like you do?’ Jesus heals the sickness of the servant because of the faith of the centurion. The implication of this is that a person in need can be helped on the basis of another person’s faith. While it is true that each individual is asked to place his personal faith in Jesus, nevertheless it is equally true that other people can be helped by the faith of friends who pray to God. This particular story should encourage us to pray more often for others.

The Lord Jesus marveled at the centurion’s faith. It is a strong word used of Jesus only here and in Mark 6:6 where it was used because of the lack of faith among the Jewish people (*He marveled because of their unbelief*). Jesus opened His heart and embraced the centurion even though Jews and Gentiles are not supposed to be on good terms. Remember. Not only was he a Gentile, but a Roman soldier, a citizen and soldier of the nation that enslaved the Jews.

A great revival among the Gentiles

Jesus used the centurion’s amazing faith to predict a great revival among the Gentiles in the future. Many will come to Jesus by faith, just as the centurion had come. They will come from everywhere, the east and the west, and they will sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in heaven. Can you imagine that, Jews and Gentiles sitting and eating together at the big festal banquet of the kingdom? The Jews considered that it was a crime to sit down at table and eat with Gentiles (Acts 11:3), yet Jesus says that the patriarchs themselves will be sitting down with Gentiles at the banquet.

The east and west represent the extreme points of the compass and are taken to indicate the regions that are far away, i.e., the whole world. This includes not only the people who are geographically far away from Israel, but those who have been far away spiritually, Gentiles as well as Jews. The centurion had whatever allowed Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to be in heaven. He had faith. He was a Gentile, not a son of Abraham by birth. But he became a son of Abraham by faith. In other words, faith, not race, is the criterion for membership of God’s kingdom.

The sons of the kingdom will be lost

Many from the east and the west will feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. However, many who are supposed to be at the banquet, some of the children of the kingdom who had already been invited, are going to be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The Jews thought that no descendant of Abraham could be lost. Here Jesus tells His own people this shocking truth: even Jews themselves are not assured of a place at the Messianic banquet.

The *sons of the kingdom* are the children or the people who expected the kingdom. The Jews felt that they were the sons of the kingdom and that they have a natural right to the privileges of the kingdom by reason of their birth, i.e., because they are the natural children of Abraham. They thought that they were the favorites of heaven and that the Gentiles do not have access to the kingdom. They were wrong! Jesus says that many of the Gentiles will be saved and many of the Jews will be lost. Believing Gentiles will take the place of unbelieving Jews. 'Even if you are a Jew, if you persist in unbelief, you will perish. You will be rejected by God. Don't bank on your race to enter into heaven.' The fact that the Jews had been chosen to be the children of God and that they had been given so many privileges does not automatically give them a seat in heaven.

When Jesus speaks of the 'outer darkness,' of a 'place where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth,' He is obviously referring to hell. Hell is a reality that we are advised to take seriously. Life without faith in Christ will lead to the unquenchable fire of hell. This will be worse than death itself. We should never lose this sense of the gravity of the gospel. If we have no real conviction of the reality of hell, Jesus' warning will mean nothing to us.

The Lord Jesus speaks twice as often of hell as of heaven. And every time He warns people about hell, it is to people who believed themselves to be heirs of the kingdom. Jesus did not teach about hell to pagans but to those who thought themselves to be believers. Hell is not something that will frighten unbelievers. It will hopefully frighten those who think themselves to be believers.

This means that the warning in this story is not just for the Jews but also for the church. The 'sons of the kingdom' may not refer only to Israel, but also to the church. The sons of the kingdom are the people who are supposed to inherit the kingdom. And the meaning of Jesus' warning is that many who think they are going to inherit the kingdom will not; and many who are thought to be out of the kingdom will actually inherit the kingdom. Christian heritage, godly parents and children, religious profession, baptism, church membership, all these things, as important as they may be to the Christian life, will not give you entrance into heaven. On the day of judgment, it will not avail men to have been called the children of the kingdom, either as Jews or as Christians. Because men will then be judged not by what they were called, but by what they were, i.e., men of faith. Entrance into heaven is based upon one thing and one thing only: faith in Christ. *Without faith it is impossible to please God* (Hebrews 11:6). Without faith, man will be thrown into the outer darkness where he will weep and grind his teeth.

The story of the centurion presented faith as the 'one thing needful.' It is a concrete faith which expects and receives results. Why was his faith so outstanding? The centurion recognized the authority of Jesus and the power of His word over everything in this world. But at the same time, he also recognized his personal unworthiness even though he was worthy in the eyes of the society. Seeing God in Christ caused the centurion to humble himself before Jesus. Such faith brings Jesus' approval. *I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!* In this commendation, Jesus is indirectly asking us to have the faith of the centurion. 'Will you trust Me as the centurion has?'