

The Believing Centurion

Devotional Reading: Acts 10:19–22, 30–35
Background Scripture: Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10

Matthew 8:5–13

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.”

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.”

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.



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

Introduction

A. Please Fix It, Daddy!

My young children run to me when something is amiss. They fully expect that I can fix whatever has gone wrong: a broken toy, a skinned knee, or a swing that won't push itself. In their eyes, I am the big, experienced adult who has been there for them since they were born. In their eyes, I seem completely trustworthy and capable of doing whatever they need. (They're still young enough to be enchanted by my capacity!) This trust is constant—whether they are behaving well or poorly, whether they are healthy or sick, whether I am full of energy or exhausted.

If children can place this radical trust in an earthly father, how much more might the children of God run to a faithful and capable heavenly Father! Yet, we often hesitate to bring specific requests or intercessions. We waver when we feel unworthy of attention, or that our situation is too much. But like the centurion in Matthew 8:5–13, we can trust God's capability and willingness to act. God will respond when we come to him, full of faith. He does not tire.

B. Lesson Context

Today's lesson comes shortly after the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5–7, Jesus gives an authoritative interpretation of the Torah (or Jewish Law), explaining the ethics of God's kingdom. The sermon includes Jesus' self-identification as "Lord," to whom everyone owes obedience and allegiance (7:21–23). Jesus compares his teachings to a foundation stone (7:24). His words are like the ground on which one might stand; they ensure the stability of whoever lives by them (7:24–27).

As Jesus descends from the mount, a "leper" approaches him (Matthew 8:2). The Torah—which Jesus just showed authority to interpret—contains purity laws that regulate contact with those who are sick. Anyone with visible disease struggled day-to-day, facing the prospect of making others ritually impure. The man's request for cleansing reveals faith in Jesus' authority over sickness and death. Thus, when Jesus responds by cleansing the man with a touch, Jesus accepts rit-

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 2: Faithful Witnesses Say "Yes" to Jesus

Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the centurion's appeal to Jesus.
2. Explain why the centurion's "great faith" is astonishing.
3. List ways to practice intercessory prayer and appeals to Jesus as an act of faith in God's power.

Lesson Outline

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- A. Please Fix It, Daddy!
- B. Lesson Context

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

- A. Centurion's Request (vv. 5–6)
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- D. Centurion's Position (v. 9)
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II. Instructing Others (Matthew 8:10–12)

- A. Jesus' Surprise (v. 10)
- B. Inclusion of Outsiders (v. 11)
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III. Healing from a Distance (Matthew 8:13)

Conclusion

- A. According to Your Faith
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

ual impurity (8:3). Simultaneously, he displays the capacity to heal the diseases that the Law of Moses carefully regulated. Jesus demonstrates healing with a touch, setting the stage for a second healing without physical contact.

I. Expressing Need and Faith

(Matthew 8:5–9)

A. Centurion's Request (vv. 5–6)

5. When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help.

Capernaum was the town that Jesus chose as the base of his Galilean ministry (Matthew 4:13). It was the home of Simon Peter and probably more of the disciples (17:25). 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: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”). 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 (Luke 7:1–10), the centurion does not approach Jesus directly but sends Jewish elders on his behalf. An indirect approach is another way to emphasize his perceived position as inferior to Jesus.

6. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

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 “mistress,” 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 (Matthew 1:20; 2:13; 4:7; etc.). Only one chapter prior to today’s text, Jesus uses *Lord* as a title for himself (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. Roman soldiers in this era were officially forbidden to marry during their term of service. Yet, in practice, the authorities often looked the other way. Therefore, soldiers in long-term localized service sometimes had unlicensed or unofficial families. In such cases, the soldier could formally adopt the legally unrecognized children after completing his term of service. With the centurion’s higher rank and long-term assignment, this interpretation fits the parallel in Luke’s Gospel, which adds that the sick person is “valued highly” (Luke 7:2–10).

What Do You Think?

To whom do you go when someone you care for is suffering? What kind of help do you seek?

Digging Deeper

Is it easy for you to ask for help? What character traits must be developed in us before we can easily ask for assistance?

B. Jesus’ Offer (v. 7)

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

Jesus practices what he preaches. During the Sermon on the Mount, he teaches love—even for enemies (Matthew 5:43–44). Since God gives

Have centurion-like faith!



Visual for Lesson 5. *Point to the visual and say, "How might you practice confident faith in Jesus' authority and abilities?"*

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).

Jesus asks the centurion a question, "*Shall I come and heal him?*" His query indicates that Jesus is willing to go and to heal at the centurion's request. The wording includes the personal pronoun *I*, which serves an emphatic purpose. Jesus clarifies what the centurion is implying: "You want *me* to come?" Jesus' answer is like the leading question he will pose to the young man in Matthew 19:17—"Why do you ask me about what is good? . . . There is only One who is good." Every word Jesus speaks reflects his identity, status, and authority.

C. Centurion's Response (v. 8)

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."

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 (Genesis 1), God creates through word alone. God only needs to say, "Let there be light," and it appears (1:3). 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. For instance, the death of a close relative requires a burial—which, according to the traditional interpretation of Deuteronomy 21:23, must be completed within twenty-four hours. Nearly all first-century Jews spent the majority of their lives in a state of ritual impurity. Only those entering holy spaces, like the temple courts, needed to purify themselves. Merely entering a Gentile house, therefore, would be a nonissue. Jewish texts and rabbinic materials presume that Jews enter Gentile households without concern, even to eat with non-Jews (provided the menu does not include forbidden foods).

Therefore, when the centurion claims unworthiness, it is on grounds other than his Gentile status. It again suggests great humility and recognition of Jesus' high standing relative to his own.

D. Centurion's Position (v. 9)

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."

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. As Jesus says in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (compare John 5:36).

What Do You Think?

Is there a unique part of your job, worldview, or skillset that sheds light on how faith works?

Digging Deeper

How might you share the analogies and examples of faith from your life and experience with others?

Officer's Orders

An army runs on authority. Soldiers must obey orders from superiors. Massive consequences occur when commands are ignored or disobeyed. General orders include the following: leaving a post *only* when relieved by another, sounding an alarm in the case of an emergency, and remaining alert while on duty. Soldiers are expected to carry out the directives of a commander—not second-guess or question the strategy.

This pattern was evident in the Roman army, which remains one of history's most successful fighting and ruling forces. A centurion served within a hierarchy. Above him were the legate, tribune, and prefect ranks; and under his authority were hundreds of common soldiers. Although everyone served the emperor, soldiers and their commanding officers were loyal to one another. Good officers care for their men.

The centurion in Matthew 8:5–13 obviously cares for his servant. His concern drives him to the source of ultimate authority: Jesus. The centurion's understanding of command bolsters his faith and his decisive action. Are you a leader with influence? Are you using your influence for the benefit of those under your care? Where is the line that indicates it is time to turn and seek God's superior capabilities and limitless authority? —B. R. T.

II. Instructing Others

(Matthew 8:10–12)

A. Jesus' Surprise (v. 10)

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."

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*.

Despite having the witness of the law—an advantage that the apostle Paul calls "the very words of God" (Romans 3:2)—the residents of *Israel* do not exhibit this measure of trust and submission. The centurion's active faith surprises Jesus; as a Gentile, the centurion enjoys none of those advantages. The centurion's faith recognizes the presence and authority of God in the person of Jesus.

What Do You Think?

What is it about the centurion's faith that amazes Jesus?

Digging Deeper

Have you ever marveled at someone else's faith? What was so astonishing to you?

B. Inclusion of Outsiders (v. 11)

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."

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).

What Do You Think?

Consider the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:16–24). Who comes to the feast?

Digging Deeper

How does imagining these banquet guests shift your understanding of the "many" who will come from the "east and west" to sit with the patriarchs?

Banquet Table

I sat at the end of a long rectangular table. It butted up against several others, creating a long line. Tables filled the lawn beside ours, and chattering picnic-goers happily sat alongside them all. Food covered another set of tables: barbecued pork, rolls, vegetables, salads, casserole dishes, fruit platters, and every kind of dessert you might imagine. It was an epic potluck to close out the summer and kick off the school year for our church.

Suddenly, the words of Psalm 23 floated through my mind, "You prepare a table before me . . ." (23:5). But instead of being surrounded by my enemies, I was surrounded by my fam-

ily and closest of friends. I felt gratitude rush through my heart for this provision, invitation, and abundance.

At the same time, movement caught my eye, and I turned my head to see a family hesitating at the edge of our gathering. They looked unsure. Quickly, I alerted my family to clean up their plates. I went to the other family and assured them we'd made space. I invited them to take our place at the table. Later, the family admitted they were considering whether to leave, but the invitation encouraged them to remain. When did you last invite a stranger to sit at God's banqueting table? How might you increase your imagination of who belongs and how to make room for them?

—B. R. T.

C. Exclusion of Insiders (v. 12)

12. "But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

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. David describes mockers who conspire against him and gnash their teeth (Psalm 35:15–16). In the same context, these teeth-gnashers are at a feast, which connects to Jesus' words about sitting with the patriarchs (see earlier comments on Matthew 8:11). In another psalm, the wicked scheme against the righteous (Psalm 37:12). Although they gnash their teeth, God will bring them and

their plans to nothing (37:20). And in Psalm 112, the righteous look forward to an enduring future, with exaltation and honor (112:9). In contrast, those misaligned with God will see honor given to others, be “vexed” by it, “gnash their teeth,” and then “waste away” (112:10). Thus, Jesus’ phrase reflects the bitterness and anger of the wicked who look upon the salvation of the righteous. It warns God’s people against having an inhospitable and faithless mindset, which can only lead to ruin.

What Do You Think?

What is the fundamental difference between “subjects of the kingdom” and “children of God”?

Digging Deeper

Have you ever expected to receive something because you felt it was your right or privilege and ended up disappointed? Explain.

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.

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. Jesus’ interaction with the centurion is an example of God’s ability to grant the “desires of your heart” to those who

pray in accordance with his will (Psalm 37:4). It puts flesh and bone to John’s words: “If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (1 John 5:14). Those who trust God can seek, ask (with confidence), and receive a righteous reward.

Conclusion

A. According to Your Faith

The centurion in today’s lesson gives us a refreshing example of approaching God properly. Our methodology is critical as we intercede for those who are suffering. The centurion showcases essential aspects of a faithful petition: acknowledge Jesus as Lord, submit to God’s authority, and do so with great humility. The centurion also appeals to the Lord’s mercy. He holds complete confidence in Jesus’ ability to alleviate suffering, even from a distance. This story demonstrates that we can be confident like the centurion—in Christ’s authority over sickness, death, and every power.

This story shows that faith sees beyond the physical to perceive spiritual realities that are deep and salient. Faith perceives Jesus’ divine jurisdiction; faith gives us boldness to act with adept confidence; faith makes us children of God.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, teach us to approach you like the centurion. May we boldly intercede on behalf of those who suffer. Grant us complete faith in your authority. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus holds complete authority.

How to Say It

Assyria	Uh-sear-ee-uh.
Capernaum	Kuh-per-nay-um.
centurion	sen-ture-ee-un.
Gentile	Jen-tile.
Herod Antipas	Hair-ud An-tih-pus.
rabbinic	ruh-bin-ihk.
Syria	Sear-ee-uh.