

**The Importance of Faith and its Transforming Power**  
*Matthew 8:5-13: The Faith of the Centurion*

Lisa Schmidt  
Submitted to: Dr. Ian Scott

April 17, 2009  
NEWT0522W

## **The Importance of Faith and its Transforming Power**

### *Matthew 8:5-13: The Faith of the Centurion*

#### **Introduction**

Barriers are common in today's society. There are cultural barriers, social barriers, economic, political, and religious barriers. We have trouble interacting with people who are different from us. Jesus has called us to overcome these barriers. A passage that highlights, and exemplifies this breaking down of walls is Matthew 5:13-18, the story about a centurion's faith. The centurion was a Roman, and Jesus a Jew.<sup>1</sup> Historically, these two groups did not get along very well, yet Jesus converses with this man. He praises the great faith of the centurion. Jesus is at work tearing down barriers here. He demonstrated that faith is better than status or works. Those who heard Jesus' words for themselves, or read the words from the gospel according to Matthew, were transformed by the message this passage contains. To enter the kingdom of heaven, faith alone is needed. The outer man has nothing to do with salvation. This story shows that we must all be transformed by faith, and in so doing we will break down walls in society and bring others into a restored relationship with God as well.

#### **Matthew 8:5-13, the Faith of the Centurion**

In this particular passage in Matthew, a centurion approached Jesus and asked him to heal his servant, who was at home, and Jesus agreed. The centurion, however, told Jesus that he did not have to come to his home, but rather just had to tell him that his servant would be healed and he would be satisfied. The centurion indicated that he was familiar with just having to say a word and have something be done because of his authority in the Roman army. Jesus marveled

---

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars suggest the centurion may have been a Syrian, and others suggest we can never know the centurion's exact identity, but the underlying point is that the centurion was certainly not a Jew. See: Howard Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and its Readers*, (Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 2003), 99. See also: D. B. Saddington, "The Centurion in Matthew 8:5-13: Consideration of the Proposal of Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., and Tat-Siong Benny Liew," *JBL* 125, no. 1 (2006), 142.

at this man's faith and exclaimed to the crowd of followers around him that he had not even come across such strong faith in the people of Israel (the Jews). He therefore healed the centurion's servant immediately and told the crowd that there would be many coming from foreign places and entering the kingdom of heaven, but that some from Israel would not enter.

### **Transformation: The First Level**

There are three different levels to this passage. In order to fully understand this passage, we must look at three different audiences. First of all, we can look at the passage and see what it says directly. Jesus is speaking to the centurion, and there is a crowd of followers surrounding Jesus, as there often was during his years of ministry. Just by reading this passage we can see that Jesus' words can have a tremendous impact on those who hear them. While Jesus is talking directly to the centurion, we must take a closer look, and see that he is really trying to change the lives of those following him. The centurion already has a great faith, and as Jesus himself later said, it was not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Jesus was more concerned with the crowds around him, composed mostly of Jewish men and women, who were still questioning his validity and his claim to the title Messiah.

This crowd had surrounded him in the town of Capernaum, located on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had moved here from Nazareth and had made Capernaum the base of his missionary work.<sup>3</sup> The Roman centurion probably knew about this place because of his military base's proximity to the town.<sup>4</sup> It was about the year AD 27. The people of Capernaum were mainly farmers and fishermen, but industry and trade also supported the economy in

---

<sup>2</sup> Matt 9:12

<sup>3</sup> Matt 4:13. See also: Matthew Henry, *Matthew Chap. VIII: Christ Heals the Centurion's Servant*, Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. 5 (Matthew to John), (Found online at: < <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc5.Matt.ix.html>>).

<sup>4</sup> W. Ewing, *Capernaum*, (Found online at: <http://bibleatlas.org/capernaum.htm>). See also: Luke 7:5. Luke indicates that the centurion built (funded) a synagogue, so he must have been quite closely linked to this town.

Capernaum. The Damascus road was close to the town, which supported the trade network.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish followers would be well acquainted with foreigners, particularly because of the trade routes and the Roman military base. However, they would not be too concerned about the spiritual welfare of these foreigners, because their religion was meant for their own Jewish group alone.<sup>6</sup>

We can look at the life of one individual in particular, a Jewess by the name of Elizabeth. Her husband was a farmer, and looked after a plot of land behind their house. She would help her husband look after their animals and crops, as well as work in the kitchen preparing the daily meals. She was used to hard work, long days, and little rest. God had blessed her family, however, because the nearby Roman guard was kinder to the dominant Jewish population than many other Roman bases in the region. In fact, just the other year, the Roman centurion had funded the construction of a new synagogue in Capernaum! Surely the Lord had blessed them greatly. Therefore, every Sabbath, she would accompany her husband to the outer court of this synagogue and give thanks to God for their many blessings. She followed the law of God as laid out in the Torah and as taught to her by her husband. She was glad to be a part of this special people that God had called to be his own. But then she began hearing of a Jew from Nazareth, a man called Jesus, who was preaching to fellow Jews around the country side. In fact, she had found out from her husband just the other day that Jesus had come to stay at Peter's house right here in Capernaum, and would probably be staying there for a long time to come. Elizabeth had heard rumours about Jesus. He was teaching strange things, saying that they were not quite following God's law, and that the Torah meant something slightly different than what they had all thought.<sup>7</sup> She was curious about this man who could supposedly heal people from diseases.

<sup>5</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1643.

<sup>6</sup> Henry, *Matthew Chap. VIII*.

<sup>7</sup> Refer to the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matt 5-7.

Her cousin had just fallen ill, and perhaps Jesus could go to her. Elizabeth was also cautious, however, because too many men had tried to fight against the Roman domination and their rebellions had simply ended in futile bloodshed and failure. Surely God was still looking out for them, though, and would save his holy people from their suffering at the hands of pagans.

Now, let us take this picture of Elizabeth, a fictional character, but one resembling a true historical personage, and place her in the crowd following Jesus in Capernaum.<sup>8</sup> She was aware of the Roman presence in Capernaum, and was not too antagonistic towards the soldiers, especially since the centurion seemed to be friendly toward the Jews. Neither was she open to sharing her life and faith with them, for they were truly outsiders. She was part of a people called to a holy life, called to following the one true God. It was a special calling open only to a few. She was curious what Jesus would do when he saw this centurion walking up to him, but assumed that he would probably only give him a passing glance while continuing on to his destination. When she heard the exchange, she was surprised, and upset. The “divine grace” of God was not just hers alone; it did not belong only to her people. God’s grace was available for everyone through faith in Christ. **Status** had nothing to do with God’s gift; indeed, God’s grace was being extended to those on the outer fringes of society as well.<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth was under the impression that the Jews would gain access to God’s kingdom because of their lineage. Abraham, their father, had been the one considered righteous by God.<sup>10</sup> Surely this lineage would count for something. According to Jesus, all that history was not enough any longer to

---

<sup>8</sup> The character of Elizabeth is entirely fictional, and is partially based on a character in Ian Scott, *Witnesses of Hope: A Pathway into the New Testament*, (Found online at: (<<http://www.tyndale.ca/~iscott/WitnessesOfHope/index.php?chapter=5&section=1>>), 3.9.21-3.9.27.

<sup>9</sup> Charles B. Cousar, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God’s New Work*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 121. See also: Henry, *Matthew Chap. VIII*. See also: Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*, (Wheaton, Illinois: SP Publications, 1980), 57-58.

<sup>10</sup> BibleGateway, *A Roman Exception*, (Found online at: <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/index.php?action=getCommentaryText&cid=1&source=1&seq=i.47.8.4>).

enter into the kingdom of heaven. Salvation was no longer reserved strictly for the Jews, and this was certainly a surprising realization.

Jesus was trying to broaden Elizabeth's surroundings. He wanted to show her that God had created all mankind and that every human was important to him. She was so intent on her lineage, so **entrenched in the stubbornness of her people**, that she needed a shock to be able to experience a change in her thinking. Jesus provided that shock factor in his statement regarding the salvation of foreigners at the expense of the Jews. In verse 12, he said that "the subjects of the kingdom" would be expelled. Elizabeth's security was now completely washed away, and she was scared – surprised and scared. Lest she be too scared to do anything about this, however, Jesus also showed her the way to salvation: faith. He praised the great faith of the centurion and indicated by his statement regarding the servant's healing that blessings would come to those with faith.<sup>11</sup> Jesus also wanted to show Elizabeth that a strong faith, a belief that Jesus could actually do all he set out to do, would be enough to get her through tough times. That is to say, faith in Christ provides the opportunity for Jesus to exercise his authority over our situation.<sup>12</sup>

Elizabeth would take more care to befriend her neighbour, Junia, the wife of a cousin of one of the Roman soldiers. She believed what Jesus had said, some Jews may not experience the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, Elizabeth would do more to take part in God's rescue mission. She had heard earlier from Jesus that the Torah was more than just a series of laws stipulating how to live. It was meant to change hearts, to enable Jews to truly love their neighbours.<sup>13</sup> From this moment on, Elizabeth would try harder to share her meager belongings with those in need. She would talk to Junia about Jesus, and bring her along whenever she heard that Jesus was

---

<sup>11</sup> Matt 8:10, 13.

<sup>12</sup> R. T. France, "Faith" In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Green, Joel B., Scott McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 223.

<sup>13</sup> See the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5-7.

talking with the crowds. Her life would be transformed by the interactions with Jesus; Elizabeth would become a more caring, more concerned woman of faith. She would trust in Jesus. She believed now that he was the Messiah and would save her and others, whoever would believe.

### **Transformation: The Second Level**

The second level of interaction in this passage took place between the writer of the Gospel of Matthew and his first century audience. The book of Matthew was probably written around AD 85 by a Jewish scribe who had been a follower of Matthew, one of the twelve disciples.<sup>14</sup> The writing style of this book indicates that the author was comfortable with using Greek, rather than Aramaic, which **would have been the case had Matthew the disciple written it**. Thus, we can be reasonably certain that the author of Matthew was a Jewish scribe, as mentioned, who was working in Antioch, compiling the teachings of Jesus according to Matthew.<sup>15</sup>

This scribe's audience would have consisted of members of the Jewish Diaspora, like himself, who had come to Antioch (also known as Syrian Antioch) fleeing the persecution in Jerusalem. Antioch was a large commercial centre, as many trade routes went directly through the town. Because of this commercialism, Antioch's population consisted of a number of different ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup> One character who may have read the Matthean scribe's gospel is Cassius, a Jewish fisherman who worked on the docks in Antioch.<sup>17</sup> He was first exposed to Christianity through another Antiochian fisherman, Jonas. Jonas had invited him to a meeting of The Way. Members of The Way believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Cassius thought Jonas

<sup>14</sup> Scott, *Witnesses*, 4.2.6. Some scholars still insist that Matthew was written between AD 50-60, but the most recent sources indicate that the later date is more reliable. See p. 1556 of my bible.

<sup>15</sup> Scott, *Witnesses*, 4.2.8.

<sup>16</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 1904.

<sup>17</sup> The character of Cassius is entirely fictional and his description is in part based on a character from Scott, *Witnesses*, 4.11.8-4.11.13.



abandoned the Jewish faith to participate in this Christianity. He thought Jonas had too little regard for the Torah and God's special calling for the Jews. And yet, out of curiosity, he accompanied Jonas to one of the meetings to see for himself what these people actually believed. When he arrived at the meeting house, he was surprised to see a number of different ethnicities present. There were Greeks, and some fellows Jews that he knew from the synagogue. There were also Syrians and Romans! Apparently, Jesus the Messiah (if that is truly who he was, Cassius was not quite certain yet) had come to save all people, not just his holy nation of Israel. Cassius did not quite think this was fair; after all, he had lived his whole life paying the tithe and following God's law. He had been privileged to be part of that special nation of God. All of a sudden, others could join in as well, others who did not have such a special heritage? Moreover, Romans, who had subjected Israel for decades, could experience God's grace? This was a bit of a shock to Cassius, but as he heard Matthew's version of the news about Jesus, he began to realize that Jesus had some important things to say. Jesus had a very different idea of what the Torah meant, and suggested that it change the inner being of every **man**, rather than just let it govern the outer appearance. This certainly made more sense to Cassius, as he remembered how the Pharisees cared little about their people but pretended to be so holy.<sup>18</sup> Cassius decided to go to another meeting of The Way to find out more about how Jesus was going to transform everyone into true righteousness-seeking people.

Cassius, having heard Matthew 8:5-13 read at one of the meetings of the Way, accepted the initial message a bit easier than Elizabeth had. After all, there were more cultural groups than the Jews present at the gathering.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, Jesus had come to include all peoples in the kingdom of heaven. The more he thought about this story, though, the more Cassius realized the

---

<sup>18</sup> Cousar, *An Introduction*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, *Witnesses*, 4.3.4.

change that would occur in his life if he truly accepted Jesus' implicit message. Keeping the Torah was not enough anymore. The Torah could only train Cassius in the way that Jesus wanted him to go.<sup>20</sup> Following the Torah only initiated the inner change that Cassius needed to experience, that of believing in Christ's power, **and then acting on it, like the centurion.**

The Matthean scribe included the story about the centurion **because he wanted to show that Jesus cared about the Gentiles.** Antioch was a city teeming with both Jews, and Gentiles – Romans, Syrians, and Greeks. The Jews would have been rather hesitant to include the other groups **in their own religion**, even after they had become Christians. Including this story would have helped the Matthean scribe drive his point home that now there is no Jew or Greek, only individuals loved by God.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Gospel according to Matthew is an entire book devoted to showing how the Torah was meant to demonstrate the proper way for relating with one another. The Torah was meant to help the Jews practice love the way God loved, the way that God was love. Jesus was calling all his followers to a **“greater righteousness”**, one more involved than keeping the letter of the law.<sup>22</sup> The story of the centurion **proves that merely keeping the law is no longer sufficient for salvation.** Greater righteousness, greater faith, is needed. The Matthean scribe included this particular story, then, to support his argument that Jesus was opening up the doors to everyone, providing each human with the opportunity for salvation. Furthermore, the scribe was demonstrating that following the law was insufficient for salvation, and that this new opportunity required faith in Jesus. Cassius had to have the faith like a centurion, a faith strong enough to believe that Jesus could do all he said he could do.

Cassius would be impacted by the reading of this passage by treating others with a greater kindness. He realized that having a strong faith in Jesus would spill over into the rest of

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.6.5.

<sup>21</sup> Biblegateway, *Roman Experience*.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Witnesses*, 4.6.2.

his life. That is to say, he understood that the greater faith that Jesus required of his followers would lead to a greater representation of Jesus within himself. Believing in the all-powerful nature of Christ would enable Cassius to trust that Jesus cared about his troubles, such as when those traders would swindle Cassius out of a fair trade for his fish. What could Cassius do when they used false scales to weigh the coins and barter for his goods? If he upset them, he would lose his customers. In this situation, however, Cassius realized now that he could turn the other cheek.<sup>23</sup> He had to remember that Jesus cared for even these Roman merchants. He now believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the true son of God that had been spoken of by the prophets. Jesus rescued him from his sin. He had to show others that they could experience the same salvation. Just like the centurion believed Jesus could heal, so Cassius believed that Jesus would give him strength, courage, and kindness toward these Romans. Perhaps in so doing, he could win them over.

### **Transformation: The Third Level**

Since scripture is God-breathed, and useful for teaching, rebuking, and correcting, a contemporary audience can also be transformed by the reading of God's word.<sup>24</sup> For myself, I am both like and unlike the previous two characters who have been impacted by the story of the centurion's faith. First of all, I am a Gentile, not a Jew, and therefore do not have that cultural heritage of being part of a specific nation called by God to represent God's covenant to all humankind. I am more open to the idea that God has come to save all nations, because I am part of one of those nations who were once far off but have now been called near to God through the blood of Christ.<sup>25</sup> However, I still sometimes think that God should not extend his mercy and

---

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 5:39.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>25</sup> Ephesians 2:13

grace to various people, such as murderers, adulterers, or pornography addicts. The truth of the matter, as we can see from this passage in Matthew, is that God has extended his grace to all people, and some who think they are deserving may not enter the kingdom of heaven, while others, “more terrible sinners”, will be able to enter the kingdom through a change of heart and a faith in Jesus Christ. If they truly believe that Christ has covered their sins, grievous though I may think they may be, God will still see fit to restore a relationship with them. And others, if they are not careful, may end up banished from the kingdom even though they carried out good works.

In the end, I am transformed by this passage in a profound way. Like the early church characters, I come away from hearing about the centurion with two specific changes. First of all, I will seek to be more open to all sorts of people, regardless of whether I may think them worthy of God’s love or not. God’s mission, to seek and save fallen humanity, includes everyone, and I cannot decide who should be saved.<sup>26</sup> Second, I am reminded that status or **good works have nothing to do with salvation**. I will seek to be more faithful in my relationship with God, to truly believe, like the centurion, that whatever God says, that he will do. This mindset will be a powerful life-transformer, in that I will no longer be relying on my own strength, but on God’s, and he will come through every time. In these two things, greater kindness and greater faith, I am like the two characters from history. Like Elizabeth who befriended her Roman neighbour, I will make more of an effort to reach out to those who are near to me, but who I previously thought were beneath me, or too different from me to interact with. In this way, I will mirror Jesus’ love toward the centurion. Like Cassius, when times are tough, when I am poor, or have

---

<sup>26</sup> I am reminded of a Casting Crowns song, *If We Are the Body*, where they sing, “Jesus paid much too high a price for us to pick and choose who should come.” (Sony Imports, 2003).

been taken advantage of at work, I will take the high road, and believe that Jesus can reach into my situation and save me, if I but ask him to help.

## **Conclusion**

The story about the faith of the centurion highlights the need for faith in Christ. By faith alone we will be saved. Jesus praised the faith of the centurion above the works of the law-abiding Jews. The Matthean scribe underlined the fact that Jesus was calling both Jews and Gentiles alike to a greater righteousness, a life-changing transformation that would occur only through faith in Christ. Today, we can experience the same transformation if we believe in Jesus and his atoning work, and pass this message onto others. If we give our faith room to go past simple “head” knowledge and become life-altering “heart” knowledge, we will draw closer to God, as Jesus said we would.

**A**

**Excellent work. You have assimilated the course material and your secondary reading very well. You show a strong sense of how a “transformational” approach to interpretation works. To continue developing your skills, focus on the middle part of the interpretive process (describing in detail *what* is said). If you focus a bit more on analyzing the details of the passage (language, emphasis, etc.) you’ll find it even easier to decide what kind of change the writer wants to provoke. Keep it up!**

## Bibliography

- BibleGateway. *A Roman Exception*. Found online at:  
 <<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/index.php?action=getCommentaryText&cid=1&source=1&seq=i.47.8.4>>. Accessed April 12, 2009.
- Casting Crowns. *If We Are the Body*. Sony Imports, 2003.
- Clarke, Howard. *The Gospel of Matthew and its Readers*. Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 2003.
- Cousar, Charles B. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God's New Work*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- Ewing, W. *Capernaum*. Found online at: <<http://bibleatlas.org/capernaum.htm>>. Accessed April 12, 2009.
- France, R. T. "Faith." Pages 223-226 In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Edited by Green, Joel B., Scott McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992.
- Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Chap. VIII: Christ Heals the Centurion's Servant*. Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. 5 (Matthew to John). Found online at:  
 <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc5.Matt.ix.html>>. Accessed April 14, 2009.
- NIV Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Saddington, D.B. "The Centurion in Matthew 8:5-13: Consideration of the Proposal of Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., and Tat-Siong Benny Liew." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 1 (2006): 140-142.
- Scott, Ian. *Witnesses of Hope: A Pathway into the New Testament*. Found online at:  
 <<http://www.tyndale.ca/~iscott/WitnessesOfHope/index.php?chapter=5&section=1>>. Accessed April 13, 2009.
- Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Loyal*. Wheaton, Illinois: SP Publications, 1980.