

## **Jesus Heals a Servant and Others**

**Matthew 8:5-17; Mark 1:29-34; Luke 4:38-41, 7:1-10**

When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

And when Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.” (English Standard Version – ESV)

\* Note: In the account from Luke 7:1-10, the centurion does not address Jesus directly, but first sends elders on his behalf (v. 3). Then, when Jesus approaches the house, the centurion sends friends to Jesus on his behalf (v. 6).

### **Background:**

- The nearest legion of Roman troops was stationed in Syria. Capernaum, as a customs post, would naturally have warranted at least some soldiers. Centurions commanded a “century” (100), but in practice this consisted of 60 to 80 troops, not 100. They were the backbone of the Roman army, in charge of discipline.
- During their twenty or so years of service in the Roman army, soldiers were not permitted to marry. Many had illegal local concubines. It was an arrangement that the army overlooked and the concubines found profitable. However, centurions, who might be moved more frequently, would be less likely to have such informal families than most soldiers. Centurions were paid much better than lower-ranking troops. Servants were too expensive for common soldiers.
- Jesus’ response, “I will come and heal him,” can be read as a question (“Shall I come and heal him?”) rather than a statement. If one reads it as a statement, it shows that Jesus is willing to cross a cultural boundary, because Jews did not usually enter Gentile homes (Acts 10:27-29).
- The centurion, who knows that Jewish people rarely entered Gentile homes, concedes Jesus’ special mission to Israel (see 15:27). At the same time, he expresses great faith, for among all the stories (both true and spurious) of healing miracles in antiquity; long-distance healings were rare and considered especially extraordinary.

- The centurion's response demonstrates that he (backed by Rome's authority) understands the principle of authority that Jesus exercises. Roman soldiers were very disciplined and (except in times of mutiny) followed orders explicitly.

- Verse 11 reflects the standard Jewish image of the future banquet in God's kingdom. Although the Bible declared that it was for all people (Isaiah 25:6, 56:3-8), Jewish literature by this period emphasized that it was prepared for Israel, who would be exalted over its enemies. People were seated at banquets according to rank. They sat at regular meals, but reclined (as indicated here) at feasts. Table fellowship signified intimacy, so fellowship with the great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was thought to represent a future hope for the Jewish people, not for Gentiles, with whom Jewish people did not eat.

- The "rightful" heirs (v. 12) are cast out; other Jewish texts used outer darkness to describe hell, often where evil spirits were imprisoned. The gnashing of teeth may allude to Psalm 112:10.

- Some Jewish stories circulated about miracle workers, but reports of long-distance healings were rare and regarded as extraordinary; therefore, this healing would be viewed as miraculous.

- Archaeologists have found what is thought to be this home (v. 14) in a site near the synagogue. Adult children were expected to care for their aged parents.

- Some religious men refrained from touching women in general to avoid any possibility of becoming unclean, unless they had means by which they could ascertain their status (based on Leviticus 15:19). That Peter's mother-in-law was able to "serve" them at table, a common womanly role in antiquity (cf. Luke 10:40), indicates the extent to which she was truly healed.

- Exorcists often used magical incantations and sought to manipulate higher spirits into helping them drive out lower ones; in contrast, Jesus simply drives out spirits "with a word."

- In context, Isaiah 53:4-6 emphasizes particularly healing from the ravages of sin, as some other Christian writers noted (1 Peter 2:24-25). But given Isaiah's emphasis on physical restoration in the messianic era (35:5-6), and the connection between physical and spiritual healing in Jewish tradition (33:24), it makes sense that Matthew also finds the nuance of physical healing here: Jesus inaugurates the messianic era, making some benefits available in advance of the cross.

### **Questions:**

- + What impresses you most about the Roman centurion's request, and why?  
Why might the centurion have felt unworthy for Jesus to come into his home?  
Would you feel unworthy for Jesus to come into your home? Why or why not?  
How does your faith compare with that of the centurion? What will increase your faith?
- + Peter's mother-in-law served Jesus after He healed her. How can you serve Him today?  
Matt. 8:16 says that Jesus "healed all who were sick." Why doesn't He heal all today?  
How does the prophecy, "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases," apply to you?