

THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

Just One Word

The authority of Christ and the faith that recognizes it

The centurion did not admire a miracle. He recognized the King.

Matthew 8:5-13

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Scripture — Matthew 8:5-13

And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him, and saying: "Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented." And Jesus saith unto him: "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered and said: "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it." When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed: "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And Jesus said unto the centurion: "Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee." And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.

Free translation for study purposes — check against your preferred Bible version.

Historical Context

Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, was a garrison and customs town on the Via Maris, the trade route linking Egypt to Mesopotamia. A centurion stationed there nominally commanded a hundred soldiers — but in early first-century Galilee, under the rule of Herod Antipas, this officer probably did not serve in a proper Roman legion, but rather in an auxiliary force trained along Roman lines, in the service of the tetrarch. Even so, the command structure was genuinely Roman: a rigid chain of orders in which every link obeys the one above and is obeyed by the one below. It is precisely this architecture of delegated authority — not military force itself — that the centurion brings to the center of his dialogue with Jesus. He does not ask for a miracle because he understands illness; he recognizes an authority because he understands command.

Cultural Context

A Jewish rabbi who crossed the threshold of a Gentile's house exposed himself, in the eyes of ceremonial law as interpreted by many teachers of the time, to a form of ritual impurity. The parallel account in Luke 7 shows Jewish elders interceding for the centurion before Jesus, arguing that he "loveth our nation, and hath built us a synagogue" — a Gentile benefactor, but a Gentile still. It is within this tension that the centurion's response gains its weight: he interrupts Jesus's own offer ("I will come") in order to spare him the embarrassment of entering a Gentile's house. In a Roman world structured around honor and status, where a centurion held a position of unquestionable authority over his soldiers, his declaration "I am not worthy" is radically countercultural. He inverts the expected social hierarchy: the more authority he himself wields, the more clearly he perceives that he stands before Someone whose authority is not of the same order — it belongs to an entirely different category.

Theological Context

Matthew writes for a Jewish-Christian community, and his entire Gospel is structured around a single question: who is Jesus? Chapters 5 through 7 (the Sermon on the Mount) establish Christ's authority as the final interpreter of the Law ("But I say unto you..."). Chapter 8 moves from word to action, in a deliberate sequence of miracles that display this same authority over ever-widening domains: over ceremonial impurity (the leper, 8:1-4), over distance and a Gentile's body (the centurion's servant, 8:5-13), over sickness within a Jewish household (Peter's mother-in-law, 8:14-15), and, shortly after, over nature itself (the raging sea, 8:23-27). The account of the centurion occupies a strategic place in this progression: it is the first clear sign, in Matthew, that Christ's authority knows no ethnic boundary — anticipating, already in chapter 8, what will only be fully declared in chapter 28: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth... teach all nations."

Exposition

The scene opens with an ordinary request — a distressed foreign officer seeks help for a servant at the point of death. Jesus responds with immediate willingness:

"I will come and heal him." It is the centurion, not Jesus, who interrupts this natural course of events. His reply ("I am not worthy... speak the word only") is not a gesture of false modesty; it is a piece of theological reasoning condensed into two sentences. He explains his logic through the only category he knows well: "For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me." The argument is a *fortiori* — if a man *under* authority can move other men with a simple word, how much more can the One who is the source of all authority move sickness, distance, and the very body of the servant with a word alone. The centurion does not ask for a touch, a visit, a rite. He asks for a word — because he understood, before any disciple did at that moment, that he stood before Someone whose word does not describe reality: it governs it.

Jesus's reaction deserves special attention. The Greek verb behind "marvelled" (*ethaumasen*) appears only twice in the Gospels describing a reaction of Jesus himself: here, before the faith of a Gentile; and in Mark 6:6, before the unbelief of his own townspeople in Nazareth. Matthew deliberately builds a contrast: the greatest faith Jesus finds in his entire journey through Israel is not among the people of the covenant, but in a soldier of a pagan army. That is why the warning that follows — that many will come from the east and the west to the table of the kingdom, while "the children of the kingdom" will be cast out — is not a side note, but the very point of the narrative: ethnic and religious belonging, without faith that recognizes Christ's authority, guarantees no place whatsoever at the messianic banquet. The healing, when it finally comes, is almost a deliberate anticlimax: "Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And

his servant was healed in the selfsame hour." No journey. No touch. No distance
resists a word spoken by Christ.

Christ Revealed

The center of gravity of this text is not the remarkable faith of a centurion — it is the absolute authority of Christ, revealed precisely through that faith. If we finish the reading admiring how well the centurion "believed correctly," we miss the whole text: his faith is significant only because it points, with surgical precision, to who Christ truly is. He is not the hero of the scene. He is the only witness, in that moment, who saw the hero correctly.

And who is this Christ whose word is enough? Scripture had already been answering that question long before Matthew 8. In Genesis 1, God speaks, and what did not exist comes into existence: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" — the divine word does not describe, it creates. John 1 reveals that this same Word (the Logos) "was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us": Jesus of Nazareth is the creating Word of Genesis 1, now clothed in human flesh, eating, walking, hearing the request of a centurion. Colossians 1 declares that "by him were all things created... and he is before all things, and by him all things consist" — Christ not only created the universe; he sustains it at this very moment, including the cells of that sick servant's body. Hebrews 1 is even more direct: Christ "upholdeth all things by the word of his power." The same word that is enough to heal a paralytic at a distance is the word that holds the atoms of the cosmos together.

It is this identity — not the centurion's religious enthusiasm — that explains why a single sentence is enough. Matthew does not leave this revelation confined to an isolated episode: the recognition that begins, embryonic, on the lips of a Gentile in Matthew 8 matures in Peter's confession in Matthew 16 ("Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God") and reaches its full declaration on the lips

of the risen Christ himself, in Matthew 28: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." The centurion did not know he was anticipating the Great Commission; he knew only that, before that man, a word was enough. And Scripture ends exactly where this authority reaches its final manifestation: Revelation 19 shows Christ mounted on a white horse, with the name "King of kings, and Lord of lords" written on his vesture, striking the nations with the sword that comes out of his mouth — once again, the word as an instrument of absolute dominion. From the word that creates (Genesis 1) to the Word that becomes flesh (John 1), from the Word that sustains the universe (Colossians 1; Hebrews 1) to the word recognized by a Gentile soldier (Matthew 8) and confessed by a disciple (Matthew 16), all the way to the Word that returns as conquering King (Revelation 19) — it is always the same Person, always the same authority, from the beginning to the end of Scripture. The centurion invented nothing new. He merely saw, in a flash of faith, what the whole Bible had already been saying: Christ is worthy of absolute trust because absolute authority belongs to him. If this study ends with you admiring the faith of a Roman centurion, it has failed. It ends well only when you close the page worshiping the One to whom it was enough to speak a single word.

Cross References

Genesis 1:3 — The word of God creates what did not exist — the pattern that repeats in Matthew 8.

John 1:1-14 — The Word who was with God and was God became flesh: the same creating Word, now incarnate.

Colossians 1:15-17 — By him all things were created, and by him all things consist — Christ sustains the universe at this very moment.

Hebrews 1:1-3 — Christ upholds all things by the word of his power.

Matthew 16:13-18 — Peter's confession matures the embryonic recognition of the centurion.

Matthew 28:18-20 — "All power is given unto me" — the full declaration of what the centurion already sensed.

Revelation 19:11-16 — Christ, King of kings, strikes the nations with the sword that comes out of his mouth — the word as consummated authority.

Applications

The question this text raises is not "do you have enough faith?" but "on what, exactly, is your faith resting?" The centurion did not trust in his own capacity to believe; he trusted in the authority of Christ, and that trust was so solid that it dispensed with visible proof. This confronts two opposite temptations: demanding signs before trusting the word of Christ revealed in Scripture, and treating religious belonging — being inside the church, growing up in a Christian home, knowing the right doctrine — as a substitute for a real faith that rests personally on that authority. The "children of the kingdom" in the text had every correct credential, and still they were left outside. The application is not "try harder to believe like the centurion," but "examine what, in fact, your confidence is resting on when God's answer to your prayer has not yet arrived visibly."

Reflection Questions

1. What did this text reveal about Christ?
2. What did this text reveal about me?
3. Does my life demonstrate that I truly believe in the authority of Christ, or do I, in practice, live as though I govern my own story?
4. In what areas do I still demand to see in order to believe, instead of trusting the word of Christ alone?
5. What would change today if I truly believed that Christ holds all authority in heaven and on earth?

Spiritual Journal

Today God revealed...

What did I learn about Christ?

What do I need to surrender to the Lord?

How did this text confront my heart?

Write a prayer.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, the centurion did not need to see you enter his house to trust your word — and I, so often, demand to see before I believe. You are the One by whom all things were made and in whom all things consist; one word from you is enough. Forgive my small faith and my trust in my own categories of control. Teach me to say, as he said: speak the word only. Reign over every area of my story that I still insist on governing myself. Amen.

Further Reading

Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke — John Calvin

The Holiness of God — R. C. Sproul

Knowing God — J. I. Packer