

Jesus Talks To A Soldier • Matthew 8:5–13

Something of an era ended in March of 1992 when Johnny Carson retired from his slot as host of the Tonight Show after what seemed like forever. He gave his final show, not on prime time as the network had requested, but at the usual time slot. I recall that the last show of his long and successful career followed pretty much the format he's followed throughout all the other shows, night after night, year after year. It's a format that he inherited from Jack Parr before him on the Tonight Show, and that he has passed along to Jay Leno, David Letterman and others who are late night show hosts and hostesses. That was, to begin with a monologue. He came out and stood on a star imbedded in the stage and he spoke for ten or twelve minutes, always without commercial interruption. Then there was a break and he moved from the monologue to a dialogue with various guests. He interviewed them and interacted with them throughout the show, and then it ended. Well, actually I don't know how it ended, because I've never stayed up that long! But I suppose it ended with an epilogue.

Pretend we're doing something of a rerun of a show that took place almost 2,000 years ago. But it's not the Yesterday Show. I suppose if you were to take the flavor of the name from the Tonight Show you would name it the Forever Show. The host is Jesus and on this particular show his special guest was a Roman Centurion whose name was never announced.

A Centurion was a non-commissioned officer in the Roman army. The Roman army was divided into legions, with 6,000 soldiers in each, and legions were subdivided into centuries of 100 men each. Over each century was a centurion. It was a career position and history says they were very good at what they did. In wars they led the men into battle rather than retreat to some command post. They were courageous, willing to lay down their lives. In peace time they were responsible for the discipline, training and morale of the Roman soldiers.

Centurions were good men, the stalwarts, the backbone, not only of the army but of much of the structure of the Roman Empire. In fact, you find several Centurions mentioned in the New Testament. At Calvary it was a Centurion who stood by

the cross when Jesus died and looked into his face after his death and said, "Surely this man was the Son of God." A few pages later in the New Testament it was a Centurion named Cornelius, who was the first gentile to become a Christian. You flip some more pages to the biography of Saint Paul and you find him repeatedly in one dilemma after another. He is being chased, his life is being threatened, he's arrested and he's being hauled off to Rome for an appeal to Caesar. Often he was rescued by Roman Centurions. They were good men.

As you read those stories you discover that, without exception, the New Testament reports the stories of these Centurions positively and with honor. But understand also, that Centurions were Gentiles. Ancient Jews didn't like Gentiles, especially Romans, and especially soldiers, for the Roman armies had conquered the land that God had given to their ancestors before them. No practicing, religious Jew would ever step inside a Gentile's house. Especially a Rabbi. It was against the law. Not only that, but in most cases, truly devout Jews would not even speak to a Gentile.

And so Jesus' guest on our show is frankly something of a surprise. It borders on amazing, that Jesus, the Rabbi, conversed with him as he did. The transcript is worth reading. It's found in Matthew 8:5-13.

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a Centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."

Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

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. 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."

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you

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

Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that very hour.

The Forever Show started with a dialogue. The Centurion was concerned about a servant of his who was paralyzed and in pain. Let’s call this servant what he really is — a slave, same Greek word. He was a slave at a time when slavery was common, although we sometimes forget that slavery takes place today, as well.

Slavery is an inhumane and immoral practice where one human being owns another. It was especially despicable in ancient times. Under Roman Law a slave owner or master could do absolutely anything to a slave. A slave was considered to be a piece of property. You could rape a slave. You could torture a slave. You could sell a slave. You could work a slave to death. As long as it was your slave, it didn’t make any difference. You could do anything at all. The extent of the cruelty in some cases was unbelievable.

But apparently this Centurion was different. He cared. He had compassion for someone that typically no one had compassion for. I’m sure that he would feel uncomfortable if he heard me use the word love, but I think he loved this slave and was willing to do something quite humbling. As a Roman officer and a Gentile he was willing to go to a Jew, a Rabbi, and to state his case and seek help. What would the other officers think? What about the 100 men under his command? If they heard about it, they might consider him something of a despicable person for condescending to deal with the Jews of the land. They might refuse to obey his orders because of it. He set all that aside because of compassion, because of conviction — because he cared.

He went to Jesus and said, “Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.” Interesting that he did not ask Jesus to heal him. He simply stated the need. Jesus’ response may not be quite as it appears in our Bibles. Let me explain.

The New Testament was written in ancient Greek where there were no spaces between either the letters or the words and they used no punctua-

tion marks whatsoever. If you imagine trying to read English that way, it is difficult. But the one thing that they do have in Greek that we don’t have in English is a way of showing where the speaker put the emphasis in a statement. The language here shows that Jesus put his emphasis on the **I**. He said, “**I** will go and heal him.” But the next line says, “The Centurion replied,” which indicates that Jesus must have asked some type of question. Apparently what Jesus said was, “I will go and heal him?” In other words, Jesus was asking, “Are you, a Gentile, a non-Jew, a Roman soldier — are you asking me, a Jew, a Rabbi, to come to your house to heal a sick slave? I mean, isn’t that a little much, since we Jews and Gentiles hardly have anything to do with each other? Besides, it’s against my law to talk to you or come to your home.” In a sense, it was a test of this soldier’s real stuff.

The Centurion came back with an amazing answer. “Lord, I don’t deserve to have you come under my roof. Let me tell you how I see things. When I say a word, something happens, I’m obeyed. I can say to one of my men, ‘Go,’ and he goes. To another one, ‘Hey, come here’ and he comes. I can say to one of my slaves, ‘Do this’ and he does it. So, you can just speak a word and my servant will be healed.”

He was using an analogy to communicate his conviction that all was under the authority of Jesus -- absolutely everything. He believed that when Jesus spoke, all must obey. He believed that everything was subject to Jesus’ authority. How many people believe that? He believed that the sick could be made well. He believed that marriages were under the authority of Jesus. He believed that Jesus had the ultimate control over the politics of the empire. He was convinced that religious matters and matters of economics, of employment and unemployment, that outcomes of battles, that every single detail, all things in life are under the authority of this Jesus.

Several years ago there was a best selling book by Hal Kushner with the intriguing title, *Why Bad Things Happen To Good People*. It’s an interesting book and has many fine things in it. But Mr. Kushner comes to the conclusion that there is a good God and that there are terrible things and God would do something about them if he could, but he can’t.

This Centurion would vehemently disagree with that view. He would say that Jesus could do anything. Every detail of our lives, the things that trouble us, the things we get stressed out over, everything is under the authority of Jesus. Which

means that Jesus need only speak a word and that sick servant would be healed. It is not necessary for Jesus to go see him or to touch him. He just has to say it and it will happen. For after all, the Centurion must have thought, this Jesus was God.

The story tells us that Jesus was astonished at the Centurion's words. This guy really understood how it works! A lot of people spend their whole lives trying to figure out how the world works and Jesus is saying, this guy figured it out! Most people drift and struggle through life trying to put all the pieces together, but never do.

Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." He would have expected it to be the other way around. This guy was from a pagan religious and cultural tradition. He should have been the last person to figure out what makes the universe work, but he understood. He understood things that those who were religious did not understand.

Life is full of such surprises. For example, research shows that in our society, the less money people have, the higher percentage of their income that they give either to God or to charity and that the more money people have, the lower the percentage they give. You would think it would be the other way around. Another surprise is that some of the greatest stories of faith in God and stories of the biggest miracles happening today are in Africa or Latin America and parts of Asia. You would think they'd come out of Europe where the Bible has been taught and the Church has been established for centuries. When is the last time you have heard a great story of faith coming out of Europe? It is comparatively rare. Likewise, there are people who have grown up in Christian homes, go to Sunday School, to church camps and confirmation and they never get it, they never understand what makes life work or how God operates. Then along comes somebody with none of that background, none of that tradition, none of that teaching and they see it. They understand it and their lives are transformed and are completely different.

Jesus was saying, it was an astonishing thing for a Roman soldier to have more faith in Jesus than any Jew in Israel. After that dialogue with the Centurion, Jesus switched to a monologue where he taught a powerful and profound truth to his disciples.

He began by teaching that faith is the thing that counts. Faith is really the key to understanding both life and eternity. At that time the Jewish people

thought of heaven as a huge feast. God would be the host at the head table and the patriarchs of the Hebrew nation, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be seated with him. They also taught that the only people who were invited to that feast and to heaven were Jews and everybody else was left out.

Those of you who are old enough to remember the Vietnam War will recall the evacuation of Saigon. There had been an American presence there for a lot of years and when there was a negotiated withdrawal, everybody had to be taken out of the capital city of South Vietnam within just a few days. On television there were daily reports of the wild and mad scramble of people trying to get out of Saigon before the Communist takeover. I remember vividly the scenes from the last day. The final evacuations were by helicopter from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Around the perimeter there were Marine guards closing in with automatic weapons, threatening to shoot anyone who was not an American or related to an American who tried to get out of the country by means of those helicopters. A news crew on one of the helicopters recorded the scene as the last people boarded the final helicopter. As it started to take off from the roof of the embassy, South Vietnamese nationals crashed through the perimeter and screamed and pleaded for a place on board. They reached up and tried to grab the runners of the helicopter, but they were left behind.

That was the way most Jews figured heaven would be. Jews were included and everybody else

was left behind to scream, weep and gnash their teeth. But Jesus taught a completely

different truth. He said that at the banquet table that is called heaven, there will be people from everywhere. "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." He was saying that heaven would be loaded with people from the east: from Iran, Iraq, Persia, India, China and Japan. And from the west: from throughout the Roman Empire and across Europe and Africa. There will be millions of people who are not Jews who will be included, eventually stretching all the way to the then unknown western hemisphere that we call the Americas. Millions and millions will be at God's banquet table — not because they are Jews or Gentiles or black or brown or white or yellow, but the determining factor is faith. Faith in Jesus Christ.

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That is very good news. It's very good news for any of us who are not Jewish, for otherwise we would be counted among the excluded. There is something important here. Jesus is teaching that the basis for getting into heaven is faith — nothing else. One must believe that Jesus Christ has authority over all of life. He has the authority to forgive sin and he alone has the authority to grant a guaranteed place in heaven.

That was a stunning teaching for those ancient people. Then he stunned them even more by adding that some who were Jews, who thought they had a guaranteed place, would be excluded if they lacked faith. "But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." You see, it was a common thing in those days to believe that just because of your background, heaven was a sure thing for you. Jesus was saying that is not so. No faith, no heaven.

It's a common thing today for people to think they are guaranteed a place in heaven because of their background. When you ask people if they expect to go to heaven, they say, "Sure, I'm a Catholic, I'm a Baptist or a Presbyterian."

The Minneapolis Star and Tribune published an interesting survey. They asked Minnesotans what their religious background is. It was an unprompted survey, which means you aren't offered choices, you just make up whatever your own answer is. When asked their religious background, 90% of Minnesotans gave an unprompted response identifying with a denomination. Unfortunately there are many, I suppose, of that number who think that because they belong to some denomination or because they've been baptized that they're going to heaven. And they are wrong. It is because of faith.

Many of us work in companies that have central computer systems. One of the things you do when you get to the office in the morning is to log on to the system. You sit at the keyboard and usually you have to enter your name and a password. You've got to spell your name right and get the password exactly right. It can't be off even one letter, otherwise there is no access.

Jesus is telling us to think of heaven pretty much the same way. To get into heaven we must state our name and the password and no other password will work. The password is "faith." It can't be just any faith, it must be faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and as Lord. When Jesus first taught this, some of those people must have been absolutely shocked. They had never heard anything like this before. It meant

they were flirting with eternal death as a result.

Maybe you're shocked too. You need to get it straight, as it could not be more important. Access to heaven is only by faith in Jesus Christ. It's a faith that needs to be registered in advance. We must tell God that we have faith in his Son, so that the record is there before we arrive. Let me suggest if you've never done that, or have any doubts, don't even wait until you finish reading. Tell God right now that you believe that Jesus Christ has all authority over every detail of all of life and that you have faith in him for forgiveness of sin and for heaven some day.

The story ends with a wonderful epilogue. Jesus tells the Centurion with faith that his request has been granted, that Jesus has already made the sick servant well. So the guy goes back home again and finds the servant healed. He asks what time he had recovered and confirms that it was the same hour that Jesus spoke the word. There was no doubt in his mind that Jesus was the one who had done it.

Which, of course, raises for us the question, will that always work? If there is somebody sick at my house and I go to Jesus can he from the distance of heaven speak a word and if my faith is good enough a guaranteed healing will take place? No, that is not the guarantee. The guarantee is that when we have this confidence, this trust, this faith in Jesus Christ that it will always show results. Jesus, even now from the distance of heaven, always makes a significant difference in the lives of those with faith.

In conclusion, let me ask you one more time, do you have faith in Jesus Christ? May your answer be, "yes." And may your place in heaven be secure.

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