

Matthew 8:5-13

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Matthew gives his second account of a specific miracle of Jesus. Jesus heals the servant of a Roman centurion of great faith. Jesus marvels at this centurion's faith and makes an important and stunning point to His disciples: Gentiles who have faith will participate in the kingdom of heaven alongside the patriarchs, while the sons of the kingdom who lack faith will lose rewards, and be excluded from being honored.

The parallel Gospel account of this event is found in Luke 7:1-10. A parallel teaching can also be found in Luke 13:28-29.

After Jesus healed the leper, he *entered* the city of *Capernaum*. *Capernaum* is located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was where Jesus first began His ministry after relocating from Nazareth (Matthew 4:13) and it was where He called John, James, Peter, and Andrew to be His disciples (Matthew 4:18-22).

When he was in Capernaum a Roman centurion came to Him. A centurion was a Roman military officer who had authority over one hundred soldiers. As a Roman, he was a Gentile. And as a Roman soldier in Judea, he was there to maintain Roman power over the Jews. From the perspective of many Jews, Roman centurions were the very enemy that they expected the Messiah would come to overthrow.

This particular *centurion* had heard of Jesus's miraculous power and had sought *Him* out, *imploring Him* with an urgent request, *Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented*. The Roman *centurion* addresses *Jesus* (his Jewish subject) with a title of respect—*Lord*. The centurion's request is not directly for his own benefit, but for that of his *servant*. The fact that *the centurion* would set aside his busy affairs to travel to *Capernaum*, most likely from a Decapolis city five or more miles away, for the sake of his *servant* shows a remarkable degree of love for the *servant*.

The *servant is paralyzed* but he is not merely unable to move. He *is also fearfully tormented*, perhaps suffering from a neurological disorder that also caused spasms. The *servant* is in such bad shape that he is unable to travel or even be brought to Jesus for healing. He *is lying paralyzed at home*.

Jesus responds to the Centurion—I will come and heal him. Christ is willing to instantly drop and leave all that He was doing in *Capernaum* to heal a Pagan enemy's servant. *Jesus* shows that He practices what He preaches. He is willing to go the extra mile (Matthew 5:41). He loves His enemies (Matthew 5:43), and He greets those who are not His Jewish brothers (Matthew 5:47). He also shows He would be willing to enter the house of a Gentile.

But the Centurion counters with an astonishing reply, *Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed*. He confesses that he, a

Gentile of considerable power and position, is *not worthy for Jesus*, a Jewish Rabbi, to enter his house. This is a stunning statement of humility. *The centurion* follows this up with an equally stunning declaration of *faith*. *But just say the word, and my servant will be healed*. This *centurion* has *such great faith* in *Jesus* that he is not only convinced that He has the power to heal his *servant*, he also believes that *Jesus* does not even need to be present to make this happen. *Just say the word, and my servant will be healed*.

The centurion goes onto explain, *For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me*. As a Roman military officer *the centurion* understood how *authority* worked. He was *a man under the authority* of his superiors, and he had a hundred *soldiers* who were *under his command*. *The centurion* had a lot of people and responsibilities to manage. He understood that he could not do it all himself, but he could give orders and he knew that his orders would be followed. *I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it*. The *centurion* reasoned that just as his word carried his authority to his soldiers, so too *Jesus's word* had the supernatural *authority to heal* wherever His word went, so long as it came from Him.

Jesus was impressed. *Now when he heard this, He marveled*. He turned to His Jewish followers and made an example of the *centurion's* amazing *faith*. *Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel*. This *Roman centurion*, this pagan Gentile, this despised enemy of the Jews had greater *faith* than all of them. His *faith* put theirs to shame. By highlighting this fact, *Jesus* was calling His disciples to have this kind of *faith*, and not only greeting this Gentile, but elevating and praising him.

Before continuing, *Jesus* repeats the self-reference to His own *authority, I say to you*. To give their statements greater credibility, Jewish rabbis would ground what they taught in the teachings of learned rabbis in the past. They would begin "Rabbi so-and-so taught..." Citing the authority of former rabbis was a way of giving teachers greater authority for what they were about to teach. *Jesus* did not teach like this. He simply appealed to the Highest authority there was, which was Himself, which is why He often began His remarks with the phrase *I say to you*.

Jesus then teaches *that in the kingdom of heaven many Gentiles will come from east and west*. Gentiles from the *east* might include Syrians, Arabs, and Persians. Gentiles from the *west* would include Romans. This might be shocking enough, that the *kingdom of heaven* would include the likes of a Roman *centurion*.

But even more surprisingly, some of these Gentiles would *recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven*. *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob* are the founding patriarchs of *Israel*—the ones whom God made His covenant with, from whom He would make a *great* nation. If the patriarchs are present at this future banquet, they will surely sit at the table of honor. *Jesus* is telling the Jewish disciples, *those who were following Him*, that Gentiles (like this *centurion*) who have *great faith*, will share honor on the same level of *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*.

Gentiles from *east and west* will participate in the *kingdom of heaven* and *recline at the table* and celebrate, rest, and serve at the *table* of the Patriarchs. Such a notion would have been

unfathomable for most Jews. To *recline at the table* with the most honorable of all Israelites would be reserved for only the guests of highest honor.

But Jesus continues with what would likely have been an even more unsettling thought for His Jewish audience: *but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness*. In other words, while faithful Gentiles are honored in the *kingdom of heaven* because of their *great faith*, there will be Jews who are *sons of the kingdom* who *will be cast out into the outer darkness* for their lack of *faith*. This might be an illustration of Jesus' statement later in Matthew: "So the last shall be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16).

Jesus uses a definitive term to describe those who *will be cast out into the outer darkness*. He refers to them as *the sons of the kingdom*. We know that the *sons of the kingdom* represent believers. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 13. His disciples come to Him in private and ask Him to explain the parable of the wheat and the tares. Jesus explains:

"And He said, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one;'"
(Matthew 13:37-38).

Jesus makes clear that the *sons of the kingdom* are the "good seed", as contrasted with the "sons of the evil one." What then would Jesus's listeners, *those who were following Him*, have understood about believers, the good seeds, the *sons of the kingdom*, being *cast out into the outer darkness*?

The picture Jesus has painted is of the guests of honor *reclining at table*, at a time of day where there is *outer darkness*, so it seems an ancient near-eastern banquet dinner is what He is describing. It is nighttime, after the temperature has cooled. At the center *table* are seated the guests of honor. The less important guests are in seats further from the center *table*. The further a guest was from the center *table*, the less honor they had. Also, the further from the center *table*, the less light there would be. Alas, it appears in this instance, some would not get to attend the banquet at all. They get no honor. They are *cast out* from attending the banquet. They don't even get to sit at a *table* on the outer ring of the banquet. Neither will they be allowed to stand in the fringe of light and eat some scraps. They will be *cast into the outer darkness*. This describes being excluded from the honor banquet altogether.

The contrast is clear. The Gentiles of great faith from *east and west* (like the centurion) are seated at the *table* of honor, basking in glory alongside the honorable *Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*, while *the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness*. Why? Because what is honored in the *kingdom of heaven* is people who exhibited *great faith*. Jesus is illustrating the point He made to *those who were following*, saying *Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel*. The point is that Gentiles like the centurion who had *great faith*, greater than *anyone in Israel*, will be seated at the center table with *Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*. At the same time, the *sons of the kingdom* who had not exhibited such great faith would be excluded from honor altogether. It is an extreme contrast driving home the point that faith is what is honored in Jesus's *kingdom of heaven*.

Would they care? After all, as *sons of the kingdom*, they will clearly participate in the *kingdom of heaven*. But when they are excluded from the banquet, they will be severely disappointed, to the point of mourning like they might at a funeral, by *weeping*. They will also express *gnashing of teeth*. The word translated *gnashing* is derived from a word also translated *gnashing* in Acts 7:54. After Stephen gives a rousing defense of the gospel, the Jews listening become enraged and “began gnashing their teeth at him.”

“Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.”

(Acts 7:54)

The phrase “cut to the quick” literally means “had their heart cut in half.” The men who began gnashing their teeth immediately stoned Stephen and killed him. The idea of *gnashing of teeth* indicates anger, lashing out, disappointment. Therefore, *weeping and gnashing of teeth* indicates sorrow, disappointment, and perhaps anger and resentment. In this case, it seems likely the *gnashing* would be at themselves, for not taking advantage of their opportunities.

The phrase *weeping and gnashing of teeth* occurs seven times in the NT, and in each case is used by Jesus referring to sorrow and disappointment experienced by those being judged.

In this instance, it is *sons of the kingdom* who experience sorrow and disappointment. They are sad because they are excluded from being honored in the *kingdom of heaven* for failing to live a life of faith during their life on earth. Instead of being near the center of the banquet, or at the table of honor with *Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*, they are *cast into the outer darkness*, meaning they are excluded from the banquet altogether. Jesus has been quite clear to this point that if you want a reward from Jesus, then you have to enter the kingdom by following the principles of the kingdom, and the commands of Jesus (Matthew 6:1; 7:13-14; 7:21). This approach to life takes faith; faith that God’s rewards will be superior to the rewards of the world (Hebrews 11:6). Faithful living requires going through the small gate and walking the narrow way (Matthew 7:14).

Jesus creates a stark contrast between the Gentiles from *east and west* who are being rewarded for their faith, and the *sons of the kingdom* who are *cast into outer darkness* to a *place* where there is *weeping and gnashing of teeth*. To the Jews in the group, this would turn the world on its head; Gentiles are being rewarded at the seat of honor while *sons of the kingdom* like them are *cast into outer darkness*. This extreme example makes the point: God will reward faith in the *kingdom of heaven* without partiality. Further, each believer will care greatly. The rewards will be for faith, and will apply to anyone, even Gentiles.

This is speaking of faith that pleases God. It is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:4). This is not speaking of the initial faith that made them *sons of the kingdom*. The word translated here as *sons* is also used in Matthew 1:23 and is translated “child”: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON.” To become a child of God only requires believing faith (John 3:14-16). It requires no actions.

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”

(John 1:12)

Every child or believer eternally belongs in God’s family. They cannot lose their status as God’s child (John 10:28-29, Romans 8:31-39). Whosoever believes in Jesus is born into everlasting life as God’s child (John 3:16) and they are eternally safe from all danger in the eternal Lake of Fire and their eternal future with God is eternally secure because of the work of Christ. They are children *of the kingdom*. This is a great comfort. Believers do not have to worry about where they will spend eternity after they die, because they have received this grace on account of *Jesus*, through their faith in Him and His sacrifice (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But while faith alone in Christ alone guarantees that we are safe from eternal damnation in the Lake of Fire, it does not guarantee that we will enter and receive our inheritance in the *kingdom of heaven*. We might be excluded from honor (*cast out into outer darkness*) and experience disappointment (*weeping and gnashing of teeth*). It takes obedient *faith* to win the reward of honor (Matthew 5:19-20, 7:13-14, 21; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; Philippians 3:7-14; 2 Timothy 2:10-13; Hebrews 10:35-12:17; James 2:14-26; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 2 Peter 1:4-12; Revelation 2:26, 3:21, 21:7; Romans 2:7).

Jesus warns that it is possible to be an eternal child of God and miss the reward of inheritance in His *kingdom*. *Jesus* warns that the *sons of the kingdom* who do not live by *faith*, *will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*. This is not a reference to eternal damnation in the “Lake of Fire.” That is reserved for those whose names are not written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:15), who never believed the promise of healing by grace through faith (John 3:14-16).

This is a reference to taking the wide gate that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). In this case the destruction is of the honor and rewards that could be gained through pleasing God with a life lived doing deeds of faith, like this *centurion*. *That place* is the opposite of the rewards banquet. Instead of the warm light of the banquet, there is darkness. Instead of Makarios (blessing), joy, and fulfillment, it is bitter and these *sons* (who lost their place and reward in the *kingdom*) *will weep and gnash their teeth* over the fact that they did not serve others as Christ called them to serve, having consequently lost their inheritance and reward. That is why Peter calls our *faith* in this life “precious” (1 Peter 1:7); because it is our only chance to know God by *faith* and receive the reward that comes from *faith*.

To the believers in Rome, Paul writes:

“But you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

(Romans 8:15-18)

When we believe in *Jesus*, we become children of God. This is irrevocable and eternal. We will live forever with Him. God is our inheritance, since we are “heirs of God” unconditionally (Romans 8:17 a). But to receive our inheritance as an heir of Christ in His *kingdom*, we must “suffer with Him” by living a life of *faith*, doing deeds of obedience from the heart. If we do, we are promised an incomparable and glorious reward in His *kingdom*, to be “fellow heirs with Christ” in reigning in His *kingdom* (Romans 8:17 b; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18). If we do not, we will be among *the sons of the kingdom* who *Jesus* tells His disciples *will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*.

After making this dramatic and important point, *Jesus said to the centurion, “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.”* Matthew informs his readers, *And the servant was healed that very moment. Jesus* completes the illustration of great rewards for faithfulness by granting the petition of the *centurion* just as he requested.

The order of these first two specific miracles recorded by Matthew is instructive. The healing of the *leper* might be an illustration of the gift of regeneration from our sins by grace through faith. The *leper* exhibited the same faith *Jesus* referenced in John 3:14-16, when He illustrates justifying faith by referring to Israel being asked to look upon the bronze snake lifted on a pole in order to be healed from snake venom. Similarly, *Jesus* said He would be lifted on a pole (cross) for all humanity to be healed of the venom of sin, the leprosy of sin. The *leper* believed, and was healed. Each person can similarly be healed from the penalty of sin. This is the great Gift of God, apart from deeds (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This is followed by the second specific miracle of the *centurion*, which *Jesus* uses to illustrate that believers will be rewarded for deeds. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10:

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

The key point *Jesus* drives home is that acting in faith will be the primary criteria for such rewards. It is quite encouraging. The *centurion* traveled over five miles to make a request on behalf of his *servant*. In the scheme of things, this is not an enormous deed, yet *Jesus* said it would be rewarded greatly because of the *centurion*’s faith. This indicates that each person has the opportunity for great rewards simply by living in faith, and serving others.

Biblical Text

8:5-13 And when *Jesus* entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, imploring Him, and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented.” *Jesus* said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” Now when *Jesus* heard this, He marveled and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom

of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.” And the servan