

## The faith of a pagan

The question is always asked who pleases God. Do only Christians please God? Are we saved by being a Christian or are we saved by faith? Is it possible that non-Christians can be pleasing to God by their faith yet Christians be not pleasing to God because of their faithlessness?

Matthew 8:5-13

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. <sup>6</sup> “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.

### 1) A Roman Centurion – a pagan

- At the time of Jesus Romans were pagans – they worshipped a pantheon of gods
  - Besides their own Roman gods and emperor worship, they quickly adopted the gods of the nations that they conquered
- The Romans were tolerant of other religions and allowed them to practice their faith freely, unless they disturbed public order and adhered to Roman rule
  - This is why the Jews could practice their religion under Roman rule without fear or trepidation
  - Of course, Jewish freedom fighters, such as the zealots, weren’t seen in a favourable light by the Romans as they sought to topple Roman rule over Israel at the time.
- The danger of a Roman Centurion believing in Jesus was the possibility of syncretism.
  - Syncretism is the merging of two religions to retain aspects of both
  - Hindus practice syncretism when they worship Mary
  - The ZCC practices syncretism when they include their traditional beliefs along with Christian beliefs
- This was the danger when the Centurion exercised faith in Jesus – was it genuine, or was it syncretism?

### 2) The Centurion’s faith

- The Centurion knew who Jesus was and knew what He could do
- Faith starts with believing and knowing who God is and what He can do
  - Hebrews 11:3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.
- He didn’t wait for Jesus to approach him. He approached Jesus
- Others who had faith to approach Jesus:
  - A leper approached Jesus and asked Him to cure him
  - A paralytic was lowered through a roof by his four friends to the feet of Jesus
  - A woman who had internal bleeding approached Jesus to be healed
- It takes an act of faith to come to Jesus to have your needs met
  - You have to believe that He is able to do more than you ask and imagine
  - You need the faith the size of a mustard seed i.e., small yet active faith that puts its full trust in God
- The Centurion was specific in what He wanted Jesus to do – heal his suffering paralyzed servant
- He knew where He stood in relation to Jesus and that He wasn’t worthy of the presence of Jesus and that whatever Jesus did was by grace and not by anything that he was and did.
  - His faith understood the authority of Jesus and that His mere word would have been enough to cure his servant

### 3) Jesus' amazement

- Matthew 8:10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.
  - The Greek word for "amazed" is *thaumazō* which means to admire or marvel at something.
  - It is also used in Mark 6: 6 in the negative sense where Jesus marvelled at the lack of faith of the people of His hometown where he couldn't do any miracles except heal a few people.
- However, the context of the Roman Centurion clearly demonstrates Jesus' admiration of his faith
  - I have never found anyone in Israel with such great faith.
  - Here Jesus was commending the faith of a pagan
- How could Jesus have commended the faith of a pagan?
  - Abraham was a pagan who believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness
  - Naaman the Syrian believed God and was healed of his leprosy. Jesus commended him too
- We were all basically pagans in our unbelief before we believed and were saved and were granted the gift of life in and through Jesus
  - Romans 3:23-25 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood —to be received by faith.
  - Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Jesus rewarded the Centurion for his faith by healing his servant
  - Matthew 8:13 Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.
- Jesus always rebuked the lack of faith and commended and rewarded acts of faith
  - Matthew 17:17-20 You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." <sup>18</sup> Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.  
<sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"  
<sup>20</sup> He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

### 4) The faithless subjects of the kingdom

- Jesus was rebuking the people of Israel as being an unbelieving and perverse generation
- In the story of the Roman Centurion He was saying that the pagans from the east and west will enter into the kingdom of heaven while the unbelieving subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- What He was saying that we need to enter by faith, live by faith, and end by faith
  - We cannot rely on our human ancestry to enter or remain in the kingdom
  - We can't say that we're saved because we were born in a Christian home and always attended church, or, in the case of Jesus' context, we were born a Jew so we're automatically saved.
  - Ancestry without faith merely makes us Christianised pagans who are religiously unsaved.
- Let us then learn from the Roman Centurion and put our faith and trust in Jesus – in who He is and what He can do