

July 20, 2008

I Kings 18:1, 41-46 / Matthew 17:14-21 / Luke 7:1-10

Luke (#28) - A Faith That Amazes Even Jesus!

Did you know there are only TWO PLACES in the whole New Testament where we are told that Jesus was "amazed" or "astonished" — and they BOTH have to do with faith.

The **FIRST** occurs in Mark 6:6 where we're told that Jesus was "amazed" (literally astonished) at the lack of faith exhibited by His friends and relatives in his own home town of Nazareth. It amazed Him that they who professed faith in the God of the Bible could have so little faith.

And the **ONLY OTHER OCCURANCE** is here in today's text where He is amazed at the centurion's faith, because He's been traveling all over Israel preaching and healing and doing miracles for a great numbers of people, and yet He's never seen (in all His travels) such great faith in any of the people of Israel — and that includes His very own disciples.

Here's a foreigner a Roman, a heathen raised in a polytheistic nation and he has more faith than any Jew Jesus has come across in all His travels through religious land of monotheistic Israel.

Yet, you know what? I've often found the same thing to be true. I've often met non-Christians (people who do not believe in Jesus) who've had more faith in God's power to heal and do miracles than some Christians I know! Not saving faith, but faith in God's awesome power.

It's true! And I scratch my head! Or like Jesus, I'm amazed, because if anything is the case we who know what the Bible says about God's mighty power should be the most convinced that He can do whatever He chooses to do! That NOTHING is impossible for Him! That NOTHING is too hard for Him!

So as I start out today, maybe the FIRST thing I could do is begin by asking everyone here: If Jesus were to come to our church today which response of amazement would He have? Would He be amazed in the Nazareth way or the centurion way? Would He be astonished by our lack of faith in His power to simply speak the word and have miracles happen, or would He be astonished because in all America He had not found such great faith in His power and authority as Lord to simply speak the word and have things happen?"

You see, this passage (just like last weeks passage) has to do with “LORDSHIP” — except for one little difference: **LAST WEEK** we looked at the issue of Lordship from the perspective of US NEEDING TO OBEY HIM, because as LORD He deserves our unquestioned obedience and submission to whatever He asks or tells us to do.

That was His concern in verse 46: “*Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ but do not do what I say?*” His point being this: If we call Him Lord, using a title that essentially pledges Him our allegiance and obedience, we should obey. And if we have no intention of obeying, it would be best to refrain from using the title LORD in reference to Him.

And **THIS WEEK** our passage also has to do with Lordship, though from a slightly different angle. Because this week it has to do with faith in His authority as Lord not so much to command PEOPLE and expect their obedience, but to command the ELEMENTS (things visible and invisible) and have THEM do exactly what He tells THEM to do!

And of course, of the two groups, the ELEMENTS (who have no capacity for rebellion) are more obedient to the commands of Jesus than WE ARE!

Jesus commands the ELEMENTS or sickness or disease or the weather or even evil spirits to do something, and they always do exactly what He commands them to do. But WE (on the other hand) frequently exercise our capacity (and sinful desire) to rebel and refuse to do what He has commanded us to do!

And it’s this centurion’s resolute assurance that the elements must do exactly what Jesus tells them to do — it’s His faith in the absolute unquestioned Lordship of Jesus over everything in creation (including sickness) — which causes Jesus to stand back in awe and amazement that **SOMEONE FINALLY GOT IT!** *Someone finally figured it out! Someone finally put it all together and got it right!*

And to such a degree that Jesus can say no one in all Israel has a faith greater than this man— faith in His Lordship and authority to command things to happen and have it be so.

Somehow this centurion (maybe by seeing or hearing that Jesus simply commanded the elements and had them obey Him) had figured out that Jesus had to be Lord of heaven and earth.

All He did was speak the command and **SICKNESS** left people's bodies. **DISEASE** submitted to His command to be healed. **DEMONS** submitted to His command to go. Meaning Jesus had to be Lord over it.

The proof of this centurion's authority over his troops was that they did whatever he told them to do, and the proof of Jesus Lordship over creation was that it did whatever he commanded it to do! That's what the centurion figured out! The One who commands and has things obey whatever He says has to be "Lord" over them!

Thus he sends his friends to Jesus with this message: *"LORD, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have YOU come under my roof."* Better yet, he goes on to say he is not even worthy to stand in Jesus presence.

WHY does he feel so undeserving to have Jesus come under His roof? So unworthy to even go and stand in Jesus presence? Because he has grasped exactly who Jesus is:

The LORD of creation / the LORD of the universe / the LORD of the elements / LORD over all that has been made (both visible and invisible)!

The ONE who gives commands to the ELEMENTS and has them DO exactly what He's told them to do! / Who says to sickness, "Go" and it goes! Or to the raging wind and the waves, "Be still!" and has it immediately become calm and still and absolutely quiet!

That's why he feels undeserving and unworthy, because he KNOWS (unlike the others) that Jesus is far more than a mere man with miraculous powers!

And LISTEN: It's not just logic that leads this centurion to that conclusion. Reason alone is insufficient to bring anyone to faith in Jesus, because the thought that the God of the universe would come in the form of a man, or that a person could be the Creator, is too phenomenal or mind boggling to believe apart from the grace God gives.

In Matthew 11:25-28 Jesus says no one can know Him or the Father (that is truly know Him and believe who He really is) unless the Father by His good pleasure, chooses to reveal it to them. (It is hidden, says Jesus, from all others.)

Thus we can know that at some point in this centurion's search (coming from his polytheistic culture, full of error and superstition) it pleased God to graciously open this man's eyes to the truth of who Jesus was.

And it wasn't because he was a good man! That's our **SECOND** thing we need to see from this text. God did NOT grace him, and Jesus did not heal his servant because he was somehow "deserving." It was NOT because he "loved the nation of Israel," and "paid to have the local synagogue constructed!" Not at all!

Notice the TWO distinctly different perspectives — the perspective of the religious people, and the perspective of the man who's come to faith. The perspective OTHERS had of this man, and the perspective this MAN had of himself.

The RELIGIOUS PEOPLE come to Jesus essentially saying: "Do this man a favor because he's done God a favor." "This man DESERVES to have you do this," they say. He has earned the right to a miracle, they say, by the fact that he "loves our nation and has built our synagogue." That's their perspective of Him.

But the MAN HIMSELF comes, and his perspective of himself is completely different! *"I do not deserve to have you come under my roof,"* he says. *"I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you,"* he says.

What a difference! And what's the reason for the difference in perspectives? I believe it has to do with one thing and one thing only: The centurion had come to realize who Jesus was, whereas the others obviously had not.

The RELIGIOUS PEOPLE simply thought Jesus was another religious person, except with the power to do miracles.

The CENTURION, having had his eyes opened by the grace of God to see who Jesus really was — had come to believe He was the LORD, the Holy One, the Creator who could speak a word to it and have it obey because He had created it.

And that lofty, exalted, true understanding of who Jesus was, caused him to realize that he as an imperfect sinner did not deserve, or was not worthy to come into Jesus presence.

Alexander Maclaren was right: *“The loftier our thoughts of Christ, the lower our thoughts of ourselves... The more we know ourselves to be sinners, the more we shall cleave to Christ, and the more we cleave to Christ, the more we shall know ourselves to be sinful.”*

When you truly realize, by the grace of God, how holy and mighty and pure and worthy and righteous and just and powerful and infinite God is, and then make the connection that Jesus is “one with the Father” — of the same being and essence — all thoughts of human worthiness disappear.

You can’t exalt yourself at the same time that you exalt Christ. The more worthy and deserving you feel you are, the less you will exalt and worship Jesus, and the more you will approach Him as these religious people — on the basis of trying to barter with God, or buy his favor with your works.

Luther once said, *“Every man is born with a Pharisee inside himself, who thinks that religion is a matter of barter, that it is so much work, buying so much favor here, and heaven hereafter. Wherever you look you see the working of that tendency.”*

“He loves our nation” they say. He deserves your favor because he’s a flag waving patriot. He deserves to go to heaven because he’s a good citizen. *“He paid to build us our synagogue,”* they say. He did God a favor so God should do him a favor. He’s earned it.

It’s the religion of barter. And it can only be sustained so long as a person fails to understand who Jesus really is and what God is really like. Because once a person comprehends who Jesus really is — LORD of Lords, and KING of Kings — then all thought of being worthy or deserving disappear.

Others look at us from the outside — they only see what we do, and what we appear to be — but only we and God know the real us — the us we are on the inside, with all our impatience and unworthiness and sinful thoughts and dark urges / Our proclivity to be selfish and sometimes mean-spirited and lack compassion and gossip and be conceited and ungrateful and proud and impure and greedy and slothful / Our tendency to treat money or careers or possessions as more important than ministry to people or loving God and our neighbor.

You see, when I take an honest look at what I’m really like on the inside, and all Jesus is in contrast to all that I am, all thoughts of being “deserving” or “worthy” or “Him owing me His favor”

melt away, and I realize I REALLY DESERVE NOTHING, and that WHATEVER GOOD THING THAT COMES MY WAY FROM GOD comes as a gift of His grace and an expression of His sheer unfathomable free love to me in Jesus.

What made Jesus heal this man's servant? The money he gave to build the synagogue?
His flag waving patriotism for the Jewish nation?

NO! Maclaren puts it better than any I've read when he says: *"When these elders of the Jews came to Jesus to plead this man's case, Jesus at once rose and went with them, not because of the... certificate of character they had given of him, but because His own loving heart impelled Him to go to any soul that sought His help.... Jesus Christ comes to us, not drawn by our worthiness (we have none), but impelled by His own love... So we do not need to painfully try and amass a store of worthiness, nor pile up a list of our own works by which we climb to heaven... Worthiness and unworthiness must be swept clean out of the field, and I must be content (like the centurion) to be a pauper, to owe everything I receive to what I have done nothing to procure, and simply cast myself solely upon the all-sufficient mercy of God in Christ Jesus... 'Not by works of righteousness which I have done, but by His mercy He saved us,' says the Apostle Paul. "*

So I ask you: Are you still working on a barter system with God? A system of always trying to be worthy enough or deserving enough to earn God's favor?

Because if you are, what this passage does is invite you to turn from all that — to 'sweep it clean out of the field' as Maclaren says — and cast yourself solely, like a pauper, upon the all-sufficient mercy of God in Christ Jesus — for nothing but Jesus blood and righteousness holds sway with God.

Religion deals on the basis of worthiness and merit, God deals on the basis of need and grace, which means that all you must bring in your hands when you seek God's favor is the sin that makes you unworthy to receive it. And God seeing the sin you bring to Him to be forgiven, will receive it, and since Christ died to forgive it, will take it away, and wash you clean.

Then **LAST** since we know this passage deals with faith in the LORDSHIP OF JESUS over all creation; with His power and authority to give commands to all He has made and have it obey

Him; I offer to you what the Bible declares about Jesus and ask you to believe it. And I do it without apology, though I know it has driven many people from the faith.

My own mother attended a Bible study nearly 25 years ago, where they studied what I'm about to share with you, and one particular lady, who had attended church all her life, yet had only attended the Bible study for a couple months, after hearing it, said, "I don't believe that," and proceeded to leave the study and never come back.

The same thing happened in my church in Honduras to a young lady who had attended a Presbyterian church all her life (PCUSA). She just happened to be attending for the first time on a Sunday when I was preaching on the Deity of Christ, and walked out saying to her friend: "I don't believe that. I've been to church all my life and I've never heard that."

She told the friend she had come with that she would never come back. But in her case the story ends a bit differently, because a little more than six months later, after coaxing her into going through a Bible study on Romans where she testified to feeling like she was physically struck on the head (odd way to come to faith!) I baptized her in the swimming pool of the U.S. military commander for Central America! (A very godly man who was of much higher rank than this "centurion.")

So what is it that the Bible says about Jesus that is so hard for people to believe? It says this in John 1:1-4:

'In the beginning was the Word (that's one of the titles for Jesus) and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made and without Him was nothing made that has been made.'

Ten chapters later, speaking of God, Jesus says: *"I and the Father are one."* Four chapters after that, *"He who has seen me has seen the Father."* Which tells us why it is that Jesus can say elsewhere, *"He who receives me receives the One who sent me."*

He who receives Jesus (by faith) receives God, because that's who Jesus is, as Thomas declared in John 20:28 after putting his fingers in the wounds of the Risen Christ: *"My Lord and my God,"* he cries out! Or as the Nicene Creed would so beautifully phrase it three centuries later: *"I believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father."*

The Apostle Paul says essentially the same thing in Colossians 1:15-19 where we read:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him (that is, by Jesus) all things were created: things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created by Him and for Him.”

And then listen to how Paul concludes the verse:

“He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

That’s what the centurion perceived! Jesus is the one who holds it all together. Everything He commands happens merely by speaking it. Apart from Him, it would all dissolve into chaos!

Or take Paul’s statement in Colossians 2: 9 where he says: *“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity (or the Godhead) dwells in bodily form.”*

The statement of the Author of Hebrews (1:3), where we read: *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory, and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.”*

And I could go on and on to Matt. 1:18-23, Matt. 28:17, Rom. 9:5, Phil. 2:1-11, Rev. 1:17-18 and so forth. It couldn’t be any more clearly laid out in Scripture. Lordship, Deity, Divine Power, Authority to speak things into being merely by saying the word — that’s Jesus.

And that’s what the centurion amazingly came to perceive long before many of Jesus own disciples ever really perceived it, causing Jesus to say of him: “I tell you, I have not found such great faith in all Israel.”

So I ask you: Is that what you believe? / Have you come (like the centurion, and Paul, and the Apostle John and the Author of Hebrews) to have your eyes opened to see that “Jesus is the image of the invisible God?” To see that: “Through Him everything was made that has been made — things both visible and invisible”?

Because that is what the Bible asks us to believe. Not simply that a religious man named Jesus existed and went around doing miracles, but that He who went around doing miracles (and commanding the elements to obey Him), could do so because He had created them, and thus had authority over them, and as Lord had the right to tell them what to do!

Have you had that spiritual encounter with the Risen Jesus whereby you also have come to discover that Jesus is: "Your Lord and your God!" Have you come to see that in Jesus: "All the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in bodily form," and thus to have gazed upon Jesus was to have gazed upon God dwelling in bodily form.

Thus I ask you again: *"If Jesus were to come to our church today, which response of amazement would He have?"*

Would he be amazed at your lack of faith in the Nazareth way because you don't believe in His Lordship over all creation / or would He be amazed in the Centurion way that you like him, have come to grasp that all He needs do is speak the word and whatever He commands will (no must) happen!

Storms cease and waves become still at His command. / Blindness gives way to sight and sickness leaves bodies and corpses rise to walk out of tombs at His command! / He spoke and worlds came into existence out of nothing! / The heavens pour down rain, we are told, at His command! / Or as Isaac Watts wrote for us to sing: *"The moon shines full at His command, and all the stars obey."*

That's what I need to ask today: Do you believe Jesus is Lord? / That's what the Bible asks us to believe, and what faith is given to us to believe. / And when you do, everything in your life begins to change!

The way you look at reality changes. / The way you look at people changes. / You begin to see everything and everyone in a whole new light. / As things and people made by and for Jesus — created by Him and loved by Him and for whom He gave His life.

You begin to see as possible things that you always believed were impossible, because you realize One of inexhaustible might moves behind the scenes in answer to prayer. What you used to think were coincidences you begin to see as events orchestrated by an invisible hand for your good.

And yes, miracles start happening — people (like this servant) startlingly get well!
Sick people get healed.

Rebels have their lives turned around.

And doubters, agnostics and those you'd totally given up hope on, come to faith!

And remember this: It has nothing to do with worthiness or merit or being deserving. Not at all! It comes to those, who like this centurion, know they are not worthy and could never be deserving of anything from a holy and righteous God.

That's what true faith brings — humility. A humility that comes from realizing who WE are in light of who JESUS really is.

A realization which obliterates all thoughts of merit or bartering or being worthy or deserving, and leaves us simply to cast ourselves in faith upon the free love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.