



“Healing Is Possible”

Matthew 8:5-13; Matthew 9:11-12

A time of pain, a time of healing.

Ironically, the need for healing is painfully relevant now more than ever. The New Testament is laced with witnesses of healing accounts seen as miracles performed by Jesus. This brings one to the question: what is required for healing, by definition? Brokenness. If there was no brokenness in the world, there would be no need for healing. From Genesis 3—humanity’s fall—sin has been with us to this day. The pivotal

turning point between Genesis 3 and now? Jesus.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus changes everything. In the life of Jesus, as recounted by Matthew, it is clear that he is the Messiah who will bring about the healing that is characteristic of God’s power. While physical healing is the most apparent demonstration of this power (i.e. the blind see, the lame walk) in Matthew’s stories, an equally important consideration are the spiritual restorations. It is the outward physical act, that represents Jesus’s ability to restore the individual’s heart through faith in him.

The first passage, Matthew 8:5-13, describes the miraculous healing account of a Roman centurion’s servant. Outside of this passage, there is astounding content in chapter eight, such as the calming of the storm and two demon possessed men. As a result, the story of the centurion’s faith is often overlooked. But when carefully studying Matthew’s gospel, one finds a radical story of the centurion’s faith. The man at the forefront here is a Roman commander, likely in charge of 100 soldiers,¹ and quite familiar with the worldly powers of authority (v.9). The story opens with him rushing to Jesus and begging for a healing miracle for his servant. When first hearing this, one might raise an eyebrow asking: what is the centurion’s motivation here? Is the servant’s illness prohibiting his productivity? Or could it be that the servant is the closest relationship to the centurion, perhaps even considered a friend? In most biblical healing accounts, when a person is petitioning for a healing of another, there is a deeply close relationship between the individuals (i.e. Jairus’ daughter [Matt 9:18-26] or Lazarus [John 11]). Ought we to consider this to be any different? Clearly the servant’s health is deeply important to the centurion. As one commentary puts it, “The faith of a Gentile centurion is introduced in striking contrast to the unreceptiveness of the Jews. If Israel will not acknowledge her King, the despised pagans will.”² When his conversation with Jesus begins, we witness the centurion doing something that few of us in our everyday lives are willing to do . . . humble ourselves before another person – not to mention before Jesus.

It is worth considering the power of words in this story. Notice throughout the gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ words often act as the catalysts for healing to occur. We live in a world where most everyone has the ability to speak audibly, yet when this one man, Jesus, speaks: the waves calm, the blind see, the loaves multiply. It would be unrealistic to act as if the reality of such power is less awe-invoking for us then it was for those who lived among Jesus. Countless biblical scholars spend their lifetimes learning various languages to interpret ancient texts and write commentaries; livelihoods built on the importance of words. As we sit with the story of the centurion and his servant, it is critical to understand verse 8, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. But just say the word and my servant will be healed.” It is this verse that sends Jesus into amazement.

Surely the centurion, like many, would have heard of Jesus’ ministry and healings as such news spread rapidly by word of mouth. Earlier in Matthew, this is perfectly seen when crowds seemingly appear out of nowhere to constantly follow him (Matt 4:24- 25). The faith exhibited by the centurion’s trust in the power of Jesus’ words stands in glaring contrast to the many doubts of Jesus’ own disciples. Matthew uniquely highlights doubters versus faithful persons. “Jesus’ pet name for his disciples in Matthew’s gospel is *oligopistoi* translated into ‘people of little faith’” (Matt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20 [elsewhere only used in Luke 12:28]).³ Yet, when Jesus hears the centurion’s belief in the power of the words Jesus speaks – a radically different reaction follows. This Roman, pagan, gentile man has more faith than the “*oligopistoi*” disciples exhibit. According to one commentator, “this is one of two times when Jesus is said to have marveled, the other time was at the unbelief of the Jews” (Mark 6:6).⁴ How fitting – both the times Jesus is amazed, it is

¹ Carson, D. A., ed. *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*. New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2018.

² Macdonald, William. *Believer’s Bible Commentary*. Edited by Art Farstad. 2nd ed. N.p.: Thomas Nelson, 2016.

³ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. Second Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

⁴ Macdonald, William. *Believer’s Bible Commentary*. Edited by Art Farstad. 2nd ed. N.p.: Thomas Nelson, 2016.

in regards to shocking, world-turned-upside-down, faithful (or lack of) demonstrations. Ultimately, Jesus *does* heal the centurion's servant—with his words. From a physical distance, Jesus speaks *"Go; let it be done for you according to your faith."* *And the servant was healed in that hour"* (v.13).

Let us now consider what this miracle demonstrated because of the cultural norms between Jews and Gentiles, as described by scholar Michael Green:

The apostolic gospel was 'first for the Jew, then for the Gentile'. That is exactly what we find prefigured in the Gospels. To be sure, Jesus concentrated on Israel during his ministry, but there are a number of pointers to the Gentile mission that would later develop. This is one of them.

The word of the risen and ascended Jesus was mighty both to transform lives and to heal bodies, in the Gentile mission as well as among those Jews who were responding to their Messiah. A story like this would be an enormous encouragement to those Gentile believers (many of them, no doubt, in Matthew's own congregation) who had never seen Jesus, but who had trusted his word and felt his power in their lives. And the attitude of this pagan centurion was a great example of the proper approach to Jesus. For it spoke of simple, profound faith. That was what brought Abraham to experience the power of God. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. But in Israel in Jesus' day there was not too much of that living trust in God's power to heal. Forty years later, as the gospel spread from a hardening Judaism to the Gentiles, there was less. That is why Jesus' words to this soldier were so treasured and remembered: *'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith'* (v. 10).⁵

The story of the Centurion ought to encourage us in our present day. Does our world desperately need healing? Of course. Perhaps that is the single thing we can all agree on. Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual healing all of the highest value. Now, the real and provoking question we can discern from this story becomes: how will we submit our own selves humbly (no matter how radical it may seem to others) to faithfully desire the healing that Christ offers? Will we be the Centurion?

A table for all

Jesus is often ridiculed by the Pharisees (Jewish teachers of the law). Perhaps one of the most well-known occasions is today's passage from Matthew 9; the irony of this biblical story is astounding. Here we find Jesus calling Matthew (a tax collector) to follow him – once again radically breaking cultural and social boundaries. Let's picture this dinner: Jesus, Matthew, fellow tax collectors, and others at the supper table passing around the same plate of hummus. What! Yes, that's right, sharing a meal all together. At the first quip of onlooking Pharisees, Jesus replies with *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."* (v.12). Wow. The most logical follow up question for anyone reading this: what defines "sick"? If Jesus brought about the kingdom of God, then are we to surmise that . . . we are included among the sick? Gulp.

Vulnerability in healing

As countless people surely have experienced in the past when reading Matthew 9:11- 12, we have now entered a conversation of "labels". In the earlier verses, "the tax collectors and sinners" are lumped in together – as if of similar stature. Now, Jesus himself is labeling healthy and sick. Our world is so good at labeling. I imagine at times God watches us and wonders how long it will take us to realize our *need* for Jesus, our need for a Savior who *was willing* to assume our sins on a cross . . . the ultimate act of costly grace.

In Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees, it is nearly impossible not to recognize that what it really means to be sick is to be vulnerable. What an incredible realization. Through illness, both physical and spiritual, there is need and vulnerability, unlike what one experiences in strength and health. A vulnerability that was also known, felt, embodied, and humbly lived out until the last breath of Jesus on that wooden cross. And so we invite Christ to be with us when we make ourselves vulnerable, humble, and willing. Rather than abruptly labeling others "us versus them," we must seek unity through vulnerability instead. For the labels we impose are merely of human origin. In the kingdom of God, *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal 3:28, NRSV). It is on this promise that Christians are called to stand, starving the temptation to fall into the labels and divisions of this world. In Christ, there is abundant life in vulnerability. And given the state of the brokenness in this world, what better message of healing could there be?

⁵ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, IVP, 2001