

July 31- Aug. 4, 2023 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 83

Jesus & The Roman Centurion

Amazing Faith How Sweet The Sound

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to spend some time reflecting on the story from Matthew chapter 8 where a Roman Centurion comes to Jesus to ask for His miraculous help. This story is about several different things but one of the main themes in this interaction Jesus has with a Roman soldier is humility.

I know the word doesn't appear in the story but for a Roman Centurion to approach Jesus rather than just summoning Him is remarkable. Here's how the story begins:

When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman centurion came and pleaded with him. "Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain." Jesus said, "I will come and heal him." But the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Matthew 8:5-8 (NLT)

Roman Centurions didn't generally approach anyone- they summoned people to them. And they used their soldiers to enforce their summons if need be. So the fact that this guy is approaching Jesus rather than summoning him is mind boggling. If you want an idea of what the social and cultural setting in first century Israel between Romans and Jews just watch a few episodes of The Chosen. Or to give this a 20th century spin this would be much like a Nazi soldier going to a Jew's house to ask for help. It's unheard of.

I can't imagine the grief this Centurion must have gotten from other Romans over his affection for Israel and the Jews. Over in Luke chapter 7 we get a parallel of this story with some extra details- one detail in particular is pretty important when it comes to this particular Centurion- it turns out he actually paid to have the synagogue in Capernaum built:

This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue. Luke 7:4-5 (NLT)

To this day you could travel to Israel and if you go to Capernaum you can see the synagogue that's was there (well- you'll see the ruins of the synagogue. But the ruins you see are from a second century synagogue and not the one this Centurion built for his Jewish friends. Pretty much everything (with only a few exceptions) in Israel from the time of Jesus has been destroyed by Rome in 70 AD when the final Jewish uprising occurred. Rome sent legions to deal with Israel once and for all. They marched down from Syria and destroyed everything in their path. So the ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum aren't the ruins that Jesus preached in- but they are built on the foundation of the synagogue Jesus preached in often whenever He was in Capernaum.

I remember listening to our tour guide tell us that the black basalt stones that the newer synagogue was built upon was the foundation of the first century synagogue. He pointed to one part of the foundation that He said was part of the steps that led into the original synagogue and I thought, "I'll bet Jesus walked on that exact stone time after time. And yes- I did get a picture of me standing on those steps.

Tomorrow we'll continue looking at this story of Jesus and the most unlikely of people to ever approach Him but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on how much humility it must have taken for this Centurion to not only approach Jesus but to ask a favor of Him.

Tuesday Reflection: Yesterday we began looking at the story from Matthew chapter 8 where a Roman Centurion went to Jesus and asked a huge favor of Him:

When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman centurion came and pleaded with him. "Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain." Jesus said, "I will come and heal him." But the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Matthew 8:5-8 (NLT)

We also learned that this Centurion was a friend of the Jews in Capernaum and even paid to have their synagogue built. This would have been a very unusual situation. The Romans almost universally hated the Jews and considered them the worst example of humanity they had ever encountered. The Jews hated the Romans right back and considered them not only the enemies of Israel but of God Himself.

So why did the Centurion approach Jesus? What gave him at least a bit of confidence that Jesus would help Him? Well, remember what happened right before this story takes place- The Sermon On The Mount. Matthew tells us that after the Sermon On The Mount as Jesus came off the mountain he was first approached by a leper asking to be healed and then when Jesus got back to Capernaum the Centurion approaches Him.

Both of these guys would have had their doubts about whether or not Jesus would help them (more on that tomorrow) but what gave them the confidence- even if it was just a tiny bit of confidence- to approach Jesus with these requests?

I think it was Jesus' words in Sermon On The Mount. It's not a stretch to imagine that both the leper and the Centurion were in attendance and heard Jesus say an awful lot about how God wants His people to deal with those that we might consider to be enemies:

"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. Matthew 5:43-47 (NLT)

Can you imagine hearing those words if you're someone that usually gets told that God hates you and that you are an enemy to God's people? What might those words inspire someone like a leper (who were pretty much told that their condition was a punishment from God) or a Centurion from Rome (who pretty much was an enemy of Israel) to do if they needed something they believed only Jesus could give them?

In this case it inspired the Centurion and the leper to approach Jesus in humility and ask for help.

And they got it.

Now read the words of Jesus from the Sermon On The Mount once more- especially His words on how we are to treat those we consider to be our enemies. What does Jesus

expect us to do for our enemies? Love them? Pray for them? And what happens when we do that? We show ourselves to be “true children of our Father in heaven”.

I don't know about you but I often want to think Jesus wasn't too serious about that love-your-enemies thing. Surely He didn't mean the people that bug me the most. Surely He doesn't mean people on the opposite end of the political spectrum from me?!?! Those people are the enemies of God, aren't they (and by the way the people at the far right and the people at the far left of the political spectrum both think they're doing God's work and the people at the opposite end of the spectrum must be the enemies of God)?

Turns out it doesn't matter what their beliefs are- friend or enemy we are to love them and show them kindness which is interesting because usually what we extend to our enemies is disdain, anger and judgment.

So I have a feeling you know what I'm going to ask you to reflect on today, don't you? Does that make you mad? Does that make me your enemy? Then love me and pray for me so that you might be true children of your Father in heaven. ;o)

Wednesday Reflection: We've spent the last two days looking at how humility fits into this story of Jesus and Centurion with a sick servant. Today we'll begin looking at the more obvious concept that flows throughout this story- faith. It's pretty obvious that faith is at the core of this story- Jesus even mentions the Centurion's faith at the end of the account (which we'll get to on Friday I think). So the question is, what is faith?

Faith is such a strange concept. The Bible word of faith is “pistis”. It is the single most used word in the entire Bible (other than words like “the” or “a” or “of” or “or”... well you get the picture). It's fascinating to me that grace isn't the most used word or love or forgiveness but they're not- it's faith. And that one Bible word (pistis) is translated at least 4 different ways in the Bible- faith, belief, trust & commitment. You can't understand the biblical concept of faith without all four of those English words as reference.

Growing up I thought that faith or belief was all about what I thought. When I read a verse like John 3:16 (For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life.) meant that as long as I agreed that Jesus was God's only Son then I was “in”. Those who didn't agree with that didn't “believe” the way I did so they were “out”. But the more I study the Bible the more I recognize how overly simplistic and really just outright wrong that way of understanding belief or faith is.

Turns out faith is many things. I don't know how you pursue figuring this stuff out but I generally get out my trusty concordance (easier now than it was 37 years ago when I got serious about my faith and had to buy a massive book [Strongs Exhaustive Concordance] and search through its entries and then go from there to my Bible to read about the reference that Strongs gave me) and start looking at all the verses in the Bible about faith or belief or trust. But here's what always left me confused, and I didn't now why until just recently- the Bible has many definitions of “faith” or “belief” and not just one.

For instance if you were to go online to BibleGateway.com or whatever your Bible site preference might be and you typed in "believe" or "faith" you'll find hundreds if not thousands of entries. Then as you read all those different references you'd start to develop an idea of what faith is. Maybe the most famous verse on faith is this one:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

When asked to define "faith" in our Bible-Bowls (contests between churches to see who had the most biblical knowledge) that verse was the accepted answer. But what does it mean? Confidence in what I hope for and assurance about what I can't see. I'm not really sure how what I'm supposed to do about that. What if my confidence and assurance are wavering? How do I fix that? Can I manufacture certainty, confidence or assurance? I don't think so. So what does that verse mean for me and you? Well, next I'd probably go on and keep researching faith and belief and this is probably the next most famous passage about pistis:

It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him. Hebrews 11:6 (NLT)

So faith is the only way to "please" God and it's really important for me to "believe" that God exists and that He rewards people who are looking for Him. Ok. What does that mean? What am I meant to do with that definition? Can a person manufacture a certainty in the existence of God? I'm not sure how one would do that. Well, actually I have a pretty good idea but it involves admitting my doubts but if I have doubts how can I please God and how will He reward me? We'll look more at that tomorrow but for today maybe let's spend some time reflecting on what faith is- and what it isn't.

Thursday Reflection: Yesterday at the end of the reflection I asked a question about how faith and doubt can coexist in my life (a human condition). I mean if faith is supposed to be this certainty/confidence/assurance that eliminates all doubt then what does Jesus do if my certainty/confidence/assurance is wavering in one area or another Well, actually I have a pretty good idea but it involves admitting my doubts but if I have doubts how can I please God and how will He reward me?

By following the example of a dad in the Bible whose son was possessed by a demon. The dad had heard of Jesus and thought maybe He would help them. The interaction with Jesus when he's finally face to face with Him is pretty wild:

When the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth. "How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father. He replied, "Since he was a little boy. The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can." Mark 9:20-22 (NLT)

If certainty is required to spur Jesus to help someone how do you think this dad is doing? Did you catch the little word at the end of that passage that shatters the illusion of certainty? "If". The dad says, "if you can". Doesn't sound like much certainty to me. Jesus noticed that little two letter word too:

What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes.
Mark 9: 23 (NLT)

Sounds like Jesus is requiring certainty for any kind of miracle or healing He might perform. He seizes on that word, "if", and gives the dad a chance to change his story. What would you do at that point if you were the dad? I know what I'd do- I'd lie. I might call it something else (especially if I was standing there before Jesus Himself) but lying is what it would be. The dad isn't sure if he believes but he does believe that Jesus is his only hope. But even so the dad doesn't lie. He doesn't manufacture at least the appearance of certainty. What does he do? He's honest about where he is:

The father instantly cried out, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"
Mark 9:24 (NLT)

What a plea! At least he was honest. But if Jesus is anything like I was told while I was growing up that He was like this is a sorry excuse for faith or belief and will surely get the dad tossed out of Jesus' presence so fast his head will spin (or maybe so fast his son's head will spin if the Exorcist is any indication of what demon possession does to a person ;o).

But turns out Jesus isn't anything like what I was led to believe. Do you know what Jesus does with the dad's anemic expression of faith?

He heals the kid.

What?!?!? How did that happen? I thought certainty was required to please God. I thought faith was confidence and assurance. And yes- faith is those things but it is so much more as well. Turns out faith is also about a willingness to bet-on-Jesus even if your certainty and faith are wavering. You see it with the disciples and maybe you've seen it (like I have) in your own life as well.

And all I can say about that is, "THANK GOD!!!!" Thank God my own certainty level isn't the only litmus test God uses to decide whether to accept us or not. Because if it was guess what? We'd all be in deep Bantha poodoo (to quote Jabba the Hutt). And not just you and me- every other human in the Bible struggles at one point or another with their certainty/assurance/confidence in God. Tomorrow we'll talk a bit more about faith from the Centurion's perspective but for today spend some time reflecting on what faith is- and what it isn't.

Friday Reflection: We've been reflecting on faith the last couple of days and I want to end the week by finishing up our focus on "faith". I hope you've seen in the last two days that faith isn't one particular thing- it's a multi-faceted diamond that may look different depending on what particular facet you're looking at but the whole diamond is "faith".

Today I want to look at how a person can have an extremely high level of faith in Jesus in one area but a wavering level of faith in another. We've seen it in this week's story of Jesus and the Centurion and we saw it a couple of weeks ago when looking at the leper who asked Jesus to heal him:

When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. Matthew 8:1-3 (NIV)

This leper has tremendous certainty in Jesus' power to heal him. He seems to have zero doubt about that. When it comes to Jesus' ability to heal him this guy's certainty/confidence/assurance is sky high. But, he does have doubt about Jesus as well- namely in whether Jesus will heal him. That's why he makes the strange statement (that isn't really a request but more of a comment), "if you are willing, I know you can make me clean" (I added the "I know" but I think it's implied). What's going on? Well the guy's faith in Jesus' power is high but he doubts whether the compassion of Jesus would extend to a leper. He has certainty in Jesus in one area but a wavering doubt in another. How very strange, am I right? I never thought that was possible. I figured you either have faith or you don't. But it seems that it's possible to have zero doubts about Jesus in certain areas but struggle with doubts in other areas.

The same is true of the Centurion. He goes to Jesus and asks for Him to heal his servant. He has zero doubts about Jesus' ability to do it but seems to doubt whether Jesus would help a Roman soldier so much so that when Jesus agrees to go to his house the Centurion tells Jesus that's really not necessary:

"Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, 'Go,' and they go, or 'Come,' and they come. And if I say to my slaves, 'Do this,' they do it." Matthew 8:8-9 (NLT)

It's amazing really- the amount of faith the Centurion has in Jesus' power but the doubt that Jesus would care about a Roman soldier. Where does that kind of a definition of faith fit in our definition of faith/belief/trust/commitment? Really, it didn't in the definitions I was given from the church I grew up in. Faith was one thing and one thing only and if you doubt in any area Jesus will cast-you-out (that was their go-to description of what Jesus did to people who did anything other than what the leaders of the church wanted you to do).

But thank God that it isn't any other human who decides on who God will accept and what level of certainty/confidence/assurance that person demonstrate. It's Jesus who decides that and as we saw with the leper and now the Centurion Jesus accepts all levels of certainty and doubt. Turns out faith isn't something you either have or don't have but something that we walk in and develop as we move forward with Jesus:

For we walk by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:4 (NIV)

So walk in faith with Jesus and let Him decide when and how your faith will grow. Few of us come to Jesus with 100% certainty. Probably none of us. So it's a good thing for all of us that Jesus works with all levels of faith and doubt. And what He loves more than anything- what amazes Him more than anything is when people who have very little reason to have faith end up betting on Him. Look what He has to say about the Centurion's belief that Jesus' power is so all encompassing that He doesn't even have to come to his house to heal the servant:

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel! Matthew 8:10 (NLT)

There are two things that amaze Jesus over and over in the gospels- He is amazed when someone who has no reason to have great faith expresses great faith. And He is amazed when someone who should have great faith demonstrates a complete lack of faith. If you want to amaze Jesus then don't try to manufacture enough faith to amaze Him. Rather commit your life to Him and walk in faith and over time you and Him working together will develop the kind of faith that moves mountains and amazes Jesus.

Jesus Is Awesome.