

Introduction: We return to Matthew's Gospel and rejoice to learn in Matthew 8 about the Holy Spirit in the Gospel ministry of Jesus. As hymn # 339 puts it in our red *Trinity Hymnal*, it is the Spirit who alone has "the power to make our lives anew." He alone is our "pledge of life and hope of glory," for whom we worship Jesus Christ as the Giver of this great gift.

Monday: Read Matthew 8:5-13, Isaiah 61:1-3 and John 3:8. We continually admire the role of the Holy Spirit in the miracles of Jesus. After all, our Lord Himself gives full credit to the Spirit as the source of the power and effectiveness of all His miracles in Luke 4:18, where He inaugurates His public ministry by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, that it was "by the Spirit that the blind see, the dead are raised and the poor have the Gospel preached to them." In short, Jesus Christ declares that He was given the Spirit to communicate unto us in our broken sinfulness, and by the Spirit to give us all the saving graces and gifts needed to be fully restored to the favor and love of God.

We are therefore always to be on the look-out for signs of the Spirit's presence, as Jesus performs the miracles for which He was sent. Where then do we find the Holy Spirit in the life of the centurion at the center of our passage in Matthew 8 today? The answer is in that simple but profound phrase that Jesus "marveled at the faith in this centurion." In other words, Jesus was full of wonder that the Spirit of God could create in this Gentile such a comprehensive faith, which takes Jesus at His word.

Jesus' wonder, of course, as the Son of God, must be an infinite wonder. Only God's Spirit can make God's Son stand back in awe and amazement! After all, Jesus "knows what is in man... and has no need for the testimony of man, nor can He be surprised or amazed at what He finds *in* man... for He knows what is in man" (John 2:24-25). No surprise there. But when it comes to the infinite Spirit of God, our Savior loves to, as it were, "buy a bag of popcorn" and enjoy the demonstration of the Spirit's limitless saving power! Jesus above all others knows that, "the Sovereign Spirit of God blows like the wind, where He wants to" (John 3:8)!

Meditate and Pray: Let us magnify with our Lord the work of the Spirit of God in effectively calling sinners like the centurion, to saving faith. Let us ask the Lord to pour out His powerful Spirit on all we do as His church, using the words of hymn # 338:

*Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art;
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.*

*I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,
No angel visitant, no opening skies;
But take the dimness of my soul away.*

*Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear.
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh,
Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.*

*Hast Thou not bid me love Thee, God and King?
All, all Thine own, soul, heart and strength and
mind. I see Thy cross; there teach my heart to cling:
O let me seek Thee, and O let me find!*

*Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame;
The kindling of the heaven descended Dove,
My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame.*

Tuesday: Read Matthew 8:10-13 and Luke 16:27-31. The centurion clearly lacked many details when it came to his knowledge of the ways of God and the amount of understanding which he had of God's Son. He was not raised among the covenant people and did not know their Scriptures. He was a Gentile – perhaps a Roman; perhaps Lebanese or even Syrian, as the Romans had officers from those nations stationed in Israel. He would have been born like the rest of us – “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

But God who is rich in mercy provided him a “place at the table” and a seat at the wedding feast of salvation, even as Jesus declares *in the object lesson* which He draws from the centurion's faith in Matthew 8:11-12, declaring that those afar off from God's people Israel, who nevertheless believed like this man, would be welcomed to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - while the natural born subjects of God's kingdom in Israel (who rejected Christ and refused Him as their Savior) would be thrown outside into verse 12's outer darkness. Truly the first will be last, and the last first!

Meditate and Pray: How tragic that Jesus' own people the Jews (who could speak even from hell to Abraham in heaven, calling him “father Abraham” in Luke 16:30) refused the very word of God by which real salvation could have come to their souls. On the other hand – when someone like this Roman centurion takes the Lord Jesus at His word, it does not matter how sinful, wicked and undeserving they are: Jesus will declare to them as He does to the centurion in Matthew 8:13: “It will be done, just as you believed it would”!

Wed/Thurs: Read Matthew 8:11-13 and 12:41. What a contrast between the rejection of Israel in their unbelief, so that they lose their place at the table of the Kingdom of God in Matthew 8:12, and the eager belief of pagans like the centurion, or Nineveh in the days of Jonah! When given just a shred of an opportunity to respond with saving faith to Jesus Christ, behold the pagans running to Jesus! This is how fellow OPC pastor Robert Needham puts it:

During his public ministry here on earth, our Lord Jesus spoke many compelling and wise words for those with "ears to hear." Not the least of these are his solemn words of warning that the "men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Matt. 12:41).

In condemning the attitudes and thinking of "this generation" Christ was calling them (indeed all of us), to consider praying for, and exercising, the redeeming grace of genuine repentance. What makes the record of the men of Nineveh so compelling is the nature of their repentance, given the way Jonah proclaimed God's incipient judgment against them with not a word of hope.

Ponder this. Jonah had no compassion or heart of mercy for the Ninevites, no gospel instruction, no offer of instruction to that pagan city of the meaning of biblical repentance, no love for the lost, no desire to see them pardoned, no variation in his minimal message of doom. Yet they repented, from the king down to the lowest beggar, even to putting sackcloth on the animals (Jonah 3:5-9).

To put it another way, the men of Nineveh, with no knowledge of the mighty works of God, no knowledge of the history of God's saving the Israelites out of Egypt, no knowledge of great prophetic gospel passages of Scripture (such as Isaiah 53) nevertheless grasped the essence of true repentance better than most of the Jews, who had the prophets, the books of Moses, the Psalms, the histories of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and most of all, the Messiah Himself! Truly they (and we) have One immeasurably greater than Jonah calling all men everywhere to repent. Today we live in a culture which has essentially lost an understanding of the nature and importance of God-given repentance unto life.

Clearly our Savior's message was, and is, a call to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, seeking a heart of godly sorrow for our own sins, and the sins of our society in which we live, which parallel the sinful state of Nineveh and of Israel during Christ's ministry there. What a privilege to know that "having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30).

Friday: Read Matthew 8:8-13 and Acts 3:19-20. We ended yesterday with the exercise of repentance as an essential grace from God – if we are to escape the doom of hard-hearted Israel in Matthew 12:41. The kingdom of God requires of those entering it in Matthew 8:11, the grace of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The result? Look at the rest and peace which come through the grace of repentance, quoting Rev. Needham again:

What a privilege to know that Jesus, unlike the harshness with which Jonah spoke to the people of Nineveh, graciously calls us to come unto Him, all who are weary and heavily laden, and He will give us rest. (Matthew 11:28)

Peace with God through the reconciling work of Christ and a resting in the forgiveness of sins – these are the fundamental blessings of the Christian life, and some of the most awesome proofs of God's power shown to us in Jesus Christ! Think of the power of such peace – able to rule our lives in the midst of this violent, evil world of fear and unbelief!

We could at this point delve deeply into the meaning of this kingdom peace into which Jesus invites us in Matthew 11:28. But for this week, let us enter into the great joy and rest which must have shone over the home of the centurion that night, when his servant was well for the first time. (Matthew 8:13) Think of the refreshment which came over the whole household as they saw this beloved young servant restored to his master's side! Such was the sweet experience of peace *into which the centurion's whole household could now enter* as they beheld their master exercising the gift of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for himself!

Meditate and Pray: *Father in heaven, thank you for the great promise in Acts 3:19-20, that when we repent, enabled by your grace so to do, the days of our lives change from **being full of vanity and guilt in a world of unforgiven sin**, to days in which we can inherit daily refreshment and relief from the joy of forgiven sin! Thank you that this grace of repentance is a gift which we are to exercise every day, and which **we will want to exercise every moment**, since there is nothing more joyful and refreshing than finding daily forgiveness from your Son's nail-pierced hand! Teach us each day to begin by saying to you, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof" (Matthew 8:8) and to end full of joy **that you did come into our homes and hearts through the daily grace of new forgiveness and new communion with you!***