



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Healing of the Centurion’s Servant, or the Faith that Astonished Christ,”

Matthew 8:5-13 – TRANSCRIPT

Will you turn with me in your New Testaments to Matthew chapter 8? I want to read verse 5 through verse 13. Matthew chapter 8, verse 5 through verse 13 is our Scripture reading for today.

“And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him, and saying, ‘Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.’ And Jesus saith unto him, ‘I will come and heal him.’ The centurion answered and said, ‘Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.’ When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, ‘Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the

children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ And Jesus said unto the centurion, ‘Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.’ And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.”

May God bless this reading of his inspired word.

Our subject for today as we continue our exposition of the Gospel of Matthew is “The Healing of the Centurion’s Servant, or the Faith that Astonished Jesus Christ.” That a pagan should come to faith in the day that salvation belonged to the Jews, is a remarkable thing. And that this pagan should be a Roman centurion, in the army of occupation, in the pay of Herod Antipas, makes it more remarkable. And that this centurion should come to such a faith that it amazed and astonished Jesus Christ is fascinating indeed.

What is his faith? Can we have it, too? This past week, in a scholarly part of my reading, I read a definition of faith. Now probably, most of you in this audience do not read this scholarly literature, but I read it [laughter]. In B.C. [laughter], this past week, the great guru was asked a question “O great guru, what is faith?” And the answer from the top of the snow-capped mountain came, “Faith is a condemned prisoner asking for a doggie bag during his last meal.” [Laughter]

There are people who believe that faith is believing something that is not true. That’s the schoolboy’s definition of faith. That faith, as defined by the great guru, is presumption. Biblical is not blind faith, as we shall see. Biblical faith is a faith that is grounded in truth, and it not faith if it is not grounded in truth.

The centurion came to a faith that was grounded in truth. This centurion, incidentally, is one of the most attractive characters of the New Testament. One of the great joys of heaven is getting to know the people who are already there. And to think that the individuals of the Old Testament and the New Testament are simply a small

minority of the interesting characters who are in heaven, makes heaven something that all true Christians should anticipate enjoying.

There are seven centurions in the New Testament. Surprisingly, every one of them is spoken of in a noble light. There is, for example, the centurion who stood around the cross, and as he saw what transpired, uttered those famous words, “Truly, this man was the Son of God.” And then there is Cornelius, the centurion who is the first Gentile to come to faith, according to the Book of Acts after the formation of the church on the Day of Pentecost. And then there is this centurion whose faith astonished Jesus Christ.

I’ve wondered about this. Why is it that the centurions are always spoken of in a favorable light? Was it because of the discipline to which they were exposed? Perhaps. We’re not told, however. It’s just one of those striking things that all of them appear in a very noble way in the New Testament.

There are two other notable things that I want to notice before we look at the centurion’s story. There is an apparent contradiction between this account and the account in Luke. Now if you’ll take your New Testaments for a moment and turn to Luke chapter 7, I want to read a few verses of the account that Luke gives us of this same incident. And you’ll notice from these few verses that there are at least two differences of some significance from the Lukan account and the Matthian account.

In the 2nd verse of Luke chapter 7 we read,

“And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die. And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they besought him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this: For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue. Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, ‘Lord, trouble

“The Healing of the Centurion’s Servant” by S. Lewis Johnson
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not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof:

Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.”

Now you’ll notice in the Lukan account, the centurion did not come to the Lord Jesus. In the Matthian account, he did come. In the Lukan account, as our Lord drew near to the house of the centurion, he sent another embassy of friends, but in the Matthian account, there is no reference to that whatsoever. In other words, in the Lukan account, it is stated that the centurion sent elders to beseech the Lord, then he sent friends to deter him from entering into his house – perhaps, incidentally, because he knew enough about the Jewish religion to know that to enter into the house of a Gentile would be defiling – but Matthew mentions none of these things and says, on the other hand, that the centurion came to Jesus himself.

Now I believe, and I’m sure most of you in this audience believe that the Scriptures do not contradict themselves, and we have to ask ourselves the question, well, how shall we explain this difference in the accounts?

Many years ago, Aurelius Augustinus – we know him as St. Augustine – Augustine said that, “What one does through others, one does himself.” Now we’ve passed through the national trauma known as Watergate, and we know from our newspapers that this general principle is a valid principle, that what one does through an agent, he does through himself. In the past, I’ve frequently had graduate students give my exams at the Dallas Seminary when I went out of town. And it can be just as well said that the graduate student gave the exam as that I gave it. A student might say, taking the exam given by the student, “Dr. Johnson’s exam was very easy today.” Rarely, of course, would they ever say it was hard. [Laughter] But I would be giving it through an agent.

Now it seems to me these two accounts would be beautifully harmonized if we just look at in that way, that Matthew is giving us a briefer account, and he’s simply saying that the centurion came through the elders and through the friends.

The second thing I want you to notice about this account is it has again on the face of it, a story to tell us about the purpose of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. When this centurion come to faith in Jesus Christ, that causes the Lord to reflect upon the eschatological future. We read in the 10th verse, “When Jesus heard it, he marveled, and said to them that followed, “Verily I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It’s evident that the Lord Jesus, seeing this Gentile come to faith in Christ, in himself, recognizes in this a fore-glimpse of the effect of his ministry. The Nation Israel will not respond, though he was sent to them and sent wholly to them, the Scriptures say. In the 10th chapter of this very gospel we read that the Lord Jesus instructed the Twelve, sent them forth, saying, “Go not into the way of Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter not, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And then in the 15th chapter and 14th verse, the Lord Jesus, in the incident of the healing of the Syro-Phoenecian woman, her daughter, we read in the 24th verse, “But he answered and said, ‘I am not sent but into the House of Israel.’”

The Apostle Paul, reflecting upon this later in the Epistle to the Romans says, “Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision to confirm the promises made unto the fathers,” and then he adds, “and that the Gentiles might glorify him for his mercy.” So, the thing that the Lord Jesus sees here is the same course of events that shall characterize his ministry. He came to confirm the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The nation as a whole does not respond. He then goes to the Gentiles to proclaim the message.

And he sees in this centurion coming to faith a fore-gleam of the course of the ministry that he shall have. Well, we want to look at the faith of the centurion, and so we notice, now, first of all, the request of faith that the centurion gave to the Lord Jesus. Remember that the Lord Jesus has just finished his great Sermon on the Mount. He has come to set up his kingdom. He does not stay on the mountain, but he deals with need at its lowest level, so he heals the leper. He heals the paralytic servant of the centurion. And he will heal, in a moment, Peter’s mother-in-law.

You’ll also notice that he acts in response to appeals. It is the leper who comes and says to him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. The centurion comes and asks him to heal his paralytic servant. And in the Markan account of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, it is someone else who again makes known the condition of Peter’s mother-in-law which provokes the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (we shall speak about that next Sunday, the Lord willing).

Now if we are to look at this account in its whole presentation, we must bear in mind the Lukan account, and so it is the elders who come on behalf of this good man, the centurion, who evidently was a favorite of them. He had built them a synagogue. He was evidently a friend of the Jews. He must have been a very good man, for this little boy was a servant, and as we have already spoken in this series, servants, in the day of our Lord, were simply chattel. They were things and not people.

And the fact that he was disturbed over the condition of the slave is an evidence of the fact that this centurion, though a soldier, also had a heart. The fact that he was disturbed over the suffering, and that he was nigh unto death, accentuates the care of the centurion. The Lord’s answer is very plain and direct, “I will come and heal him.” And that, I find, is quite interesting. It’s not, “Why did you wait so long?” It’s not, “Since you represent the oppressor, I cannot do anything for you. You are not a Jew.” Nor is it, “I will see what I can do,” but it is a plain and direct question, no evasion whatsoever. How

contrary to the healing of the so-called healers of the 20th Century. That was the request of faith.

Then we have a beautiful section in which we learn the reasoning back of this request. We hear a great deal, incidentally, today about simple faith. Now, you’ll notice this centurion, while he had faith, did not have simple faith. Here is a man whose faith is grounded in a whole philosophy of life, and it is grounded in a philosophy of faith in the sense that it contains a very mature and intelligent view of Jesus Christ.

Notice what follows, then. Before he speaks of the estimate of the Lord, he estimates himself. He says, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.” A Gentile, highly regarded by the Jews—the Jews had said, remember, when he came, “He’s worthy, for whom you are to do this; he’s built us a synagogue.”

He probably was attracted to Judaism because that would account for the building of the synagogue, and also, it would account for the fact that he had heard of the Lord Jesus. Luke tells us that he had heard of him. And so evidently, he had heard a report of the ministry of our Lord, and if we may affirm that he was familiar with Judaism, then we may affirm that he probably was a monotheist. He had come to believe in one God rather than many gods.

He had learned, not doubt, the *Shemah Yisrael*, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord,” and he had been attracted from faith in many gods to the one God of Judaism. Intelligently, he had reflected upon the fact that we cannot have a multitude of infinite beings. We must have one God. And having come to that by reflection, he had been attracted to Judaism.

Now of course, we know from the theology of the New Testament, that this was the result of the Holy Spirit’s teaching. And he is the subject of a gradual enlightening ministry of the Holy Spirit which everyone must have if they are to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

John Trapp, one of the Puritans, has said, “It is the nature of faith to believe God upon his bare word. It will not beset sense, it cannot beset reason, it both can and will beset faith, for I have the promise of it.” And this man, remarkably, had come to a faith which involved an estimate of himself of the lowest kind. Now, if ever a man had reason to think of himself highly, this man did. He was a Roman centurion in an occupied land. He was a representative of Rome. He evidently could have had all of the pride that goes with being a member of the Roman army.

I took eight years of Latin when I was going through school, and consequently, have great regard for the Latins, and to be one of the members of the Roman army in the day of its greatness would have been reason for pride. This man, however, says, I’m not worthy.

In addition, he was a religious man, thought highly of by the Jews. And finally, in our language, had built a church. And in addition, had sympathy and love for a servant who was only a slave. If a man ever had reason to think of himself as pretty good, this man did, but he says, Lord, I’m not even worthy that you should come under my roof. That’s the kind of estimate that a man must have of himself to become a candidate of the great salvation.

But now, most significantly, look at his estimate of the Lord. The opening words of the 9th verse have been given two different senses, “For I am a man under authority.” The New American Standard Bible, which many of you, I notice, have in your laps, is a very accurate translation for the most part. But no translation is perfect. There will be a perfect translation some day, if I ever get around to making it [laughter], but it’s doubtful that that will ever come to pass. And then, of course, there will be some unenlightened people who won’t like it, either. [Laughter]

In the meantime, we have to work with translations, and consequently it’s possible for all of us to make mistakes. The New American Standard Bible says, “I, too, am a man.” The little word *kai* in Greek means “and.” Ordinarily, it’s a connective, simple

connective. It may be adjunctive, in which case it means “also,” translated here in that way: “I too,” “I also am a man.” It may be attentive, translated then “even,” and it has a few other meanings as well. Those are the three most prominent meanings.

The Arians – who wanted to refute the claims of Athanasius and his party at Nicea concerning the deity of Christ – the Arians made something over this text which reads, “I am a man.” They said, “Notice that it says the Lord Jesus himself speaking, ‘I also am a man,’ so we should not accord him the deity that we give the Father.” But they thought of Jesus Christ as simply a kind of superman, but not as God himself.

There is another way to take this, and I feel convinced – I of course cannot prove it to everyone – but there are many other fine commentators who have taken this view also. I really feel that this should have been rendered, “For even I am a man and yet have authority.” The context does not stress the similarity between the two so much as the centurion’s intimate knowledge of authority, so the argument is from the less to the greater. Even I am a man under authority, and I may say, “Go and someone goes; come, and someone comes. Do this, and someone does it. How much more may you be able to speak authoritatively?”

And I think that in the light of this fact, that we have here a stress upon authority, and we have an argument from the less to the greater, that we are to give that term, Lord, its full force. Now you know in 1 Timothy chapter 3, it is stated there (I think I mentioned this last Sunday) that Abraham was called by his wife, Sarah, “lord.” I tried that at my home, incidentally [laughter]. It doesn’t work too well, men. I suggest that you not try it.

“Lord,” at times, means simply, “sir.” And it’s possible, of course, to render that here. Lord, sir, I am not worthy. But in the light of what he is saying, I am a man under authority – even I, Roman centurion, I have authority – how much more you? I am inclined to think that we are to give this “Lord” its full force. And so he has come to an impression of the deity and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. So he speaks of him in this

great way. He knows that he can heal with a word because he is God. True, at times he will heal by touching a leper in order to convince all that there is a love in back of his power, but he doesn’t have to do that. He may heal with a word.

And he knew, by virtue of what he heard of the Messiah, and the work that the Holy Spirit had wrought in his heart, that diseases fled at a word from the Messiah, Jesus Christ. What a tremendous estimate of the word and authority of the Lord Jesus that he had.

The Lord now responds to the faith. And the faith to which the centurion has come is astonishing to Jesus Christ. Now this does not mean that he was surprised by this, but it simply means that he marveled at it. Only two times are we told in the New Testament that the Lord Jesus marveled over faith. Here, he marveled at the faith in the centurion. In the 6th chapter of Mark we read that he marveled at the unbelief of Israel. So, he marveled at the unbelief of Israel, and he was astonished by the faith of the Gentile.

And notice that the faith that the Lord Jesus praises is the faith that praises him. Isn’t that interesting? The faith that he praises is the faith that praises him. This has always been one of the most astonishing things to me about the word of God and about the Lord Jesus, and one of the things that has convinced me so much concerning the inspiration of holy Scripture.

The Lord Jesus endorses the centurion’s expression of praise of himself. He accepts it, and he always accepts the praise that men give him. In fact, the more they praise him, the more he approves of the expressions. Now we don’t do that. If someone praises us, we say, “Oh really, I’m not that great; really your praise is out of place, I don’t deserve it.” At least that’s what we say. And most of us think that and know that deep down within.

Isn’t it a remarkable thing that the more men praise the Lord Jesus, the more he responds? In other words, it’s almost as if we can’t have too high of a view of him. Now

when you look at other men, you can see the difference. Take Peter,¹ when the man was healed in the early chapters of Acts, he replied, “Why look ye so earnestly on us as though by our own power or holiness we made this man to walk?” But Jesus Christ takes everything that is said about him in a laudatory way to himself as properly belonging to him.

In fact, it’s almost as if, the more you praise him, the more you please him, the more he will praise the faith that praises him. And so we must conclude that either he has an exorbitant appetite for adulation, as McLaren has said, or else in this we see the manifestation of his conscious divinity. So the faith that praises him is the faith that pleases him. Thomas Watson said, “Other graces make us like Christ. Faith makes us members of Christ.” And of course, the application of that is simply this: if we are to come to a true faith in the Lord Jesus that saves, we must come to this faith in him that acknowledges him as the Son of God who is the Messiah and the Redeemer. That’s the faith that unites to him.

Well, the coming to faith by the centurion causes our Lord to reflect, and so we read in the 11th verse, “And I say unto you that many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness, and there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Now we have spoken about this. I’ll pass this by this time, but I’ll simply make this comment that this faith causes him to reflect on the presence of believing Gentiles among the elect of Israel in the kingdom of heaven. The Apostle Paul will give us further information in the Epistle to the Romans in the 11th chapter.

And then finally, there concludes with the word of healing, “Go thy way. As thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.’ And his servant was healed in that very same

¹ This sentence has been modified by the transcriber. Dr. Johnson uses an illustration here from the story of Naaman, which though accurate in its basic idea of self-deference, is inaccurate in its reference to the actors in 2 Kings 5. Dr. Johnson mistakenly ascribes a quote to Elijah instead of the King of Israel, thus the clause has been redacted, and only the illustration of Peter has been transcribed.

hour.” And notice that he also says, “As thou has believed, so be it done unto Thee.” In other words, the measure of the believing is the measure of the healing. And there is not simply abatement of the disease, but absence of it. Again, how different from the healing of the healers.

William Barkley, in his commentary on the Book of Matthew, goes to great lengths to explain away this miracle, as Professor Barkley generally does. He says that “The reason that the Lord Jesus was able to heal the centurion’s servant was that he recognized, by extra-sensory perception, that his spontaneous work of healing was to take place in the centurion’s servant. And it’s on this basis that we are to explain this miracle.” He then gives some historical illustrations from Emanuel Swedenborg, to others, in order to support this, and then makes the amazing statement at the end of this explanation, humanistic and rationalistic as it is, “If human minds can get to the length, how much more the mind of Jesus?” But Professor Barkley, if Jesus is only a man, then this does not hold, for he, too, has a human mind.

“The strange thing,” he continues, “is that modern thought, instead of making it harder, is making it easier to believe it.” But that is not true. And your own smiles, when I mentioned it to you, confirm it. The truth of the matter is, that if we do not have a Christ that performs miracles, then we do not have a credible New Testament. And if we do not have a Christ who performs miracles, we cannot explain the faith of the Christian church in him as a performer of miracles. No, this is a divine miracle, performed by the Son of God.

Well now, it is evident from this simple account that the means of his healing was the faith of the centurion. So I ask the question now, as we come closer to the end of the message, what is this faith that he had? Let me answer this by first saying what it is not.

It’s evident that it was not good character. The Lord Jesus did not say, after the request of the elders and after the request of the friends, “Well, I have not found such

great character among all the Gentiles in the city of Capernaum, therefore on the basis of character, I heal the centurion’s servant.” It does not say that.

He does not say, secondly, that it was because of the religion of the centurion. The centurion had both character and religion; evidently a very religious man. But the Lord Jesus said, I have not found so great faith – not religion.

He does not say it is because of philanthropy. Here is a man, as I say, who built a church, who actually constructed a church. We’ve known of individuals like that. We say, “He’s a great man; he built a Baptist church, or whatever it may be.” He doesn’t say that. He doesn’t say that it was because of his philanthropy that his servant was healed.

He doesn’t say it was because of his humility, and he certainly had a great deal of humility. It was not for any of these things.

[Indistinct] Brooks said, in one of his admirable works, “He that believeth on the Lord Jesus shall be saved, be his sins never so many. But he that believeth not on the Lord Jesus must be damned, neither his sins be ever so few.” You see, God requires perfection, and if we are not to come by faith to Jesus Christ, we must present a perfect righteousness of our making. But unfortunately, not a one of us in this auditorium or anywhere could ever present him a perfect righteousness. We have failed. Therefore, we are all condemned.

What is this faith, then? His acceptance is not based on religion, good character, philanthropy, humility—we could go right down the line—culture, education, good works, not any of these things. His healing takes place on the basis of trust. But what is faith? What is faith?

I’d like to suggest to you that faith is made up of three basic elements. Now I’m sorry, I’m going to have to give you a little lesson in Latin, but it’s important that you grasp this. Faith is made up of three elements, of which the first is *notitia*.

Notitia is a Latin word from which we get “notice,” “notification.” It means, knowledge. There can be no faith that is not grounded in truth or knowledge.

Impossible to have faith in Jesus Christ in a saving way without knowledge. Now, that is of the greatest importance. There must be a certain kind of knowledge. *Notitia*.

A couple of hundred years ago, the world was covered with a great deal of bigotry and cruelty and superstition. We always seem to run to extremes, do we not? Back then, it was said, there is one faith, and if you do not have it, off went your head. That was not good, although I imagine some people got saved in that way.

Now it’s just the opposite. However contradictory our creeds may be, they are all right. All of them. Now if we would just use our common sense, we would know that that’s not true. Some reply, such-and-such doctrine need not to be preached and need not to be preached. We answer, then it need not to have been revealed.

And when we say that a doctrine found in the word of God does not need to be preached or revealed, what are we ultimately saying? We are ultimately saying that God has let slip something which is harmful to us, or unnecessary to us. What do we do when we say something like that? We ultimately impugn the wisdom of God.

I often hear people say this about the doctrine of election. I’m not going to talk about election; I’ll only say this, just using this as an illustration. There are some hard doctrines in the word of God, but if we ever take the attitude that they are not to be proclaimed, we are simply saying God has made a mistake in revealing them. The things that are revealed are for us and for our children, the holy Scriptures say. Certainly they are hard, but we are to study them and ponder them, reflect upon them and receive them, and seek, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to come to the meaning of them.

There are lots of people who have the faith of Mr. Spurgeon Fuller. A friend asked him, “What do you believe?”

He said, “I believe what the church believes.”

“Well, what does the church believe?”

“Well, the church believes what I believe.”

Well, finally, “What do you and the church believe?”

“We both believe the same thing.” [Laughter]

Now this man believed something, and the thing that he believed was that the church is right. He didn’t know a thing about what the church believed, but he believed that. He believed that the church was right. It’s an idle thing for a man to say he’s a believer and not know what he believes. How foolish.

We often hear preachers saying, “Believe, believe, believe!” You can sit and hear a man say that constantly, go out of the auditorium and someone comes up to you and says, “Are you a believer?” Yes, I’m a believer. What do you believe? Well, I’m not exactly sure, but I’m a believer. [Laughter] You’re not a believer. You’re not a believer at all. You cannot have faith without knowledge. There has to be truth; that is the object of your faith, and that truth, Scripturally, is truth about a person, our great triune God in heaven. Now that’s one thing about faith: *notitia*.

Secondly, *ascensus*. *Ascensus* is the word from which we get the English word, assent. *Ascensus* means conviction, conviction of the truth of something. In one of the books of Dr. Kennedy, he has given the story of a typical Sunday church service in communist East Europe. The service was progressing as usual, when suddenly, two communist soldiers brandishing sub-machine guns kicked open the door, and with flailing arms and angry voices, they came in among the Christians and denounced the Christian worship, and said such words as, you have no right to exist upon the face of the earth, we’re going to shoot all of you. However, any of you who are willing to denounce your faith in Jesus Christ step over to the right side of the sanctuary. Some of the people got up, moved over to the right side of the sanctuary. They turned and said, “Get out!” And they got out; they believed the soldiers.

And then the soldiers turned to the Christians that were left, trembling in their seats, no doubt. “We, too, are Christians. We’ve come to fellowship with you, but first we wanted to get rid of the hypocrites.” [Laughter] One thing about those that left, they believed. They believed the soldiers.

Ascensus is the conviction of truth of a message.

And finally, the third thing in faith: *fiducia*. *Fiducia* is the word from which we get our English word, “fiduciary.” A fiduciary institution is a trust company, or a bank that has trust departments. Fiduciary; that means “trust.” True biblical faith is made up of knowledge, conviction of the truth of that knowledge, and finally, reliance upon it. The reformers made a great deal over the fact that faith was reliance upon the gospel message. It was Paul’s belief of the heart. A reliance upon someone else. So when a man comes to faith upon Jesus Christ, he renounces all trust in himself or in anything that he does, and relies upon what someone else has done. That’s faith.

So when a man comes to saving faith, he rests upon Christ for what Christ has done. Knowing what he has done, being convinced of the truthfulness of it, he relies upon him. Let me illustrate with an old illustration. Let’s suppose an ocean-going liner has just been torpedoed. The liner is sinking quickly. The captain gets everyone off the boat but three sailors. The lifeboat is lowered. There is a little island about three miles away, and the captain says to the three men, “This liner is sinking. Within the half-hour it’ll be under the sea. I’m staying with this boat. The lifeboat has been lowered; I order each of you three men to get into the boat. The pilot will take you to that island to the west over there.”

Nothing happens. They stand there. He addresses the men again and he says to one of the sailors, “Didn’t you hear what I said? I told you the lifeboat would carry you to safety, and I ordered you to get in that boat. Did you understand what I say?”

The sailor says, “Yes sir, I understand exactly what you say. I heard your message, I just don’t believe that boat will carry me to safety.”

He turns to the second one. He says, “Did you hear what I said?” He says, “I heard what you said. I heard your message very plainly. I believe that boat will carry me to safety, but I don’t want to try it.”

And he turns to the third fellow, and he says, “I heard your message. I got *notitia*, and I have *ascensus*, too. I’m convinced it will take me to that island. Goodbye,” and he got in the boat and left, and he was saved. That’s biblical faith: *notitia, ascensus, fiducia*.

Another old, hackneyed illustration. Let’s suppose there’s a fire in an upper room of a house. The people are gathered out in the street. Suddenly, a child appears on the second story, and in there crowd, there’s a great big fella who plays for the Dallas Cowboys. And he goes over, and as the crowd shouts for the child to jump, this huge man stands out, he’s 6 feet 7, weight about 275 pounds – well, he really weights about 300; it’s the off-season – [Laughter] and he holds up his arms and says, “Jump! Jump, I’ll catch you!”

Now, it’s part of faith to know that the man is there. And the second part of faith that if the person jumps, that man is strong enough to catch him. But he’s not saved until he relies upon him and jumps. That’s what it means to come to faith.

What does it mean to plead the atonement of Jesus Christ? Why it means simply to cry out to God, “O God, Thou who has given the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, I rely upon him, because I am a sinner. And since Christ has died for sinners, I’m eligible.” And so, in pleading of the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, he trusts the atonement. In the final analysis, only when you have pled the atonement for your own salvation have you really trusted in him.

Now this comes only by virtue of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and he works sovereignly in distinguishing grace. I know what you’re saying. My goodness, if he only works sovereignly in distinguishing grace, then perhaps I’m not included. Well, you can settle the question right here. No one knows who is included in God’s sovereign, distinguishing grace, but you can settle the question as you rely upon the acts of the Redeemer who died for sinners. And as you come to him and rest in him, you can settle the question.

Now of course, you can go off and say, “Oh, but I don’t like that doctrine. I don’t like the idea of a sovereign, distinguishing Redeemer, who saves some and passes by others—I don’t like that.” Well if you want to stand off and do nothing about it, my dear friend, you are getting exactly what you wish, so you have nothing to complain about.

So I call upon you. Would it be a horrible thing to come into a meeting like this and hear that Jesus Christ has died for sinners, and that he offers a salvation that is completely acceptable to the Father that is heaven, and to pass out without having it? So I say, as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus, come. Come to him. Come as the centurion with the knowledge of his redeeming work, with the conviction that the Holy Spirit brings of the greatness of the Son of God and the truthfulness of the gospel, and cast yourself upon him. Trust in him by pleading the atonement he has accomplished. Say within your heart, O lamb of God, I come. May we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered for sinners, the love of God the Father who gave the Son, the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit – the blessed possession of all who have believed, be and abide with the saints.

And O Father, if there be some here who have not come to Christ, give them no rest nor peace until they rest in him.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.