

## *The Centurion* *Luke 7:1-10*

The finest flowers do not always grow, pampered and peat-mossed in the heat and humidity of a greenhouse. Now and then a beautiful blossom blooms, surrounded by thorns and thickets. Others struggle up through stones.

Some even grow in trash heaps and garbage dumps. And Rome was just that. It was a foul, decaying dump.

Roman society was a stinking sewer where cruelty was a spectator sport. Lives were traded like loads of wheat. And pagan temples were perfumed by painted prostitutes.

The centurion grew up in a squalid apartment somewhere in Rome's maze of side streets. He was free born. But his family did not live much better than slaves.

So when he was of age, he enlisted in one of Rome's legions and marched off to fight battles from Africa to Asia Minor. He was a good soldier. And over the years he rose in rank until he was offered an officer's commission.

Then the centurion was shipped to Galilee. There, he commanded a company of mercenary troops of the cohort that was quartered at the Roman barracks beside the lake at Capernaum.

The life he led was cold and carnal. Before his tour of duty in Galilee, he had never even heard of the God of the Jews.

Nevertheless, that God's only Son said the centurion's faith was beyond any in all Israel.

*He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith." Verse 9*

With neither scriptures nor spiritual instruction, the centurion's faith even impressed our Savior. And ours will too if it is like his.

## *Faith and Works*

Rome's vast empire depended upon slaves. Slaves cleaned houses, shoveled grain, and even treated injuries and illnesses.

But not every slave was beaten and abused. Some were prized and pampered. And Solomon promised there was a rich reward for doing that.

*He who pampers his slave from childhood will in the end find him to be a son. Proverbs 29:21*

That is precisely what happened with the centurion. He bought the boy when he was first transferred to Capernaum. Over the years, the boy grew from a child to a teenager.

Then the slave got sick. And the centurion was eaten up with anguish and worry. It was not merely a matter of purchasing another slave. He felt like he was losing a son.

Then the Roman remembered the rumors. From the waterfront to the market place, everyone in Capernaum was talking about the miracle working Carpenter from Nazareth.

*When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum. And a centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. Verses 1-3*

The centurion had studied his neighbors. And he knew how clannish Jews were. Most of them believed so much as stepping under a Roman roof was a terrible sin.

So the officer asked some Jewish friends to approach the Rabbi on his behalf. Those elders

found Jesus surrounded by a crowd of seekers and disciples.

But they did more than deliver the centurion's request. They added a plea of their own, urging Christ to come and help the man.

*When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored Him, saying, "He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue." Verses 4-5*

The Jewish elders knew the Nazarene. They had heard Him preach in Sabbath services. They had seen Him heal, too. So they had no doubt about Jesus' ability to heal the slave boy.

But they did wonder and worry about the Master's willingness. They knew Jesus both preached and practiced purity. They knew He insisted upon strict obedience to the scriptures, too.

So they were not at all sure the Savior would be willing to help their friend. After all, the man was not only a gentile and a pagan. He was an officer in the occupying army. That is why they spiced their urgent pleas with a testimonial of the centurion's good works.

A white limestone synagogue shimmered against the green grass on a hillside overlooking the lake. And it had been built by the centurion. From pillars to pews, the pagan officer paid for it all.

The centurion built a synagogue for worshipers who would not even allow him to step inside and worship with them. He did not do so for selfish reasons, either.

He did not build the synagogue because he felt he had to. Neither did he do so for purely political reasons: to make his job easier by currying good will and purchasing favor with the people.

The crumbling columns of a synagogue still stand above the blue waters of Gennesaret. Tiled paving stones covered the floors. And carved images decorated the walls.

The centurion did not cut corners. He sacrificed to build a place of worship for the Jews of Capernaum. But he did not do so in an earnest effort to please God.

That centurion served and sacrificed for the best of reasons. He loved the closed community of Jews at Capernaum. Even the elders knew that. That is why they spoke first of his love for the Jews.

Without the benefit of either the commandments or the counsel of God's Word, the company commander obeyed the very essence of what Jesus said God demands.

*He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." Matthew 22:37-40*

But love must be more than an attitude. It must also be an activity. God demands a working, giving love.

*Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 1 John 3:18*

Somehow, the centurion knew that merely loving God was not enough. It must be matched with a sincere love for people.

*...the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. 1 John 4:20-21*

The elders were careful to say the centurion did not merely build their synagogue. He did so because he genuinely loved God's people. That made our Savior smile.

And if we have a giving love for both God and others, it still pleases Him today.

## *Faith and Worthiness*

The Jewish elders who approached Christ on behalf of the centurion did disagree with that Roman officer in one important matter. They sincerely believed he was worthy of God's favor.

*When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored Him, saying, "He is worthy for You to grant this to him; Verse 4*

The Jews believed the Roman was worthy of Christ's favor because of his love and good works. But the centurion did not believe that was true at all. And he said so, not once but twice.

*...the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, Verses 6-7*

That company commander realized it was more than a bother for the sinless Son of God to come to his house. That is why he used such a strong word. Literally, the word translated trouble means skinned.

He realized Christ was more than a mere man. And he knew he was utterly unworthy to be in Jesus' presence. For the pure and perfect God, being with anyone as sinful as we are is much more than an annoyance. It is demeaning and degrading to so holy a God.

The centurion could not have known it, but he was in good company. The best among God's people agreed with him.

Jacob was more than Abraham's grandson. He was also the father of God's people. And he said the same thing.

*I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; Genesis 32:10*

Jesus Himself declared that John the Baptist was the very best of all mankind. Yet he too felt he was utterly unworthy to serve and stand in the presence of God's Son.

*He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; Matthew 3:11*

Coming to Christ and supposing we have any right to His favor is entertaining a double-edged lie. First, it is believing Isaiah was wrong; that our righteous acts really are pure and praiseworthy.

*...we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; Isaiah 64:6 (KJV)*

But believing we are worthy of God's favor is also founded upon an illusion that is much more insidious. It is not only seeing ourselves as high and holy. And it is also looking upon God as little more than a man.

But our God is not at all like us. He is the pure and perfect Lord of the universe. His power is beyond imagination. And His love is beyond measure.

He is so grand and glorious He could not allow Moses to look upon His face. If He had, the old lawgiver would have died.

*He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" Exodus 33:20*

The centurion was right, of course. He was unworthy. But so were the Jewish elders. And so are we.

Our God is more than willing; He is both eager and delighted to pour His limitless purity and power into our lives. But not because He is impressed with anything we are or anything we do.

No, all of God's goodness flows to us out of the storehouse of grace, and grace alone. It took the tears and torment, the body and blood of His own beloved Son to purchase that grace for us.

We must never forget that. Yes, we can come to God as our Abba: our loving Father. But we can only do so because of what Jesus did for us. And we come to God as those who are utterly unworthy even to be in His holy presence. That was true of the Centurion. And is even more true of us.

## *Faith and the Word*

The Jewish elders pleaded with Jesus to come and heal the centurion's slave. So the Savior started walking the cobbled streets of Capernaum toward the Roman's villa.

But Jesus never made it to the officer's home. A second delegation of friends met Him before He got there. They had a message for the Master, too.

*I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Verses 7-8*

The centurion had a remarkably deep understanding of Christ's authority on earth. Somehow, that Roman officer realized our Redeemer's authority was much like his own.

The centurion had no power of his own. He had been given authority over both servants and subjects of the Roman Empire by Caesar himself. All the power the Roman ruler had over his empire was given to that Roman officer. So when the centurion spoke, it was as if Caesar himself was speaking.

And Jesus had the same sort of authority. While He was on earth, our Savior was not free to do whatever He wanted. He worked within the perfect will of His heavenly Father.

*I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. John 6:38*

In fact, Jesus insisted that He could do nothing at all on His own. He could only do as His Father instructed.

*I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. John 5:30*

The Roman was right, of course. Christ did have the same kind of authority on earth that he did. So, even though God's Son was able to command all creation when He was on earth, His authority was not His own. It was His heavenly Father's

The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus emptied Himself of all His greatness and glory before He became a human being. So Jesus could command wind and waves, demons and diseases because He had been given that authority by His Father.

The Roman also understood how that authority operated. When the officer wanted something done, he issued a command. There was no need for persuasion and penalties or coaxing and cajoling.

The centurion spoke for Caesar. And Jesus spoke for God. So when Jesus commanded demons to flee away from the people they were terrorizing and tormenting, there were no arguments. The demons did as they were told. The sovereign God had spoken.

The same was true on the Sea of Galilee. The gale force winds and pitching waves had no choice but to silence into serenity. God's Son spoke for the Father. So they instantly obeyed.

The centurion did not lose himself in theological arguments. He applied his spiritual understanding specifically and practically to his own immediate problem.

Jesus spoke on the authority of the Lord of the universe. So if the Savior commanded, even germs and microbes had to obey.

And it was so. While He was still some distance from the centurion's home, the Savior spoke. And the disease instantly fled away from the slave's body.

*When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.*  
*Verse 10*

Our Redeemer has been restored to the full power and glory He knew since before the universe was began. But the principle still stands. No, we cannot speak for God as Jesus did. But we do not have to. We have His Holy Word.

The Bible is the infallibly inspired Word of God. And it carries the full authority of the Father. That is why we can quote God's promises, proclaim them, and trust in them. Our God is Lord over all creation. And His commands must be obeyed.

Our loving Lord's promises are more than words. They are the power of God. And we can use them to take command of our own crises. We never need to suffer under Satan's whip or the power of sin. We can command them to flee away from us.

And they must obey.