

SUCH GREAT FAITH

Luke 7:1-10

Key Verse: 7:9

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

In today's passage Jesus commends the faith of a Roman centurion. This man was a Gentile soldier. But he had such great faith that amazed Jesus. What kind of faith do you have? Would Jesus commend your faith? May God help us to think about our faith personally as we study this passage!

I. THE SHEPHERD'S HEART OF A CENTURION (1-6)

Look at verse 1. *"When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum."* Jesus had just finished sharing the most beautiful message, sometimes called, "The Sermon on the Plain," with his new disciples and a crowd of people. He told them, *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"* (6:20). He also said, *"Love your enemies"* (6:27). Jesus taught them after spending a night in prayer and designating his 12 apostles. He also touched and healed many sick people. It was an exhausting day of work for Jesus. Afterwards, he entered Capernaum, perhaps to visit Peter's house.

Look at verse 2. *"There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die."* We meet a centurion and his servant in this verse. A centurion was a Roman officer who was in charge of 100 soldiers. Roman centurions were trained to be tough, both mentally and physically. They were ruthless. They routinely committed terrible atrocities on the people they conquered, like today's ISIS and Boko Haram. They were not known for compassion and mercy. But the Roman centurion in this passage was different. Verse 2 says that the centurion valued highly his servant.

Historians estimate that there were about 3 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Most of them were captured in battle. These enslaved prisoners of war had no human rights. They were regarded as nothing more than property. Their sole purpose was to provide slave labor for their masters. When slaves became sick and useless, their masters would abandon them like a broken piece of furniture (1Sa 30:13). However, this centurion saw his servant as a person, not as his possession. When the servant got sick, he did everything he could to help him. This centurion had a personal concern for his servant, despite their differences in their social status. He took care of him like his own son. And the servant was deeply grateful to his master for his personal care. A loving relationship between them grew. Every morning, the servant would greet his master with a basin of warm water to start a new day. He would say, "Good Morning, Sir. How are you feeling this morning?" The centurion would reply with a smile, asking, "Did you sleep well last night?"

But one morning, the servant could not get up from his bed. His master called for him, but all he heard in reply was a soft moan. He had a fever and flu like symptoms. The centurion gave him some pain medicine and hoped he would get better. But instead of getting better, he got worse. The centurion called in a doctor. But the sickness kept on getting worse. Now the fear of death was on his eyes. As the centurion heard his painful breathing and saw his utter helplessness, tears rolled down his cheeks. He wished he could attack the sickness with his spear, as he had done with his enemies. But his power was totally useless before the tiny virus that was killing his servant. At this point, many men would give up, saying, "Well, I have done all I could." But where there is a shepherd's heart, there is no giving up. He still tried to find a way to help his servant. This centurion reminds us of the friends of the paralytic in Luke 5, who dug through a hole on the roof of someone's house in order to bring their friend to Jesus by any means. Jesus saw their faith (Lk 5:20). Jesus saw their shepherd's heart. A shepherd's heart is beautiful. A miracle begins with a shepherd's heart.

Look at verse 3. *"The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant."* This was the beginning of the centurion's faith in Jesus. He heard of Jesus. It is important to hear of Jesus. We hear of Jesus when we study the Bible. This is what St. Paul says in Romans 11:13-15: "For 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, 'How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!'" (NLT)

So what did the centurion hear about Jesus? He heard how Jesus healed a man with leprosy. He heard how Jesus healed a paralyzed man. He heard how Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand. When human hope was gone, he found hope in Jesus. He must have said the name, "Jesus," over and over again. As hope grew in his heart, he pounded his right fist into his left hand and decided to ask Jesus to help his servant. So what did he do when he realized that Jesus could heal his servant? Did he rush to Jesus to demand him to heal his servant? No. He asked some of his Jewish friends to go and see Jesus with a humble request. Though he was a Roman centurion with power, he saw the Jewish society with respect. He did not try to coerce Jesus, but consulted the elders in asking for Jesus' help.

When the elders came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, *"This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue"* (4-5). This was a very unusual statement. The Jews hated the Romans, the Gentile oppressors. But it is clear this Roman centurion had won the hearts of the Jewish people. They genuinely respected the Roman officer. When they went to Jesus on the centurion's behalf, they had no reservation for him at all. They pleaded for him earnestly with Jesus. The elders bowed their heads before the young rabbi, and pleaded with him on behalf of the centurion.

How could the proud Jewish elders humble themselves to ask a favor of Jesus? It was because they really appreciated the centurion's love towards their people. They testified that the Roman centurion loved their nation. He even built their synagogue. This was an amazing statement. Being deployed in Judea was not a dream job for Roman commanders. It was far from Rome. The Jews were extremely hostile to Romans, which made their job very difficult. It was like a U.S. army commander deployed in Afghanistan today. But this centurion loved the nation Israel. He must have been moved by the beauty of Jewish society, based on the Law of God and the worship of the one true God. So he was happy to build their synagogue, not as a gesture, but out of his deep respect and love for the people of Israel.

During the Gulf war, Col. Edward Willis, a commander of the Army National Guard's 115th Engineering Group, and his unit have been building and fixing schools, sewers, buildings and highways in southern Iraq. When he met an Iraqi father whose daughter was born with a congenital heart problem, Col. Willis did everything to help the 5-year old girl. Finally, the girl was brought to the U.S. for a successful surgery by a surgeon in Maine. Many American soldiers were killed and maimed by the Iraqi bombs. But this commander loved them. No doubt many Iraqis loved the commander for his humanity.

We can learn a lesson from the centurion on how to minister to people in our mission field. Sometimes, we are tempted to complain about our difficult situation or the unfriendly people around us. But this centurion did not complain. Instead, he won the hearts of his enemies by having a compassionate heart towards them. He made an environment in which God could do his saving work, even though he might not have realize it. Likewise, I believe we can serve the Lord even in our material-oriented, pleasure-seeking generation, by reaching out to young students with the heart of Jesus, one person at a time.

We also learn that the centurion in this passage was a man of true humanity. The Jewish elders vouched for him, saying he deserved a favor. But the centurion himself said he did not deserved it (6). This is the attitude of a truly humble man. How did Jesus respond to the plea? Verse 6 simply states, "*So Jesus went with them.*" Jesus was deeply moved by the centurion's shepherd's heart toward his servant. Jesus is always moved by a shepherd's heart. Until now, Jesus had to endure many self-righteous Pharisees who were not concerned about their suffering people. His heart was broken when he saw the people who were like "sheep without a shepherd." So Jesus was greatly encouraged by the centurion's deep concern and love for his servant. Again, Jesus is delighted to see a person with a shepherd's heart. A shepherd's heart is the heart of God.

II. HE HAD THE "SAY THE WORD" FAITH (7-8)

Look at verses 6b-7. *He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed."* When he heard that Jesus was near

his house, the centurion stopped thinking about his servant for a moment and began to think about Jesus. When he realized that Jesus was coming to his house, he was shocked to realize how presumptuous he was when he asked Jesus to come to his house. The fear of God came into his heart. He knew Jesus was no ordinary Jewish doctor. He called Jesus “Lord.” He had accepted Jesus as the Lord. And he knew that even ordinary Jews would be reluctant to enter a Gentile person’s home. So he trembled at the thought of the Lord coming to his house. His reverence for Jesus is well expressed in his words, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.”

What did the centurion want Jesus to do for his servant? Through his friends, he said to Jesus, *“But say the word, and my servant will be healed.”* When the centurion had a trembling heart before the Lord, he absolutely came to believe the authority of Jesus’ word. He was convinced that Jesus could heal his servant by just rebuking the sickness from a distance. He had great faith in Jesus’ word. His servant was dying in any minute, yet he believed that Jesus’ word would bring his servant back to life.

How did the centurion come to have such faith? Look at verse 8. *“For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”* This centurion had a great learning mind. He learned spiritual principles even from professional life. In the Roman army, the words of a commanding officer were absolute. The centurion knew what it meant to be “under authority.” He had to obey his superior officer absolutely. There were no excuses, no questions and no alternatives. It was “obey to the death.” As some soldiers would say, “Our orders are not to question why, but to obey.” The centurion applied this to the authority of Jesus. Based on what he heard about the ministry of Jesus, he accepted Jesus as one who had authority over the world. He saw Jesus as the Commander-in-Chief of the universe. He understood Jesus better than his disciples did. Outwardly Jesus was a poor carpenter from Nazareth. But Jesus’ word had authority over even sicknesses. When he said to the leper, “Be clean!” the leprosy left him immediately (5:13). Jesus’ word drove out evil spirits. When he said to a demon possessed man, “Be quiet. Come out of the man!” the demon came out of the man. All the people were amazed and said to each other, “What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to impure spirits and they come out!” (4:36) When the centurion heard about this, he knew Jesus had the authority. He knew that all Jesus had to do was “say the word” and his servant would be healed.

When we have the “say the word” faith, we can experience Jesus’ healing. Jesus’ word has the power to heal the sick, both physically and spiritually. Many young people are sick spiritually. But Jesus’ word can heal them. One young man was growing spiritually when he was overcome by romantic feelings toward a girl and his faith stagnated. He was distracted and could not study. His grades suffered. He looked like a zombie. Then his Bible teacher began to pray earnestly for him and helped him prepare a Bible message for a conference. By God’s grace, Jesus’ word spoke to him personally. The word of God healed his heart and made him well. He delivered a wonderful message. Afterward, two students eagerly asked him to teach them the Bible. He

finished the semester with good grades and continued to grow as a faithful shepherd. Jesus' word has the power to heal spiritual sickness.

III. "SUCH GREAT FAITH" (9-10)

Look at verse 9. *"When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.'"* Jesus was amazed at the centurion's faith. In the gospel accounts, Jesus was seldom amazed by anyone or anything (except by his hometown people's unbelief). But here Jesus was amazed by the centurion's faith. Therefore, we must take note and learn from him. Let's briefly review the nature of the centurion's faith. First, he had a shepherd's heart for his servant. Second, he genuinely respected and loved the Jewish people to the degree that he was recognized by the Jewish elders. Third, he recognized the holy God in Jesus. He called Jesus his Lord. Fourth, he had absolute faith in the power of Jesus' word. Jesus was amazed at him and praised his faith, saying, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." The Roman centurion was a Gentile, but Jesus recognized his faith. Jesus is not only the God of the Jews, but the God of the Gentiles, too. Jesus reveals the universal love of God for all people of all nations. Those who have faith are blessed by God, be they Jew or Gentile.

Look at verse 10. *"Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well."* Jesus was pleased with the centurion's faith. He was happy to heal his dying servant. The servant got well precisely at the moment Jesus commended the centurion's faith. The color returned to the servant's face. He must have thanked God for Jesus. He must have thanked God for his good shepherd, the centurion. When we have absolute faith in the word of Jesus, many young people can be healed.

May God help us to learn the faith of the centurion, beginning with his shepherd's heart! May God help us to believe the word of Jesus with absolute faith and serve many young people through one-to-one Bible study! May God help each of us to have faith that even amazes our Lord Jesus!