

The Great Faith of The Centurion

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to Luke's Gospel and to chapter 7. We're actually going to be looking at the two passages we read, but we're taking Luke's account as our main area of exposition.

But we will come to Matthew 8 as well, we'll be referring to it, and indeed the differences between the two accounts in due course. Obviously, we're looking here at the great faith of the centurion. And this centurion, although commended by Jesus for his great faith, is unnamed. We don't know his name. We know that he was in charge in Capernaum for that area of Galilee.

And we see him used by the Saviour both as a caution to people and an encouragement too.

Because he came to Jesus with little theological knowledge, with little background.

He had some, no doubt. But he hadn't the background of the Jews of Capernaum, those who were brought up on the Old Testament Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible.

[1 : 20] But he, nonetheless, had a view of Jesus that the leaders in Capernaum, the religious leaders, lacked. And he comes therefore as a caution to us, regarding our use of the knowledge, the spiritual and biblical knowledge we have.

But he comes as an encouragement as well. That despite his deep feelings of unworthiness, he believed that Jesus was able to help him.

He believed in Jesus' power to help him. And he had faith in Jesus. And indeed this faith is commended by the Saviour himself.

And it is commended to us as we look at this passage today. I mentioned already, the Jews, the authorities in Capernaum, in the synagogue, hadn't made the best use.

In fact, they hadn't made much use at all of the knowledge they had. And so the centurion in his great faith, serves as a serious and solemn rebuke to unbelief.

[2 : 37] And to scepticism. And particularly as it was found there, in that wee seaside town of Capernaum. So let's consider the passage, and think about the helpful lessons that we derive from Jesus' emphasis on the great faith of this centurion.

The context itself, of course, takes Jesus into what is called the first Galilean ministry. And we're talking about 28 AD, if you wanted to put a date on it.

He had been around and about. He had been in Jerusalem, and then he came up into Galilee, and so on. And at this point, he comes and he settles in Capernaum, and makes use of it as what you might call his mission base.

I want then to think about the centurion, just simply because the Lord Jesus Christ himself commends the great faith of the centurion.

First of all, I want to notice things about the centurion that demonstrate how the Lord was at work in him, and characteristics, if you like, or traits that show us why he had such great faith.

[4 : 01] He made use of what the Lord had given him, and he made use of it in a big way. First of all, the centurion's compassion. Now, the word compassion is not used, but it is demonstrated in both the passages in Matthew and in Luke.

You see, the man himself cared for his servant. Verse 2 tells us, A certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick, and ready to die.

So he heard about Jesus, and sent elders to plead. Verse 3, They begged him earnestly. They begged him earnestly to help with this serious problem.

And it's important to notice that this man was charged, as it were, in his heart, with care for his servant.

A man who had hundreds and hundreds of soldiers to be in charge of, to direct, and to see to it that they were doing their work efficiently.

[5 : 15] He had the whole region there, around in Galilee, upper Galilee, and he was responsible to Herod Antipas to look after that area, to police it effectively.

But we find that this centurion, like other centurions, in the gospel records, was an honourable man. He was trustworthy. He was a true leader of men.

You see the same in Acts 10, when it talks about Cornelius, the centurion. But the most significant thing about the man, at this point, is the heart he had.

His caring heart, his compassionate heart, for his servant. We would say people mattered to him. He wasn't just using people to further his own ends, but simply people mattered.

Even his servant. who was sick and dying. And there's a nice touch in Luke's account of this, where we read in verse 2, a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die.

[6 : 32] He wasn't just a servant. Yes, he was a servant. But he was dear to the centurion. He was his friend. He was regarded by him.

And he was so concerned for him, both as his slave and as his friend, that he wanted to do everything he could to save his life. And this is why he considered, you see, that the best solution to this urgent problem was get help from Jesus.

Although he lacked the background, the theological background, he didn't lack the knowledge of what Jesus was doing. After all, he was policing the area with his hundreds of soldiers.

And he was in touch, we can be sure of that, with all that was going on, with all that might cause problems. After all, people were flocking to Jesus.

And the centurion knew there was something great going on wherever Jesus went. And so he decided he was going to ask Jesus to help him.

[7 : 43] But I think it's fair to say that as a Gentile, he was at a disadvantaged position. He was, although he had attached himself to the synagogue, he was a Gentile still.

And he perhaps thought the best way to get a response from Jesus is to go to the Jewish elders, to the elders of the synagogue, verse 3.

So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders, the elders of the Jews, to Jesus, pleading with him to come and heal his servant.

Now, we'll explain, in its place, the difference between Matthew's account of it and Luke's account. For the moment, suffice to say, the centurion thinks the best way forward here, the best way to get Jesus' help, Jesus' help, is to go through the Jewish leaders.

Call for the elders. It's a very biblical thing. And get them to pray and anoint with oil and so on. So he goes through the elders. Rather than the direct approach, he seeks their assistance.

[8 : 59] Now, this is an important thing. He makes every effort to help his servant because he cares for him.

He has compassion upon him. His heart went out to him in his hopeless and perilous state. He's sick and ready to die.

Verse 2. And I think it's at this point that we begin to take real stock of the quality of the man himself. That he was an honourable man.

He was used by Jesus on purpose to demonstrate that God was at work in his life. A man who went out of his way to help his dying servant.

You remember how, in another place, Jesus takes in the parable of the good Samaritan, built round actual characters, no doubt. He showed how the Samaritan had his heart was right.

[10 : 02] He was compassionate and merciful. And whilst the priest and the Levite passed by on the road home to Jericho, the good Samaritan went where the man was who was bleeding and dying because he had been beaten and robbed.

And so it's in this same way that Jesus gives us to think about the centurion and the kind of man he had become.

And I think there's a practical lesson in this for us that we have to watch ourselves lest we become hardened through life's difficulties.

There's such a thing as the hardening effects of sin on our lives. The hardening effect of what we see, what our minds are exposed to.

Let me illustrate for a moment. We can't look at the television, at the news, at the tragedy of Haiti, at the tragedy that is in Indonesia and the different islands, in Pakistan.

[11 : 12] We can't look at these things without being affected. And one of the great dangers for us is that we become hardened. We see it and see it and we just feel the best thing to do is not to think

too much about it.

We give help here, we give help there, we give to disaster relief. And the fact is that sometimes it can come up on the screen, we get the latest bulletin, and we're chatting about something that's our own concern.

Sin can harden. Life can harden. And our compassions can fail. And we have to learn, I think, from this. After all, he was a soldier.

He was the equivalent of a senior officer. And we can learn from him in the way that he didn't let the hard side of life take away his care and compassion.

That's the first thing about him. And at least one lesson we learn from him. The second thing we may learn is of the centurion's conviction.

[12:27] We've touched on this a little bit, but I want to focus in on it. He heard about Jesus, verse 3, and decided that Jesus could help.

He was absolutely convinced that this great miracle worker, this physician, as it were, that he'd been hearing about, could heal his slave.

And as we've said already, he knew his territory, and he knew what was going on around Capernaum. And he concluded that Jesus was the one to really help.

And I think this is a very practical lesson. We need to have a real conviction in our hearts that Jesus is the one to help us.

Life's trials present all sorts of difficulties. Sometimes these difficulties come upon us unexpectedly. And they come upon us in a way when we're not ready for them and don't want them.

[13:31] There's other things, maybe good things, to be going on. And here they come, like a great, like a great sea swell coming at us. And our mind is impacted.

And we're shaken. And we need this conviction to rise again and again in our hearts. Jesus can help me here.

And it's not told to us in the passage, in either passage, what help, what medical help was available for this dying slave.

But whatever it was, nothing could be done. And there are times in life when that is the case, when all the expertise is exhausted.

And we ought to think that when we go into an experience, maybe when a family member has to go into hospital or some such thing, we're not ultimately putting our hands, our lives rather, in the hands of the experts, but ultimately in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[14:43] He is in control. He has authority over everything in the whole created realm. And this centurion commends the necessary conviction to us.

Jesus can help here. those of us who have been around crisis situations, sometimes we have seen the Lord take people away.

That has been as well. Other times we have seen him keep people in this world that perhaps we never thought would ever stay in this world. I remember one case and it's only one just because time doesn't permit it, but I remember one old lady she was a retired teacher and she was in the Dornoch congregation.

I was looking after it, a neighbouring congregation in Sutherland. And she succumbed to some illness or other and nobody seemed to know what was happening but she looked dreadful and was incredibly ill and was taken into hospital and folk were called for and people were praying for her that really that the Lord would look after her and take her to himself soon.

And I remember going in as her minister because of the vacancy in that congregation finding I didn't know what really to be praying and praying and praying that if it was his will that he would spare her and restore her or if it was his will that it would become apparent he was going to take her away.

[16:36] And that lady made a marvellous recovery and she had contacts and connections who were very supportive of her when she recovered and went out to hospital one of whom had a holiday home in Tenerife and she was there many times for holidays before she left this world.

And if one had to give a judgment and others gave a judgment even medical people gave a judgment on it that had said she wouldn't have lasted a couple of weeks.

We are not in charge even the best estimates of those whose business and calling it is to make assessments and to give a prognosis sometimes maybe more often than we expect the Lord Jesus Christ intervenes and acts and heals and restores.

And this centurion in his own day and own time with the knowledge he had had this conviction that Jesus was the one to help.

He believed in Jesus' authority. And it's interesting you see that this senior officer in the Roman army he takes his own position and he uses it to illustrate to himself Jesus is far greater.

[18:16] I am under authority but I have others under my authority and I say to this one go and he goes do this and he does it.

And he uses this you see in the passage. He knows that just as he had authority over people Jesus had a far greater authority over people and over illness too as was apparent.

I say to my soldiers go and they go and all Jesus needs to say to this illness to this paralysis that is bringing my servant to the crisis of death all Jesus needs to say is go and it will go it will go out of him and you see he had this borne and upon him he was convinced that even though his slave was near to death Jesus could reverse this and deliver his servant.

Now of course this doesn't always happen and we saw it not so terribly long ago of one who was much loved among us that we had a notice of an event there in memory of the late Annie Margaret and her name is a fragrant name to us and everybody hoped and prayed that the Lord would spare her and she would recover but it wasn't his will to do but it would have been totally wrong not to have the conviction about his capacity for doing it if he was willing he could have done it it wasn't his will to do it wasn't lack of ability to do it and this centurion had this conviction a conviction which we need to have ourselves and to ask for if we feel we don't have it he is the one who is able to heal us and restore us not least from the sins that beset us from the spiritual maladies we have and the diseases from all that is awkward and obtuse and sinful about us we need the conviction that the centurion commends the conviction that Jesus is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or imagine the third thing I want us to consider about him in putting in building up a picture of him as a man of great faith is the centurion's humility we're told we're told in verse 6

Jesus went with those who had come to plead for the healing of the servant verse 6 then Jesus went with them and when he was already not far from the house the centurion sent friends to him saying Lord do not trouble yourself for I am not worthy to come under that you should enter under my roof I am not worthy now this is an interesting section that demonstrates so clearly the man was humble let me show you what I mean in his own right he was an important man we've already been saying that but we discover he was a wealthy man he was well thought of in Capernaum the Jews who come say about him he was very well thought of by them he loves our nation and has built us a synagogue think about it think about that he built them a synagogue that is the equivalent of building a church we've got to simply say in those days it cost as much to build a synagogue as it would build a church today this is what we're talking about this is the man he had all that going for him he was well thought of by the elite in

[22:57] Capernaum when the Jewish elders came to Jesus with their request for the centurion pleading for help they didn't say this is a humble man this is an unworthy man they said he is worthy look at verse four and when they came as the elders of the synagogue came to Jesus they begged to mournfully saying that the one for whom he should do this was deserving literally worthy see that they say he's worthy he says I'm not worthy they say he loves our nation and has built this synagogue at his own expense is obviously implied now there was only one synagogue in in Capernaum and there's one synagogue on the site of that to this day in fact

I nearly took in a photo for you to show you sat in it it's a ruin now of course but it is there a fourth century rebuild on the site and to my mind it is a lovely touch here if you think about it Jesus heals the servant of the centurion who built the synagogue that Jesus taught in in Capernaum there's a wonderful thing about it and this centurion you see had come in from paganism and the multi-gods of the Roman Empire into the Jewish fold into Jewish monotheism but he wasn't merely formal in his allegiance to the

Lord because the official position about human nature was he is worthy the spiritual attitude of the centurion is I'm not worthy and it takes God in his grace to make us say I am not worthy it's true if we think God word we're not worthy of the least of his mercies or of all his kindness it was Jacob who became Israel who said that the man's estimate of himself was exactly opposite to the elders of the synagogue he is worthy I am not worthy I'm not worthy Lord that you should even enter under my room somebody has called this the humility of grace and I think that's a nice way of putting it here is a heaven taught soul taught by the grace of

God to have a lofty view of Jesus and a lowly view of self my dear friends the difference you see between these leaders is that they had lofty views of man and far too lowly views of God himself and their attitudes were resisted Jesus himself denounced the leaders of Capernaum later on in Matthew's gospel we read that but this man is a humble man taught by the grace of God and so we're told that when Jesus is almost at the centurion house the centurion sent friends telling the Lord not to trouble himself and don't even come under the roof just say the word verse 7 and my servant will be healed now time is whizzing on so we must just notice here the difference between Matthew's account of this and Luke's account because you can easily get the impression from Matthew's account that the centurion himself went directly to Jesus but Luke tells us more particularly what happened Luke tells us that the elders of the Jews went representing the man and on behalf of the man the centurion begged Jesus begged him as if he were there himself let me illustrate this we have several references for example in Mark in chapter 10 verse 37 we're told that James and John asked Jesus they petitioned Jesus master grant that each of us can sit one on the right and one on the left when you come into your kingdom

[28 : 23] Matthew in chapter 20 and verse 21 tells us it wasn't actually James and John it was their mother we're told Jesus baptized more disciples than John the Baptist John 4 verses 1 and 2 tell us that Jesus didn't baptize any but his disciples did see what I'm saying you've got it said Jesus baptized but that didn't mean literally did it he was represented by his disciples another example of the same way of putting the thing Pilate scourged Jesus Pilate had Jesus beaten is what really meant in other words

Pilate the governor didn't literally take the lash and lash the Lord Jesus Christ he instructed others to do it and yet we're told Pilate scourged Jesus John 19 1 and I raise these up simply to remind you that it can be it can be said in such a way that it appears on the surface as if the centurion actually went to Jesus whereas in fact he sent the leaders of the Jews now one last thing before we finish the centurion's faith all these things we've looked at combined to impress us with the kind of man he had become by grace and we look lastly at his faith he believed

Jesus could heal at the crisis point of death he could do it from a distance he didn't need to see the man he could do it with a word he believed that Jesus could simply and powerfully bid the disease to go and health return I can bid my soldiers go and do and Jesus you can bid the disease to go and stay out and health to can just as I have authority Lord Jesus you have sovereign authority and if you are willing you can make this happen and that that is abundantly the case you only need to consider

Jesus own response to the centurion's faith verse nine when Jesus heard these things he marveled at the centurion and turned around and said to the crowd that followed him I have not found such great faith among the Israelites only twice that I know of in the New Testament in the gospel certainly are we told Jesus marveled that word is a word that conjures up the notion of astonishment twice he marveled once at the end belief of the people of his hometown of Nazareth and here at the faith of the centurion now

Jesus healed the slave with a word and all went well for him and the centurion but if you think about it what an indictment this was upon the inhabitants of Capernaum and indeed the leadership of the synagogue in Capernaum in the Matthew account in verse 11 we are reminded by Jesus that the time would come when people from the east and the west and that means just all over the world would come into the kingdom of God and those who were the sons of the kingdom that is the Jewish people the Israelites not literally everyone but the bulk of them having had so much blessing would be left outside and would go into outer darkness would be dispatched by the

[33 : 57] Lord because they neglected to believe his report the Gentiles from all over the world will sit down at the lamb supper in the kingdom of God says Jesus but you sons of the kingdom you'll lose out at last and surely that's a solemn charge to you and me that we make use of the knowledge of the gospel we have that we make the best use of our spiritual privileges and that when we say of ourselves Lord I am not worthy it may be to sit at the Lord's table I am not worthy what our response to be is he is worthy we are called upon to believe in him that he is worthy and he is able let us take to heart the centurion's compassion and the conviction he had about

Jesus and the humility he had before God and man and above all the great faith that he had in the Lord Jesus Christ the writer to Hebrews says how shall we how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation salvation let us be not faithless but believing and he is able to give us the great faith of the centurion Amen