

SEED & BREAD

FOR THE SOWER ISA. 55: 10 FOR THE EATER
BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

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THE CENTURION OF CAPERNAUM

The Biblical accounts of the Roman centurion who was stationed in Capernaum are found in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. A discrepancy has been supposed in these two accounts, and students have long tried to decide if the centurion came alone to the Lord *Jesus*, whether he sent the elders of the *Jews* to represent him, *or* if the accounts record two different events. My own opinion is that since among the Hebrews what one did through agents he did himself, and the matter could be stated either way. The centurion had commissioned (*apostello*) these elders. Matthew's omission of the detail about the elders is not at variance with Luke. It is simply an abbreviation of the account.

This centurion is of special interest to us because of two things. The Lord declared He had found no faith as great as his in Israel; and he was one of the two Gentiles who received favors *from* the Lord *Jesus* during His earthly ministry. The other was the Syrophonecian woman spoken of in Matt. 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30.

The character of this centurion is such that some interpreters think he was a proselyte; that is, one who had become a *Jew*. They are inclined to describe him as what is called "a proselyte of the gate," a somewhat meaningless term which has no basis in Scripture and would make this centurion to be ambivalent, neither fish nor fowl. When all facts are considered it will be seen that it was impossible *for* a Roman soldier, serving in the army of occupation to have become a true convert to the faith of Israel. There was a mutual exclusivity about these two positions that made it impossible *for* one to be both at the same time, unless he were a renegade and traitorous *Jew*. He then would have been an apostate, but not a proselyte.

Those who make him to be a proselyte seem to do so because they feel this explains his kindness, humility, faith and godliness. "How can we account *for* one who was a heathen by birth, and a soldier by profession showing such a spirit as this?" is the question asked by *J.C. Ryle*; a question that would not need to be asked if men accepted by faith the truth declared in John 1:9 that "**the Word**," the great Creator, is

"the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." This "Light" was not a feeble flicker, a pathetic failure, and neither was it so murky that none could find the true God by following it. This Light "shined in the darkness," and this centurion was one who followed it to its source. He had sought and found God, and this was in no way based upon any contact with Israel.

There are those who will reject this inasmuch as the idea of "the total depravity of all men" is already indelibly written all over the slate they give the Lord to write upon, and no clean space can be found on which to write the truth concerning the Roman centurion we are considering.

In the Roman army the largest unit was a legion composed of 6,000 men. Each legion was divided into ten cohorts of 600 men each, and each cohort had six divisions of 100 each. These were called "centuries" with a centurion over each. One of these centuries was stationed in or near Capernaum, and over this century the nameless centurion of our story was in full command. He being the chief Roman in the area greatly enhanced his prestige and authority. Even the elders of the Jews were under his jurisdiction.

When the Lord Jesus entered Capernaum, He was no stranger to the people of this area. After John was imprisoned, Jesus left Nazareth, departed into Galilee, came to Capernaum and dwelt there (Matt. 4: 12-13). From here, He went about all Galilee, His fame spreading far north, even throughout all Syria (Matt. 4:24). And in a simple way, making no effort to excite the reader, Matthew tells by inspiration the tremendous number of miracles He performed. Later in His ministry, when He was in the synagogue in Nazareth, He said: **"Ye will surely say unto Me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself; whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country"** (Luke 4:23). And, when they sought to do Him harm, He left Nazareth and came again to Capernaum, where a miracle performed in the synagogue caused such great amazement that His fame went out into every place of the country round about (Luke 4:31-37). Thus it is evident that this time when He again entered Capernaum, He was no stranger to the people there.

Among those who would be quite familiar with all He had previously done in Capernaum, and probably more knowledgeable than most, was the Roman centurion who was stationed there. It was a part of his duty to be informed on all that happened in his district, and especially so if crowds assembled.

This centurion had a slave who was very dear to him, and this slave was at the point of death. Once again, that which had happened on previous occasions was taking place. They were bringing the sick, the diseased, the lame, and the demon-possessed to Him and He was healing them all. The centurion knows what is happening, and

now he is all the more exercised about his own beloved slave. However, the healing ministry of the Lord Jesus is not available for this man or his slave. We know this from the clear declaration of the Lord Jesus who said to His disciples that He was not sent (*apostello-commissioned*) to any but to "**the lost sheep of the house of Israel**" (Matt. 15:24).

The centurion having known before of the Lord's mighty works, having evaluated them without prejudice as being the works of God, and knowing that Jesus had returned to the city, determined to find some way to approach the Lord concerning his slave. So, he sought out the elders of the Jews, and commissioned (*apostello*) them to entreat the Lord diligently that He having come (i.e. to Capernaum, and now being close by) would heal his dying slave.

When the elders came to Jesus they brought forth at once their two best reasons as to why the Lord should do this: first, that the centurion loved the Jewish nation; and second, that he had built for them a synagogue. These were good reasons, and the Lord answered at once, "I will come and heal him."

Whether these words were spoken directly to the centurion or to his authorized representatives makes no difference. The centurion is now in possession of a word of promise from the lips of the Lord Jesus, and we can well imagine that from the moment these words were spoken they were relayed from person to person and house to house. "He said He would come - He said He would come and heal him!" was the cry all along the route to the centurion's house.

After declaring His intentions, the Lord moves to fulfill His word. With the elders escorting Him, He moves at once to go to the residence of the centurion. This was a most irregular and daring move upon His part, since all Israelites were forbidden by law and strict custom to have any personal contact with one of another nation (Acts 10:28), and these strictures and prohibitions were doubly strong when it came to having contacts with any member of the hated army of occupation.

The elders of the Jews who are escorting the Lord Jesus will not need to enter the centurion's house. They can stop short and save themselves from censure by their countrymen. Their presence at the sick-bed will not be required, but it seems apparent that the Lord will need to go all the way. And while the Mosaic law had no specific prohibition to this effect, the law when taken in its entirety did result in such an injunction. The one who acted otherwise was going contrary to the law. This was understood, accepted, and practiced as a fixed principle throughout Judaism.

Therefore, if the Lord enters this centurion's house He will lay Himself wide open to the damaging charge of having collaborated with the enemies of Israel. Then, His own

enemies, some of whom are always watching His every move, will quickly seize upon His act and use it against Him.

The centurion well knows the damage that can be done to the Lord's reputation as a true and faithful Israelite if He enters his house; and he does not wish to secure the blessing he desires at such a great cost to his benefactor. So as the Lord nears the house and the shouts arise, "He's coming! He's coming!" the centurion quickly sends friends to the Lord saying: **"Lord, do not involve yourself in this trouble, for I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof"** (Luke 7:6).

Today the act of entering into someone's house has little or no significance, but this was not true in Palestine in 31 A.D. Then, such an act was a public declaration of unity, friendship, and solidarity. And for a great man to enter into someone's house was fraught with much greater significance. So the centurion said further: **"This is why I did not deem myself worthy to come unto you. All you need to do is speak a word and my servant will be healed. For I am a man under authority myself, and I have soldiers under me. I tell one man to go and he goes; I tell another to come and he comes; I tell my servant to do this and he does it"** (Matt. 8:9).

When the Lord Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to them that followed Him: "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Matt. 8:10).

The Lord's commendation of this centurion's faith, declaring it to be greater than any He had found before, even in Israel, compels us to ask what it was in his actions that brought forth these words of praise. Many before him had sought the Lord for personal healing and had received their desire. This can be seen in Luke 4:31-36; 40:41; 5:12,13, 15, 17-26; 6:6-10 and 6:17-19. In all these incidents men had come to the Lord personally. Furthermore, Peter, James, and John had forsaken the valuable tools by which they made their living (Luke 5:11). Yet it was of this centurion that the Lord said his faith was the greatest. The question persists: "Why did He say this?" However, there is an answer.

This centurion believed that the Lord could work at a distance just as effectively and powerfully as He could close at hand. Very few believe this today. They are shocked when I tell them that the Lord can and will do just as much for me from His place in heaven (Mark 16: 19), as if He were sitting across from my desk, hearing all my problems and petitions in person. And they are shocked even more when I tell them that Jesus Christ can govern this world better from His throne in heaven than from someplace on earth, such as Jerusalem. Did He not say to His disciples: **"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth, it is expedient for you (to your advantage) that I go away"**(John 16:17)?

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