

THE ROMAN CENTURION

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Key Scripture: Matthew 8:5-13 (NLT)

(see also Luke 7:1-10 and John 4:46-54)

When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, "Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain."

Jesus said, "I will come and heal him."

But the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, 'Go,' and they go, or 'Come,' and they come. And if I say to my slaves, 'Do this,' they do it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel! And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, "Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened." And the young servant was healed that same hour.

This healing happened after the Sermon on the Mount and is in the middle of a sequence of three healings – a leper, a Roman Centurion, many including Peter's mother-in-law.

It took place in Capernaum, Galilee, a client kingdom of Rome. At the time of Jesus, Galilee was governed by Herod Antipas and was more provisional than Judea. Other regions were:

- **Decapolis:** the ten cities, semi-autonomous and Hellenistic
- **Judea:** Herodian and Jewish, direct Roman control (Pontius Pilate)
- **Samaria:** like Galilee but Samaritans had their own flavour of Judaism (see the woman at the well in John 4:4-26). It was under the same direct Roman control as Judea

Who are the people in this Scripture?

- **Jesus**
- **The sick servant:** who was probably worried about dying and would have liked to get well!
- **The Roman Centurion:** a Gentile – Galilee wasn't considered civilised by the Romans, so this was not a glamorous posting. However, he was the most important Roman citizen in the area, and his job was to maintain the *Pax Romana*, keeping the peace and collecting taxes. He would have overseen local auxiliary units made up of non-Romans (often Samaritans).
- **The Jewish followers:** they were interested in the preservation of Jewish culture / purity in midst of the imposed Hellenistic / Roman culture of the Roman oppressor. They were looking forward to the coming Messiah, at which time they would regain their independence and would once again become prominent as God's chosen nation.

Courageous faith

Recognises that we need God

– the Roman Centurion was helpless and desperate because he knew he couldn't heal his servant.

Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible." (Matthew 19:26 NLT)

Has the right priorities

– his thoughts were not for himself but for others

Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others. (1 Corinthians 10:24 NLT)

You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure. (James 4:2-3 NLT)

Recognises Jesus as the answer

– this was an unusual situation, the Roman Centurion would have heard about Jesus healing people (Matthew 4:24) but as the most important Roman in the area, a man of high status and probably unpopular with the locals, asking a Jew for help does not seem like a good idea. But he asked Jesus!

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor. (James 4:10 NLT)

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28 NLT)

Understands that God is for you

– the Roman Centurion might not be Jewish, but he had heard that Jesus was healing people and that was just what he needed. 'I will come and heal him.'

Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand. (Isaiah 41:10 NLT)

Is balanced by a fear of God

– the Centurion had a fear of Jesus, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed.' He treated Jesus with deference.

Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Proverbs 1:7 NLT)

Understands God's authority

– as a Roman soldier, the Centurion understood real authority, and he recognised it in Jesus.

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:18-19 NLT)

Has nothing to do with culture, background and is not bound to a nation (v10-12)

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28 NLT)

Is not overfamiliar, making assumptions about God's plans and purposes

– the Jews assumed that God's plans were the same as their plans! "But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

They forgot God, their savior, who had done such great things in Egypt (Psalm 106:21 NLT)

May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10 NLT)

Our God is in the heavens, and he does as he wishes. (Psalm 115:3 NLT)

See's God's will being done

– 'Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened.' And the young servant was healed that same hour."

In conclusion, Matthew was warning the Jewish nation about complacent faith, overfamiliarity and assumption. This was not real faith; their false faith led to separation from God! Instead, real faith was demonstrated by the most unexpected person, faith which drew that person close to God, seeing God's will being done and his needs being met. We too can have the same courageous faith that the Roman Centurion demonstrated as we live our lives as true believers.

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