

THE FAITH OF THE CENTURION

Luke 7:1-17

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 the previous chapter Jesus commanded us to love our enemies as the basic attitude of his disciples. Today we want to study the faith of the Roman centurion, a Roman army officer (1-10). Jesus admires his faith "greatly." We want to know why Jesus admires his faith. Today Jesus also raises a dead person--the only son of a widowed mother (11-17). May God teach us the faith that Jesus admires.

First, the Roman centurion begs for the healing of his servant (1-2).

When Jesus had finished giving all the basic instructions about how to be his disciples (1), he then entered Capernaum, located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, which served as Jesus' home base for his Galilean ministry. Look at verse 2. "There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die...." The centurion was a captain of a hundred Roman soldiers and commissioned to keep the Roman peace in the dispatch area. Usually, Roman soldiers controlled colonial people with weapons and with a superior feeling. A soldier's occupation was invading, killing, destroying and oppressing the colonial people. They would do these things either with loyalty to the Roman Emperor, whose ambition was world conquest with the slogan, "Roman peace," or they would do these evil things to gratify their sadistic joy.

In the ancient world, people tacitly regarded a servant or slave as a "living tool," and no more. There is a story in 1 Samuel about the slave of an Amalekite. The Amalekites had raided the Negev and Ziklag, and had taken David's people captive. When David came back to his garrison, he found that all his family members and those of his subjects left behind had been taken away. David pursued the Amalekites. On the way, he found an Egyptian, the slave of an Amalekite. David's men asked, "Who are you?" "I am an Egyptian," he replied. "My master made me work hard, and when I became ill, he abandoned me three days ago." This was the situation of a servant or a slave of the times. But the Roman centurion in this passage did not treat his servant as others might have done. The centurion also did not ill-treat his servant

when he became ill. Rather, he treated him as his youngest son. He did not know God. But he treated his servant precious, because the centurion had the image of God in him.

Second, the centurion found a living hope in Jesus (3-6a).

Of course, the centurion knew that his servant was only a slave boy. But to him, the servant boy was very dear, like his youngest son. The centurion usually said, "Good morning." Then the servant boy would make a big smile in response and answer, "Good morning, sir! What can I do for you, sir?" But this time, the servant did not respond. Instead, he hid his face between his legs and covered his head with his arms. He was very sick, breathing heavily, so heavily, hovering between life and death. Yet, he looked as if he had had no right to appeal for help in his plight. The centurion dismounted quickly and embraced him tightly and sobbed quietly. The centurion wished he could do something for him. But he was helpless. He was not a medical doctor. He had never experienced such great human limitation. It was painful for him to realize a deep humanistic dilemma. In this situation, ordinary people could not but say in deep despair, "No way...very sorry." But the centurion did not stop there. He began to seek the way to help his servant.

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." In this hopeless situation, the centurion found a living hope in Jesus for his dying servant. The centurion remembered what he had heard, "that Jesus heals the sick and preaches the good news of the kingdom of God to the poor." He thanked God for Jesus with deep gratitude, heaving a sigh of relief. Then the centurion shouted, "Yes, Jesus heals the sick!" Meanwhile he completely forgot to attend the officers' conference he had called. The centurion also forgot who he was and went to where he should not go, to the elders of the Jews, with whom he had become acquainted. The centurion humbled himself and begged and asked them a favor: "Would you please go to Jesus on my behalf and ask that he come and heal my servant?" He repeated, "Would you please?" again and again until they did not have a chance to catch their breath. It was quite a surprise to the Jews. They were startled at the centurion's compassion and humbleness, to the degree of becoming speechless. The elders of the Jews were so moved by his noble humanity that their enmity toward Romans melted away. Rather, they were eager to help him out. Usually the Pharisees were legalistic and did their best to look dignified. They never acted frivolously in dealing with something; they thought first, before doing anything, in light of the law and traditions. What's more, they had to take time to brush their whiskers and dress in their long robes for an outing. But this time they did not care about anything. Probably, they hurried to Jesus

with all their strength, not knowing they were in their pajamas. Anyway, it was the first time for them to experience real joy in their souls.

As soon as they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with him and said, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (4b,5). Their pleading was truly earnest. According to the elders' saying, the centurion was a man of integrity. As a Roman officer, he did not exercise his imperialistic disposition. In addition, he was a man of compassion. Not only did he love his servant boy, but also he loved the people of Israel in the colony. The centurion loved the Jewish people like brothers and gave them what they wanted: He built a synagogue for them at his own expense (5). His respect for human life broke away the cultural differences between Romans and Jews and made a beautiful friendship among them.

What did Jesus do when he heard their pleading? In verse 6a, Luke simply says, "So Jesus went with them." This tells us that Jesus was greatly moved by the centurion's compassion and was willing to heal his dying servant. Until now, Jesus had encountered many bigoted and malignant religious leaders who were unconcerned about their indigent and suffering people. Jesus had been weary of adamantly withstanding those selfish people. But when Jesus saw this Gentile centurion's love for his servant, he was greatly encouraged. This centurion seemed to have been the only source of joy to Jesus in the midst of suffering. Jesus is pleased when one loves his neighbor as himself. This event reminds us of 1 John 4:7,8: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

Third, the centurion had a deep respect for God's word (6b-8).

Look at verse 6b. When Jesus was not far from the house, the centurion sent some friends to say to him, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof." When the centurion was overcome by compassion for the poor servant, he was inspired to send the Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come to his house. But soon he realized that he had thoughtlessly conducted himself in asking Jesus to come. Look at verses 6b-7. So he sent messengers to say to Jesus, "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 the centurion loved the servant boy, God gave him spiritual eyes to see God in Jesus. He also acknowledged that Jesus' word had authority to heal the sick.

He said in verse 7b, "But say the word, and my servant will be healed." The centurion had absolute faith in the word of God. He also believed the absolute authority of Jesus' word. The ancestors of faith are the source of comfort to us. Who were they? They were those who believed that the world was made by God's word of command (Heb 11:3; 2Pe 3:5). Abraham was a good example. Genesis 22:18 says, "...and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." See! The centurion was a Gentile. He could have been relativistic, oscillating between human thinking and the word of Jesus. But in him was no doubt about the authority of Jesus' word.

How could he have such respect for Jesus' word? 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." As an officer in the army, the centurion had learned how to submit himself to higher authority and how to give orders to his soldiers and his servants. Usually Roman officers were very proud, like Masalla in the movie "Ben-Hur." But the centurion was not proud; he was humble. Roman army discipline helped him accept the spiritual authority of Jesus.

Fourth, Jesus admires the centurion's faith greatly (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.'" So far, Jesus had been dismayed by his own people's unbelief. When Jesus heard the centurion's words, "But say the word, and my servant will be healed," he marveled at his faith. As we know, to Jesus nothing was so great; nothing was frightening (6:11) and nothing was amazing. But the centurion's faith was so great that even Jesus was amazed and said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Why was his faith so great and amazing? As we studied, his faith was based on the authority of Jesus' word.

Jesus gave the world mission command to his disciples: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). Down through the generations, innumerable saints have obeyed this command and sacrificed their lives for this cause. But these days many secular humanists say that this command was only for the eleven disciples, maybe for you, but not for me. Those dispensationalists have no respect for the authority of God's word. They don't want to obey God's word because they want to live according to their sinful pleasures. Look at verse 10. "Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well." Jesus blessed

the centurion's faith and healed his servant.

Fifth, Jesus said, "Don't cry" (11-17).

After a while, Jesus went to a town called Nain. His disciples and a large crowd went along with him. It was a procession which paraded the joy of true humanity and the joy of heaven, stirred by the faith of the centurion, a Gentile soldier. Look at verse 12. There was another procession. It was a funeral procession. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out--the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. He was the only son of his mother. This tells us that he grew up without a father. He must have been a good child to his mother, and he was everything to his mother. It may be that, though he was a good child, he grew up sickly, due to his widowed mother's deep sorrow hidden in her heart. One day this child wailed and breathed his last. He died young and was no more. Now he was being carried out to the tomb. His mother followed, tottering in the rear of the funeral bier. In back of her was a long line of mourners made up of a large crowd of people from the town. In that atmosphere, both old and young must have felt that man's life is transitory, from nothing to nothing, from one sorrow to another. Beginning with the widowed woman, all who were in the funeral procession were swallowed up by the power of death. This is an allegory about the tragedy of all mankind without Jesus. What did Jesus do for the helpless?

Jesus said, "Don't cry." Look at verse 13a. "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her." Jesus was not sorry because of her situation; he was sorry because she was overcome by the power of sin and death. Jesus was sorry that all the townspeople were overcome by the power of sin and death and were tottering behind the funeral bier. Jesus was seized with great pity for the widowed woman. So Jesus said to her, "Don't cry." To Jesus, she had no reason to cry. But she was crying because she was overcome by the power of sin and death. She cried because she did not know who Jesus really was.

Who is Jesus? John 11:25 says, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies..." When Jesus said, "Don't cry," he wanted to plant in her faith that the Son of Man is the giver of eternal life (Jn 3:16). After saying this, Jesus went up and touched the coffin and those carrying it stood still. Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk. "Mom, why are you crying again? Don't cry. Mom, if you cry I am sad." In this event Jesus demonstrated that he is the resurrection (Jn 11:25,26), and the giver of eternal life (Jn 3:16).

What was people's response? They praised God. Look at verses 16,17. "They were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people.'" Historically, a prophet was known as a man sent from God to deliver his people. Jesus demonstrated that he was the Messiah who was promised to come to the world to save his people from their sins. When the people saw the work of Jesus, they could not but believe that Jesus is God who has come to help his people. They shouted, praising God: "God has come to help his people." They were no longer bitter about their lives, but were filled with joy. Here we learn that Jesus is the source of life and joy.

May God help us use divine integrity in us. May God help us to have the mercy of God like Jesus. May God give us faith in the word of God.