

Introduction:

- A. Here’s an interesting thing: in all the stories about Jesus in the Bible, there is only one time when the Bible says Jesus was *amazed* at someone’s faith, and it was all the more amazing because that person had none of the advantages of being raised Jewish. What do you think was so amazing about it? Did they believe so confidently a mountain moved? *Illus.:* This morning I stopped at Einsteins to get a cup of coffee and my friend Edward was just leaving. Edward is a ex-Marine, and something of a religious skeptic. He asked what I was preaching on today. So I said, “*I’m preaching on the story of the one time Jesus was amazed by someone’s faith.*” “*The centurion whose servant was sick,*” he said matter-of-factly. I was very surprised. “*It’s a story of authority and duty,*” he went on, his Marine training beginning to show. “*Are you surprised a heretic like me knows that story?*” I was.
- B. **Turn to Luke 7:1-5...** A centurion was an elite Roman soldier, in command of about 100 men. The Romans occupied and ruled over Israel. So in Capernaum, this centurion was the law. He gave the orders. Peace and punishment lay in his hands. But this centurion was *not* an oppressor. This man had been drawn to the Jewish people. He *loved* them and built them a synagogue where they could worship the Lord. It isn’t obvious just what he believed about God but no one who loves God’s people and helps them worship can be too far off.

Matt. 8 tells this same story, but has the centurion coming to Jesus directly. I think my favorite biblical artist **James Tissot** may have caught the idea with his painting of the scene. He depicts the centurion as coming *part way* to Jesus but sending the Jewish elders to actually approach Jesus on his behalf. He was, after all, a Gentile, and new synagogue or not, centurion or not, he doubted he had any pull when it came to getting Jesus to heal his servant.

The Jewish elders did approach Jesus because they owed this Roman a debt of gratitude and they were more than willing to put in a good word for him with Rabbi Jesus. Matthew also tells us that the centurion's dying servant was paralyzed and suffering greatly. A lot of drama in this story. So what happened? **Vv.6-10....**

- C. So, what amazed Jesus about this man's faith? Well, I'll tell you what it *wasn't* amazing. It *wasn't* amazing that he believed Jesus could heal his servant. By that time, everyone in the region believed Jesus could heal whoever he wanted to heal. They were coming to Jesus in droves. So what was amazing? What distinguished this man's faith above everyone else Jesus had met, Jew or Gentile?

Clearly, it was his grasp of Jesus' authority. His faith wasn't notable because he believed that some incredible thing might happen, like the healing of his servant. We *think* that's the measure of faith—believing confidently that a mountain will move, or a healing will happen, or the impossible dream might come to pass. But that's not what impresses Jesus. **The centurion's faith wasn't remarkable because he thought Jesus could heal his servant but because he bowed to Jesus' authority as no one else had.** This military man recognized authority when he saw it and he knew what it meant. He is our model. Let's look a little closer.

- D. We're looking at this story, of course, because we want to have high quality faith. Heb. 11:6, says, "*Without faith it is impossible to please God.*" **To our surprise, we learn from this story that great faith isn't a matter of believing that the impossible can happen. Great faith has to do with how we see Jesus.**

We can all see that authority was a key issue in this story. But there's another theme almost as prominent. In fact, variations of the same word are used three times. **V.4**, "*This man deserves to have you do this.*" Literally, he is *worthy*. And you can certainly see their point. I mean if anyone deserved the Lord's help it would

be a man who had exercised his authority on behalf of the people God loved. But then the centurion himself says twice that he is *not worthy*: **vv.6-7**, “*I do not **deserve** [I am not **worthy**] to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself **worthy** to come to you.*” This wasn’t just a kind of social modesty or deference. The centurion would not have said that, say, to another rabbi, nor to the Jewish elders he’d sent to Jesus. He meant it literally: He didn’t believe he was worthy to have Jesus in his house; in fact, he didn’t even consider himself worthy to come to Jesus outside his house. **Interestingly, it doesn’t seem to be because he saw himself as a sinner (which, of course, he was) but because he had no rank nor citizenship among God’s people.** He didn’t have the *right* to presume upon such a commanding officer. How do you feel about that?

I. GREAT FAITH REQUIRES GREAT HUMILITY BEFORE CHRIST

- A. What about those good deeds he’d done? They really were good. They mattered. God was pleased with him for his love for the Jews. But just as a private in the army has no right to come unbidden to a general, no matter how good a soldier he is, so this man knew that his good deeds did not entitle him to Jesus’ favor.
- B. When he saw himself as unworthy he wasn’t saying he was worthless. I’m guessing this tough Roman commander was not struggling with self-image issues. And I don’t think he realized that his sin was a problem. He *did* understand that being a Gentile left him without citizenship in God’s chosen people. And he *did* understand Jesus’ rank was far above his own.
- C. It is certainly true that our sin has separated us from. No one can say they deserve God’s favor, because our sin made us all rebels and enemies of God. But can you see that sin isn’t the point here. This isn’t even about sin. This is simply about position, about rank. Remember how Jesus “*called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of*

this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” [Matt 18:2-4] That is what great faith looks like. Great faith begins by knowing how small we are in God’s kingdom, how poor and powerless.

- D. This smallness, this clarity about our low rank, is essential to faith because it takes away our presumptuousness, our inclination to think that God owes us; that he is at our beck and call. You see this whenever people get angry that God didn’t answer prayers as they wanted. It takes awhile sometimes, as we pray head bowed and even on our knees, to get a grip on our littleness. We are as welcome to Jesus’ arms as a little child, but it can take time to get small; to get low.

Back to our story. How did this centurion know about Jesus’ great authority? Because Jesus had been in Capernaum before and Luke tells us about it in **Lk 4:31-41**... That’s how he knew about Jesus’ authority. Everyone knew. All that Jesus did was intended to prove his authority—his teaching, his miracles, his confrontations with demonic powers—so that people would believe in him for their salvation and as their ruler. But even though everyone saw and acknowledged Jesus’ authority there was this disconnect. Only this one Roman officer responded as a man under Christ’s authority.

II. GREAT FAITH BOWS TO CHRIST’S GREAT AUTHORITY

- A. *Illus.*: There is a scene in Act I of Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*, where the Earl of Kent approaches King Lear and asks for permission to follow and serve him. King Lear is taken aback, and asks him what he really wants.

“Service,” the Earl replies.

“Whom wouldst thou serve?” asks Lear.

“You.”

“Dost thou know me, fellow?”

“No, sir, but you have that in your countenance that I feign would call Master.”

“What's that?” asks the King.

“Authority,” replies the Earl.

That's what the centurion saw in Jesus. Authority. He grasped that a man who could cast out demons with a word, who could heal with a word, and whose teaching had the sound of orders from headquarters, was a man with unprecedented authority.

- B. What's more, the centurion realized that not only wasn't he worthy to be in Jesus' presence, he didn't need to be in order for Jesus to act. Nor, for that matter, did his dying servant. The amazing thing about the centurion's faith was that he recognized that **Jesus had authority over life and death no matter where he was.** Jesus could give commands to death and demons as easily as the centurion gave orders to his soldiers. Jesus had command over life itself. And this one man had the faith to believe that.
- C. *Illus.:* I've been getting to know a bunch of little neighbor kids. I asked them to call me Mr. Lee and they all do. A lot! "Mister Lee! Mister Lee!" Except for one seven-year-old girl who just calls me Lee, as if she's in a different league than the little people. We can get that way with Jesus, forgetting just who it is we're dealing with.

Don't forget: **Jesus** said, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*"

Don't forget that...

*"God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father."*

Don't forget that in the end, heaven's trumpets and voices will proclaim,

*"The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever."*

Let us not forget our rank.

- D. When we come to pray about anything, it may take some time to readjust our sense of perspective—to remember just

where we are—in the throne room of the Great King—and who we are—his humble servants. But when we get ourselves squared away there, when we see his majestic authority, our faith will grow great and our prayers will grow confident and rich.

There is one other element of the centurion’s faith, and it is all the more remarkable now that we’ve seen his profound sense of unworthiness and his absolute respect for Jesus’ authority. It is simply this: *he asked Jesus to serve him*. Even though he knew his unworthiness and Christ’s great authority, yet he asked for grace.

III. GREAT FAITH ASKS CHRIST THE LORD FOR LIFE

- A. Unwittingly, the centurion became a kind of illustration of Jesus. He became the servant to his dying servant. He valued his dying servant enough to take his own life and reputation in his hands and approach the Lord Jesus. *Though he was rich, for his servant’s sake he became poor. Small. Humble.* The centurion, I mean. **The notable servant in this story is, of course, the Lord Jesus.**
- B. The centurion began by bowing to Jesus’ authority but he continued by begging for Jesus’ grace, which Jesus is always ready to give. Jesus gave life to the dying servant as an act of grace. A total gift. It wasn’t because the centurion loved the Jews or built the synagogue. Nor was it because he came so humbly. Jesus saved the servant’s life because he is compassionate and gracious; because he loved both the centurion and his servant. And because Jesus is the Lord of Life.
- C. When the centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant he believed Jesus would do so, despite the centurion’s low rank and status. We know he believed Jesus not only *could* but *would* heal his servant because according to Matthew’s account, Jesus said to him, “*Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.*” [Mt 8:13] What the centurion had believed was that Jesus could give the command and it would be so.

And several streets from there, in the centurion’s fine house, shrouded in black silence, death heard and obeyed

the command to leave and life invaded the servant's paralyzed body, all by order of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think that two men received the Lord's life that day—both the servant and the centurion. I think they're both living to this day!

Conclusion

There is a lot in this story to think about.

- Submit your life to Christ's authority. He has proven that his word commands life and death, angels and demons. He is the Lord of all. Submitting to him as absolutely and irrevocably a matter of your life or death. Humble yourself and believe.
- Ask him for life. For eternal life. Ask him for abundant life now. Where is deep death paralyzing you? What's killing your soul? Ask Jesus for life. What's more, ask him on the behalf of others as this centurion did. You serve them bringing them to Jesus in prayer—by humbly asking Jesus to use his authority to come to their aid.
- Come to Jesus boldly. Here is a difference between us and the centurion. He understood that he had no right to even meet Jesus, lacking both citizenship and rank. But Jesus himself has come as our priest, to bring us safely and freely to God. Jesus died on the cross so we can be welcomed into God's presence. **Heb. 4:16** says, *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* Isn't that wonderful! No need to stand afar, tho' we are no more worthy than the centurion was. No need to send someone to represent us, for Jesus himself represents us to God.