

“Faith of a Centurion”

Lesson Text: Luke 7:1–10 **Background Scripture:** Luke 7:1–10 **Devotional Reading:** Zechariah 8:18–23

Luke 7:1–10 (NIV)

When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. ² There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³ The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, “This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵ because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” ⁶ So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷ That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 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.”

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.” ¹⁰ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

TODAY'S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To identify the reason for Jesus' amazement.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain the role of the town of Capernaum in Jesus' ministry.
- **Daily Application:** To brainstorm ways to exhibit faith as analogous (similar) to that of the centurion.

INTRODUCTION

Remote Everything

My first modem-equipped computer allowed me to purchase a small amount of usage time from an Internet service provider, connect to a phone line, and access distant servers. I marveled at what I could do. An exciting moment came when I was able to access the digital catalog of a university library in England, helping me identify a book I had needed for months.

Now we take the Internet for granted. Now we can take video calls with family and friends halfway around the world. When I teach online, it is not uncommon for me to have students in several geographically separated areas “attend” class at once.

Physical distance was a challenge to communication in Jesus' day. Indeed, distance remained a challenge to rapid communication until the year 1844, when the first public telegraph went into operation. We easily see the challenge of distance in today's lesson. What is more difficult to see is the positive importance physical distance played in communicating with Jesus. We dare not miss it.

LESSON CONTEXT

The physical context of today's lesson is the village of Capernaum (see also the parallel account in Matthew 8:5–13). It was located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, a freshwater lake in northern Palestine, and was Jesus's primary resting place during His great Galilean ministry. Matthew 9:1 calls Capernaum “his own town.” Since Jesus had no home of His own (Luke 9:58), He must have stayed with one or more of the disciples who lived there (example Peter's wife's family or Matthew). The village became something of a headquarters or base of operations for His preaching and teaching tours of Galilee (4:13; Mark 2:1).

The importance of Capernaum is seen in the fact that it is mentioned 16 times in the New Testament, in one instance quite negatively (Matthew 11:23 and parallel Luke 10:15). Five of Jesus' twelve disciples were residents of Capernaum when Jesus called them to follow him: four fishermen (James, John, Peter, and Andrew; see Matthew 4:18–22) and one tax collector (Matthew, also known as Levi; see Mark 2:14).

Although Capernaum probably did not have more than a few hundred residents, it was a thriving regional hub for at least three reasons. First, the fishing industry provided steady income for many families. The lake was productive, with one account telling of a haul of 153 large fish (John 21:11). Fishing businesses like that of the Zebedee family (Mark 1:19–20) would have caught more fish than could be sold locally. So some fish were preserved with salt and sent to larger cities such as Jerusalem. Second, Capernaum was situated on the main road from Damascus into the region. This location made it a good place for the Romans to set up points for tax collectors to assess tolls on goods passing into the area. Matthew worked for the Romans this way, maintaining a tax-collecting booth on this road (Luke 5:27). Jewish tax collectors from Jerusalem also operated out of Capernaum to collect the annual temple tax from the Jews of Galilee (Matthew 17:24).

Third, Capernaum was important enough to have had some Roman soldiers stationed there, as today's lesson reveals (compare Acts 10:1). The need to safeguard the tax money collected may have been the reason. It is possible they were under the authority of Herod Antipas, the Roman client "tetrarch" of the Galilee region from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39 (Luke 3:1).

Capernaum has been the site of some remarkable archaeological discoveries over the last hundred years. A lavish synagogue dating from the fourth century A.D. likely sat on a foundation floor from the time of Jesus. This place could be the location of the synagogue of Capernaum where Jesus taught (Mark 1:21). Also uncovered nearby is a large house that has become a Christian pilgrimage site. Evidence suggests this was the actual house of Simon Peter, a place where Jesus resided while in town (Luke 4:38).

Desperate Need: Luke 7:1-5

In verse one of today's lesson, we reach a transition point in the narrative. The teaching (*saying all this*) and healing actions of the previous section (Luke 6:17–49) were concluded, so Jesus moved from one place to another. For Jesus to have then entered Capernaum was probably not a long walk, given his record of movements around that area at the time (see Lesson Context).

A centurion was a soldier in command of at least 100 men. In the Gospels and the Book of Acts, Roman centurions are presented as quality men of character, and this one is a sterling example. This centurion had numerous noble qualities as we will see.

Verse two of today's lesson reveals to us that this centurion had a servant who was dear to him, was sick, and about to die. Luke here depicts the deathly ill servant as "valued highly" to the centurion, which expresses value and respect (the same word's translation as precious).

Luke, a physician, does not give us his specific diagnosis of the man's affliction; Luke gives us only the prognosis: he was sick and about to die. Matthew adds more information by noting that the servant was "paralyzed, suffering terribly" (Matthew 8:6). In contrast with the situation in Luke 5:18 (last week's lesson), the servant may have been too ill to be brought to Jesus.

The centurion undoubtedly had *heard of Jesus* (v. 3 of today's lesson) in two senses: through general word of mouth (Luke 4:14, 37) no doubt referring to the tremendous healing miracles Jesus had done, and specifically of His return to Capernaum. Here we see that this centurion had great influence with the Jews which was unusual because Jewish elders had little love for the Romans in general and Roman soldiers in particular.

Perhaps the fact that the centurion sent his healing request via the *elders of the Jews* reflects an intentional strategy, reasoning that Jesus may respond more positively to fellow Jews than to a Gentile (compare Matthew 10:5–6; 15:21–24).

This verse paints a picture of an intelligent man who recognized and understood the cultural issues of Gentiles interacting with Jews (Acts 10:28; 11:1–3). Rather than risk being spurned in a public, face-to-face meeting with Jesus, the centurion turned to Jewish leaders with whom he had become a friend in the community.

1. What scenario was taking place when Jesus entered Capernaum? (Luke 7:1-3)

These elders who *came to Jesus* give two reasons as to why this Gentile was worthy of having Jesus come to heal his servant: (1) he loved the Jews though not many Romans did; and (2) he built the Jewish synagogue in Capernaum.

The need for synagogues as gathering places for worship and instruction in Scripture arose during the Babylonian exile that began in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25). With the temple in Jerusalem destroyed and Jews far from their homeland, the people needed places to congregate; the word *synagogue* is a Greek word that means “place of assembly.”

Some students believe that the centurion was a Gentile in the category of “one that feared God” (compare Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26). Such Gentiles were not proselytes (converts) to Judaism (contrast Matthew 23:15; Acts 6:5; 13:43) but were devout nonetheless. Therefore, the centurion’s funding of the synagogue was more than a public works project designed to curry favor. Instead, it was rooted in his deep respect for Judaism and its God (see v. 5 of today’s lesson).

2. What happened when Jewish elders came to Jesus with this request to heal the centurion’s servant? (Luke 7:4-5)

What Do You Think?

In what ways can your congregation act as a go-between in connecting resources to those in need?

Digging Deeper

How can your congregation partner with other congregations in this regard?

Unmatched Faith: Luke 7:6-10

Naturally, Jesus could effect healings even from a distance (John 4:46-53), But He went toward the centurion’s house. When He had nearly arrived, the centurion sent word that he knew Jesus could simply give the command and the servant would be healed. This was said because he felt unworthy to have Jesus come under his roof.

We are impressed not only with this man’s great love for the community, but also his great humility. Imagine a Roman officer telling a poor Jewish rabbi that he was unworthy to have Him enter his house! The Romans were not known for displaying humility, especially before their Jewish subjects.

3. How did Jesus respond? (Luke 7:6)

What Do You Think?

How will you show humility as you come before God in prayer?

Digging Deeper

In what ways is humility crucial for your formation into Christlikeness? How does James 4:6–10 inform your response?

The centurion’s plea was based on a hierarchical view of authority—a view that came from his military experience. Earlier in Capernaum, Jesus had commanded a demon to come out of a man (Luke 4:31–37). Those who had witnessed it acknowledged

Jesus' authority and power as a result (4:36). The centurion was undoubtedly aware of this miracle and thereby recognized an analogy to his own authority. Moreover, the statement of the centurion admitted the limitations of his authority. The centurion had authority over his soldiers. However, Jesus has unlimited authority over the world. Regardless of how we perceive the centurion's words, they emphasize Jesus' authority over all things—even sickness.

4. How did the centurion view his own authority? (Luke 7:7-8)

What Do You Think?

How can you use the positions of leadership in which God has placed you to worship and serve Him?

Digging Deeper

How do you discern the limitations of your leadership and use those limitations as an opportunity to depend on God?

The four Gospels do not often speak of Jesus himself being amazed at something or someone. Almost always, it's the other way around: people were amazed because of Jesus or something He did. But the characteristic that most impressed Jesus was the man's faith. Twice in the Gospel record we are told that Jesus was amazed. Here in Capernaum, He was amazed at the faith of a Gentile; and in Nazareth, He was amazed at the unbelief of the Jews (Mark 6:6). The only other person Jesus commended for having "great faith" was a Gentile woman whose daughter He delivered from a demon (Matt. 15:28). It is worth noting that in both of these instances, Jesus healed at a distance (see Ps. 107:20; Eph. 2:11-13).

As far as Luke is concerned, the centurion's faith is the greatest miracle in this passage. If this Roman, with very little spiritual instruction, had that kind of faith in God's Word, how much greater our faith ought to be! We have an entire Bible to read and study, as well as nearly 2,000 years of church history to encourage us, therefore we should never be found guilty of "no faith" (Mark 4:40) or "little faith" (Matt. 6:30). Our prayer ought to be, "Lord, increase our faith!" (Luke. 17:5).

5. What was Jesus' response when He "heard these things" (Luke 7:9-10)?

What Do You Think?

How can you demonstrate "great faith" in your neighborhood? your city? your country?

Digging Deeper

What distractions do you need to remove in order to live with "great faith"?

When the centurion's friends returned to his house, they *found the servant well!*

CONCLUSION

Centurion Faith

When we offer up intercessory prayer for the healing of a friend or family member, are we exercising the faith of the centurion? Without a doubt, any forthcoming healing will be a "remote healing" since Jesus is not here in the flesh, so that is not the issue.

The issue, instead, is one of believing in Jesus' authority. That's the essence of what we might call "Centurion Faith." Our intercessory prayers must have more than a "maybe" or "hope so" tone. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we demonstrate "Centurion Faith" that God will answer our prayers. When we are distracted from Him and wring our hands in despair, nothing good happens (Matthew 14:25-31). Jesus taught, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" (21:22).

The centurion's background speaks loudly. He had cultivated friendships within his community for years. He had treated his neighbors with respect and honor, not pulling his rank as a Roman officer to get his way. In many ways, the significant gap between the Jews and Gentiles of Jesus' day was bridged on that day in Capernaum. The centurion had used his wealth and influence to protect the Jews and provide a gathering place for their study of Scripture in a sincere and authentic manner. When his household was in need, his character and actions were remembered. Can the same be said of ours?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, our lives constantly need Your support and healing. Our churches and homes need Your presence. May we honor You in all ways and never doubt. May we have great faith like the centurion! We pray in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Have "Centurion Faith!"

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is called "Faith of an Anointer," where we will compare and contrast the mindsets of Jesus, the Pharisee, and the woman. Study Luke 7:36-50.