

Stories of the Master

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The Centurion's Servant and the Widow's Son

Anger and bitterness – they fill the hearts of people in nations occupied by foreign armies, by those who rule over them. But sometimes, in the midst of such conflict, people overcome the hurt and the anger. Masks come off and the humanity on both sides of the conflict emerges.

Such is the case with the story of the centurion and his servant.

The Romans ruled the land God had given Abraham and his descendants. The symbol of Rome's might and power, the Roman eagle, was placed on the Temple Gate, an offense to the people of God. Pilate was the governor of Judea and Samaria and answered directly to the emperor. His insensitivity and cruelty often provoked the people. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great ruled Galilee by the permission of Rome and though he gave a show of piety, his immoral behavior and tendencies to compromise with paganism were well known. Throughout the land, including Capernaum, Roman garrisons reminded the people who was in charge.

But in the midst of the Roman domination, one centurion, whose name we do not know was touched by the people and the religion of the Jews. The centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. They were veteran soldiers who commanded 100 men. One could easily be identified by his chest armor of tough leather, his plumed helmet, and the wooden baton which he carried. He could also be identified by his words of authority. He would say to a soldier, "come" and the soldier would immediately come, and to another he would say "go" and the soldier would immediately do his bidding.

But then, his soldiers also knew that he was a man under authority. When his superiors gave him orders he would obey them instantly without question. Such was the discipline of the Roman army and with such discipline, authority, and power it was easy to abuse the people for one's gain.

But this centurion was different. He loved the Jewish people, and with his earnings that were sizable compared to a regular Roman soldier, 15 times as great, he built a synagogue for the people. Perhaps he also worshipped at the synagogue as a God-fearing Gentile. The Jews recognized that among the pagans were some who worshipped the true God, some who had abandoned the idols of their fathers and worshipped the Creator. Some of them were circumcised and became full-Jews. Others were not circumcised but would attend synagogue services and worship the God of creation. They were on a spiritual journey and their faith in the true God was acknowledged. Such was this centurion.

There was something else that marked him out – the way he treated his servants. One servant in particular was special to him, a young boy, and one day he became sick to the point of death. The centurion was grieved. He loved this young servant boy and his heart was torn as he saw him become weaker with each day.

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The centurion went to the village elders, the Jewish men who presided over the community and the synagogue services. The centurion had come to love these men as well and they had great respect for him, his growing faith and the just way that he ruled over his soldiers and servants and treated the people of Capernaum.

“My friends,” the centurion said, “you know that among my servants there is one that is very special to me – the young boy. He is gravely ill and I fear that he is at the point of death. Can you help? I have heard of a teacher and prophet among you who has healing power. Can you tell me about this man?”

The elders looked at each other. They knew who he was talking about, and he was a controversial figure. He was talking about Jesus. Had he not recently encountered resistance from the Pharisees? Were not these spiritual leaders in the land highly suspicious of Jesus and his methods? And did not Jesus break the Sabbath by healing on the Sabbath?

Yet, people were healed through him. A paralyzed man walked. The blind were given sight, and evil spirits left the bodies of people at his command. People were made new.

Finally, one of the elders spoke, “Yes, there is a teacher among us by the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He travels from village to village teaching the people about the kingdom of God ... and ... he heals. Remarkable things occur. I have seen some with my own eyes. Our spiritual leaders do not follow him and say that he is not from God, but ...”

“But what? What do you say?” the centurion asked his heart filling with hope. “Do you believe he is from God?”

“We do not know. We cannot be completely sure, but perhaps he would come and speak to you. He does not seem to be partial to people whether young or old, male or female, learned or unlearned, and perhaps he would also come to your home and see your servant. Then, you can decide for yourself if he is from God.”

“But I am a Gentile. Would he come to my home? Would he cure my servant? Would he even see me?”

The village elders paused and then one of them said, “You are a good man and you have been good to us. You have built our synagogue and you have abandoned the idols of Rome and worship the true God. We will do this. We will go to Jesus and tell him about you. Perhaps he will listen to us and we can persuade him to come to your house and lay his hands upon your sick servant.”

“Thank you my friends, thank you! But hurry, because I fear that he may not have long to live.”

The elders went off in search of Jesus and when they found him they went up to him and earnestly said, “Jesus, there is something we would like to ask you – a question, a favor that we would ask you to consider. We know that you are a just man and that you do not show partiality.”

“Yes,” Jesus replied, “That is true. How may I help you? What do you want me to do for you?”

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“It is not for us, but for a friend. He is a Gentile, and not just a Gentile. He is a Roman, and he is a man with considerable authority. He is a centurion who commands the soldiers who rule over us, but let me hasten to add that he is a good man. This Roman centurion has a servant that he loves – a young boy. The centurion has cared for him but now the young boy is very sick and is at the point of death. Could you come and heal him?”

Jesus looked deeply into the hearts of the village elders. If only they knew how impartial he really was – that his impartiality extended to Gentiles as well as Jews because Jesus loved them as he loved his own people. He loved all of them – not just the ones who were good to his people but even the ones who were harsh. Had not Jesus just taught the multitudes to love their enemies and if a Roman soldier forced them to carry their bags one mile they should carry the bags two miles?

His people were so slow of heart to understand the kingdom of God and the forgiveness and love he was bringing not just to Israel but to the whole world.

The elders continued, “He is worthy for you to grant this to him. He loves our nation and he is the one who paid for the building of our synagogue.”

But Jesus did not need these extra reasons to come. He would come out of love for the man whether he built a synagogue or not and so he said to the village elders, “I will come and heal his servant” and with some surprise and great joy the village elders led Jesus to the centurion’s home.

The centurion had been growing anxious. His servant grew weaker, and he did not know if Jesus would come. He paced outside his house and looked down the road and there were the village elders coming with a man who seemed to walk with great humility, yet great dignity – great compassion, yet great authority. The centurion continued to watch and a sense of unworthiness swept over his soul as he saw Jesus in the distance, but something else stirred within – a sense of power, a sense of majesty coming from the man in the midst of the elders.

The centurion knew about power. He knew the power of Rome and those who commanded him and he knew his power and how he could tell his servants and soldiers to do anything and they would immediately obey. But this man coming towards him was a power of a different sort – not just brute, raw power but spiritual power, moral power and in that moment the centurion did something that would stop Jesus in his tracks and make him marvel and when we come back, we’ll discover what happened.

Interlude

Jesus and the village elders were not far from the house where the centurion lived. The village elders were pointing it out to him when suddenly another group of men approached Jesus and said, “Jesus, we see that you have come to heal our master’s servant. Indeed, you can see our master standing at the doorway of his home. He is watching you even now. But he does not wish you to come into his home?”

“What? Why?” the elders said. “Has his servant died? Are we too late?”

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“No, his servant lives but his condition worsens. Yet, our master has given us a message for you. He says, ‘Lord, do not trouble Yourself further. I am not worthy for you to come under my roof. For this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You. Just say the word ... from where you are ... and my servant will be healed. I am a man under authority and I am a man with authority with soldiers under me. I **say** to one soldier ‘go’ and he goes and I **say** to another ‘come’ and he comes. I **say** to my slave ‘do this,’ and he does it.

“I have heard about you Jesus. I have heard the stories about your power. I believe them and I believe you have the authority to heal my servant. Jesus, just **say** the word and I know the sickness will obey you and leave and my servant will be healed.”

Jesus looked at the messenger. His mouth opened and a smile spread from one corner but no words came out. He turned and looked at all those around him. Then, with great wonder and joy in his voice he said,

“Truly I say to all of you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel!”

The people were stunned. What did Jesus just say? A Gentile has great faith? A Roman centurion has great faith? And his faith is greater than anything Jesus has seen among his own people?

The people of Israel were to be the people of faith. Abraham was the father of faith and his believing God was the standard by which all others were measured. Men and women of old had exercised great faith in God – Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Ruth, David, Elijah, Isaiah and the other prophets were men and women of exceptional faith but what about this generation?

It took a gentile, a Roman centurion to express the kind of faith Jesus was looking for in his people. “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel!”

The Roman centurion recognized the authority of Jesus and knew that by just saying a word, the disease would leave his servant. He knew that Jesus’ words were backed by God’s authority just as his words were backed by the authority of Rome. That is why when he spoke a word of command his soldiers and servants would do exactly as he wished. In the same way, when Jesus spoke a word of command, disease, death, evil spirits or whatever was afflicting people would immediately obey.

Let me ask you a question today – do you understand the power and authority that Jesus has? He has power and authority over all sickness, all physical problems, all spirits, over death, over all things. Jesus has all authority.

And you, my friends, must become like that Roman centurion who sees what others in his day could not see – that Jesus has all authority and that he only has to speak a word of command. You must reach out in faith to Jesus today and ask him to speak a word of command in your life.

What is the word of command that he wishes to say to you?

He wants to command that all your sins be taken away.

He wants to command that you be purchased from your slavery to sin.

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He wants to command that you, a sinner, be justified before a holy God.

He wants to command that you be adopted into his family and become a full member with all others.

But you, like the Roman centurion must admit that you are not worthy even to have him come under your roof. Remember what the Jewish elders said, “He is worthy. He is a good fellow. He built our synagogue. He loves our people.”

And while those things were true and good, the centurion had a very different view of himself. He said, “I am unworthy. I am not even worthy to have you come into my home.”

What do you think of yourself? Do you listen to the praise of others and hear how worthy you are? You may believe it for a while, but when Jesus comes near, you will realize something far different. You are not worthy to receive Jesus even as a guest into your home.”

But when you do realize your unworthiness, then you are ready to hear the word of command from Jesus to take away your shame and unworthiness and to receive his gift of righteousness and belonging to his family.

Not all have such faith. Jesus often called the people of his time an unbelieving and perverted generation and he often wondered at their unbelief but he wondered and marveled at the faith of a Gentile.

Jesus then said to those who were around him:

“I say to you, many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness, that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

These were equally shocking words. The sons of the kingdom cast out? Who were the sons of the kingdom? These were the natural born descendants of Abraham – the Jewish nation, the rightful heirs of the kingdom of God.

But some had become so wrapped up in their revolutionary zeal to get rid of the Romans and a Roman in their midst had more faith than they!

Some were so wrapped up in proving their worthiness by keeping details of the Law that God had never intended that they lost sight of faith and a relationship with God!

And so because they missed the point of having faith, Jesus said they would be cast out of the banquet hall into the darkness outside. There they would weep over what they had missed. There they would gnash their teeth in anguish, shame, and frustration.

A favorite metaphor for the coming of the kingdom was a great banquet. The great men of old would rise from the dead and feast at the table of God. All the Jews expected that they would join Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and others in the brightly lit banquet hall where the Messiah would spread the feast before them.

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But Jesus was showing that a reservation for that great dinner could be made only by faith and humility and not by the pride of being descended from Abraham. It was the spiritual children of faith that mattered, not the physical children of the flesh. And the Roman centurion was showing himself to be a true man of faith.

The words were unsettling to many. This is what got Jesus into so much trouble. This is why so many leaders rejected him. He always seemed to have such negative things to say about them. This is why so many people walked away from him, but then he would perform some miracle that was so amazing that it was hard not to pay attention to his words.

A miracle – that’s what started this whole episode. A Roman had a servant who was sick and he asked for Jesus to come and heal him. Would Jesus heal the young boy?

After he said his words about the faith of the Roman and the spiritual sickness of his own people, Jesus turned to the men who had come with the Roman’s last words of faith and he said:

“Go, it shall be done as you have believed.” The friends of the centurion rejoiced at this word and they ran back to him with the good news. But when they arrived, they did not find faces lined with care and concern but faces lit up with joy, relief, and laughter for the young boy was completely well!

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Shortly after this Jesus left Capernaum and was walking toward the village of Nain. Nain was a little village to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus approached a noisy procession was coming out from the gates. But this was no procession of joy. Jesus had left Capernaum with joy within a Roman household, but as he approached Nain he could see that there was sorrow coming from a Jewish household.

Another young man had become sick, and this young man died. He was the only son of his mother, and the mother’s husband was also dead. She was a widow and now in desperate need. The noisy and large crowd followed the burial coffin which was led by the mother, and they were on their way to the tombs in the rock formations by the eastern gates of the village. They were playing sad melodies on flutes and somber beats on cymbals, crying out over the great misfortune that had fallen upon their friend who was now alone in the world and would be unprotected by a man in her family.

But when Jesus saw the woman he felt compassion for her. He felt compassion that she was a widow. He felt compassion that she was now childless, and he felt compassion because she would now be unprotected from evil, rogue men who loved nothing more than to exploit the weak for personal gain.

Jesus moved toward the noisy crowd and in a loud voice to overcome their clamor he said to the widow, “Do not weep.”

Everyone stopped. The musicians ceased their playing. The mourners stopped their crying and one of them said, “Do not weep? And who are you, sir, and what are you doing to tell us not to weep. Are

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you so blind that you do not even recognize the sorrow that fills this mother in Israel? Her only son has died!”

But Jesus said, “I am aware of her sorrow. I am aware of her trouble. I know what has happened and for this reason I have come.”

Jesus walked to the men who were carrying the coffin and said, “Put the coffin down,” and when they did the mother knelt beside her son and bowed her head in grief. Jesus knelt beside her and then said, “Mother, do not weep.” He paused and then he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise!”

And the young man immediately sat up and began to speak. What did he say? We don’t know, but it must have been amazing! Perhaps he said, “Where in the world are you taking me. I am not dead. I am alive!”

Jesus helped the young man out of the coffin and gave him back to his mother who was astonished and overjoyed. Her son had returned from beyond the grave. Her son was alive!

With the crowd, fear and awe gripped them all and they began glorifying God saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has come to his people!” And this report concerning Jesus went out all over the land of Israel and in all the surrounding districts.

And this report has now come as far as you!

Two stories today – both about young men, one a beloved servant of a Roman centurion, the other a beloved son of a widow in Israel. One was at the point of death, the other had passed through death into eternity. Jesus healed one from a distance. Jesus healed the other right in front of him. Jesus brought great joy to a Roman man and great relief and joy to a Jewish mother.

With one, Jesus saw great humility and faith. With another, Jesus felt great compassion in his heart. But with both, Jesus showed that he is Lord of all. He is the one who can say to sickness, “be gone” and it will go, to evil spirits, “leave” and they will flee. He is the one who says to blessing, “come” and it will come to you and to salvation, “enter this person” and salvation will enter his life.

And he is the one who says to you who are listening today with a compassionate word of command, “come to me and you will find healing and life.” Will you come to Jesus as you are with your problems and sins and let him speak his word of authority over you?