

HEALING OF CENTURION'S SERVANT

According to various polls, many people in our country count themselves among the Christians. Many say they pray, attend church, give money (but not much), etc. We tend to talk about faith as regards what we believe and do not usually make an association with what we do. We focus more on the correctness of our doctrine (the person of Jesus, the Trinity, how we baptize, inerrancy of Scriptures, etc.) than on the correctness of our actions. Some times we see Christians behaving in sinful ways and we may wonder "What good is their faith?" On the other hand, it rarely (if ever) crosses our mind that there is more to the Christian life and walking by faith than just avoiding evil. If we don't step out in faith on the "positive" side, then perhaps the same question should be applied: "What good is our faith?"

Luke 7:1 When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.

Saying All This: Jesus entered into Capernaum immediately after He had completed the Sermon on the Mount. The message that Jesus shared with the people was mainly about what you DO in life. We know that works of righteousness can never save us from our lost condition. God, in His mercy and by His grace has provided salvation by the sacrifice of Jesus in our place to pay the penalty of sin (the soul that sins shall die) and to give us new life (you must be born again). As Christians, our actions which are the greater works that God does through us are evidence of His presence in our lives and are the outcome of following the leading of the Holy Spirit and the new nature within us.

Capernaum: This town was located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. The exact location is uncertain, some suggest that it was near the point where the Jordan flowed into the lake. That would put it on the northwest shore.

The name literally means "village of Nahum" and in the Hebrew, Nahum has a literal meaning of "comfort." Some accounts indicate that the town was very prosperous since it was located on the trade route that went up to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea at Tyre. Others have questioned the prosperity of the town itself since the synagogue was built by one of the Roman occupation forces, perhaps indicating that the people did not have the means to build their own synagogue.

Though Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, we would say that Capernaum was the "home town" after his ministry started. Why Capernaum and not Nazareth? After His baptism and the wilderness temptation, He returned to Nazareth and His message was not well received after He taught from the writings of Isaiah. He left Nazareth and went to Capernaum. There He taught in the synagogue and healed people. He taught in synagogues in some of the other town and He taught from a boat and there were miracles. Many of His disciples were from this area.

Word spread and people came and others were healed and He began teaching about the Kingdom of God and His mission and He called more to follow Him. He healed in disregard for the rules of religious leaders and answered their criticisms. He spent a lot of time in prayer and after a night of prayer He named 12 of those who were following Him as Apostles. Then He shared with the people the Sermon on the Mount - the Kingdom Manifesto. Following that significant teaching time and revealing of expectation of behavior for those who are part of the Kingdom, Jesus return to Capernaum.

Luke 7:2-3 There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.

This event is also found in Matthew's account (8:5-10). There is a very similar report in John's Gospel regarding a "nobleman" whose son was very ill and was healed. Luke reports that the request was made by some of the Jewish elders (town officials) on behalf of the centurion and a follow-up request was made by some friends. Matthew wrote that the centurion made the request. There is a Jewish saying "a man's messenger is as himself". We need not get caught up in the differences of the details, but look for the truths and the principles of the account. Why was it recorded and what can we learn from it?

Centurion: Most of the people whom Jesus had helped (up to this point) were the poor and the common people - people without means to help themselves. Up to this point, they were the only ones who sought help. When we have no resources in which to put our trust, then it becomes somewhat easier to look for help and not rely on our own strength. The centurion was a person of economic resources and (perhaps) demonstrated a higher degree of faith in his request for help than that demonstrated by those who asked for help because they had no other choice. What takes more faith: to put our total trust in God when we have lost everything or when we have everything (material) we think we need? Losing everything (or having no resources) does not guarantee that a person will turn to God. However, it is an opportunity to turn to Him and to see what faith in God will do.

Valued Highly: We have typically assumed that the centurion was a person of compassion and went against all the established customs and traditions and social taboos to get help for his dying servant. That is likely the case; however, you cannot really determine that from the context of the account. It could have been that he simply valued him highly from an economic sense rather than from a sense of his value as person and from compassion for human suffering. The point: It is difficult to know the motives of a person simply from the observable actions of a single event. (We will see other events that would confirm that this man had genuine compassion.)

Heard: The centurion had not ever met Jesus nor had he personally witnessed anyone being healed by Jesus and yet he could acquire a measure of faith based on what he heard. He heard and he believed and that resulted in faith that produced action that proved how genuine the belief was. Paul wrote to the Romans, "So faith comes by hearing - hearing what? Hearing the word (or work) of God." What is the lesson for us? One of the most effective witnesses we can have that will produce faith in others is to share with them what God has done in our lives. People need to hear a live, first-person account.

Sent Elders: The Romans and the Jews had segmented themselves into two separate societies by establishing barriers that separated them from each other. Each side had built its own fences. In order to cross the fences or the barriers, people typically use an emissary or someone who has knowledge of both sides. The centurion knew that he did not have adequate knowledge of the Jewish ways and traditions but he had dealt with the elders (civic leaders) of the city. Out of respect for the customs and traditions and having a sensitivity to not offend through ignorance, he sent his request through people who were knowledgeable. In addition to this, based on what the centurion had heard, he (unlike the Jews) treated Jesus with awe and respect.

Heal Servant: Desperate situations cause us to get out of our comfort zone and cross barriers and forget about social taboos. Is there a lesson for us? For example: Why do we not share our faith with people in general? It is either that we are not comfortable doing it or we do not recognize the situation as desperate. Why would we be unlikely to share our faith with a Muslim? *Barriers have been erected on both sides.* Why would we be unlikely to share our faith with a prostitute? *Social taboos.*

Luke 7:4-5 When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue."

Question: Were the Jewish elders good representatives for the Roman centurion? What did they do right?

They came to Jesus: There was not really much other choice at this point. I guess they could have gone to a physician if one had been available. The elders did very well in representing the centurion in that the request was delivered to the right person. Are there any similar situations that we encounter today where people ask us to represent them as an emissary to someone else? What about prayer requests? Sometimes requests are made for certain people to pray for a situation because there is a realization that the person has an effective prayer life. Other times, we are simply requesting someone to stand along side of us as we pray. When we get such a request, how faithful are we to represent the one who made the request? That is, do we really pray in earnest for people who make such requests of us?

Pleaded Earnestly: The elders recognized the seriousness of the situation and the urgency. In this, they were excellent representatives for the centurion.

Deserves to Have You Do This: Oops! The centurion's approach was one of humility and not merit based. He had a desperate need and gave no credentials to indicate that help was deserved. The Jews put their own "spin" on the request and the error of their thinking caused them to misrepresent the centurion. They had the best of intentions but they were wrong in their approach. How many times do we find ourselves praying for someone and we put in words such as "Joe is so faithful in his service and we just ask you, Lord, to help him now." Even if we don't say it about someone else, do we not at times of pleading (even or especially) for our own situation think that God will take into account the good deeds we have done, etc.

Loves our Nation: What would cause a Gentile to love the nation of the Jews? They were not a very lovable people. In fact, many people had and still have just the opposite reaction to the Jews. We can figure out why people dislike them, but the reason why someone would like them is not immediately obvious. What is your feeling toward the Jews? Hatred? Ambivalence? Love or genuine care and concern? Most Christians have genuine concern and care for the Jews and their nation since we believe that they are special to God. Since we wish to please God, then we make the Jews special to us. It is not on the merit of the Jews that we have a beneficent attitude toward the Jews but it is based on what we believe about their position with God.

So what might we conclude about the centurion? Was he a believer in Jehovah God? Some commentators think this is the case and if that is so, then it is not surprising that he would be generous toward the Jewish people.

Built our Synagogue: Such an action would be a logical response of someone with financial means if he were a believer in the God of the Jews. Generosity should be a natural association with Christianity.

Luke 7:6-8 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. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 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."

Lord, don't trouble Yourself: Do you ever have second thought about a decision that initiated action and when you begin to see what you set in motion you attempt to undo what was started. I would imagine that word came back to the home of the centurion that Jesus was on His way to the centurion's home. Could it be that the centurion thought that Jesus probably would not come (especially if He was like the typical Jew) but he asked anyway. Do we find ourselves praying for something but not really believing that God will give us what we ask for. Many times we would be totally unprepared to deal with a significant miracle from God.

I do not deserve: Notice that the words of the centurion delivered by his friends (rather than the elders) attempted to correct the misrepresentation of the elders that he was worthy to have his servant healed and his feeling of unworthiness was why he did not personally come to Jesus.

Say the word: The centurion's humility was matched by his faith. He recognized the superiority of Jesus as a person of power and authority. He also realized and believed that Jesus could "just speak the word and it will be done." We have nearly two millennia of the church age and seldom do we demonstrate such faith in the Lord of Glory.

Luke 7:9-10 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." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

He was amazed: Verse 9 raises an interesting theological question: Can it be that God is ever impressed or surprised? Both Luke and Matthew record that Jesus marveled or was amazed by the faith and understanding of the centurion. An alternate translation of the Hebrew word translated "amazed" is "had admiration." It is easier to accept that Jesus admired the faith of the centurion.

Saving faith is not limited to those who are like us in being "good church people." On the other hand, not all "good church people" have such faith. Many practice the rituals and get involved in the activities but all do not walk by faith. In Matthew's account, we see the importance of "what we believe" in the words of Jesus when He told the (friends of the) centurion, "As you have believed, so be it done unto you."