

April 14 Lesson 7 (NIV)

## Faith of a Centurion

Devotional Reading: Zechariah 8:18–23

Background Scripture: Luke 7:1–10

Luke 7:1–10

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. <sup>2</sup> There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. <sup>3</sup> The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, <sup>5</sup> because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>8</sup> 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."

<sup>9</sup> 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." <sup>10</sup> Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

### Key Text

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

## Examining Our Faith

### Unit II: The Measure of Faith

Lessons 6–9

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*Credit Check*

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## How to Say It

Capernaum *Kuh-per-nay-um*.

centurions *en-ture-ee-un*.

Damascus *Duh-mass-kus*.

Herod Antipas *Hair-ud An-tih-pus*.

Levi *Lee-vye*.

Nazareth *Naz-uh-reth*.

synagogues *in-uh-gog*.

tetrarchs *teh-trark* or *tee-trark*.

## Introduction

### A. 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. My wife and I have weekly video calls with my grandson and his mother from 1,500 miles away. 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.

## **B. 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. Bible students are accustomed to thinking of Jesus as being from Bethlehem (John 7:42; etc.) or from Nazareth (Matthew 2:23; etc.). But a case can also be made for the claim that he was from Capernaum because the village became something of a headquarters or base of operations for his preaching and teaching tours of Galilee (4:13; Mark 2:1); notice that Matthew 9:1 refers to Capernaum as Jesus’ “own town.”

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 BC to AD 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 AD 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).

## I. Desperate Need (Luke 7:1–5)

### A. Situation in Capernaum (v. 1)

**1. When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum.**

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. The location of where he moved from is only given as “a level place” (6:17), perhaps referring to a suitably level site on or at the base of the mountainside (6:12). 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).

### B. Request and Endorsement (vv. 2–3)

**2. There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die.**

A centurion was a soldier who commanded a unit known as a “century” in a legion of a Roman army. A Roman legion ideally consisted of 59 centuries organized in 10 cohorts. The second through the tenth cohorts consisted of 6 centuries, each century having 80 men. A legion’s first cohort was an exception. That cohort had only five centuries, but each of those, also commanded by a centurion, was at double strength. The math of all this adds up to 59 centurions in a legion of approximately 5,000 troops. Thus, the centurion in today’s lesson was likely the most important and senior Roman official around Capernaum.

The *centurion’s* domestic situation in the case at hand is indicated by his having at least one *servant* in his household. This servant was likely not a hired hand but an enslaved person owned by the centurion. Roman military campaigns often resulted in those people on the losing side being taken into bondage. Also common during this period were children born into slavery as the offspring of women who were themselves enslaved. Legally, Roman slavery laws allowed the owner to use another man “like a piece of property or a domestic animal” (historian Dio Chrysostom; lived AD 40–120). But not all master/slave relationships were brutal or exploitative.

Slavery was not necessarily a lifetime situation among the Romans (compare 1 Corinthians 7:21). Ancient sources indicate that many were freed (manumitted) by age 30, thereby becoming “Freedmen” (compare Acts 6:9, lesson 4). In depicting the deathly ill servant as *valued highly* to the centurion, Luke uses a word that expresses value and respect (compare the same word’s translation as “precious” in 1 Peter 2:4, 6).

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, the servant may have been too ill to be brought to Jesus. Although people in antiquity had a limited understanding of disease and its causes, they could recognize the signs of unlikely recovery and impending death.

**3. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.**

The centurion undoubtedly had *heard of Jesus* in two senses: through general word of mouth (Luke 4:14, 37) and specifically of his return to Capernaum. 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.

### C. Insistent Elders (vv. 4–5)

**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.”**

The elders who *came to Jesus* were apparently leaders of the synagogue in Capernaum. They did not convey the centurion’s message as reluctant lackeys—they earnestly pled his case.

For some unstated reason, the centurion loved the Jewish *nation*. The proof of that love is found in an astonishing detail: the centurion had *built* Capernaum’s *synagogue*. The expense might have included not only funding for the structure itself but also the interior furnishings: (1) a place to store scrolls for preservation and convenient access (compare Luke 4:17), (2) an elevated platform from which someone reading the Scripture would be visible to all in attendance (compare Nehemiah 8:4–5), (3) lamps for illumination, and (4) adequate seating (Luke 4:20a). We don’t know whether the centurion footed the bill for these, but it is possible.

The need for synagogues as gathering places for worship and instruction in Scripture arose during the Babylonian exile that began in 586 BC (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.” The return from exile probably modified the function of synagogues to being primarily places of Scripture teaching rather than worship. This transition was because worship in its fullest sense was to take place at the temple (compare 1 Kings 8:29–51; John 4:20; contrast 1 Kings 13:26–30), which had been rebuilt.

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.

## II. Unmatched Faith (Luke 7:6–10)

### A. Insightful Centurion (vv. 6–8)

**6a. So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him:**

Capernaum was not a large city. Crossing from one end to the other would not have taken more than 15 minutes. Therefore, the time between when the elders spoke to Jesus and when the *friends* did so must have been very short.

Since the group was *not far from the house of the centurion*, the man may have seen Jesus and his entourage approaching before he dispatched delegation number two. These friends may have been either Gentile, Jewish, or both (compare Acts 10:24; 19:31). The message they brought was surprising! This act demonstrated, among other things, knowledge of and respect for Jewish law, customs, and sensibilities on the part of the centurion (compare John 18:28; Acts 10:28).

The parallel in Matthew 8:5 has the centurion himself speaking to Jesus personally. One way to resolve the tension between the accounts is to consider how that first-century culture would have viewed a messenger commissioned to speak on behalf of another person. In other words, when the centurion's friends talked to Jesus, it was as if Jesus was conversing with the centurion himself since that man had commissioned his friends to do so on his behalf. Matthew's Gospel, in a way, merely simplifies the account of the interactions.

**6b–7. “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.”**

As the centurion (through his friends) addressed Jesus as *Lord*, we should not automatically presume that the centurion acknowledged Jesus as the Lord God. The Greek word translated “Lord” occurs more than 700 times in the New Testament, and it is often used as simply a polite address of respect. In such cases, it is equivalent to our modern word *sir* (examples: Matthew 27:63; John 4:11).

The centurion's friends brought Jesus the unexpected message we see in the verses before us. Two things should be considered. First is the centurion's humility in admitting his unworthiness. Other admissions of unworthiness (same Greek word) occur in the parallel passages Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7; and Luke 3:16. The tension created between the theme of unworthiness here and the theme of worthiness in Luke 7:4–5 is interesting! Second, some students propose that in addition to admitting personal unworthiness, the centurion was demonstrating sensitivity in avoiding a potentially awkward cross-cultural meeting under the *roof* of a Gentile (compare John 4:9; 18:28; Acts 10:28; 11:3).

**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.”**

The centurion's plea was based on a hierarchical view of authority—a view that came from his military experience. See the discussion of the centurion's status in the commentary on Luke 7:2, above. 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.

## B. Astonished Jesus (v. 9)

**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."**

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. The two exceptions are the *faith* of the Gentile centurion (today's text plus parallel in Matthew 8:10) and the lack of faith of the people of Nazareth (Mark 6:6).

Furthermore, Jesus did not actively seek to minister to Gentiles, only to fellow Jews (compare Matthew 10:5–6 with its parallel in Mark 6:7 and Luke 9:1–2). Even so, Gentiles sought him out in a few cases (in addition to today's text, see Matthew 15:28 [lesson 9] and John 12:20–21). Jesus' initiative to the Samaritan (a person who was ethnically half Jewish) in John 4:1–42 is unique. As far as Luke is concerned, the centurion's faith is the greatest miracle in this passage.

## C. Remote Healing (v. 10)

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

Jesus' healing miracles in the Gospels have been categorized in various ways. These include healings by touch (example: Matthew 8:15), command (example: Luke 5:24), and prayer (example: John 11:41–42). One interesting way of healing, not often considered, is miracle healing from a distance. There are three such: the ones involving (1) the Gentile centurion's servant in today's text and Matthew 8:5–13, (2) the Gentile woman's daughter in Matthew 15:21–28 (lesson 9), and (3) the nobleman and his son in John 4:46–54. In all three cases, faith was vindicated.

## Conclusion

### A. 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. He

played “the long game” in the most sincere and authentic manner possible. When his household was in need, his character and actions were remembered. Can the same be said of ours?

### **B. 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 a simple faith like the centurion! We pray in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Have “Centurion Faith”!<sup>1</sup>

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