

Prayer

Call us, O Lord, from Your glorious throne on high;
Speak to us, O Lord, through the world of natural beauty;
Address us, O Lord, in the joys and hardships of our earthly lives;
Talk with us, O Lord, in the midst of our deepest, heartfelt feelings;
Describe to us, O Lord, Your plans for us and for all things;
Your voice, O Lord, is ever true, and we Praise You!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Try standing back from something you do out of habit, in order to give more time to your prayers; watching television, reading a magazine, or talking aimlessly, for example.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the carers in your church:** *Pray for those who look after elderly people in the home, and whose lives are compromised by the work they must do for those they love*
- *Give thanks to God for the faithful work of missionaries and aid workers throughout the world*
- *Pray for Egypt, and pray that the people of that land will be able to choose their government free from external or internal pressures*

Meditation

Be comforted, you who have felt the power of sin,
There is One who has the victory over Satan's evil sway.

Be strengthened, you who know cruel oppression,
There is One who has the courage to bring you freedom.

Be heartened, you who struggle with your burdens,
There is One who takes the weight you suffer on Himself.

Be encouraged, you who need to hear good news,
There is One who broke through death to bring you love.

Be enlightened, you who have the heart to understand,
There is One who taught the way of life, and lived it perfectly.

Be enthused, you who are willing to speak your faith,
There is One who works through you in authority and power!

Be blessed, you who have walked in hope and joy,
There is One you know who has a place for you in heaven!

Bible passage - Luke 7:1-10

¹ When Jesus had finished everything He wanted to say to the people, he went to Capernaum.

² A centurion had a certain servant who was held in high esteem, but he was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Him, asking Him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to Him urgently, saying,

'He deserves your doing this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he has even built our synagogue for us.'

⁶ So Jesus went with them, but when He was not far from the house, 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 this is why I did not think myself fit to come to You. But only say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I tell this one, "Go," and he goes, and that one, "Come," and he comes, and I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.'

⁹ When Jesus heard all this He was amazed at him, and he turned to the crowd that followed Him and said,

'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found so great a faith.'

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

Bible Study

Review

After a significant passage of teaching, Luke reports that Jesus went to Capernaum, and while there, He continued His healing ministry. Luke has already told us about Jesus' general healing ministry, in which He healed the sick and cast out demons (4:40-41), and he has also reported Jesus' personal healing ministry for individuals (5:17-26). Another healing story does not therefore add much to what we know about healing ministry, except that Jesus' compassion is shown in a new light, and His method of healing in this story is quite different.

Here, the most intriguing thing is not therefore Jesus' healing of a servant, it is the interaction between Jesus and the centurion. This introduces a new theme to Luke's Gospel, that of 'faith'. So far in Luke's Gospel, faith has only been mentioned once, in the story of the healing of the paralysed man. When Jesus saw the man's friends lowering him through a roof, Luke reports that Jesus '*saw their faith*' (5:20), and proceeded to forgive the man's sins. This story says nothing more about faith, but a great deal about forgiveness, and it is not until the healing of the centurion's servant that we learn more about faith.

After envoys from the centurion had told Jesus about the sick servant, Luke reports that Jesus was touched by the concern of this Gentile man for God's people (7:4,5). Here was a man who was open to Godly things, so Jesus went to meet the man, even though he was a Gentile (7:6). It was not normal for Jews to meet with Gentiles under one roof, and although Jesus seems ready to ignore this convention, the centurion was keenly aware of it, and sent a message to Jesus, amounting to an astonishing statement of faith. His message expressed the certainty that if Jesus truly was a man of Godly authority, as the Jewish Messiah must surely be, then He did not need to come in person in order to effect a healing. Dramatically, this Gentile man was willing to believe in the power and authority of God's Messiah on earth, as no Jew had yet done!

This story has spawned various theories about healing 'by proxy'. Yes, Jesus healed someone from a distance, and we may therefore conclude that the same is possible today. But why should this form of healing be any more remarkable than any other? Surely, everything is possible with God! And if this is true, then we should surely accept that the purpose of this story is to reveal something about faith.

Luke wrote his Gospel for the early Christian Church, and together with the Acts of the Apostles, he provided early Christians with good evidence of both the life of Jesus and the foundation of the Christian Church. It should not surprise us therefore to discover that Luke's first powerful description of a man of faith is that of a Gentile man (7:1-10). The New Testament itself records that it was only when the Gospel began to be both preached and accepted in the Gentile world that the Good News of God's grace broke out of its Jewish confines and spread across the world. The consequences of this are immeasurable, for the Gospel calls the whole Gentile world to have faith in God through Jesus.

Jesus recognised in this Gentile centurion a quality of faith not found '*even in Israel*' (7:9), with two important characteristics. Firstly, the centurion recognised that he was himself '*under authority*' (7:8), which is a reminder that true faith is not a status that can be claimed, it is accepting what God gives through Jesus Christ. Secondly, the centurion understood the nature of God's authority, which is about obedience and getting things done. This story reveals a man who had done good deeds by helping God's people, but more than that, a man who had done these deeds out of faith in the living God, and His Messiah.

Our passage ends with faith being rewarded as the servant who was ill is healed. If we read this story as an illustration firstly of faith and secondly of healing, then we will learn important lessons about both.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What are the differences between this and the same story in Matthew and (possibly) John?
- Why was the faith of a centurion important to Luke?
- What does this passage tell us about Jesus' developing ministry in Luke's Gospel?

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'When Jesus had finished everything He wanted to say to the people'

Other translations:

'When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people' (NIV)

'After Jesus had finished all His saying in the hearing of the people' (NRSV)

My translation here does not follow the Greek closely, because a literal rendering does not convey the true sense of the passage in English. The Greek reads literally, *'after He had finished all His words in the hearing of the people'*. However, the Greek for *'words'* can mean *'teaching'*, or *'sermon'*, or anything spoken, and the sentence summarises what Jesus has just done, which is to teach the people. I therefore think that it is reasonable to use the common English expression *'everything he wanted to say ...'*

V2 'A centurion had a certain servant ...'

Other translations:

'There a centurion's servant ...' (NIV)

'A centurion there had a slave ...' (NRSV)

I suggest that we use the term *'servant'*. Although the word here is *'doulos'* which means either *'slave'* or *'servant'*, Luke also reports the centurion as speaking of the man as a servant in verse 7 (using the Greek term *'pais'*). The term *'servant'* is common to both words and avoids our confusion.

Going Deeper

What are the differences between this and the same story in Matthew and (possibly) John?

This passage is found in two other Gospels. Matthew records a very similar story towards the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Matt 8:5-13), just after Jesus delivered the great Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). John records the healing of the son of a royal official in Capernaum (John 4:46-53), but although it is similar to the story found in Matthew and Luke, there are also a number of considerable differences.

The main difference between the story is found in Luke and Matthew are to do with contacts between the centurion and Jesus. Matthew records the centurion speaking to Jesus personally, but apart from this, and the fact that he therefore sends no envoys to speak to Jesus, the basic structure of the story is very similar. Indeed, the point about Gentile faith is just as strong in Matthew's Gospel as it is in Luke's Gospel. The centurion demonstrates a unique understanding of God's authority, and is rewarded by Jesus' approval *'truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith'* (Matthew 8:10).

Perhaps Luke goes further. In his story, the centurion exercises faith from a distance, not having seen Jesus. We can imagine how wonderful it was for early Christians to read this story, especially those who never knew Jesus. Here was evidence that their faith was commended by Jesus. There are a number of other stories in the Gospels which seems to be recorded with the same purpose in mind. One other of these is the story of *'doubting Thomas'* (John 20:24-29), which concludes with these famous words, *'have you believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe!'* (John 20:29). These texts are as important today as they ever were.

John's story of the healing of the official's son (John 4:46-53), is a little different. For some time, scholars have strongly suggested that this story records an entirely different event in Jesus' life. In this story, a royal official concerned about his son approaches Jesus. If this is the same event, then clearly, John's recollection of the characters is quite different from that of Matthew's! Yet the meat of the story contains similarities to that found in Matthew and Luke. Here, the official does not demonstrate faith, but Jesus challenges him to accept God's authority (John 4:48), and when the son is healed by proxy, the man comes to faith along with his whole household (John 4:53).

Is it worth making too much of whether or not this is the same story found in three Gospels or not? Each gospel writer conveys a powerful message about Jesus within their own story, so why should we be concerned to try and unify the background? Yet all of us observe the way in which people remember things in remarkably different ways, and a story about a party will sound quite different according to the person who tells it. Such earthly frailties do not contradict God's ability to reveal His truth, either within our own experience, or within the Gospels.

Why was the faith of a centurion important to Luke?

The centurion is clearly essential to this story here in Luke. He was undoubtedly a Gentile, and throughout, nearly all the centurions mentioned in the New Testament receive good press. It is doubtful that this is coincidental. In first century Palestine, good-quality people were headhunted to such positions within Roman society, so we can assume that a centurion will be somebody who has proved by their life and character to be a good moral citizen. In post, they wielded considerable authority, but they would not have been given such a position unless they were people who were able to act under authority. Jesus clearly recognised the importance of this quality. Another centurion found within the Gospels is the one who watched Jesus die and prophetically pronounced Him to be 'God's son' (Matthew 27:54). Also, the very first Gentile convert to the Christian faith was a centurion named Cornelius, a story recorded at length in Acts chapter 10.

We should remember that in Jesus' day, Galilee was officially ruled by Herod Antipas on behalf of the Romans, and no Roman legions were posted within the region because of Jewish sensibilities. Because of this, Herod employed his own small army modelled on the Roman army, employing people who in other Roman colonies, would have been Roman soldiers. Part of their terms of employment was the lucrative prospect of transfer into the regular Roman army elsewhere in the Empire, where a centurion was afforded considerable privileges.

It is just possible that the figure of the centurion pointed the way ahead to Christians of the early church who first read the Gospels. The future of the gospel lay in the Gentile world, not within the confines of Judaism, and the figure that demonstrated the vastness of the Roman Empire was the centurion. The growing Church would require people with a combination of qualities exemplified in the figure of the centurion, and Jesus saw in this man qualities of faith to which early Christians could aspire, and this is why Luke may have recorded the story.

What does this passage tell us about Jesus' developing ministry in Luke's Gospel?

Now we have begun to think about the importance of the centurion within the life of the early church, some other features of the story come into the light. A unique feature of Luke's story is his inclusion of Jewish elders who act as emissaries for the centurion (7:3-5). On the face of it, it is quite difficult to imagine why any Jewish leaders would speak warmly about a Gentile centurion, but Luke gives us the reasons. This man was regarded as a friend of Jewish people, and has clearly given financial assistance and practical help to the Jewish community.

It is heart-warming to read a simple story here in Luke's Gospel that illustrates how the appalling social barriers of the first century could be overcome. Luke tells us that despite great difficulties, sometimes the simple qualities of human decency, love and support, can overcome the worst prejudices. Indeed, in his story, they are a prelude to faith in Almighty God.

The last verse of the story tells us that the servant was healed. In some way, this is something of an anti-climax, because most of the story has not been about the healing, but about the faith of the centurion. Of course, we need to know that the servant was healed, but some might argue that the real conclusion of this story is found in verse nine. Here Jesus responds to all that has happened by saying, *'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found so great a faith'* (7:9). Jesus is not merely wistful when He says this, as if Israel is always lagging behind but will always, eventually, demonstrate faith. There is a certain sadness to what Jesus says here, and if we read on through Luke's Gospel, we will find that the rejection of Jesus by Israel is a recurring theme. Eventually, Israel's rejection of Jesus is complete, and He is crucified on the Cross.

Throughout these early chapters of Luke's Gospel, if we look carefully, we will find more of this theme of the rejection of Jesus. It was there after Jesus confronted the Pharisees in the synagogue (6:11), and it was there after Jesus announced His Ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth (4: 28-30). From the beginning, Jesus knew that His call to be the Messiah would not end in earthly glory.

Application

As we have seen, some will read this passage of Scripture and assume that it is primarily about healing ministry, and of course, we can learn here something about healing. When Jesus heals someone from a distance, this adds to the wide variety of ways in which Jesus went about His healing ministry. It helps us build up a picture of Jesus not using standard techniques, but dealing with situations as they arose, and

sensitive to real human circumstances. So those who have a healing ministry today should not think of it as a particular technique; the gift must be used in as many different ways as there are people who need healing. Healing should not be confined to church services, the laying on of hands, prayer, or any other setting or technique. A Godly healing ministry is one that responds to the real needs of real people in real and varied circumstances. It enables God to be active in the lives of those who suffer, bringing them release, healing and hope, and drawing out their faith.

The message about faith in this passage of Scripture is very important. Faith is about being under authority perhaps more than exercising authority, and people in the church need to be reminded about this. All too often, faith is treated as if it is like a badge of honour; those who have faith are told they are part of the club of Christianity, or those who have demonstrated faith through the baptismal waters or through good deeds, are regarded by some as being especially righteous. It does not take much to see such attitudes at work amongst people in the church around us. In truth, the real examples of faith within the true church of God are those who demonstrate in their lives the good and Godly qualities of practical faith. Paul describes these as the '*fruit of the spirit*', which are '*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*' (Galatians 5:22, 23). If God's people aspire to faith, then they aspire to submit to the authority of God and live the humble qualities of Christ.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss what this passage of Scripture tells you about the healing ministry of Christ, and the healing ministry of God's people today.
2. In your group, discuss what this passage of Scripture tells you about the meaning of faith, and how that faith may be practised today.
3. Have you been healed, or do you know others who have been healed? Has healing been accompanied by an increase in faith? If not, why not?

Personal comments by author

I feel reluctant to play down the significance of healing within this passage of Scripture, but it seems to me that the message about submissive faith is too important. Having been a church minister and a leader of God's people, I know how hard it is to refrain from standing on one's own authority, in order to depend upon God's. We live in an age when Christians want strong leadership, but people often seek from their leaders what God is not willing to give, for they must depend upon Him, not leaders. Although for many, the issue of authority in the church is all about the role and function of leaders, this passage of Scripture warns us to be careful. There is only one authority among God's people, God Himself.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Find an opportunity to write down the characteristics of faith as you understand them. Make up a checklist, so that you can assess how you measure up to these standards.*
 - *In an attitude of prayer, bless your church leaders, and pray that they will both recognise the authority of God, and exercise authority in a godly way amongst the people of the church.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you have revealed yourself to us in many ways, throughout our lives. Show yourself again in power and authority, and may we yield to you as we have done before. Lead us to a place of humble submission before your great power and authority, and give us the wisdom to live our lives by the light of your love. AMEN
