

## **A Centurion's Slave and A Widow's Son** **Luke 7:1-17**

After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore, I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country. (English Standard Version – ESV)

### **Background:**

- The Roman legion nearest was stationed in Syria, but many troops were also stationed at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. Smaller groups were stationed or settled at various points in Palestine. Centurions commanded a "century" (i.e. 100), which in practice consisted of 60-80 troops. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army.
- Non-Jews who feared God and gave large sums to the Jewish community were well respected. Centurions' salaries were much higher than those of their troops, but for this centurion to have built the local synagogue represented a great financial sacrifice.
- The centurion was not a full convert to Judaism and thus retained some of his uncleanness as a Gentile, especially with regard to the food in his home. To invite a Jewish teacher into such a home would have been offensive under normal circumstances, but in this case the community's elders want to make an exception (7:3).
- The centurion shows that he understands the principle of authority that Jesus exercises (7:8). Roman soldiers were disciplined and except in rare times of mutiny followed orders carefully.

- During their twenty or so years of service in the Roman army, soldiers were not permitted to marry. Many had illegal local concubines, and married only after retirement. However, by ancient definitions a household could include servants, and household servants and masters sometimes grew very close, especially if they made up the entire family unit.
- Some Jewish stories circulated about miracle workers, but reports of long-distance healings were rare and were viewed as more extraordinary than other miracles. Therefore, people would view the kind of healing Jesus performed here as especially miraculous.
- Interrupting a funeral was a blatant breach of Jewish law and custom; touching the bier exposed Jesus to a day's uncleanness (Numbers 19:21-22); touching the corpse exposed him to a week's uncleanness (Numbers 5:2-3; 19:11-20). In spite of these restrictions, Jesus touches the coffin.
- People customarily dropped whatever they were doing and joined in a funeral procession when it passed by. For a widow's only son to die before she did was considered extremely tragic; it also left her dependent on public charity for support unless she had other relatives of means.
- According to custom the bereaved mother would walk in front of the bier, so Jesus would meet her first. Philosophers often tried to console the bereaved by saying, "Do not grieve, for it will do no good." Jesus' approach is entirely different, in that he removes the cause of bereavement.
- By touching the bier, a stretcher on which the body was borne (Jewish custom did not use a closed coffin), Jesus would contract corpse-uncleanness, the severest form of ritual impurity. Only those closest to the deceased were expected to expose themselves to this kind of impurity.
- God used other prophets (Elijah and Elisha) to resuscitate the dead, but it was a rare miracle.

### **Questions:**

- + What virtues does the centurion demonstrate? Which is most prominent to you, and why? In 7:9 Jesus says to onlookers, "not even in Israel have I found such great faith." Why not? What is the greatest act of faith you ever witnessed? What impressed you most, and why? What is the greatest act of faith you ever demonstrated, and what prompted your actions? What would it take for you to demonstrate faith like that of the centurion in Luke 7:2-10?
- + Upon seeing the funeral procession, what does Jesus notice? What would you have noticed? Verse 13 says that Jesus felt compassion for the widow. Why? What might it have felt like? Have you ever felt compassion for a stranger who was suffering? If so, what did it feel like? Jesus broke religious and social taboos to raise the dead son. What message is he conveying? How should people of faith respond to religious laws and customs? How should you respond?