

4. The man who made Jesus marvel

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 January 2012

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 01] Well, let's turn in our Bibles, friends, to Luke's Gospel, Chapter 7. Luke's Gospel, Chapter 7, and let's open our ears to hear the word of the Lord through his servant, the evangelist Luke, who is giving us his account of Jesus' life and ministry.

So I'm going to read from Luke, Chapter 7, beginning at the first verse and going down to verse 17. We have the healing of a centurion's servant and then the raising of a young man, the son of a widow.

So Luke, Chapter 7, verse 1. After Jesus 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.

[1 : 40] 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.

[2 : 54] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us this evening.

Well, friends, do let me ask you to turn up our passage again. And that is Luke's Gospel, Chapter 7. Now, I want to take for our text tonight the first ten verses there.

[4 : 05] I did read the next paragraph as well about the raising of the widow's son to give us a little bit more context. But it's this interaction between the Lord Jesus and the Roman centurion that I want to look at this evening.

Under the title, The Man Who Made Jesus Marvel. Now, you'll realize, of course, that that title is derived from verse 9. When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him at the centurion.

Now, the fact that Jesus marveled at this man should immediately arouse our interest. Don't you think it's surprising that Jesus should marvel at anything or anyone?

You wouldn't think, would you, that the Son of God, who made the world and all human beings and who understands human nature so profoundly, you wouldn't think that he would be surprised at anything that he discovered in human nature.

And yet, there are two moments, two moments recorded in the Gospels, where we read that Jesus marveled. The first of them comes in Mark's Gospel, where Jesus visits his hometown, Nazareth. [5 : 16] And he is amazed at the depth of the unbelief that he finds amongst the people of his hometown. And then the second case is this incident here at Capernaum, where he marvels at the belief of this Roman centurion.

So, in the one case, he marvels at unbelief, and in the other case, he marvels at belief. Now, Jesus knew, and he often taught, that some people would believe in him and that others wouldn't. He always knew that his coming into the world would force a division between two groups of people, those who believe in him and those who refuse to believe. But it was the depth of the unbelief at Nazareth that shocked him.

And equally, it was the quality of this centurion's faith that took Jesus by surprise and astonished him. So, as we look at this passage this evening, the big question I want to address is the question, what was it about this man's faith that so pleased and so surprised Jesus?

Now, this passage doesn't give us an exhaustive treatment of the subject of faith. The Bible has more to say about faith in God than these few verses teach us. But what these verses teach us about faith in Christ is critically important.

[6 : 36] And will help us to understand something that is at the heart of what it is to be a Christian. So, that's where we're heading. What does this passage teach us about the nature of faith in Christ?

But I want us to approach that question gradually. Because if we do understand this man's faith, we also need to understand something of this man. So, let's notice three things that Luke the Evangelist shows us.

First, he shows us the kindness of Jesus to a Gentile. Now, this is an important theme in this story. Just look at the words that Jesus says at the end of verse 9.

I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. One of the reasons for Jesus' astonishment is that it's a Gentile who is expressing his faith in him.

What Jesus is implying in verse 9 is that he would hope, he would expect, to find a measure of faith in the Jewish people. But to find it in a Gentile and faith of such quality and such perception is astonishing.

[7 : 45] You'll remember that Jesus once said to a Gentile woman who came to him in great need because her daughter was possessed by a demon. He said to her, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Now, that was a provocative thing to say. And it was designed to test this woman out to see if she would persist in what she was asking for. And in the story, she does persist and Jesus does answer her plea and he delivers her daughter from the demon.

But you can't escape the conclusion that it was to the Jews that Jesus came as his first priority. He was born in Bethlehem in Judea, not far from Jerusalem.

He was not born in Derby or in Dromna-Drochet. The only nation over which he claimed kingship was Israel. We can never think of him as the king of England or the king of Scotland.

And when later on, Jesus commissioned Paul the Apostle as his special envoy to the Gentiles, and Paul traveled all around the ancient world, the Mediterranean world, planting new churches, Paul always took the gospel first to the local Jewish population.

[8 : 57] He would look out the synagogue if there was a synagogue there. And only after he'd preached to the Jews would he turn to the local Gentiles, although he was the apostle to the Gentiles. And Paul summed up his missionary endeavor with that little slogan, which he repeats two or three times in his letter to the Romans, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

And in Romans chapter 11, Paul likens the people of Israel to a cultivated olive tree. And he likens the Gentile peoples to a wild olive tree.

And he makes the point, and this is a humbling point for Gentile Christians. He makes the point that it's a very kind and merciful thing indeed, that God should graft a wild olive, a rough hillbilly backwards olive, onto the beloved stock carefully nurtured and cultivated for many centuries, the stock of Israel.

So those of us who are Gentile Christians, and I imagine that most of us who are Christians here tonight are Gentiles, we need to be humbly grateful that God has extended his saving grace to us, as well as to the Jews who turn to Christ.

Now, that's not to say that Gentile Christians are second-class Christians or second-best Christians. Not at all. We have all the privileges and blessings of Jewish Christians.

[10:19] We're not second in importance, but we are second in chronological sequence. The gospel was brought by Jesus and by Paul to the Jew first and then to the Gentile.

And when Jesus deals with this Roman centurion here in Luke chapter 7, he is giving us a foretaste of the great extension of the gospel all over the world, which is going to follow the day of Pentecost. This Roman centurion is a forerunner of Cornelius, another Roman centurion that Luke is going to introduce to us in Acts chapter 10, as Luke explains the beginnings of the worldwide spread of the gospel.

So there's the first thing to notice. Luke shows us the kindness of Jesus to a Gentile. Now, second, Luke shows us the kindness of Jesus to a human being in great need.

It's remarkable just how much we learn from a few sentences here about this centurion. Luke doesn't name him as he names Cornelius in Acts chapter 10, but he does tell us quite a lot about the kind of man that he was.

[11:32] Just look at the last phrase of verse 2. The centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by the centurion.

Now, that is a refreshing and interesting piece of information. The centurions of the Roman army were regarded as the backbone of the Roman army. As their name tells us, they were in command of a hundred men, and they had to be tough disciplinarians.

They were more or less the equivalent of a company sergeant major in the British army. I remember when I was in the army cadet force at school, when I was about 15 or 16, we had a sergeant major attached to our school force.

He was recently retired from the regular army, and he was a pretty tough character. His head looked like an unexploded shell. And if we boys were out on parade in our serried ranks, and a particular boy was not standing to attention properly, he would say, Stand to attention, boy!

You look like a packet of knotted razor blades! Or if a boy was unwise enough to be attempting to grow a moustache, he would say in front of all the other boys, What's this I see?

[12:49] What's this? Eyebrows coming down for a drink? Well, there's your sergeant major. Now, the Roman centurions, they would have been no-nonsense disciplinarians.

But this centurion valued his dying bond servant highly, and was so distressed about the man's illness, that he sent an urgent message pleading with Jesus to come and heal him.

Now, you might have expected a man like this to say, Well, if this one dies, my commanding officer will quickly replace him with another. We can't get too sentimental about a sick man, can we? But no, this man cared a great deal about his servant.

And perhaps even more remarkable, he cared a great deal about the local Jewish population too. In verse 3, when he hears about Jesus, he doesn't send a couple of his own soldiers, a couple of Roman soldiers to Jesus.

He sends some of the local Jewish elders to Jesus to ask for his help. And when they come to Jesus in verse 3, they say to him, He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built our synagogue.

[14:02] So this was a compassionate and generous man who was deeply concerned to foster the kind of relationship with the local Jewish people that would be really healthy and positive.

Now just think of the relationship between the Romans and the Jews at this time. The Romans had conquered Judea in 63 BC. Now here, we're at about 30 or 31 AD, so nearly 90 years previously, they'd been the occupying superpower for nearly a century.

And in many places, there must have been very difficult relationships between the local people, the local Jewish people, and the soldiers at the barracks who were there to keep the population under control.

Many Jews longed to see the back of the Romans. You can understand that, can't you? Even the apostles, in chapter 1 of the Acts of the Apostles, they asked Jesus, just before he's taken up to heaven, if he is now about to restore Israel's sovereign independence.

It's what the Jews wanted so deeply. No country enjoys being occupied by the armies of a superpower. But this Roman centurion had come to love the people that he was stationed amongst, and he'd been generous enough to build their local meeting house, their synagogue.

[15 : 21] Now we're not told whether the funds came from his own pocket, or whether he'd obtained a grant from the Roman army. But the point is that he cared for these local Jews, and he went to a lot of trouble to help them.

And yet, this humane and generous man suddenly found himself facing an overwhelming difficulty, a difficulty that he was powerless to overcome.

The grim reaper had barged into his house and was standing at his beloved servant's bedside, sharpening his sickle. Where could the centurion turn? The threat that faced him was not the threat of illness.

It was the threat of death. We might rather superficially read these first 17 verses of Luke chapter 7, and we might say, well, verses 1 to 10 show Jesus' power over sickness, and verses 11 to 17 show Jesus' power over death.

But both stories are about the authority of Jesus over death. This beloved servant, as verse 2 tells us, was not just suffering from flu or the mumps.

[16 : 33] He was at the point of death. He was about to breathe his last. And when death threatens, you know that it is the worst enemy that human beings face.

Paul the apostle, in 1 Corinthians 15, calls it the last enemy to be destroyed. And we human beings face all kinds of difficulties as we live out our three-score years and ten or our four-score years.

But at the end of our lives stands this thing, this gloomy gateway that we all have to pass through eventually. Henry James, the American novelist, was on his deathbed.

And apparently, he said to a friend of his, well, here it is at last, the distinguished thing. That was his description of death, the distinguished thing.

Well, it is distinguished, isn't it? It's distinguished from all other events. It is distinctive. There is nothing else like it. All other events in human life can be survived.

[17 : 38] But death brings our experience of this world to a complete halt. Now, that is what the centurion was facing here. Not his own death, but the imminent death of someone he cared a great deal about.

But, verse 3, when he heard about Jesus, he sent messengers to him asking him to come. That's where the man's faith in Jesus begins to show in verse 3 when he sends out this urgent SOS message to the one person that he thinks might be able to help him.

So, Luke is showing us, first, the kindness of Jesus to a Gentile. Second, the kindness of Jesus to a human being in great need. And third, Luke shows us, Luke teaches us, something that lies at the heart of what faith in Jesus means.

And this is the central feature of this story. And if we can grasp what is going on in verses 6 to 9, it will greatly help us to understand what it means to be a believing Christian.

And I hope it will be a great encouragement to us. In verse 6, Jesus responds to the cry for help. And he sets off with the Jewish elders towards the centurion's house.

[18 : 59] But when he gets close to the house, I guess perhaps within sight of the front door, the centurion sends him another group of messengers who say on the centurion's behalf, Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.

Now, when the centurion says that, almost certainly he does not mean I am a Gentile and you are a Jew and I know that Jews have scruples about visiting Gentiles' homes and I don't want to embarrass you.

Almost certainly he's not saying that. What he means is simply what he says. I am not worthy. I'm a man of small account. I don't have any kind of glowing moral track record.

I don't have a chest full of decorations for noble behavior. And I would feel embarrassed to have you come through my front door. You're a great one and I'm a small one. It's very striking to see how the centurion's account of himself is the opposite of the account given of him by his Jewish friends.

So they say in verse 4 he is worthy. But he says in verse 6 I am not worthy. Luke means us to understand that the centurion's estimate of himself is the better one.

[20 : 19] And Luke's message here is that the Lord has a blessing for those who come to him as humble petitioners. but no blessing to those who are proud and self-sufficient. Remember how Mary said back in Luke chapter 1 God has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.

Well here we have a humble estate Gentile. But we must read on. Verse 7 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. I say to one go and he goes to another come and he comes and to my servant do this and he does it.

Now it is these words from halfway through verse 7 to the end of verse 8 that astonish Jesus and make him marvel. It is these words that show how the centurion is putting his faith in Jesus.

So let us look at them together carefully. Most people if they were engaging the services of a faith healer friends I am not encouraging you to do this but most people out in the world if they were engaging the services of a faith healer they would make sure that the faith healer and the sick person were in the same room together.

[21 : 44] It would never occur to them that the healer could practice his art from a distance in the absence of the sick person. I remember years ago down in England seeing the business card of a faith healer.

It was an ordinary little white business card. It had the man's name written there John so and so and underneath his name it said natural healer and below that it gave his address and his telephone number.

So a sick person who wanted his help would ring him up would make an appointment to go and visit him and would spend some time with him. Now our centurion is not like that with Jesus.

He somehow realizes that Jesus doesn't have to be in the sick room with the sick man laying his hands upon him or giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He doesn't have to be present at all.

All he has to do is to say the word. The centurion realizes that the power and authority to raise this sick man from his deathbed lies in the word of of Jesus.

[22 : 49] That last sentence in verse 7 means all you have to do is to speak and I know that my servant will be healed. And then he goes on in verse 8 to explain himself more fully.

For he says I too am a man set under authority. In other words as a middle-ranking Roman soldier I have men who are senior to me who can command me to do things because I'm under their authority but I also have men who are junior to me and when I issue commands to them they obey me.

My word carries power. I say to one soldier come and he comes to another one go and he goes to my servant do this and lo and behold he does it. In other words he is saying through my life in the Roman army I have come to understand the power of a word of command.

A soldier like me only has to speak and my words are effective. They bring about the desired result. Now the Roman Empire of course was a formidable set up.

At the top of the tree was the emperor himself and from the emperor downwards there stretched a great hierarchy of power and command. There were generals, there were tribunes and consuls and governors and commanders right down to the centurions and below them the ordinary soldiers.

[24 : 12] And the empire worked because of this chain of command that ran from top to bottom. So when a centurion gave an order to a junior soldier, that junior soldier obeyed because he knew that the centurion's authority carried strength because it was backed by the authority of the whole Roman machine which stretched right back up to the emperor himself.

Now look with me at the beginning of verse 8. I too am a man set under authority. Now why does he say I too, I also?

Because he recognizes that his position mirrors Jesus' position. He is saying I, like you, am a man under authority.

Just as my words to junior soldiers carry authority because I'm part of a higher chain of command, command, so I realize that your words carry authority and will be effective because you too are part of a higher chain of command.

So what the centurion sees is that Jesus is not some solo operator, he works under the authority of God. The centurion makes the connection between Jesus and the God of heaven.

[25 : 32] So if his words, the centurion's words, carry power in their sphere, how much more will Jesus' words carry power? If he has come to earth with God's authority, of course he only has to speak and whatever he commands will be done.

Now this is the thing that takes Jesus' breath away and makes him marvel. Look again at his words in verse nine. I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.

What he means is that he might have expected Jewish people to have faith like that because the Jews have had the Old Testament for centuries and the Old Testament is eloquent on the fact that God only has to speak and wonderful things happen.

Genesis chapter one says that God said this and said that and it happened. He created the sun and the moon and the stars merely by speaking. By his bare words he made apple trees and pear trees and lions and polar bears.

He only had to speak and the Pennines and the Grampians and the Highlands and the Islands came into being. And this theme is traced right the way through the Old Testament. We read for example in the Psalms that by the word of the Lord were the heavens made and all the starry host by the breath of his mouth.

[26 : 52] Now of course Jesus could expect Jewish people to connect the words of God with wonderful things happening. But for a Gentile Roman to do so was quite different.

The Romans were polytheists. They believed in all this great pantheon of Roman gods and goddesses, Jupiter and Mars and Venus and Ceres, a jealous fickle bunch who loved to squabble and behave badly.

How was this Roman centurion going to understand the true God? Now he did love the Jews and he did build their synagogue. So it's more than likely that he attended synagogue worship on the Sabbath day and heard the readings from the law and the prophets of the Old Testament.

But even so, it was a delight and a wonder to Jesus to see this man and to see this man making the connection between the words of Jesus and the irresistible power of the words of God.

All you have to do is to speak and my servant will be healed. What this centurion has come to see is that if Jesus says something, he will do it.

[28 : 00] Whatever he commands will be done. His words have the power to accomplish whatever he speaks. Now this is the big lesson for us from this passage and once we have grasped it, it will change our hearts and it will be such an encouragement to us.

In this world, this old world, our human words are very frail and we have learned not to trust human words very much. It has shaped our mind to think of words as untrustworthy.

So for example, somebody who wants to be elected as the next prime minister or the next American president will talk big during the election campaign and will promise great things.

If you voters will trust me and vote me into high office, then when I come to power, I'm going to sort out this problem and I'm going to solve that problem and the whole nation will benefit under my leadership.

Now sometimes that kind of electioneering promise is kept, but often it's not. Not because the man doesn't necessarily want to keep it, but because he lacks the power to keep it.

[29 : 07] He can't get his legislation through the House of Commons or the House of Representatives. He says, I'm going to do this, but when the time comes, he can't. He's unable to perform what he has promised.

And this happens right down at the most mundane level in our lives. The plumber says he'll come and put the new hot water tank in on Friday. And he doesn't come.

Now, there may be a good reason, a very valid excuse. Maybe his van has broken down. Maybe his wife has gone into labor. But the result is that he can't do what he has said he will do.

Because we live in this atmosphere in which human words are so frail and human promises are often not kept, we can come to believe that God is like us or that Jesus is like us, that their words and their promises are no stronger than ours.

But that is not the case. And we must allow Luke to re-educate our thinking. What he is showing us is that Jesus' words, backed by all his authority as the Son of God, will always be effective.

[30 : 15] He will always do exactly as he promises. He only has to speak. And whatever he says will happen, will happen. Now in this case, a word from his mouth extinguishes the power of death.

Death was just about to overcome the centurion's servant, but a word from Jesus' mouth was all that was needed. It's just the same in the next story, in the next paragraph. Look at verse 14.

Young man, I say to you, arise. And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. This is the voice that wakes the dead.

So Luke is showing us that Jesus' words are irresistible. Whatever he commands will be done.

Whatever he says he will do, he will do.

Even death has no power against him when he speaks to it and commands it to flee. The last enemy, writes Paul, is death. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

[31 : 16] And Jesus is the destroyer. Now, friends, the gospel is a promise from God. It is a promise.

It's not like the promises of prime ministers and presidents and plumbers, which are fragile and not always kept. The gospel is a sure promise.

And we can be sure that God will keep his promise. What, then, is this unbreakable promise that God gives us in the gospel?

It is this, that whoever comes to Christ and puts their trust in him will be raised to eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

We all have to die, but after our death we will be raised up in a new and perfect body to be with the Lord and each other, and we will never die again.

[32 : 12] The power of death will be forever broken and in God's presence there will be neither death nor mourning nor pain nor tears. Now, this is what Luke is showing us in this story of the centurion and his servant, that Jesus' word instantly banishes death and its power.

And the point of this story is not that if we're sick we can pray and we'll be made better. By all means, when we are sick, let's pray there are other parts of the New Testament which encourage us to do that.

But this story is not about that. This story is about the authority of Jesus over death. And Luke is showing us that real faith in Jesus Christ is believing that whatever he says will be done will be done.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we indeed trust your promises and we know that you will never break them because your word has power.

And we pray that you will write this message on our heart and make it a deep encouragement to us so that as we face the prospect of death eventually we shall be filled with the joy and certainty of newness of life because of you.

[33 : 46] We ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen.