

## **Cadillac Faith.**<sup>1</sup> (slide.1)

We've been looking at the Gospel of Luke. In doing so, we are considering the life of Jesus as one who graciously reached out to those in need. Today we're going to look at a story about a centurion and his faith. Samantha just read our text, so let's open by looking to the Lord in prayer. (slide/black.2)

A long, long time ago, back when I was still in school and back when I was still new to the Christian faith, I moved into a house with a group of guys from our church. There were seven of us (including Joe Mascherin). Because the house was big, over time it became something akin to a youth hostel. Friends of the church passing through town would often stay with us, usually for a day or two. All these years later, I realize that it would have been nice to have had some kind of book listing all those who passed through that home. But I guess we rarely think about doing those sorts of things while they're happening.

Anyway, there was this guy who stayed with us for one night. I don't remember his name, but I do remember that he was quick to tell those of us who were there when he arrived that he was a man of great faith. Being a new Christian, I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but before I could ask, he went ahead and told us. He explained that whenever he goes to the mall, he always claims a parking space by the front door "in the name of Jesus" and does so because he's a child of the King and a man of faith. He then explained that most Christians he knows have what he called **Ford Pinto faith**. Something small, with worn-out tires, and a broken AM radio, and cheap vinyl seats that get all sticky during the summer. In contrast, he told us that he had **Cadillac Coup de Ville faith**. Something big, with whitewall tires, and leather seats, and air-conditioning, and an 8-track tape player with stereo speakers.

So, being a new Christian, I wondered if maybe this is what constitutes great faith—parking spots, and luxury cars, and claiming things "in the name of Jesus," and telling God what to do. But then we come to a passage like the one Samantha read just a moment ago, and we realize that great faith may be something a little different and a little more complex than that.

## **The Centurion's Need.**

As our (slide.3) chapter opens, we see Jesus returning to the city of Capernaum. It seems like Capernaum was His base of operations during his ministry in Galilee.<sup>2</sup> There in Capernaum was (slide.4) a centurion. Centurions were officers in the Roman army. As implied by the name, centurions were responsible for about a hundred soldiers. In terms of rank, they were roughly the equivalent of a captain. They were well-paid, and according to the history books, after twenty-five years of service a centurion could be rewarded with Roman citizenship.<sup>3</sup>

We read in (slide.5) verse 2 that this centurion had a servant who was sick and about to die. We're also told that this servant was (slide.6) "valued highly." The word used here speaks of more than a monetary worth, but instead speaks of one who is "esteemed" and "respected."<sup>4</sup> The centurion thought well of this servant. So here's Jesus. He had already ministered throughout this region of Capernaum. It was in Capernaum that Jesus healed a number of people, including the man that was lowered through the roof by his friends. Word gets out. This centurion (slide.7) hears about Jesus. So what does he do? He sends some of the Jewish elders of Capernaum in hopes that they might persuade Jesus to "come and heal" the servant. The centurion is in crisis and it's his hope that Jesus can help.

It's interesting that (slide/black.8), as best as we can tell, the centurion had no strong interest in Jesus until after there was a problem in his life. And that's often the same in our own lives. I like how Tim Keller puts it; he writes that we rarely ask the "big questions" when things are going well. No, generally speaking, we most often first come to God when things are not going well. Even those of us who were brought up in the church and maybe strayed will often come back to the faith in times of difficulty. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's strange, there are people who are skeptical of anyone who finds God in a hospital room, or in a prison, or after a tragedy (an illness, a divorce, the loss of a job or a loved one). And those who are skeptical will often sneer and argue that such a conversion during such a time is inauthentic. But why believe that is the case? Why believe that a pull toward God during a difficult time is somehow less than genuine? Here's how Keller puts it; he writes (slide.9):

If there is a God, and if we were built for Him, then the vague emptiness we feel even when things are good, would become unignorable when things go bad. But the bad things do not *create* the need, they just *reveal it*.<sup>5</sup>

The emptiness was there to begin with, but so often it is those difficult, disappointing, painful, lonely times in our lives that bring that pain to light. And that's absolutely reasonable. It's what Augustine wrote of at the beginning of his *Confessions*. It's the idea that (slide.10) God has made us for Himself and that our hearts are restless until they rest in Him.<sup>6</sup> And that's true for each and every one of us here—even if things at this time are going well for you.

### **The Elders' Request.**

So here are (slide.11) these elders sent by this centurion. They approach Jesus. And they not only bring the centurion's request, they also *lobby* for him. We read that they "plead earnestly" with Jesus. They tell Jesus that (slide.12), ± "*This centurion is a good guy. He deserves to have You do this for him. We owe Him one. He loves our nation; he's even the one who built our synagogue.*"

It's interesting, in the fourth century, the synagogue in Capernaum, the same synagogue being spoken of here was rebuilt. Here's (slide.13) a picture of what remains of that synagogue today. Do you (slide.14) notice the difference between the stones? All of the lighter-colored stones along with the pillars are part of this fourth-century renovation, but they're all built on the foundation of the original first-century synagogue. The lighter stones on the top are all part of the rebuilt synagogue, but the *darker stones* on the bottom were paid for by this centurion we're reading about. Those are his stones. You and I can go to Capernaum to this day (some 2,000 years later) and see the foundation of the synagogue Jesus preached in, the foundation of the synagogue funded by this Gentile centurion.<sup>7</sup>

So here (slide.15) are these elders sent by this centurion making their appeal on his behalf. But while all of this is taking place, something happens. The centurion has a change of heart. He sends (slide.16) a second delegation with a message; they say, "*Jesus, do not trouble Yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.*" The first delegation tells Jesus that this centurion is deserving; the second delegation tells him that he's not. Something happens between the first group and the second. It seems that this centurion sees something about himself and sees something about Jesus, and that changes him. And that takes a miracle. It's funny, one of our biggest problems is that we're often strangers to ourselves. We're so good at looking at *others* through a microscope, but we often look at *ourselves* through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars.<sup>8</sup> But that's not this centurion's problem. Something happens (we don't know exactly what it is) but he sees himself for who he is, and sees Christ for who He is. And that changes everything. And in the process this Gentile centurion begins to understand something about Jesus and something about His authority; so he says (slide.17):

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.

And Jesus is impressed. In fact, we read (slide.18) that He is "amazed" at what He hears. He turns to the crowd that had been following Him and says, "*I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.*" And then (slide.19), as we've seen throughout Luke's Gospel (even in the story of the healing Mark spoke of last week), with no fanfare, with no waiving of arms in the air, with no incantation, with no hocus-pocus (in this case, without Jesus even seeing the man), those who had been sent return to the house and find the servant well.

### **Great Faith.**

There's a lot going on here (slide/black.20). For one thing, we see a foreshadow of the work of mission and the spread of the gospel to the Gentile world. In a sense, it's the book of Acts before the book of Acts. It's what we read of in (slide.21) the psalm James led us in earlier in our service: the proclamation of salvation, and the declaration of God's glory, and the pronouncement of our Lord's marvelous deeds being declared, not just to Israel (slide.22), *but to all nations, and to all peoples, and to all families of nations*. Eventually, the followers of Christ will spread the message of the gospel to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Mark spoke of this in his class last Wednesday), but this story here in Luke 7 is a prefigurement and a taste of what will happen (slide/black.23).

So we see this foreshadow of the work of mission to the Gentiles. But we also see a portrait of faith. And, if we're to be truthful, it's a portrait that differs from the portrait we often see on Christian television. If we're to watch the TV evangelists, we often see a picture of faith that is transactional. In some ways, it is not unlike the ancient Greco-Roman approach to faith. It's a faith that begins with you. You bring the right offering, you use the right incantation, you follow the rules. And in exchange the gods and goddesses give you the stuff you want. But the faith of the centurion is different. It's not a faith that begins with him. It might have started off that way when he sent the first delegation, but certainly not in the end. No, it's a faith that is founded on Christ and Christ alone.

There's a famous rock climber; his name is (slide.24) Royal Robbins. This is a picture of him in his younger years. Back in 1978, Robbins was interviewed for an article that appeared in *Sports Illustrated Magazine*. In that interview he talked about rock climbing and indicated that the one great essential of the sport of rock climbing is not physical strength, or having the safest or best equipment, or even proper training. Instead, he said that the one essential for mountain climbing is (slide.25) "...the ability to see things as they really are." He went on to say (slide.26):

Climbing is an exercise in reality. He who sees reality clearly is on safe ground, regardless of his experience or skill. But he who sees reality *as he would like it to be*, may have his illusions rudely stripped from his eyes when the ground comes up fast.<sup>9</sup>

Here are two rock climbers (slide/black.27). They trip and fall on a ledge, and there are only two ways off the ledge. There's a tiny rocky outcrop in one direction and a tiny rocky outcrop in the other direction. The first climber points to the one rocky outcrop and says, "*I am fearless, and full of assurance, and full of confidence, and I know that this will hold us up.*" The second climber says, "*I'm really nervous, and I'm really scared, but I am pretty sure this rocky outcrop is the right way.*" So they agree to disagree. Both make their move. The first climber (the one who was confident) takes a step. The rock is unstable and he falls and hurts himself. The second climber (the one who was nervous) steps the other way and is fine. ***So who is saved? Is it the one who was confident or is it the one who stepped on the right rock?***

*Faith is knowing the right rock.*

Again, Keller puts it best. He writes that (slide.28): "*It's not the strength of your faith, but the object of your faith. It's not the perfection of your faith, but the direction of your faith.*"<sup>10</sup> Faith is not self-confidence; it's not positive thinking; it's not contrived optimism (slide/black.29). And if we're to believe Scripture (which of course we should), then apparently, even faith the size of a mustard seed is enough. Two (slide.30) people are on a plane. They're flying from Tampa to Chicago. One person is an experienced flyer; the other is in a panic. ***How much faith do each of them need to get from Tampa to Chicago?*** Enough to get on the plane (slide/black.31). You watch the faith preachers with their "Cadillac faith," and you see faith being treated like a superpower reserved for the elite, for those who possess enough resolve and determination. But you look at Scripture and you see something that looks more like trust. Honestly, the weakest faith in Jesus carries more power than the strongest faith in anything else. One of the best examples of this can be found in Mark 9. A man (slide.32) comes to Jesus. His son is ill; he asks for help. Jesus asks him if he believes. The man says (slide.33), "*I do believe; help me in my unbelief!*"

The (slide.34) Jewish leaders come to Jesus and tell Him that the centurion is deserving/worthy for you to do this for him. The centurion (slide.35) sends a message to Jesus saying, "No, I am neither deserving nor worthy (slide.36), *but come and do it anyway (just say the word).*"

That is great faith.

His trust is not in himself.

His trust is not in his merit.

(He admits that he is not worthy.)

His trust is not even in his faith.

His trust is in Christ (slide/black.37).

He asks for what he knows he doesn't deserve, *yet expects to get it anyway!* He seems to intuitively understand that although he has a right to expect nothing from Jesus, still Jesus is willing to give him everything.<sup>11</sup> Darrell Bock (Professor of NT Studies) defines faith beautifully; he writes that (slide.38) "*Faith is your plea to Jesus to offer His aid in the form of His power, even though you and I are unworthy to receive it.*"<sup>12</sup> Faith is not positive thinking; it's not magic; it's not our way of twisting God's arm. It's instead knowing who we are, and knowing who Christ is, and resting in Him (slide/black.39).

This faith is a gift from God. It rests on the love of the Father and the work of Christ and the "amazing grace" we sang of earlier. This Jesus who paid the price, bore the shame, took the nails, took our sin, gave us His righteousness, rose from the dead, took His rightful seat at the right hand of God, calls us His people, and calls us to trust Him.

Let's pray,

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<sup>1</sup> OT reading: Psalm 96:1-7 (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew were all from Capernaum.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Leslie Garber, "Centurion," *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 189.

<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 279.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, "Faith in Jesus" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.

<sup>7</sup> Stanislaw Loffreda, "The Late Chronology of the Synagogue of Capernaum," *Israel Exploration Journal* 23 (1973): 37-42.

<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, vol. 1, PtW (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 256.

<sup>9</sup> Sam Moses, "Stone Walls; Stout Hearts," *Sports Illustrated Magazine*, March 6, 1978, 67; Hughes, *Luke*, PtW, 253.

<sup>10</sup> Keller, "Faith in Jesus" (2003).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement*, BIS (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 98.

<sup>12</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, vol. 1, BECNT, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 630.