

Centurions in the New Testament

By Dave Redmond

Our brotherhood is composed of many active and former military service members, frequently living in locations away from their original home. There is therefore interest, and possible empathy, concerning the Roman centurions who are recorded in New Testament scripture.

The centurion was not the equivalent of just any Roman soldier. In today's military, he would be among the middle to upper officer ranks, major to brigadier general, or among the highest enlisted ranks. The name implies that he would be in charge of 100 men, but this could be 80 to several hundred. Some achieved this status after first serving in the Legion, or soldierly class, while others were appointed. It was an honor to be selected, and these are some of the qualifications: centurions had to be literate, to read orders, to have letters of recommendation, to be at least 30 years old, and to have former military service. . The Roman writer Vegetius describes them as men chosen for their size, strength and dexterity; they were to be vigilant, temperate, active and "readier to execute the orders he receives than to talk," strict in exercising and keeping up proper discipline among his soldiers.

The word centurion appears 20 times in the New Testament, sparsely among the synoptic gospels and more prolifically in the book of Acts. We will focus upon three very instructive accounts, and then note two other examples.

Our first example occurs during Christ's ministry (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10). Knowing Jesus' reputation as a healer, a centurion approached and pleaded with Him concerning his servant who was paralyzed and "dreadfully tormented." In Luke's account, the centurion's servant was described as "dear to him" and "sock and ready to die." He also recorded that elders of the Jews begged earnestly on the centurion's behalf, noting that "he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue." Here we receive a glimpse of the character and reputation of this centurion. While Jesus readily offered to "come and heal him," the centurion demonstrated humility and faith when, according to Matthew, he replied to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof, but only speak a word, and my servant will be healed." He recognized Jesus' absolute authority and compared it to his own. "For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." Jesus marveled at his answer, and credited this Gentle with "such great faith...not found even in Israel." He commanded the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." As a man ready to obey orders, the centurion obeyed Jesus. The timing is noteworthy, as Matthew

records that his servant was healed “that same hour”! This centurion’s life reflected a love for his fellow man, as evidenced by the building of a synagogue and seeking help for his dying servant. He recognized the power and authority of Christ, and through an obedient faith his servant was healed.

Our second centurion is recorded near the time of Jesus’ death. It is with profound sadness that we recall the suffering of our Savior. Before the crucifixion, Roman soldiers (not recorded as centurions) humiliated Jesus, stripping His clothes, putting on a scarlet robe, placing a crown of thorns and a reed in His right hand, mocking Him, spitting upon Him, and leading Him to be crucified (Matt. 27:27-31). While we do not condone any of their actions, we understand that Jesus was delivered to be crucified by the governor, Pilate (Mark 15:15). Their actions fulfilled prophecy, according to God’s will. Afterwards, it was a centurion, and apparently his men, who were trusted to guard Jesus (Matt. 27:54). After witnessing the earthquake and the things which had happened, they “feared greatly,” saying, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!” (cf. Mark 15:39). Mark also records that Pilate inquired of the centurion whether Jesus had been dead for some time, facilitating transfer of the body to Joseph of Arimathea for burial (Mark Mark 15:44-45). Luke emphasizes that the centurion “glorified God” in his pronouncement, saying, “Certainly this was a righteous Man!” (Luke 23:47). In each of these accounts, it was the centurion who was chosen to guard Jesus, and because of his “vigilance and temperance,” these honest observations lend credibility to the truth of the crucifixion and the surrounding events. Vegetius described centurions as men “readier to receive orders than to talk.” Fittingly, the short but powerful pronouncement of this centurion has echoed through time.

Our next example, Cornelius, is one of two centurions whose name is recorded in Scripture. Acts 10 reveals the character and actions of this obedient Gentile. In the first verse, we find that Cornelius was devout, God-fearing, and an example to his household. He was generous to all around him and always prayerful to God. Although not yet a Christian, his prayers and charity were recognized by God. After seeing clearly in a vision from an angel of God, he humbly asked, “What is it, Lord?” Then the angel indicated that there was something that Cornelius must do, and that this would be explained by Peter. Instead of questioning the angel, or going about his daily business, Cornelius immediately obeyed and sent men to bring Peter (vs. 1, 3-4, 5-8, 33).

In anticipation of Peter’s arrival, Cornelius invited his friends and close relatives to come and hear. Cornelius received Peter with humility and a mistaken desire to worship God’s servant, falling down at his feet. Recognizing the Lord’s

holy presence, the centurion and his household listened intently to the words commanded by God through Peter (vs. 24-25, 33).

Also through a vision, Peter had been prepared to preach to Cornelius and his audience. “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.” Peter preached the preparation for Christ by John the Baptizer and proclaimed Christ: His divinity, ministry, death and resurrection, and the remission of sins through faith (vs. 34-43).

In verse 44, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those Gentiles who heard the Word. Peter and the Jews with him were astonished as they heard Cornelius and his company magnify God. They readily understood that salvation was now available to the Gentiles. They must have recalled and reflected upon the events of Peter’s first gospel message on the day of Pentecost, as the apostles were also filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). Just as on Pentecost, Cornelius and his party were commanded to receive water baptism in the name of the Lord (Acts 10:47-48).

The account of Cornelius, a devout centurion, was central to the understanding that the gospel is for all people of all nations. It was a fulfillment of the promise made to Abram centuries earlier, “In your seed all nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 26:4), and “that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:14).

There are other citations which also lend credence to the character of centurions. In Acts 22:25, Paul inquired of a nearby centurion, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?” Paul knew his Roman citizenship conveyed protections, and that the centurion would be able to intervene as he did. He told his commander, “Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman citizen.” In Acts 23 and 24, centurions delivered Paul safely to the governor, Felix, and then guarded him under house arrest. Later in Acts 27, Paul started his final voyage to Rome. Julius, another centurion, was responsible for Paul and the other prisoners. Along their journey, they stopped in Sidon, where Julius permitted Paul to visit his friends who might provide for his needs (vs. 1, 3). Later in this account when the storm arose, Julius prevented the crew from escaping in the lifeboat. After the shipwreck, Julius again intervened to prevent the soldiers from killing Paul and the other prisoners (vs. 11, 31-32, 42-43). As Paul’s ministry was drawing to a close, we see that centurions played vital roles in his protection. These men acted decisively, with discretion and great courage.

In conclusion, we see that God worked through each of these centurions: one, as an example of great faith during Jesus’ ministry; another, to boldly proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God; still others for the protection of Paul. Most importantly to

us as Gentiles, Cornelius was called upon to help fulfill the promise that through Abram all nations would be blessed.

These centurions, though not perfect men, were chosen by God to accomplish His perfect will.