

## Miracles of Jesus - 1

# Jesus Heals the Centurion's servant

The miracles performed by Jesus in the gospels arouse curious reactions. Some just refuse to believe them, assuming they were made up by fanciful disciples who lived long after the events. They disregard the fact that two of the gospel writers were eyewitnesses of the events they record.

Others take a pseudo-scientific view to discredit them, looking for 'rational' explanations. Jesus walked on water, they say, by sticking to shallow, half-submerged sand banks near the shore of the Sea of Galilee; he did not really die on the cross, but fainted, and later revived in the coolness of the tomb. In both cases, the detail of the gospel records automatically excludes these 'explanations'. The water walking took place in a gale in the middle of the night. The soldiers in charge of Jesus' execution were surprised he had died quickly, and to make sure he was really dead, stabbed him with a spear.

So often the critics of the Bible fail to read it carefully. They pick out the odd verse, or rely on memory, and ignore the facts.

In this series, we propose to examine some of Jesus' miracles quite closely, looking at the detail and the evidence that finally led the tough Roman centurion at the foot of the cross to exclaim, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

## An Unusual Centurion

There are several Roman centurions in the New Testament. By nature and



training, army commanders tend to be robust characters – mentally disciplined, clear thinking and decisive.

The centurion at Capernaum was no exception, but he also showed respect and consideration for those in his charge. The Romans were the occupying power in first century Palestine, but this centurion had an excellent rapport with the Jews of his area. We are told he paid out of his own pocket for the local place of worship, as the Jews told Jesus:

*He loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue (Luke 7:5).*

This centurion also had a great respect for the men who served under him. Even his servant, or slave, "was dear to him" says the record in verse 2. When the man fell sick, his master did his best to find someone to make him better. It was a hopeless quest, for Mark's gospel says he was "ready to die" (v2).

We do not know for sure what the illness was, although Matthew 8:6 describes it as paralysis. This can stem from injury, such as a bad fall, or from a stroke or a virus affecting the nerves. Whatever it was, he was not expected to live.

## The Man from Nazareth

It was at this crisis that news of the young teacher from Nazareth filtered through to the centurion's household. Jesus had already worked miracles of healing in the vicinity, including the public healing of a man with a shrivelled hand actually inside the synagogue at Capernaum. Opposition from the Jews had driven Jesus into the countryside for a while, but now he was back, and with reports coming in every day of his cures, the centurion saw the possibility of helping his dying servant. He turned to his friends, the Jewish elders, to ask the young rabbi to pay him a call.

Jesus could so easily have snubbed them – told them he was too busy to help, reminded them of their hostility and sent them away. It would have been understandable. But it would not have been his way; he went. We can be sure he went, not to save the reputation of those proud, hypocritical elders, but for the sake of the sick man and his warm-hearted master.

## A Remarkable Message

For Jesus to get there took time, because his footsteps were always dogged by a large and demanding crowd. Word seems to have gone on ahead to the centurion's house that Jesus was on the way, for what happened next was extraordinary.

Jesus and his attendants, walking



towards the Roman villa, were met by a group travelling towards him in the opposite direction. The centurion had sent a party of his friends to intercept the healer. They brought a message from the great man:

*Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, having 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 (Luke 7:6–8).*

The message was respectful – how different from the scorn Jesus had to endure from the people of his own nation! He, the centurion, the representative of the Emperor, was counting himself less worthy than the carpenter from Nazareth. He had decided there was no point in Jesus making a special journey. If he had the power of God to heal, he did not need to be present in the room. A word would do.

The explanation that followed was clear. He himself was under authority. He was responsible to his commanding officer, who, in turn, had a regional commander over him, with a chain of command all the way back to the

Emperor in Rome. When he gave an order to his lieutenant, the effect was immediate. There was no questioning, no argument as to why he should obey. The iron discipline of the army worked like clockwork. To challenge an order was to challenge the authority of the superior officer, an authority that came ultimately from the Emperor. To disobey was punishable with death.

In the centurion's mind, there was no question that Jesus could cure his slave. Although he had probably never met him, he had heard enough reports to know he was no impostor. Just as the centurion had the authority of the Emperor invested in him, so Jesus had the authority of God. He did not need to threaten or raise his hand to produce a result. At a word of command, the disease would depart from the servant's body, as rapidly as the slave, when well, would run to fetch his master's cloak.

## The Miracle

Jesus was visibly impressed by the centurion's conviction that he could work the cure. A Gentile (non-Jew) was putting to shame the very people who had been waiting for centuries for the coming of Messiah, the Son of God. We read in Matthew's account:

*When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom [Israel] will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:10-12).*

Jesus did indeed say the word, and the man was healed.

*"Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour (v13).*

## Our Response?

When Jesus returns to set up God's kingdom, then those who reject him and his power will, in turn, be rejected.

But we can be part of that wonderful world order. Like the centurion, we need to listen to the evidence from the



reliable witnesses in our Bibles, and declare with faith that Jesus is Lord. If we do so, then in this life we can experience the limitless love of God and His Son. Then we share the hope of being in that kingdom, to sit down with the greatest men and women the world has ever known. As the apostle Peter wrote:

*For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty (2 Peter 1:16).*

**David M. Pearce**