

Everyone in your time knows that a Roman centurion commanded one hundred men, right? Because in Latin, the “cent” in centurion means one hundred. You have one hundred cents in a dollar, one hundred years in a century, so centurion...one hundred men, right? Wrong.

Let me explain how the Roman armies were organized in the time of Jesus. At the head of the Roman Empire was the Emperor. At the time when Jesus preached, the Emperor was Tiberius, who ruled from 14-37 A.D. Below the Emperor were the legions which each had about 5,000 men. In the time of Tiberius, there were about 28 legions. Each legion had ten cohorts, with each cohort having six centuries. Each century had about eighty men. So, a centurion typically commanded about eighty men, not one hundred.

There were different levels of centurion, but in your terms, a centurion would be equivalent to a captain or major. Centurions typically attained their position by being competent soldiers. However, they usually led from the front in battle, so the life span of centurions could be short.

Centurions were highly respected, and were known for being tough. In the time of Jesus, it would have been common for a centurion and his century to be placed in charge of a city or area. It was their duty to keep the peace in their area of command, and they had the authority to do so. Although centurions were paid, professional soldiers, many of them were independently wealthy or found ways to supplement their incomes through taking advantage of the areas they administered.

I was the centurion in charge of the northern part of the Sea of Galilee. This was an important area for several reasons. The vital trade route, the Via Maris, came through this area, and I had to keep it safe at all times. It was an important source of tax revenue, and any slow-down in traffic was a cause for concern from Rome. That is one reason I was an acquaintance of Matthew and the other tax collectors in the area.

As part of keeping the area safe, I was in charge of keeping peace with the Jews in the area. This was actually a pretty simple chore except for one group. Nearby was a large faction of Zealots, Jews hoping to take their nation back from Rome. They were prone to violent actions, so I had to keep a tight rein on them. I partly accomplished that by working closely with the peaceful Jews, Pharisees, or other local leaders.

The Jewish leaders found that I was willing to support peace by building synagogues and respecting their customs, but they had to reciprocate by helping me keep the Zealots under

control, and by helping me collect a fair amount of taxes. We had a symbiotic relationship, and, unlike most Romans, I came to love the people of Galilee.

My region stayed so peaceful and we collected so much tax revenue that Rome let things stay intact for many years. I had a simple job, and my life was calm. Until Jesus showed up. At first, he was just a simple traveling preacher who preached a simple message... and healed people. I could not imagine what trouble he might be able to cause. (big sigh) Over time, he really upset the Jewish leaders by his teachings. However, since he wasn't any threat to the peace or to the trade route, I didn't have much to do with him.

One day, I was in a meeting outdoors with the religious leaders and tax collectors about some rather mundane matters. I could not hold these meetings in my house because I am a Gentile, and it would have been a big problem to them to enter my house. In fact, having a meeting with those two groups was a bit a problem in itself because tax collectors were considered unclean. As the meeting progressed, a messenger came rushing up to me.

He whispered in my ear that my most trusted servant had taken ill and appeared on the point of death. This man had been with me for twenty years, and I loved him like a brother. I dismissed the messenger and kept my Roman calm, but the men in the room could sense I was distressed. Finally, I told them the problem. They were distraught because they did not want me to be upset in any way. None of them had a solution. One younger man in the back asked to speak, I granted permission, and he suggested that we ask the new faith healer in town to try to heal my servant.

I laughed, and then I remembered that Matthew, the most logical man I had ever known, had left his tax collecting business to follow a healer named Jesus. I also remembered that Matthew had told me that this man had amazing powers to heal. "Jesus?" I asked. And then told the young man to quickly take some of the other leaders to him and plead my case, and I dismissed the meeting.

When I arrived at my house, I found that my servant really was at the point of death. I knew we had no time to lose, but I also realized that Jesus would not be able to enter my house without becoming unclean. Jesus would not have hesitated to come in if it meant doing more good than harm, but I didn't know it at the time. I was in a quandary that had no apparent solution.

That is when the gracious God of the Jews gave me the solution. One of my soldiers walked by, and I began to instruct him to go do something. I realized that my soldiers were under my authority and were required to do anything I told them to do. I didn't even have to tell them in person. I could do it from a distance by invoking my authority through my word or personal seal.

I rushed outside and found a few of my Jewish friends who were praying for my servant. I begged them to rush to Jesus and tell them what I knew to be true. He had the authority to heal, and to heal from a distance. He just needed to give the word. They rushed out the door to

find Jesus. Twenty minutes later, my servant was healed instantly and completely. I guess I so thoroughly believed in his authority that I wasn't even surprised.

Later, I learned that my friends had found Jesus about a mile away, and told him my message. He was astounded at my level of faith and gave the word that my servant should be healed. My friends were shocked when they heard Jesus say, "I have not found such great faith, even in Israel." I think it was their first inkling that Jesus had come for more than the Jews, for the Gentiles, too.

From that point on, I kept tabs on Jesus and tried to do him favors whenever I could. That usually took the form of deflecting any concerns that Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, had about him. Antipas was so paranoid about John the Baptist, that he worried about Jesus, as well.

I decided to hire one of my Jewish friends to follow Jesus and report back to me everything he learned. It wasn't long after he healed my servant that Jesus went on another of his long preaching walkabouts, and my friend followed him. Jesus went by Nain, which is about 35 miles from Capernaum, but only a few miles from his hometown of Nazareth.

As Jesus was going by the town gate of Nain, a large crowd was leaving the town. The crowd was accompanying a dead body to the cemetery outside of town. Jesus saw the body was accompanied by a distraught woman, and he surmised that this was the only child of a widow. And by the depth of her sorrow, most probably a son, so a very uncertain future waited at the end of her grief. I bet he thought of his own widowed mother, and how endangered she would be if she had only one son, and lost him. Jesus had pity.

Sure enough, she was a widow. He told her not to cry, then he went to the body. Jesus did not worry about becoming ceremonially unclean. He said, "Young man, I tell you to get up." Immediately the dead man sat up and began talking. Jesus gave him back to his mother and then went on his way. Absolute wildfire...the news of this incident spread throughout the entire region.

A couple of years later when Jesus was crucified. I was reminded of the incident in Nain. Centurions are a tight group, and I spoke with a soldier who was at the crucifixion.¹ He told me that just before Jesus died, he had called his apostle John and his mother over and said, "Woman, this is now your son." He gave the widowed mother back a son, just as he had done for the widow of Nain.

One last event. Most of you probably think that Jesus was always an enemy of the Pharisees. Not so. Early on, the Pharisees were just trying to figure out who Jesus was and whether he was worth dealing with. Jesus even had some friends and acquaintances among the Pharisees. One of those was a man named Simon.

¹ Mark 15:39

Simon decided to have a dinner and invite Jesus to it. I suspect he wanted show off a little that he was friends with the new faith healer in town. Simon invited all of his important friends to the dinner, and made sure all the Pharisee traditions were honored. I believe he had ulterior motives because he did not treat Jesus as a guest of honor.

During the course of the meal, a woman of ill repute slipped into the room and began to clean and anoint Jesus' feet with a costly perfume using her hair and tears. Simon and the guests were appalled; she was a woman, a woman of ill repute, and she was touching a man in public. All of this was abhorrent to the Pharisees. Believing Jesus would not have let her do such a thing if he knew about her, Simon concluded Jesus was not a prophet. He was not only wrong in thinking that, but he was incapable of understanding the significance of what she did.

Simon must have been shocked when Jesus answered out loud to what he was thinking. Jesus told a story about two men who owed a "certain" moneylender two different amounts of money. You can be sure that he winced when Jesus started his story, because Simon probably knew the two men Jesus was using as an example, and one of them may have been him! Jesus went on to say that the moneylender forgave the two men because they could not pay back their debts. Then he asked a question, "Which one of the two men loved the moneylender more because of the forgiveness?" I suspect Simon really flinched when he heard that question.

Simon answered, "I suppose the one who was forgiven of the bigger debt." When Jesus said that he had answered correctly, Simon almost collapsed with relief that he had appeared wise in front of his guests. If so, he was relieved far too soon.

Jesus described how the woman had treated him with such precious actions, and by doing so had showed her faith in Jesus. He said she had many sins, but her sins were forgiven. Jesus went on to say that Simon had not treated him as an honored guest because Simon felt so self-righteous. What Jesus pointedly did *not* do, was forgive the sins of Simon.

I'm pretty sure the dinner came to a screeching halt soon thereafter. This incident set the course for Jesus to be in opposition to the Pharisees and other self-righteous religious leaders. In retrospect, if they had just humbled themselves, the Jewish religious leaders would have saved themselves a lot of trouble. As one of Jesus' followers would write, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."²

As for me, I spent the rest of my military career going to the places where Rome most needed me. Unlike most of my fellow centurions who retired, I did not go back to Rome or Italy. I went back to Israel to raise olives and grapes.

² Romans 12:3

Rome had a huge problem dealing with the large number of soldiers who retired and expected a land grant as part of their retirement compensation. The world had been at peace so long that too many of us had survived instead of dying in battle. I was content to take my land grant in Israel, a place few soldiers wanted to be.

I never did get to see Jesus again, but I did stay in touch with my fellow centurions who told me about his death, burial, and resurrection...and about how his followers began spreading Christianity. I wasn't surprised. He told them to go make disciples, and he had more authority than anybody I ever knew.