



# THE CENTURIONS

Lessons from Ten New Testament Men of Valor

R. Herbert

# **THE CENTURIONS:**

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New Testament  
Men of Valor**

**By R. Herbert**

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# INTRODUCTION: Ten Centurions

In the decades before the life of Jesus, the growing Roman Empire increased its influence in the eastern Mediterranean, and by 40 BC the land of Judah became a province of the empire, protected but tightly controlled by Roman armies.

As a result of this historical situation, the story told by the four Gospels is inextricably connected with that of the Romans in Judea. We see this beginning with the decree of the Emperor Augustus that the Roman world should be taxed – leading to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem – to the story of the Roman centurion who stood by the cross at Christ’s death. After the life of Christ, a centurion became the first Gentile Christian, and yet other centurions became instrumental in the spread of Christianity to Rome itself.

Although the events recorded in the New Testament show the potential for cruelty of some of Rome’s military men, the Gospels and Acts also show that others were honorable, humane, and deserving of praise. Such were the ten centurions – company level officers commanding eighty to one hundred men (see Appendix) – who are mentioned in the New Testament and who are the subject of this book. Although we only know the names of two of these men, the New Testament shows us that they all played some role in establishing and furthering the Christian faith, and we can learn lessons from each of them.

In chronological order, as they appear in the New Testament narratives, the ten centurions were:

1. The centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10).

2. The centurion at the cross when Jesus died (Matthew 27:51–54; Mark 15:38–39, 44–45; Luke 23:44–47).
3. Cornelius, the centurion who was the first Gentile convert (Acts 10:1–7).
- 4 and 5. The two (or possibly more) centurions who were involved in the arrest of the apostle Paul (Acts 21:32; 22:25–29).
6. The centurion who took Paul’s nephew to his commander and thus helped save Paul from the Jewish plot to kill him (Acts 23:17).
- 7 and 8. The centurions who escorted Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea (Acts 23:23).
9. In Caesarea, the Governor Felix commanded a centurion to guard Paul (Acts 24:23).
10. Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment (Acts 27:1–43) who escorted Paul to Rome with other prisoners.

However, rather than looking at each of these men chronologically, this book looks at the ten centurions in an ascending order – from those who are mentioned only by rank, through those whose words are recorded, to the men whose actions are discussed in detail by the New Testament writers. Looking at the ten centurions in this way, we see that certain themes become clear. Each soldier shows us something regarding character traits that are as important now as they were then – as vital and valuable to the Christian warrior today as they were to the centurions of Rome.

# 1. DISCIPLINE

At its height, the Roman Empire controlled some two million square miles – over half of the known world at that time. Historians agree that the winning of this huge empire was made possible to a very large degree by one simple factor: discipline. The Roman army was the most organized and well-disciplined army in the ancient world, and its military discipline consistently helped it rout its enemies and maintain its influence for hundreds of years.

Roman military discipline involved not only the careful training of its troops to execute complex military maneuvers and tactics, but also extended to almost every aspect of military life in war and peace. For example, in battle, the Romans used rallying calls only sparingly. A centurion might shout the invocation *Honos et Virtus!* –“strength and honor”– and the legionnaires might reply *Semper fidelis* –“Always faithful”– (the motto, of course, of the present-day United States Marine Corps); but the tight discipline of the Roman troops meant they were mainly silent in battle (despite what we might see in modern films!).

## **The Power of Restraint**

This disciplined restraint had the advantage that a silent force can seem psychologically more in control and threatening to an enemy, but silence was carefully maintained mainly so that the Romans could better hear every order of their centurions and could thus maneuver more quickly and effectively than their opponents.

Tight discipline was maintained just as much in peaceful times and in peacekeeping operations. For example, the Romans utilized a highly developed military mail system and decreed stern punishments for any individual using the system for private correspondence. Such details may not seem of great importance by themselves, but the total effect of Roman military discipline was that its army usually functioned better, more efficiently, and more

successfully than any other fighting force in the ancient world.

This primary aspect of Roman military life is clearly seen in the first example we will look at of the centurions mentioned in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, we read that when the apostle Paul was attacked by a violent mob in the temple at Jerusalem, the Roman soldiers stationed in that area responded quickly and with typical discipline.

The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. (Acts 21:30–35)

The chief military officer of the Romans in the area – a *chiliarch* commanding a thousand men (see Appendix) – was stationed in the Fortress of Antonia, which King Herod had built on high ground at the northwest corner of the temple. This location allowed observation of the temple area and early warning of exactly the kind of mob activity or uprising that was occurring around Paul. So we are told that the commander was able to rush to the scene with at least two centurions (plural in the Greek and so translated “officers” in the NIV) and probably about two hundred men, and to rescue Paul by taking him into protective custody.



Dealing with such a chaotic situation is particularly difficult, and it is imperative that the restraining soldiers do not become separated from each other and get into isolated and unprotected combat with the mob. Discipline is what prevented that. Luke's careful description of the scene also shows the disciplined work of the officers and men in what happened next.

Luke tells us that once the soldiers were able to get Paul to the safety of the fortress, they prepared to interrogate him with a beating as the situation was confused and volatile enough that it was vital that they discover the cause of the Jewish uproar before it spread further:

As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen." The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I am," he answered. Then the commander said, "I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains. (Acts 22:25–29)

Here we see that the commanding officer had delivered Paul to a centurion (probably one of those who had arrested him) for the interrogation and that the centurion immediately halted the procedure once he found Paul was a Roman citizen in order to discuss the situation with the commander. Luke shows how the whole event was characterized by disciplined control on the part of the soldiers and the centurion, and this may have possibly saved Paul's life, or at least saved him further injury in his already beaten state.

## **The Christian and Disciplined Living**

Paul doubtless especially valued the concept of discipline from that point forward, and it is interesting that in his later letters – written after his arrest – Paul emphasizes the importance of discipline in the Christian life, while we do not often see him mention this quality in letters written before his arrest. Paul does mention those who are “disorderly” in his earlier epistles (for example, 2 Thessalonians 3:11 NKJV), but does not stress discipline in the same way.

However, after his imprisonment we find Paul wrote to his faithful assistant Timothy that discipline should be evident in the life of every Christian: “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7). The highest and most important form of discipline, Paul indicates, is *self-discipline*, and he stressed this to his other assistant, Titus, when he wrote that those called to serve others must especially be “self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined” (Titus 1:8).

Paul experienced the positive results of Roman military discipline in his interaction with Roman soldiers and centurions. It is not surprising that he saw the importance and value of disciplined self-control in the life of every servant-soldier of Christ (see Philippians 2:25; Philemon 1:2). Perhaps today, in an age when undisciplined living and disrespect for authority and any kind of control is so widespread, that is a particularly important lesson for every Christian should remember. And, regarding the centurions’ invocation of “strength and honor!” we can also remember that those are qualities we too should strive for – because they are qualities of the God we serve. As Paul wrote: “To him be honor and might forever” (1 Timothy 6:16).

## 2. COURAGE

If discipline was the first hallmark of the Roman centurion, courage was doubtless the second. The centurions led their troops into battle and took position in the front rank of their troops in stationary fighting. This resulted in a disproportionate fatality rate for centurions, but they were chosen for their courage and seldom failed their men.

### **Men of Valor**

Although many centurions were doubtless men of courage, a number of these officers distinguished themselves by extreme valor throughout Roman history. In the fifth century BC the centurion Lucius Siccus Dentatus – known as the ‘Roman Achilles’ – participated in a staggering one hundred and twenty battles and survived at least eight single combat confrontations. At one point he single-handedly retook the captured military standards of his legion, and he is said to have borne no fewer than forty-five battle scars on his body.

In the second century BC another centurion, Spurius Ligustinus fought throughout a twenty-two year career during which he won over thirty awards for courage on the battlefield. Closer to New Testament times, in the first century BC Julius Caesar's account of the Gallic Wars frequently mentions the centurion P. Sextius Baculus who was known as ‘the Staff’ and who once saved Caesar's life on the battlefield. These are just a few examples from a long line of battle-tested soldiers who made the Roman Empire a reality and who, as is often said, made the rank of centurion respected by both Roman troops and their enemies alike.

The courage of many centurions and their men was not just seen in military conflicts, but also in many policing actions that the Romans undertook to preserve peace and ensure justice in their empire. We find a great example of this everyday courage of the

soldiers and their officers in the New Testament story of how the apostle Paul was transferred from Jerusalem to the Roman headquarters at Caesarea on the Judean coast, for safekeeping and proper trial:

The commander ... called two of his centurions and ordered them, “Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix..” ... So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. (Acts 23:22–33)

The situation Luke describes here was far from a routine transfer. All Jerusalem was in an uproar and the Roman commander knew that there was a major plot among the Jews to kill Paul and that an ambush had been planned to overpower any Roman escort in order to be able to do away with the apostle (see Chapter 5, ACTION). So the commander assigned two full legions to protect Paul, fearing the possibility of a massive attack on him. The centurions and men given this assignment knew that the most dangerous place in all Judea at that moment in time was wherever the apostle Paul was, and their acceptance and carrying out of their orders shows exactly the everyday courage of these men who knew they might well be walking or riding into a death trap.

At times like these, the Roman soldiers knew that they were responsible to uphold two qualities that were held in the greatest esteem in the legions – the qualities associated with Honos, the personification of honor, and Virtus, the personification of valor and courage. These soldiers endured danger and the very real possibility of suffering for the sake of Honus and Virtus and for the

sake of their bond with each other and with their centurions. This is not unlike what Paul later wrote to Timothy, telling him to be strong and urging him:

Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. (2 Timothy 2:3-4)

## **Take Courage**

Paul knew the very real danger that he himself faced in his transfer from Jerusalem, of course, but he had been encouraged after his arrest by a vision of Christ who spoke to him, saying: “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome” (Acts 23:11). Paul clearly obeyed that command to take courage (Philippians 1:20; etc.) and he passed the instruction along to the Christians he taught. For example, to the Christians at Corinth Paul wrote: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; *be courageous*; be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13). And to those at Philippi he wrote “stand firm ... striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you” (Philippians 1: 27-28).

In fact, when we read the letters of Paul, we find continued admonitions to “fight,” “defend,” “seek,” and “resist” – spiritual actions that require not only work, but also courage. But Paul knew that he was continuing a long biblical tradition whereby the people of God are commanded: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified ... for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). The Roman centurions and their men who protected Paul also remind us that courage is always necessary for justice and right to prevail.

### 3. DEDICATION

After discipline and courage, the next quality we find among a great many centurions is their dedication to their comrades, to their legion, and to their country's best interests. This dedication was often necessary, considering the hard work and less than ideal conditions that many soldiers served in. Rome's legions were stationed across a vast swath of Eurasia and Africa and a centurion or soldier might find himself anywhere from the freezing winter forests of northern Europe to the burning sands of Africa or the Middle East. Just getting to his assigned area could be an arduous journey of weeks or even months by land, sea, or both.

So the dedication of the Roman military man was often expressed in his strong sense of *purpose* and in *patience* and *persistence* – factors which without doubt helped build and maintain the empire. When the Romans fought the Etruscans for over ten years, they did not give up – they persevered and won. When they suffered a huge defeat and lost tens of thousands of troops to the Samnites, they did not give up – they won. When they lost every battle they fought against the great Greek general Pyrrhus, they did not give up – they eventually won. Even when the brilliant Carthaginian general Hannibal wiped out a fifth of the Roman population and almost destroyed Rome, the Romans refused to give up – and eventually they won.

This dedication fueled by persistent patience (along with the threat of punishment!) meant that Roman military men did not sleep on their watch, got to where they were sent, and could be trusted to endure even the longest and most wearying of assignments. We see a very small example of this in the book of Acts. When the apostle Paul was taken to Caesarea (see Chapter 2, COURAGE), the Roman Governor Felix commanded a centurion to guard him there (Acts 24:23). This may seem like a simple and everyday assignment – which it was. But when we realize that Paul was then confined in that area for two whole years (Acts 24:27), we

realize the willing patience of the centurion whose responsibility Paul had become, and who got to do nothing to further his career (and increase his pay – see Appendix) while he fulfilled that order.

Paul also patiently endured this two-year loss of freedom and ability to do his work – just as he had encouraged others to be “strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience” (Colossians 1:11). In fact, it was doubtless during this two-year period of arrest at Rome’s Judean headquarters that Paul observed his military captors and began to use many of the military metaphors that are found in his later writings. But Paul seems to have always delighted in making analogies between the spiritual life of the Christian soldier and the military life of the Roman army.

## **Military Metaphors**

Consider an example of Paul’s military metaphors – one pertaining to dedication – that you may have read over, not realizing its significance. Writing to the Galatians, Paul said “let no man trouble me; for I bear branded on my body the marks of Jesus” (Galatians 6:17 ASV). Many presume that this refers to the wounds Paul endured – just as Jesus had done before him. But Paul was actually using a clear military metaphor.

The Roman army branded every recruit taken into service with a hot iron. Slaves were branded too, but while the cruel branding of a slave showed ownership and insignificance, the soldier’s branding was one of the most honorable things in Roman life. A man who had the military brand mark showed with it his dedication to what he served. Paul tells us that he likewise bore the mark of dedication to his Lord. Paul gives ample proof of this dedication in listing some of the many hardships he had suffered in Christ’s service:

Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I

have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:25–28)

Roman centurions and their men certainly suffered hardships – for example, in Britain troops brushed themselves with stinging nettles to keep warm in the cold, and in desert areas men sometimes went without water or had to drink filthy water to survive – but generally they were well provisioned and seldom without food or sufficient clothing. Paul certainly endured as much as any legionary and a great deal more than most, and he did this through the dedication he felt to the cause in which he had been enlisted. As he told Timothy “Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3 ASV), and (mentioning all three of the qualities of dedication that we have looked at in this chapter), “You ... know all about my teaching, my way of life, my *purpose*, faith, *patience*, love, *endurance* (2 Timothy 3:10).

Timothy would certainly have been aware of these aspects of Paul’s life and ministry and would have known that Paul was not merely affirming his suffering and accomplishments, but stressing how important the qualities of dedicated purpose, patience, and endurance are for every Christian. All of these traits were manifest in Paul’s life through the power God supplied and Paul’s dedication to those he served and to God himself. We may not be called to endure the many hardships Paul suffered, but every life has its difficulties and with God’s help we too can develop the purpose, patience, and endurance that come from true dedication.



## 4. BELIEF

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 27:51–54; Mark 15:38–39, 44–45; Luke 23:44–47) all record that when Jesus died, an unnamed Roman centurion and some of his men standing by the cross uttered the words: “Truly this was the Son of God!” We will come back to this centurion’s words, but first we need to see them in context.

### **The Religious Romans**

Some have doubted that a Roman officer would have uttered such religious words, but that doubt fails to understand how great a role religion played in the Roman society and in the Army. The Romans considered themselves the most religious of all peoples, and we have ample historical and archaeological evidence of the importance of religion for many Roman soldiers. For example, archaeologists have recovered letters written by military recruits to their parents which make this devotion clear. Sometime in the century directly after Jesus lived, a young recruit wrote to his mother:

Apollinarius to Taesis, his mother and lady, many greetings!  
Before all I pray for your health. I myself am well, and make supplication for you before the gods of this place ...

Another wrote to his father:

Apion to Epimachus, his father and lord, very many greetings.  
Before all else I pray for your health and that you may always be well and prosperous, together with my sister and her daughter and my brother. I thank the Lord Serapis that when I was in danger at sea he straightway saved me ...

In fact, religion permeated the life of the individual Roman soldier, and a great deal of the daily routine of the army revolved around rituals which had religious significance. Most military units had religious personnel on their staff, and before a battle sacrifices would be performed to gain the favor of the gods and the purification of the soldiers.

Because the army was a melting pot of ethnicities and religions, virtually every kind of religion could be found within its ranks. The god Mithra – or Mithras as he was called by the Romans – was a Persian deity of the sun, light, covenants, truth, and justice who was especially popular among military men. And even the lesser-known Jupiter Dolichenus, a fusion of Roman and Anatolian gods, is recorded on a surviving papyrus as one cohort's password for May 28, AD 239 –indicating that the god's name was familiar enough to be easily memorable for all the soldiers in the unit.

Christians were also to be found in the Roman Army as the religion grew and even before serious persecution began. Even after Christianity became frowned upon, and eventually outlawed, we find evidence of Christians in the military. The second century writer Tertullian tells a story of a Christian who had served in the army for many years, but who was eventually martyred as a result of his beliefs. In fact, one of the oldest Christian inscriptions to have survived is a funerary inscription for a Christian who served in the Second Parthian Legion around AD 200; and a Roman centurion (likely in the 3rd-century) left a famous inscription in the mosaic floor of a church at Megiddo in Israel.

## **The Centurion at the Cross**

So the fact that the centurion who stood by the cross of Jesus was a religious person is hardly surprising. As we have seen, religions of all types were commonly found in Rome's military units. And as we see in other chapters of this book, the New Testament records at least two centurions whose devotion to the Jewish faith was evident to Jesus and to the later apostles. What is so shocking about the

centurion at the cross, and the soldiers with him, is not that they were religious men, but that they were willing to witness to a religious figure who had been officially declared an enemy of the emperor and the empire – someone they themselves had crucified.

The gospels tell us that at Christ's death the centurion – and other soldiers present – became deeply afraid despite their training and courage: “When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39). Luke adds “When the centurion saw what had happened, he gave glory to God, saying, ‘Surely this was a righteous man’” (Luke 23:47).

These men had to deeply believe what they said so openly about Jesus in those circumstances, and that is doubtless why three of the four gospels record their witness. Tradition says that the centurion who saw Jesus die and who saw the supernaturally caused events surrounding his death (Matthew 27:50-56) became a believer in Christ. But whether that is true or not, it is clear that other centurions and many other soldiers did. One of the most important of those believing centurions was used to expand Christianity exponentially, and we will look at his example next.

## 5. ACTION

It goes without saying that Rome's military men were men of action, and we saw powerful examples of that trait in the careers of some of the centurions discussed in Chapter 2. Rome trained its soldiers to act quickly and decisively when action was needed, and this often led to lives being saved. We see an example of this in the book of Acts when the Jews who hated the apostle Paul plotted to kill him (see Chapter 6, HUMILITY). Notice what Luke writes:

some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot... But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."  
(Acts 23:12–18)

Because of the immediate action of the centurion Paul talked with, and the subsequent action of the Roman commander, Paul's life was saved – and doubtless those of numerous Roman soldiers guarding him, also.

Acts also shows that action is just as important spiritually as it is physically. In the previous chapter we saw the clear connection between Rome's military men and belief. But religious belief is not always the same as action and we do not know, for example, if the centurion at the cross (Matthew 27:54; etc.) ever went further than declaring Jesus to have been the Son of God. We should always remember the Bible shows that belief by itself is not enough (James 2:19), and that even spiritual activity may not be the same as positive spiritual action.

Paul used a military metaphor to explain this fact: “if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Corinthians 14:8). The context of Paul’s remark is interesting:

Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? ... if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. (1 Corinthians 14:6–9)

Paul was referring to what seems to have been a temporary spiritual gift of speaking in unknown languages that was given to help establish the infant Church. But as Paul implied with his military metaphor, and specifically stated in what he wrote, unless spiritual intention is turned into spiritually motivated action that benefits others, it is of little use (1 Corinthians 14:12).

### **A Spiritually Active Centurion**

While we do not know for sure if the centurion who witnessed the death of Christ ever turned his belief into practice, Acts records another centurion who certainly combined belief with action:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said ... “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God” (Acts 10:1-4).

Luke tells us that Cornelius was baptized and became the first Gentile to be converted to Christianity (Acts 10:44–48) – moving beyond belief to action in what was a massive step in the spread of the faith. But two additional aspects of this military man’s life are shown twice over in Acts 10:1–4 – his generous gifts to the poor and his prayer. Given the fact of Cornelius’ evident concern for those with needs, he may well have been praying for the poor as well as giving to the poor. The poor were doubtless not all Cornelius prayed about, but the story of this centurion reminds us that prayer and giving are equally important in helping others. Just as we can give without being truly concerned, we can pray without actually giving.

This is a point the apostle James makes so clearly in his epistle: “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? (James 2:15–16). James does not suggest that our words of comfort are not important, just that they should not be alone. This applies as much in terms of our words spoken in prayers as it does in our direct relations with others.

The book of Acts shows us that Cornelius well understood the importance of both speaking and acting. He reminds us of another centurion (who we will look at in the next chapter) who told Jesus “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” (Matthew 8:9). Both of these professional soldiers understood that words and actions are always interrelated – just as much in prayer and other areas of Christian life as on the physical battlefield. The more we remember that and keep the necessity of action in mind, the more our lives will accomplish.

## 6. HUMILITY

Humility is not a quality that might immediately come to mind when we think of a military context. It is not that there are no humble soldiers or other service people – there certainly are – but the reasons we do not find them often are twofold. First, to one degree or another, every military has a culture of bravado and focus on overcoming others, whether it is besting them in strategy or in hand to hand combat. This is unavoidable and to some extent necessary in all fighting forces. We certainly see this in ancient stories of Roman soldiers who broadcast their military exploits with self-elevating pride.

Another factor making humility somewhat rare in fighting forces is power. Some centurions and other Roman officers are recorded as being arrogant and overbearing – as, again, we might find in any military force (or other group of people). But it does not have to be that way. Some centurions were outstandingly capable yet humble men.

We saw a small example of this in the story we looked at in Acts of the centurion who was approached by Paul's nephew to ask his help regarding the plot to kill Paul (Chapter 5, ACTION). It is easy to read over the centurion's helpful response, but it was clearly predicated on some humility. Many Roman officers would have brushed away any local youth who tried to request something of them. Begging and persistent offering of goods or services by locals have long been common in many Middle Eastern areas, but the centurion mentioned in Acts 23 was humble enough to listen to the young man who accosted him on Paul's behalf.

An even clearer example – and one of the greatest examples of humility that we find in the entire Bible, other than in the life of Jesus – is seen in the story of the centurion who sent to Jesus to ask him to heal his servant. Both Matthew and Luke record this event (Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10), and the additional details each one gives paint a picture of a leader of men who was remarkably

humble. First, however, we will look at the story as Matthew tells it:

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?” The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just 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.” When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith... Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment. (Matthew 8:5–13)

The first thing we notice about this story is perhaps the centurion’s faith – especially because Jesus drew attention to it. Matthew and Luke both tell us that on hearing the centurion’s request that Jesus simply command that his servant be made well, Jesus was amazed and told those present “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel” (Luke 7:9). As a result of this soldier’s great faith, we are told that his servant was healed at that exact moment (Matthew 8:13).

There is also another quality of this soldier that we should not overlook, and that is his concern for all those under his command. Clearly, he was concerned for his servant’s welfare, but the sick man was apparently not an indispensable or key person in his household. Luke tells us, in fact, that the sick man for whom the centurion asked Christ’s help was not an important servant, but simply a lowly slave (*doulos*). This centurion was obviously genuinely concerned for even the least members of his household staff.



## **Humility and Strength**

But underneath these other aspects, the centurion's humility is certainly one of the most memorable aspects of the story. As the acting officer in his unit, he was an important soldier who gave orders to many men. Yet this same centurion willingly humbled himself in his request to Christ, declaring "I do not deserve to have you come under my roof ... I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you" (Luke 7:6-7). This attitude is all the more remarkable as we know that many Romans looked down on the Jewish people, considering them to be a relatively uncivilized nation. The story also shows the humility of Jesus in his willingness to go to the sick rather than having them be brought to him, but the centurion's humility is what is highlighted. For a Roman officer to humble himself to the degree he did before one of the people he was charged to rule over was almost startling.

We should also remember that centurions were usually battle-hardened individuals who were not chosen for weakness of any kind. This is an important fact because it shows that the biblical quality of humility so clearly demonstrated by this man was not in any way an expression of weakness. In fact, the centurion's humility was all the more noticeable because of his undoubted strength.

Finally, the level of detail given in both Matthew and Luke's accounts of this centurion shows how important his story is from a New Testament perspective. The Gospels could simply have recorded that Jesus healed the servant of a Gentile centurion – but they do not. They clearly emphasize that the soldier was a man of compassion, strength, faith, and humility – all of which are fitting goals for every soldier of Christ.

## 7. KINDNESS

Like humility, kindness may not be the first thing we think of regarding military personnel, but there is no reason to doubt its existence among them. When Roman soldiers ended their term of enlistment they were allowed to settle in the areas in which they had served. Many did this, and many remained when the legions were pulled back from pacified areas late in the empire. We can be sure these individuals were not hated as cruel and unkind people by the local people with whom they intermarried and had families or they would likely have left.

And while some centurions were known for their distinct lack of kindness, the New Testament gives us a wonderful example of one who was not, and whose considerate nature was exemplary. Although the New Testament mentions some ten different centurions, it only mentions the names of two of them. The first is Cornelius (the centurion we looked at in Chapter 5) who became the first Gentile convert to Christianity. The second centurion whose name we are told, Julius, is hardly known by comparison, but what the New Testament tells us about him shows that he was an exceptional soldier and of no small importance in the spread of Christianity.

Like Cornelius, Julius was stationed in Caesarea, the Roman headquarters in Palestine, but he is said to have belonged to the Sebastes or Imperial Cohort or Regiment (Acts 27:1), rather than the Italian Cohort. Although the title Sebastes was given to some Imperial troops, Caesarea was itself called “Sebaste,” and it is likely that the soldiers under Julius’ command were simply troops belonging to Caesarea itself (see Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* ii.12.5).

Because Julius was stationed in Caesarea, he was selected to transfer the apostle Paul from Caesarea to Rome (Acts 27:1); and he is mentioned several times in the narrative of Paul’s sea voyage (Acts 27:6, 11, 31, 43). At first, Julius did not listen to Paul when the

apostle warned him of impending hazards; but eventually he allowed Paul to tell him what the soldiers should or should not be allowed to do, and even took measures to ensure Paul's safety when others wished to kill him. During the voyage to Rome, Julius also showed considerable kindness to Paul on several occasions. Acts tells us that when the ship stopped at the port of Sidon "Julius treated Paul kindly and allowed him to go to his friends to receive their care" (Acts 27:3 CSB).

It is possible that Julius knew that Paul had done nothing wrong, and that if he had not appealed to Caesar he could have been released (Acts 26:32). But Roman centurions were held personally responsible for the prisoners delivered into their charge, many had reputations for being strict, and few would allow any situations in which prisoners might escape. Julius could also not easily give Paul preferential treatment before the other prisoners. The fact that he allowed Paul to visit his friends was unusual enough for Luke to record this – and shows a notable level of kindness on the part of the soldier.

Later in this account when a great storm arose, at Paul's urging Julius prevented the crew from escaping in the lifeboat – which would have led to the death of all those left aboard the ship. After the ship was wrecked, Julius again intervened to prevent the soldiers from killing Paul and the other prisoners (Acts 27:31–32, 42–43). In fact, Luke tells us specifically that the centurion "wanted to spare Paul's life" (Acts 27:43). He persevered in this, and was finally able to deliver Paul safely to Rome.

So, we see that during a particularly dangerous and critical period in Paul's ministry, the centurion Julius played a vital role in his protection and ultimately in the successful spread of Christianity. As a soldier and an officer, Julius was alert, learned from experience, acted decisively when necessary, and conducted himself with discretion and courage. As an individual with a caring side, he treated Paul – although he was only a prisoner – with consideration, respect, and care.

Although Luke gives us no hint that Julius was a believer like Cornelius, there are several lessons we can learn from Julius, nonetheless. The centurion can remind us that there are many non-Christian people in the world who exhibit unselfish kindness, and we should be willing to learn from their behavior when it is good. To take an example from what Luke records, Julius evidently focused on his prisoners enough to see that Paul could use the help of his friends – and assisted him in getting that help. Do we look out for the needs of those on the periphery of our lives? Pondering the actions of this soldier can be profitable for anyone who can see the qualities that Luke highlights in his account of this centurion who balanced service, honor, and caring, and who helped in taking Christianity from Judea to the very heart of the Roman Empire.

### **Kindness and Valor**

In our own age, pictures and news stories of US and other troops showing kindness to children, adults, and animals in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that military men and women can and do offer kindness when appropriate, and that they are often not less, but better warriors for that. In fact, modern armies have increasingly come to acknowledge the role of considerateness, kindness, and compassion in a great many situations. One recent article written by a decorated (including Purple Heart and Combat Action Ribbon) master gunnery sergeant with 25 years of service in the US Marine Corps was titled “I Had the Best Squad Leader in the Marine Corps. He Showed Us Kindness Is Not Weakness.” And USMC General Anthony C. Zinni wrote in the book *Among the People: US Marines in Iraq* (2008, Marine Corps University Press p.iii) “Our American pride in the fighting prowess of our Marines is equally felt for their demonstrated compassion.” Such statements show what Christian men and women in the armed services have long known – that compassion is not antithetical to strength, and that kindness can always coexist with valor.

# **CONCLUSION:**

## **Lessons from Leaders**

As we have seen in this book, the centurions mentioned in the New Testament were remarkable men. They are all favorably viewed in the Scriptures, and many of them displayed characteristics and traits that are worth our emulation. These centurions – and especially those who played a part in the protection of the apostle Paul – are shown to have been disciplined and honorable leaders. They acted decisively, with discretion, with courage, and even with humility and kindness.

The positive portrayal of these centurions by the New Testament writers is all the more remarkable because Roman soldiers were hated by many Jews of that time who saw them only as enforcers of the Gentile occupation of their land who were trying to reshape the world to Roman liking. But while most centurions were shunned by the ancient Jews, the early Christians saw and admitted their positive qualities and also acknowledged their contributions to the to the successful growth of the Christian faith.

On an individual basis, while the importance of Cornelius as the first Gentile convert to Christianity is obvious, the other centurions who are mentioned in the book of Acts also played an especially important role in protecting the apostle Paul and allowing him to carry the gospel as far as Rome. Without the protection and help God provided for Paul through these military men, the apostle would have been unable to complete his mission and to write the later epistles that add so much to his writings.

Doubtless inspired by some of these centurions, military themes were developed in Paul's writings, as we have seen. These were no minor themes, but are relevant to the very nature of Christian life itself. Not only does Paul repeatedly use the analogy of the Christian's arms and armor (Ephesians 6:11-13; etc.), but also in Philippians 2:25 and Philemon 1:2, Paul is clearly comfortable

describing fellow Christians as “fellow soldiers.” And he urges his assistant Timothy to “Join with me ... [as] a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3–4 CSB) – showing that Paul thought of himself in that way also. We see in these words that Paul – through much personal experience – appreciated the contributions of the military that had helped him fulfill his own mission.

But whether they appear in the narratives of the four Gospels and Acts, or in the metaphors and analogies used in Paul’s epistles, we find a clear connection between honorable military traits and Christian belief. The lessons we can learn from the ten centurions of the New Testament are just as important for us as the knowledge of the role they played in the expansion of a faith that would reshape the world far more than Rome ever did.

# APPENDIX:

## The Rank of Centurion

There is no doubt that centurions formed the backbone of the Roman military structure, but it is difficult to make an exact comparison between these ancient field officers and modern military ranks. Some scholars describe the centurion as a captain, others as a colonel, and the best we can say is that he was a company-level officer commanding eighty to a hundred troops, depending on the period. Under the centurion was a *dekadarch* (described variously as a sergeant or a captain), and above the centurion was a *chiliarch* (perhaps best described simply as a commander. The term is translated that way in most modern Bible translations) commanding eight hundred to a thousand men.

According to Roman tradition, the rank of centurion went back to the eighth century BC when the fledgling Roman Army was said to have been led by the legendary Romulus, founder of Rome. By the first century BC, the Roman army was divided into legions of between five and six thousand men, each of which was divided into ten cohorts, consisting of six one hundred-man “centuries.” So each legion had a total of around sixty centurions.

Centurions were appointed (sometimes by the Roman Senate or the emperor himself), purchased their commissions, or were promoted through the ranks. In Roman terms, there was just one rank of centurion, but that rank was graded by seniority and appointment, and there was a definite pecking order among the centurions of each legion.

Although we think of the centurion as an army officer, there was also some flexibility in that regard. Roman battleships carried some forty marines and between eighty and one hundred legionaries with their centurion-captain. So these naval centurions and their men would often function as marines, boarding and attacking enemy ships.

But wherever he might serve, the centurion was recognized by the distinctive crest on his helmet which ran from ear to ear (or sometimes from front to back in the Imperial Period) and which made him immediately recognizable from the front in normal circumstances, or from the back as he led his men into combat. In battle, the centurion carried a sword and very often a spear also. When not fighting, he would still usually wear the sword, which centurions distinctively wore on the left hip as opposed to regular soldiers who wore their swords on the right side. This meant that a right-handed centurion could grasp and draw his sword faster than any of his men, and that fact is said to have prevented more than a few cases of insurrection in the ranks.

Centurions also often carried a short rod or staff as a symbol of their rank and to punish negligent or wrong-doing troops. Some centurions were known to be harsh in this respect, but most were firm but reasonable with the men under their command.

Although we may think of the centurion as primarily a combat-oriented rank, these officers were also responsible for setting watches, assigning duties, making passwords, administering punishments, escorting prisoners, and performing various administrative duties on a daily basis. Some were very capable organizers and rose to higher administrative positions within the empire, but the name centurion was – and always will be – most associated with the experienced and often decorated soldiers who led their men by strong and courageous example.



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