

Survival experts will tell you that someone stranded alone in the wilderness needs at least four things to survive: shelter... water... food... and hope. Stories abound of people who floated helplessly at sea for days without water... or lived for weeks in the open (without food) - yet survived. ... Hope kept them going until they were rescued.

But what we see in America today... is an increasing sense of hopelessness. I read a shocking statistic that every day... in the United States... 90 people lose their hope and choose to end their own life. My source was about 10 years old... so I googled it and found that today's number has actually increased. Several sources (including USA Today with several articles) are consistently saying that it now averages **130** people every day. The figure is higher than the number of people who die from drug overdose. Hopelessness is on the rise!

Despair is the antithesis of hope. ... As Thornton Wilder wrote:

“Hope is a projection of the imagination; so is despair. Despair all too readily embraces the ills it foresees; hope is an energy and arouses the mind to explore every possibility to combat them.”

Without hope... despair drowns in difficulties... all too often pulling its victim under with it.

As our passage today will show us... hopelessness was a great concern to Jesus. Continuing on... in our study of Luke's Gospel... we will find hope for our increasing hopeless times.

After deputizing twelve apostles and instructing His followers on discipleship... Jesus returned to His adopted home of Capernaum. ... Soon afterward... He began to encounter hopelessness in varying degrees.

The stories preserved by Luke illustrate the close connection between hope for the future ... and ... confidence in Jesus' power and goodness. ... We will encounter (today) two meetings that Jesus had in Capernaum... which involve stark contrasts.

Capernaum was where Jesus now made His home. The Lord performed many of His miracles there. ... Of the 33 recorded miracles performed by Jesus... eleven of them were done in Capernaum... and only two were done for Gentiles. Today we come to one of them. ... This passage marks a turning point in Luke's account of Jesus' ministry. ... Up until this point... Jesus has dealt exclusively with the Jews. (But in today's passage He begins to include the Gentiles.)

Jesus ministers to a Roman army officer... and then to a desperate widow who had just lost her child. We might (otherwise) see these two people as unconnected to Jewish social and religious life. Widows were ostracized in Jewish society – and (definitely) Roman soldiers (also) were. ... But Jesus cares for outsiders (those who are not connected to the church.)

The setting for this first encounter (given to us in Luke chapter 7... verses 1 and 2) – is rather ordinary.

Luke 7:1-2

A centurion commanded a hundred men in a Roman legion of approximately six thousand soldiers. ... In terms of modern-day rank... he would be an infantry captain or... (perhaps) a major. So he was a medium-rank combat veteran... (not extremely high ranking – but not the lowest - either.) But... Centurions earned significant amounts of money: in a period where the lowest-paid soldier earned 75 denarii... a centurion earned

between 3,750 denarii and 7,500 denarii. (He would have had considerable wealth... as far as Roman soldier go – he was ordinary.) ... Death (too) was commonplace in the ancient world. ... Normal life expectancy did not approach 50 years.

But there is something extraordinary in the centurion's concern for his servant. The Greek word translated "valued highly" means the servant was **honored** by the centurion. ... The centurion cared for him as a person. ... This was an unusual attitude toward a slave by a centurion. Under Roman law... a master had the right to kill his slave... and it was expected that he would do so... if the slave became ill or injured (to the point where he could not work.)

The tough Roman army officer did not want his slave to die. ... But what is (perhaps) **most extraordinary**... the most mind-boggling thing... is that this Gentile... (a captain in the occupying Roman army... asked Jewish elders to request help from Jesus — and the elders went eagerly! ... Clearly this centurion was no ordinary Gentile.

The animosity between the Jews and the Romans was no secret. The Jews hated the occupation army. The Jewish elders had no love for the Romans in general and Roman soldiers in particular. ... The Romans (in turn) hated the Jews. (And please understand) - the proud synagogue leaders were not prone to running errands for anyone... much less a Gentile (Roman) soldier.

But... as to what the Jewish elders in Capernaum thought of this Roman soldier... there can be no doubt. Verses 4 and 5 records this : "*When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, 'This man deserves to*

have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue' ”

The elders commended this officer to Jesus. He loved the Jewish people... and he loved his servant – and did not want him to die. The physical condition of the centurion’s servant was (indeed) desperate. Luke’s wrote that the illness had brought the servant to the very doorsteps of death.

Was there no hope for recovery? ... Yes... there was...! The centurion had heard about Jesus. ... The Lord had already done so many mighty works... right there... in that city. So it is not surprising that the centurion (stationed there in Capernaum) had heard about Jesus.

Luke 7:4-5

Their insistence that he “deserves” (literally, “is worthy”) to have Jesus heal his servant was their own spin. ... It certainly was not his. (We will see that in a moment)! ... But these elders were overly generous in their assessment. ... (You see)... Their rationale was patently external — “he loves our nation and has built our synagogue” — *this wasn’t an internal assessment...* (along the lines of: “*He is humble and meek and godly.*”)

They lauded the centurion for the kind of works with which people today think they can earn Heaven. Build a Gothic cathedral... solicit public donations with a promise that donors’ names will appear on a published subscribers list... and the money will roll in! ... However - the Bible (in both Testaments) teaches that a plea of worthiness is totally unsustainable before God.

The elders presented such a *surface* argument for Jesus' involvement because that was the way they were accustomed to analyzing *their own lives* — by **externals**. ... They might as well have said: “*On the balance scale of good and bad, he tips the scale decidedly toward the good.*”

Unfortunately... in spiritual matters... *seeing falsely*... is **worse** than being blind. ... The blind at least know they cannot see. ... But the surface-seer *thinks* he sees. ... [P A U S E] ...

Before the seventeenth century... when people looked at a lake or a pond or a glass of water... they judged it clean *if they could see through it*. ... But in 1674... the Dutchman (Leeuwenhoek) filled a glass vial with water... began curiously looking at it through his newly acquired microscope lens... and saw... (as he quaintly put it); “*very many small animalcules.*” He then examined a drop of water and jotted down his findings:

I now saw very plainly that these were little eels, or worms, lying all huddled up together and wriggling; just as if you saw, with the naked eye, a whole tubful of very little eels and water, with the eels a-squirming among one another: and the whole water seemed to be alive with these multifarious animalcules.

... [P A U S E] ... When we turn the magnifying glass of God's Word onto what is inside us... we find a whole universe of squirming critters and realize our own unworthiness.

Luke 7:6-7

What a remarkable statement! The elders of the synagogue said, “*He is worthy.*” The centurion said: “*I am not worthy.*” He had evidently been having second thoughts about sending the delegation to plead his cause. They would plead his merits, and that would never do. “*I am not worthy*”...

he said. ... No one can approach God on the ground of personal merits. ... It is possible that word had gotten back to him as to how he had been misrepresented by the elders as worthy of Jesus' action. So he sent the second delegation saying "*Do not come...*"

In the words and behavior of this centurion... we can discern the elements of spiritual humility and unworthiness. ... This man had obviously seen himself as he really was. ... He had a wholesome consciousness of his own sin. ... Once we see ourselves as we are... and take into account not only our actions... but our corrupt tendencies... our improper thought-life... our manipulations of others for our selfish benefit... our pampered sensualities... (much of which we keep buried and has never come to the surface)... we will avoid ever saying or even imagining, "*I am worthy.*"

The great problem for most non-Christians (and even many Christians) is that they are strangers to themselves. ... They look at the errors of others through a **microscope** and see all the wriggling animalcules... but they look at their own sins through **the wrong end of a telescope** and fail to spot the foul creatures bumping in the dark. (They live with an unwholesome unconsciousness of their own sin.)

No Biblically-informed... Spirit-filled Christian should ever look self-righteously upon an unbeliever... because the believer understands his/her own humanity and heart — (his/her own proneness to wander.) ... (But LISTEN!) Jesus does not help people who think they are worthy. ... The way that we see Him respond to this Roman officer... He wants us to admit our **un**worthiness.

The Roman officer not only regarded himself as undeserving of having Jesus come under his roof... but even unworthy of meeting Jesus in the street. What humility! ... The centurion (apparently) realized that One Who has power over life and death... (Who can heal with a word)... was One of Whom he was unworthy to meet.

He recognized that Jesus had access to God and that all this powerful figure need do... is to speak... and healing would occur. He has faith that Jesus' command is all that is needed. The word of Jesus (given unseen and from a distance)... can deliver the precious servant from his illness. ... It is a profound *insight* that the centurion possesses and expresses.

From this man's faith... we learn two essential components of Christian faith — knowing who Christ is... and knowing who we are. ... Do you know who and what you are? ... Do you know and believe that you are unworthy? ... Even more important... do you know who Jesus is?

Luke 7:8

As a man of power and influence in the military... the centurion understood the nature of authority. ... He demonstrated his complete understanding of Jesus' authority over all things ... **including** whatever causes illness!

The centurion reasons: If, though I am but a military officer with very limited authority and power... even *my* orders are nevertheless immediately carried out by both soldier and servant... They are carried out whether I am there... or not... if I issue them. ... And You (Jesus) can command (without being there) and it will be done. When You say, "Go," sickness will go;

when You say, “Come,” health will arrive; and when You tell the body of “my boy,” “Do this,” it will immediately respond.

Humility mixed with deep faith was what Jesus praised (in our next verse.) ... The centurion recognized that God’s power works through Jesus - *without spatial limitations*. ... Magical presence or touch is not required for His healing... only the power of Jesus’ command and will.

Luke 7:9

We are impressed not only with this man’s great love... but also his great humility. ... Imagine a Roman officer telling a poor Jewish rabbi that he was unworthy to have Him enter his house! (The Romans were not known for displaying humility - especially before their Jewish subjects.) ...

But the characteristic that most impressed Jesus - **was the man’s faith !**

Let me ask, “Does your faith and confidence in the Lord amaze Him? ... Is your faith great or small? ... How confident are you in the Lord’s ability to meet your needs and solve the problems in your life?” ... (LISTEN!) God wants us to learn to rely upon Him... just as this Roman soldier. ... Realize that every crisis you face is an opportunity to trust in God. ... Storms may rage in your life like the temper tantrums of a tempestuous sea. ... Christ (however) has the power and ability to calm your storm... or to help you sail through it.

Luke 7:10

Sometime after Jesus healed the centurion’s slave... Jesus faced another (and perhaps even more hopeless) situation. ... The death of a child is certainly one of the greatest agonies possible in this life — a burying of a

part of oneself... a period before the end of a sentence... the death of a future. ... It is a burden that **all** parents *fear*. ... Such untimely pain was the emotional context of Jesus' next ministry event.

Luke 7:11-12

The town of Nain was about twenty-five miles from Capernaum, a day's journey. So it was probably in the late afternoon that Jesus and his band of disciples encountered an unexpected public display of sorrow at the city gate. A funeral bier (an open coffin)... preceded by the pathetic figure of a woman... stood directly in Jesus' path. ... **The Way of Life meets the way of death.**

The coffin was surrounded by professional mourners who were leading a large, wailing crowd with flutes, cymbals, and frenzied cries. The cries were especially deafening because of the loud mourning associated with the death of an only child.

This woman had already lost her husband... and here her only son was dead — her last means of support. ... The crowd of mourners would soon go home... and she would be left penniless and **alone**. ... The widow was probably past the age of childbearing and would not marry again. So... unless a relative would come to her aid... her future was bleak.

In the first century... it was very difficult for a woman to earn her own living. Without anyone to provide for the widow... she would be an easy prey for swindlers... and she would likely be reduced to begging for food. ... No wonder *when the Lord saw this sad sight and the tearful woman*... His heart overflowed with compassion. ... In fact (as Luke repeatedly emphasized)... Jesus cares about people's deepest needs.

Jesus has a heart that is big enough for our sorrows. His compassion... His empathy... is real. “ ... You may have such an immense hurt that you cannot even voice it. ... Perhaps your trauma has left you *inarticulate*. ... But He understands completely and sympathetically. His immense heart goes out to you.

In this case... no one approached Jesus for help. ... No one asked the Lord to do anything. ... He acted on His own initiative. ... What was there to ask? ... The man was dead... was he not? ... With regard to so many of Jesus' other miracles we have already seen in Luke's Gospel (with fever... for example in Luke 4:38... leprosy in 5:12... and the paralysis we just saw of the Centurion's servant)...there was always a glimmer of hope... (some reason to ask for help)... but surely not when death had entered. The case was regarded as absolutely hopeless. ... Prompted solely by His own compassion... Jesus halted the funeral procession with an unusual command for a mourner.

Luke 7:14-15

Jesus again reached out to someone in need with compassion... risking becoming unclean. ... To touch even the bier would have made Him unclean... (ceremonially defiled according to the law - Numbers 19:11–22). And yet - Jesus **touched** the **coffin**. ... He was more interested in demonstrating MERCY than what others would think of Him (defiling Himself.) Jesus approaching the procession and touching the coffin was highly unusual... so the bearers stopped. (We can almost hear everyone around gasp...!) Then Jesus spoke directly to the body, “*Get up.*”

Notice that when he spoke to the boy's cold corpse, the boy heard him. The young man was dead in body, but he was fully alive somewhere! For we humans, death is only death of the body. The human spirit lives on.

The gray, cold clay of his face flushed with color, his fixed, dilated eyes twitched and focused on the blue sky, he blinked, he sat up in his shroud—and he began to talk. Perhaps his words were mundane—“*Mother, you sure look tired. I'm hungry. Who are these people?*” Or perhaps it was gloriously exalted.

At any rate... the crowd fell back... and some began to shriek. There was a universal rush of adrenaline. Here and there incredulous voices began to praise God. And his mother? There were still tears... but her wet eyes radiated heavenly light and overwhelming joy... as she embraced her only son.

Jesus raised the dead on three different occasions. He raised a young girl of twelve who had only just died as He approached where she lived. He raised the young man of whom Luke tells us here... a man on his way to the tomb. ... And He raised Lazarus... a man dead and buried for several days and whose body was already in the process of decomposition. Jesus REALLY knows how to destroy a good funeral! ... (It seems that) He broke up every funeral that He attended.

Luke 7:16-17

Our passage today has shown two tragic scenes that had siphoned all the hope out of the people who were grieving. ... But when Jesus stepped in... their hope revived. ... A centurion's sick slave regained complete physical health. (And) a widow's only son who had died... returned to life. ... Small

wonder the news of these miracles went out all over Judea and all the surrounding district!

Christ's compassion and redeeming power are sufficient for every need. There are grieving souls who mourn not only death... but the loss of a relationship. ... There are rejected men... women... and children who feel worthless. ... There are the betrayed... who are so wounded they fear they can never trust again. ... There are the depressed... for whom a single positive thought – seems like an **impossibility**.

The hurts and failures of this world are burdens that cannot be borne by anyone - except Jesus. ... But He hears the pain of every voice... and His heart goes out to us (His children)... with deep compassion. ... Are you afflicted and hurting? (LISTEN!) Jesus hurts with you!

Not only does He have awesome compassion—He has awesome power to minister to our deepest needs. The same power is available for us in every trial we encounter.

His power is mediated by his wisdom. He will not do everything we ask... but He will do what is best for our well-being and for His glory. ... He will bring His mercy and compassion to bear on the points of pain and need in our lives. ... He will bring healing. ... He will bring life.

There are two things that I would like to emphasize in closing.

#1. Hope is restored when we remember that our Lord is not hindered or limited by the things that make us feel helpless. When we come to a mountain we cannot cross... it's not a hindrance to Him. ... When we are

caught in a no-win predicament... He is infinitely resourceful. ... He specializes in impossible problems.

That is a great source of hope. I know He is greater than the greatest of my problems.

#2. Hope remains when we accept as truth that even though we cannot see God or hear Him or touch Him, He is hard at work on our behalf. ... This is perhaps the hardest part of faith. Not seeing... not hearing... not having any tangible evidence of God's concern for our problems... leaves too much room for the imagination. ... And (unfortunately)... we don't tend to fill the information void with good thoughts or encouraging anticipation. ... Satan would have us believe our Creator has abandoned us... leaving us to suffer evil alone and forgotten. When we fall into the natural pattern of doubt — “God doesn't love me... God doesn't care” — the circumstances of life will substantiate our worst fears. ... Consequently... choosing to accept the truth of God's genuine care and active involvement becomes a discipline. ... When we **choose** to trust in His love... we will see it abound.