

Battle-Tested Obedience

By Nathan Warner

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on My own authority, but speak just as the Father taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me. He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him.”
(John 8:28b-29 ESV)

There are many ways we can think about God’s authority and our responsibility to it. One of the best human pictures we have of authority comes in the meeting Jesus had with the Centurion.

“When He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to Him, appealing to Him, ‘Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.’” (Matthew 8:5-6)

A Centurion was an officer of the Roman Empire’s powerful military that at this time had conquered the known world. “Centurions often suffered heavy casualties in battle, generally fighting alongside the legionaries they commanded. They usually led from the front, occupying a position at the front right of the century formation. They led and inspired their men by example. They also sought to display the skill and courage that may have brought them to their rank in the first place. It is for these reasons that they often suffered a disproportionate number of casualties” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centurion>, 2013).

“And He said to him, ‘I will come and heal him.’ But the centurion replied, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with 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.’”
(Matthew 8:7-9)

This Centurion’s understanding of authority and obedience was likely learned firsthand in combat and battle-hardened in war. Here on every field of victory and defeat, his life and the lives of all his friends were on the line. How many of his friends and fellow soldiers did he see die? How much blood did he himself bleed on those fields? Did he bear scars from those places of pain and horror, whether of the soul, mind, or body?

Did he always understand or agree with what was required of him? I would hazard a guess that he did not, yet he followed his orders and commanded those beneath him to carry them out, even though he knew they might mean his death and the death of everyone obeying him.

“When Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who followed Him, ‘Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.’” (Matthew 8:10)

So much faith and trust is required on the field of battle! Your very life may be required of you at the command of your superior. He may command you to march out in the front row! What questions go through your mind? Does my commander really know what he’s doing? Why should I entrust my life into his hands? What if I think his commands are foolish and will result in many lost lives or my own? Few of us can comprehend this.

The question constantly comes to mind: do I obey, or do I disobey? This is the background of

the man who came to Jesus and asked for the healing of his servant. Even though Jesus was willing to come with him to heal his servant, he refused because he recognized Jesus was commander of all things and that He was also his commander. He displayed the same trust and faith that he exhibited towards his military commanders on the physical battlefields of the Roman Empire. Jesus commended him on his faith, his trust, and his belief.

Perhaps Jesus marveled at the Centurion's faith and his understanding of authority because it was so close to His own relationship with His Heavenly Father. Jesus Himself said to those who rejected His authority, *"I do nothing on My own authority, but speak just as the Father taught Me...I always do the things that are pleasing to Him"* (John 8:28b; 29b). Jesus was bearing the commands of His Father to the world, but they would not obey or follow. His ultimate command was to sacrifice Himself for His men and women that He would save by His death. Just as the Centurion had probably put his life on the line many times for his men when he led them into battle, Jesus *"humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross"*

(Philippians 2:8b). He was unflinchingly obedient to His Father's will, even knowing it meant a cruel, painful death. Speaking to His disciples, Jesus told them that He loved them if they obeyed His commands and would lay His life down for them and all who would come to obey Him: *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you"* (John 15:13-14).

Isn't it interesting that a foreigner and gentile was the only person in Israel who understood Jesus' relationship to His Father and the appropriate relationship of Believers to Jesus? Perhaps this, too, is why Jesus marveled, because the Centurion's response stands in such stark contrast to the religious leaders of the Jewish people who demanded Jesus to tell them *"by what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"* (Matthew 21:23b) They were demanding that Jesus, under no uncertain terms, explain Himself to them and the authority He claimed to have. They refused to obey the Captain that God had sent to lead them, and like mutinous soldiers demanded their own terms, instead.

Jesus told them that the orders He was delivering were not His own: *"I have not spoken on My own authority, but the Father who sent Me has Himself given Me a commandment – what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told Me"* (John 12:49-50). Even when He showed them that He was under His Father's authority and was simply carrying out His orders, they did not believe or have faith. They would not obey the commands He had been given by His Heavenly Father, even though He had been given authority over all things.

Is it any wonder then that Jesus says about the Centurion's faith, *"I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (Matthew 8:11-12)?

Jesus is saying that gentiles who understood His authority and had faith in Him, like the Centurion, would inherit the promise, while many of the Jewish people would be cast out of the Kingdom of God for their disobedience and lack of faith. This is a very stark warning but also a beautiful promise to those who believe in, trust in, and obey our Lord Jesus Christ, who leads us from the frontlines and gave His life for all mankind.

"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father" (John

10:17-18). Jesus had authority to do this because He had been given the authority by His Heavenly Father as the Son of God.

For Believers today, we do not have Jesus in the flesh leading us, but He did not leave us leaderless—“as orphans” (John 14:18). He gave us His living Word of God and the Holy Spirit to lead us from the front in our daily battles and struggles. Just as Jesus did what His Heavenly Father commanded Him to do, the Holy Spirit also does not lead us by His own authority:

*“When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own **authority**, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come”* (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit speaks to us the will of the Son who has been given authority over all things by the Father, as Jesus told His disciples after He had conquered death, sin, and darkness on the Cross: *“All **authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to Me”* (Matthew 28:18b). Let us obey the Son, our Lord and our King, who leads us into the many battles we face in this life. Let us, as faithful obedient soldiers, endeavor to hear from our Captain in our battles what the Centurion heard in his: *“Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith...Go; let it be done for you as you have believed”* (Matthew 8:10b; 13a).