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JUST SAY THE WORD

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A Centurion's Faith

"But just say the word" (Matt 8:8, NIV). This ringing affirmation of faith addressed to Jesus didn't come from the Pharisees or Sadducees—not even from the lips of Peter, James, or John. They came from a Roman centurion, the imperial knife at the throat of Capernaum. Unlike Pilate, who seemed to hate the Jews, this centurion was attracted to the Jewish people and their religion. Normally the conqueror tries to force his "superior" religion on the conquered. This soldier was different, because he desired truth.

Living in Capernaum, he could not escape the reports of Jesus. The accounts of His miracles and teachings flooded the town and excited everyone. As the centurion put it all together, it became obvious to him who Jesus was.

Capernaum lay on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Peter's home was situated there. Archaeologists believe that it was later enlarged to become one of the earliest Christian churches. The Romans who lived there also bought and sold slaves as they did all over the empire. Often they treated them with cruelty. Yet, again, this centurion seemed to be different. He treated his servant more like a son. He cared deeply for the young man.

In the course of events the servant came down with a terrible disease. We are not told what it was, but it must have been dreadful. The Scriptures say that he was "paralyzed and in terrible suffering" (Matt 8:6, NIV). The officer could only sit beside him and watch his servant's life ebb away. He knew his only hope was in Jesus. But how could he, an unclean Roman soldier, appeal to the Savior.

In the first of three approaches to Jesus, the centurion asks the Jewish elders of Capernaum to intercede with Jesus for him (Luke 7:2-5). They were happy to do this, and they told Jesus things like: he is worthy, he loves our nation, and he built us a synagogue. They emphasized his merits. They, no doubt, noted that it would be good P.R. with Rome. When Jesus agreed to go with them to the centurion's house, they must have sent messengers ahead to tell the officer that Jesus was coming to his house.

The reaction of the centurion is mysterious. He sent another delegation of friends to tell Jesus that he was not worthy for Him to come into his house (Luke 7:6). Doesn't that seem strange? If we heard that Jesus was coming to our home, what would be our reaction? In this age when there is no fear of the Lord, I wonder how we would react. The reason the centurion reacted this way was because he knew who Jesus really was.

Perhaps fearful that his friends might be misunderstood, he finally went himself to Jesus. He repeated that he was not worthy for Jesus to come under his roof. He shared the thought that he was a man who was under authority. He answered to Rome. Whatever orders he received, he carried them out—no questions asked. He also had 100 soldiers in his command who did exactly what he told them (Luke 7:7-8; Matt 8:8-10). What was he saying to Jesus with all of this?

I think he was saying something like the following: "Jesus you are not who you appear to be. It is true, you are dressed in those humble Galilean clothes, but you are not a simple Galilean peasant. You have vast, unseen forces at your command—forces whose power is awesome and mysterious. Even disease flees at your command. The truth is that you are really King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Your power and kingdom are vastly superior to any known on earth, including Rome. I am awed in your presence. For this reason, I am not worthy for you to even come under my roof. Just say the word and it will be done."

The reaction of Jesus is fascinating. The Scriptures say that Jesus marveled (Matt 8:10, KJV). If Jesus marveled, what must the Devil have done? Shattered? Rome was the Devil's doing and here was one of her sons expressing more faith in and understanding of Jesus than even the Jews. Jesus turned to the multitude around

him and said simply, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matt 8:10, NIV).

Then Jesus gave a warning. Sometimes we don't like to hear the warnings of Jesus. We just want to hear the kind, thoughtful words He expresses. Some can't imagine Jesus speaking a rebuke or a warning. Yet here is what He said, "I say to you, that many will come from the east and the west, and shall take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:11-12, NIV). Jesus was saying that because of their lack of trust, the children of Abraham would be replaced by Gentiles who would put their faith in Him.

End-Time Trust in God's Word

The question arises for us who live in the time of the end: Is it possible for some similar scenario to happen to those who have been entrusted with the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus? Is it possible for thousands to leave the truth as it is in Jesus? Is it possible for some of the greatest and most brilliant lights of Present Truth to go with them? Is it possible that their places will be taken by many from the "east and west"? If that is possible, and I believe it is, then the next question is *Why*? The deception that would cause such defeat must be very powerful.

How shall we resist such a temptation? The answer is found in the centurion's request to Jesus, "Just say the word." In those few words he declared his trust, his unworthiness, and his willingness to believe.

First, consider the centurion's trust in the word of Jesus. If there is going to be continual change for the good in our lives, we must trust the word of God. If we don't trust the word of God and yet declare ourselves to be Christians, we are like a hot, sweaty basketball player who puts fresh, clean clothes on a perspiring, dirty body. We may look different, but we still smell bad.

We live in an age of skepticism and cynicism. The people of our day are proud and confident in their own opinions and abilities to think. Like Pharaoh of old, our generation responds, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him" (Exod 5:2, NIV). If we want to put it

in the modern tongue, they say, "Who does God think He is?" Unfortunately, no church or Christian is immune to the temptation to set up his/her own opinion in place of the Lord's.

Many times I have sat across from people who were discovering the Sabbath for the first time. After reading a few scriptures concerning the issue, I would start to get excuses and opinions why they couldn't keep the Sabbath. But I would ask, "But what does the Bible say?" There is great power in God's word.

I would hand them my Bible and ask them to read it. They would begin in a loud confident voice, but as they continued to read the Sabbath commandment, the voice would become slower and more sober. Finally, as they finished, I would simply ask the question, "Well, what does the Bible say?" They would look at me and say, "Well it says what it says. Then I would say, "The only question left is, Will you obey it?" It has been a great joy to watch people surrender their opinions, wants, and desires to the word of the Lord Jesus Christ on this issue.

But it is a struggle, because in this age people love their own opinions. We often say to Jesus, "Just say the word, but we will do the translation." Or "Just say the word, but we will do the explanation." Or "Just say the word, and we will do the clarification." How many times have I sat in a Sabbath School class and listened to people discuss the lesson. Sometimes the Bible is scarcely opened, while people drown in their own opinions.

The world today is flooded with opinions. There must be 10,000 talk shows, many of them spewing out nothing but poison! From the air waves to cyberspace, we are inundated with opinions, opinions, opinions. The real question is, What will shape our attitudes? What will shape our character? What will direct our living? Jesus asked the haunting question, "Will [I] find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8, NIV). Will He find a generation of Christians who will say, "Just say the word"?

In those few words the centurion also declared his unworthiness. Even though he was the "big man" in Capernaum, he was humble. When the Jewish elders came to Jesus, they emphasized his worthiness but the centurion said of himself, "I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you" (Luke 7:7, NIV). When He

did come to Jesus, he did not come to bargain but to plead his great need. What a marvelous example to us all.

We often give a good deal of lip service to our great need of Jesus, but we act differently. We talk about praying, but we devote little time to prayer. We commonly spend more time watching television and reading newspapers than reading His word. Then we demand a firecracker sermon in 20 minutes on Sabbath morning to make up the difference.

Today, some Christians no longer think they even need Jesus as their Substitute. They just want a good example. The truth is, we are not worthy of Jesus. We don't deserve Him but, oh, how we need Him! The song of our heart should be, "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling."

In his appeal to Jesus, "Just say the word," the centurion declared his willingness to do what Jesus asked. Many people like to hear what Jesus has to say, but they don't want to do what Jesus asks them to do. Even Jesus told a parable about two boys: one, He said, was willing to go to work for his father, but didn't; the other, He said, wasn't willing to go, but he did.

I was holding a series of meetings in Kent, Washington. I never will forget the contrast between two women who attended: one in her fifties, the other, about 18, was in high school. We came to the subject of adornment. The lady in her fifties was quite attached to her jewelry. After going over some of the Bible texts, I asked her what she thought. She was not the least inclined to surrender that jewelry to the Lord.

Then I asked her this question, "If Jesus were here in person, and you knew it was He, the Savior Himself; if He asked you to give up these things, what would you tell Him?" I will never forget her answer. She looked at me and said, "I would tell Him, No." Then I knew we had a deeper problem. These trinkets had become an idol in her life.

A few days later I sat around the table with the 18-year-old young lady. Her mother was at the table with us. I presented the same subject. With tears of joy streaming down her face, she reached up and began to remove her earrings, voluntarily, and told me how happy she was to give these things to Jesus.

We must ask ourselves a serious question, "What good is it for

Jesus to 'say the word' to us if we are not willing to do what He asks us to do?" (cf. Luke 6:46).

The Bible and the Bible Only

There is no question in my mind that the end-time events are moving rapidly all around us. The great day of the Lord is moving ever closer. In the book, *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White makes a prophecy concerning the last conflict. She says, "In the great final conflict, Satan will employ the same policy, manifest the same spirit, and work for the same end, as in all preceding ages. That which has been will be, except that the coming struggle will be marked with a terrible intensity such as the world has never witnessed. Satan's deceptions will be more subtle and his assaults more determined" (p. xi).

This prophecy seems to be coming to pass right before our very eyes. Both within the church and out of the church there is a terrible struggle going on between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. But God will have an answer to Satan's vicious and persistent attacks. The answer is found in the same book:

But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines, and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any part of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain "Thus saith the Lord" in its support (*The Great Controversy*, p. 595).

So once again, in the end of time the battle will be over the Scriptures. That was the issue between the 16th century Reformers and Rome, the Waldenses and the Pope, and the early Christians and Pagan Rome. The question that faces all of us is, "Will we stand like the centurion before Jesus and say to Him, 'Just say the word'?" Will we be willing to surrender our opinions in light of His word, or will we take our opinions and sit in judgment on His word? Do we love the Truth enough to cry out to Jesus as did the centurion, "Just say the word"?

There is a wonderful story that Dr. Truitt tells about a famous

radio commentator. His life had not been good, and he went out to a western ranch to spend some time thinking things through and trying to put his life back together.

While living at the ranch, he met one of the cowboys who seemed to be terribly depressed. The young man was short and bow-legged and nothing anyone could say seemed to cheer him up. Finally the guest asked him why he was so down.

The cowboy told how he had reared his most beloved horse from a colt. It would follow him around like a puppy. Then one night, he said, about three weeks before the commentator had arrived at the ranch, some wild horses had broken into the corral, and his horse had run off with them; and no one knew where they were. Anyone acquainted with horses knows they take a lot of care, and the wild ones don't fare nearly as well as those who are looked after.

The radio commentator related that a few days after this conversation, about sunset, another cowboy came galloping into the corral. He jumped from his horse and ran to the short, bow-legged cowboy announcing he had sighted the horse in a ravine not too far away. The glad owner determined he would find his horse the next morning.

The ranch guest asked if he could join the young man. Yes, said the cowboy, if you will do what I tell you to do. Together they started off before sunrise. As the morning sun lighted up the valley they could see the horses grazing below, and the cowboy spotted his horse. The cowboy told the radio commentator to sit very quietly on the rim rock while he worked his way down to where the horses were.

The commentator watched as the cowboy stalked the horses from rock to rock and bush to bush until he was next to them. Then, suddenly, he stood and began calling to his horse. A tremendous struggle immediately gripped the senses of the pet animal. As the horse heard its master's voice, it started toward him; then it started running back to the wild mustangs. What a cross pull! A few steps toward the wild horses—a few steps toward the cowboy. Finally the beloved animal trotted after the wild horses. The cowboy gave one last pleading call. The horse stopped, bowed its head, and walked with a purpose back to its cowboy master. As the horse nuzzled up

to its master, the cowboy began to weep, hugged its head, slipped on a halter, and fed the animal sugar cubes out of his pocket.

The commentator exclaimed he suddenly saw the solution to his problems. "I slammed my fist down on that rim rock and cried out to God. I said, 'Oh, God I have been running with the wild horses far too long. I am coming home to your corral never to roam again with the wild horses.'"

My appeal to each of you today is, Stay in the corral of God's Word, because all of the wild opinions galloping around us in our modern societies will bring you nothing but grief. Like the trusting centurion, hold fast to the Word, humble yourself to its authority, trust it, obey it, and it will lead you safely into God's eternal kingdom!

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TASTE AND SEE

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At her college graduation party Jane received a gift from a young engineering professor. Arriving home that evening, she opened the present and discovered it was a book. One glance at the uninteresting title was enough to cause her to lay it aside unopened for months. Engineering was not exactly the most fascinating subject to her.

Sometime later she and the professor fell in love and became engaged. One evening as they were happily pondering their wedding plans and future lives together, he asked her what she thought of the book he had given her at her graduation. All of a sudden she remembered how she had dismissed it from her mind. Embarrassed for neglecting it, she determined to show better appreciation for the gift of her soon groom-to-be.

Arriving home that evening, she could hardly wait to find the book. And looking at more than the title this time, she was pleasantly surprised to discover that the author was no other than the professor himself, and that he had written in it a note of dedication to her. Needless to say, Jane did not sleep much that night. Gripped by the whole experience, and utterly fascinated by the book her lover had written and dedicated to her, she simply could not lay it down until she had read the last page.¹

Delighting ourselves in the Lord, who loved us and gave Himself for us, propels us to delight ourselves in His Word, and anything else related to Him. In loving Him, we love what He loves, and shun what He shuns. As we look upon Him, we come to view things from His perspective, in a brand-new way. Jesus incon-