

# DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS

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## Chasing Hope: How Ordinary People Make Extraordinary Disciples

### Session 7 - The Centurions

#### Day 1 - Roman Soldiers and Centurions in the World of Jesus

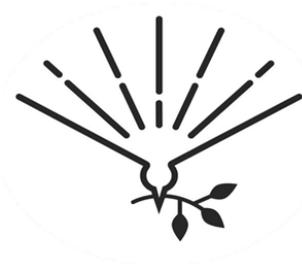
1. Centurions were officers in the Roman military who were responsible for leading 80-100 elite Roman soldiers (legionnaires). Men who sought to become Roman soldiers had to meet strength and height requirements before enduring an intense basic training regimen. They had to be able to walk twenty miles a day in full armor while carrying all their gear. Legionaries signed up for at least 25 years' service, but if they survived their time, they were rewarded with a gift of land they could farm upon retirement.

Imagine what sort of men signed up for, and survived, the life of a Roman soldier? What characteristics, physical or otherwise, do you imagine most of these soldiers possessed?

2. Centurions were “alpha dog” leaders of men. They were expected to lead by example and to display the greatest courage on the battlefield. This is what the Encyclopedia of Ancient History said about the lives of centurions in the first century:

*Centurions often wore a helmet with a distinctive transverse crest, which was typically silver with a feather plume, typically ostrich or peacock feathers. His armour included greaves, which usually had engraved decoration, and a bronze cuirass chest plate, either belly-shaped or sculpted to replicate muscles or incorporating scaled armour. Chest (and back) armour could also have shoulder guards and protective hanging strips for the upper arms and groin and even a neck protector at the back. In the 1st century a short-sleeved ring-mail armour vest was also common amongst centurions. A tunic was worn under the armour, which for centurions was either white, off-white, or various shades of red. A centurion also carried a 90 cm vine-stick cudgel as a measure of his rank. On top of all this, centurions also wore the awards they had received for valour, which could include heavy necklaces, bracelets, and medallions which were worn attached to a leather chest harness.*

In addition to the general traits of Roman soldiers you listed above, what kind of men do you imagine rose to the rank of centurion?



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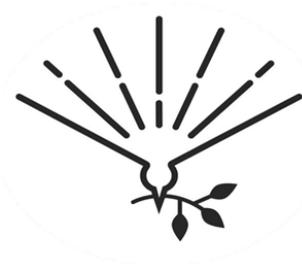
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3. This week we'll be learning about the centurions who chose to follow Jesus. In addition to the gospel accounts of centurions' conversions, there is a wealth of historical evidence that centurions and other Roman soldiers who followed Jesus, built churches, and shared the gospel with their fellow soldiers. What does it say to you about Jesus and his gospel that, within two centuries following his crucifixion, thousands of Roman soldiers had become committed disciples of his?

## **Day 2 - The Faithful Centurion and His Servant**

1. Read Luke 7:1-5. What details about this part of the story stand out to you and why?
2. Why did the centurion approach the Jewish leaders? How did the Jewish leaders respond to his request? What did they tell Jesus about the centurion?
3. Read Luke 7:6-8. How would you describe the centurion's approach and attitude toward Jesus in this exchange?
4. What was the centurion suggesting when he compared his authority over his troops to Jesus' authority? What does that suggest to you about the centurion's understanding of Jesus' identity?



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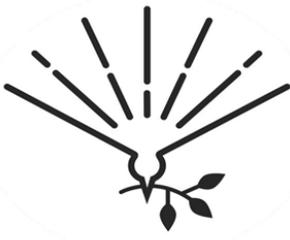
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5. Read Luke 7:9-10. What message was Jesus sending about the relationship between salvation and religious identity? What does this mean for Christians today?

## **Day 3 - Cornelius**

1. Read Acts 10:1-2. The Book of Acts records the events that took place immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus. Cornelius was a Gentile (non-Jewish) who, along with his entire family, believed in the Jewish God. He was also a centurion in the military force occupying the land of Israel. He likely faced pressure from his Roman colleagues for worshipping a foreign God, as well as some side-eye looks from Jews who despised the likes of him. Has your faith in God ever put you in between a proverbial rock and a hard place? What happened, and what were the pressure points?
2. Read Acts 10:3-8. Describe what happened. Who did Cornelius see, how did he see him, and what was his response?
3. Have you ever received a vision from God that gave some you specific direction or instructions for your life? If so, what happened?

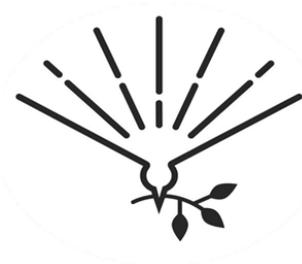


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4. Read Acts 10:9-16. Up to this point in his life, Peter, who was Jesus' lead disciple, had been hesitant to include Gentiles (non-Jews) in the Jesus movement unless they converted to Judaism first. In this passage, God gives Peter a vision suggesting that it's time to include Gentiles who believe in Jesus whether or not they become Jews first. The vision had to do with clean and unclean foods as prescribed in Leviticus 11. Peter, who claimed to never have eaten unclean foods, was initially appalled by the vision. Has God ever challenged you to rethink your assumptions, to go outside of your comfort zone, or to reach out to unexpected people on His behalf?
  
5. The voice said to Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." What (or who) was that in reference to, and were the implications for Peter and other Jewish Christians?
  
6. Read Acts 10:17-35. This passage ends with Peter saying, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." This represented a total 180 for Peter. Has God ever changed your mind on something that you once felt so strongly about? What happened?
  
7. Read Acts 10:47-48. Cornelius, his family, and others who worked for him were the first Gentiles to be baptized by any of the apostles. After these events, the number of Gentiles who became Christians exploded and Jesus' movement began to take the world by storm. It's another reminder of how God blesses faithful obedience. How have you chosen to be faithfully obedient to God? What has it cost you, and how has it blessed you?



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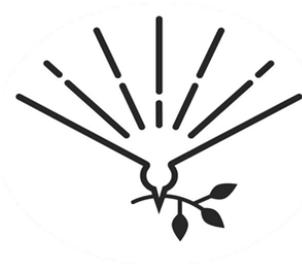
## Day 4 - The Centurion at the Cross

1. Whenever the Roman government ordered the crucifixion of a convicted criminal, a centurion was appointed to see the execution through to its awful end. The same was true for Jesus' crucifixion in Jerusalem. Before we take a closer look at this centurion, let's think more broadly about the crucifixion of Jesus.

Most people are aware that, before he died on the cross, Jesus famously cried out with a loud voice: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Few people are aware, however, that Jesus wasn't just expressing his own loneliness and despair; he was quoting Psalm 22. Why? He was sending messages to his enemies and his followers. For example, we know that there were many Pharisees and priests who despised Jesus who were present as he died. These guys knew the Psalms by heart, so when Jesus quoted Psalm 22, they were no doubt reminded of the rest of that psalm, part of which says:

*All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. "He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me. Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.*

What was the message Jesus was sending to his enemies when he quoted Psalm 22?



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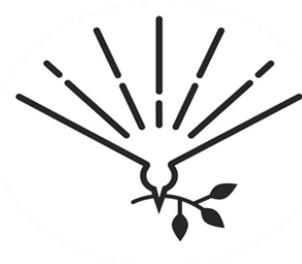
2. But that's probably not the only message Jesus was sending by quoting that particular Psalm; he also signaled the expansion of his movement beyond Israel to include the whole earth. Psalm 22 also reads:

*I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.  
You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!  
All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord,  
and all the families of the nation will bow down before him,  
for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.*

How does this Psalm speak to the inclusion of Gentiles in the movement of Jesus?

3. Read Mark 15:33-39. What do you think the centurion saw or heard from Jesus that would lead him to make such an unexpected profession of faith?
4. What were some of the personal and professional implications of this centurion's newfound faith in Jesus? Have you ever faced any personal or professional backlash because you follow Jesus?





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The inscription identifying Gaianus reads: “Gaianus, also called Porphyrius, a centurion (leader of 100 men in the Roman army), our brother, has made the pavement at his own expense as an act of liberality. Brutius carried out the work.”

What is the significance of so many Roman soldiers becoming outspoken Christians as early as the first, second, and third centuries?

2. What does it say about Jesus that Roman soldiers and centurions are as welcome as anyone else in his Kingdom?
3. Read Romans 3:21-26, especially verse 23. Why was this such good news for the Roman soldiers who decided to follow Jesus?

Why is this such good news for you?

## **Day 6 - Personal Reflection**

Write your reflections about the discipleship of the centurions you've studied this week. How has their faith inspired you along your path of Christian discipleship?