

# Seven Centurions

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## Introduction

In this lesson, we consider the seven centurions mentioned in Sacred Scripture, and the varied lessons they communicate.

Thomas defines **hekatontarchēs** or **hekatontarchos**, derived from **hekaton** [a hundred] and **archō** [to rule, to begin], as “a centurion, a captain of one hundred men” [1543].

BDAG say it refers to “a Roman officer commanding about a hundred men (subordinate to a tribune), centurion, captain.”

This word occurs 20x in the NT (Matt. 8:5, 8, 13; 27:54; Luke 7:2, 6; 23:47; Acts 10:1, 22; 21:32; 22:25, 26; 23:17, 23; 24:23; 27:1, 6, 11, 31, 43).

*Matthew 8:5 (NASB95) — 5 And when Jesus entered Capernaum, a \*centurion came to Him, imploring Him,*

*Matthew 8:8 (NASB95) — 8 But the \*centurion said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed.*

*Matthew 8:13 (NASB95) — 13 And Jesus said to the \*centurion, “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very moment.*

*Matthew 27:54 (NASB95) — 54 Now the \*centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”*

*Luke 7:2 (NASB95) — 2 And a \*centurion’s slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die.*

*Luke 7:6 (NASB95) — 6 Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the \*centurion sent friends, saying to Him, “Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof;*

*Luke 23:47 (NASB95) — 47 Now when the \*centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent.”*

*Acts 10:1 (NASB95) — 1 Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a \*centurion of what was called the Italian cohort,*

*Acts 10:22 (NASB95) — 22 They said, “Cornelius, a **\*centurion**, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.”*

*Acts 21:32 (NASB95) — 32 At once he took along some soldiers and **\*centurions** and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.*

*Acts 22:25 (NASB95) — 25 But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the **\*centurion** who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?”*

*Acts 22:26 (NASB95) — 26 When the **\*centurion** heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.”*

*Acts 23:17 (NASB95) — 17 Paul called one of the **\*centurions** to him and said, “Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him.”*

*Acts 23:23 (NASB95) — 23 And he called to him two of the **\*centurions** and said, “Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.”*

*Acts 24:23 (NASB95) — 23 Then he gave orders to the **\*centurion** for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.*

*Acts 27:1 (NASB95) — 1 When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a **\*centurion** of the Augustan cohort named Julius.*

*Acts 27:6 (NASB95) — 6 There the **\*centurion** found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it.*

*Acts 27:11 (NASB95) — 11 But the **\*centurion** was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship than by what was being said by Paul.*

*Acts 27:31 (NASB95) — 31 Paul said to the **\*centurion** and to the soldiers, “Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.”*

*Acts 27:43 (NASB95) — 43 but the **\*centurion**, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land,*

Additionally, one other word should be considered. Thomas defines **kenturiōn**, of Latin origin, as “a centurion (a Roman army officer)” [2760]. BDAG say this Latin loanword refers to a “**centurion** (=ἐκατοντάρχης).” This word occurs 3x in the NT, and only in Mark’s account of the crucifixion (Mark 15:39, 44, 45).

*Mark 15:39 (NASB95) — 39 When the \*centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”*

*Mark 15:44 (NASB95) — 44 Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the \*centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead.*

*Mark 15:45 (NASB95) — 45 And ascertaining this from the \*centurion, he granted the body to Joseph.*

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia provides the following summary: A centurion was “The commander of a hundred men (a “century”), more or less, in a Roman legion. Matthew and Luke use the Greek word while Mark characteristically prefers the Latin form, since he seems to write primarily for Roman readers.”

“The number of centurions in a legion was always sixty, but the number in the cohort or spēra varied. The ordinary duties of the centurion were to drill his men, to inspect their arms, food, and clothing, and to command them in the camp and in the field. Centurions were sometimes employed on detached service, the conditions of which in the provinces are somewhat obscure. Men like Cornelius and Julius (Acts 10:1; 27:1) may have been seconded from the legion to which they properly belonged for the discharge of special duties. They and other centurions mentioned in the Gospels and Acts (Matt. 8:5; Mark 15:39, 44ff; Luke 23:47) are represented by the sacred writers in a favorable light” [*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), s.v. “Centurion”].

## **Christ’s Authority**

The first centurion understood the authority of our Lord (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10).

*Matthew 8:5-13 (NASB95) — 5 And when Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, imploring Him, 6 and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented.” 7 Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.” 8 But the centurion said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 “For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” 10 Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. 11 “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; 12 but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” 13 And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very moment.*

*Luke 7:1-10 (NASB95) — 1 When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum. 2 And a centurion’s slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. 3 When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. 4 When they came to Jesus, they*

earnestly implored Him, saying, “He is worthy for You to grant this to him; 5 for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue.” 6 Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the **centurion** sent friends, saying to Him, “Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; 7 for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 “For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” 9 Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, “I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.” 10 When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

## **Jesus’ Divinity**

The second centurion understood the deity/innocence of the Savior (Matt. 27:50-54; Mark 15:37-39; Luke 23:44-47).

*Matthew 27:50-54 (NASB95) — 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now the **centurion**, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”*

*Mark 15:37-39 (NASB95) — 37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. 38 And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 When the **centurion**, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”*

*Luke 23:44-47 (NASB95) — 44 It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, 45 because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. 46 And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” Having said this, He breathed His last. 47 Now when the **centurion** saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent.”*

According to Mark’s account, he also recognized the certainty of Christ’s death on the cross (Mark 15:37-46).

*Mark 15:37-46 (NASB95) — 37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. 38 And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 When the **centurion**, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” 40 There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. 41 When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister*

to Him; and there were many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. 42 When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the **centurion**, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. 45 And ascertaining this from the **centurion**, he granted the body to Joseph. 46 Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

## **Individual Accountability**

Cornelius, the third centurion, understood individual accountability (Acts 10:1-8, 17-33).

*Acts 10:1-8 (NASB95) — 1 Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a **centurion** of what was called the Italian cohort, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, “Cornelius!” 4 And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 “Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; 6 he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.” 7 When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, 8 and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

*Acts 10:17-33 (NASB95) — 17 Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon’s house, appeared at the gate; 18 and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 “But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself.” 21 Peter went down to the men and said, “Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?” 22 They said, “Cornelius, a **centurion**, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.” 23 So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. 24 On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter raised him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am just a man.” 27 As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. 28 And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit*

him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. 29 “That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me.” 30 Cornelius said, “Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, 31 and he said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 ‘Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.’ 33 “So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

## The Value of Citizenship

The fourth centurion understood the value of citizenship (Acts 21:30-34; 22:21-29).

*Acts 21:30-34 (NASB95) — 30 Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. 31 While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 32 At once he took along some soldiers and **centurions** and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33 Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done. 34 But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.*

*Acts 22:21-29 (NASB95) — 21 “And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ” 22 They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!” 23 And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. 25 But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the **centurion** who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?” 26 **When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.”** 27 The commander came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman?” And he said, “Yes.” 28 The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born a citizen.” 29 Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.*

## The Value of Haste

The fifth centurion understood the value of haste (Acts 23:12-35).

Acts 23:12-35 (NASB95) — 12 When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. 13 There were more than forty who formed this plot. 14 They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, “We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. 15 “Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place.” 16 But the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Paul called one of the **centurions** to him and said, “Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him.” 18 So he took him and led him to the commander and said, “Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you.” 19 The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, “What is it that you have to report to me?” 20 And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. 21 “So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you.” 22 So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, “Tell no one that you have notified me of these things.” 23 And he called to him **two of the centurions** and said, “Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.” 24 They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor. 25 And he wrote a letter having this form: 26 “Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. 27 “When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. 28 “And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; 29 and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. 30 “When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.” 31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. 32 But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. 33 When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, “I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,” giving orders for him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.

## **The Value of Companionship**

The sixth and seventh centurions understood the need for companionship (Acts 24:22-23; 27:1-3).

Acts 24:22-23 (NASB95) — 22 But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.”

23 Then he gave orders to the **centurion** for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.

Acts 27:1-3 (NASB95) — 1 When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a **centurion** of the Augustan cohort named Julius. 2 And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. 3 The next day we put in at Sidon; and **Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care.**

## The Value of Prophecy

Julius, the seventh centurion, originally discounted, then respected, and finally protected the apostolic voice of prophecy (Acts 27:4-15, 27-32, 39-44).

Acts 27:4-15 (NASB95) — 4 From there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary. 5 When we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. 6 There the **centurion** found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it. 7 When we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us to go farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; 8 and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea. 9 **When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them, 10 and said to them, “Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” 11 But the **centurion** was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship than by what was being said by Paul.** 12 Because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there. 13 When a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and began sailing along Crete, close inshore. 14 But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; 15 and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be driven along.

Acts 27:27-32 (NASB95) — 27 But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land. 28 They took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms. 29 Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak. 30 **But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the ship’s boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, 31 Paul said to the **centurion** and to the soldiers, “Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.” 32 Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it fall away.**



*Acts 27:39-44 (NASB95) — 39 When day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. 40 And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders; and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach. 41 But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern began to be broken up by the force of the waves. 42 The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none of them would swim away and escape; 43 but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, 44 and the rest should follow, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship. And so it happened that they all were brought safely to land.*

## **Conclusion**

Do we have the same spiritual perceptiveness as these seven centurions? Do we recognize Christ's authority and Jesus' divinity? Do we understand individual accountability? Do we realize the value of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven? Do we understand the need for haste, the importance of companionship, and the value of prophecy?