

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: Say the Word (The Centurion)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that the faith Jesus marvels at belongs to the furthest outsider in the room, a Gentile officer of the forces holding Israel down, traditionally read as a Roman; that this faith is not a mood but a soldier's inference from evidence about authority; and that his one sentence is placed on the lips of the faithful at every Mass in the Roman Rite.

Catholic Touchstone: Before so great a sacrament, the faithful can only echo humbly and with ardent faith the words of the centurion: Lord, I am not worthy (CCC 1386).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

The centurion approaches first, but the sequence behind the scene is the study's pattern intact: he comes because reports of Jesus reached Capernaum before he did; the word was out ahead of the asking. **Spoiler discipline:** if your group has not finished the six core sessions, keep this framing leader-only. If they have, the “meal with the outsiders” promise in verse 11 will land with extra weight; let them find it.

What You Need to Know

Measure the distance this man crosses. A centurion is Gentile military power in a uniform: a professional soldier of the regime holding Israel down (in Galilee, likely in the service of Herod Antipas, Rome's client), traditionally read as a Roman, the last resume in Capernaum you would nominate for a faith award. And his errand is for a servant: “my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress” (Mt 8:6). A Gentile officer, publicly begging an itinerant Jewish rabbi, on behalf of a slave. Every line of the setup is upside down.

Jesus offers to come. The centurion declines the house call with the sentence the Church never stopped repeating: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed” (Mt 8:8). Then he explains his reasoning, and the reasoning is the session: “For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes” (8:9). He is not working up a feeling; he is arguing from his profession. A commander's word does not need his physical presence to be effective, because the word carries the authority of the whole chain above it. If Jesus commands with God's authority, distance is irrelevant. It is a soldier's inference from the reports of Jesus that had reached him, and it happens to be the most precise theology anyone has spoken to Jesus so far in Matthew.

Jesus' response is one of the very few places the Gospels report Him marveling: “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (8:10). The record-setting faith in Matthew's Gospel belongs to the outsider's outsider. And Jesus widens the lens immediately: “many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (8:11): the table is going global, and this soldier's faith is the occasion for the announcement.

The Catholic payoff is direct enough to say plainly to seekers: at every Mass in the Roman Rite, moments before Communion, the congregation says this man's sentence, adapted by the Church: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed. A seeker who visits a Mass will hear a Roman soldier's words in every mouth in the building. Few bridges from a living room study to a Sunday liturgy are this short.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 107:19-20. "He sent forth his word, and healed them." The psalm already knows what the centurion inferred: God heals at the range of His word. The group finds it live.

Genesis 1:3. "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." The deepest background: in Israel's scriptures, God's word does not describe reality; it commands it. The centurion's military logic lands, without his knowing it, on the Bible's first page. Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine *Sermon 62, on Matthew 8:8 (summary)*

Augustine loved the paradox of verse 8: by declaring himself unworthy to receive Christ under his roof, the centurion showed himself worthy to receive Christ into his heart. Humility, Augustine argues, is not the opposite of bold faith but its foundation. A faithful summary of his preaching on this passage.

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew (summary)*

Chrysostom marvels at the marveling: the teacher astonished by the student. He points out that the centurion understood Christ's authority more precisely than the crowds who had seen the miracles up close, reasoning his way from his own command to Christ's, and that Jesus publicized the Gentile's faith deliberately, to teach Israel from an outsider. A faithful summary.

The Roman Missal *Communion Rite*

"Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." The Church judged one anonymous soldier's sentence so exact that she placed it, lightly adapted, on the lips of the faithful at every Mass in the Roman Rite, at the threshold of Communion.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1386:** the faithful echo the centurion's own words before receiving the Eucharist: the session's sentence, canonized by the liturgy.
- **CCC 543:** the kingdom is for all: what verse 11's east-and-west table announces.
- **CCC 153:** faith is a grace, and it is also a genuinely human act: the centurion's reasoning and God's gift are not competitors.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

This is the outsider's session, so know your room. The friend who was not raised in anything, who feels like the occupying army every time they walk into a church, needs to hear tonight's headline stated flat: the faith Jesus marveled at belonged to the person with the least religious standing in Capernaum, and the table in verse 11 was announced for people exactly like them. If there are veterans or service members present, the centurion's authority logic is their home turf; ask, do not lecture, and let them

explain chain-of-command to the group better than you could. And the Mass connection is your cleanest “come and see” bridge in the whole catalog: extend the invitation once, warmly, with yourself as the seatmate, and let it rest.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: run before, during, or after the core, or alone.
- Pairs well with the Zacchaeus deep-dive (two outsiders honored) or as a follow-up for a group heading toward a Mass visit, since the liturgy quotes this session.
- Luke 7:1-10 preserves a fuller version with Jewish elders as intermediaries; Matthew's compression keeps the exchange direct. If a sharp reader raises the difference, name it honestly: two evangelists, one event, different levels of narrative detail, no contradiction in substance.

Session Goals

1. Establish the full distance the centurion crosses: Gentile, occupier, officer, pleading for a slave.
2. Land the authority argument as reasoning, not mood: a soldier's inference from evidence.
3. Register Jesus' marveling and the east-and-west table: record faith from the furthest outsider.
4. Land the live discovery in Psalm 107:19-20: healing at the range of the word.
5. Make the Mass connection plainly: this session's sentence is said before Communion at every Mass in the Roman Rite.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the Missal connection; it is the session's bridge out of the living room.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. State the two rules if new faces are present: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

“God, some of us feel like insiders here and some of us feel like the occupying army. Tonight's story says the table is longer than we think. Amen.”

Win

1. Whose word do you trust so completely that you would act on it without checking: a doctor, a mechanic, a friend, a parent? What earned that trust?
2. Have you ever been the outsider in a room where everyone else belonged? What did it take to speak up anyway?

Build

Read Matthew 8:5-9 aloud.

1. Inventory the distance this man crosses to make this request: his nationality, his job, his rank, and who he is asking for. What does each detail cost him?
2. Jesus offers a house call, and the centurion declines it: “only say the word.” Then he explains his logic from his own profession (v. 9). Put his argument in your own words. Is this a feeling, or a deduction?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A Gentile officer of the power structure holding Israel down, publicly petitioning a Jewish rabbi, on behalf of a servant: every layer inverts the expected order, and each costs him standing with somebody: with Rome, with his rank, with the crowd. Then the argument, and it is an argument: a commander's word is effective at any distance because it carries the authority of the whole chain above him; he says go, and it happens, without his presence. If Jesus commands with God's authority, then presence, distance, and roofs are irrelevant: the word suffices. He has reasoned from what he has heard of Jesus to a conclusion about Jesus' authority, the way a soldier reads a chain of command. It is the most precise theology spoken to Jesus so far in Matthew's Gospel, and it comes from the last resume anyone would have picked.

3. “Only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” Israel's scriptures already knew about healing at the range of a word. Let's find it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Psalm 107:19-20 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

“Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he sent forth his word, and healed them.” The psalm describes exactly what the centurion requested: healing dispatched at the range of God's word, no house call required. And behind the psalm stands the Bible's first page, where God's word does not describe reality but commands it: let there be, and there was. The soldier's military logic landed, without his knowing it, on Genesis 1.

Read Matthew 8:10-13 aloud.

4. The Gospels almost never show Jesus astonished. Here He marvels: “not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Why does the record-setting faith in this Gospel belong to the furthest outsider, and what is Jesus announcing with the east-and-west table in verse 11?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The insider's familiarity can inoculate: those closest to the evidence had categories to file Jesus into, while the outsider looked with a professional's fresh eyes and drew the straight-line conclusion. And verse 11 turns one Roman's faith into a policy announcement: many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The kingdom's guest list is going global, and the announcement is made over the faith of a Gentile soldier. For anyone who has ever felt like the last person a church would want: this verse is the counter-evidence, spoken by the host Himself.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength: “This story trains credulity. 'Faith healing' has killed people whose parents prayed instead of calling doctors; celebrating a man for believing a healing could happen at a distance is celebrating magical thinking.” Grant the real harm: treating belief as a technique that substitutes for medicine has done genuine damage, and the Church condemns it; Catholic Christianity built the hospital system precisely because faith and medicine were never rivals. Then look at what the centurion actually does, because it is the opposite of magical thinking: he does not visualize an outcome or work up intensity; he weighs what has reached him about a specific person's authority and acts on the assessment, exactly as he would evaluate an officer's commission. Christian faith is trust in a person, not confidence in a technique; it is a grace, God's gift, and at the same time a genuinely human act that the evidence makes reasonable (CCC 153, 156). The question the story leaves a skeptic is not “can believing hard bend reality,” which is superstition, but “what did this trained assessor of authority see in Jesus that produced this inference,” which is history, and worth investigating.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Say the Mass connection plainly, because for a seeker it is startling: at every Mass in the Roman Rite, seconds before Communion, the congregation says this anonymous soldier's sentence, adapted by the Church: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed. The Church heard one Gentile outsider get the theology exactly right and decided everyone should say it forever. If anyone from this table ever visits a Mass, they will hear tonight's session in every mouth in the building; invite them to listen for it.

Send

3. The centurion's humility and his audacity arrive in the same sentence: not worthy, and, say the word. Which half comes harder for you?
4. He reasoned his way to trust from the evidence in front of him. What evidence about Jesus have these sessions actually put in front of you, and what would a fair assessor do with it?

Live It This Week

1. Once this week, act on a trustworthy word without triple-checking it, and notice what trust actually feels like as an act.
2. If you know someone who feels like the occupying army around religious people, tell them this story exists.
3. Optional: if you ever visit a Mass, listen for the centurion's sentence just before Communion. It has been waiting there for you.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Lord, we are not worthy that you should enter under our roof. Say the word anyway. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” **Matthew 8:8**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Matthew 8:5-13, the request, the declined house call, the authority argument, the marveling, the east-and-west table

Live Discovery Text

- Psalm 107:19-20, he sent forth his word, and healed them

Supporting Texts

- Genesis 1:3, the commanding word (leader background)
- Luke 7:1-10, the parallel account with intermediaries (Standalone Notes)

Catechism

- CCC 1386, 543, 153

Memory Verse

- Matthew 8:8