

THE CENTURION AT THE CROSS

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Mk. 15:39 And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God. [*Ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν*]

Lk. 23:47 Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man. [*Ὅντως ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος δίκαιος ἦν*]

We are at the cross ... at Calvary, or Golgotha in the Aramaic, ‘the place of a skull’, just outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. ... On duty that day was a centurion with all or some of his company of one hundred men, and they were responsible for the successful execution by crucifixion of three men, - two of them had been found guilty of theft, insurrection, and murder ... and the third had been convicted of the crime of blasphemy.

Doubtless, the centurion had overseen many crucifixions, and was well-used to ensuring they went smoothly and without interruptions from any associates of the convicted criminals. ... Indeed, there was always potential for violence at such events, and he would have been briefed about the deplorable exploits of the two men on the two outside crosses. Matthew (27:38,44) and Mark (15:27) describe them as ‘thieves’ (ληστής, robbers, plunderers). Luke uses another word, κακοῦργος, which is made up from κακός (a bad nature, troublesome, destructive) and ἔργον ... and this was the calibre of these two men, crucified on either side of Jesus.

The centurion would not have been particularly familiar with the Man in the middle. He was not a known terrorist, like the other two. He had not led an armed rebellion ... but He was nonetheless considered a significant threat/danger for the Jewish authorities had convinced themselves He was potentially the leader of some kind of insurrection within Judaism ... Now, it wasn't up to the Roman centurion and his soldiers to investigate the ‘ins and outs’ of the case referring to Jesus. As far as he was concerned, he was there to uphold the court's decision, - death by crucifixion on all three men. ... He was an experienced and seasoned soldier, a Roman army officer no less, used to following orders ... but, as he stood there, observing the whole proceedings, he could not help but arrive at his own personal conclusion, **Mk. 15:39** Truly this man was the Son of God, [*vere homo hic Filius Dei erat*].

Since everything had happened to Jesus so quickly, - during the dark hours of the morning, - it was more than likely this centurion was present when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was very probably there when Jesus appeared before Annas, Caiaphas, and the Sanhedrin. He could have been responsible for bringing Jesus to Pilate, and then Herod, and back to Pilate again. He would have been in charge of those soldiers who made Jesus carry the cross and stumble His way out to Calvary ... This Roman centurion would have seen it all! That is what Matthew reveals, **Mt. 27:50** Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. **51** And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; **52** And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, **53** And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. **54** *Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.* ... Back in the first verse of Mark's Gospel he introduced it like this, **Mk. 1:1** *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God* ... And this is *now* the first time anyone recognised Him as such, when the Roman centurion identified Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah.

So, all in all, this centurion had his 'work cut out for him' ... And clearly, he was chosen because he was an officer in which his superiors had confidence. They knew he was up to the task of keeping order, regardless of what possibly might happen ... added to the responsibility of overseeing the execution of Jesus and the two hardened criminals.

No doubt the centurion had been well-briefed, and was fully aware, of the implications of his charge. In relation to Jesus, he would have heard the Jewish leaders chant "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" ... He was most probably in Pilate's court when the death sentence was handed out. ... Either way, Jesus was just another criminal committed to him, - the centurion and his soldiers, - to be put to death. ... It was all in a day's work! ... To the centurion, that is what it was, - it was a job ... and it was simply his duty to carry out the command of the court, and his superiors. At the same time, though, he 'is party' to all that's happening to Jesus for it was his soldiers, - the men under his command, - who had mockingly pressed a crown of thorns on Jesus' head. It was his men who had hit Jesus on the head with reeds, and slapped Him, and spat on Him, and punched Him, and opened the wounds on His back, and grabbed a purple robe from somewhere and threw it on His shoulders ... Those were his men, - his soldiers, - who gambled for His garments in an

amazing display of callousness. They were indifferent to His suffering. They didn't care about Him. Those soldiers were under *his* command!

... And if the centurion was good at his job, - and in all probability, he was, - he would have known, - or he should have ... and he did not stop the heartless behaviour of his soldiers. No, instead, he allowed them their 'fun' making the last few hours of Jesus' life the most miserable. ... If he had a modicum of decency, he would have ordered his men to stop their cruelty.

And yes, the centurion knew more about Jesus than his soldiers did because he would have seen the 'charge sheet', and being a discerning officer, he would have recognised Jesus wasn't a rebel, an insurrectionist. ... He was experienced enough to know! ... Jesus had nothing whatsoever in common with the other two men who genuinely *did* deserve to be crucified! The centurion would have known all this but ... it obviously made no difference to him. ... He simply kept quiet, and went along with it all!

And so, he and his soldiers escorted Jesus to the cross. When Jesus stumbled, one of his men would have poked Him with their spears. They wouldn't have given Him any sympathy or relief ... Let's get it done with, and let's get it over ... and at the head of the procession to the cross, - leading the way, - was the centurion.

And then, when they arrived at Calvary, - ... far enough outside the city of Jerusalem, on a forsaken wasteland ... the centurion gave the command to lay the cross down on the ground. And then he ordered the weary Jesus to lie on it, with His arms stretched wide apart ... and, - at the command of the centurion, - soldiers began *banging* without mercy the nails into the hands of the Saviour! The blood gushed ... but they didn't care ... and he (the centurion) didn't care either, - they had seen it all before. ... And then they shouted at the afflicted and distressed Jesus to straighten His legs ... and they hammered the nails through His feet ... as hard as they could! It didn't matter to them, - and it didn't matter to the centurion, - how horrifically they banged those nails into Him ... It was all in a day's work! ... And the centurion supervised it all. ... He gave the commands, "Nail His hands! Nail His feet! Drop the cross into the ground!"

And then he simply stood there ... unconcerned ... unmoved ... untouched. That is the kind of ruthless man this centurion was! ... Even though he went

on to say something profound concerning the Saviour, we dare not make him out to be something he wasn't, for he was an evil, wicked, sadistic man!

However, something begins to *stir* that indicates a change within even a man like this, **Mt. 27:54** Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done ... At twelve noon, when the darkness descended, - when the sun completely disappeared, and the moon did not shine, and neither did the stars ... there was no warning ... and when the earthquake shook and split the ground ... and the rocks fell apart ... and the graves opened up ... and the veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom ... then they knew something was terribly wrong ... and they feared greatly (v. 54). ... In fact, the word (φοβέω) says it all! They were absolutely petrified ... Their fear was more than words could describe, (σφόδρα), - the centurion, and they that were with him. ... Sheer panic! Absolute horror! An unimaginable fear had gripped them!

Those soldiers who had travelled across north Africa, Europe, and throughout the Middle East had experienced all kinds of horrors, but this was more than they had ever encountered! ... All of a sudden, they realised this prisoner hanging on the centre cross was no criminal, or rebel, or fool, a fake, or impostor. They were challenged to assess the whole situation very quickly.

The centurion heard Jesus speak ... No cursing or swearing came from His lips. Instead, he heard Jesus calling for a drink. He also heard Him calling for His Father to forgive His crucifiers. He heard Him speak to one of the criminals beside Him, **Lk. 23:43** To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. He heard Him crying, **Mk. 15:34** Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? ... Never before had there been an execution like this! ... In fact, this battle-hardened centurion feared!

Now, let's keep this in its context. To have been promoted to the rank of centurion he had to prove himself. This was no cadet, just out of military academy! He knew what real soldiering was all about! He could have rammed a spear into the enemy, and thought nothing of it! So, this was not a normal fear he had. ... It was totally out of his control.

Here is what had happened ... As he stood at the foot of the cross, - protected by all his military armour, - he realised how powerless he was in the presence of One over whom he had no control ... He was in the overwhelming company of the Son of Almighty God, for that is what he said, **Mt. 27:54** Truly this was the Son of God. ... **Mk. 15:39** Truly this man was the Son of God.

The fear that 'hit' Him was no ordinary fear. Yes, of course, like any soldier, - no matter how seasoned and experienced, - he would have known flutters of fear confronting the enemy ... but this was a fear like he had never encountered before for this was a depth of horror brought about by coming face-to-face with his own sin. Standing at the feet of the sinless perfect Saviour, he was complicit in putting to death the Son of God! ... Jesus died at *his* hands! Jesus died because of *his* cruelty! Jesus died because of *his* sin!

While he wasn't the one who actually condemned the Saviour to die ... and he didn't belong to those who trumped up the charges against Him, nevertheless, *he* was complicit in Jesus being nailed to the cross. And so, the fear which gripped him that day was the realisation he was a sinner in the presence of an angry God! He was responsible for nailing Jesus to the cross. He pierced the Saviour's hands and feet with cruel nails. He was culpable, - along with all the rest of those people berating Jesus, - ... he was an accuser of the Son of God ... and great fear fell upon him ... But it wasn't ordinary fear for it was the awareness of the evil he had done to the Lord Jesus Christ. It was fear, intensified with guilt. ... *What have I done?! ...*

Yes, the centurion and his soldiers ... *guilty for crucifying Jesus ... complicit in the crime against God ...* for look at this, [Mt. 27:54](#) *they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.* ... Inside the hearts of the centurion and his soldiers the trepidation which came upon them *made* them acknowledge their sin for they realised the extremity of what they had done to the, innocent and blameless Son of God.

And the fear that had initially gripped them turned into a *holy* fear for that is what caused them to recognise Who Jesus was. If it had only been a normal human fear, - no matter how strong, - they would have run, but they didn't ... In fact, Mark tells us when exactly this happened ... It was immediately after the centurion heard Jesus crying out ... [Mk. 15:39](#) *And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God.* ... It was those final words of the Saviour, - [Jn. 19:30](#) *It is finished,* - that *particularly* spoke into the heart of the centurion, and as a result, this man of war met the Prince of peace at Calvary! ... This thoroughly undeserving godless soldier was granted the privilege of coming to know Jesus Christ dying for him on the cross.

... Truly this was the Son of God ... That is a fantastic statement of faith. This centurion, - a Roman Gentile pagan, - was granted the knowledge Who Jesus was. He didn't say, "*Maybe, or possibly, this might be the Son of God*". Neither did he turn around and have a discussion with his soldiers to see what they thought. No, with absolute certainty he declared for the record, **Truly this man was the Son of God**. ... He was there. He heard and saw Jesus ... and it left the centurion convinced as to Who Jesus truly was, **the Son of God!**

Everything about Jesus on the middle cross demonstrated His identity, - despised and rejected, though gracious to His accusers ... sorrowful and stricken with grief, and yet He brought hope to the penitent thief beside Him ... The centurion saw all this, and more. But, here is *really* how he came to recognise Jesus as the Saviour ... and it is the only way anyone can come to know. ... In Mt. 16, Jesus said to His disciples, **15** whom say ye that I am? ... **16** And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. **17** And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: *for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven*. ... That is the only way anyone can acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and Lord, - it is only through Divine revelation ... the Sovereign work of God's grace in salvation.

No one can figure who Jesus is by ordinary mental capacity, - it is not a human conclusion anyone can come to, - and that is why many only saw Him as a good man, or a prophet. But He is more than that for He is the Son of God, the Saviour, the only Mediator between sinful man and the holy God ... As Paul explained, **1 Cor. 12:3** Wherefore I give you to understand... that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.

Here is this Roman centurion, a man so steeped in sin all his life, and he came under the power of God *and was saved*, - I believe he was, for look at how his words were recorded, **Mk. 15:39** **Truly this man was the Son of God**. ... Absolutely no room given to doubt or unbelief!... He saw *Christ* on the cross, - he was convinced of it! ... And he feared for the state of his sinful heart ... until he declared the wonderful power of the Saviour ... How was he so sure? ... Here's how ... He had heard how Pilate had spoken, **Mt. 27:24**, I am innocent of the blood of this just [*righteous*] person. And Pilate's wife had warned, **Mt. 27:19** Have thou nothing to do with that just [*righteous*] man. ... And here now is the centurion at the cross *confirming* it, **Lk. 23:47** Certainly this was a righteous man. ... And then a step further, **Mk. 15:39** **Truly this man was the Son of God**.

And in fact, to consolidate it, Luke says, *he glorified God*. Now, if this man's witness was false, the Holy Spirit would not have recorded those words, for that is something only the Redeemed of the Lord can do. Scripture records what this centurion said, for his words are etched upon God's memory ... and only the saved can bring glory to God, for it is only from the saved He will accept it. ... Surely, if the thief on the cross was saved by saying, *Lk. 23:42 Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom*, then also this centurion when he discovered, *this man was the Son of God. ... Saved at the cross!*

Let's go one step further ... Jesus in grace and in love redeemed the very men who put Him on the cross. ... His previous prayer was answered, *Lk. 23:34 Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.* ... In the immediate context, the 'them' and the 'they' were the Roman soldiers ... and Jesus was praying for them to be forgiven, - ... for their sin to be removed ... He was praying for their salvation. ... They knew nothing about Him, and what a Messiah was. They were ignorant about these things ... but Jesus was asking His Father to forgive them, and that day, salvation was brought to the foot of the cross, for His prayer was answered in the very moment of His death.

Remember what Jesus prophesied before He was arrested, *Jn. 12:32 And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.* ... On the cross He was lifted up, and He drew unto Himself the thief on the cross, a centurion, and a group of soldiers at His feet. ... *There* is the saving power of Calvary! ...

There is power, power, wonder-working power,
In the precious blood of the Lamb.

Just for a moment, turn over to Lk.23, *46 And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. 47 Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man. 48 And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. ... All the people (v.48) had experienced the darkness, the earthquake, the rocks splitting, the graves opening, the veil of the temple torn ... and yes, it touched their hearts to the extent it 'affected' them ... but that was all. It did not 'touch' them as it did the thief on the cross, the centurion and the soldiers.*

Yes, many of the people *smote their breasts*, - they felt a degree of guilt and grief ... because, after all, this was 'a good Man' who had been killed because

of a dubious judgment! However, those ordinary people had ‘the tea to make’, the ‘washing to get done’, the ‘cows to feed’ ... life goes on!

What’s the point? The point is simply this ... There are those who recognise Jesus died at Calvary for sinners, and they know the story so well, but it has no deep meaningful impact upon their souls. On the other hand, there are those who realise Jesus was crucified *for them*. For them He suffered and died. And for them He rose again. ... And because they believed Jesus did all that for them, they committed themselves to Him for salvation.

That is what we call coming to a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ ... knowing that He died on the cross for *you*. ... And that is the difference between someone who knows *about* Him, and someone who knows Him *personally* as their Saviour and Lord.

Examination time ... Do you only know *about* Him, or *do* you truly know Him personally? Is He your Saviour, and is He your Lord? That is why He came ... to take away your sins, and to prepare in this life for Heaven.

There is none so hard whose heart cannot be touched ... not even a Roman centurion and his soldiers. ... History suggests one of the earliest arrivals of Christianity in Britain came with soldiers belonging to the army of the Roman Empire. ... Roman soldiers were among the first missionaries to our shores. ... I’m not saying it was *these* soldiers, but for the Gospel to reach, the story begins at the cross. There is no Gospel without the cross. There is no salvation without the cross ... **We preach Christ crucified** for only at the cross the grace, mercy, and love of God meets the needs of the hell-deserving sinner who turns to Him to be saved. ... And if you are not saved, - if Jesus is not yet your Saviour, - acknowledge Him today as the Roman centurion did, and own Him as the only-begotten Son of God who came to die for you. Amen.