



GOOD FRIDAY
THE CENTURION, THE ASTONISHED

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Mark 15:39

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that He thus breathed His last, the centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

He was a Roman soldier, an officer in charge of a hundred men. Very likely he had seen so many men die that he couldn't keep count. He had witnessed many brutal crucifixions you might even call him an expert at the art of crucifixion. He was disciplined he was self-restrained, he was hardened and unemotional. He would tend to be cynical in most matters. He was a professional in the vocation of execution.

But this time it was different. This time fear and awe gripped his soul, and he could not keep his usual stoic presence masked in indifference. He exclaimed: *"Surely this was the Son of God."* He became the centurion, the astonished.

I. THE CENTURION WAS UNLIKELY TO BELIEVE IN JESUS

Had he not reacted as he did, the centurion at Jesus' crucifixion might have carried out his day's work completely unnoticed. He became involved almost incidentally. The trial was conducted by others. The sentence was pronounced by others. He was simply a loyal heathen soldier, helping to keep order and to see that his men properly executed the crucifixion. He was doing his job. His men, in fact, were more personally involved than he was.

This man did not come to the cross as a follower of Jesus or for that matter, even as an enemy of Jesus. To our knowledge, he had had no relationship with the man he was crucifying and no prejudices about him. His spiritual heritage was, most likely, pagan, filled with gods and goddesses and superstitions and omens.

Whatever part pagan superstitions played in the centurion's spiritual makeup, a more important influence was working in his life at the crucifixion. He may have been stationed among the Jews for some time, certainly long enough to have learned of their idea of a divine Messiah. He had likely heard of the claims of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and that the Jews wanted Jesus crucified because He claimed to be the Son of God. Then, the events surrounding the crucifixion moved him, the indifferent one, the stoic one, to confess what the Jews and many of our age have denied.

What an impression those events must have had on this soldier! Besides his professional aloofness, he would have been trained to feel revulsion, not sympathy, at Christ's death on the cross. For "the cross," as one scholar explains it, *"represented miserable humanity reduced to the last degree of impotence, suffering, and degradation."*

To a Roman, crucifixion was an ignoble death reserved for slaves and rebels, the scum of the earth. Roman citizens were exempt. Such a victim was the lowest form of humanity, hardly the candidate for reverence and praise. A crude drawing on the wall of a palace in Rome from the second century shows what some thought of worshiping a criminal who died on a cross. The shameful graffiti depicts a young man adoring a crucified man with the head of a donkey. No worse, no more humiliating death could have been concocted for Jesus. No one, least of all a Roman, would be expected or encouraged to believe in Him after that.

II. THE CENTURION WAS DRAWN TO JESUS

But as the centurion witnessed the whole scene, he was astonished and drawn to Jesus rather than repulsed. He saw Jesus conduct Himself on the cross with calm dignity. He heard the mockery against Jesus, including the taunts for Jesus to save Himself if He were indeed the Son of God. He heard the words of Jesus on the cross, words of forgiveness, words of comfort, words to His heavenly Father.

He compared Jesus with all the others he had seen crucified, and there was no comparison. He saw the strange darkness while Jesus suffered there. He felt the earthquake when Jesus' died. A deep religious fear passed over him. He concluded that Jesus was not a criminal. Jesus was a righteous man. "Surely this man was the Son of God," the very Son the Jews refused to accept.

In that moment, this pagan soldier spoke as a believer. He saw in Jesus at His dying, what every enemy of Jesus from that day on has refused to see and has tried to deny: the divinity of Jesus. That Jesus was the Son of God everything that the hostile Jews said he was not. There, under the cross, the Roman centurion, of all people, confessed that he saw the Son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

III. THE CENTURION GIVES US REASON TO PONDER JESUS' SACRIFICE

Oh, to see Jesus as the centurion saw Him! Can you imagine yourself standing at the foot of Jesus' cross, wondering about the man hanging there, a man so different from the usual criminal? Would you have recognized Him? Would you have confessed Him in that moment?

Imagine yourself there for the moment. Jesus is wounded from the scourging, the spikes have been driven through his ankles and hands, and He hangs in torment. The crowd is milling about taking delight in baiting Him, mocking Him, laughing Him to scorn. A haunting darkness has enveloped the day.

You look up at Him and what do you see? —a miserable wretch of a man who deserves only to be mocked and scorned? —a first-century visionary who is being martyred because he stood alone for some high-sounding, revolutionary principles? —a criminal? —an innocent man dying unjustly who is, in fact, the very Son of God?

What do you see? Only one answer is true. Do you see it in the man? Do you see something in His face? Does His dignified silence in the face of mockery strike you? Maybe you catch His concern for others while He is suffering: concern for His enemies, for His mother, for the thief dying next to Him. Do His words "*It is finished*" reveal Him to you? Does the moment of His death—His cry "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*"—open your eyes to see Him for what He truly is, the Son of God?

Would we have known Him? We can't say for sure. But we know that the centurion has helped remove the offense of the cross for us. Through him, and to his own astonishment, we learn that when a person comes to the cross of Christ without a preconceived mind-set, without unbridled hostility, he can see that Jesus, the crucified Christ, is the Son of God. God's own Son died on that cross.

The centurion's confession helps us see the good in Good Friday, because it helps us see God in Christ. His confession helps bring the light back into the darkness of those hours. That He is seen as the Son of God gives meaning to Jesus' words "It is finished." He did the Father's will for our salvation, and through His death He won the victory over Satan and the powers of hell. Because the one-and-only Son of God gave Himself in death on the cross, we can be sure that His death counted for us also.

Because the centurion was correct, we still today preach Christ crucified. Our message today is the same one the centurion was astonished to learn: The Son of God sacrificed Himself on the cross. And what the centurion could not have fully known in that moment was that Jesus sacrificed Himself for all people. He finished the work of salvation. He died to give us life.

Legend tells us that this centurion named Longinus, continued and grew in faith in Jesus Christ and even died a martyr for the Christian faith.

We don't know if that part of his story is true. But we know that anyone who believes in the crucifixion of the Son of God, and holds that faith to the end, has a Savior from sin, death, and the devil, and, ultimately, has a home in heaven. We know that in three days the confession of the centurion had the stamp of heaven on it as Jesus rose from the dead. We know that in Christ we have a new life, eternal life.

So today we remember the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for the sins of all the world. May we always remember and glorify God and confess Jesus and continue in the faith unto eternity.

In Jesus name, amen and amen.

