

People of the Passion

Good Friday

The Centurion, the Astonished

In our Lenten series this year, in each worship service, we have focused in a particular person or player in the process of Jesus' suffering and death for our sins. On this Good Friday, the person we focus on is a Roman centurion... the one who oversaw the crucifixion of Jesus. It's interesting for us to consider this man's perspective, because in all likelihood, he was an indifferent observer to all that took place with Jesus' crucifixion.

He probably had at least heard of Jesus. But did he know a little about him or a lot about him? We don't know. What we do know is his conclusion after Jesus died, "Certainly this was the Son of God!"

Friends, this Lenten season, this is really the heart of the matter. Who is Jesus really? If he was a wise man, a gifted teacher, a skilled orator, and an insightful observer... the truth is, you can afford to dismiss him. The world has been full of similar people, and you can learn something by listening to any of them. But what if Jesus really is the very Son of God? This changes everything!

So this evening, let's hear one man's opinion of Jesus: the Roman centurion. By the way, legend has it that the man's name Longinus, and that he became a strong Christian after this... in fact, legend has it that he died as a martyr for Christ. So what we will do this evening is hear each of the 7 phrases Jesus spoke from the cross, along with their surrounding context. But after each reading, Longinus the Roman centurion is going to offer his commentary, his perspective on what happened. My prayer is that you will be impacted by Jesus crucifixion just as the man who oversaw it was. We'll begin right after we take the offering.

They took Jesus to what was called Place of the Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh and gall, but when He tasted it, He refused to drink it. They crucified Him there. At that time they crucified two robbers with Him, one at His right and the other at His left and Jesus in the middle. It was nine in the morning when they crucified Him. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

In my job as Roman centurion, I've overseen dozens of crucifixions. Some people would be bothered to do the work I must do, but I see it as enforcing law and order in the land. If you break Roman law, you'll face the consequences. But the moment they brought Jesus to Golgotha, I knew he was different. First, I was shocked how they had abused him. I mean, most arrive at this hill bruised and battered... but Jesus... I shudder to remember. His back was shredded from being flogged. His face was bruised from beatings, and bloodied from the crown of thorns they had pressed into his forehead. He was in really rough shape. In fact, he was already so weak, there was another man carrying his cross for him.

I ordered my soldiers to give him a drink. Wine mixed with myrrh and gall. Tastes nasty, but it's a mild pain killer, and also would have quenched his thirst. For some reason he refused.

Besides Jesus, there were two more criminals to be crucified. Jesus went in the middle.

But what happened next I'll never forget... because this never happened before and has never happened since. Understand that these are hardened criminals I put to death. I always get one of

two reactions: defiant anger and curses from the crucified; or fearful, panicked pleadings... as if I had the authority to spare their lives at this last moment.

But not Jesus: even with nails being driven through his hands and feet, Jesus said a prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." As he said the words, he was looking at those crucifying him... and his eyes stopped just for a moment on me. He absolved me from my guilt as I was carrying out my duty. I'll be honest. Never once had I ever had a second thought about disobeying a crucifixion order. But for a split second, I thought twice about what we were doing to this kind and innocent man. I've got a lot more to tell you. This story gets a lot more interesting.

Pilate wrote a notice, the accusation that had been written against Him they placed above His head on the cross. It read: THIS IS JESUS FROM NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many Jews read this notice, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. Therefore the ruling priests of the Jews told Pilate, "Do not write: 'The King of the Jews,' but: 'He said, "I am the King of the Jews." ' "Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." The people stood there watching. Those who passed by ridiculed Him, shaking their heads and saying, "Ha! You who are going to tear down the Temple and build it in three days-save Yourself if You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the ruling priests together with the scribes and elders were sneering and made fun of Him among themselves and said, "He saved others-He cannot save Himself. He should save Himself if He is the Christ whom God has chosen." He is Israel's King-He should come down from the cross now, and we shall believe Him. He has put His trust in God-let God rescue Him now if He so wishes, for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" The soldiers also made fun of Him when they went up to Him and offered Him sour wine. They said, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." In the same way the robbers who were crucified with Him also were insulting Him. One of the criminals who were hanging there was mocking Him: "Aren't You the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other, warning him, asked, "Aren't you afraid of God? You are condemned just as He is. Our punishment is just, for we are getting what we deserve for what we've done, but this One has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom." "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to him, "today you will be with Me in Paradise."

I've crucified rebels before... a guy with leadership ability hates that they are subject to Roman rule. They gather a small fighting force, and rile up the people. But our armies are highly trained and efficient. Those rebellions don't get very far, and the rebel leaders end up on my little hill to be crucified. So I wasn't terribly surprised to see the sign that Pilate wanted over Jesus' head: **"THIS IS JESUS FROM NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.** Such a claim will get you crucified every time. But again, what threw me was that Jesus was just not the rebel leader type. In fact, he was the very opposite. And here's what was really strange: his own people were hurling insults at him and mocking him. If he really was leading a revolt, he was so terrible at his attempt that he had no backing from his own people?! If that was the case, why was he being crucified? This just didn't add up.

But then I heard something that caught my attention. Some of those mocking said that he claimed he could save people. Another said that this Jesus has claimed to be the Son of God. The

Son of God? Living on earth among man? Even if it weren't true, why would you kill a man for saying *that*? I decided I'd listen more carefully and see if I could connect a few more dots along the way.

As if it weren't bad enough that the people and the rulers were mocking Jesus, what happened next had never happened before. The criminals... the ones dying on either side of him... actually started mocking him too! "Save yourself... and us!" But then one of the criminals changed his tone. I'm sure the reality of his impending death was setting in. He obviously felt genuine remorse over the crimes he had committed. He knew the punishment he was receiving was just. But just as certainly, he knew that Jesus was not receiving a just punishment. "This one has done nothing wrong!" he said. Then I'll never forget how he turned to Jesus and said, "**Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom.**" Jesus winced as he turned his head to look the criminal in the eye, and said: "**I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in Paradise.**" The man had just admitted he was getting what he deserved! Yet Jesus promised him a place in paradise... with him. And who was this man who thought he had the right to grant entry into heaven?!

But it got me to thinking... what if I died that very day? Would I be in paradise? What if Jesus really did have the right to give people entry into this eternal paradise? Would this Jewish Savior King Son of God... accept me, a Roman executioner? I couldn't believe I was even thinking about such things... but neither could I shake that question out of my mind the rest of the afternoon. I'll tell you more in a minute.

Now, His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary from Magdala were standing near the cross of Jesus. Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing near. "Woman," He said to His mother, "there is your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "There is your mother!" From that time on this disciple took her into his own home.

You know, I noticed something in common with every person I executed. As they are dying, they are very self-consumed. They're in pain, and they're thinking about that pain, and their plight, and their impending death. They really aren't paying attention to those around their cross. But, and I know I keep saying this... Jesus was different. His mother was there, the poor woman. She was just torn apart to see her son like that. My heart went out to her, even though there was nothing to do for her. Her son, Jesus' heart was going out to her too... and he did do something for her. Knowing he wouldn't be around to care for his mother, he asked one of his friends to do that for him. Such selflessness in the midst of pain and suffering. This man had the wheels turning in my head.

It was about noon when darkness came over the whole land-lasting until three in the afternoon, because the sun stopped shining. About three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, My God, why did You forsake Me?" When they heard Him say that, some of those standing nearby said, "Listen! He's calling Elijah." The others said, "Let's see if Elijah comes to save Him."

Although this whole crucifixion had been unusual from the very beginning, things really got weird when at noon, it got dark. Yeah, I don't know how else to explain it. This eerie, creepy

darkness just set in. I wanted nothing more than to leave, but I had a duty to perform. The crowd thinned out at that point, and it was strangely quiet except for the occasional moans of the three from their crosses. After three hours of darkness, I was startled when all of sudden Jesus cried out. The Greek speakers in the crowd that Jesus was crying out to Elijah, but I've worked in Israel long enough to know a fair amount of Aramaic. What Jesus cried out in his native language was, "My God, My God, why did you forsake me?"

Two things still stand out in my mind: the agony he was in... and strength of his voice when he said it. I don't know how to describe it, but Jesus was clearly suffering from an inner turmoil and agony that was overshadowing the physical agony. He felt that God had left him. And judging from the darkness and everything else that had happened... I guess I had reached the same conclusion.

After this, knowing that everything had now been finished, and to have the words of the Scripture come true, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. Immediately one of the men ran, took a sponge, soaked it in sour wine, put it on a hyssop stem, held it to His mouth, and offered Him a drink.

I honestly was shocked that Jesus hadn't taken a drink sooner. His lips were swollen and cracked. That horrible tasting sour wine is at least some relief. I soon found out, though, that he wasn't looking for relief. He needed to wet his mouth so he could say clearly what he needed to say next.

When Jesus had taken the wine, He said, "It is finished!"

Let me help you out with a little language barrier. In your language, "It is finished!" sound like the end... like giving up. But that's not what it means. In my language, Greek, it's a single word, and it means, "It is finished" as is in "Completed!" It's a pretty common word, actually. Most commonly we write it at the bottom of an invoice that has been paid in full. "Completed! Nothing more is owed!" That's what the word means. So why did Jesus say it? What was finished? What was completed? What was paid for in full? At the time, I honestly wasn't sure. But now I know. Jesus was proclaiming that the work his Father had sent him to do was finished. Completed. He finished what the Father sent him to do. The one who chose not to save himself, did save all mankind. He paid the full debt of sin that mankind owed. To this day, tears well up in my eyes and smile to myself when I remember Jesus speaking that announcement of his victory. "It *is* finished!" And that means I am right with God.

And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Father, into Your hands I entrust My spirit." After He said this, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. Just then the inner, curtain in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and the bodies of many believers who had been sleeping were brought back to life. They came out of the tombs after He had risen and went into the Holy City where they appeared to many people. When the centurion who stood facing Jesus saw how He gave up His spirit, he praised God. He said, "Certainly this Man was righteous!" Now when the centurion and those watching Jesus with him saw the earthquake and the other things happening, they were terrified. "Certainly this was the Son of God!" they said.

Yep, this is where I am mentioned in this formal accounting of what took place that day. I watched Jesus die. And would it sound strange if I said that it seemed like he chose that very moment of his death? When you're crucified, the strength is sapped out of you as you slowly suffocate. But Jesus cried out in a loud voice at the moment of his death. Make no mistake: he *gave* his life. His life wasn't *taken*. [Repeat.]

What final doubts lingered in my mind up to the moment of his death, they disappeared completely when I saw what happened right after his death. I've been in earthquakes before... but not one that starts right at the moment a man dies. It was then I had to say outloud what others had to be thinking. "This man was righteous! Certainly this man was the Son of God!"

I knew at that moment that my life was changed forever. I asked around and found out more about Jesus and his teaching. On Sunday morning, the news of Jesus' resurrection was spreading around town. And somehow, I didn't doubt it for a second. Jesus was alive again.

And before I go, here, I have some good news for you. You didn't have to be there to witness Jesus' death in order to benefit from it. Anyone who believes in the crucifixion and resurrection 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. I only pray that your life has been changed as much as mine has... because that Jewish Savior Christ Son of God... is your King and your Savior too. And I pray my testimony this evening will lead you to praise him and honor him with your lips and with your lives now and forever. Amen.