

# The Centurion and Christ's Cross

*Via Dolorosa*

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Let us turn together to the gospel of Matthew and we read together verses 45 through 56 where we see God's love and covenant grace. Matthew 27:45,

45 Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. 46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? 47 Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias. 48 And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. 49 The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him. 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. 55 And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: 56 Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children.

Thus far God's precious word to us this morning.

Dear congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, on the way to the cross on the Via Dolorosa we saw him already, the centurion who led the procession all the way to Golgotha. He was a centurion, a commander of 100 soldiers, and he was given the charge to oversee the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly he had seen many people die. Undoubtedly this was not the first crucifixion that he took charge of but one thing is sure, this crucifixion was like none else, different from every other crucifixion he had ever witnessed. This crucifixion made this man say things he might have never thought he would say. This crucifixion, though there were three men crucified, it focused him on that one on the center cross. That's what made the difference. He made the difference. Yes,

this Jesus was crucified but he was different from any other person that was crucified. He responded differently than any other person that was ever crucified. Things took place around his crucifixion that never ever happened in other crucifixions. This was a crucifixion never to be forgotten. Never to be forgotten. It left a deep impression upon this man and this experienced Roman soldier and may it therefore also this morning leave a deep impression upon us as we see, as it were, through his eyes this morning what happened, what he saw, but also as we listen to what he said.

Our text this morning is Matthew 27:54, "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." We will focus together, then, the centurion and Christ's cross: what he saw and what he said. What he saw, first of all.

Our text says, "Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done." So he was watching. There he is, that man who was in charge of 100 soldiers together with his 100 soldiers probably, he's watching Jesus die and making sure that everything goes orderly. For this officer in the Roman army, Jerusalem was probably the last place that he wanted to be. The Romans were deeply resented in this place, Jerusalem, but here he was. Jerusalem hated the Romans and he must have felt a sense of that. Although they came now, they needed Rome to crucify Jesus, they must have felt a sense of that still during this Passover. Feelings were running high and the crowds gathered for this special feast, for this Passover.

He soon learned that Jesus was this Jew, this man he didn't know yet, this man from Nazareth was arrested and claimed to be a king. He spoke like a prophet and claimed to be a king, and so they charged him with sedition, disloyalty against the Romans. He was brought before Pilate. Jerusalem was in an uproar and he had never seen anything like this before. This was different. Did he hear Pilate say those words, those glorious words, "I find no fault in him"? Did he see how Pilate twisted judgment and gave the desires of the people instead of maintaining justice? What did he think about Jesus if he knew that, "This is one of those pretenders. This is one person that thinks he is a king. Well, let's show him for a moment who is king. Let's show him who rules Jerusalem. It's the Romans."

Now finally this Jesus had been taken to the cross to keep the peace, to make sure that people would soon calm down again, but things went so differently. He would never forget what happened that day and we shouldn't either, and let us come and look through his eyes for a moment this morning. Yes, he allowed those soldiers to undress and mock and dress Jesus up as a king. He did so in a purple robe and the crown of thorns and that reed in his hands. He allowed all that. He followed orders when Pilate said that he needed to be scourged, Jesus needed to be scourged. And he saw him there. He must have seen him humbly bearing the cross, Jesus bearing his cross. Simon of Cyrene, they forced him, that's what they did. And he must have seen maybe also something what we saw last week, Jesus saying, "Weep not for yourselves," to those women.

Now they come to Mount Golgotha and then he and his men do this cruel work. They drive the nails through Jesus' hands and Jesus' feet, those hands that never ever lifted up, were never ever lifted up to do any evil, those hands that were there to always do mercy and do justice and walk humbly with his God, with his Father. And those feet that run in the way of God's commandments, they pierced those feet. They pierced those hands. This officer and his cohort, they didn't know they're fulfilling a prophecy, Psalm 22. "They pierced my hands and feet." They didn't know anything about it. They just did their duty.

They were just keeping the peace, making sure everything went orderly and now he stands there at the feet of the cross. Yes, his disciples, Jesus' disciples stood afar off we read in Mark, but it says about the centurion that he stood over against him, maybe just so that he could watch right in front of the cross or next to the cross, however it was. But one thing is sure, this centurion, beloved, got a front row seat to see what happened there that day. The Lord wanted him to be there and the Lord wants us to be here this morning so that he can give us a front row seat in the glories of his redemption so that he can show us the glory of Christ's cross and hold it before his and our eyes this morning.

Don't you think it must have amazed him that somehow everything was focused on this center cross? The taunts, the mocking, everything, even the crucified criminals next to him were mocking. He must have heard everything that the Lord Jesus said, everything that the Lord Jesus said. When he heard the Savior pray for his enemies, did he realize, "He's praying for me"? Jesus prayed for his enemies, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they do." That's how gracious our Savior is. That's how gracious our Savior is today if you're still an enemy.

He must have seen that change on that one criminal next to the cross, first mocking and then becoming silent, realizing he's innocent, Jesus is innocent. He must have heard him, "Remember me when thou art come in thy kingdom." He must have heard Jesus say to that wicked criminal, "Verily I say unto thee, to day thou shalt be with me in paradise." What did he think? King? Paradise? Even on the cross, beloved, Jesus was focused on sinners like you and me and he saved. He saved.

He must have heard those tender words that he spoke to his mother, those tender words, those caring words. And then suddenly, children, it became dark, pitch dark, and it became eerily silent around that center cross. This was something that had never happened before and you know that it can be scary in the dark, right children? But this just was not just a few minutes, this was not even an hour, this was three hours of darkness, pitch darkness. And there he stood. Maybe some would want to go home. Maybe he wanted to go home too but he was in charge. He couldn't leave it. There was something that God was doing here. The darkness showed him this is something that is completely out of my control. This is different than he ever had seen before. And toward the end of those three hours of darkness, he heard that soul-rending cry of the Savior in the darkness, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Out of the depth of his soul, out of the depth of his forsakeness, out of the depths of darkness a cry unto the Lord, "Lord, hear my voice." Don't you think that must have left a deep impression upon this man? Maybe he found it scary. "This is beyond me. Someone

else is doing this, darkening the sky in the middle of the day. Nature is even responding to the crucifixion of that one who is in the center." God brings darkness. It was understood darkness, judgment. Judgment.

Then after this cry and the three hour darkness, then suddenly it becomes light again. He must have seen how the soldiers ran to his cross and gave him something to drink when he cried out, "I thirst." And then came that very holy moment, the holy of holies, when Jesus died. It was so different from what he was used to. He had seen Jesus humbly bearing his cross, he had seen Jesus being calm and in control, seemingly in control, and not a bitter word, not an ugly word came from his life and lips. And normally those crucified would visibly suffer and then they would be gasping for air and then finally wrestling with death they would give up. But Jesus, it was so different. Normally they would die of exhaustion but Jesus so different. He heard Jesus cry with a loud voice, "It is finished!" A triumphant cry. And followed by those words, "Father, in thy hands I commend my spirit." This was not a death of weakness. This was not a death that looked like a struggle with death. It was different. It looked like triumph. "It is finished!" And his death was characterized by trust. "Father, in thy hands I commend my spirit." This was a death in which Christ willingly and courageously faced death, confronting death without fear, surrendering himself into death as he bowed his head. That was different too. He bowed his head as he surrendered himself in the Father's Spirit in the hands of the Father's Spirit.

Here Jesus fulfills probably what the centurion never had heard but we know from the Scriptures what he said in John 10:17, "Therefore doth my Father love me because I lay down my life that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me but I lay it down." That's what we see in Jesus' commanding his spirit in the hands of his Father and bowing down his head. He was obeying his Father. "This is the commandment I have received of my Father." O beloved, come and see, come and see, stand in awe for Jesus' death is the death of all deaths.

It deeply impressed the centurion and should deeply impress us this morning. Mark tells us also about the centurion and his response. It's a little different from our verse. What does he tell us about it? He puts that verse on the pinnacle of his gospel, the climax of his gospel, and there he writes, "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 especially what Jesus said, Mark says, that he cried with such a loud voice. The way he died, that is what impressed him, Mark says. This was no normal crucifixion. Everything about Jesus Christ and his crucifixion told the centurion and tells us this is different. Jesus was tasting death, as Hebrews says, for every man. Jesus here is overcoming the power of death.

So we see triumph and trust, "It is finished! Father, in thy hands I command my spirit." O believer, how precious, how precious, your Savior says it is finished and your Savior commands himself in the hands of his Father. He is welcomed. He is welcomed with the Father and so all those who trust him this morning are welcomed with the Father. But if

you are here without trust in Jesus Christ, oh unbeliever, your heart should melt, shouldn't it? Even this hardened centurion, his heart was softened.

But saw more, as if this was not enough. When Jesus yielded up his spirit and he gave up the ghost, at that very moment something happened that was totally different too. The earth began to shake. Not just a little bit. Yes, later on it would shake again, we hope to see that Sunday. But this shaking earth was terrible. Verse 51b, "and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent." That means the rocks around Golgotha that he saw were splitting open. And we are told in verses 51 through 53 that at that time he couldn't see that but the priests would have seen that the veil was rent from top to bottom, and that even some graves were opened. And then after Jesus rose, these saints rose and entered into Jerusalem and appeared to many. He didn't see that. Maybe he had met some, I don't know, but what he felt here and what he saw here was this earthquake and that impressed upon his heart too, that's what our text shows. The rocks rending and splitting, think about that. It's as if God's hand was shaking the earth in judgment as his beloved innocent Son was coming home. And this whole crucifixion, even the earth was, as it were, shaking at this very special moment but also showing signs of judgment but signs also of victory as Christ was victoriously overcoming Satan and his hosts and crushed death forever for all those who trust in him.

We don't know when his heart began to soften. He must have understood maybe not every detail as we understand it about Jesus' death, but one thing must have been very clear for this man and should be very clear to all of us this morning, this death is different than any other deaths. The darkness of heaven, the shaking of the earth. This death has even an impact on the creation itself that is groaning now and is waiting for the redemption of the sons of God. And here we hear some groans of the earth eagerly waiting.

Don't you think he must have known deep down in his heart, "This is something beyond us. God is doing something." Beloved, congregation, God is doing something very glorious there that Good Friday, and we are given this morning a front row seat with the centurion. Come and stand in awe this morning and ponder what is happening here, this death of deaths. You remember that in Galatians when Paul preached, he said that Christ was so, as it were, portrayed before, set forth in the congregation of the Galatians that it was as if Christ was crucified right in the midst of them. May that be so this morning, that you see the cross and that you see Jesus, as it were, crucified right here before our very eyes and that the blood of Jesus Christ, as it were, would drip in the congregation. O that precious blood that he gave that shows God's love.

Oh, stand next to the centurion for a moment. Think about what happened. Let it sink in. This man had sorrows like no other man had. This suffering was like no other suffering. This cross is like no other cross. This death is like no other death. And the way Jesus died is like none else. Triumphant. Surrendering his life. Even heaven and earth could not be silent. And when you have pondered these realities and what he did to save sinners, ask yourself this question, let us ask ourselves this question this morning, "Who is this on yonder tree?" Who do you say he is? Who do you confess him to be for you?

Come and listen to the testimony of this centurion, secondly, what he said. He's going to tell us something about Jesus, children, something glorious. "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." What does he say about Jesus, children? He says that he is sure that he is the Son of God. Actually that's not the only thing he said. He said something more. Luke in his gospel tells us about it, Luke 23:47b, he says, "certainly this was a righteous man." And probably that's what he said first, "certainly this is a righteous man," and then he said as well this in our text, "Truly this was the Son of God."

Now over the years this text has generated many questions. Why did he say that? What did he mean? How much did he understand of what Jesus did and what he said and what the gospel is all about? Let's try to answer those questions. What did he say? Why did he say this? What did he mean? And how much did he understand?

The first, why did he say this? Well, look at our text, because he saw the earthquake and those things that were done. It's different from Mark, Mark says because he cried out. Well, we can put them together, those things he all saw. So it was this triumphant cry as well as this earthshaking and all the rest that we considered. We don't know how much impressed upon him, how much passed by him, but we know one thing from this text, that it impressed him greatly. They feared greatly, he and his men, that is. They were awestruck. They were amazed. They were sure God was doing something and most likely they had fear, and maybe they were even scared, terrified. But this word generally means in awe, reverence, maybe a mix of all this.

Then we hear him say, "Certainly this was a righteous man. This wasn't the kind of man I usually crucify. A righteous man. Innocent. He was. He did what was right. Even on the cross I could see it. Even when everything seemed to go wrong in his life, he thought about others. He wasn't angry, frustrated like many of the crucified undoubtedly were, unwilling to die, fighting death. No, not this man." And as he pondered what happened, we hear these words, the words that the leaders of the Jews at that time were not willing to take on their lips about Jesus, "certainly this was a righteous man." And in our minds we think the soldiers we see them, as it were, mumbling in agreement. "Yes, yes, yes. This is something we've never seen before. We haven't seen it either."

And he adds to our text in our text something more amazing, something that all those people that were standing and seeing what happened, all those Jews, those religious Jews must have found sounding blasphemous. The irony is that Jesus went to the cross because they thought he was making himself equal with God. Now here, listen, God has someone to testify, the centurion of all people. "Truly this was the Son of God." They must have been shocked, a despised Roman saying that. And again we imagine that those soldiers mumbled in agreement, "Yes, yes, yes. This is different. Different." These were the men, mind you, those men who gambled away his clothes in just a moment and just unaffected. No longer. They must have said something like, "That's right, centurion, this indeed was the Son of God."

That's why he said this. What did he mean? What did he mean, secondly. Well, commentators go different routes here. Many commentators say, well, though the Jews understood this title Son of God is the title for the coming Messiah, this Roman centurion just had it in his own context, said it in his own context, simply using the way he knew it. He knew the Son of God as a title for Caesar. Caesar was the Son of God. Or just a hero. "He's one of those sons of god, one of the gods who had come down, yes, and one of them," they served many. One of them had now come down and then those commentators stress the fact that our text says "this was the Son of God and this was a righteous man," past tense. He just thinks Jesus is a hero now died. That's the end of it.

Other commentators say, no, this is not just a confession about Jesus being a hero, instead this man was the first to confess Jesus as the real Son of God. As a Roman centurion he must have learned and studied among the Jews, he must have heard people use this title for the Messiah, Son of God. He must have meant it. And this, then, is the victory of the cross, one Gentile convert drawn to the cross by Jesus, by his death. Just as Jesus said before in John 12, "When I be lifted up, I will draw all men, that is, all types of men, Gentiles, Jews, unto me. This he said concerning what death he would die." So these commentators say it's a true confession of faith, this man's heart was not just softened, he not just spoke the truth, he was changed. Perhaps he didn't know everything about Jesus yet but it was a true confession. And they also listened to the legend that is out there about the centurion and they quote that he was indeed the first Gentile convert.

Now which one is true? How much did the centurion understand of what he confessed? We can't know for sure. God knows. But it is remarkable, don't you think, that Luke 23:47 says that he glorified God? To give glory, once again, that's what we were created for. Then we are answering the purpose for which we were created. He saw at least something of the glory of Jesus Christ, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, this is the Son of God. He saw something of the glory of God. Isn't that remarkable? Of all persons, this Gentile makes this statement about the identity of Jesus Christ.

So the least thing we can say about this confession therefore is that this man spoke the truth. He spoke the truth and God made him speak the truth at that moment when many Jews at that moment absolutely didn't want to confess the very same thing. And we can say more than that. Here we see that God is showing that the cross is going to have a glorious impact on the Gentile world. Here's a Roman, a Gentile, God is, as it were, saying the gospel is going to spread all over the world. The whole world is going to be impacted.

So the gospel is coming to us this morning because God knows his heart, we don't, and that is the same God who knows our heart this morning. He knows what happened in the soul of the centurion but he also knows, as we have heard, the gospel once again. What your and my response is to Jesus Christ as he is portrayed and set before us, as it were, this morning, he sees our response, he sees us. In case the centurion wasn't changed, he sees that too with us when we say something and we are not changed. He sees that. He sees it when we say, "Glory, this is glory, this is amazing. Bless God. This is the Son of

God." He sees us when we glorify him this morning in our hearts. He sees us when there is a true work of grace in your and my heart. He worked it. He worked it. He sees it when we don't know everything yet about Jesus, when we need to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. He sees it. He sees what you and I say and think about this Savior. The confession that we make this morning, he sees us. He sees if sin is a struggle to us even after we have confessed him and said that he has changed us, and confess that we believe in him. He sees your and my struggle with it. He sees our weaknesses. He sees our doubts at times. He sees it all. He sees it if you are one of those trembling souls this morning standing afar off perhaps and yet wanting to be close to Jesus. He sees you, doubting soul, he sees you if you're more assured. God knows your and my heart and how we respond to the glory of the cross and the crucified Savior. He sees our desires. He knows them.

The centurion stood there, are you standing there this morning? Is your heart echoing this confession, "certainly this was a righteous man." Indeed. Really. Truly. Or in other words, this is the truth, no doubt that this was the Son of God. And how much more reason we have because of the scriptures and because of God working with his Spirit still to make those scriptures effectual in our hearts, to make this same confession, don't we? And we know, we know from the scriptures and we know from what we hope to hear on Sunday that he was not only the Son of God but he is the Son of God in glory forever. Alive. The living Savior.

The centurion might have missed some of these points but we shouldn't miss them. They're all there for us in the scriptures. And why are the scriptures given? Well, 1 John 5:13, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God." Truly this is the Son of God, "so that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God."

So there's only one question this morning that you need to take home and need to answer before God and your soul. As you ponder the cross of Jesus Christ, who do you think that Jesus is? Whose Son is he? And come and make that confession that the centurion made with mouth and heart, that same confession about who God is and about how Christ is. And confess your need also for this Savior, your need to know forgiveness, to know peace with God through the blood of Jesus Christ, through the blood of his cross, through the death of Jesus Christ. Truly I need this Savior. I'm a miserable sinner.

So we have watched the cross for a moment this morning, now we are going home. People were going home too after all this. They've heard the testimony of the centurion and now they were going home. The centurion couldn't get home yet. He was not done with Jesus yet. He soon had to break his bones. He didn't do that, the soldiers didn't do that. They pierced him instead. And the next day he needed to come again. The grave needed to be sealed. Jesus kept him busy. I hope and pray that there are some here this morning Jesus keeps you busy. You go home and you see what has happened, it keeps you busy. Don't rest until you're saved.



So the crowds slowly left Golgotha. Among them were the leaders. They were hardened. Let's pray that none of us this morning would be hardened by the cross. But there was also a different response, Luke 23:48, "And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned." How are you and I going home this morning? They were just simply smiting their breast. They felt guilty. They felt guilty. They didn't see yet that Jesus came to take away guilt. Are there some here this morning too who go home this way? Don't go home this way. Jesus came to take away guilt. That's why he suffered. Won't you trust him today? First time? Afresh? Don't go away with a guilty conscience. Will you not rejoice and surrender your life to him when you have seen this cross this morning? Will you not with him triumph over sin, death and hell? Relish what he has done for sinners like you. Will you not commend your spirit in his hands today for both life and death? Won't you today confess that Jesus is truly the Son of God, righteous, a man like us and truly God? Will you not confess that he came to die for such a wretch as you and I are by nature in your place? O come kiss the Son, confess the Son, lest he be angry and ye perish in the way when his wrath is kindled but a little.

So go away this morning and you can know that you are blessed. How blessed are all they that put their trust in Jesus the crucified. Amen.