

The Centurion

Conversions at Calvary – Part II

Selected Scripture

Introduction

By the time of Christ's crucifixion, the Romans had crucified approximately 30,000 men in Palestine alone.¹

Execution assignments would have been a normal duty of the day for Roman soldiers in order to take care of political prisoners who were guilty of insurrection and hardened criminals who had run out of appeals. The soldiers had mastered the use of whips to bring the criminals to what they called "near death" before nailing them to a cross.

However, never had Roman soldiers encountered the death of anyone like Jesus.

I sincerely doubt that any of the soldiers had much knowledge of Christ's life, and they more than likely met Him for the first time outside Pilate's judgment hall. As a result, most of what they would know about Christ would revolve around one day – the day of Christ's crucifixion.

Jesus' actions, words, and spirit were so different than that of anyone else the soldiers had ever seen die on a cross that by the time Christ died, some, if not all of them placed their faith in Him as their living Lord.

The commanding officer over this scene is never named in scripture. Tradition has handed down that this Roman officer's name was Longinus, but the Bible refers only to his rank.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospel accounts, the officer is simply called "the centurion". This is the Latin word for "100," which is the basis for our English word "century" – a period of 100 years.

This title tells us something about this man. He would have been an experienced soldier and loyal to the Roman Empire. Because of his skill and loyalty, he was promoted to a position of command over 100 of the best soldiers.

This centurion was also entrusted with particularly difficult assignments. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ would have been one of his most volatile assignments yet.

The surrounding mob was close to rioting, to the point that it seemed unlikely that his prisoner would even make it to Golgotha. To make matters worse, the criminal in this soldier's charge fell beneath the weight of the cross beam and he had to force another man to carry it. The crowd lined the streets shouting insults and calling for the criminal's death. More than likely this centurion had never before seen the hatred and utter lack of compassion that he was seeing directed at this Man.

Matthew's gospel informs us that after seeing several things happen, the centurion and his soldiers came to the conviction that Jesus Christ was actually the Son of God. They even risked their own lives and reputations to declare this truth.

These Roman soldiers would actually become the first evangelists of the crucified Savior. They would declare not only His innocence and righteousness, but His deity.

This would become yet another early indication that the gospel of the Messiah was going to include both Jew and Gentile!

What were these "things" that the soldiers saw and heard as they carried out just one more

crucifixion of one more criminal that would bring them to faith in Christ?

Events Leading to the Conversion of the Centurion

Let me rehearse several of the events that I have pulled from various gospel accounts that would have struck the centurion and the other soldiers as unique.

1. One of the first events is the fact that Pilate declares Jesus Christ to be innocent.

In Luke's gospel, in an unprecedented move, Pilate says to the mob,

... "I have found in Him no guilt . . ."
(*Luke 23:22*)

As Pilate hands Jesus over to the centurion, instead of hearing the crimes committed against the state that justify the death sentence, he and his soldiers watch, according to Matthew's account, Pilate wash his hands in a ceremonial manner and say,

... "I am innocent of this Man's blood . . ."
(*Matthew 27:24*)

Without a doubt this got the centurion's attention. He was a soldier who had given his life to protect and uphold the law of the land, and his leader just announced that this criminal had never broken the law.

2. The second event is an unusual exchange between Christ and a group of women.

As they made their way through the streets of Jerusalem toward Calvary, the centurion and his soldiers would hear Christ make an unusual statement to the daughters of Jerusalem.

Luke, in chapter 23, records that women from the city were following Jesus and weeping because of His imminent death. They were weeping not as much because of their faith in Him as because of their remorse over a Jewish man being executed in this manner by the Romans.

Instead of feeding off their kindness and their sympathy, the centurion hears Christ say to them,

... "Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me . . . weep for yourselves and for your own children." (Luke 23:28)

In other words, "Don't be concerned about Me, be concerned about your own families."

Even in this hour, the compassion of our Lord causes Him to stop and tell these women that they and their nation are in grave danger.

Jesus, beaten beyond recognition, is on His way to die, and yet He shows compassion for other people who are also going to die.

This would certainly have seemed odd to soldiers well worn by the crying of the condemned for mercy. Had they ever seen a condemned man care about anyone else on his way to an excruciating death?

This is the point. These soldiers would be struck by the repeated evidence – over and over again – that Christ did not seem to care about Himself at all!

3. The third event that would have mystified the soldiers is Christ's refusal to drink the wine mixed with myrrh.

History records the custom of the Daughters of Jerusalem to, out of compassion for the condemned, provide wine mixed with myrrh – a narcotic drink intended to ease the pain of the crucified victim.ⁱⁱ

Mark's gospel informs us that when Christ reached the Skull, He was offered this drink but . . .

... He did not take it. (Mark 15:23)

Why did He not take this drink? Christ had work to do on the cross; He had things to say and would not be in a stupor. He would face death without an anesthetic so that every word could be trusted; so that every final act could be recorded and freighted with divine meaning.

Christ had prophecies to fulfill and souls to save. It would soon become obvious to these soldiers that He wanted to save *their* souls. This would begin to dawn on them as they heard the next event.

4. The fourth event is that Christ offers the soldiers forgiveness as they nail Him to the cross.

Luke writes further in chapter 23,

When they came to the place called The Skull... (Luke 23:33a)

This place is "calvaria, crania, Golgotha," in Latin, Aramaic, and Greek, and you may remember from our last session that all three words mean "The Skull". This was the nickname for the hill of execution.

Now notice,

... there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.

But Jesus was saying [that is, kept saying], "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they

cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.

(Luke 23:33b-34)

The context clearly points to the often overlooked fact that Christ was not offering this prayer for the religious leaders who had come to mock Him – they knew what they were doing. They certainly could be forgiven, by the way. Jesus was praying for the soldiers. The Sanhedrin knew what they were doing, but these soldiers did not – they were simply on duty this fateful day.

Can you imagine this scene? The Savior’s body was twisting in pain with each blow of the hammer and being jolted as it was raised upon the saddle, followed by further hammering through His feet, yet all the while He kept praying aloud, “Father, forgive them . . . forgive them . . . forgive them . . . they do not know what they are doing.”

I cannot imagine any criminal these men had ever executed looking at them and offering prayers of forgiveness.

Do not miss the fact that Jesus keeps praying to the “Father”. Even the Romans would have known enough to know that no Jew ever called God his “Father”.

The centurion had listened as Pilate declared this Man innocent. He had heard Christ warn a group of women that He was not in danger with God, but they were. He had watched Christ refuse to drink the narcotic. He then heard this Man offer forgiveness to his soldiers for what they were doing.

By now, I believe, the centurion is deeply wondering, “Just who is this Man?”

5. The fifth event is the pleading of one of the criminals to be given entrance into Christ’s kingdom.

Luke’s gospel account records the dramatic conversion of one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus. His eyes had been opened by the grace of God to the truth of Christ. He says,

. . . “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!” (Luke 23:42)

There is no doubt the centurion had already mulled over the meaning of the words on the placard behind Jesus’ head that declared Christ’s only crime,

. . . “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” (Matthew 27:37)

Now this soldier hears one of the condemned cry out to Jesus in faith, asking that Jesus allow him to enter His kingdom. Surely this man on the center

cross will tell the criminal he has been misled and that this is all a myth. Surely He will say something like, “Do I look like a King?! Do I look like there’s a kingdom waiting for me?!”

Instead, the centurion and his soldiers are more than likely shocked to hear Jesus reply,

. . . “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

In other words, “I *am* the King of the Jews. I *am* the Messiah. There *is* a kingdom belonging to Me. I *will* give you entrance!”

After these words, nature, in the grip of Creator God, lends its voice to this scene on Calvary.

6. The sixth event is total darkness that sweeps in and covers the land.

Luke tells us that darkness blankets the earth at the sixth hour and that it lasts until the ninth hour (Luke 23:44).

The sixth hour happens to be noon! When the sun is at its zenith, it suddenly gets turned off like a light bulb.

Matthew tells us,

. . . darkness fell upon all the land . . . (Matthew 27:45)

The word that is translated “land” is the Greek word “ge” (γη), which can refer to a region or to the entire world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sources outside the Bible indicate that the darkness was actually global. One of these sources is a letter from Pilate to the Roman Emperor Tiberius in which he referred to the darkness he knew Tiberius had also experienced, even though Tiberius was not in the land of Israel at the time. Pilate even mentioned that the darkness lasted from twelve to three o’clock in the afternoon.^{iv}

There is no doubt that the soldiers quickly started a fire in order to keep watch and that torches were lit as this supernatural darkness blotted out the sky for three hours.

From this point forward, I believe, the tone of everything changes.

The rabbis had taught for centuries that the darkening of the sun was a judgment from God.^v

There is no more mocking or jeering. Everyone senses that God’s hand is somehow involved.

Undoubtedly the religious leaders slip away. In fact, Luke’s gospel tells us that after Jesus dies, the crowd that is still at this scene will return to

Jerusalem weeping and in deep contrition (Luke 23:48).

I would agree with some commentators who suggest that this crowd will be among those who respond to Peter's message on the day of Pentecost and become members of the newly created church.

They are about to become witnesses to the Savior becoming the sin-bearer.

There were three days of darkness in Egypt before the first Passover. There are three hours of darkness before the last Passover.^{vi}

This darkness *is* the judgment of God the Father who abandons His Son as He bears the wrath of the Father, representing the wrath of Triune God, against the sins of the whole world.

Darkness falls.

A world that rejects Jesus Christ – the light of the world – is a world that lives in darkness.^{vii}

The person who rejects Jesus Christ is heading for an eternity of suffering in hell, of which Jesus warned us as He described it as a place of darkness where there will be weeping forever (Matthew 8:12).

This is in contrast to heaven where there will be no more tears of sorrow (Revelation 21:4).

During these three hours of darkness, Jesus makes more statements.

7. The seventh event occurs when the centurion hears the cry of agony and abandonment of Christ.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, Jesus cries,

. . . *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mathew 27:46)*

The centurion would have noticed that Jesus is not referring to God as His Father. For the first time in scripture, Jesus does not address God as His Father.

There is no intimate communion at this point,

- as Jesus takes upon Himself our transgressions (Isaiah 53:5);
- as Jesus who knew no sin becomes sin on our behalf (II Corinthians 5:21);
- as Jesus becomes a curse for us (Galatians 3:13);
- as Jesus is delivered up because of our transgressions (Romans 4:25);
- as Jesus bears our sins in His body on the cross (I Peter 2:24).

Jesus bears the wrath of God by not only bearing our sin, but becoming sin on mankind's behalf in order that those who believe in Him might be saved from the penalty of their sin.^{viii}

The centurion hears Jesus cry out,

. . . *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mathew 27:46)*

We might think, “Wait, didn't Jesus know? In the agony of His suffering, had He forgotten the plan of salvation crafted before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8)?

Jesus was not saying these words because He had forgotten. He was making this statement to clearly connect His dying to the prophecies of scripture.

Christ happens to be quoting and fulfilling Psalm chapter 22, which is the prophetic Psalm in which David expresses his own personal agony and sense of separation from God.

At the same time, David delivers prophecies more specifically than he can imagine of what will take place at the crucifixion of the Messiah at a place called “The Skull”.

David writes in Psalm 22:

- *All who see me sneer at me . . . (verse 7);*
- *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint (verse 14);*
- *. . . my tongue cleaves to my jaws; and You lay me in the dust of death. (verse 15);*
- *. . . a band of evildoers has encompassed me; they pierced my hands and my feet. (verse 16);*
- *They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. (verse 18);*
- *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? . . .” (the Psalm begins with this in verse 1).*

Jesus Christ is expressing the agony of separation from His Father, but He is expressing it in a way that connects the specifics of death by crucifixion with the words of scripture.

This was to be one more piece of evidence that announced His deity.

8. The eighth event occurs when the centurion hears Christ deliver a shout of completion.

When the darkness is about to lift, John's gospel records that Jesus cries out,

. . . *“It is finished!” . . . (John 19:30)*

This statement is one word in the Greek language, “tetelestai,” which literally means, “paid in full”.

The gospel was being delivered in a word. Jesus did not cry out, “I am finished,” but “It is finished!” The perfect tense of this verb that He shouted means “It is finished and it always will be finished.”

What a strange word this is for a dying man to cry. However, this is not strange for the Christian; this is the cry of the believer’s deliverance, the shout of their forgiveness, the declaration of their eternal justification. This is not the end of story; it is merely picking up speed!

Luke then includes this final word as Jesus says,

... ***“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.”*** ... (Luke 23:46)

The centurion hears Jesus reverting back to calling God “Father”.

Why did Jesus do this? Because it was finished! In the darkness, on the cross Christ had paid the eternal sacrifice for our sins and now, no longer abandoned, Christ offers up His spirit to the care of His Father.

9. One of the final events that the centurion will literally feel is an earthquake.

As Christ bows His head in death, Mathew records that the earth began to shudder and shake so violently that rocks split apart (Matthew 27:51).

Throughout the course of Jewish history, an earthquake was a sign of the presence of God. This was true even to a Gentile Roman soldier – he had seen enough.

It is no wonder that the centurion stood at the cross and said,

... ***“Truly this was the Son of God!”***
(Matthew 27:54)

It all makes sense – the compassion, the dignity, the promise of a kingdom, the communication with God His Father, the darkness, the earthquake . . . “Truly this was the Son of God!”

I deeply resent the notations by some translations that the centurion might have said “a son of God” or “a son of a God” simply because the definite article is lacking. Throughout the New Testament the title “Son of God” appears with or without the article and there is never a grammatical or contextual question.

When the angel came to Mary with the announcement of her divinely conceived child, she was told with this same Greek construction,

... ***the . . . Child shall be . . . the Son of God.”*** (Luke 1:35)

We see the same Greek construction used when the Jews announced to Pilate,

... ***“He [Jesus] made Himself out to be the Son of God.”*** (John 19:7)

Christ never claimed to be a son of any god, but the only Son of the only living God.

When the disciples saw Jesus walking toward them on the water, they said to Him, with this same grammatical construct,

... ***“You are certainly the Son of God!”***
(Matthew 14:33)

Why would there be any attempt to water down or even question this fact? Because this happens to be the gospel.

Jesus Christ told Nicodemus,

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten [literally the only one of His kind] Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”
(John 3:16)

A Roman soldier is the first Gentile convert after the death of Christ – a conversion at Calvary.

From Luke’s account, this centurion was not quiet about his conversion either. The text says,

... ***he began praising God . . .*** (Luke 23:47)

The “Hallelujahs of the Cross” came first from the lips of a redeemed centurion.

Imagine that! He came to faith beneath the dead Savior’s cross.^{ix}

He believed that this dead Man was indeed the King with a coming kingdom – the Son of God.

We place our faith in Him because He rose again – and surely He had to in order to validate His claim. We place our faith in Him because He is alive.

The centurion placed his faith in Him even though He had just died. What grand faith this is!

This soldier was the first to begin singing praises to God for the sacrifice and sufficiency of Christ.

And rightly so! The “Hallelujahs” can begin at Calvary, because at Calvary:

- the deal was done;

- forgiveness was finalized;
- the sacrifice was offered;
- Christ’s own lips declared, “It is and always will be finished.”

This is why Christians to this day can look at a cross and do the unthinkable, the unimaginable – they can praise God and sing:

*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest
and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.*

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Oh, to see the pain written on [His] face,
Bearing the awesome weight of sin.
Every bitter thought, every evil deed
Crowning Your bloodstained brow.
This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us;
Took the blame, bore the wrath;
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

*Now the daylight flees;
Now the ground beneath
Quakes as its Maker bows His head.
Curtain torn in two, dead are raised to life;
“Finished!” the victory cry.*

*This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us;
Took the blame, bore the wrath;
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

*Oh, to see my name written in the wounds,
For through Your suffering I am free
Death is crushed to death, life is mine to live,
Won through Your selfless love.*

*This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us;
Took the blame, bore the wrath;
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

Who started this tradition of praising Jesus Christ at Calvary? Soldiers who had seen a lot of men die on crosses and a centurion who thought he had seen everything – until they saw the King and believed in the Savior who was, is, and always shall be the Son of the living God.

Jesus Christ came as the suffering Lamb, but will one day return as the sovereign King of Kings and Lord of Lord, and He shall reign forever and ever.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, Matthew: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1989), p. 266.

ⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 2 (Crossway, 1998), p. 389.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 84.

^{iv} MacArthur, p. 268.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Warren W. Wiersbe, Matthew: Be Loyal (Victor Books, 1989), p. 206.

^{vii} Trent C. Butler, Holman New Testament Commentary: Luke (Holman Publishers, 2000), p. 396.

^{viii} MacArthur, p. 270.

^{ix} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel (Augsburg Publishing, 1964), p. 1133.