

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor Emeritus  
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
Sunday, March 24, 2024

## Mark 15:21-41          “The Cross of Calvary”

Intro. We come now to consider together the subject of the Cross of Calvary. Calvary (Lk. 23:33), also known as Golgotha (v.22), is where Jesus died. Both words refer a skull, probably because the hill on which Jesus died looked like a skull.<sup>1</sup> How appropriate that the place of execution was associated with a skull!

All deaths are solemn events. But never was there a death of such importance as the death of Jesus. Even creation was forced to recognize the significance of His death. Darkness fell upon the land for three hours in the midst of daytime. Furthermore, when Jesus died there was an earthquake, and miraculously, the thick, heavy veil of the temple was torn in two at the very moment of His death. One of the many things different about the death of Jesus is that His death had a redemptive purpose.

You see, six months before this fateful day, we are told that Jesus steadfastly set His face toward Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51, 53). He knew that He must die on the cross, and He was determined to fulfill His mission to save us from our sins. Actually, Jesus was determined to die on the cross even before the world began. The Bible describes Him as “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). And then throughout the Old Testament we see many signs and prophecies pointing to the fact that someday, God would send a Savior who would shed His blood for the sins of His people (esp. Ps. 22 and Isa. 53). That Red River of Redemption flowed from Eden, where an animal was sacrificed to provide clothing for Adam and Eve, who had sinned. It continued into Abraham’s day, when he told his son Isaac, “My son, God will provide for Himself a lamb.” That Red River flowed on through Egypt, when on that first Passover night, a lamb was slain and its blood applied to save the lives of the first-born children of Israel. We see the blood in the sacrificial system of the Tabernacle.

And so now we arrive at the culmination of God’s saving plan, and let us reverently approach this subject together. Now as we think about the cross, let’s imagine that we are there at the cross. And let us consider first of all:

### I. THE PEOPLE AT THE CROSS

There were many people who were at the cross of Calvary. Many were there because of the location of Calvary. The Romans crucified people along well-traveled roads. They wanted many people to witness the suffering and death of those crucified there as a bloody warning not to violate Roman law. So some would have been at Calvary because they were just passing by. Hundreds of thousands of people were in Jerusalem for the Passover. Yet our focus today is on others who were there. So consider with me some of the people who were there at the cross.

A. Simon Was There by Compulsion - V.21 says, “Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross.” According to law, the one sentenced to crucifixion had to carry his

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<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps because that place was frequently used for executions and skulls could be seen there on the ground.

own cross, or at least the cross beam, to the place of execution, and Jesus was no exception. He left Pilate's hall bearing His cross (John 19:16-17) to the place of execution, about a mile away. But at some point along the way He could not continue due to sheer physical exhaustion and the loss of blood. Meanwhile, Simon of Cyrene just happened to be passing by from the countryside on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover. So the soldiers "drafted" Simon out of the crowd to carry that bloody cross for Jesus.<sup>2</sup> You see, Roman officers had the privilege of "impressing" men for service, symbolized by the flat end of the sword touching the shoulder. Simon was from north Africa (Libya). There was a large colony of Jews there (Acts 2:10; 6:9; 11:20; 13:1). After he was drafted, he probably thought he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Initially he didn't carry the cross because he wanted to, but because he had to.

And so what I want to know this: why are you here today? Are you like Simon; you are here by compulsion? Are you here because your parents or your wife pressured you into coming to church, or are you here because you love Jesus and you want to be here to worship Him?

I believe that Simon became glad that he was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus. We have good reason to believe that Simon must have stayed around and witnessed what happened at the cross. He knew there was something special about Jesus. Either that day or soon thereafter, he must have trusted the Savior. Perhaps he became the leader of the church in Antioch mentioned in Acts 13:1<sup>3</sup>. At that time or later his two sons were led to the Lord. No doubt many of Mark's Roman readers knew his sons Alexander and Rufus (Rom. 16:13), which is why Mark mentioned them by name.

There were others at the cross.

B. The Women Were There by Choice – In vv.40-41 we read, "There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome,<sup>4</sup> who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem." We also know from John's gospel that Mary, the mother of Jesus was there, but perhaps she was not mentioned because she was much closer to the cross.<sup>5</sup> They must've been bewildered and perplexed at what was happening to their Lord. But they were there out of love and devotion.

We might well have supposed that when all the apostles but one or two<sup>6</sup> had deserted our Lord and fled, the so-called weaker sex would not have dared to show themselves as His friends. But these women were there in good numbers. The faith of women sometimes stands upright when the faith of men fails and gives way. It is interesting to note, by the way, that the women were the last to leave the cross and the first to arrive at the tomb. They were the ones who were faithful to the very end. The church of Jesus Christ owes much to the sacrifice and devotion of believing women.

Are you like these women? Are you faithful to follow the Lord with complete devotion, even in times of adversity? Men, are we going to let women outdo us in devotion to the Lord? May *we* be as faithful to the Lord as they.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 23:26 says Simon carried the cross behind Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> "Simeon who was called Niger..." Simeon was the same as Simon but just a variation (2 Pet. 1:1).

<sup>4</sup> The mother of James and John (cf. Mt 27:56).

<sup>5</sup> At some point Mary Magdalene joined her (Jn. 19:25). Luke 23:49 says that some of His acquaintances, evidently men from Galilee, also stood watching from a distance.

<sup>6</sup> John was there for sure (John 19:27), and it seems likely that Peter witness the crucifixion from a distance (1 Pet. 5:1).

C. The Soldiers Were There by Commitment to Duty – In v.22 we read, “And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull.” These were Roman soldiers who brought Jesus there, not the temple police. Normally four soldiers accompanied a man to his execution by crucifixion (Jn. 19:23), one in front carrying the placard with the charge against him, one behind, and one on either side. So these soldiers were there at the cross just because they were doing their job.

No doubt most or all of these men had become callused in the face of human suffering. They had driven spikes into the hands and feet of many victims before, and doing the same to Jesus didn’t mean anything to them. In v.24 we read that the soldiers played a game, casting lots for the clothing of Jesus, even while He was suffering greatly. But they didn’t care about Jesus. They were totally indifferent to Him.

I wonder how many people are like these soldiers. They can hear about the cross of Christ, and yet they do not care; their hearts are not moved to repentance. My dog developed cancer in his side and on Friday we decided it was time for euthanasia. The death of our dear dog caused grief. Her death came without suffering; in fact, it *ended* suffering. How many people care more about the death of a dog than they do the death of Jesus, who was innocent and suffered as no man is ever suffered. As you hear about the cross of Jesus today, I hope you are not indifferent to His suffering.

Furthermore:

D. The Thieves Were There because of Crime – Jesus was not crucified alone. There were two others crucified with Him. In v.27 we read, “With Him they also crucified two robbers,<sup>7</sup> one on His right and the other on His left.”<sup>8</sup> They *deserved* to be there for crimes that they had done. They were violent robbers. But Jesus did not deserve to be there. The hymn writer sang, “Was it for crimes that I have done, He groaned upon the tree?” (At the Cross). The answer is “Yes,” and I will explain why as we continue into the message.

E. The Leaders Were There by Contempt – In vv.31-32 we read, “Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, ‘He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ<sup>9</sup>, the King of Israel,<sup>10</sup> descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.’” They were there to mock Jesus, and to add to His suffering with their cruel words. They had no pity for His grief and agony whatsoever.

Some people go to a certain church just to make fun of the preacher and others in the church. They will cut up and make cute remarks to their friend sitting next to them. Believe it or not, that was my attitude when I first started attending a Baptist church at the age of 16. I spoke against their preacher. But it wasn’t long before I realized that what that Baptist preacher was saying was something I needed in my life. I was baptized by the preacher. Then, two years later, I became a Baptist preacher. Boy, did God turn the tables on me!

Most important of all,

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<sup>7</sup> This word does not simply refer to a thief, but a thief that uses force and even violence to plunder and steal (Lk. 10:30). This word was used of Barabbas (Jn. 18:40), who evidently violently plundered Roman possessions, as is common in war.

<sup>8</sup> Surely the placement of Jesus in the midst was providential (cf. Mt. 18:20; John 20:26; Rev. 1:13; 5:6; 7:17).

<sup>9</sup> The NIV has “let this Christ...”

<sup>10</sup> Notice the connection between the charge that Jesus was the King of Israel and their own view that the Messiah is the King of the line of David.

F. Jesus Was There by Choice – Jesus said in John 10:18, “No one takes it [My life] from Me.... I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” In the final analysis, Jesus was not there because of the murderous plot of the Jewish leadership, or because of the cowardice of Pilate, or because of the military might of the executing soldiers, but because He chose to suffer and die there, and I will tell you why in just a moment.

But first, to help you marvel at the sacrificial love of Jesus, I want us to consider next:

## II. THE PASSION OF THE CROSS

Of course, I’m referring to the suffering that Jesus endured, especially at the cross. If you are here only by compulsion, or out of curiosity, or even if you are here to make fun, perhaps your attitude would change if you would only consider how much Jesus was willing to suffer for you. First of all,

A. He Bore the Pain of Crucifixion - No gospel writer records the details of the Crucifixion.<sup>11</sup> Mark simply says in v.24, “they crucified Him...”<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say, crucifixion is one of the most horrible forms of death ever devised by man. It was the punishment reserved for the worst of criminals. It was so bad that no Roman citizen could be crucified. Furthermore, according to v.23, they<sup>13</sup> offered Jesus wine mingled with myrrh, to help deaden the awful suffering of the cross. The tense of the verb indicates that they kept offering this to Him. But He kept refusing the cup of sympathy so that He might keep His mind clear and fully drink the cup of judgment against sin (Matt. 26:36-43).<sup>14</sup> Then they proceeded to crucify Him. They bound His wrists to the cross beam and drove spikes into His hands or wrists, crushing bones, tearing tendons, and the blood would flow. Then they drove a spike through both feet with similar results. Can you imagine the pain that went racing through His body, shouting alarms of pain? And then for six hours He hung on the cross, experiencing pain, great thirsts, difficulty breathing, and pressure on His joints and muscles.

There are at least 26 New Testament references to the suffering of Jesus. For example, in Luke 17:25 Jesus predicted that “He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”

Oh friend, contemplate how much Jesus was willing to suffer for you and respond accordingly. Surely His great suffering reveals His great love, but also God’s holy hatred of sin. Furthermore, Jesus suffered to save us from eternal suffering.

Not only did He bear the pain of crucifixion, but also:

B. He Bore the Shame of Crucifixion – One of the most shameful ways to die was to die by crucifixion. The victim was lifted up in a public place to expose them to shame and ridicule. He suffered shame in three ways:

1. They Stripped Him of His Garments – In v.24 we read, “They divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take.” So Jesus was probably crucified naked, though they have allowed Him to have a loin cloth. The soldiers kept His

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<sup>11</sup> Everyone in the Roman world knew of the sheer torture involved in crucifixion.

<sup>12</sup> Either as they were driving the nails or shortly thereafter, Luke 23:34 says that Jesus prayed that God would forgive them.

<sup>13</sup> Barclay believes that a group of merciful women in Jerusalem typically offered this to crucified victims (p.380). Brooks refers to the Babylonian Talmud as providing evidence (p.258).

<sup>14</sup> He also wanted His mind to be clear when He spoke from the cross.

garments<sup>15</sup> for themselves, dividing them by lots, totally unaware that they were fulfilling the prophecy in Psalm 22:18. Can you imagine the shame of being exposed in such a manner to the gaze of thousands of people?

And why was this? The *shame* of nakedness was a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, and Jesus bore the shame of sin. Furthermore, it was so that we, who have no righteousness of our own, might be clothed in the perfect righteousness that Christ has wrought for us (see Mt. 22:10-14).

2. He Was Publicly Treated as a Criminal – Jesus was crucified between these two criminals, as if He, too, were a criminal. In fact, my translation of v.28 says, “So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And He was numbered with the transgressors.’” This is a quotation from Isa. 53:12. Your translation may not have that verse but Luke 22:37 records that Jesus predicted that this prophecy would be fulfilled. Jesus suffered and died with criminals, not only to fulfill prophecy, but also because He suffered the pain and shame of a lawbreaker on our behalf.

There was a time when about once/week they published in the newspaper the names and offenses of everyone arrested in my city of Colonial Heights. Even though probably 98% were guilty, it’s unfortunate that they do that, because some were exposed to the shame of having their name put in the paper even though they were *not* guilty.

Well, far worse than having your name in the paper with some charge was to be crucified among some of the worst criminals. Their crime was posted above their head on a placard. Yet Jesus willingly bore that shame for you and me.

3. They Mocked Him – Words can hurt deeply. Notice what many of the bystanders said, as reported in vv.29-30. They “blasphemed<sup>16</sup> Him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!’” They were just repeating the charge against Him spoken at His first trial. Perhaps they heard this from their leaders who were there at the cross. In vv.31-32 we have already seen the fact that the leaders also mocked Him.<sup>17</sup> You would think that they would leave Jesus alone by this point. Physical death and physical suffering were not enough for these godless men. So they mocked Him as Prophet (14:65), as Savior (v.31), and as King (v.32). *Their* mocking was the worst of all. The bystanders spoke *to* Jesus. The leaders only spoke *about* Him to each other. Even the robbers who were crucified with Him heaped insults on Him, according to v.32. Thankfully, one of the two later repented (Lk. 23:42).

In the midst of it all Jesus remained silent. He offered not one word of rebuke. Peter puts it beautifully when he says, “who, while being reviled, did not revile in return...” (1 Peter 2:23).<sup>18</sup>

Oh, what shame Jesus patiently endured for you. It just added to the depths of His suffering. How will you respond to such suffering?

We have reviewed for you the people at the cross, and the passion of the cross. But we will not understand what really happened that day unless we comprehend:

### III. THE PURPOSE OF THE CROSS

Why did Jesus suffer such pain and shame? Why did He not come down from the cross? It was not because the nails held Him there but His love, for He knew that a great saving purpose

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<sup>15</sup> This included his headgear, sandals, belt, and outer garment. The seamless tunic, all of one piece, woven all the way from top to bottom, was also put into the lottery.

<sup>16</sup> These are the ones who committed blasphemy against the Son of God!

<sup>17</sup> Luke 23:36 says the soldiers mock Him as well, ridiculing Him as a Savior and King.

<sup>18</sup> By His example Jesus told us that we should not respond in like manner.

would be accomplished by His suffering and death. So consider with me two specific purposes of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. First of all, it was:

A. To Pay Sin's Debt – From the very beginning God declared that death was the consequence of sin. He told Adam that if he disobeyed Him, he would surely die (Gen. 2:17). God declared through the prophet Ezekiel, "The soul that sins shall die." The Bible also says, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Everyone in this room has sinned against God, and so we face physical death, and we will suffer eternal spiritual death unless our sins are forgiven. The good news is that one purpose for the death of Jesus was to pay our debt by dying in our place. Now notice with me that:

1. He Suffered Spiritual Death - V.33 says, "Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour." A miraculous darkness came over the land at noon. This was indeed a miracle and not some natural phenomenon, such as a dark storm or an eclipse, which can only last a few minutes.<sup>19</sup> I believe that it was during those dark hours that God placed the sin of the world upon Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). As the Jews around the cross felt the darkness, many must have recalled that darkness was one of the judgments that fell upon Egypt just before Passover (Ex. 10:21-22). Jesus described hell as a place of outer darkness (Mt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) and Jesus bore the darkness of hell on that cross. Imagine the agony He must have suffered as He suffered God's wrath in our place!

The next evidence that Jesus suffered separation from God can be found in the words of v.34, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He quoted from Psa. 22:1, a prophecy about the cross. He experienced the lot of sinners in eternity, divine abandonment. These words imply an amount of mental suffering such as we are unable to conceive. He uttered His dying cry, under the heavy pressure of a world's sin laid upon Him and imputed to Him.

Ah, Jesus was forsaken that you and I may never be forsaken. Heb. 13:5 quotes the Old Testament, where God says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (See also Mt. 28:20).

Furthermore, He not only suffered spiritual death, but also:

2. He Suffered Physical Death – Physical death is one of the consequences of sin. Yet notice that Jesus died differently from any of us. As a minister, I have seen people die on several occasions. By the time they die, their voice is weak, and they are hardly able to breathe. Yet in v.37 we read, "And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last."<sup>20</sup> That tells me that He did not die because His bodily organs ceased to function. Jesus *willingly* laid down His life for us (John 10:11, 15, 17-18).

Since Jesus paid our sin debt, we can indeed be forgiven! One of the things He said with a loud voice was, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Our sin debt was paid in full. What wonderful news.

So Jesus suffered the full consequences of sin on our behalf. Another purpose of His sacrifice was:

B. To Provide Access to God – God wants to do more than forgive us. He wants to make us His children. He wants to have a relationship with us and provide us with full access to Him. So notice what happened in v.38 when Jesus died, "Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." The rending of the veil, or at least the result of it, was evidently witnessed by many priests, especially if it was the outer veil into the holy place. Three o'clock was the time of the

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<sup>19</sup> It was not even possible during full moon at Passover.

<sup>20</sup> One thing Jesus said with a loud voice just before He died was, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

evening sacrifice and they were serving in the temple at that very moment. At any rate, we note later on that many of the priests came to a saving knowledge of Christ (Acts 6:7). The fact that the very moment when He died was the moment that the veil was rent in two is not accidental by any means. They are specifically stated together.

What did the miraculous tearing of the curtain mean? The veil was a barrier. It separated man from God. But now, through His death, Jesus had opened for the whole world a “new and living way” (see Heb. 10:12-22; Eph. 2:18). It taught that Gentiles as well as Jews might now draw near to God with boldness, through Jesus the one High Priest, and that all barriers between man and God were forever thrown down. Furthermore, it taught the abolition of the whole Jewish law of sacrifice and ceremonies. To attempt to revive the Jewish ceremonies in the Church of Christ, by returning to altars, sacrifices and a priesthood, is nothing better than sewing up again the torn curtain.

So the purpose of the cross was in order that Jesus might save us from our sin, and grant us eternal life in the presence of God. What the enemies said in the last of v.31 had more truth than they realized, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save.” He had indeed saved others. He saved many from incurable disease. He forgave the sins of the paralyzed man and proved it by causing him to walk again. Indeed, Jesus had saved others. And even now, as He was experiencing the agony of the cross, He could not save others *and* at the same time save Himself. He did not save Himself so that He could save you! It is not that He *could not* come down from the cross, but that He *would not*. What was it that bound Jesus to the cross and kept Him there? It was love for you! He died for you.

Conclusion: Let us leave this Scripture passage with a deep sense of the enormous debt which all believers owe to Christ. Through His condemnation we have acquittal—through His sufferings we have peace and joy—through His rejection we have acceptance with God (Rom. 15:7)—through His shame we have glory—through His death we have life! No wonder the apostle Paul says, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15). Let us leave the passage with the deepest sense of Christ’s great love for our souls. Surely the thought of this love should constrain us daily to live not unto ourselves but unto Christ. It should make us ready and willing to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to Him who lived and died for us (Romans 12:1).

The story is told that Steinberg, the artist, struck with the beauty of a gypsy girl, took her to his studio and frequently had her sit for him. One time she visited him and at the time he was working on his masterpiece, “Christ on the Cross.” Then she said to him, “He must have been a very wicked man to be nailed to a cross like that.” “No,” said the painter, “On the contrary, he was a very good man, the best man that ever lived. He died for others.” The little girl looked up at him and asked, “Did he die for you?” Steinberg was not a Christian at the time, but the gypsy girl’s question touched his heart and awakened his conscience and he became a believer in Him whose dying passion he had so well portrayed.<sup>21</sup>

One of the soldiers in our story came to believe in Jesus. The centurion had seen how Jesus had been conducting Himself in the midst of all the wicked taunts and mockeries. He saw the prolonged darkness at midday. He heard that loud, *strong* cry<sup>22</sup> just before He died. He felt the

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<sup>21</sup> Eugene A. Hessel in Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #2763* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> V.39 says, “when the centurion... saw that He cried out like this...,” i.e. “with a loud voice” (v.37). After all that Jesus had suffered, how could he have had the strength to speak with a loud voice? Mt. 27:50 and Luke 23:46 also report the strength of His voice.

earthquake when He died (Mt. 27:51). And after hearing the Jewish leaders' scoff at Jesus' claim that He was the Son of God (Mt. 27:40, 43), he said in v.39, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!"<sup>23</sup> What Mark declared at the beginning of his gospel (1:1) is confirmed near the end of his gospel. Do you believe that Jesus was God's Son? Do you believe He died for your sins? If so, and if you are not yet a Christian, repent of your sins. Ask Him to save you! He is your only hope of forgiveness and gaining access to God's heaven. Do it today!

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956); James A. Brooks, *New American Commentary: Mark* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2024; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961); H.A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Mark* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Jerry Vines (notes from sermon tape of 6/10/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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<sup>23</sup> Also stated in Mt. 27:54. This charge was even presented to Pilate, for Jn. 19:7 says, "The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.'" Luke 23:47 says that the centurion also proclaimed that Jesus was innocent.