

The Testimony of a Roman Centurion

(First-Person)

Matthew 27:50-54 (NASB)

⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.⁵¹ And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

What you are about to hear is a “first person” sermon from the perspective of the Centurion Roman Soldier. The message was developed by blending what we “know” with what we “think”... The Roman being depicted is identified in the passage I just read – but he is not named...

I understand that you people sing a song sometimes that raises a question;
Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?...

Well... I was there!... I am a centurion in the legions of Rome and was stationed in the land of Judea at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth...

For many years I have faithfully served my Emperor. Rising up from the lowest ranks, I became the captain of 100 men in a regiment of 5000. I have fought in countless battles in lands such as Greece, Persia and Carthage.

My blade had shed the blood of... more than I want to remember... and I had learned to fear nothing ... and no one ... for I have served in one of the mightiest armies that had ever marched upon the face of the earth.

But to be stationed in the land of Judea? ... My sword has shed the blood of too many Judeans – and there was no honor in that... for they had no army – no force to face on the field of battle...

They were simply a pathetic, difficult, and backward country that hadn't the sense to bow before the throne of Caesar...

Other nations accepted Caesar's rule... Other people bowed the authority of Rome – but not these Jews... not these Jews...

We knew it was their religion – their faith in this One holy and righteous God which made their backs like iron and the made it impossible for them to bow the knee... Privately we speculated that we would have to destroy their very temple before they would ever bow before Caesar...

They were a harsh, bitter and unkind people... But to be fair not all of them were that way... Some were kind to us, some were good... And most of those were the ones who listened to the teachings of a rabbi known as Jesus.

We Romans laughed about this Jesus.

To us He was little more than an itinerant preacher Who had nothing better to do with His time than to wander about the countryside preaching of repentance, faith, peace and love...

We Romans knew that peace comes by the edge of the sword... And love?... Love was something you purchased...

We were men of the world. We understood these things... To us this Jesus was nothing more than a simpleton and a fool...

There was one among us centurions that did not agree with us... In fact he told me the strangest tale... You can read about it there in your Bibles in [Matthew 8:5-13](#)... It seems that his servant became sick and was paralyzed and was racked with pain... My friend was beside himself because this was his favorite servant... But then he heard about this rabbi Who not only preached of love and peace, but – it was rumored – could heal someone by simply touching them.

The crippled were made to walk... The blind were caused to see... And lepers were made whole again.

So my friend sought out this Jesus... and finally found him in a dirty backwater town... My friend said to Jesus; “My servant is sick and in great pain. Will you come and heal him?”... And Jesus said that he would come at once and heal him... But my friend boldly said “No, that will not be necessary. I am a man of authority and I say to one man ‘do this’ and to another ‘do that.’ You have only to say the word and my servant will be healed.”

My friend told me that Jesus looked into his eyes and said; “Never in all of Israel, have I ever seen such faith. Return home and it will be done as you have asked.”... and he told me that that very hour of the day, his servant rose from his bed and was completely healed... Did that really happen?... I didn’t know...

I too was a religious man, and in my religion there were many stories of great healings and miraculous occurrences... most of which we knew were false... So what did I know?...

Then one day I met this Jesus... He had been arrested the night before, and brought up before the leaders of His people... They accused Him of being a heretic... They said that He claimed to be the “Son of God!”

And they condemned Him to death.

But because Judea was under the authority of Rome, they had no authority to execute Him legally. So they brought Him to Pontius Pilate, the governor of that region... They accused Jesus of being a traitor to Rome... They said that He claimed to be King of Israel and He challenged the authority of Caesar himself.

This was a crime worthy of death on the cross, and *IF* Pilate did not crucify this man, he was no friend of Caesar’s...

I was present when Jesus entered the room. And from the moment He stepped through the door I knew something wasn't right.

Pilate was a man accustomed to sending hundreds of prisoners to their deaths. I had seen him sentence men to be crucified without even flinching... But as the interrogation proceeded it became increasingly apparent that Pilate was not judging this Jesus... Jesus was judging him.

Pilate's unease only increased when his wife burst into the room and dragged him off to the side, warning him in low tones not to have anything to do with this righteous man because she had had a dream about Him in the night.

Pilate sought to spare Jesus the pain of the cross and so he instructed me to take him outside to the outer courtyard and have Him flogged... Flogging was a punishment usually reserved for the most hardened criminals.

Thirty, forty, fifty lashes and a man's skin would hang from his back and chest in strips and the blood would pour from his wounds... A third of the men ever flogged died from this punishment...

When we were finished – my soldiers began to mock Him... They put a purple robe on His shoulders and fashioned a crown of thorns that they shoved down upon his head – and cried out; *“Hail King of the Jews!”*... Then they blindfolded Him and spat on Him, and struck Him... *“Prophecy, O Son of God! Who was it that struck you?”*... But He never spoke – He never uttered a word...

He stood there as One Who still had the authority of a man of power...

Finally, I returned Him to Pilate... and Pilate – thinking to gain the sympathy of the crowds – led this Man with His terribly beaten body, out before them...

“What would you have me do with this Jesus who is called the Christ?”...

The chief priests and the Pharisees went throughout the crowd and whispered *“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”*... And the crowds began to shout; “CRUCIFY HIM! CRUCIFY HIM!”

When they did – Pilate became more and more nervous about this Jesus... He feared the crowds more – and then finally ordered me to take Jesus outside the walls of the city to a place called Golgotha and crucify Him!...

Crucifixion is one of the most terrible and cruel forms of execution ever devised by man... It is designed to cause the slow and agonizing death of those who were condemned to be crucified... This method would serve as a strong deterrent to others not to commit the same crimes of those who have been condemned...

At one time, Rome required the common soldier to put prisoners upon the cross... But it didn't take long to realize that this was devastating for those who were given the assignment... It so demoralized the troops that our superiors finally began to select special squads to serve as executioners...

I don't even blink anymore when the nails are pounded in... I'll never forget seeing my first crucifixion as a young soldier and how hard pounding those nails was, but now, after thousands of them, I don't even blink... It's just a job... I hate even saying this – but you get used to it... You get calloused. I don't even get the nightmares anymore... We Romans actually got this crucifixion thing down to an art ... after all – we had a lot of practice... During our time, we crucified about 30,000 Jews... Those who served on these squads were normally men of great strength!... When it came time to pin a man's hands and feet to the cross – we could do it with one blow of the hammer to drive each nail thru the flesh into the wood...

Roman soldiers who were assigned to stand guard of those dying on the cross often took to drinking large amounts of strong drink to dull their senses... One soldier wrote *“Of all the sounds in hell, none is more pitiable than those terrible cries through the silence of midnight, where crucified men hang in agony and cannot die while a breath of suffering remains.”*

When men were being nailed to the cross they often would spit on us. They'd curse us, and threaten us and our families... .. But we all knew their threats were meaningless.

Once a man was nailed to a cross and raised into the sky, he would never come down again – alive...

But Jesus was different... He never spat at us... or threatened us... or cursed at us... **Like a lamb going to slaughter, He opened not His mouth.**

At one point during the day, Jesus pushed up on his feet, which were pinned to the cross, and took air into His lungs... He then cried out **“Father forgive them for they know not what they do!”**... They know not what they do...

Can you believe that?! We usually give the guys some wine and vinegar to dull the pain a little, but not this Man – He would have none of that!.. Then He said something really strange to one of the thieves we were also crucifying that day... That thief asked to be remembered when the Jesus **came into His kingdom!**... Then He made some promise about **being in paradise today!**... What an amazing thing for one dying man to say to another!

Instead of worrying about Himself, He makes sure his poor mother, who I couldn't even look in the eye, was taken care of...

It was noonday and the sun should have filled the sky. But instead, darkness came down like a curtain and the crowds scattered!... My own soldiers began to shrink back from His cross.

For three hours darkness **fell over the whole land**... And at last, Jesus pushed Himself up again and breathed in one last gasp of air, crying out **“It is finished!”**... He shouts as if He was some sort of Victor!... And finally, right before He dies, He says – with this calm peace – **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** ... It sounded like “mission complete; coming home.”... and then He died... ..

No sooner had He died then the earth began to shake beneath our feet and my men fell to their knees. I looked up at the man on that cross and said ...

“Surely, this was the Son of God.”

Yes, this was no ordinary Man... Looking back to Pilate's courtroom earlier that morning, it makes sense now... I was standing there when he told Pilate

that **His kingdom was not of this world**. I heard the Jews accuse Him of saying he was the **“Son of God”**. And when my soldiers mocked Him for this by dressing him up, He didn’t even complain...

But you see, that morning wasn’t the first I had heard of Jesus of Nazareth... A week earlier, He had come into Jerusalem on a donkey, with the whole city hailing Him as their Divine King!... Believe me, we had all the troops on duty that day. So I knew there was something special about this Man – but never dreamed it would ever affect me or my life!... And now, I can’t think about anything else!...

Three days later it was rumored that this Jesus rose from the dead. Some of my own men told me that they were there when the earth shook once more beneath their feet, the stone rolled back from the grave... And there was no one to be found within the tomb...

Over 500 men were said to have seen this resurrected Jesus... But I was Roman. I worshipped many gods. Even if this man were actually a god, He would have simply been one of many... But I couldn’t forget His words... I couldn’t remove them from my heart – or the scenes of that day from my mind... I couldn’t shake the fact that I was guilty of this innocent Man’s blood!... I had been the one in authority... I was the one that ordered His death!...

(Now speaking as your pastor)

We don’t know if this Roman soldier ever came to know the full significance of the crucifixion of Jesus... I like to think that his confession was deeper and more transformational than a mere observation...

But, you and I have more information... We know that Jesus was / and is indeed THE Son of God... We know that His death had not been an accident, but was instead the very will of God!... And that Jesus had died to take away the guilt and shame of our sin...

The truth that we all need to come to is that we are guilty of the death of Jesus – not because we “ordered it” to take place as this Roman centurion had done – but because it was our sin and selfishness and arrogance and pride that requires a Holy God to deal with us directly – or provide a perfect substitutionary sacrifice – which He did!...