

Putting First Things First (Reaching the Lost) The Man Who Crucified Christ

Intro: If we are to persuade our friends and neighbors to become Christians, we must lead them to see who Jesus really was. One of the best approaches is to have them evaluate the response of those who believed in Jesus; and there are many examples. Let's consider the unique testimony of a man we would not have expected to believe in Jesus.

He was a Roman soldier, a man of authority, chosen by his superiors to lead others. He was the man in charge of the job of seeing that Jesus was crucified. And did indeed do so; and yet ironically it was he who is recorded in two of the gospels as proclaiming his own dawning faith in the deity of Christ. Let's consider the man who crucified Christ. (Mt. 27:33-54) First in the gospels we see him:

CRUCIFYING CHRIST

After Jesus was tried by Pilate, he was turned over to the soldiers for crucifixion. Before taking Jesus out to Golgotha, the soldiers decided to have some fun with Jesus before his execution:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. And they stripped Him, and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. (Mt. 27:27-30)

This was no small party. The Roman cohort had in full number as many as 600 men made up of six centuries with their respective centurions overseeing them. The practice of abusing criminals was probably to be expected; and since Pilate had already commanded Jesus to be scourged, these soldiers felt free to play their game of "hail to the king."

And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him. (Mt. 27:31)

Taking Jesus to crucifixion would not have required all of these soldiers. Most of them would have remained in the barracks, but at least a century might be involved in taking Jesus out to Golgotha and seeing to his execution and for guarding the site.

It was the commanding centurion's job to see that everything was done according to the governor's wishes. He supervised the crucifixion of Jesus, the placement of the sign identifying the reason for his punishment (his claim to be king of the Jews), and the execution of the two robbers that had also been sentenced to die. The gospels make clear that the centurion had ample opportunity to observe Jesus, saying in fact, that he was "standing right in front of him" (Mk. 15:39) as he died.

Though the centurion was following orders, he shared in the sin of crucifying an innocent man. However there is no reason to believe that he would have felt any special remorse or sympathy concerning Jesus initially. He had no doubt seen this take place many times. Those taken to crucifixion were in Roman eyes the scum of the earth and well-deserving of their sentence. And that makes his response to Jesus all the more remarkable. Because we see him now...

CONSIDERING CHRIST

From his vantage point the thief could get an up-close look at Jesus and reflect upon what these things said about him. Let's look at some of the things he could have witnessed:

Jesus' amazing spirit of forgiveness toward his enemies

But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Lk. 23:34)

And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Lk. 23:42-43)

Did the centurion wonder, "How could a criminal show such grace?"

Jesus' loving care for his mother

*When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He *said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He *said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household. (Jn. 19:26-27)*

And if he heard it, would it not have made the centurion to wonder, "How could a person in such pain show such care for others?"

Jesus' astounding response to his pain

Sure, there were the clear and typical signs of suffering:

*After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, *said, "I am thirsty." (Jn. 19:28)*

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Mk. 15:34)

And yet Jesus was not railing upon those who crucified him as might have been expected:

and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; (1 Pet. 2:23)

And if the centurion heard these words, then he might asked, "Why is this man not returning abuse upon those who are causing him so much anguish?"

Jesus' sense of determined accomplishment

When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head, and gave up His spirit. (Jn. 19:30)

And if he heard it, the centurion might have asked himself, "What exactly does this man think he has accomplished?"

Jesus' unending trust in the heavenly Father

The centurion was there to see and hear how Jesus died. And what he saw and heard was a pious plea to God to receive the spirit He was about to give up.

And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." And having said this, He breathed His last. (Lk. 23:46)

But in addition to all these things, he saw the amazing signs of divine intervention.

And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Mt. 27:51-53)

Each of the events would itself be a remarkable display of divine power.

First, the veil of the temple was rent. It was a heavy and thick woven curtain between the holy place and the holy of holies of the temple. It would have been 60 feet in height. Yet it was torn from top to bottom (something no man could have done).

Second, there was a rock splitting earthquake. That itself is a powerful event in nature, but timing would suggest divine intervention.

Third, there was the opening of the graves of the saints, the remarkable miracle of their resurrection from the dead and appearance in Jerusalem.

For Matthew each of these attesting miracles would have spiritual significance:

The rending of the veil would be a spiritual sign that the barriers to God through inadequate sacrifice were not removed in the sacrifice of Jesus.

The earthquake would be a spiritual sign of divine indignation at the sin having been committed or the removing of the present order.

And the resurrection of the saints would be a spiritual sign of the victory Jesus brought over death.

Some of these things the centurion had occasion to personally see and to consider. And thus we see him...

CONFESSING CHRIST

The basis for his faith--his own personal witness. "And when the centurion saw..."

The way Jesus died

And when the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39)

What impressed the centurion about Jesus' death?

Some suggest that it is the strength with which Jesus' life was ended. "He cried out with a loud voice" indicating personal strength vs. physical exhaustion. It may indicate that Jesus' life was not taken from him, instead He gave it up as He had indicated He would. Others suggest that it was piety of Jesus' words, indicating trust in God to the very end. His final words were words of trust and commitment to God, not curses before giving up.

The miracles that occurred

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!" (Mt. 27:54)

Soldiers were ordinarily men of great bravery; but they were clearly unnerved by the signs they were seeing. The gospel writers choose to use a word indicating great fear, near panic. A Roman centurion who did not know the true God could easily relate to the timing and power of these signs that would to him indicate divine displeasure with what has happened!

Consequently we see...

His expression of faith

Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent." (Luke 23:47)

In a moment the centurion's callous impiety was turned to sincere praise of God for what He had witnessed.

Surely, these acts indicated that Jesus was innocent of the charges made against Him.

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!" (Matthew 27:54)

Jesus had been crucified as a criminal for falsely saying he was the Son of God. Did not these events indicate that He was in fact who He said He was?

The centurion would surely have not had a full understanding of all that the term Son of God implies in our modern theological understanding. But clearly he is willing to acknowledge that Jesus was no mortal man. At least he would have seen that Jesus was a supernatural being.

His confession is yet another example in Matthew of how the Gentiles

And we should remember that others were persuaded to join in the confessions of the centurion that day.

I'd like to believe that the confession the centurion made that day was the beginning of a new life. Whether he followed up on his confession the Scriptures do not say. (There is an ancient tradition that he did.) He was persuaded that day Jesus was the Son of God and his testimony has been given for our faith. A Roman centurion who had a part in crucifying Jesus would have had no reason to believe in Him as God or an innocent person! But the evidence was so compelling that the centurion reversed his thinking.

Conclusion: And so today that process still continues. Each of us is given an opportunity to know that Jesus was crucified, and to know how He responded to His death. We have the opportunity to consider Christ. And we have the opportunity to make a decision about him. What do you think about Jesus?

Will you confess Him?

Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. (Mt. 10:32)

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed." (Rom. 10:8-11)

Will you follow up on that confession and be baptized for the remission of sins?

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)