

# Attention at the Cross

*Easter Sunday*

April 4, 2021

**Could Jesus have had second thoughts on the cross?** I'll give you a moment to ponder that.



Shar and I just flew back from Hawaii, where we celebrated the first birthday of grandson #5. It's just easier to call 'em by their number. His name's Otis. At the party, some young fathers were talking about needing "Dad jokes"; so they turned to the old man and asked if I knew any. "Get your pencils out, boys!" Instead of affirming, nodding, or saying "yes", I subtly leaned in and said, "Well, I switched all the labels on my wife's spice rack; I haven't felt the heat yet, but the Thyme is Cummin." The rest is a 10-minute blur.



The flight was a bit turbulent, but that doesn't bother me. It's the takeoffs and landings. I always check in with the Lord: "**Father, if this is it, get ready to catch me – I'm in Your hands.**" I pray a version of that every time. Then I fix my eyes on the nearest flight attendant. I stare at *their* eyes, because I don't know which noises and movements are normal or alarming – but their eyes tell all. It's very calming. **As long as their eyes say everything's under control, I'm safe.** This little fear is kind of funny because normally, risky stuff doesn't bother me; and also I was a pilot. I got my license when I was 20 and had a perm. But **it's different when you're in control.** Your eyes are fixed on a *goal*, so fear goes away; **it's when you put your life in someone else's hands.**



Today I want to visit an old friend. At Easter I always look over the individual personalities and situations surrounding the cross of Christ and the empty tomb, and choose someone to focus on.



With my setup, you might think it's gonna be Pilate. Close. But we're taking a good look at his right-hand man. A guy we haven't checked in on for five years now – and I kind of miss him: **the Centurion at attention at the crucifixion**, who suddenly realizes who's actually in control, fixes his eyes on Jesus, **and then takes his own life into his hands**, risks everything, and suddenly, publically declares:



"Surely this man *was* the Son of God!" – Mark 15:39 NIV

**That's treason.** Every Roman coin in his day declared Caesar as "son of the divine". It's his title. Only *he* was called the "Son of God". So what possible reason could this centurion have for being the *first* to declare *that* after Jesus' death? Well to start with, **he's rebuking those who'd been mocking.**

Those who passed by hurled insults at [Jesus] ... "Come down from the cross, if you *are* the Son of God!" In the *same way* the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked Him. ["If you *are* the Son of God"] – Matthew 27:39–41 NIV

And this gentile military commander had had enough: “Surely this man *was* the Son of God!” Interesting guy. Battle hardened. Death desensitized. He’s inflicted pain and suffering to a degree we can’t begin to imagine. But I *like* him! You take the good with the bad. This Centurion has seen countless crucifixions. And there’s a pattern: **Raging. Cursing. Bargaining. Pleading. Despair. Sobbing. Madness. And death.** But ...

When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, *heard* His cry and *saw* how He died, he said, “Surely this man *was* the Son of God!” – Mark 15:39 NIV



Medical experts agree that Jesus suffered one of the most grueling, torturous, and painful forms of capital punishment ever devised. Straining for each breath while enduring a symphony of pain. Cramps. Spasms. Panic. Terror. Exposure. Humiliation. Exhaustion. And Suffocation. **So what did he hear and see that would cause him to do what he did?** Beginning with the abuse at Pilate’s, this guy had his eyes *fixed* on Jesus. It was his job. And through it all, he saw that **Jesus radiated compassion throughout His crucifixion.** He made living arrangements for His mother – from the cross! (Jn 19:26–27) He comforted the insulting thief who was dying beside Him. (Lk 23:39–43) And **as His tormentors hissed “If you are the Son of God,” He asked God to forgive them!** (Lk 23:34) For this Centurion, this is *not* a typical day at the office! The Lord had said through Isaiah:

I will gather all [non-Jewish] nations and tongues [which we call “gentiles”]; and they shall come and see My glory. I will set a *sign* among them ... And *they* shall declare My glory among the Gentiles. [Starting with, guess who? The gentile that just nailed that sign above Jesus that hailed Him as the King of the Jews!] – Isaiah 66:18-19 NKJ

So when the [non-Jewish, Roman] centurion saw what had happened, *he glorified* God, saying, “Certainly this was a *righteous* Man!” And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, [to mock and to watch what they thought would be a fear–fueled fight with death to His dying breath] seeing what had been done, [the same thing the centurion had seen] beat their breasts [like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable who “beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Lk 18:13)] and returned. – Luke 23:46-48 NKJ

What’s everybody seeing that so life altering?! Well for one, they saw what Jesus had publically predicted just the day before. Talking about (what Isaiah prophecies about) the gentiles ...

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified* [By the centurion?] ... and where I am, there will My *servant* be also. ... And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this *purpose* I have come to this *hour*. Father, *glorify* Your name. ... And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself.” [beginning with, guess who?] ... “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.” – John 12:23-35 ESV

Remember the three hours of darkness at the cross? (Mt 27:45) Whatever Jesus endured was veiled in darkness and not intended for display. But that Roman had a front row seat to what Simeon had prophesied at Jesus’ dedication when He was eight days old:

My eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the *face of all peoples*, a *light* to bring *revelation* to the *Gentiles*, – Luke 2:30-32 NKJ

I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, and will ... give You as a covenant to the people, as a *light* to the *Gentiles* ... those who *sit* in darkness – Isaiah 42:6-7 NKJ

[And quoting Isaiah, regarding those Gentiles sitting in darkness, Matthew writes] The people who were *sitting* in darkness saw a great *Light*, and those who were *sitting* in the land and *shadow of death*, upon *them* a Light dawned. – Matthew 4:16 NAS

### Did you know the Centurion had been *sitting* in the darkness and the shadow of the cross?

And *sitting down*, they kept watch over him there. – Matthew 27:36 NIV

And what did he see in that darkness alone with his thoughts? *I'll* tell you what he saw:

In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it ... and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him – John 1:4–5, 10 NIV

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. – Hebrews 1:3 NIV

For *by* Him *all* things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... and *in* Him all things hold together. – Colossians 1:16–17 NIV



And **this is when the Light of the World took on the full weight of the darkness of sin and death for everyone who's ever been or ever will forevermore**, and the cosmos strained under the load for three hours as He paid each and every debt at the speed of light. And when the cosmos powered back up He was finished and the centurion was ready.

[Jesus] said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." Having said this, He breathed His last. [By choice. How?] – Luke 23:46 NKJ

Bowing His head, [which cuts off the air supply] He gave up [*paradidōmi*: committed into another's hands] His spirit. – John 19:30 NKJ

And yielded up [*aphiēmi*: sent forth] His spirit. [To meet up on Easter] – Matthew 27:50 NKJ

**These aren't euphemisms for Jesus' death, they're descriptions.** It's *how* He died. And it's why that tough-skinned, death-numb, decorated ol' commander made a spontaneous, treacherous, public confession! Which Jesus knew all along he'd do once he saw **a truly fearless expression of trust and conviction and love and power under perfect control.**



**Ever wonder why God chose crucifixion?** Of all the forms of public execution, whether beheading, burning, hanging, stoning, electrocution, gas chamber, lethal injection, or firing squad, only crucifixion is uniquely suited for God's purpose; because, **only the cross offered control to the One facing death.**



Granted, Jesus is most likely the *only One* to ever exercise such control. Most struggled till the bitter end ... which is what *TV Jesus* does. TV Jesus struggles to stay *alive*, but dies, and drops His head. And that's backwards. And that's what got the centurion on his feet, at attention, eyes fixed. He thought he'd seen it all. But ...

When the centurion, who was [now] standing right in *front* of Him, [looked up at Jesus' face and] saw the way He breathed His *last*, [by bowing His head in perfect peace; that's when] he said, "Truly *this Man was the Son of God!*" – Mark 15:39 NAS

Because of all the things he'd ever seen, from cowardly to heroic, he'd never anything like *that!* In the place of terror, tenderness in the face of Jesus, and **the tranquil eyes of a man with the weight of the world on His shoulders while beating death at its own game**, by powering up with nuclear reserves of absolute love. No doubt about it. Just ask that Roman with the front row seat. Was it suicide? Yes-but. We mostly see suicide as an overwhelmingly negative, desperate, even self-centered action; but **there's a rare form that we call "heroic"**. Like when a soldier throws their body on a grenade to shield others; or a mother gives up her life to give birth. **Jesus didn't take His life, He gave His life.** Huge difference. And no *greater* love. Jesus once said:



The reason My Father loves me is that I *lay down* My life — only to take it up again. *No one takes it from Me*, but I *lay* it down of My *own* accord. I have *authority to lay it down* [because it would otherwise be a sin] and authority to *take it up* again. – John 10:17–18 NIV



Which is why it was okay in this specific case; **it's only temporary till Easter!** And according to Matthew, the centurion got to see that too! Think Jesus might've had second thoughts? Think again.

"Do you think I cannot call on My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal *more* than twelve legions of angels?" – Matthew 26:53 NIV

That's 72,000 by-the-way. You see, **Jesus was never not in full control of His crucifixion!** He had an out all the way to the end. Had to. It wouldn't be much of a sacrifice if the High Priest was reluctant to offer it! Like with you, me, and that centurion, **the commitment has to be complete.** Because **our Savior was completely and utterly committed as both our faithful Offerer and our willing Offering.** So ...

Let us fix *our* eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the *joy* set before Him *endured* the cross, scorning *its* shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that *you* will not grow weary and lose heart. – Hebrews 12:2-3 NIV

When it comes to the cross of Christ and putting our life in His hands, we're faced with the same four choices as that centurion: **ignore it, reject it, modify it, or get off your seat, stand at attention, and admit it – into your heart and then to your world.** It's time to put your life in the Father's hands and fix your eyes on the Son of Man. And when you do you get to see what lit up that ol' centurion: "The glory of God in the face of Christ." (2 Cor 4:6) Like Father like Son.