

Mark 15:39 3/18/09 (Triumphant Entry #7) A ROMAN SOLDIER

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Slide: Triumphant Entry

Tonight's picture within the picture of the Triumphant entry is subtle. It is the figure of a Roman Soldier who is almost invisible in this scene. Actually there are three Roman soldiers altogether.



Slide: Highlight three soldiers and bring up the one to our left of Jesus.

They tend to blend into the background, but of course their presence in this picture represents the reality of that day. The Jewish people could have their fun and welcome this “Son of David” into the city, but the Roman government was watching very carefully. And if and when it saw fit to act, it would act decisively and then everyone would know who was really in charge. With today's subject, we could go in many different directions and almost get lost in the distinctions between our allegiance to country and government and God. I mainly want to talk to you tonight about this soldier from the aspect of observation. The Roman soldiers were charged with keeping the peace and regulating the people in this occupied territory of Judea. Soldiers in these environments are trained to observe and look beyond the surface to see things that many people would not. It could very often be a life and death look. So, as you look at this soldier, who is himself so observant and alert, what is he seeing as he stands there so close to the action, so close to Jesus?

He doesn't look so happy, does he? Almost disdainful – kind of sneering, and I think that's quite likely the attitude he would have had. A Roman soldier knew how vast the Roman Empire was and he knew what the Roman machine could do. Again, these backwater people could have their fun, but they weren't going to set up any other kingdom than the one that was large and in charge. And his sword and 5,000 others that made up the Roman Legion stationed in Judea, was there to make sure everybody knew that.

Unfortunately, I think we can also assume that attitude from what happened five days later, when Jesus was brought into the Roman Praetorium, the governor's palace. We know from John's Gospel that Pilate said at least three times to the chief priests and their officials, “I find no basis for a charge against him.” But apparently trying to satisfy the crowd, the Bible says that Pilate handed Jesus over to his soldiers to be flogged. And the soldiers dutifully followed their instructions. But the Bible also tells us that in this case they went a little beyond their duty. In addition to the flogging, we have the following description from Matthew's Gospel:

Slide: “Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.” (Matthew 27:27-31 NIV)

Folks, that is just a dark, dark picture of the reality of sinful man. When you turn loose the brutality of man under the guise of “just doing my duty” then man can be very brutal indeed. And according to the picture we get in the Gospels, I believe Mel Gibson was pretty accurate in his rendering of these Roman soldiers. In this mixed audience, I'm not going to show you the whole scourging scene from the Passion of the Christ, but I do want you to endure a very short

clip of how he shows the perverted enjoyment taken by some of the soldiers in the scourging of Jesus.

Slide: Passion of the Christ – soldiers clip

Folks, can you imagine having all the power in the universe at your disposal, and yet submitting to that brutality? Such was the love of our Savior Jesus, that led Him to bear that punishment for your sins, so that the justice of God against sin would be satisfied and you could be forgiven.

So Roman soldiers observed Jesus as he came into Jerusalem amid the shouts of Hosanna. They observed Him as He bore this abuse and scourging. They observed him as they led him away to be crucified, and they observed Him also at the cross. Again, the Bible shows the callous nature of at least some of the soldiers as they stripped off His clothes and divided them up between them and then gambled for who would get his undershirt.

Slide: soldier's gambling pic.

Not a pretty picture of these individuals – who were only following orders, right? Folks, do you realize the amount of evil that has been done throughout the history of the world under that excuse?...

Have you ever heard the expression, “Be a good soldier”? What does that mean? ... Doesn't it mean “Follow your orders whether or not they make sense; Don't think for yourself; Don't question things; Just do as you're told,” right? And to a certain extent, if an army is to function properly, there does have to be strict discipline in the ranks. You just can't have each soldier making his own decisions about how he's going to fight a war or occupy enemy territory, for instance. It would be chaos. There has to be an unwavering obedience and loyalty to the orders of the generals. The positive side of this kind of obedience is exemplified in the motto of the U.S. marine corps, “Semper Fidelis”, sometimes shortened to “Semper Fi”. It means “Always faithful”. Always faithful to the mission, to each other and to the country. There is within the Marine Corps, an almost fanatical allegiance to that motto that sets them apart (at least in their minds) from even the other branches of the military. They take pride in the fact that there has never been a mutiny within the ranks of the Marines. And I guess, as a citizen of the United States, I do take comfort in knowing that I have folks like that protecting me and my freedom.

At the same time, throughout history, there has been a dark side to that kind of obedience when soldiers are commanded by evil kings and rulers. One that comes to mind very quickly of course, is Adolf Hitler. Hitler first won over the German people with powerful speeches and charisma during the difficult days of their political and economic recovery from World War I. He later consolidated his power by convincing people that various crises demanded more and more control by the government. Finally given the power of dictator, he was able to carry out his deluded and evil designs on the purification of the race, and he ordered his soldiers to commit unspeakable evils. And his soldiers followed those orders. One of the movies recently that deals with the issue of that evil from a different perspective, is called “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas.” I've mentioned it before, and it's out now on DVD. It's not a happy movie, but I believe it's an important one as it follows the family of a German soldier, ordered to take over as the commander of a concentration camp. I want to show you a brief clip that will help you to understand the theme of that movie, and introduce one of the deep challenges of a soldier in any day.

Slide: “Boy in the Striped Pajamas” clip – “The Thing about being a soldier...”

“The thing about being a soldier is that life is not so much about choices, more about duty...” Of course, in the movie as in real life, a soldier under Hitler who only followed his “duty”, only blindly followed his orders, ended up justifying crimes against humanity, and later they were justly apprehended and judged for those crimes.

For that reason, I like better the motto contained in the Boy Scout creed “...duty to God and my country...”, that recognizes a higher duty than the one that just calls us to follow orders. It should go without saying that within our obedience to our country there remains an obedience that we owe to a higher authority and that is God. And we have a very clear principle laid out in the Bible that if those duties conflict, that our higher duty is to follow God – at whatever the cost. The Apostles, when ordered to stop preaching and teaching about the resurrected Jesus, declared, “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

Now, without question, had the soldiers under Hitler stood firm and refused to follow orders on the persecution and annihilation of the Jews and other political prisoners, they themselves would have been persecuted, but in those times that is then the calling of a Christian, to suffer for doing good. Peter says,

Slide: “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” (1Pet 3:14-17 NIV)

And those are tough words and a tough concept to swallow, that there may be a time when you will be called upon to suffer for the sake of Christ. But folks, the church that Jesus Christ built on His blood, has always been refreshed by the blood the martyrs. And never believe the lie of the devil that your own simple example of suffering for Christ – in whatever form that may take – can’t make any difference. It can. And even the most hardened heart can break and be won for Christ. That certainly was the case for these Roman soldiers. They were cruel. They had done evil things beyond the evil they were ordered to do. But they were not beyond God’s grace – nor His power to save.

Slide: Triumphant Entry and Roman Soldier

I don’t know that any of these three in the picture would have been the centurion mentioned in the text... perhaps the one above it all next to Pilate. A centurion in the Roman system was a commander of 100 soldiers, hence the title “centurion”, meaning 100. Practically speaking at the time of Jesus, a Roman century had evolved down to 80. So in the legion stationed in the province of Judea, there might have been around 50 to 60 centurions. It’s likely that they gathered together from time to time in an officers club and exchanged information and stories, so the centurion mentioned in this text might have heard about another centurion who went to Jesus to heal his servant and Jesus did. Maybe it was the same one. We don’t know. We do know what he has already seen of Jesus, not defending himself, taking all the abuse without returning any in kind. We know that He’s watched Jesus nailed to the cross and heard the words, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” We know that he’s seen the sun stop shining at noon and the day become as dark as night. We know that he saw Jesus give up His spirit with a great cry. We know he saw the light come back on and the earth shake and

rocks split. Where did that Roman soldier's "observation" change from contempt to curiosity to conviction? Somewhere underneath that cross, where he heard the chief priests and teachers of the law mock Jesus

Slide: "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matthew 27:42-43 NIV)

That centurion saw and observed it all. And as others lost their faith and ran from Christ and assumed that He was not the Son of God after all, the centurion journeyed the other way, to saving faith.

Slide: Centurion picture

Once when Jesus was trying to prepare the disciples for His crucifixion, he gave them an absolutely awesome word. He said

Slide: "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (John 12:32 NIV)

That's what he was talking about. People like this hardened Roman soldier being drawn to the cross and seeing what God has done for us there, not forced, not overwhelmed by God's power, but convicted by His love to give this great testimony:

Slide: "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39)

Jesus, we thank you for drawing us to the cross again tonight. We have been privileged among the many choices we had tonight to be drawn here to come and worship you. Lord, help us to know and believe that no one is beyond the reach of Your great love and that You can use even our weak witness to draw people to you. Amen.