

# The Sin of the Soldiers

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## **Text:**

John 19:16-24

Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led *him* away. And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called *the place* of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha: Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.

And Pilate wrote a title, and put *it* on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, *and* Greek, *and* Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written.

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also *his* coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did.

## **Introduction:**

The events surrounding the death of Jesus are an illuminating illustration of the Apostle Paul's universal indictment of humanity in Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." At the time of his sufferings, everyone fails except Jesus. Mark especially emphasizes this in his Gospel. "No one is excepted, from Pilate and the soldiers in the execution squad, through the leaders of the People and the crowd which they goaded on, to the twelve, with Judas who betrayed Jesus and Peter who denied him, indeed to the women at the tomb who fled in utter confusion and in their fear failed to obey the command of the angel (Mark 16:8). Their flight is matched by the flight of the disciples in 14:50; thus they too share in the scandal which Jesus prophesied in Mark 14:27". (Martin Hengel, *The Atonement*, p. 67).

One of the great questions of history has been: "Who was responsible for the death of Jesus?" Was it the Jews? Great injustices have been meted out to the Jewish people based on the belief that they alone bear the guilt. Was it the Romans? Certainly it was Pontius Pilate, the

Roman governor who pronounced the death sentence, and it was Roman soldiers who nailed him to the cross. However, in the end we must say as Mark and Paul do that no one is innocent. We have all sinned, and the main mission for Jesus' in coming into the world was to save us from our sins. The very name that the angel gave Joseph to give him means "savior" because he would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). When John the Baptist first pointed him out; it was with the words: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus, himself, defined his mission when he said: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). And when the time had come for Jesus to lay down his life on the cross he prayed: "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour" (John 12:27).

Our great problem is sin. To set things right and offer a way of salvation God must find a way to do away with sin. His way was the way of the cross. Christ must suffer in our place "the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (I Peter 3:18). Our hope of salvation is found in the saving death and resurrection of Christ alone. We have all sinned. But if Romans 3:23 says that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God", Romans 3:24 says: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". Christ, Paul says, was "delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:25). This is the hope of the gospel, the hope of Easter.

## **I. The Sin of the Soldiers**

If all sin, all do not sin in the same way. The sins of some are more evident, more flagrant than those of others. Last time we looked at the sin of Judas the betrayer. Today we are looking at the sin of the soldiers who crucified Jesus. They were a contingent of four men, four Roman soldiers, who made up the execution squad. Their job, the work they were paid to do was to place individuals on crosses and make sure that they remained there until they were dead. In performing their duty they became witnesses to indescribable human suffering. Knowing what we do of the situation in Jerusalem at the time, we know that they stayed busy. On a regular basis they carried out their ghastly duty. If the cries of the crucified had at first created pangs of sympathy in their conscience, they had long ago become hardened to them.

This hardening of the heart had occurred as it always does by dehumanizing the victim, by thinking of them as something less than human. They no doubt had derogative names for them. They displayed the hardness of their hearts by their rude remarks and cruel humor. They had not been born so cruel, and most likely when the job of executioner had at first been

proposed to them they had hesitated, as all of us would. Their initial hesitation had been overcome by excuses. They had, no doubt, said to themselves the kind of things we would say, things like: "I'm a soldier, it's my duty"; "I need the job"; "As cruel as it is, it is for the general good". After a time they no longer need excuses, and after more time they actually begin to take pleasure in it. Our consciences were not made to be abused, and when they are they become perverted so that the things which we once detested; things which made us cringe; things which made us nauseated, can eventually give us pleasure.

So as we watch these soldiers overseeing the most significant death in human history, we see them detached, unaware of the significance of the momentous event in which they are participating. For them it is just a day's work. The one thing that brought a bit of change and excitement was the dividing of the spoils. Their bonus was whatever belongings the victim still possessed, usually only the clothes on his back. But since cloth was relatively expensive and necessary for all, the confiscated clothes could be traded and bartered and added significantly to soldiers income.

Now they were dividing Jesus' clothes which were only the clothes of a peasant Galilean. There were two items. The outer cloak was common and of no great value so they simply divided it into four equal parts, but the inner garment was unusual in that it had been woven as a single piece. Theologically this is significant, because this was the way the High Priest's was made. Not wanting to destroy it, they cast lots for it fulfilling the descriptive prophecy of Psalm 22:19: "They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots." Once they had done that, all that remained was to keep order until their victims had expired.

Like so many people they had become blind and deaf to anything other than the most basic and material things of life. All that they hoped to benefit from what they were doing was to divide the clothes of the victims. God was performing his greatest act on behalf of humankind in their presence and they were shooting dice for an unusual garment. Life is full of wonder and grace for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, but sin so dulls our spiritual senses that we can live in the midst of wonder and see none of it. For these soldiers, however, the day isn't over. As hard as their hearts have become, they are not beyond hope and redemption. Something is about to happen that will shake them in a way they didn't think possible.

## **II. The Salvation of the Centurion**

If we fast forward to the final scene of the crucifixion, Christ dies rather suddenly and unexpectedly. This is after unexpected darkness had covered the earth. As he dies we are told the veil of the temple is rent from top to bottom. These soldiers had watched many victims of

crucifixion expire, but they now realize there is something different this time. No victim of their violence had ever acted like Jesus, and none had died as he dies. Since his words had been spoken in his native tongue, Aramaic, they probably hadn't understood what he said, but the entire situation had been so unnerving for the leader of the group, the centurion that seeing Jesus die he says: "Truly this man was the Son of God." Grace had overcome the hardness of his heart. What had started out as a routine day had become a life-transforming day.

This is the way God works. We may drift through life missing most of what is important, squandering the opportunities God gives us, hardening our hearts to God's grace and goodness. We live, like this quartet of executioners, oblivious to all that has no immediate benefit to us, and then in the course of our lives God's grace breaks through. He speaks to us; gets our attention; wakes us up, and suddenly we realize that life is far more than we had imagined it to be. God really is for us he has not abandoned us. He loves us and he has gone to unimaginable lengths to save us from our sin and from ourselves, and the cross of Christ is the proof.