

# The Soldiers

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning. Today's scripture comes from Matthew chapter 27 verses 27 through 37 and 50 through 54.

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. Then they 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.

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene named Simon and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull.

[ 1 : 13 ] There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall, but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

And sitting down, they watched over him there. Above his head, they placed the written charge against him. This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split, and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.

They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, Surely he was the Son of God.

This is the word of the Lord. Would you pray with me? Almighty and loving God, thank you for the gift it is to have this moment, for the ability to be able to worship together.

[ 2 : 28 ] And now, with our hearts open, having been moved by song and having offered prayers and heard your word, Lord God, pour into each of us afresh. Fall fresh on us, Holy Spirit.

Give us what you know we need to go into the world and testify. Let the light of God shine brightly through each of us, through what you do now. In Jesus' name we pray and ask. Amen.

Amen. So week three, the third Sunday in Lent, and we are continuing our journey towards Easter Sunday. And this is about the soldiers as we continue looking at witnesses at the cross, which is based on this idea of we look at what happened that day from the perspective of different people who were there.

And today, we're going to talk about the soldiers. And soldiers have an interesting lesson to teach us, because as you heard me say during the greeting time, they will challenge us. They will challenge us in ways we don't like.

And so, that said, here's what we mean by ways we don't like. Anybody deal with somebody who was closed-minded this week? Sounds like we relate.

[ 3 : 43 ] Closed-mindedness is an interesting phenomenon, but we seem to encounter it pretty regularly, do we not? That somebody just refuses to hear what we have to say.

That you may have a perfectly rational argument, you may even have facts and evidence to support said argument, but people just are not open to whatever it is you have to share.

And that banging your head against the wall is no fun, right? But here's the thing about closed-mindedness. This is one of them things that it's real easy to spot in other people.

Y'all know where I'm headed with this. It's real easy to spot it in other people. But we are, of course, always open, right? Somebody presents a new idea, somebody presents some new evidence about something we believe in, we are just right there ready to receive, of course.

Yes? Because that's what these soldiers are going to tap into for us. They're going to challenge us about how open we really believe ourselves to be.

[ 4 : 51 ] And here's how. Because for much of the story, when you read the Gospels, we get the sense that the Romans and the soldiers are in many ways the bad guys in the story.

And because that's how they are portrayed, when we come across them, you know, it's almost like we should hear certain theme music when they come up in the story.

But here we are today, not only dealing with them as an entity, as an idea, we get very specific accounts of what was going on. And so what I want us to do is walk through this morning, Friday morning, from the perspective of one of those soldiers.

Now, what we know about history, tells us that in order to get into the Roman army, most people would have joined, and these would have been men.

There were no women. That most young men would have joined the Roman army at about 17 years old. They had to meet certain physical expectations.

[ 6 : 09 ] It was just common. And they tended to be the bigger guys. They tended to be the stronger guys. And they had to go through some pretty grueling physical tests, as you would imagine.

But they were trained rigorously, and pretty brutally, actually. But they turned into pretty efficient killing machines.

they were good at what they did. Otherwise, they couldn't have conquered all that territory. And they were good at following orders. They would be pressed into doing any number of things.

They sometimes had to build bridges and roads, in addition to the regular fighting that comes with being a soldier in a conquering army. So, that said, now you've been assigned, you've been left home, and you've been assigned to this place.

You're in this city called Jerusalem, which is very different than what you're used to. But your mission here is very straightforward. Maintain order for the empire.

[ 7 : 19 ] That is your task. Keep the peace for the empire. Now this morning, you wake up, and you know that there's something going on, because there's this much more active and much more agitated, much more loud crowd that seems to be gathering around.

Everybody's shouting different things, and the religious leaders from the temple are involved, and all this activity is happening in the street. And remember your job.

So, as you go out and you stand your post and you are making sure everything doesn't get too far out of hand, you hear people talking back and forth, you hear people shouting towards the governor, what should we do with him?

Crucify him, crucify him, they keep saying, and finally, the governor orders that he be flogged and condemned. So you and your colleagues take him to, essentially, your barracks, if you want to think of it that way.

And while you're there, you carry out the governor's orders. Now, whether you are physically one of the people who do this, or you're just part of the larger company, you watch this happen.

[ 8 : 45 ] Certainly not the first time you've seen this done. It was common for prisoners to receive 39 lashes with a whip. 39 because 40 was known to kill people.

And so whether you're the one who actually does this, whether it's a whip of cords, meaning that it's like a common leather whip that we're used to, sometimes people were beaten with rods.

But you watch this happen. There's also the scourging part. You've heard me mention scourging before. Scourging actually happened on a whip that's more like a cat at nine tails.

It's got several strands that come off of it. But there are metal hooks embedded in the end. And the whole purpose there is to increase the pain and torture for the victim because it tears the flesh every time it hits.

So that happens. And at best, you're a witness to this who's just doing his job. But at worst, you might just have fun doing this.

[ 9 : 57 ] One of the things that we know from a lot of these accounts is that soldiers tended to be bullies. That they conscripted people into doing things that they needed done.

And they were good at what they did. So, they tended to have a little fun with the skill set that they carried. So, you watch this guy go through this beating.

And let's remember what we already heard. Bill read this, but I want you to hear it again because you need to remember the mindset. So, if you want to follow along with me, we're in chapter 27 of Matthew.

We're going to read verses 27 through 31. 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.

Then they twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him.

[ 11 : 02 ] 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. Odds are, we're leaning more towards the they had fun with it side of that equation.

Simply put, they abused him because they could. It was common to do that with people who were condemned and prisoners. This is what we know of the story.

Now what are we doing? After this, we put his clothes back on him and now it's time to take him to the hill. If you're assigned to this detail, it's more than likely four, but there could have been more, could have been less.

You have to make your way through this crowd, people who are crying and saying, no, this can't happen and people on that side and then you have this other side of the crowd that's screaming all sorts of things and insults at him as you're trying to make your way through the streets of Jerusalem.

[ 12 : 11 ] So from time to time you've got to beat people back, you've got to hold this at order as you just simply want to get to the site. But then you've got a new problem. It's he's not going to make it.

He can't carry this cross. He's simply too weak, too beaten. So you do what you know how to do. You get somebody to carry it for him.

Let's be clear, Simon did not volunteer for this duty. Simon was conscripted. He was made to do this for Jesus. And who do you think made him do that? So now we've got our person and off we go.

When you finally get to Golgotha, when you finally get to the site, what's interesting about this piece is that this is something you're used to.

Most people, it kind of bothers though. Having been a soldier and having been through things and also having witnessed a few of these, you're not so much surprised when you hear the nails break his bones.

[ 13 : 25 ] When he cries out in agony, you've seen this before. So when a nine inch spike goes into somebody's wrist, it's not a pleasant sound.

Then he's hoisted up onto the pole, he's finally in place, and now you just do what you're there for, which is to make sure that nobody comes and tries to take him down. That's why soldiers were at crucifixions.

not to mention you'd have this crowd that you still have to worry about. But even in the middle of it all, you have a few minutes, and so you want to make sure you get in on the game.

There's a reason why we play this game. There's a reason why we do this. It's because even though we're soldiers and we tend to live better than a lot of poor people, by getting the good stuff from the prisoners, you can sell it and then get a little extra money for yourself.

You can have a little fun, if you will. And that's what happens. So when you tell the story, looking at it through the eyes of a soldier, where's your heart now?

[ 14 : 42 ] Now, I ask that because we're going back to that whole open-minded thing.

Because when you tell the story from this perspective, it's hard to open your heart to these guys. We have brutality that takes place here.

Not only brutality that comes by virtue of what crucifixion is, but brutality that seems to just be soldiers having fun doing what they're allowed to do. And that's hard for us to open our hearts to that.

It's hard to open our minds to that. Because while this shouldn't happen to anyone, for us, it's worse because it's happening to Jesus.

This is Jesus we're talking about. And as I said, it's hard to find compassion.

[ 15 : 50 ] It's hard not to have those emotions well up in us. It's hard not to want to lash out against these folks. But let's remember what Jesus says.

when Jesus is put into place, after Jesus has endured all of this, Jesus, his words are Father forgiven.

that's our challenge. That's a long ways away from where most of us stand.

How might we get our hearts to that place? How might we learn to love like he does? It gets harder.

because after Jesus has endured all of this and he's on the cross and he's ready to breathe his last, we have this other moment. Second half of our reading today, whereas Jesus breathes his last and then we see the temple curtain rent in two.

[ 17 : 10 ] we have an earthquake that takes place throughout the city. The sky has already been darkened for hours and all of this is taking place and so these guys, people who are not followers of Jesus, for them he's just another guy.

Remember, for them it's Friday. that's all it is. It's not an exceptional day, this is what they do. But all of this happens.

Not only the supernatural pieces, but how Jesus interacts with people from the cross. They see him talk to this other guy and his mother.

they hear people mock him and cry out and he doesn't cry back. They hear him speak these words, but they don't know what they mean.

But others around them seem to know what they do mean. And after all of this, after seeing how he's carried himself, after seeing how he died and seeing how the world and the creation seems to respond, they're moved.

[ 18 : 44 ] It was interesting, as I was preparing for this, I had not noticed this in verse 54. Nancy brought it up today and of course you heard Bill read it, but I want you to hear it again.

Because if you have ever watched a Jesus movie, right? There's a few of us in the church who like watching those different movies. So if you've ever watched a Jesus movie, one of the things you will notice is that when you get to that place with the centurion, it's almost always just the centurion.

And a centurion is a commander of somebody who would have led a centurion meaning a hundred or a century. It was probably more like 80. But that said, this is a commander level officer.

And he says, surely this man was the son of God. Now, what's interesting about this is that, like I said, usually that shot, if you're watching a Jesus movie, is just him.

But what you hear in verse 54 is the centurion and those who were with him. So it wasn't just him.

[ 19 : 56 ] The centurion and those who were with him. they're moved. That God has done something so extraordinary in this moment that it has reached people who have not cared about God at all till this moment.

And there's our second challenge. God has done God and I'm willing to bet that many of us have probably heard stories like that. Somebody who lived a life and didn't seem to care about God at all and all of a sudden now, as we used to say, they done got religion.

God has done something that has actually reached them. God has done something that has actually moved them, touched them and they are professing that this is the Son of God.

Where's your heart now? Do you think you would be ready to receive one of these guys? Like if you were a disciple of Jesus and you heard that centurion say that, you ready to go pray with him?

You ready to bring him home for dinner and say let's talk about what that means? Where's your heart now?

[ 21 : 32 ] That's the challenge. You see, when we talk about being open minded, we talk about being open hearted, yet God does this extraordinary thing in people's lives.

And it's legitimate, it's honest, it's authentic. People have had a connection to God and what do God's people say? That's the rub.

If he was looking for help, if he was looking for people to guide him, if he was looking for someone to say, I don't know what to do with these feelings I'm having, but clearly God is doing something in this man, who will welcome him?

Because in our lives, there are always those people. There's always someone who's done something, said something, represents something that seems too far afield for us to go, absolutely, you are welcome at Jesus' table.

As if it's us who gets to decide who's welcome at Jesus' table. That's what we have to master.

[ 22 : 50 ] That's what we have to learn. See, here's the thing, church. How open are you to God moving in such a way that would surprise you completely out of left field?

You get up and it's just Friday or any other day of the week and God does something that takes you to a whole different place in your faith. And you're left standing there.

Truly, this man is the son of God. Does that not happen? Is that so hard to believe? I know I got people in this room for whom that is your story.

story. So why is it so hard to believe that it could be someone else's story? But that's who we are called to be.

Let us also not forget that there are people out there in the world for whom you are the Romans. Maybe it's a group or maybe it's just you as an individual.

[ 24 : 01 ] That person for whom they think, nope, that's just too far, Jesus. You can't possibly mean them. And yet, Jesus has pulled out a chair at the table for you.

That's where we have to go. That's who we are called to be. See, friends, when we talk about being witnesses at the cross, who will you bear witness to?

Will you bear witness to a God that can move in people's lives with that kind of power, that kind of grace, a love that is that big that nobody is excluded, even the villains in the story?

Or will you be closed-minded? That's what we have to learn. I don't know about you, but I choose to go into this world and bear witness to a Jesus that opens the door to all God's children, that the cross covers everyone.

All you have to do is want it. All you have to do is say yes. All you have to do is profess. So no matter where you sit, no matter where you are, no matter how far away you feel, you too can have that moment where your heart opens up and you can only say, truly, this man is the Son of God.

[ 25 : 40 ] And know that he has saved you too. That's who I bear witness to.

I hope that's your story as well. Amen. And amen. Almighty and gracious God, we thank you that you do in fact open the door for all God's children.

That the cross makes the difference for every single one of us. There is no sin too far. There is no one too far that your outstretched arms cannot reach them.

Lord God, let your movement, the ways in which you speak forgiveness and grace, the ways in which you love even in spite of our brutality, the ways in which you continue to pour love and receive anyone.

Let us live lives that bear witness to who you are. Let us speak that truth. Let us go into this world showing those who have no hope, those who believe they are irredeemable, those who believe there is nothing that can be done, that this is who Jesus is.

[ 27 : 03 ] Truly, this is the Son of God. Amen. Indeed, our Lord is Lord and the Messiah and the one who is above all.

As you go into the world to serve him this week, there are three things I would highlight for you. First, we need to talk about fish fry ministry. We're doing really great this year. This is week three and we almost hit 600 again, which is a pretty big deal for us, so that's a good thing.

I also want to add a personal word of thanks. Last week, I stood here and told you that we had been struggling with the number of desserts that had come in and you guys stepped up as you always do and we had an abundance of desserts.

That was beautiful and that was amazing and we are grateful. But remember, we are not done. So if you have not signed up for coming weeks, please consider doing that as well because we really did have an amazing time.

This week, we are in need of people to help specifically with our Friday morning piece of the fish fries, doing some of the drink station setups, things of that nature that takes place Friday morning.

[ 28 : 17 ] So if you are able to if you have questions about that, you can talk to me, Louie, Mary, there are some others like Jan who also could fill you in. But we could use more bodies to do that.

And we also could use more help with the cleanup and breakdown as well. And of course, make sure we overload the pie room as always. Okay, so please keep that in mind. Also, on your bulletin, you will see the needs currently for the Easter celebration.

It's on the back. So I'm not going to try and sit here and read through all of that, but it's there. If you are able to supply any of that need, please do. And lastly, there's no Bible study this week, at least none of the ones I lead.

I'm going to be out of town for several days, so if you are in the Thursday Bible studies, we are not meeting this week. The one Pastor Mike leads is still planning to meet.

So that said, make sure you read your bulletin and see all the other opportunities because while concentrating on the Easter pieces, we still have an upcoming Feeding Hope meal, we still have need for the Thursday night dinners, we have other things, so please make sure if you are able that you support those ministries as well.

[ 29 : 24 ] Now let's receive our benediction. Lord God, we know that your reach goes so much further than we can imagine. Let us indeed be open to all who have claimed and seen your movement and have touched their hearts, claiming you are the Son of God.

And now in the name of God, our King and Creator, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and our Sustainer, may God bless us now as we leave to love and serve God and all of God's children and all God's people said, Amen.