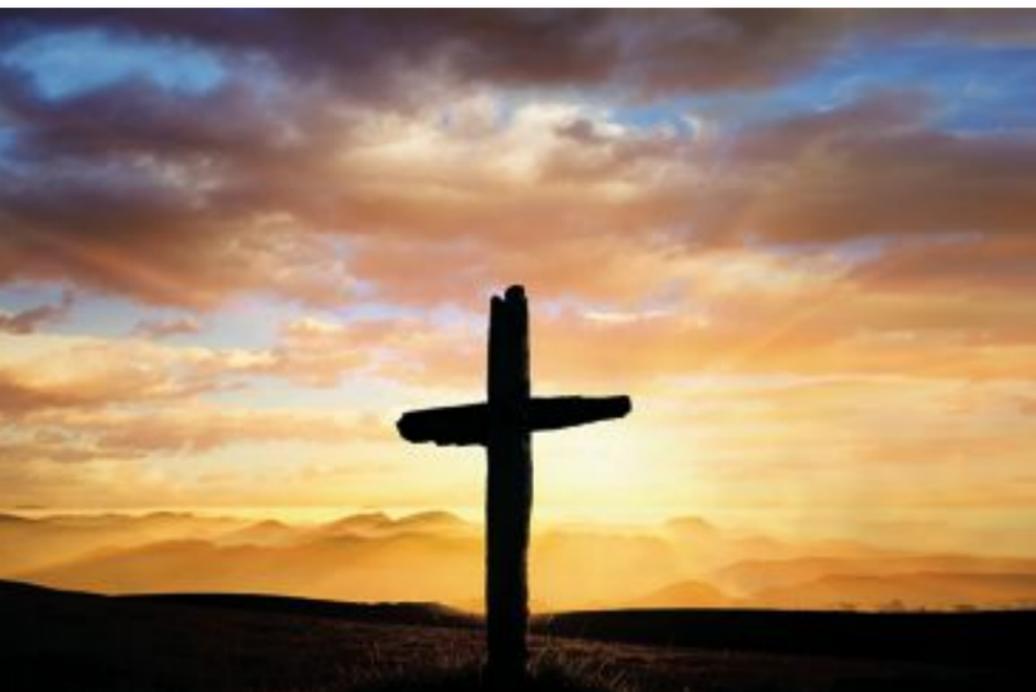


DISCOVERY SERIES

The **POWER** of
THE CROSS



Bill Crowder



introduction

The Power Of The Cross

When I wrote the book *Windows on Easter*, from which this booklet is adapted, my goal was to take a fresh look at the familiar events of the death and resurrection of Christ by seeing them through the eyes of some of the men and women who were there. Those moments that opened eternity for the undeserving at the cost of the life of the One who is eternally worthy must never be allowed to grow stale.

One of those eyewitnesses was the Roman centurion who assisted at the crucifixion itself. The

old spiritual asks the haunting question: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Oh, yes, this man was there.

As we try to imagine what he saw and felt, may the grace and mercy of Christ grasp our hearts in ways that transform us deeply, just as the centurion was transformed.

Through the centuries, soldiers have been despised and they have been revered—despised by those they attack and conquer, revered by those they protect and defend. We are often shocked by the actions that war, itself a result of hatred and sin, compels military personnel to take; yet we are frequently amazed by the courage it requires for soldiers to take those actions. Those of us who have never experienced the horror of combat cannot comprehend the toll a soldier's work takes on him or her. We will never fully understand what soldiers have endured in the line of duty.

Soldiers suffer the hardships of training and are often subjected, in duty or in combat, to a lifestyle of deprivation. It is a life that sometimes seems barely civilized, alternating between acts of valor and barbarism. To live continually in the shadow of death, to face the reality that you are an agent of death—even for a just cause—is a difficult thing.



The life of a soldier is not an easy life. It isn't now, and it wasn't two thousand years ago. Yet, even hearts hardened by the heat of battles and the struggles of

Even hearts hardened by the heat of battles and the struggles of military service are not beyond the reach of the gospel or the power of the cross.

military service are not beyond the reach of the gospel or the power of the cross.

Let's look at this power at work in the life of one soldier—the centurion in charge of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.



BILL CROWDER
RBC MINISTRIES

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one

A Centurion's Life

Our oldest son has been in the Army for several years. Watching him progress through the ranks from recruit to staff sergeant has been an education in what military life is like. Soldiers are committed to putting the mission before comfort, their comrades before self, and obedience to duty above their personal opinions about the orders they are given. It is a lifestyle rooted in discipline, authority structures, and teamwork.

The core elements of soldiering have not changed over the centuries. Certainly the technology, the apparatus

of warfare, and the training have changed. But the basic commitments to obedience, duty, discipline, authority, and teamwork have not. So with that in mind, let's consider what military life might have looked like for a first-century Roman centurion.

The word centurion comes from the Latin term *centum*, meaning "one hundred." A centurion was a Roman officer in command of a hundred men. To have a proper grasp of a centurion's role, it is helpful to understand the design of a Roman legion.



Each legion was divided into ten cohorts, each cohort into three maniples, and each maniple into two centuries. In a legion there were thirty maniples and sixty centuries. A century always consisted of a hundred soldiers, meaning that sixty centuries formed a combined legion of six thousand troops.



Crucifixion was a method of execution commonly practiced by the Roman Empire. It probably originated in ancient Persia and was adopted by Alexander the Great. The crucified victim was tied or nailed to a large wooden T-shaped cross and left to hang until dead.

In the Roman army, the office of centurion was the highest rank an ordinary soldier could achieve. The position was similar to what we know as

The centurions mentioned in Luke 7 and Acts 10 were men of financial means who contributed to their communities and were respected.

a company commander. Sixty centurions served each legion, with rankings among those sixty. Promotion to the office of centurion was usually based on experience and knowledge, and, just as in the military today, centurions were promoted as they transferred to positions of increasing responsibility.

The centurion typically earned his rank the hard way, and it was a position of prestige and honor, commanding the respect of others. Centurions received substantial pensions at retirement

and were viewed as notables in the towns where they lived. The centurions mentioned in Luke 7 and Acts 10 were men of financial means who contributed to their communities and were respected.

It was not easy to gain the strategic position of centurion. While it is true that some were able to purchase their rank and some were appointed because they were favored by higher ranking officers or Roman officials, most centurions were appointed by the tribunes over them. These promotions were almost always based on a soldier's merit, with good conduct being a key consideration.

A centurion's tasks fell into two basic areas. In combat, the centurion was responsible for implementing military strategy. He would almost always be on point, leading the charge into battle. Away from the battlefield, the centurion administered discipline in the ranks, mediated interpersonal conflicts among his men, provided security and protection when called upon, supervised police actions in occupied areas, and, most notably for our purposes, oversaw executions. As a general rule, these executions were done by the sword for Roman citizens (Romans 13) and by crucifixion for non-Romans (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*).



two

Centurions In The New Testament

Several **centurions** are mentioned in the New Testament. The accounts of the more prominent ones reveal the degree to which Christ's message and influence were crossing social, ethnic, and political lines and barriers.

The Centurion of Capernaum (Matt. 8:5-13)

Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." And Jesus said to him, "I

will come and heal him.” The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you.” And his servant was healed that same hour.



This man came to Jesus on behalf of his servant. He exhibited great submission (calling Jesus “Lord”) and great faith in



*In its first century context, **this scene is remarkable**. First, a Roman centurion calling a Jewish rabbi “Lord,” shows submission to a Jewish teacher. Second, Jesus’ action, going into a Gentile’s home, would have immediately rendered Him ceremonially unclean making it impossible for him to participate in Temple worship. This interaction shows great love and deference by each man toward the other.*



This encounter makes it clear that neither ethnic background nor vocation determine one's fitness for kingdom citizenship.

declaring that he believed that Christ need only say the word and his servant would be made whole. As if this weren't remarkable enough, this tough warrior showing deep concern for a mere slave by seeking out the rabbi of Nazareth is truly amazing.

The accounts of the more prominent centurions reveal the degree to which Christ's message and influence were crossing social, ethnic, and political lines and barriers.

The Centurion of Caesarea

(Acts 10:1-2, 22, 44-48)

There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who

gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. And they said [to Peter], “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.” . . . While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. Then Peter answered, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.



Cornelius, a prominent Gentile convert, was a centurion who had dealt kindly with and was appreciated by the Jewish people. Through his exposure to Judaism, his heart



The word translated **regiment** is the Greek word **σπερα**. It refers to a Roman military unit of about six hundred soldiers (Louw-Nida). This means that Cornelius was one of six centurions giving leadership to the Italian regiment.

had been prepared for the seed of the gospel, and when Peter came to him with the message of the cross, he believed.

Cornelius' heart had been prepared for the seed of the gospel, and when Peter came to him with the message of the cross, he believed.

The Centurion of the Shipwreck

(Acts 27:1, 11, 42-44; 28:16)

And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment. Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul. And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded

that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land. Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.



Julius, the centurion responsible for delivering Paul to Rome for trial, was reluctant to accept the apostle's counsel at first. During the shipwreck experience, however, he was exposed to the vitality of Paul's faith and saw the power of God in the miraculous and saved Paul's life when it was threatened.



Centurions were not the ancient equivalent of "the boy next door." They were part of an occupation force—



The concern of the soldiers that the prisoners might escape is understandable. Roman law held the guards personally responsible for escaped prisoners. Rome enforced capital punishment on guards from whom prisoners escaped (The New American Commentary: Acts).

Centurions were professional soldiers exerting the iron heel of Rome . . . Yet the centurions mentioned in the New Testament are uniformly spoken of in terms of praise.

professional soldiers exerting the iron heel of Rome and its subjugation and bondage. The hated Roman conquerors were brutal and swift in their approach to any and all problems. Yet, according to *Easton's Bible Dictionary*: "The centurions mentioned in the New Testament are uniformly spoken of in terms of praise, whether in the Gospels or in the Acts."

Ancient Roman historian Polybius noted that centurions were chosen by merit and were remarkable not so much for their daring courage and valor (although those qualities were important) as for their deliberation, constancy, and strength of mind. Regarding these centurions, he wrote, "They must not be so much venturesome seekers after

danger as men who can command, steady in action and reliable; they ought not to be overanxious to rush into the fight, but when hard-pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts."

In fact, Bible scholar William Barclay concluded, "The centurions were the finest men in the Roman army."

This historical background sets the stage for the appearance of the centurion at the cross and for the weight and the credibility of his words.



three

The Centurion At The Cross

Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour.

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?” that is, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”...

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were

split. 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.

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!"

(MATT. 27:45-54).

"Truly this was the Son of God!" What a declaration! These were not quavering words from a frightened pup of a recruit or an easily manipulated conscript. This was the reasoned conclusion of a seasoned veteran who had been watching men die horrible deaths—and had been putting them to death—for years.



Some have speculated about what he meant. Was this a confession of faith, or was he just trying to define something outside the scope of his experience? I believe that the answer is in the context. Obviously the centurion was deeply moved by the events he had witnessed, and the declaration of deity is what followed his observation.

We need to consider two things in order to fully and carefully consider the magnitude of the centurion's words:

the evidence against this declaration and the evidence in support of this declaration.

The evidence against such a declaration was strong indeed. This centurion was well aware of the strong condemnation of the Jewish religious leaders that had put Jesus on the cross for making

“Truly this was the Son of God!” What a declaration! These were not quavering words from a frightened pup of a recruit or an easily manipulated conscript.

the claim to be the Son of God. His commander-in-chief, Pontius Pilate, had upheld the conviction for Jesus' making that claim. But the centurion rejects the condemnation and affirms Jesus' claim. Why? Because the arguments in favor of Christ's claim were overwhelming.

Looking at the evidence in support of this declaration, we must remember that this man had no doubt supervised many

crucifixions. Yet there was something extraordinarily different about this particular execution. What did he see? There are several scenes from the events of the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus that combine into a compelling mosaic.

- The **response** of Jesus to the injustice that He had been forced to endure at the hands of His own countrymen through arrest and trials:



*And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him." But Jesus said to him, "... How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" In that hour Jesus said to the multitudes, "**Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me? I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and***



Scripture indicates that **John** was only member of the 12 who publicly identified with Jesus at His crucifixion.

you did not seize Me. But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled” Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled....And the high priest

There are several scenes from the events of the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus that combine into a compelling mosaic.

arose and said to Him, “Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?” But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” Jesus said to him, “It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?” They answered and said, “He is

deserving of death.” Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, “Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?”
(*MATT. 26:47-68, EMPHASIS ADDED*).

• The **response** of Jesus to the torture that the centurion and his men had inflicted upon Him:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole garrison around Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off



John 19:12-16: “From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, ‘If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.’ . . . ‘Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!’

‘Shall I crucify your king?’ Pilate asked. ‘We have no king but Caesar,’ the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.”

Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. (27:27-31).

- The **dignity** with which Jesus responded to the lynch mob that demanded His blood—as a sheep, silent before the slaughter. Scripture records no

Even as they sat down to gamble for His meager possessions and to watch the gruesome spectacle, Jesus' concern was for their forgiveness, not His own escape.

response by Jesus to the mob's cries:

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them. Pilate answered and said to them again, "What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" So they cried out again, "Crucify Him!" Then Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, "Crucify Him!" So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he

delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified (MARK 15:11-15 CF. ISA. 53:7).



- The **mercy** of Jesus toward the people who rejected Him and the soldiers that crucified Him, including this centurion. His response? "Father, forgive them!" (LUKE 23:34). Even as they sat down to gamble (MATT. 27:35-36) for His meager possessions and to watch the gruesome spectacle, Jesus' concern was for their forgiveness, not His own escape. That is powerful.

- Creation's **response** to the Creator's sin-bearing act. As Matthew records, witnesses "saw the earthquake and the things that were happening" (27:54). They saw the sun go dark, they felt the power of the earth quaking under their feet—and they saw these supernatural phenomena suddenly end when Jesus yielded up His spirit with a loud voice and died.



First century Jews expected a Messiah who would overthrow their oppressive Roman occupiers. Jesus, however, had come to overthrow the power and oppression of sin and death.

The centurion and his group of battle-hardened soldiers had learned to cope with fear, but now they experienced sheer terror.

This centurion was understandably shocked by the significant events that accompanied the death of the Christ. In all of his up-close exposure to torture and death, he had never seen such things before, and the impact on him was inescapable.

There cannot be a reasonable doubt that this expression [“Truly this was the Son of God!”] was used in the Jewish sense, and that it points to the claim which Jesus made to be the Son of God, and on which His condemnation expressly turned. The meaning, then, clearly is that He must have been what He professed to be; in other words, that He was no impostor. There was no medium between those two (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Bible Commentary).

Bible scholar Dr. Herbert Lockyer writes, "What a remarkable testimony Christ received from this Gentile! How striking was the homage he paid to the crucified one at Golgotha!"

The centurion had seen, heard, and felt all of the events of the crucifixion and death of Christ. As a result, he and his troops "became very frightened." The centurion and his group of battle-hardened soldiers had learned to cope with fear, but now they experienced sheer terror—not a true reverential fear, but, perhaps, as commentator John Gill wrote, the "fear of punishment: lest divine vengeance should light on them for their concern in this matter."



They had reason to be fearful because there was absolutely nothing ordinary about the significant events they were experiencing. It was:

- **No ordinary execution.** The darkness, the earthquake, and the cry of abandonment from Christ convinced the soldiers that this was no ordinary execution. The events terrified them and probably led them to believe that these things testified to heaven's wrath. What a realization! They had put to death God's Son!

- **No ordinary power.** They did not come to this conclusion because of the announcement of some angelic messenger or prophet. Their conclusion came solely from the effects of the power of God on display at Calvary that dark day.

All who are saved are saved because of the death of Jesus on the cross. The cross began to do its work immediately. And that work has continued for two millennia.

- **No ordinary confession.** The centurion's confession tells us something eternally important: Jesus as the promised Messiah and Son of God is seen most clearly in His passion and death. How interesting that the Jewish religious establishment had mocked Him with the title (vv. 41-44) by which a Roman centurion now confessed Him.

Matthew Henry wrote: "The dreadful appearances of God in His providence sometimes work strangely for the

conviction and awakening of sinners. This was expressed in the terror that fell upon the centurion and the Roman soldiers. Let us, with an eye of faith, behold Christ and Him crucified, and be affected with that great love wherewith He loved us. Never were the horrid nature and effects of sin so tremendously displayed as on that day when the beloved Son of the Father hung upon the Cross, suffering for sin, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. Let us yield ourselves willingly to His service."



Church tradition has given the name Petronius to this centurion. If he was won to faith in Christ, he came as a pagan and, like the thief on the cross who believed, was saved as Jesus hung upon the cross. How simple and basic! All who are saved are saved because of the death of Jesus on the cross. So the cross began to do its work immediately. And that work has continued for two millennia.

The preaching of the cross may be foolishness to the world, but to those who are saved it is the power of God. No wonder Charles Wesley declared in his anthem of praise for the death of Christ, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!"



It is that powerful cross and the love displayed there that moves hearts—even the hardened, battle-weary heart of a career soldier—from death to life. There is an old saying, “The ground is always level at the foot of the cross.” It was in the first century, and it still is today. The foot of the cross is

The foot of the cross is where paupers and princes, religionists and pagans, well-knowns and unknowns, and—yes—generals and centurions find level ground to kneel and embrace the Christ who died for them—and for us.

where paupers and princes, religionists and pagans, well-knowns and unknowns, and—yes—generals and centurions find level ground to kneel and embrace the Christ who died for them—and for us.



The men and women who witnessed the trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection

of Christ saw more than words can ever express. They heard things that we can only imagine. But what they saw in their lifetime, we have seen in the Scriptures, and the result is amazingly the same. Though we may not have seen Him physically, we have seen Him through the pages of Scripture and found solid ground for belief. The book of Romans explains the phenomenon this way: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (10:17).

"Truly this is the Son of God!" We have heard and we have believed. But it mustn't end there. We must burn with the passion to know Him—the very passion of the apostle Paul, who wrote that his life's goal was "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (PHIL. 3:10).

May that same desire burn in our hearts as well, that we might truly know the One who loved us and gave Himself for us.



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