

Question: Are you willing to let God take you as far as he wants to take you in the spiritual life? We’re in this **Have You Heard?** series, and as we’ve done each week, I want to introduce you to a man who encountered Jesus on his way to the cross. A man who, totally unsuspecting, had his life shaken by Jesus and allowed God to take him *beyond*, into a richer, deeper, more fruitful spiritual life. A man unsuspecting. A gruff man, a blue collar guy, a soldier— it’s the story of the centurion at the foot of the cross found in the gospel of Mark. We don’t know much about him. We don’t know his name. We don’t know his history. He’s got one line in the entirety of the New Testament. But we know Jesus changed his life.

Annnnd **ACTION!**

[GROWING UP ROMAN] *Lord, have mercy.* Yes, *that’s* what I said. And I meant it too! If I’m anything it’s an honest man. How can I deny my eyes? How can I deny my ears? It started out as a joke, really. We put a sign over his head that said, “Jesus of Nazareth. King of the Jews.” That was Pilate’s idea, but we went right along with it. But then the sky grew dark, and immediately I knew something was different about this man. **SO YES, that’s what I said...but have you heard WHY?**

You know I didn’t plan to end up here. I mean, you *know* me. I’m Roman born, Roman raised. And I joined the army because as dad always said, “If you’re gonna bet on anything, you better bet on Rome.” So I went all in.

And I stinkin’ LOVE Rome. I’d give my life for Ceasar! You see this coin? What’s it say on it? SPQR! *The Roman Senate and its People.* That’s who I’m loyal to! That’s who I’ve BEEN allegiant to, at least. I gave Rome my time. My energy. My heart. My EVERYTHING. I didn’t even take a wife. It was tough, yes. But I like the challenge. I loved the gruel, the discomfort. You know I’m not the kind of guy to run from a fire. Give me a task and I’ll do it. Give me an enemy and I’ll crush him. Give me WHATEVER and I’ll figure it out!

[SOLDIER REWARDS] It was all going good until just a couple hours ago. Rome rewards people who are allegiant, who work by the sweat of their brow, who won’t back down from a challenge, who get stuff done. I’ve seen parts of the world I’ve never dreamed of! I’ve sailed the Mediterranean! I received GLORY AND HONOR from my battles in the Pannonian revolt. I started as a common soldier. I worked my btt off for like 14 years and now I oversee 100 men. Brothers, actually. *True* comrades. DO your duty. HONOR the emperor. SPQR. Pledge allegiance to the Son of God, Caesar, and you will be richly rewarded! Just as the gods have made *him* a god amongst men, he’ll make us Faithful Ones men amongst boys. Trust me. I know. The pay is good. The pension is solid. The wine flows. The food fills. AND they’ll give me land when I retire. Not bad for a kid who grew up like I did. I joined because of the benefits. But I stay because THIS. STUFF. MATTERS.

[SOLDIER DUTIES]

- Every day, I inspect my men. *How’s their condition? Their armor? Their weapons?*
- Every day, I drill my men. “DEX, SIN! DEX, SIN!” We’ll be the best century there is.
- Every day, I make them train. We will be disciplined! Combat, tactics, skills!
- Every day, I give my superiors the status report.
- Every day, I discipline the guys who step out of line. Disrespect Rome? Fail to do your duty? You’ll pay for that.
- And every day I do what Rome needs. Need a road repaired? We’ll do it. Need a bridge constructed? Done. Are the zealots plotting again? I’m your man. Need a rabble-rouser shut up?

Just say the word. Got a criminal who needs flogged? It'd be my pleasure. Got a traitor you want to make an example of? I'll kill him. I don't care.

But you know all that. Okay, here's what happened.

[CRUCIFIXION] There was this Jewish rebel they called Jesus that the Jewish religious leaders *hated*. I mean they *hated* this guy. I know Pilate didn't really care about him either way. He was charged with being a King, the Son of God, but he didn't seem like much of a threat. BUT they wanted him crucified, so that's what we were tasked with. Good. We needed something to do that day. The next couple of hours found Jesus taken to be flogged. I watched. We ALL did. Everyone was whooping and hollering. And making fun of him. Every lash with the whip was an accusation. Every *fwap!* with the rod an indictment. And you know what I did? I LOST myself. I got caught up in the heat of it all. I spit on him! ME! ***Oh Lord, have mercy on me.***

I didn't notice it then, but thinking about it now, it was like they all *needed* him to be guilty. It was like they were taking all of their dashed hopes, all of their hatred, all of their shadow side, all of their uncleanness and putting it on him. The crowd was shouting at him, "You're no king! You're pathetic! What a joke!" Underneath all of that though it was like what they were really saying was, "We need you to be dirt, we need you to be muck and mire, we need you to be disease, and evil, and hurt, and pain, and disease, and guilt, and shame, and humiliation, and darkness, and decay, and death." The whip ripped pieces of flesh off his side. Blood gushed out. I led his procession to the place of the skull where we'd crucify him. I mean you should have seen him carrying that cross. He was drooling all over himself. He had blood caked to his face. You want to know what he looked like? I remember when I was a kid we had a dog die near our house and the birds had started picking at it. THAT's what this dude looked like—like that dog. *Disgusting*. And he kept moaning and crying. ***Oh Lord Jesus, have mercy.***

When we reached the hill, I had the guys strip him naked and nail him to the cross beams. He screamed when we did that, and kept screaming until it was finished. We even put a sign above his head to mess with the Jews. It said: Jesus of Nazareth—King of the Jews. Hilarious. Eventually, he just hung there. The only noise he made now was a whistle through his nose and his suffocated breathing. Then, we waited.

[JESUS' FINAL WORDS] As time pressed on, the sky grew ominous, dark. Women were wailing. People walked by and mocked him, "If you're so powerful and the true Son of God, pull yourself down off that cross! Oh, you can't?? Well, you must be a fraud!" Until he did manage to get a few words out.

You want to know what he said? This guy was hanging. No hope in sight. And he looked up into the heavens and then down at us and he started saying over and over again, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do. Father forgive them, they know not what they do. Father forgive them, they know not what they do." Over and over. I lost it. I had to turn away. ***Oh Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.***

I began looking around. No one seemed any different. *What just happened?* Then Jesus looked up again and said, "My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?" Finally, at about 3pm, Jesus spoke his final words. I remember them so clearly: "It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit." I mean WHAT WAS THAT? Who was this man? ARGH! I know now. How can I deny it? How can I be an honest man and deny what I know to be true? He HAS to be more than what they said he was. No one dies like that. So, YES, I said it! SURELY he is the Son of God.

END SCENE.

What are we to make of a story like that? Entrenched in a particular way of living, passionate for Rome, zealous for his brothers-in-arms, allegiant to Caesar, the Son of God, and yet HERE he allows God to take him where God wants to take him.

We don't know what happened next with this guy, but he was confronted with three ways I think Jesus wants to take you and me into a deeper, richer, more fruitful, more compelling faith.

1. WONDER

I recently saw a Twitter account called The Hellenist tweet (view online sermon to see the photo). Look at what it says. Only on Twitter!

What's interesting about this account is how it embodies Greco-Roman thinking in a lot of ways. It feels so counter-cultural to us today. But I would imagine this is some of the water that the Centurion would have been swimming in when he watched Jesus die. But something about this man, something about this (see the photo) upended his life. Somehow, somehow THAT picture got this hardened, Rome-allegiant centurion to utter words of treason and sedition. Somehow, the poor, weak, crucified Jesus got him to say, "SURELY, this is the Son of God."

Edward Shillito has a poem. He writes:

**The other gods were strong / but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds but Thou alone.**

It was beauty and *wonder* that slipped behind this centurion's defenses and procured a newfound devotee. It wasn't fear or insecurity or his being gullible. It was the beauty and goodness of Jesus' sacrifice that caused in him a change of allegiance. When I think of my own life, perhaps MOST of what God has used to draw me to him is being struck with WONDER and AWE at the person of Christ.

When I was a sophomore in high school, right in the midst of my "wise fool" years, in the midst of a stronghold, Christ on the cross met me and WONDER reigned in my heart. Years later, I'm at a Jesuit retreat center outside of Chicago. I'm sitting on a bench looking up at a crucifix. And I'm struck with the crucified Jesus who knows everything about me yet would die on that cross for me.

Fast forward a couple years after that. I'm sitting in my home at my kitchen table feeling empty but then I open to John 4 and I have tears streaming down my face because Jesus met me there. Here's the thing: God wants to take you to a place of *reverent wonder*.

For some of you this has already happened. Good. He wants to take you deeper still. For others of you, maybe you're sitting here not IN WONDER (Surely! He's the Son of God!), but you're WONDER-ING, "IS he the Son of God?" Here's what I'll say: My mind has reasons for believing in Jesus to be the Son of God that my heart knows not, but as Pascal says, "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of..."—experiences of Jesus, experiences of awe, experiences of wonder, experiences of beauty, experiences of the Jesus who hung on a cross forgiving his enemies, who sacrificed his life for you, who holds tender mercy in his heart towards you, whose sole disposition towards you is love.

Like the centurion, will you allow God to take you into a life of WONDER?

That's #1: **WONDER**. Here's #2: **ZEAL**.

Here's the deal: God doesn't just want you to be on board with what the Bible says, he wants whole-life devotion. God wants you to turn the temperature up on your devotion to Him. Wherever it's at, he wants it turned up a few notches.

When I was a kid, we had a gas furnace but we never used it. We heated our house with a wood burning stove. Every summer I'd chop wood with dad and then in the winters, we'd burn it. Without that stove, the house would be freezing. Wasn't hard for it to be 32 degrees like it was outside. So, we'd have to burn the logs. But the thing with the logs is, they burn up, and the heat dispels. When that happened, the fire died and the temperature cooled.

Here's why I share that: I share that because some of you have been neglecting the fire and your house is getting cold. The fire you had at first has waned. Too many of us have gotten comfortable with the temperature at 55 degrees. We think it's normal.

When I think about the Roman centurion, I imagine that coming to the realization that Caesar is not the Son of God and that Jesus is wouldn't diminish the zeal that he had inside of him, it only *redirected* it. The Psalmist says, "Zeal for your house CONSUMES me" (Psalm 69:9). Consumed with zeal. You know the little flame that a bic lighter pops out? I wonder if too many of us are content and satisfied with a little bic lighter's worth of passion and zeal for Jesus. Instead of living our lives saying, "SURELY HE IS THE SON OF GOD!" we've been lulled into a passionless faith that's more like: "surely he's the son of God."

Will you allow God to take you into a life of ZEAL? Because what I think God is saying to us is this: PUT A LOG ON THE FIRE. TURN UP THE HEAT. How do you do that? You get close to the source of heat! If you want your water to boil you don't move your pot to the counter; you keep it on the stove.

So, #1: **WONDER**. #2: **ZEAL**. Here's #3: **OBEDIENCE**.

Ew. Gross word, right? *Obedience*. Again, we don't know for sure, but I would imagine Jesus would take his radical obedience to Rome and redirect it towards King Jesus. Honestly, I think that so many of us want to be like the centurion and say with every ounce of our being, "SURELY, he is the Son of God!" But in reality, what we say is, "SURELY he is the Son of God...*sometimes*" with dissonance our lives. I think what this story is calling us to is to give way to radical obedience to Jesus—radical obedience to love your neighbors, radical obedience to mission, radical obedience to Christian ethics, radical obedience to proclaiming the gospel.

There was this time Jesus said, "**If you love me, keep my commands**" (John 14:15). "If you love me, DO WHAT I SAY," Jesus says.

- "But what if in my heart I don't feel bad about the thing I know your Word says not to do?"
 - IF you love me, keep my commands.
- "But what if I don't think it's a big deal?"
 - IF you love me, keep my commands.
- "But what if I haven't done the requisite interior work?"
 - IF you love me, keep my commands.

Look, God desires obedience from you but not because he's a tyrant or a killjoy. God's saying, "All that I ask of you is only for your good, your flourishing! My Beloved, *trust* me."

Wonder, zeal, obedience. Are you willing to let God take you as far as He wants to take you in the spiritual life?

Let me wrap up with this.

On one of the days I was prepping for this message, I was sitting in a Starbucks, reading this passage over and over again, trying to put myself in the story. I found myself closing my eyes and imagining Jesus in front of me, and saying, “Surely, you are the Son of God. Surely, you are the Son of God. Surely, you are the Son of God.”

In doing that, I could feel my heart shift in literally ALL 3 of these areas! I don’t know where my allegiance walking into Starbucks was, but walking out I felt renewed. I felt recalibrated. I walked out going THIS is who I’m living life for.

CS LEWIS says:

Christ says, “Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cutoff a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked – the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead.”

Jesus is worthy of giving your everything to. He is worthy of giving your loyalty to, your zeal, your passion, your obedience to for either the first time or for the 1,000th time.