

THE TOUGHEST MAN IN JERUSALEM
Sermon Series: "Faces at the Cross"
March 26, 2017 –Matthew 27: 45-54
The Church of the Covenant

Who was the toughest man in Jerusalem? If there was an "iron man" or America Ninja Warrior competition who would have won? The Centurion who is mentioned in Matthew 27 would have also been the same Centurion who was responsible for the scourging and beating of Jesus in the Praetorium. Centurions were responsible for the escort of prisoners, especially when they were about to be crucified. Over the course of his service how many crucifixions would he have been responsible for? 100? 1,000? 10,000? So he would have been coarse and hardened and jaded where such matters were concerned –just one more expendable soul the Empire needed to crucify in order to maintain order. He would have ordered the brutal scourging of Jesus. He would have consented to Jesus' mockery. He ordered Jesus to have been beaten to within an inch of his life. He would have ordered that Jesus carry his own cross to Calvary. He would have ordered Jesus to be nailed to the cross. He was a man in authority. He was the one most personally responsible for giving the orders to kill Jesus. He was a hardened veteran with a hard heart. He had seen it all. Perhaps he was the toughest man in Jerusalem.

How many virtual brutal killings have we observed through television and the movies? 100? 1,000? 10,000? How have we desensitized ourselves to brutish, cruel, and hardened behaviors?

The Centurion who is mentioned in Matthew 27 because of his assignment was probably a long time, battle-hardened Centurion. Centurions were known for their experience and valor. They were the principal professional officer leading a centuria, approximately 100 legionaries, that by 30 AD had conquered most of the known ancient world. They were the backbone of the Roman legions, grizzled veterans, sometimes the third or fourth son of a noble Roman family who had lost their wealth. They led by example, they led from the front, they were in the thick of the fighting. They led by displaying the greatest courage on the battlefield. Tough, brutish, exemplifying the old Roman virtues in service to the senate and people of Rome. As a youth in training he would have been beaten with a wooden staff every day. A typical Centurion of this age, Siccius Dentatus, had been in 120 battles, 8 single combat duels with barbarians, 45 battle scars, 34 separate awards for valor, had single-handedly recaptured the Legion's standard from barbarians. He would have used a short sword, a gladius hispanicus, so killing was up close and personal, blood-spattered and feeling the twisting sword in the carcass of a dead enemy of Rome, less than a foot away. The brutishness of the Centurions was why the Roman Empire conquered the known world. Perhaps this man, this Centurion, was The Toughest Man in Jerusalem.

How many virtual brutal killings have we allowed our children to experience through all the video games we allow them to play? , 100? 1,000? 10,000? How have we desensitized even our children to brutish, cruel and hardened behaviors? Perhaps in the retelling of the story of Jesus, perhaps we can no longer even feel the awfulness and cruel inhumanity of His cross anymore? So jaded are we, so hardened has become our heart, so immune to human suffering are we anymore?

So this Centurion is observing Jesus. The Centurion is a man's man, as tough as nails, no mere push-over, no part of his heart allowed for compassion and sympathy. He's crucified thousands. He has watched as Jesus has suffered the physical cruelty and depravity of the scourgings and beatings and mockery in the Praetorium courtyard. He watched as this Jesus does not beg for his life as does every other prisoner he has ever crucified. No, this Jesus does not even open his mouth, as a sheep going to his shearers, Jesus does not even utter a word in his own self-defense. As a lamb going to the slaughter,

Jesus keeps His own counsel. Jesus allows his life to speak for itself. He lets the Lord God Almighty fight His battles for Him. Jesus allows his own integrity, what he has done and what he has said to speak volumes. He needs no defense. He does not whine nor whimper nor complain, nor shake his fist at heaven saying, "Why me, God?" This Centurion has seen a thousand people face the cross and only this man Jesus walks through the midst of it with strength and dignity. Where does this strength come from? Where does this inner power emerge? Whence commeth His strength and resiliency for facing the crosses in life????? Perhaps the toughest man in Jerusalem, the man who has encased his heart with stone, the Centurion is now observing Jesus; Jesus has this Centurion's attention. He has watched thousands die around him; He has run through thousands with his gladius, up close and personal, he has crucified hundreds perhaps thousands, why is this JESUS so very different?????

So the Centurion would have given the order to crucify Jesus. He would have been the one to order the use of cruel nails rather than merely tying Jesus to the cross with stout ropes. He would have watched as his legionaries nailed the nails into Jesus' hands and feet. Jesus, strong and silent, unflinching, unbowed, and unbroken. "Who is this Jesus?" he must have asked by now. He would have seen the heavy cross raised from the ground and roughly dropped into place. And this Centurion, who ordinarily would have looked away from his cruel handiwork, now looks up to see and to study in detail this man who this day he is crucifying; this tough man looks up into the face of the man he has just nailed to the cross. What does he see? What does he hear? "Father, forgive them they know not what they do." Forgiveness and mercy even for the cruel men who nailed Him there. "Mother, this is your son; son, this is your Mother." Jesus has a family whom He loves. "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" O, the humanity and the divinity. Our cruelty, our inhumanity, our lack of feeling, our inability to be moved even by our Lord's death on a cross anymore, our lack of compassion for others, our desensitized souls, our cold hearts, our "we've heard about Jesus going to the cross for us and we don't really care anymore", the same thing that nailed Jesus to the cross 2,000 years ago, still nails Jesus to the cross today. Because if we really did care, if we really did let what Jesus did for us 2,000 years at Calvary get through to our cold, unfeeling and distant heart then we couldn't live our lives the same way we do. We would have to live our lives for HIM, because HE lives His life for us. We would have to be willing to pick up His cross and actively follow HIM because He carried our cross for us. We would have to have love and compassion for others. We would have to forgive as we have been forgiven. We would have to live for HIM because He has died for us!!!! The Centurion, with his cold, brutish heart, saw something in Jesus. Jesus got through. The Centurion thought he was the toughest man in Jerusalem that day. But he had met his match. Because Jesus Christ on the cross was the toughest man in Jerusalem that day. Not the Centurion. Jesus.

The Centurion, and everyone who thinks they can go it alone in life because they are strong, is a face at the foot of the cross. He looks up into the eyes of the man he has crucified and he declares for the ages: **"Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27: 54)** Did you know that "son of god" is a title given to the Caesars and Emperors of Rome? Augustus Caesar was by 30AD considered divine and there were temples dedicated to him throughout the Empire. He was Caesar and Emperor, Censor, Tribune, Pontifex Maximus. Augustus, his title was "The Emperor, son of god." So this Centurion, who had fought his whole life for his Emperor, who had sacrificed and given his life for Rome, at the foot of the cross, this tough man with a hard heart declared: "This Jesus is the Son of God...not Augustus". Everything I have lived my life for is now transformed in an instant and I live my life for this man whom I have crucified. From where does your strength come from in your life? When you are in the midst of those crucifying moments in life where is the center of your strength? Psalm 27 declares: *"The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom (and of what) shall I be afraid????"* Jesus was and is the toughest man

in Jerusalem because His strength came from the Lord on that day. May you draw your strength from HIM TODAY!!! Because TRULY JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD! Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*