

# The Soldiers and the Saviour

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[0:00] Well, for a short while this evening, we're not going to consider the whole of that passage that we've just read, but five verses in the middle of it, verses 32 to 36.

So Matthew 27, verses 32 to 36 is our text. And in these verses, things are not as they seem. Now, I don't mean by that that Jesus' cross wasn't really carried by a man from Cyrene called Simon, and he wasn't really taken to a place called Golgotha, and he wasn't really crucified. I'm not denying for one moment the literal occurrence of all the events narrated here. No, when I say that things are not as they seem, I mean this. Who seems to be in control in these verses? Who seems to be calling the shots? To use an expression that President Trump famously used in his Oval Office spat with President Zelensky last year, who seems to have the cards?

[1:14] Well, the answer is the people indicated by that pronoun, they. They appears in every verse in our passage. Sometimes more than once. Who exactly is being described?

Well, you have to go back to verse 27, where Matthew refers to the soldiers of the governor. And all the subsequent occurrences of they, first of all in verses 27 to 31, but then also in our text, verses 32 to 36, it's those soldiers of the governor still.

And so to go back to my question then, who seems to be calling the shots here? Well, they do. The Roman soldiers do. Pontius Pilate's soldiers seem very much in charge here, robustly initiating and dictating everything that happens.

And Matthew wants us, as we engage with this text, to be immediately struck by that. However, having been immediately struck by it, he then wants us to look harder.

Or if you like, he wants us to put on a different pair of spectacles. And he wants us to realize that the dominance of the soldiers here is actually an illusion.

[2:29] It's not real. All the details that on the face of things manifest the strength and clout of those men, in a deeper way, they point in fact to something else.

Matthew wants us to see this passage operates at two different levels. Yes, there's the apparent story of the intimidating soldiers, but then there's the actual story of the invincible savior.

So let's spend a few minutes then walking through the apparent story of the intimidating soldiers. And the first thing we come to is what I'm going to call the grabbing.

The grabbing. So in verse 32, presumably because Jesus, who initially, according to John's account, carries his own cross out of the city, presumably because he's now too exhausted to continue doing that, the soldiers grab a bystander and they force him to carry the cross.

When you think about it, it's outrageous, this, isn't it? There's a guy in my congregation who's a police officer and he's recently passed his riot police training.

[3:42] And suppose then there's some protest or something going on in Newcastle City Centre and he's there on duty with all his riot gear.

But he's a bit tired and things are fairly quiet and there's no sign of anything kicking off. And so to give himself some respite, this is what he does. He picks on some guy that he sees walking out of Tesco and he says to him in his meanest tone of voice, carry my riot shield for me.

The man seems reluctant to carry the shield. And so my friend, undeterred by this, raises his truncheon menacingly and basically forces the man to comply.

I mean, that story would be all over the news, wouldn't it? There would be an investigation, there would be disciplinary proceedings. It would probably spell the end of my friend's career. You can't use your position as a police officer to commandeer people and force them to carry heavy objects

for you.

It would be scandalous behaviour. But Roman soldiers could commandeer people and force them to carry heavy objects for them. It was a common occurrence. Jesus alludes to it elsewhere in chapter 5, verse 41 of this Gospel.

[4:53] And here then, these Roman soldiers commandeer this man, Simon, and force him to carry a very heavy object indeed, that massive wooden beam from which Jesus will be suspended at Golgotha.

And they don't have to worry about any disciplinary proceedings. They don't have to worry that Simon may lodge a complaint or pursue compensation in the courts or something. No, they are Roman soldiers.

They can do this kind of thing. They can grab a man, a random member of the public, and they can treat him like a farm animal loading stuff onto his back.

I'm saying these men look impressive in verse 32. They look intimidating. They are powerful guys who do as they please and get what they want.

And so that's the first thing in our walk through these verses, the grabbing. But then next, as we continue our walk, we have the giving. The giving. Because in verse 34, the soldiers give Jesus something.

[5:55] They give him wine to drink mixed with gall. And strangely enough, the purpose of this concoction, the purpose of wine mixed with gall, is to ease his pain.

Why, then, are the soldiers giving him that? Are they taking pity on him here? Are they displaying for a moment at least a softer side to their characters? Do they stop being intimidating and domineering for a moment in verse 34?

Well, no, I don't think so. There was a story on the BBC website the other day about the war in Ukraine, and specifically about how some of the Russian commanders on the front line treat their own troops.

Apparently, they demand their men to go into battle in dangerous places with inadequate protection, effectively suicide missions, where the chances of being gunned down by the Ukrainians are extremely high.

And so some of these Roman soldiers, they refuse to do it. They disobey their commanders. And as a consequence, they are severely punished. They are subjected to all kinds of inhumane treatment.

[7:08] The BBC journalist who wrote the article has talked with some of these soldiers who either experienced such things themselves or who witnessed others experiencing it. The journalist was shown a video filmed at a Russian camp on the front line.

The video shows a pit in the ground that's covered over. The lid is then lifted up off the pit, revealing several men who are detained inside the pit.

Soldiers, apparently, who have resisted their commander's orders. Are you hungry? The forlorn men in the video are asked. They nod and hold out their hands.

Some dry grains are thrown into the pit. The men catch as many as they can and wolf them down.

There's laughter from the senior officers who are standing around the pit watching the scene.

And the lid is then put back on. What's going on there? The commanders are giving those detained soldiers food. They could lead them to starve.

[8:10] So are they being kind then? Well, no, they're not being kind. They are enjoying the fact that those men in the pit are entirely at their mercy. They are relishing the sight of them, desperately seizing on whatever scraps they choose to give them.

And something similar is going on here in our passage. The Roman soldiers aren't being kind in verse 34. They are just enjoying the fact they are in control of whether and when Jesus receives pain relief.

He's at their mercy. They love the idea of this man who thinks he's a great king. And remember, they've already mocked him mercilessly about that back in the governor's headquarters. They love the idea of King Jesus now desperately guzzling down whatever drugs they choose to give him.

And so don't be fooled by this giving in verse 34. The soldiers at this point have been just as controlling and oppressive as in the rest of the scene. Here too, they are using intimidation tactics.

Here too, they're absolutely throwing their weight around. So there's the grabbing and the giving. And then thirdly, there's the gambling.

[9:25] The gambling in verse 35. They divide his garments and cast lots for them. And I don't think we should view this as solely or even primarily the soldiers having a bit of fun.

Newcastle United's football ground, as many of you will know, is called St. James' Park. And if you do the official tour of St. James' Park, one of the most striking parts of that tour is seeing the away team's changing room.

It's dreadful. Think of your PE changing room at high school. And it's like that, if not slightly worse. It's small. It's drab.

It's airless. Why is that? Well, it's not because the away team's changing room just gets a bit overlooked and forgotten about whenever any refurbishments have been done at the stadium.

On the contrary, the powers that be at St. James' Park have given a lot of thought to that changing room. Indeed, they've given a lot of thought to the entire route that the opposition players take from the moment they step off the coach through the stadium to the changing room.

[10:32] And they've plastered the walls of the relevant corridors with huge images of Newcastle's best players over the years and Newcastle's best moments over the years. And everything then, everything about the corridors, everything about the changing room is designed to get under their skin, get under the opposition players' skin and unsettle them and put them off their stride.

And in a similar way, everything about a Roman crucifixion was carefully thought through and intentional. In this case, everything was designed to heap upon the victim the maximum shame. So that when the soldiers started to gamble for the victim's clothes, that wasn't an impromptu thing any more than it was an impromptu thing when they installed that extremely low ceiling in the away team's changing room at St. James' Park.

No, it was a highly calculated action on the soldiers' parts aimed at increasing the victim's shame. I mean, the very fact that his clothes were in the soldiers' hands at all meant that the victim was unclothed, naked.

And that, of course, created immense shame. But then when on top of that, the soldiers gambled for the victim's clothes, what was that saying to him? It was saying to him, your clothes are more valuable than you are.

[12:01] We'll dispense with you, but we'll keep your clothes. They are the only thing about you that is worth anything. It doesn't matter what happens to your body, your limbs, your organs.

No one cares about them. They can be battered. They can be butchered. They can be salvaged. But your clothes, they mustn't go to waste. That's what soldiers at a crucifixion were saying when they gambled.

And that's what these soldiers are saying then to Jesus. Jesus, you remember, had lived for the last three years in a pretty hand-to-mouth kind of way. I don't suppose his clothes are anything to write home about.

I don't suppose they are classy garments purchased from Jerusalem's equivalent of Savile Row. They are most likely very plain, very basic items.

And indeed, plain, basic items now drenched in blood because Jesus has been flogged twice prior to the crucifixion. I'm saying Jesus' clothes are not desirable, but these soldiers want him to know that they are more desirable to them than he is.

[13:08] They want to rub it in his face that they are more concerned about a bundle of bloody rags than they are about him. Again then, these men are being brutal here.

Their cruelty is in full flow and they are sparing no effort to ensure that Jesus' ordeal is as bad as it can possibly be. They are pulling out all the stops and turning the screw tighter and tighter and tighter.

So the grabbing, the giving, the gambling, and then one more thing, the guarding. The guarding, verse 36, then they sat down and kept watch over him there.

Jesus has loyal followers who might attempt some kind of rescue mission. Moreover, given that Jesus thinks he's a great king, he might attempt himself some Houdini-like escape from the situation.

And so they guard the cross, but not in a twitchy way. Not all on edge and anxious. No, they sit down, Matthew says.

[14:17] Sitting down in the New Testament and indeed in Matthew's Gospel often represents authority. Jesus has announced to the Sanhedrin in the previous chapter, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power.

Earlier in this chapter, Pilate is described as sitting on his judgment seat. In the next chapter, the angel of the Lord at Jesus' tomb will grandly sit on the stone that he has removed from the entrance.

And the soldiers here, they sit. They're in control of what is going on at Golgotha. They're not faze. They're not pacing around tensely. They are calm and confident and self-assured.

Let any of Jesus' followers try any funny business. Let Jesus himself try any funny business. They're ready. They have it covered. They'll put a stop to anyone who tries to sabotage this crucifixion.

And once again then, verse 36 displays a strong bunch of men who are not to be messed with. And so we've walked through the passage now and we've engaged with it at that first level.

[15:28] We felt the formidableness of these men, these soldiers, as they grab irresistibly a random man to carry the cross, as they give on their terms pain-numbing wine to Jesus, as they gamble humiliatingly for Jesus' clothes, and as they guard the scene with effortless control.

We've seen clearly and unmistakably the apparent story of the intimidating soldiers. But now we must, on that different pair of spectacles I mentioned earlier, now we must see past the apparent story of the intimidating soldiers to the actual story of the invincible savior.

The actual story of the invincible savior. And all we're going to do is walk through those same four details that I've just highlighted, but we're going to do so in reverse order.

And we're going to do so no longer wincing at their grim surface-level significance, but now smiling as we perceive deeper, happier realities.

So first of all, the guarding. Remember I said we're working backwards now. The guarding. And surely Matthew writes, verse 36, with a twinkle in his eye.

[16:55] Actually, there's even a bit of dark humor there, I think. I mean, if the soldiers only knew what a good-for-nothing bunch of men Jesus' followers were, they would discount altogether the possibility of a rescue attempt.

Jesus' followers have all vanished into the woodwork, for goodness sake. There are some women there looking on from a distance, verse 55, but the guys, they took fright back in the olive grove the previous night, and they're now nowhere to be seen.

The soldiers are more likely to see a pig flying across Golgotha's skies than to get any grief from Peter and Andrew and Thomas and co. But there's more than just dark humor in the verse.

The real reason for the twinkle in Matthew's eye is this. The sheer preposterousness of the idea that Jesus would even consider, even consider for a moment coming down from that cross.

He's not on the cross because he's been overpowered by the Jewish leaders and the Roman governor and the imperial troops. He's on the cross because this is why he came into the world in the first place.

[18:05] You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins, chapter 1, verse 21. And because this is where he has been heading all along, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, chapter 20, verse 28.

He's on the cross by his own volition because there are millions of sinners whom he loves ferociously and is absolutely determined to save. Matthew, I'm saying, writes verse 36 with a heavy dose of irony.

Perhaps we can see that even more clearly if we translate the verse slightly differently. It could be rendered simply, they sat down and kept him there. That's what the soldiers think they are doing.

They think they are keeping Jesus on that cross. No, they're not. No, they're not. An infinitely greater force is keeping Jesus on that cross.

An infinitely greater force than the might of the entire Roman army, let alone this little handful of soldiers. There's a hymn that goes, was it the nails, O Saviour, that bound you to the tree?

[19:23] Or we could change it to, was it the soldiers, O Saviour, that bound you to the tree? The hymn goes on, no, it was your everlasting love, your love for me, for me.

That's what was keeping Jesus on the cross, his love for me and for you. The soldiers could have all fallen asleep. It wouldn't have made any difference.

They could have sneaked home early and spent the rest of the Friday with their families. It wouldn't have made any difference because they weren't actually needed in order to keep Jesus on the cross.

The thought of you, believer, was enough to keep Jesus on the cross. The thought of you and your sins and your need of a ransom, that was more than enough to keep the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

He was not going anywhere until he had dealt completely with all of your guilt and could finally cry, it is finished.

[20:27] And so rejoice, believer, this evening. Rejoice in your invincible Saviour, who in fact was far more determined to stay on that cross and save you than the soldiers were to keep him on that cross.

The guarding. As we continue our walk backwards, we come next to the gambling. The gambling. And yes, as we said then, the soldiers' gambling was a nasty, belittling action.

It was intended to make Jesus feel worthless as he watched his clothes afforded more respect than he was being afforded. But you don't have to be Albert Einstein to work out there's something else going on with this gambling.

You just need to have a little bit of Old Testament knowledge, or in our case this evening, actually, you just need to have been concentrating when we sang from Psalm 22. Because this is the thing. Those soldiers at the foot of the cross are no doubt smirking at how cleverly, how effortlessly, just by playing a little game, just by casting a few lots, they are dismaying Jesus even further, crushing his spirit even more, breaking his heart into even more pieces.

[21:46] How powerful it's making them feel. But they might be smirking rather less and feeling rather less powerful if they knew that they were in fact dutifully fulfilling a prophecy that was uttered a millennium earlier.

Psalm 22, verse 18, they divide my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots. They think they are doing as they please with Jesus.

They are in control of the shame dial and they can turn it up another notch whenever they want. At this point through a bit of verbal jeering, at this point through something else, and at this point through casually initiating a sweepstake for Jesus' clothes.

But in reality, God is doing as he pleases with them. He's the one at the control desk with all the knobs and buttons and dials in front of him. And one of those dials is labeled the soldiers.

And one notch on that dial is labeled gambling for Jesus' clothes. And God has, as it were, the full schedule, the full itinerary of that Friday's events there beside him.

[22:57] He wrote it before the world began. He revealed a few of its details to the psalmist in 1000 BC. And at just the right moment then, he turns the appropriate dial to the gambling notch.

And sure enough, the soldiers begin their game. They aren't in the driving seat. They aren't, as they foolishly imagine, wiping the floor with Jesus the phony king.

God is in the driving seat. God is wiping out your sins and mine through Jesus the invincible savior. And Jesus knows Psalm 22.

He's going to quote it a little bit later on. And as he looks down then at the gambling soldiers, yes, he does feel pangs of humiliation because he's a sensitive soul made of the same stuff that you and I are made of.

And it is hurtful that he's despised while his stupid clothes, of all things, are coveted. But in the cocktail of emotions swirling around his heart, there's surely also in that moment a feeling of relief

and satisfaction.

[24:09] If the soldiers are gambling for my clothes, then things are on track. My father's program is being carried out to the letter and I am indeed in the process here of saving a vast multitude.

It didn't enter the soldiers' minds that their gambling was encouraging Jesus and reassuring Jesus. How could an action carefully designed to remove Jesus' last vestiges of dignity, how could it possibly encourage and reassure him?

But because Jesus sees in their casting of lots another of the prophecies being ticked off. And he sees therefore your salvation inching that little bit nearer.

And he prizes you and your salvation more than he prizes his own dignity. And so he's glad in that moment. Even as they gamble for his clothes at the foot of the cross, he's glad in that moment. The very thing intended to mortify him gladdens him. So the guarding, the gambling, thirdly the giving.

[25:22] The giving, remember we said that the sight of Jesus, the man who thought he was a great king, the sight of Jesus dependent on their clemency, greedily devouring whatever pain relief they give him, that sight will give the soldiers a huge kick.

And so sniggering like the men in that video chucking grain into the pits, the soldiers extend the wine to Jesus waiting for this pathetic figure to frantically lap up the stuff that they're giving him. Except that that doesn't happen, does it? Things take a very unexpected turn. Jesus takes one little taste of the stuff, realizes presumably what it is, and instead of opening his mouth as wide as he can and imbibing as much of the stuff as he possibly can, he shuts his mouth.

He refuses to take another drop. The soldiers' sniggers are suddenly exchanged for frowns. Jesus isn't playing ball. He isn't abjectly at their mercy after all.

You see, what the soldiers haven't bargained for is that even when Jesus is suspended by nails on a wooden cross enduring one of the most barbaric forms of torture known to man, pain relief is not his number one priority.

[26:49] Amazingly, saving us is a higher priority to him than that. And how, we need to ask, is he saving us here?

He's saving us by experiencing in our place the divine punishment that we deserve as sinners. To put it bluntly, he's saving us by experiencing our hell for us.

And this is the thing. In hell, there's nothing available to ease the torment. There's no pharmacy in hell.

There's no boots outlet in hell where you can pick up something to temper the ravages of the holy wrath of God. There are no helps in hell on offer to take the edge off the misery and make the whole thing a wee bit more bearable.

And were Christ then to endure hell at Golgotha ever so slightly spaced out from the gall that's in that wine.

[27:58] Ever so slightly woozy from the soldier's narcotics. It would represent a terrible question mark over his substitutionary work.

Had he adequately been punished in our place? Was justice fully satisfied by this drugged up savior? And he won't countenance a question mark like that hanging over his atoning sacrifice. He's not going to cut corners and barely just about get our salvation over the line. He's going to do the thing properly. He's going to do it beyond any possible doubt.

He's going to do it in such a way that Satan himself can pick no holes in this salvation. He's going to drink the cup of God's wrath that he has talked about in Gethsemane with all his faculties fully operative.

Altogether compass mentis. Altogether conscious of every horror, every terror, every monstrosity contained in that cup.

[29:03] And to that end then, he refuses to drink this other cup, this literal cup, this numbing, dulling, stupefying, desensitizing cup.

What a savior this is. You and I can be absolutely sure this evening he took our hell. He took our hell unambiguously he took it and we therefore are safe.

We're safe. These soldiers trying to assert their power over Jesus by allowing him as much or as little pain relief as they fancy, they're actually an irrelevancy here.

They pale into insignificance. They're a mere footnote in verse 34. the glory of that verse is this invincible savior going the whole hog and doing whatever it takes to render you and me absolutely immune to the miseries of hell.

The guarding, the gambling, the giving, and then lastly, the grabbing. The grabbing, the soldiers, you remember, show their strength in verse 32 by grabbing that man and compelling him to carry a cross.

[30:22] So what's the deeper reality that Matthew wants us to perceive there? Well, surely this, Jesus does that too. He grabs men and women and compels them to carry a cross because carrying a cross is a way of describing being a follower of Jesus.

He himself has described it in that way in this gospel. Chapter 16 verse 24, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And Jesus then grabs people and makes them cross-carrying followers of himself.

You think of the very writer of this gospel, Matthew. He had been a tax collector, you remember, just getting on with his life. He hadn't gone looking for Jesus. But one day Jesus had come to his very tax booth.

You can read about it in chapter 9, verse 9. And he had grabbed Matthew and he had made Matthew a lifelong cross carrier. And so Matthew wants us on our second deeper reading of verse 32 to recognize that what the soldiers do here, Jesus does too.

But not only that, Jesus does it better. Jesus does it better. If their grabbing of Simon was a display of their might, Jesus is mightier still.

[31:50] How come? Why do I say that? Well, Jesus' grabbing of people is superior to these soldiers' grabbing of people in two ways. Number one, Jesus does it on a vaster scale.

I mean, think of it, Roman soldiers don't even exist anymore, do they? When was the last time you saw a Roman soldier patrolling the streets of Glasgow? They're long gone. They're the stuff of history. They ain't grabbing people in 2026, but Jesus is.

He's been doing it now for two millennia. We can be certain that even this very day, he has grabbed more people in this world. And in parts of the earth, indeed, that were utterly untouched by the Roman Empire in all its pomp and splendor.

So Jesus does it on a vaster scale, and then the second way that his grabbing is better. Jesus does it winning hearts and minds in the process. Jesus does it winning hearts and minds in the process. I don't suppose that Simon was exactly chuffed to bits to be apprehended like this by these Roman soldiers. I don't suppose he felt a grand sense of honor and privilege as he bent over and braced himself for this heavy wooden beam to be loaded on his back.

[33:04] But you see, when Jesus grabs people, it's every bit as irresistible and inescapable as when the Roman soldiers did it, but it's never unwelcome.

Those he grabs must follow him. They must become his disciples. They must take up a cross. But at the same time, those he grabs never do those things begrudgingly and complainingly.

Isn't that a wonderful thing? Here we are this evening. And our Christianity is not some mere lifestyle choice that we all made. We have been forcibly enlisted in Jesus' service.

We could not possibly evade his mighty call on our lives when it came. But which of us here wishes that we could have done? Which of us here wishes that Jesus had reached out for someone else instead and grabbed them and left us alone?

None of us wishes that, do we? None of us would have had it any other way. I'm saying then these Roman soldiers, for all their sound and fury, there in verse 32, they are amateur grabbers.

[34:15] The real grabber of people is this invincible saviour, Jesus Christ. In fact, we've good reason to think that he's the real grabber of Simon of Cyrene, actually.

How does Matthew even know this man's name? Probably because he became a part of the Christian community. That is to say, his involvement with Jesus on Good Friday led to him being converted.

That is to say, in the very grabbing of his collar by some Roman soldier, he was really being grabbed by a greater hand. He was being grabbed by the very man whose cross he was about to

carry.

I hope he has grabbed you. And if not, I hope he's in the process, even this very night of grabbing you. You know, it really is, there really is nothing better.

Nothing better in all the world. It may sound crazy, and if it hasn't happened to you yet, it will sound crazy, but there really is nothing better in all the world than to be forcibly seized, mightily seized by the all-conquering, invincible, Jesus Christ.

[ 35 : 37 ] Amen .