

Those beholding Christ's death (Quality: Good)

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[0 : 0 0] Let us turn this evening to Luke and the 23rd chapter, the Gospel according to Luke, the 23rd chapter, verses 47 to 49. Luke 23, 47 to 49. Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man. And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts and returned.

And all his acquaintance and the women that followed him from Galilee stood afar off, beholding these things. Now what occasioned these verses? We know the answer to that question.

It was the crucifixion of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. And the preceding verses tell us how the sun was darkened and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. And having said thus he gave up the ghost. Here is the death of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. The dying bed of many is an impressive scene, deeply moving. Oftentimes it is a private thing witnessed only by a few family, perhaps some friends. Maybe the doctor is present, perhaps the minister of the gospel.

And it is, as I say, a very solemn. And if it is the going to be with the Lord of a child of God, it is also fraught with a holy joy also. Very deeply impressive time. We think of in the days of the Old Testament, the death bed of Jacob, with his sons gathered around him, blessing them in turn. And then he gathered his feet up into his bed and he gave up the ghost. The spirit departed.

And his soul went to be with the Lord. There is a picture in Providence Chapel, Chichester. It's on the stairs, I think, leading to the upper parts of the building. And it's a picture of the death bed of John Calvin in Geneva in 1564. And the servant of God, now about to take his departure, is sitting up, giving his parting counsels to the many pastors that are gathered round his couch. A moving scene.

[3 : 3 4] It's a very different scene of public execution, though. We have them not in this land since the ending of the death penalty. But it was, prior to that, not uncommon for there to be a public execution.

In the days more distant back in history, it was very public. There was the witness of the beheading or the hanging to a multitude that assembled for the occasion. And that was solemn, too, in another sense. Still, of course, in certain lands. Still, the practice we know in some of these Arab lands that there are summary public executions still, and in other parts of the world likewise.

When you come to the death of God's Son, the Holy Son of God, you would have imagined it would have been a most moving scene, and of the private nature, with farewell being taken with dignity. And people gathered to hear the dying utterances of the one about to be removed from them. But of course, the death of God's Son is unique, utterly different.

And he is one that was subjected to public execution and all the ignominy and all the shame of it.

There was no dignity about it, although he brought a dignity to it. But he was made a spectacle. He was, to the Jew, cursed is every one that hangeth upon a tree. He was visited with that death, which was, according to Roman practice, crucifixion, excruciatingly painful, lingering and protracted, and with the note of disgrace about it.

[5 : 51] And these things were done for our sakes. These things were done for the elect's sake, that there might be obtained the salvation of their souls. As we've been reminded in Hearts Hymn, we are deep in debt, every one of us, some more than others, but all of us debtors, unable to pay our way, unable ever to come forth from the debtor's prison.

Except another pay the price, and he paid the price, the price not of silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, are we redeemed.

And that's why he came to this place, and it was made public, because the wrath of God was poured out upon him. God loved him, and God loved his people, and yet God spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, because it was needful.

It was according to the divine purpose that he should die, the just for the unjust, to bring us unto God.

Now that was the momentous event, this which has divided all human history, the coming and the doing and the dying of Christ.

[7 : 17] We speak of that which was before Christ. We speak of that which is from the day of Christ. And this is the greatest event, I believe, that has ever been witnessed in time, when God gave his Son to the death of the cross, that sinners might live, that mercy might be extended.

And yet it was needful that wrath should be visited upon him, that we might not be condemned, that we might not know wrath brought upon us at any future state.

It was needful that it should be brought upon him, and he died in our place. In my place, says the hymn writer, condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood.

Hallelujah, what a saviour. Now some months ago, now we went through the sufferings of the Lord in a fashion, and we followed the text in the gospel according to John, in chapters 18 and 19, and dealt with certain other places.

But we did not then include any reference to the centurion, and to this 48th verse concerning the people that came together to the site, beholding the things which were done, who smote their breasts and departed.

[8 : 49] And I felt that it was appropriate that we should fill up the omission and seek to think about these verses, and add to them the 49th verse.

All his acquaintance and the women that followed him from Galilee stood afar off, beholding those things, those things connected with the death of God's dear Son for the salvation of the Church.

May then we be led to the cross by these means, and through these persons. We would cry like the Greeks that came up to the feast, Sir, we would see Jesus.

May the Lord be opened up to us. May God help us. Let us begin by consideration of the centurion. The centurion, when he saw what was done, glorified God, saying, certainly this was a righteous man.

Perhaps before we mention the centurion, it's needful to stress the fact that the chief priests had not altered in their enmity. There was no change of heart by these solemn events.

[10 : 06] We find that earlier in this chapter, that they were deriding with the rest. You read it in the 35th verse.

And the people stood beholding, and the rulers also with them derided him, saying, he saved others. Let him save himself, if it be Christ the chosen of God.

Perhaps we should notice, relevant to the verse, now dealing with the centurion, that the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him and offering him vinegar, and saying, if thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.

There was no change of heart, I say, on the part of the rulers of the people, nor did that come later. We find that they go asking that the bodies of Jesus and the thieves be taken down from the cross.

And if they are not already dead, they want their legs broken, according to Roman practice, to hasten, to expedite death, because they don't want them to be on the cross or around when it is the Sabbath.

[11 : 18] And that Sabbath of the Passover was a high Sabbath. It would never do to have this ugliness, to have this that was contrary to the law of God. We don't have any respect to the keeping of the law of God.

They have no love to the person of the Son of God, the great lawgiver himself, who is now brought to know the character of that law, which is holy and just and good, as for the transgression of the law and the transgressors of the law.

He makes atonement thus by his death. But they are not moved themselves. They are of the enemies, the enemies of Christ.

But this centurion is different to return to him. True, he mocked with others, but then they were all of them, the crowd and the rulers and the soldiers, mocking it was what everybody was doing.

And they were all engaged in it. But there was a difference. What made the difference? Well, we shall come to that presently. But this centurion was certainly impressed.

[12 : 29] He glorified God, saying certainly this was a righteous man. The Lord said that he had not met faith in Israel like the faith of this Roman officer.

He said concerning that centurion, many shall come from the east and west and shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. So many that were first shall be last.

And many that were last shall be first. And the Jews that had been so long favored, they who should have been first are as last.

And many that were last of the Gentile world that seem to have no part or portion in God's scheme. They are those that shall be first.

[13 : 36] And Jewish enmity is one of the amazing things that one finds in the gospel record in the Acts of the Apostles subsequently.

The implacable opposition of the Jews. Paul speaks of the Jewish opposition at Thessalonica when he says that they killed the Lord Jesus.

And they are those that have sought to oppose the preaching of his name. We should not be surprised, he says, that there is this opposition for they are those that hate anything to do with Christ.

They killed the Prince of life. They desire that a murderer should be given unto them. And yet there are those who are Gentiles.

As far away one would have thought as any could be that are brought nigh. Of course it's a fulfillment of what we read in Isaiah 11. That in that day which is the day of Christ there will be the gathering of many from various far off places.

[14 : 45] They will be brought, they will be brought to no reconciliation with God through the work of the one that God will send, his dear son.

And this is something of course that comes down in practical terms in chapel life. Why is it that some long favoured with gospel opportunity, brought up with Christian godly influence, why is it that some that have been taken from their earliest days to the house of God are nowhere in their own spiritual experience and yet some that they might judge and perhaps at times do as upstarts and nobodies are brought in and they are brought to faith and true repentance and numbered with the church and brought into all the blessings and privileges of God's people.

Well it's in the sovereignty of God it's because God will be gracious to whom he will be gracious and show mercy to whom he will be gracious. Of course as Paul brings out in the 11th chapter of Romans concerning the mystery of God's purposes to Israel, to the Jewish, the old Israel and to the Gentiles, that very thing should provoke the Jews to seek after God, to call upon God.

And if in the chapels we find that there are those that are brought in and there are those that have been there under the word for years and they don't seem to be benefited or profited by it, it is for them to seek them all, to cry to God, to say if these have been saved, oh show mercy to me, deliver me from wrath to come, bring my soul into the place of liberty, set me free from bondage, deliver me from debt, bring me to know a saving interest in the blood of Christ.

So we find this centurion, a Gentile sinner, impressed, moved, when he saw what was done, who glorified God, saying certainly this was a righteous man.

[16 : 59] There are four centurions mentioned in the New Testament. One behaved courteously to the apostle Paul when he had the charge of Paul to take him from Caesarea to Rome.

And he was with him for many, many months and shared many adventures with him, the hazards of shipwreck at sea, until he was able to deliver up his prisoner in Rome to the God.

He was a man that treated Paul well. We're told his name. His name was Julius. And we're told also that he was of the Augustan band.

That meant that he was one of those centurions, one of those Roman soldiers that belonged to the emperor himself and had special imperial duties to attend.

No doubt in Palestine, his charge was to serve the procurator, the Roman governor. And this was the man into whose charge Paul was entrusted.

[18 : 06] It shows the importance the Romans attached to the conduct of Paul to Rome. He had appealed to Caesar, to Caesar he must therefore go, he must stand in Rome.

And this man took him there as his prisoner. That's one centurion. No doubt he heard the gospel. You couldn't imagine this centurion that treated Paul well, even preventing him from being thrown overboard when someone would have done that.

You can't imagine this man not being told the gospel. Paul would use the opportunity to preach Christ to this man. We're not told concerning the outcome.

But we are told of other centurions. The next in the Acts of the Apostles that we know the name of was this man Cornelius. Cornelius in Acts 10 was a centurion, a Roman centurion.

He was a believing man. He was a man in God's sovereignty who was brought, as we're told, to fear God. He did alms to the nation of the Jews.

[19 : 18] He was a man of prayer. And you know how God sought that Peter should go and preach the gospel fully to him, to bring him in to gospel liberty.

And this man and those that heard the gospel with him, they were brought into the confession of Christ and they were baptized and greatly blessed through the ministry of Peter.

that was another centurion. There was the one whose servant, whose slave was ill that I mentioned a moment past told in the gospel narrative.

This man who had great authority that simply had to say go and a man went, do this and a man did it. And yet he came himself because of the compassion that he felt for his slave.

That Jesus might be pleased to heal him. And that was why he was so commended for his faith. I have not found such faith, no not, in Israel.

[20 : 21] And this also was a man that was a God fearing man, a man that trusted, a man that believed in Christ, was sure of it. A man that sought to do all that he could.

And then there was the fourth and this is he in the 47th verse of Luke chapter 23, this centurion who saw those things that were done.

He was on guard duty. A centurion was a man in charge of a hundred men, a century of men. But that didn't follow that every centurion required a hundred men to go around with him.

He would sometimes be with a smaller detachment of men, some of his company on special duties. And it would seem that four of his men were associated with him.

There seemed to have been four soldiers with the centurion that attended the duty to see to the crucifixion of this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

[21 : 31] And they gave themselves to the task and thought probably in their rough soldierly way very little of it. And marked with the rest until there were those events that made a difference.

It was just another day's work to them, just another day of the soldier's life in that far off land, in that long distant time.

And they thought little of it. Just as we often don't think very much of events, Joseph didn't think very much of his being sent by his father to look for his brothers.

And he came down to Dothan and met them, but he wasn't to go back to his father, and indeed he wasn't to see his father for years and years. He was to be sold into slavery in Egypt and to come to strange events in Egypt and the sovereignty of God.

His brothers meant it as evil towards him, but God meant it for good. What about David when he went with bread and cheese from Jesse, his father, to the valley of Elah that he might provide for his brothers that were in the army of Israel and heard the taunts of the Philistine champion Goliath and was concerned that there was none standing against him and he went forth with his sling and slew the Gittite and laid him low.

[23 : 10] What would the world say? Well, it was just luck. It was the luck of this event or perhaps the world might say it was the bad luck that came in his path that this should have happened to him.

There is no such thing as luck. The fictitious powers of fortune and chance we defy our life's minutest circumstances subject to God's eye.

And it is God that controls all events are at his command. And that centurion was not there then by accident.

It wasn't me a chance. It was just a duty but it was a duty like none other that he would ever be called to perform. And seeing these things when the centurion saw what was done he glorified God.

Now what then made this influence upon him? Well, he witnessed these strange events upon the cross. It was strange for one thing that this man upon the center cross should die so soon.

[24 : 20] Man in the very prime of his life was not uncommon for a victim of crucifixion to last for many days. Writhing in agony until he was brought to utter physical exhaustion and total collapse.

And his system simply caved in and he expired. Days could pass, a week could pass. that was why the Gentile practice or the Roman practice of the breaking of the legs was introduced.

It was not always convenient for it to go on so long. But here in a matter of hours, three hours, there is the one upon the center cross dead.

That was an unusual fact. We know that the soldiers when they came to break the legs of the thieves to hasten death, they were surprised. Pilate marveled that he heard concerning Jesus that he was dead already.

It's a most unusual thing. But he also heard the cry with the loud voice, this centurion that he uttered. When he cried, it is finished on the cross. That's the cry with the loud voice.

[25 : 33] And this we are told in Mark chapter 15 verse 39, Mark's account of the crucifixion supplementing Luke and Matthew and John, as John and Matthew supplement each other.

We are told that he saw the centurion, saw that he so cried out and gave up the ghost and said truly this man was the son of God.

That great cry of the one that died upon the cross caused the centurion to cry out that this man truly was the son of God.

It must have been quite an exceptional experience to have been a witness to that great cry from the cross. So unusual. And then we are told in Matthew 27, 34, that he saw the earthquake and the things that were done when Christ died.

And we are told of course that the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom and the earth did quake and the rocks rent and the graves were opened and many bodies of the saints which slept arose and came out of the graves after his resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared unto many.

[27 : 02] The opening of the graves, the rending of the rocks as a consequence of this great earthquake moved the centurion. Now when the centurion and they that were with him watching Jesus saw the earthquake and those things that were done they feared greatly saying truly this was the Son of God.

These were the sort of things the word said he had heard father forgive them for they know not what they do. The provision that Christ made for his own mother from the cross these things he had witnessed and gradually the mockery began to lessen until it ceased and now there was a wonder and a gnaw and we're told here in the account before us that the centurion when he saw what was done he glorified God saying certainly this was a righteous man and here the record ends we don't know whether there was a saving work done in this man's heart to glorify God there may have been there may have been we cannot say for sure was this a real work of grace this man was under deep influence nonetheless one can be under deep influence of course and not be truly saved one can taste the powers of the world to come and yet be short of a saving experience of the grace of

God but this man was moved this hard worldly wise Roman centurion was moved to glorify God and to bear testimony concerning the character oh how God was jealous to secure the testimony to his son's character from Pilate this is a just man I find no fault in him the centurion this man is a righteous man and this man had the discernment at least to acknowledge that he was the son of God well there is something concerning the centurion who saw these things that were done glorified God was moved by the circumstances moved by the events we don't know whether he was truly in grace but where do you stand are you in grace are you one that has looked to the Christ who died for our sins according to the scriptures have you been brought to see yourself as a sinner and Christ as your savior have you sought him to save you have you cried forgive me be my savior and my lord we are not sure how it was with this man but we can be sure how it is with us but you never be sure how it is with you if you have never called upon his name there are those that want an assurance in order to believe on the lord Jesus Christ you've got to believe on the lord Jesus Christ before you can have anything of an assurance and in the name of Jesus Christ and in the things that he has done preached as I have sought to preach them this night and in past nights that you have been present in this place it is to it is the believing of that record these things are written that ye might believe this record is true concerning Jesus the Christ do you believe upon him can you say truly this is the righteous man this is the son of God this is the savior that I need lord cried the dying thief remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom have you cried thus have you asked the lord that he might remember you in the day of judgment and bring you into his kingdom and prevent you entering into the place of destruction into an everlasting hell well then let us pass from the 47th verse to the 48th verse all the people that came together to that site beholding the things which were done smote their breasts and returns here are many of the people we've got to always interpret the alls of the scripture in their setting in their context clearly it was not all the people without exception because the rulers were not included in the number and the soldiers were not included in the number it is all the people in the sense that many of the people all of the people that came beholding verse 35 the people stood beholding those that had come to look at these things those that had turned out for the occasion those that had come to witness this public execution it would seem from many of their lips the cry had earlier passed crucify him they had cried that he should be crucified whom shall I release unto thee

Pilate said Barabbas or Christ and they cried for Barabbas to be released to them crucify him and they had come to see this done and now strangely they are affected by the sight all the people that came together to that sight beholding the things which were done smote their breasts and returned they are brought now to a different attitude they are brought to a sense of repentance that's the language here who is it that is probably best known of all the characters in the gospels that smote his breast and would not so much as look up to heaven it was the publican the publican that felt so sinful that prayed God be merciful unto me a sinner he beat upon his breast sign of contrition a sign that he felt himself to be a sinner they feel conviction of sin they hadn't felt conviction they hadn't felt anything of the sort when they cried crucify they had not felt it even when they were beholding even when they were deriding with others but now in the force of circumstance and in the beholding of these events and supernatural things that they had witnessed they are brought to a change and now they smite upon their breast and return that is they don't want to be there any longer they want to slink away in ones and twos this way and that way each one going back to the place when she came and they go back in order to think about the solemn sites perhaps wishing they had no part in these events and yet in a strange way perhaps some of them glad that they had seen what they had seen and their ears having heard the things that they had heard from the cross and I believe that there are those of this very number that go away returning from that place with this deep conviction upon them who are six weeks after on the day of

Pentecost brought to true saving repentance and saving faith there's a difference between mere conviction of sin and that saving application of the gospel whereby we are convinced and struck by the spirit of God as those that are dead before him with no appeal with nothing to command us unto God shut up to the grace of God that came on the day of Pentecost there were these exceptional numbers that were converted to God on the day of Pentecost Christ had said father forgive them they know not what they do and his prayer was answered and many of that number many of that number brought to repentance and faith under the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost now there is the beginning of the work God does not always do it in a moment there can be that gradual application of the law I believe some of them had many a sick night for the sinful compliance and presence of that crucifixion and they couldn't get out of their mind the things that they had seen and the significance of it they sought to understand the better until

[35 : 48] God's servant spoke and gave the meaning this Jesus whom ye crucified God hath raised him up whereof we are all witnesses and this is the savior and they were convicted in their heart they were convinced and they cried men and brethren what shall we do and Peter directed them to believe upon Christ and to be baptized in his name for the remission of sins and that they should receive the Holy Spirit and many were added to the church that very day these were the people that were beholding all the people that came together to the sight beholding the things which were done smote their breasts and returned and what seemed to be Christ's extremity what seemed to be the Lord brought to the very depths of his humiliation there is that display of power in the midst of it there is majesty in his misery and from the cross he is the reigning and the ruling saviour he can forgive the dying thief today shalt thou be with me in paradise he says to the thief and he says father forgive them and his prayer is heard the father hears his righteous son and the prayer is answered and man might say well where is the triumph in the cross but they was a triumph on the day of

Pentecost when many of those that had witnessed the crucifixion and had been brought under the work of God ever since they were brought into gospel liberty on that day there is the triumph of the cross there is the power of the gospel he died for their sins according to the scriptures and they were brought to know themselves of that number for whom his blood was shed there is the power of a reigning cross if he can do that from the very cross if he can exert that influence by his very death what will he do for us who is raised and exalted a prince and a saviour at God's right hand he is able to save to the uttermost all them that come unto God by him or learn from this see how he is shown to be the son of God with power by the way he forgives no man forgives sin he is able to forgive sin for he is the God man he is the son of God he is the righteous one as the centurion has said the just one

God is pleased to look on him and pardon me do you look to him do you know something of the work of God already begun do you feel that unsettlement do you feel that distress that disquiet within you are you being made to feel that there is no tree in this forest in which you can find a lodging or a nesting place have you been brought then to the refuge and the rendezvous for guilty men who is Jesus Christ God grant that this will be true for you and then one other verse before we end the 49th and all his acquaintance and the women that followed him from Galilee stood afar off beholding these things all his acquaintance what is an acquaintance we would understand the word to be people that come somewhere between friends and strangers they're not quite intimate with us or we with them so that we would count them amongst our friends but we're acquainted with them and they're acquainted with us they are our acquaintances there must have been many that were acquainted with the

Lord Jesus Christ but this is not such many acquainted with the Lord Jesus Christ were in that beholding crowd that now were returning many of them beating their breasts with conviction and contrition in their hearts they were acquaintances some of them they'd heard they'd witnessed in the past they may even have seen some of the miracles wrought or those upon whom miracles had been worked they are the acquaintances but this is although the word is used in the 49th verse this means those that are the disciples and you see the word is literally those that come together unto those that were those gathered to the Lord those that in his ministry in Galilee and in Judea those that were gathered to him these are his acquaintances in the sense of the original here and the women which followed him from Galilee those that were near to the Lord now are far off are watching they can't return they can't go away they've got to watch this through to the very end and yet they do it are far off and while we are wont sometimes to say that were they not courageous enough to have been near to the Lord remember the women had been near

John had been standing at the foot of the cross when the Lord commended Mary his mother into John's care they had been near and then they had moved out again it was God's desire that they should not be any of them harmed none of the followers of the Lord was harmed not one that was his suffered on that occasion not one was apprehended on that occasion even Peter who had put himself in his folly into the place of danger he was able to get away from it the sheep were scattered and the shepherd was smitten but it was his desire that none of his should suffer the thing that he had come to do was his alone to do none other would be involved in it and I see the merciful protection of God over these others they cannot go away and yet they're present they're watching afar off they are those that are beholding it says these things who were these people well disciples of the

[42 : 12] Lord I don't judge that the the apostles were amongst them but disciples and the women which followed him from Galilee women have often been present at public executions it's one of the famous pieces of history that the women sat in the forefront of the guillotine in the days of the French Revolution knitting as the heads rolled in that bloodbath which shook France in the days around 1789 and after and which might well have happened in this country but for the evangelical revival that prevented it happening in this country had France had an evangelical awakening as our land did they wouldn't have had the revolution if we had not had an evangelical awakening in that day then we would have had a revolution

I'm sure of it God was merciful to this nation in a past day but these women history records how they sat knitting as these awful deeds were done and many were slaughtered before their very eyes but these women are watching and they're not watching with the eyes of bitterness or the eyes of impassive unconcern for the savagery before them they are those that are watching in their love and in wonderment of the things that they're beholding the dear saviour brought to the very death of the cross and we have spoken of them before I mentioned the women sometimes it's thought that there were three I think there were four there were three Marys and one called Salome there was Mary the mother of the Lord there was also the Mary who was the wife of Cleopas and there was the other Mary

Lord in the days of his flesh Mary his mother these others were near to them they loved him there were other women raised up that ministered to him of their substance their Christian church has a noble army of godly women that have been in the very forefront of the advance of the gospel there are names in the very new testament epistles of godly women that were those that served their generation by the will of God they fell asleep and these women and his acquaintances stood afar off beholding these things and a comment as we close on the beholding of these things this is the beholding with wonder they are not merely looking they are beholding with wonder they are beholding with reverence they have seen with their eyes and they are seeing with their eyes but they are beholding their minds are in it their hearts are in it they are deeply involved in it deeply affected by it now I draw to a conclusion on this wise we have looked at these three verses we have looked at these different persons the centurion saw the wonder of these things have you seen the wonder of the cross and Christ crucified and then the people that came together they were convicted of sin have you been brought to feel yourself a sinner before God to smite upon your breast as it were and to warn that you are a sinner and to cry with the public and God be merciful unto me a sinner and have you been brought to that place where you look with wonder increasing wonder and with ravishing love as you think of the God man smitten for your sakes he loved me and gave himself for me his acquaintances and the women they were beholding like that

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