

“Nails in the Hands of a Carpenter”

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Date

Luke 23:44-47

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Did you realize that nails are not well respected? At least not by most people, that is. I mean, let's face it, they're cold and hard, and we throw them away when they are bent. Most of a nail's life consists of setting around just waiting to be used, hopefully by someone with a little skill. Nails never receive much glory, and they are seldom noticed when they do their job right. Nails are holding much of this world together. There are nails in the walls, nails in the ceiling, and nails in the pews; each doing what they were designed to do in order to keep things from falling apart.

If nails could dream, I imagine they would desire to be a part of something glorious; some majestic building or finely crafted piece of furniture. Not something as hideous as a crucifixion. For each cross raised, three nails were driven through the body to hold the prisoner to the wood. I imagine a nail feels pretty special in the hands of a skilled craftsman. I wonder how these three nails felt in the hand of a Roman soldier.

[44] By this time it was noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. [45] The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the thick veil hanging in the Temple was torn apart. [46] Then Jesus shouted, "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!" And with those words he breathed his last. [47] When the captain of the Roman soldiers handling the executions saw what had happened, he praised God and said, "Surely this man was innocent." Luke 23:44-47

I was thinking about this Roman guard and was wondering about his life before the day he crucified Jesus. What was he like? Was he married? Did he have children? What was it like to work in this dungeon of death? Perhaps at one point in his life these executions used to bother him, but apparently now he watches without any passion or remorse. Considering the hate directed toward Jesus by the Jewish authorities, perhaps this guard felt he deserved to die. "What difference does the death of one man make?" he may have muttered as the nail pierced a hand. "I've watched a hundred men die, they're all the same" he thought as the cross was raised.

For this Roman guard, watching people die had lost its sting. Executing criminals made little difference to him and to the other guards present. They even threw dice to see who got His robe. And yet the death of this Man Jesus was different somehow. As he stood there with His clothing at his feet and the blood of Jesus on his hands, something about how this man was dying was different. Rather than fighting and cursing, Jesus looks upon them and offers forgiveness. He even offered grace to one of the other prisoners. And for a moment, He caught the attention of this guard.

What must go through a man's mind after executing countless people? Could there be any love in his heart? But this "King of the Jews" died like no other. There was something different about this Christ who hung on a cross. And as Jesus died, he, who had been heartless, cold, and cynical, found within him the ability to wonder if this Man's death wasn't a mistake; a waste of innocent life. "When the captain of the Roman soldiers handling the executions saw what had happened, he praised God and said, "Surely this man was innocent." (Luke 22:47)

Perhaps we all wonder what these nails in the hands of a Roman guard have really accomplished. Driven through flesh and bone, these nails in the hands of a Roman soldier held a body to the cross. But nails in the hands of a carpenter? They, indeed, have accomplished much.

"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" says the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:55. Indeed. Where is it now? Death has been conquered by our Lord Jesus upon a cross. And just in case you thought Jesus was murdered empty handed, consider that grasped tightly in one hand of our Savior were the keys to Death and in the other the keys to Hades; nailed tightly there by a Roman guard. Grasping those keys, Jesus descended into Hades, freeing all the righteous that had died. His keys removed the sting of death, and His keys now allow each of us who die to be with Him in Heaven. "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:18).

There is no fear of death for those made righteous by the blood of Jesus because there is the promise that when we die, we may join Him in paradise (And

Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise", Luke 23:43). The sting of death has invaded humanity; our punishment for disobeying God ("But the Lord God gave him this warning: "You may freely eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die." Genesis 2:16-17). Death is not what God intended for us. Death was a reminder of our sin and our shame. It was, but it is not any more. The "Sting" and the "Shame" are gone.

I know how I feel when my sin betrays our Lord. I know how I feel when I follow my passions instead of the teachings of Jesus. I imagine this soldier must have felt the same. And although we were not physically present for the crucifixion, it was for our sin and guilt that Christ died; it was for all of humanity that His blood was shed on that day. And this Captain of the Roman guards represents us all. Each of us, because of the sin we are born with, held the hammer that drove these three nails into our Savior's body. Now, although there are many things we different denominations do differently, it is Jesus that holds us together. And it is to the cross we all look for hope and assurance. But not just any cross, mind you. We look to the cross that held the Messiah, the Lamb of God. For it is upon that cross He willingly suffered and died so that we may have eternal life. Three little nails may have held His body, but it was His willingness to die for you and me that kept Him there. And personally, I am thankful for those three little nails used by this unknown Roman Soldier.

Nails in the hands of this Roman guard held a man to the cross. Nails in the hands of this Jewish Carpenter have freed us all. We have been freed by the curse of death. We have been freely granted access to God. And we believers have been united; held together by these nails in the hands our Savior.

I don't know what this guard was thinking when he went home that evening. I don't know if he talked about his feelings with anyone else that night. But standing there, watching Jesus suffer and die, this man's attitude changed; perhaps even his attitude toward God. I wonder how long this Roman soldier replayed the events over and over in his mind. Was he haunted by the memory of this crucifixion? I wonder what went through his mind the next time his hand reached into a box of nails.

As we leave here tonight, you will find a box of nails. Reach in and take one. Keep it in your pocket throughout this Easter season. Each time your hand touches this nail, may it remind you what difference the death of Jesus has made in your life.