

Draw Near: The Soldiers

Matthew 27-31, 54

INTRODUCTION

Queen for a Day was an American radio and television game show, the first of the big-prize giveaway shows. It originated on the Mutual Radio Network on April 30, 1945 and ran until 1957. NBC turned it into a television program in 1956 and ABC took it over in 1960.

The show opened with host Jack Bailey asking the audience of mostly women: "Would YOU like to be Queen for a day?" After this, the contestants were introduced and interviewed, one at a time.

- Each contestant was asked to talk about the recent financial and emotional hard times she had been through. The interview would climax with Bailey asking the contestant what she needed most and why she wanted to win the title of *Queen for a Day*.
- Often the request was for medical care or therapeutic equipment to help a chronically ill child, or might be for a hearing aid, a new washing machine, or a refrigerator. Many women broke down sobbing as they described their plights.

The winning contestant was selected by the audience using an applause meter. The harsher the contestant's situation, the more likely she would win.

- The winner would be draped in a sable-trimmed red velvet robe, given a glittering jeweled crown to wear, placed on a velvet-upholstered throne, and handed a dozen long-stemmed roses to hold while her list of prizes was announced.
- The prizes began with the help the woman had requested, and included a variety of extras, many of which were donated by sponsoring companies, such as a vacation trip, a night on the town with her husband, silver-plated flatware, an array of kitchen appliances, or a selection of fashion clothing. The losing contestants were each given smaller prizes.

Bailey's trademark sign-off was: "This is Jack Bailey, wishing we could make every woman a queen, for every single day!"

My mom never participated on that show, but she would on occasion proclaim herself to be queen for a day. She would put on a plastic tiara and tie a small piece of red material around her neck as visible reminder of the special occasion. We kids always dreaded those days, because it usually required us to be extra good and extra helpful around the house.

The Roman soldiers did not hold a contest on that day 2000 years ago. There were no applause meters, no sponsoring companies, no special prizes. But once Pontius Pilate handed Jesus over to them they began to treat Jesus like a King – a King for a day.

- Of course, they didn't believe that He was a king. They had just heard that Jesus thought He was one, so they decided to hold a coronation.
 - After all, a king needs a coronation!

- Pilate even joined in the fun by creating a sign to hang at the top of the cross. It read:

Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. (John 19:19)

- To those soldiers Jesus was nothing more than a delusional Jew on His way to a cross.

Their coronation “ceremony” began with a Roman flogging. That is described in the verse before the events of our text:

Then Pilate released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. (Matthew 27:26)

Jesus was stripped. His hands were tied behind him, and he was tied to a post with his back bent down so that it was conveniently exposed to the lashing of the whip. The whip was a long leather strap studded at intervals with sharpened pieces of bone and pellets of lead.

- A flogging always preceded a crucifixion. It was a chance for the soldiers to have a little fun before starting their work.
- It would reduce the bodies of the victims to strips of raw flesh, with deep gashes and lots of blood.
- Some men would die from the flogging, never making it to the cross. Others would pass out. Only a few would remain conscious. Jesus was one of those.

This is where our text begins:

- They then took him to their barracks and started the official part of the coronation.
 - They called for the rest of the detachment. This could have been as many as six hundred men, but most scholars don’t believe a full detachment was stationed in Jerusalem. It is more likely there were about 200 soldiers that day.

They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. (Matthew 27:28-29)

- And then they led Him away to be crucified.

From the time of His crucifixion until the time the body was removed from the cross, a small detachment of soldiers was always nearby. Even after His burial, soldiers were stationed at the tomb because the Jewish religious leaders thought someone might try to steal the body.

- So from the time of His arrest on Thursday evening, until His resurrection on Easter Sunday morning, soldiers were present.

- They were an essential part of this part of the story, from its beginning to its end.

Let me make two observations about these men.

#1: THEY FULFILLED PROPHECY

Everything they did to Jesus in that weekend fulfilled some prophecy about what would happen to Jesus. They were clueless! But nonetheless, they were used by God in those moments.

Look at these lines from Psalm 22:

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. (v. 7)

"He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord rescue him." (v. 8)

They pierce my hands and my feet. (v. 16)

All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. (v. 17)

They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. (v. 18)

Or these from Isaiah 53:

He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. (v. 3)

Or these from Isaiah 45:

Before me every knee will bow (v. 23)

They were clueless, but their actions helped to establish the truth that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

One commentator made this notation:

There are over 300 prophecies about Jesus mentioned in the Bible. These were written between 500 and 1000 years before Jesus was even born. The mathematical chances that any one person could fulfill all of them is one chance in a trillion, trillion! (13) And Jesus had to fulfill every single one, or He was not the Messiah at all!

#2: AT LEAST ONE PROFESSED FAITH

Together these soldiers witnessed this important part of salvation's drama. Think about all they saw:

- Jesus didn't resist like ordinary people would have
 - Instead he healed the ear of a soldier who was injured by Peter who did resist!
- Jesus offered words of forgiveness from the cross to all who had participated in the cruelty He had experienced – again, unlike anything ordinary people would have done
- The sky went black when Jesus was crucified.
- The earth shook when He died and when He was resurrected.
- They heard the angels when the tomb was opened. Some of them fainted at the sight.

We know these soldiers were bribed to say that the body of Jesus was stolen.

When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28:12-15)

But still ... they knew the truth. They could lie for the money, but deep down they knew the truth.

We are told, however, that one of them – a centurion – standing at the cross when Jesus died proclaimed:

Surely he was the Son of God! (Matthew 27:54)

That is a role played by John Wayne in George Stephen's 1965 movie *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. This was his only line. Supposedly the director told John Wayne to say it with awe, so on the first take the Duke recited "Aww, truly this man was the son of God." The real centurion did not need a second take.

Don't miss this fact. When Jesus died, it was a Gentile that first confessed. When He was born the Wise Men – Gentiles – were among the very first to do that same.

APPLICATION

So what can we say? Two things.

1. God will accomplish what He wants to accomplish.

He doesn't need a believing heart to make it happen. That's great news for us!

- God can even work through evil men and women to bring about His plan.
 - His word will always accomplish what He intends
- My doubts don't inhibit him either.

2. Faith can grow in the most unlikely places.

Even in the heart of a Roman soldier, so don't quit praying for those you love!

Amen.