

Forced to be Happy

January 15 2023

Our New Testament was originally written in Greek and sometimes a study of the words our English Bible translated can be a surprising source of enlightenment. The Greek word, *aggareuein* is found three times in the New Testament and translated with the sense of “compel” (Matthew 5:41; 27:32 and Mark 15:21).

Aggareuein isn't a Greek word. It is a Persian loan word. The Persians had an amazing courier system. (Our Pony Express was modeled on it.) Herodotus described it:

Nothing travels so fast as these Persian messengers. The entire plan is a Persian invention; and this is the method of it. Along the whole line of road there are men (they say) stationed with horses, in number equal to the number of days which the journey takes, allowing a man and a horse to each day; and these men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they must go, either by snow, or rain, or heat, or by the darkness of night. The first rider delivers his dispatch to the second, and the second man passes it to the third; and so it is borne from hand to hand along the whole line, like the light in the torch race The Persians give the riding post in this manner the name *aggareion*. – Herodotus 8.98

In similar fashion, it was the law under the Greeks (and later the Romans) that anyone could be compelled to provide a horse or to



act as a guide to keep the messenger service going. William Barclay notes, “This business of impressment was one of the bitterest and most constant humiliations that subject nations had to endure” (*New Testament Words*, p. 31). Thus, Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus. There was nothing remarkable about this, but the law was severely abused. Many soldiers simply stole the belongings, livestock or boats of the people claiming the rights of *aggareion*, but now notice the instructions of Jesus: “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” Why?

Consider how we react when things don't go as we had planned or if someone abuses us. We could give in to anger and so multiply the impact of the abuse, or we can smile, pick up the burden and look for the blessing.

Imagine a Roman soldier who impresses a poor peasant to carry his heavy armor. The peasant could grimace and begrudgingly count each step of the mile and not a foot more before he dumps the armor in the dirt.

His day is ruined and he'll probably resent and talk about the injustice of his experience till the day he dies.

On the other hand, imagine a Christian peasant who is forced to do the same. It wasn't what he had planned to do but, with the words of Jesus in his ears, he picks up the load and starts down the road. The soldier is expecting what he normally got: abuse, but instead, the cheery Christian begins to ask him about his home, his family, how he is enjoying his tour of duty. All the while, the Roman is counting the steps and grins to himself as they pass the first mile. But as they go farther – a mile and a quarter, a mile and a half, a mile and three quarters – the soldier realizes this peasant didn't forget to count. The soldier wasn't getting something for nothing. The peasant was giving him a gift! He begins to listen more closely to what the smiling Christian says and is even grateful for the prayer the peasant offers at the end for his safety. And what did the Christian receive by going two miles? He has changed an injustice into a joyful gift and we can too!