

## **The Centurion's Story**

### **Easter 2010**

Make another cross they said. He goes up today. This Roman political machine thinks nothing of extinguishing threats to their power by the cross. Remember when Spartacus rebelled, they crucified 6,000 of his defeated soldiers along the highway, they were lined up 120 miles long. The Romans don't hesitate to us this brutal death. My soldiers and I are in charge of another one today.

Oh, I didn't mean to not introduce myself. My name is Felix and I command a battalion of soldiers here in Jerusalem. We are charged with keeping the peace and extinguishing the threats; we carry out the crucifixions in these parts.

### **Crucifixion is Barbaric**

As a soldier, I have watched many people die. Crucifixion is the worst way to go. At first, Roman law only allowed it to be used against slaves. It is only in the last few years they allow us to use it against non-Roman citizens.

The job of my soldiers is to not just to make the cross the most painful death possible but to have criminals wishing for death even before they get to the cross.

We whip men before they die. We chain their hands over their head and two of my soldiers, one on each side of the criminal, whip them using a cat-o'-nine tail. Some of the strands of the whip have heavy metal balls that strike the criminals side, tenderizing the meat on his back, legs and buttock. Other cords in the whip have pieces of bone and metal hooks that sink deep in the flesh of the legs, back, and shoulders. Once the hooks are lodged into the tenderized flesh, soldier rips them out, tearing skin, muscle,, tendons and even bones off the criminal's body. It is not uncommon for a man's organs to hang out of his body through the holes left in his flesh.

To finish a crucifixion we drive 5 to 7 inch nails through the most sensitive areas of a man's body, his wrists and feet. We give men a little footstool to relieve the weight of the body pulling apart their arms. To you, that may sound like an act of kindness, but to us, it is a final act of cruelty. This dangles a man over death for a longer time as his legs slowly give way because of exhaustion and he asphyxiates himself by his own inability to support the weight of his body. As I said, the cross is the most barbaric death the Romans conceived of. It amazes me that so many of you wear little ones around your neck as a decoration. You are very sick people.

### **Crucifixion Reveals the Heart**

The slow death of the cross brings everything out of a man. It reveals his heart. As my battalion has nailed criminals to the cross they have said the vilest things as the hatred and anger in their hearts came out in their life. After hearing what some men say in their final moments, it is no wonder the Roman authorities condemned them to die.

## **A Crucifixion That Changed My Life**

The other soldiers haven't arrived. Before they come, can I take a few minutes to tell you a story. It is a story about a man my battalion executed a few years ago but it wasn't an execution like any other I supervised. The death of that man changed my life and after I tell you his story, I hope it changes yours.

### **Recounting the Crucifixion**

The day started like normal. We received orders of another criminal to be executed, another cancer of society to be removed. His name was Jesus. We were debriefed about him in the barracks the week before the Passover holiday in Jerusalem. The Jewish people were wild about this man. There were rumors he could heal people. Jerusalem was packed that week not just because of Passover but people were coming from miles around to bring their sick in hopes that he would touch and heal them. It was a madhouse around here.

When I first heard about Jesus and his miraculous powers, I suspected a scam. After all, wouldn't you? I was sure that after the authorities examined him, they would find he was no more than a trickster deceiving the people to gain fame and notoriety. When I hear about con artists preying on the sick and desperate, it makes me angry. Don't you feel the same way?

While the Jews in Jerusalem were anticipating the arrival of Jesus for Passover, the word on the street was he raised a dead man named Lazarus who lived just 2 miles outside of town in Bethany. Talk about stirring the people up, that did it. If people think you can raise dead people, everybody wants to talk to you.

When I heard the news of a dead man coming back to life, I didn't believe a word of it. I watch people die for a living, nobody comes back from the dead. Besides, I heard Jesus was a friend of Lazarus' family and he was tight with Lazarus' sisters. No doubt they were in on the deceptive scheme.

When Jesus finally arrived, the city was in an uproar. They threw a palm branch parade, giving him royal treatment, a king's welcome. When I heard about his grand entrance I just knew this Passover wouldn't pass smoothly. Jerusalem filled with tension, you could cut it with a knife.

It was only a few days later when my battalion received orders to scourge him. The Jewish authorities had investigated him and discovered what I suspected all along, he was a fake. Things were going to his head. He was even claiming to be the son of God and a king. (*Laugh*) How could he be the Son of God? He didn't look any different from you and me. His hair was unkempt, his clothes were dirty and drenched in sweat.

The son of God and a king, he certainly wasn't, he looked like an ordinary carpenter to me.

As my soldiers whipped him with the cat-o'-nine tails, I became uneasy (loosen collar). Usually the darkness of a criminals heart is exposed during these tortures. We whipped him again and again ripping out chunks of flesh and muscle. My men beat and whipped him so badly he wasn't recognizable, yet, he had not said one word against us or anyone else. There was no hatred or evil in his heart. Surely the beating would bring it out of him.

The men dressed him in a purple robe and twisted together a crown of thorns. He wants to be a king; my soldiers would make him one. They pressed the thorns into his skull and the blood ran down his face. They spat on him, beat him and mockingly knelt before him.

We delivered him back to Pilate, a piece of torn and tattered flesh, I was surprised he was still alive, he was barely recognizable. Surely that would be the last we saw of him, but it wasn't. Pilate delivered him back to us that same day,... to be crucified. What had this man done to deserve this?

As we stretched him out to nail his wrists to the cross, I wanted this crucifixion to be over. Everything felt so wrong. This man's heart was not that of a criminal. After nailing him to the cross, we sat down to watch him die.

Perhaps now, as the flame of his life was slowly snuffed out, I would finally see the darkness in this deceivers heart, but it never came. The only thing he said to us as he died was something I will never forget. He looked at us as he was dying and he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Forgive us, we tortured and killed him. We are Roman soldiers, nobody forgives us, everyone hates us.

The leaders of the Jewish people came to watch him die. They had a smirk on their face as they mocked him. "He saved others", they said, "but he can't save himself." The smirk told it all. They had a nefarious goal all along. This man challenged their authority and they defeated him. The man who claimed to be God was dying like a man and they made sure it happened in the most painful way.

As for me, the uneasy feeling in my gut grew stronger. This man couldn't be a criminal. There was no evil in his heart. The evil and hatred was in the heart of the Jewish leaders. This man named Jesus was the victim. I didn't know what to believe about the Jesus' healings and miracles, but I did know what to believe about his heart, and he was innocent. It was like most of life, evil was triumphing over the good.

It was about the sixth hour when everything changed. Darkness covered the land like a blanket was thrown over the sky. Creation itself went into mourning. For the next three hours it was as if creation was grief stricken as this man suffered. I had never seen anything like this. As the ninth hour approached, we could see his breathing was

labored and his life was in its final moments. He gathered his final strength he lifted his head and said, "It is finished." He breathed his last and his head slumped forward in death.

I had never seen anything like this. My soldiers and I were speechless. I turned to my men and said, "Surely this man was innocent, this man was the Son of God!" Watching him die, I knew he was different. He looked like a man on the outside, but his heart was filled with the purity of God himself on the inside. Maybe all the amazing stories about this man were true. It was too late now, we killed the man who was the son of God.

### **The darkness of the heart**

The next few days were filled with darkness. Not darkness in the sky, but the darkness that surrounded his death, covered my heart. What would become of me? I executed a man who was the son of God. I was filled with such sin and shame for who I was, for what I had done. Have you ever felt that way?

### **The joy of resurrection**

Then in the middle of my darkness, the most amazing thing happened. I began hearing stories that Jesus was alive. Was it true? Had the man who overpowered death for others broken the grip of death on himself? It couldn't be true. Nobody beats death on a Roman cross. I know that first hand. The body was probably stolen.

But it wasn't a missing body people talked about. It was a living Jesus. He kept appearing to people all over this city. First he appeared to some women, then his disciples, then others, then to more than 500 people at one time.

I would meet people in the city laughing at the idea of a resurrected Jesus one day and less than 48 hours later they were swearing it was true. They met him, they talked with him, they ate with him, they put their fingers in his side. *Jesus is alive.*

You have to understand what was happening. In the very city where Jesus was crucified before our eyes, *Jesus is alive.* I know you are thinking it is a leap of faith to believe a dead man is alive but in those days, it took more a faith to believe he wasn't alive.

- Hundreds of Jews who grew up with the animal sacrifice system left everything they knew to follow Jesus as God.
- Jews who followed the law of Moses for thousands of years, left it to follow Jesus because he fulfilled the law.
- Jewish law said that to not worship on Saturday was punishable by death, but Jews began worshipping on Sunday, the day Christ rose from the dead, instead of Saturday.
- Hard core opponents of Christ that did a complete 180 after a risen, living, Christ appeared to them. Even Jesus' mother and brothers began worshipping him as God.

*Jesus is alive!*

What was I to do? I supervised his death. My men spat on him, they whipped him and killed him. I was in charge of it all. I was in charge of the death of the man who is God. Was there any hope for someone like me? I asked some Christians what would be my fate now that Jesus was back.

They told me the most wonderful news.

They told me, that when Jesus died on the cross a great exchange took place. All of the sin, guilt and shame of those who ask him to be their savior and king was placed on him. He paid the death that we deserve for our sin. All the righteousness, goodness and purity of Jesus was taken from him and put on those who have him as their savior and king. Forgiveness of my sin, guilt and shame and replacement with the purity, goodness and character of Jesus is what I need, it is what I want.

I got down on my knees right there and asked Jesus' death to pay for all my sin. In that moment, it felt like Jesus took a sponge and soaked them all away. He forgave me, he changed me. He made me into a new person who love him and loves to please him.

That was the crucifixion that changed my life. The man who is God, died for my sin so he could give his purity and holiness to me. Did it really happen? He rose from the grave to prove it.

I done some pretty evil things in my day, I carried out the death of Jesus, but I was forgiven by Jesus. I don't know what you have done but I know how guilty and shameful you feel. Trust Jesus, he died for our sin to give us his righteousness and he lives again to prove it.

I often think back to that day when we crucified him. Herod had us post across the top of his cross the charge, "King of the Jews." We should have posted not who he was, but what he was doing on that cross, "Paid in Full."

The death and resurrection of Jesus changed my life. If you ask him to be your savior and king, he will change yours. *He is alive!*



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