

Centurion

I am a Centurion. I worked my way up through the ranks of the Roman army to become commander of a century... 100 men. My century was part of the Legion assigned to Governor Pilate, to uphold Roman law in the conquered city of Jerusalem.

Ah, Jerusalem, what a city -- unrest, riots, rebellion. The people are passionate about things that seem trivial to us, like religion. As Roman soldiers, we never knew what to expect when we came here.

See that cross? My soldiers and I, executed many a Jew on one of those devices. Cruel way to die. Normally it took two to three days. They died of exhaustion, exposure, thirst, a very public example to lawbreakers.

Of all the people that we executed, there is one I will never forget. His name was Jesus. I remember it well. It all started early in the morning. There was an unruly crowd with the Jewish leaders who brought Jesus to the Governor. They stood outside the Praetorium. It's somehow against their law to mingle with us Romans at certain times. I put my men on alert for riot control.

I admire Governor Pilate. He's calm, efficient and decisive. We figured there'd be an execution. There usually was. But the Governor acted real different that day. He could not seem to understand the crime. I guess it had something to do with their strange religion of one God.

Then he did all sorts of things to pass the buck. It was as if he was afraid to decide. I couldn't figure why. He had never held back before. He first tried to send the case back to the Jews, but they insisted on permission to have the man executed. The Governor even shipped Jesus to Tetrarch Herod. That was a waste. The playboy of Galilee is as spineless as he is corrupt.

Since it was the Jewish Passover and it's customary to release a prisoner, Governor Pilate gave the crowd a choice. He said, "I'll let you choose between Barabbas or this man Jesus." It was a typical, clever move for Pilate. Barabbas is a notorious murderer and rebel. He hasn't done anything good in his whole life and everybody knew he would be a menace back on the street.

Would you believe it? They chose Barabbas. Then they started to holler about Jesus, "Crucify him! Kill him!" Pilate was disturbed. He walked over to a basin and washed his hands of the whole mess. Then he turned Jesus over to us.

We took Jesus to our area of the Praetorium, the Roman Garrison. Soldiers have a hard life and it is customary to allow them a little fun. I turned my back while my men took his clothes and put a purple robe on him. On the wall there was this vine with huge thorns and they took a big piece of it and formed it into a crown and crammed it down on his head. There was a stick laying there and they put it into his hand as a scepter.

Then they gathered around and yelled, "Hail king Jesus! Hail to the king." I admit they got carried away. They began to hit him, kick him, spit on him. They took a staff and

struck him across the head and the face. By the time they were through, you could hardly recognize who he was.

I've seen a lot of men tortured. They do all sorts of things. They curse and scream. They plead for mercy. They go crazy. But through it all, Jesus never said a word. He took it in silence.

Later we brought him up to a place called Golgatha, where we usually carried out the executions on a cross. We laid him out on the cross and we pounded nails through his wrists and through his feet. Then we raised the cross up and we dropped it into this hole in the ground. We always let it fall with a thud. Above his head we were ordered to put a sign that said, "King of the Jews."

And would you believe it? Pretty soon the mob came at him like flies, even some of my soldiers. They were mocking him, saying, "Hey! You claim to be God? Why can't you get down off that cross? You did all those miracles. You saved others. Why can't you save yourself? Where's those angels that are supposed to help you? What's wrong with you?"

Jesus said nothing... until he finally said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Imagine that, here we are, mocking, crucifying him. And he's asking his God to forgive us.

About noon, the strangest thing happened. The sky grew dark, right in the middle of the day. The sun was shining and all of a sudden it was gone. It was an eerie darkness. We could barely make Jesus out on the cross. All the people were scared. Even my soldiers were shaken. In fact, I had to give the command, "Stand firm. Do not leave your posts." A lot of the crowd ran.

About three in the afternoon, Jesus began to move a little bit. He had this terrible agonized look on his face, like he was carrying the weight of the world. I watched as he looked up into the heavens and he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then his head dropped and he died. The cross didn't kill him. He wasn't up there long enough. My soldiers didn't. Never used a sword. Didn't use a spear to kill him. Jesus gave up his own life.

No sooner had Jesus died, than the ground began to roll, began to heave back and forth. We had trouble standing. We saw boulders come rolling down the hill. The ground began to split apart in great cracks. We were thrown to the ground. And then we looked and doors of tombs were thrown open. And out walked dead people, with their funeral clothes on.

My soldiers and I, we looked at each other. I said, "For certain, this man was the son of God."

Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 18 --19