

LENTEN VESPERS
The Crucifixion of Our Lord
Surely He Is the Son of God!

Bear with me. It's been a long day. My name is Longinus, at least that's what church tradition calls me. I'm a centurion in Caesar's army. I serve in Jerusalem. If Rome is the head of the Empire, Jerusalem is the armpit. It's a hotbed of problems. Today I was on crucifixion duty. I didn't ask for it. I was assigned it. And a soldier does as a soldier's told. I do what my commander tells me, and my soldiers do what I command them. Today, however, it seemed like they enjoyed it a little too much.

You have to understand, there are three types of men who serve in the army in Palestine: criminals, perverts, and the ambitious. None of them care about the locals. They're all in it for what they can get—the criminals and the perverts want the power and the opportunity to exploit those weaker; the ambitious want a cushy assignment somewhere better down the road.

The men assigned to me today were for the most part the criminals and perverts. They don't mind torturing; they enjoy it. Truth be told, they even scare me. They're certainly a disgrace to Rome. They happily join with the locals in mocking the unfortunate and broken men they nail to wood. They look at them like rabid dogs at hunks of meat. They're hoodlums who use the Roman emblem on their shield, a sign of civilization, for the most wretched barbarism.

But back to my long day. We were crucifying criminals along the road into Jerusalem. The Jews have some big festival this time of year, the Passover, and the road is always packed with pilgrims. It's a field day for robbers, and conditions are perfect for a riot. There have been problems with that in the past, and so Rome likes to drive home what happens when people break the law. Crosses upon crosses of men in bitter anguish tend to get the message across.

We were crucifying three men on Golgotha: two thieves and some religious nut, we were told. The hill itself looks like death. It's shaped like a skull. My soldiers were having some fun with the One from Nazareth. I didn't like it, but they consider it part of their pay, a fringe benefit of the job. Unusually, even many of the Jews lined up to hurl insults and spit on the One called Jesus. I've never seen anything like it before. Usually they look compassionately on those crucified and sometimes even beg for us to show them mercy.

I knew from the start this was a special case. Pilate ordered us to attach a placard to His cross that read, "JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS." The religious leaders were incensed about it and wanted it taken down. They screamed at Him, "***You said you were the Son of God; let God save you now.***" I've seen hatred. I'm a soldier. I've looked an enemy in the eye as I ran him through. But I've never seen hatred like this. But He didn't shout back. He didn't even look mad at them. Thinking about it, I've never seen someone put up less of a fight than He did.

All hell broke loose when He died. The curtain in the Temple tore in two, or at least I heard. Word was spreading pretty quickly. Darkness covered the land. There was an earthquake. To be honest, if it weren't for the fact that I had to provide a strong example for my men, I probably would have made a run for it. I've never seen anything like it, and it made me sure of one thing: this Man had been innocent, and God didn't seem happy about what had happened to Him. Before I knew it, I said something that I still I'm trying to wrap my head around. I've never been a very religious man. I go to the sacrifices on the big holidays. I've said a few prayers in especially brutal battles. But I've never said anything like what I said today. But, as I thought about how this Man had pliantly this Man had accepted His fate, and how He had prayed for His enemies on the cross, and how He had committed Himself to God even when it seemed that God had forsaken Him, I looked at some of the Jews that had been mocking Him, and I looked at His dead body, and I blurted out, ***“Surely He was the Son of God!”***

I don't know what you call one of this Man's followers, but I think I want to be one. If he forgave the very people that condemned Him to death, maybe He will forgive me my sins, and I have many. We Romans know a lot about power, but I've never seen someone so strong as Him. To endure what He did, to trust His God through it all, to worry about His mother while life drained from Him, to pray for His enemies—this Man was so human in His frailty, but something about Him made Him seem so much more. We Romans also know about signs. I've waited to see which way the birds flew over my shoulder before a battle, or paid careful attention as a priest read a pig's entrails to see if victory awaited us. No sign I've ever seen, though, has ever been as clear as those that took place today: the darkness and the earthquake and that giant curtain ripping in the Jews' temple.

Look, I'm a centurion, not a preacher. I'm a Roman and not a Jew. What do I know about Galilean theology? But I'll tell you one thing for sure: ***“Surely this Jesus was the Son of God!”*** I don't know much more about Him, but I'm going to learn. And I'm not the only one that felt this way. One of the thieves asked Him to go to paradise with Him when he died. I don't know where that paradise is, but I think I'd like to end up there too. If a thief can make it, maybe I can too. If it's something this crucified Rabbi can give to people, maybe He would give it to me too. I don't deserve it, but I don't think that thief deserved it, and I know those He prayed for don't.

I don't think I'm going to get any sleep tonight. I just can't wrap my head around it: the Son of God, an innocent man condemned to death forgives those who deserve condemnation in His place and promises eternal life to criminals. I'm no expert on it all, but I do plan to learn a lot more in the week to come. I know Palestine, and something tells me that we haven't quite seen the end of all this. If I were you, I'd learn more with me. Whatever happens, I'm pretty sure things will never be the same. Amen.