

(The following is a first-person narrative sermon telling the story of the crucifixion of Jesus from the perspective of the Roman Centurion who confessed in Matthew 27:54, "Surely, he was the Son of God." This narrative is based on Matthew 27:27-56 but includes embellishment.)

Good morning! My name is Marcus, and I'm a centurion in the legions of Rome. That may not mean much to you, but for me it means everything. For 23 years I've faithfully served Caesar. I began my service in the lowest ranks of the Roman legion, but my years of service have given me this position as a non-commissioned officer in the greatest army in the world. I command 100 men. After two more years of service, I'll be rewarded with Roman citizenship. This vine-staff is the symbol of my authority. I knew I'd be visiting your church today so I left my sword at home, but you must know that blade has shed the blood of hundreds. If any man knows what it is to watch a man die, it's me.

But then I found myself stationed in the land of Judea. This was not the way I saw my career advancing. These Jews had no real army; no force to face on the field of battle. This was a pathetic and backward country filled with people without the sense to bow before the throne of Caesar. Other nations accepted his rule, but not these Jews. It was their religion, of course — their stubborn belief in just one holy and righteous God. They had laws, more laws than most of them could keep track of, and those laws made it impossible for them to bow to our Emperor.

But that's not why I've come here today. I've come to tell you about just one of them who was different from the rest. I've come to tell you about Jesus of Nazareth. You see, I was there the moment he died. I've seen hundreds of men die, but nothing like this. This was more than just another death.

Jesus started as just another itinerate rabbi. Oddly enough, he came from a tiny town in Galilee, called Nazareth. You have towns like Turlock and Wasco. Well, Nazareth was like that. But this Jesus turned things upside down everywhere he went. His most loyal followers were fisherman, tax-gatherers,

women, some who didn't have the best reputation. He refused to abide by the petty laws of the Pharisees. Everyone said there was something different about him. He spoke of love for God and neighbor. He said things like, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." He offered peace. Huh! Peace! We Romans know about peace! Rome brought peace to the civilized world for over 200 years!

Honestly, at first, to me, Jesus was just another flash in the pan. Lucius however, didn't agree with me. Lucius was my friend, a fellow centurion. He told me the strangest story. His servant became sick and was paralyzed, suffering terribly. Lucius was beside himself. This was his most trusted servant. But then he heard about this rabbi, who not only preached of love and peace but had the power to heal. The lame were made to walk. The blind to see. Lepers were cleansed. So Lucius sought out this Jesus and found him in Capernaum of Galilee.

"My servant," he said to Jesus, "lies crippled back at home."

Before he could even make a request, Jesus offered to go and heal him. But Lucius had such faith in this man. He said, "No, that's not necessary. I'm not worthy of having you enter my home. But I, too, am a man of authority. I say to one man 'do this' and to another 'do that.' Just say the word and my servant will be healed."

Jesus looked into his eyes and marveled. "I've not seen such faith in all Israel," he said. "Go home, and it will be done as you've asked."

Lucius told me at that exact hour of the day, his servant rose from his bed and was completely healed.

I didn't know what to make of that. I knew Lucius. I knew he was a sane man much like me. I believed in the gods. In my religion, there were stories of healing, but not like this.

But then one day I had a chance to see for myself. I'll never forget that day. Jesus had finally been arrested the night before. He'd appeared before the Jewish leaders, and they accused him claiming to be the

Messiah and King, which to them was blasphemy; a crime worthy of death. But they had no authority to execute a man, so they brought him before Pilate, the Roman governor of this region. I was there. From the minute he stepped through the door I sensed something wasn't right. They accused Jesus of being a traitor to Rome, a threat to Caesar. Pilate had sent hundreds of prisoners to their deaths, but for some reason with Jesus, he hesitated. He questioned him. But, finally, he gave in. He had Jesus flogged, and with bloody strips of skin hanging from his back and chest he handed him over to me and my men for crucifixion.

But my men wanted to have a little fun first. You know how young men are; a little horseplay. I watched as they stripped him. They threw a scarlet robe on His shoulders. They fashioned a crown of thorns and smashed it on his head. They put a king's staff in his right hand. "Hail King of the Jews!" they cried. They spat on him. They took the staff and beat him over the head. I should have stopped it, but they didn't know what they were doing. The strange thing is this Jesus of Nazareth never said a word. It was almost like he knew a script had been written and this was the part he was destined to play.

But I knew this couldn't go on. My job was to be sure the sentence was carried out. I chose four of my best men, and we took the patibulum, the crossbeam, and dropped it on Jesus' torn shoulders. We headed out with Jesus stumbling along after us. One of my officers led the way with a wooden sign bearing the inscription of his crime for all to see: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." It was a long walk. We always led the condemned through the city by the longest route to induce fear in the people as a detriment to crime. When we came to the gates of the city, it was clear Jesus couldn't go on. So, as the law permitted us to do, we conscripted a nearby man to carry the crossbeam for him. I later learned his name was Simon, a Jewish proselyte from North Africa. I guess he'd squeezed through the crowd to get a better view of the spectacle; little did he know he'd be drafted into our service right on the spot.

And then we came to the place outside the city, a god-forsaken place we called, Golgotha, which means, "the place of the skull." Immediately, as was the custom, a few local women offered Jesus wine mixed with gall to deaden the pain of what was about to happen. But Jesus refused it as if he wanted to drink a different cup to the last drop. I'm not going to lie. It was a gruesome way to die. That's why we'd never allowed a Roman

citizen to be crucified, regardless of what they'd done. So horrendous was this form of death, it was taboo to even speak of in polite company.

Simon laid the crossbeam down. My three soldiers pushed Jesus down upon it, naked. They spread his arms and drove a spike through each wrist. They raised the crossbeam, collected his dangling legs, and nailed his feet to the post. The charge against him was then nailed above his head, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Then the misery was taken to a new level. Like all the rest, Jesus began pushing up with his feet to get a breath, then collapsed downward in exhaustion. This could go on for hours, even days.

The four of us sat down beneath the cross. The worst thing about this duty was the waiting. Hours upon hours of listening to men wailing in agony, waiting for them to die.

The only concession was lots of strong drink and one small perk. It was customary for us to take whatever the victim had in his possession. In this case, my men cast lots for his robe. Some even said that robe had healing powers of its own!

You learn a lot about people at times like that. I've found people are seldom more heartless than when they see another person suffering. It was true that day.

Jesus was crucified between two criminals, and as they waited for the inevitable, they mocked him.

Some of the Jewish priest and elders chimed in, "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we'll believe in him. He trusts in God. If he's God's Son, so let God rescue him now."

Even those passing by took a few shots of their own: "Hey if you're God's Son, come on down from the cross!"

The only ones there who were silent were a few women huddled together, watching from a distance. I wondered if they were among his disciples, sadly loyal to the bitter end. Instead of hurling insults at him, they just wept.

Strange thing about Jesus: When ordinary men were on the cross, they'd spit on us, curse us, and threaten our families. But we knew their threats were meaningless. Once a man was placed on the cross and raised into the sky, he'd never come down again alive. But

Jesus was different. He never threatened us or cursed us. Like a lamb going to slaughter, He hardly opened His mouth.

Until the darkness came, from noon to three, when the sun should have filled the sky, the darkness came down like a blanket, and the crowds scurried away. My soldiers were frightened and began to shrink back from His cross. For three hours that darkness reigned.

And then, at 3:00, Jesus let out a cry, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" In your language, that means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" My first thought was, well, that's more like it. That's what I'd expect a man in his condition to feel. Abandoned! Forsaken!

Some people thought he was crying out for help from one of their prophets, but I knew. If he did have a God, if he was God's Son, his Father had forsaken him.

And then, finally, the end came. But it wasn't like any other death by crucifixion I'd seen. Most men first fell unconscious and died feebly, quietly. But he departed with another cry, the loudest cry I'd ever heard, like he was making a final declaration, "It is finished!"

And then, before the darkness lifted, the earth shook. This land of Judea was known for earthquakes, but not like this. Massive rocks were split open like cracked eggs. Later, I heard that even tombs opened up.

It was even reported that the curtain in their temple was torn in two into from top to bottom.

And then there was just a dead silence. I thought about this man. It was there, beneath the cross of Jesus of Nazareth, it began to sink in: this was more than just another death.

I thought, maybe he IS God's Son. I even said it out-loud right there at the cross. The irony is, maybe all the things people said about him in jest were true. They mocked him as King of the Jews, what if he WAS their king? They said, "If you're the Son of God, come down from the cross." Maybe it was because he WAS the Son of God that he would NOT come down from that cross. They said, "He saved others, but he can't save himself." But what if, in order to save others, he couldn't save himself? He said to his God, "Why have you forsaken me?" What if somehow he had to be forsaken to carry out his plan?

I wish I could tell you that was all that happened that day, but it wasn't. Sometimes bodies hung there for days, but not Jesus. As evening approached, a wealthy man named Joseph, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, approached me with papers. He'd obtained

permission from Pilate to prepare the body for burial in his own tomb that was cut from rock. This man was secretly a disciple of Jesus. All of this was in haste because the Jewish Sabbath would begin at sundown. Work such as this wasn't permitted after that. It was a bold and generous act for a man like him. But as he walked away with the corpse, I wondered where his other disciples were, and where his own family was.

Again, I wish I could say the story was over. But the next day I was summoned by Pilate. He said something about a rumor that this man had predicted he'd rise on the third day after his death. The Jewish leaders were afraid his disciples would steal his body and then go around telling people he'd risen from the dead. So Pilate had me send a few of my men out to guard the tomb for two more days. Honestly, it seemed like a foolish thing to do. Who posts a guard to watch a dead man? But they went, and when they got there, they even sealed the tomb. It would be impossible for someone to get in or out!

Or, so I thought. Sunday morning a rumor began to spread that this Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead. But, remember, my men were there. When I questioned them, they told me all they know is once again the earth shook beneath their feet, the stone was rolled back, and they found tomb was empty besides the linen cloths Joseph had wrapped him in.

How could this be? I was Roman centurion, loyal to Caesar, who we worshipped as a god. Even if this Jesus of Nazareth was really a god, wouldn't he just have been one of many? But I couldn't get it that day out of my mind. It wasn't just the rumors of his resurrection, but his death. For months, I thought about it. I'd been the one in authority. What if he WAS sent from God; what if I AM guilty of this innocent man's blood?

But months later everything changed for me. I encountered a man named Matthew, a follower of this Jesus. He called himself a Christian. I told him what I'd seen on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. He told me this Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. He said His death hadn't been an accident, but part of the plan of God. I WAS guilty, he said, of Jesus' death, but not because I'd ordered His execution. It was my sin, selfishness, arrogance, and pride that put Him on that cross. In fact, we were all guilty. He said He'd died to take away the guilt and shame of our sin; to purchase our pardon. Yes, his death tore that curtain in the temple in two, so we could all enter and approach this Holy God. He was raised up to prove he

was stronger than even death. He said, "Put your trust in him, Marcus, and he'll give you new life and hope beyond the grave."

In that moment I knew it was all true. I bowed, not before Caesar, but before this Jesus. I laid this staff down and submitted my will to his. I was baptized. I died to who I used to be. And then I rose up to become a new man. Still a soldier, but now a soldier for Him!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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