The Centurion

"Jupiter, god of the universe, bless me with your presence."

 The centurion kissed the token, placing it on the small altar. Arising from his knees, his left cracking painfully, as usual, he touched his chest over his heart in worship. Lifting the galea, he placed it with reverence on his balding, closely cropped head, and fastened the leather chin straps. Had he a mirror, he would have been proud of the sight. On his head sat the galea, with the transversely arranged ostrich plume. It was beautiful in his mind and signified the overwhelming power of the Roman empire. Draping his imposing chest, the bronze stadios or chest plate, humeralia or shoulder guards, and the recently sharpened gladius sword.

Pride, as usual, pumped through his being. The gods would turn the tide today. They would direct his soldiers, victorious in all their pursuits, the greatest military power in all history. But blast this wretched land. Could the gods not see to return him to his glorious home in the toe of the Italian boot, Calabria?

Cassius, the centurion, stepped proudly out of his tent into the early morning sunlight of Judea. It was a difficult, trying assignment, leading a centuriae of men in this foul country. Their assignment was discipline. They were to lash out the necessary punishment that kept their army oiled, in his mind.

The messenger was out of breath, bringing a scroll for the consideration of the centurion. "Sir, this is for your immediate attention. The primus pilus insists on it."

Cassius took the scroll from the messenger with some disdain. His recent clash with Felix, the primus pilus, was less than honorable. He quickly unrolled the document and scanned it quickly.

"This is from Felix?"

"Yes, I took the volume from his aid. Marcus told me that it was written by the primus himself."

 Cassius turned and looked distracted at the rising sun. What the message instructed him to do this morning was odd, so out of routine. His centuriae always disciplined the legionnaires, the working men who disobeyed the military law. The message instructed him to support the capital punishment of three miscreants, Jewish criminals charged with various offenses. The judgment was death, Pilate himself evidently involved in the sentence.

The Jews were always battling; their conquerors, their religious leaders, and indeed themselves as well. They were a disagreeable lot, content with nothing; it seemed to Cassius. But crucifixion, it was a serious, and really horrible verdict. He should be proud of the request, but something told him that the event would not be so rewarding.

The document used the term prepared. The three criminals were thoroughly prepared; the writing went on to describe. This was a roman euphemism, and Cassius chuckled to himself. Flogged, scourged, beaten, now those are the words that applied. May the gods help those scoundrels. They were in for it that day.

Cassius moved to calling his men, rounding them up and marching to instructed rendezvous spot indicated in the document. It was the foot of a miserable rocky hill of disrepute. A site of an evil presence, an absence of a godly sanction, it seemed to the centurion. Nothing ever came to good at the skull of Golgotha.

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 When they marched to their assignment, the growing crowd was already large and disruptive. There was a mounting mob, a swarm of a most disagreeable horde. Before him congregated the grimy rabble that made up this unpleasant city of Jerusalem. At the base of the road, hundreds of the lowly class were gathering. There were fights, shouting, and thrown rocks. What was going on here, the centurion wondered with a growing sense of tension?

 His men began dispersing into the crowd. They bludgeoned and clubbed the unruly, separated clashing groups, and doused the throng with buckets of dirty water. Their presence brought a small semblance of quiet to the roaring multitude. Nothing, however, could quell them for long.

 And then an enigmatic happening occurred in the life of the centurion. The crowd mysteriously parted, and He appeared. The pull-on Cassius soul was immense and burdensome. The centurion felt drawn to him, and he pushed through the crowd to get a better look.

The man was struggling, the heavy cross member of his intended gallows roped to his shoulders. He was dressed in a plain color, strangely one-piece tunic. His shawl was torn and dragging. He was beaten, bruised, and bleeding, with a hat of woven thorns on his head. Trailing the man were two common criminals, beaten and carrying their gallows as well. But while the crowd pelted these two with rocks and debris, the crowd separated and left the first man alone.

 "Who is he?" Cassius grabbed a vocal man in the crowd and shook him for an answer.

 "He is Jesus. A fool. A man of Nazareth," the man spit out with disgust.

 "What has he done?" Now Cassius knew peripherally about the crimes of the three, but this man struck him as different.

 "He is the King of the Jews…or so he claims."

 "King?" Cassius was surprised by this disclaimer.

 "He is the messiah, so-called. Look at him now."

 Cassius returned to the prisoner. He did not look like a messiah. Then again, something was overpowering and consuming about the man. His eyes suddenly met and fixed directly on Cassius. There was a consuming burn felt instantly in the centurion's heart. This man, Jesus, was sad, swollen, and bloody. His brutal treatment distorted his face and body. There was, however, an air of expectation to his visage. His look was laser-like, seeming to select the centurion alone, out of the crowd. His gaze fixed on him. It seemed intended for no one other than he. Miraculously, the word peace became fixed in the centurion's mind. There was harmony in his heart. It replaced a stony constitution, where the absence of peace was present, always before. What was happening? Cassius was surprised and unsure.

 There was an older woman on the edge of the crowd. Dressed in black, there was an overwhelming sadness on her face. She seemed surrounded and protected by a group of men. In front of her, however, was a fool of a man. He was laughing and carrying on. His intoxication, obvious, his disrespect of the woman, apparent. Cassius felt drawn, and he grabbed the man and pushed him away to the ground. Brandishing his sword, he threatened the man. "Leave her be, you dupe." He then looked up at the woman. Her traumatized face broke for just a moment. She nodded quietly with some deference for the centurion.

 The crowd and prisoners continued their journey. At the foot of Golgotha, they began their ascension. Cassius' centuriae assignment was to control the crowd at the foot of the hill. Cassius left his post deserting his men, however and trailed the prisoners to the top of the so-called skull. Drawn to the scene and overwhelmed, he felt no choice in the matter.

 At the apex of Golgotha was a stony clearing. The mob surrounded the sight with gleeful merriment. Disruptive and angry spectators crowded onto the scene. There was a festive atmosphere coming from some, venders actually peddling their fare with a light-hearted hilarity.

Cassius was overwhelmed, however, with despondency. The sadness he felt looking at the Jew's treatment disturbed his usually robust character. There were mourning and lamentation in the air and covering the visages of many others in the crowd.

 Jesus was thrown harshly to the ground. Soldiers kicked him, moving the prisoner into position on the gallows. His hands were lashed to the crude cross, and a square spike was driven, gruesomely, through his limbs.

 Cassius was tearful, and he fell to his knees as he watched. He struggled to rise, his painful left knee cracking loudly. He stood at the edge of the crucifixion helplessly.

 One soldier began voiding, emptying his bladder on Jesus. The anger blasted through Cassius's soul. He limped quickly and grabbed the soldier throwing him to the ground. Standing over the man, he roared. "You must respect this man, you scoundrel. Have you no honor?"

The crucifixion continued around the centurion. There was laughing and hilarity from some of the Romans, as the cross was raised and then dropped painfully into a deep hole.

One soldier climbed the cross and hung a sign above Jesus' head, which read: *The King of the Jews.* The soldiers then cast lots for his garments, and to decide who would keep what.  They offered wine mingled with myrrh to him. He shunned it forthright and did not take it.

The chief priests were about, and an arrogant group. They mocked him to one another with the scribes. "Look, the fool saved others; why can he not save himself?" The crowd joined in. "Save yourself, King of the Jews. Come down from that cross."

As the day drew on, Cassius stood at the foot of the cross with devotion to the scene. Around noon, the sky darkened to seem as if nighttime. A mighty earthquake then shook the earth many falling to the ground in fright. Nearly all in the crowd quickly left the scene in panic.

34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "E'lo-i, E'lo-i, la' ma sabach-tha'ni?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.

39 And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Followers remained, crying and comforting each other. The Romans charged with his execution scattered. The man's spirit had departed, but his influence on all, and all through man's history was just beginning.

And Cassius stood and looked at the cross. A tear rolled down from the centurion's eye. He recalled his charge given to him in the morning. He was a Roman soldier through all of his sinew and flesh. He could never, however, feel the same passion again. He drew his gladius sword from his breast scabbard. He looked to the ground beside him and buried the sword's point with authority. Slowly Cassius undid the leather chin straps. He removed his treasured galea with deliberation. Reverently he set the helmet with its ostrich plume on the ground by his sandaled foot and walked off Golgotha.

1. Mark 15: 34, 37, and 39. Revised Standard Version of the Bible [↑](#footnote-ref-1)