**The Second Thief**

The blow struck him squarely in the face, a stinging shock to the corner of his quivering mouth. The dung projectile arrived as a clay-like congealing mass, warm and malodorous. It drooled down the side of his face, a bitter taste reminding him of his crimes. Rotting fruit, dirt, and rocks pelted the thief during his turbulent journey. Vulgar shouts of hate left little question as to their feelings. The putrid package, however, left no doubt as to the mob’s embittered spirits.

 He was powerless to clean himself as the debris ran down his face. The liquifying mixture covered his face helplessly. His struggling hands were lashed to an overwhelming beam of wood perched on his shoulders. His muscles began to twitch in an exhausted failing state as he struggled along the grimy road.

 "Thief! Murderer!" The accusations burned in his ringing ears as the roar of the crowd began to engulf him. He stumbled and fell on his face, the heavy load crashing and burnishing his blistered neck. The whip rang out. His back twisted, and he struggled again to his feet. The agony sent his mind away. Painful memories began to appear in his tortured mind.

 The wooden falcon would be the boy’s only proper toy. Carved from a single piece of olivewood, the beak, the wings, they were all mighty, powerful, and glorious. The uncle was his sole friend, his solitary gift surprising him on another ignored birthday. As he laid his head down for the night, he was so excited. Before sleep fell over him, the boy opened an untrusting eye to confirm the gift's presence.

 He awoke in a dreaded panic. Before he saw, he knew; his treasured bird gone. The boy jumped to his feet and ran, trembling into the next room. The man was naked, his empty wine bota bag in his outstretched hand. The boy stood sobbing alongside his drunken father. Tossed carelessly aside was the mighty bird, its magnificent beak broken off and buried in the dirt of the floor.

The whip crashed across his back, returning him to his tortured predicament. Rotting food and vile odorous buckets of water doused him, further weakening his soul. As he reached the rocky hill's summit, he realized that he was not alone. Others carrying their crosses struggled alongside him.

 The dream of his past behavior flashed upon the thief's tortured mind. It was a calmer time, that burgeoning fall season when Tamar left him for good. The jewel's possessor was obvious, the letter *H* engraved on the beautiful golden necklace. He was drunk as usual, and in his affected state, he ironically took the jewelry for his wife. He would have hidden it from her more securely, but he had carelessly tossed the stash under his cot.

 "They are Hadassah's. Could you not demean me any clearer?" The furious woman cast a bowl of dirty soapy water over his head. "I toil for her. I knew I should not trust you in her chamber! What else did you make your own?"

 Her centurion brother woke with the chaos, chasing Gestas away with his violent presence and threatening gladius sword. She was the only decent thing in his life, gone now for good because of his needless betrayals.

 The jarring shock returned his sickened mind to the mayhem. A shove pushed the thief backward onto the ground. The wooden post, lashed to his arms, twisted and broke the sinew of his shoulder with a loud pop. The soldiers were on him with the whip, stinging, thrashing, and laying open his loins and chest. Bloody serum sprayed over his tissues. They pierced his limbs with roughened spikes. A massive, rusty mallet drove the nails through the bones with a ferocious crushing sound.

 Before they lifted him to the sky, one helmeted soldier urinated on him, and the warm acidy fluid burned his torn flesh. An acrid stench bubbled up from the rising steam. As he rose on the cross, he could see out of only one torn eye. The crowd at his foot laughed, cajoled, and called for his death.

 Again, his consciousness dwindled to a prior time. Tamar was in her marriage dress, fresh, white, innocent, and beautiful. A sprig of green and red decorated her hair. She looked lovely and happy; the visage never to be seen again. His betrayal began that very day, his forceful violation of a young bridesmaid exposed and secret to no one.

The sun beat down upon his withering being. The rusty spikes tortured him, pinning him in agony to his wooden snare. Another scene played out in his tormented mind. It told the story of his ultimate crime, his final mistake.

 The thief thought the night would be his trusted ally. A black, murky sky hid him from his target, as well as from himself. The magistrate would not be in residence. It was the night of assembly, the local gathering leading the rich man away. He would grab the jewels and gold as they lay for his seizure within the stone dwelling, then escape without opposition. After all, his victim's corruption was the motive for their presence, his twisted mind reasoned.

 The plan went awry. The man was on him like a crazed jackal, jumping from the shadows as he entered. Their struggle was deadly, the thief making an ultimate, fateful decision. Confused and struggling, he dragged the dying man to the window. The moonlight revealed the horrible truth. Here lay the magistrate, his throat mortally slashed and bleeding.

 The Romans lifted him on the cross upward. He reached the apex and returned to the horror of the moment, with a violent jolt. A dry wind blew, and dirt billowed up, scratching his watering eyes. Suddenly, a wonderful peace overcame him. A man on an identical cross to his right looked out over the crowd. On his head was a crown of twisted thorns. His ripped beard hung from his face. Blood flowed down over his tattered limbs. Tissues of his body were thrashed, bleeding, and weeping, and yet an overwhelming love emanated from the brutalized man known as Jesus.

 The crowd hurled insults at Jesus. "*If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." The chief priests and scribes berated him. "He saved others; he cannot save himself. "*

 Gestas repeated the indictment suddenly, without thought or control. It was like the accusation was forced from him by an evil life-force. This second thief hanging on the Savior's left repeated the indictment, suddenly, and then felt overwhelming sorrow and shame.

 *"Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"* The first thief, the thief on Jesus' right, rebuked Gestas. And then it happened. Jesus turned his torn shredded head to his side. With great difficulty, he made eye contact with Gestas, his silent stare beginning a super-natural transformation. The stare penetrated Gestas' tattered soul. Its disapproval hurt worse than his wounds but was eventually replaced with an all understanding peace.

 Breathing now was a tortured process. As Gestas struggled to lift himself for air, he grew weaker and weaker. Coughing was ineffective at clearing his airways. He gurgled and spat, gasping for every ounce of air.

 Jesus would not leave him alone. Passion emanated from him. Love, adoration, and tenderness overwhelmingly evident. It burned the evil soul of Gestas like fire to paper. He was nearly gone when dense darkness came across the land.

 *"Eli, Eli, lan'ma sabach-tha'ni?" That is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!"* And with that, the Savior breathed his last.

The battered thief felt an emptiness beyond description. Gone was the light of the world. Gone was a powerful sense of forgiveness. He struggled for air one last painful time and then was catapulted into eternity.

Author's Note:

Dialogue in italics is scripture from Matthew and Luke's gospels in the Holy Bible's revised standard version.