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writings by Beth Ann Phifer



By a Roman Soldier

An Imaginative Interpretation

Written in the 1980s by my friend De Gaskins

It was another execution day. Three men charged with felonies were to be crucified. The execution squad is selected on a rotating basis from among the Roman soldiers stationed under Pontius Pilate. It was my turn, along with three of my companions, to perform the execution.

I had always had mixed feelings about this part of my job. Crucifixion is an ugly business, and I always have to put the human aspect out of the picture. Justice has to be carried out and malefactors made an example in order for crime to be curbed and society to be protected. After all, I convinced myself, a murderer is little more than an animal.

I must admit, though, having a few drinks and joking with my buddies helps to suppress any guilty thoughts that might arise. You just don't allow emotions to get in the way of justice.

On this particular day, the air was muggy and suffocating, while the streets were crowded with all sorts of humanity. The Jewish people were here to celebrate their traditional feast and to offer sacrifices. They are a peculiar people, and today they seemed more than ever intent on making my life difficult, crowding in on the criminals until I literally had to beat some of them away with the end of my spear.

They seemed very interested in one of the criminals, a Jew. I could understand that fact. For a Jew to be executed by the Romans was a double insult to these proud people. But wait! Some of this man's own people were hurling insults at Him, calling him "King of the Jews," sticking out their tongues and wagging their heads. This was unusual, indeed.

The man himself was rather ordinary, nothing to get excited about. He looked terribly abused, so that he could not even carry his own cross, and he had a crown of thorns on this head from which drops of blood trickled down his face. The peculiar thing about this man was his quiet determination to get to the top of the hill, and every ounce of strength was summoned to that end. I saw him say a few words to some weeping women, but that was all.

When we finally reached the hill of the Skull, the unpleasant task of crucifixion began. We nailed all three of them in the customary way, hands and feet to their crosses. Seeing their pain was unnerving. There was something different about that Jew, though. He submitted to the whole thing as if it were divinely ordained, as if he were offering himself as a sacrifice. I don't know what it was, just that look in his eyes, even in the midst of his pain - no bitterness or self-pity.

When that job was over, my buddies and I sat down to wait and had our drinks. We even cast lots for the Jew's clothes.

"Hey," I asked one of my pals, "what's that guy up there for?"

"Claims to be divine, related to the living God. Something about a kingdom. He's a threat to the Jews, and they want to get rid of him."

"Boy, I'd just write him off as crazy! Why all the commotion?"

"They say he did miracles and had quite a following."

"Hey, you up there," one of my friends yelled, "if you are the Kings of the Jews, come down off the cross, and we'll believe you!"

We all laughed and continued our drinking. At one point, he said that he was thirsty, so we filled a sponge with vinegar and offered it to him on a pole. He took it and then, in a loud voice, cried out to his God...something I couldn't understand.

We'd been there a few hours when the sky grew dark and foreboding. It was very strange. We kept on drinking. Then the thunder and lightening began and the earth began to shake. The thunder was deafening. I began to sober up fast. I looked at the Jew...he was dead. So were his companions.

My superior, a Roman centurion who had not joined in the games and the ridicule, stood staring at the Jew on the cross and with amazement in his voice, he said, "Truly, this man was the Son of God." Then he fell on his knees and began to pray.

A cold chill ran through my body, and I began to shake like the earth beneath me. Fear and condemnation came over me, and I remembered the determination and the look in that man's eyes. Hadn't he said something to "His Father?" Could he have been God's son?

What had I done? I had actually held those hands and feet, while another soldier drove the nails through them. I had actually laughed and scorned him. What if he was the Son of God and an angry Father was now spewing out his wrath in thunder and lightening and shaking the earth as one would shake a naughty child?

All those repressed feelings of guilt came over me...all those men I had murdered on the cross, and now, God Himself? I wanted to run, to hide, to die! I wept, I cried, I cringed with fear.

For the next three days, I confined myself to my home. I was in a deep state of despair. I could not eat or drink or talk, and I didn't know what to do with myself. My wife and children didn't know what to do with me, either.

Finally, on the third day, I decided to venture outside for a walk and hoped that the sky wouldn't fall down on me, so great was my fear and guilt. I took the road outside Jerusalem, and as I walked, I pondered my dilemma. What was I going to do with this uncertainty, fear, and guilt? How could I ever be free? How could I resume a normal life with these questions hovering over me? I felt as though I had no where to turn.

I sat down on a stone to rest and ponder these things, when suddenly, I saw a stranger approaching. As he neared, I recognized him as a Jew. He stopped and asked me where I was going.

"Probably to hell," I muttered.

Somewhat surprised by my response, he asked me why, and feeling his sympathy, I began to relate to him the events of that terrible execution three days before.

When I had finished, my voice was quivering, and tears began to flow down my cheeks.

Then he looked at me. That same look that I had seen on the cross. That same divine expression! Only now it was full of love and sympathy. A sense of recognition came over me, and I fell at his feet. Then I saw the nail prints. Weeping, I took hold of those beautiful feet, those feet that I had helped to bruise. My mind did not comprehend, but my heart was bursting with mingled sorrow and relief.

Then those hands, the hands that I had treated so roughly, reached down and touched me.

"Arise, my son," He said, "Do not be afraid. I have forgiven you because you did not know what you were doing. You intended evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring about the salvation of many. Therefore, do not be afraid. Go now, and sin no more."

And then He was gone.

I had seen the Son of God! He's alive! I'm forgiven! I began to praise God. My life had been restored, my past removed. I would never be the same again!

I ran all the way home, determined to tell by buddies, my superior the centurion, anyone who would listen, "He's alive! He's alive!"

P.S. A lot of time has passed, and I am still a soldier, but no longer a soldier of Pilate's. I am a soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ and am willing to suffer hardship for Him. I realize fully that it should have been I who was nailed to that cross, but because of His undying love, I am free. And so, as a soldier of His, I no longer entangle myself in the affairs of everyday life, so that I may please Him who enlisted me as a soldier and called me to eternal life. (2 Timothy 2:3,4)