

Reflections on the
Seven Sayings of Christ from the Cross
Hank Thompson

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Dear friends at Christ the Redeemer,

Last year I was asked to share a personal response to one of the *Seven Sayings of Christ from the Cross* at a pre-Easter service. I decided to write and read a short piece from the perspective of one of the robbers crucified with Jesus. Afterward I was encouraged to write reflections on all seven *Sayings*. In the course of working on the project, I was thrilled that the members of my MUSE writing class were open to hearing the Biblical content, with which they were totally unfamiliar, as they freely offered suggestions regarding writing craft. They were excited about the project and gave me a lot of encouragement to finish it.

So hear it is. I have not arranged the seven pieces in the traditional order, but in the order that makes for the best reading. Four are from the perspective of those present at the day of crucifixion—Pilate and his wife, Mary mother of Jesus, the robber mentioned above, and a fictional centurion. Three involve personal experiences.

Sincerely,

Hank Thompson

Haunted House

“And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” Luke 23:34

The odor of compressed and overheated bodies filled the air. Slowly at first, the crowd began to move from Pilate’s outer court, sandals kicking up dust from the cobblestones and hardpacked dirt. Crowd anger and threats having turned into shouts of satisfaction and anticipation, hundreds dispersed into streets leading away in every direction, away from the Governor’s Palace. After watching silently for the crowd to clear, Pontius Pilate himself turned from the stone porch rail and the ordeal that had erupted in his court that morning.

But it was settled now. Finally. Shoulders slouching, Pilate trudged between a dozen centurions, erect statues lining both sides of the entryway. Wiping drops of perspiration from his forehead with the back of his right hand, and glancing at the sky with a sigh, he stepped through the wide, arched doorway into his massive house. He yearned to let his tight muscles relax and to sit down to a quiet meal.

“The Governor was certainly impressive today,” commented his wife Claudia, waiting in the foyer, with its marble statues and intricate tapestries.

“Quiet!” Pilate barked, raising a palm. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“You heard the Chief Priests and Jewish leaders well enough.”

“I have to listen to them. They are the head that turns the horse. You saw that mob, their shouts, their fists shaking in the air, hate blazing in their eyes. Minutes more and they’d have stormed this house.

“I saw exactly what happened,” said Claudia. “The Governor caved. He ordered a decent man crucified. One that everyone knew had done nothing wrong. Not even his vocal accusers. Nothing!”

“But the man wouldn’t stand up for himself! They called him their king. They said he claimed to be God! And how did he answer me? Either by silently looking at the pavement, or with, ‘It is as you say.’”

“Isn’t it always how the Governor says?” said Claudia. “The Governor rules the Palace. The Governor commands legions. The governor rules the province. Does he really, now? She turned and pace briskly into the adjoining dining room.

Pilate followed, protesting, “Listen. I absolutely begged those scoundrels to back off on their demands. I offered to have the man flogged and freed. I tried to give the man the yearly Passover pardon, but what did they want? They wanted that murderer and insurrectionist Barabbas freed instead.”

In the privacy of the dining room Claudia stood with her hands on her hips. “But you, you have crucified that man. You!”

“It was either that or have a riot.”

“What does Rome have its legions for?” said Claudia, taking a step sideways and slipping into a seat behind a sturdy, linen covered table, richly set for two.

“How about a little mercy!” said Pilate, following her to the table and sitting opposite her. Spreading his napkin he glared at Claudia and continued, “Look, my decision this morning wasn’t simply about another arrested and accused insurrectionist. It was about preventing an armed revolt by the whole populace, led by their priests and elders. Do you know how many hundreds--thousands--of Jews are crammed into this city right now for their Passover? A revolution, especially at this moment, is not what I need.”

“So, is a reputation for judicial corruption what the Governor needs?” countered Claudia, squarely meeting his gaze. “Is a province run by a Governor who bends like a reed, who has a backbone of flax, what Caesar needs? What would the Emperor have to say about that?”

“This was a situation with no good solution,” said Pilate, glancing at the fruit bowl and warm bread before him. He beckoned a servant. “And you know it.”

“The worst part is that you heeded a bunch of evil, self-seeking Jews, but you wouldn’t listen to your own wife,” said Claudia. “I told you over and over that that man was innocent. I told you that I was tormented by a nightmare, that haunts me yet. “Let that man go,” I pleaded. But, as usual, you wouldn’t listen. Not to me.”

“I told you, Claudia, there was no good answer. I had to make a decision.”

“And so what did the Governor decide? He decided to give the chief priests their way, and to wash his hands of all responsibility.”

The discussion stopped. Pilate and Claudia sat still, waiting for their wine glasses to be filled. The amber light of the oil lamp on the table shone on their faces. In the distance they heard the clang, clang of hammerhead on nails, nails being driven through an innocent man’s hands and feet.

“*Father, forgive them,*” the man cried, “*for they do not know what they do.*”

Tops and Bottoms

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I am thirsty.” John 19:28

“I’ll walk up,” I said to my parents. “You can come up later on the bus.” I yanked tight the shoestrings of my Converse All-Stars, stood, and bent at the waist to stretch. I looked along the path that led from the Peaks of Otter Lodge, into the trees, and to the peak of Sharp Top Mountain.

Although I was enjoying the easy inclines, smooth curves, and scenic overlooks along the Blue Ridge Parkway on a motor trip with my parents, I was also trying to get in shape for JV football practice the following week. I had played Community League ball for five years, but this would be taking it to a new level. After a childhood of dreaming about it, I would actually wear a Maury High School football jersey.

My determined stride carried me back, forth, and around Sharp Top. The climb forced me into deep but even breathing, but I was able to press steadily up the trail without having to relax my pace or pause for rest. Although it was a sunny August day, I traveled mostly in pleasant shade under a canopy of maple and chestnut oak branches and leaves. “So refreshing,” I thought.

I crisscrossed the paved road used by the tourist bus. After an hour I reached a junction of path and pavement where there was a historic marker. I read that Sharp Top Mountain had once been thought Virginia’s tallest, but that more recent surveys disproved that notion. Even Flat Top, the other Peak of Otter was a bit taller. All that was left was the final fifty feet, which could only be done on foot. “No sweat,” I said, looking up the narrow path that wound upward between rocks and shrubs toward blue sky above.

The remainder of the path became decidedly steeper, and as I took one step upward after another, I dodged uneven shrubs and steadied myself with a hand on the rough, round sides of boulders as I pushed by. There was no longer a green canopy over me. I was now in the soothing warmth and direct light of the sun. I soon walked out on a wide rock that formed the open peak. Old Flat Top stood directly across the valley, white buildings of Bedford shone to my far right in the hazy distance, and the Peaks of Otter Lodge was a matchbox below. I suddenly realized why people spoke of “mountaintop experiences.” I had one. Contours of mountain and valley stretched into the sky in every direction. All of mankind’s waste, strife, and broken dreams were rendered invisible by height and distance. I contemplated the sun, sky, lakes, trees, fresh open air. I sat on the rocky peak, hands locked around my knees, to take in the grandeur with senses and spirit. “How could anyone believe that you didn’t make all this,” I whispered to God.

The descent was easy and went so much more quickly. It didn’t take me long to discover, in fact, that it was harder to hold myself back from running than to let myself go. So I ran. The air cooling my face, I felt like I was flying. My feet pounded down the path. I worked up a huge sweat and gasped for breath. The now familiar bends of the path, the crisscrossing of the bus road, and the surrounding greenery passed by quickly. I nearly crash landed, though, when my rubber soles slipped on gravel in a couple sharp turns. In fifteen minutes I was at the lodge, with its siding, signs, and visitor store. But what a workout! “I’m ready for JV football.”

Or so I thought.

One week later I was in practice football gear sweating in ninety-five degree heat behind Maury High School. The backs’ Coach had them dancing down rows of old tires and doing tipping drills. Mr. Streett worked the linemen, including

myself, on the two-man blocking sled. With the first tweet of his whistle forearms popped the pads on the sled. Then it was push-push-push-push-push-that-thing till the second tweet. Then a roll-away on the grass, back on feet, and running in place till the third tweet.

“Head up, Thompson!” Coach Streett barked. “Butt down!”

To end the session, stop-and-go sprints for everybody. How many lengths of that field?!

During the “going home” lap that ended at the locker room my muscles screamed, and my chest heaved as I huffed and puffed. The lining of my mouth was parchment. In those near death seconds of desperation, my spiritual moment Sharp Top Mountain was the farthest thing from my mind. I thought I would die. But I didn’t.

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One thing I marvel at is how quickly everything can change from top-of-the-hill exhilaration, to thirst. Thirst for direction, recognition, a sense of worth, inner peace, harmony, reconciliation, a quiet moment to oneself, death. For someone to love you, someone to freely say “I love you” to, to have said it before it was too late. For an unblocked exit, sixty seconds without pain, an ounce of justice, a cup of joy, a single drop of God Himself. For a chance to re-tape that one remark, to rewrite an entire act, to peek at the next couple of pages. To hear your song one more time. To see your ship to come in-- whatever is its cargo. To simply believe there is a ship.

Home

*He said to His mother, “Woman, behold, your son!”
Then He said to the disciple, “Behold your mother.” John 19:26-27*

I continued to stand close to the cross, but I could no longer bear to look up at it, at my own son getting weaker and weaker, grimacing and moaning, struggling for every last breath. Dripping blood had formed pools on the ground. All we could do was wail and weep. My sister and Mary Magdalene were with me, but no longer attempting to console me. Just there. John approached from behind me. When our eyes met, tears ran in rivers down his face.

For the first time in an hour Jesus spoke. To me. “Woman, behold your son,” He said. Then, turning his gaze to John and pushing Himself up on the nails for a snatch of air, “Behold your mother.” He knew that John, the disciple He loved most dearly, would take care of me, give me a home.

After a few minutes John gently rested his fingers on my left shoulder “It’s time to leave. I will walk you home. Next week you will come to my house and be part of my family.” He put his right arm around my waist and began to turn me away from the cross.

“No!” I blurted, angry, and I resisted his pressure. “I must stay here!”

I faced the cross directly. Jesus hung from it like raw meat. If I had come here without knowing what was happening, I would not have recognized my own baby.

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John’s gesture with upturned palm told me we were looking into the room he had prepared for me. “Your new home,” he announced, gesturing for me to walk in. I stood silently, looking in at the white curtains moving with the cool air from outside. John put an arm around my shoulders and gave me a gentle squeeze. Then he walked away, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I looked across the room. Nicely done. Comfortable, thoughtfully arranged, pleasant colors and textures, I remarked to myself.

Along one side of the room was a neatly made bed. I slowly stepped beside it and pressed my fingers down on it. Firm. So neat and clean. Thick wool blanket, folded, on the foot of the bed. Wouldn’t need that for many months. Such a nice place to sleep. So much better than what we had for Jesus when he was born in the chilly, drafty stable. Only Joseph would have thought of turning the animal feeder into a baby bed. But Jesus seemed content, didn’t he? I’ll never forget how His little arms waved when he wailed. Or the smells in that stable, now a fragrant memory.

I looked to the other side of the room. Look! A writing desk and chair. I pulled the chair out and sat in it. Hard, but it fits my legs and body perfectly. And sturdy. I jiggled my body but it didn’t squeak. I could write late at night and wouldn’t disturb a soul. I knew I was going to write the story of Jesus’ life. After all, I was the one who was with Him the longest, from beginning to end. My thoughts turned to that day in Cana when He turned water into wine. The stunned look on that head waiter’s face told it all. Jesus had worked His first miracle! Just like I knew He would.

Flowers! I picked up the tall, thin vase from the desktop. Wild flowers. God's favorites. I held them under my nose. Just enough of nature's perfume. And they possessed more than Solomon's glory, without ever working or weaving. That's what Jesus said. Or worrying. Me worry? I did that time when Jesus was twelve and stayed behind in Jerusalem talking with the teachers, and we didn't miss him for three days. But He had an answer for us, didn't He. "Had to be about his Father's business." He always was.

The rays of light sifting through the curtains caught my attention. Reminded me of the time God's angel stood before me. Told me I would bear God's Son. And I did, just as he said. So many confirmed that Jesus was the promised Messiah: Simeon, Anna, John the Baptist. And now He has come back to life and appeared to his disciples and friends. They say it with such certainty. Mary Magdalene claims she actually had him in her arms. He always told us He would rise in three days. So surely He has. Then why doesn't he appear to me? Let me squeeze Him in my arms. He could visit His own mother, don't you think?

I parted the curtains and rested my fingertips on the sill. I looked out on a garden, where John was inspecting the fig trees. I thought of the time I wanted to speak with Jesus but couldn't get through the crowd. A lot of people thought he was being disrespectful when he heard I was there and said, "Whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother." But I understood perfectly, that He was taking advantage of a teachable moment. What a master He was at that! And how he liked to put his arms around the children and make them laugh!

I gazed across the garden and beyond. Late afternoon sun blazed through branches and leaves. The sunbeams were a roadway to heaven and to God Himself! I turned to survey my lovely room. John has been so thoughtful, so faithful. Provided me a wonderful place. But will it ever feel like home?

I turned back toward the darkening garden and the bright rays of sun beyond. I would live here but I could never belong here. I knew that. My home was with Jesus, My Lord.

Fingertips

"It is finished." John 19:30

My mother did the talking at our house. For the most part it was her words that soothed, encouraged, instructed, and reprimanded me as I grew. Quieter and less verbal by nature, my father typically remained silent. Or was drowned out. It took me a long time to hear what he was saying.

I was thirty-four years of age and working in the Finance Department for Wycliffe Bible Translators, headquartered in Dallas. When I arrived home to Norfolk in June of 1984 for a two-week visit with my parents, I was surprised at how badly things were going for my father. He was already enrolled in a hospice program but trying to live at home as long as possible. The front left side of his jaw and half the blade of his tongue had been removed in an attempt to stop the spread of cancer in his mouth, and his is daily diet was pink canned Ensure, which my mother poured through a tube that entered his neck and ran to his stomach. His speech was garbled, and he couldn't remember to slow down. To make matters worse, he turned his face away with a pained look and barked at anyone asking him to repeat garbled words. A by-the-recipe type, my mother's nursing was extending his physical life, but she couldn't see how her rigid adherence to doctor's orders sometimes bruised his spirit. He was still able to stand and take short steps room to room, but beyond that he needed support.

One afternoon he was sitting in the sun on warm brick steps out back in his tattered, button up, navy blue gardening sweater. As I popped out of the back door, he shifted his gaze from the middle of the back yard to my swift movement toward the detached garage. "Henry!" he called out.

I stopped, and turned. "What?"

"Bring me the lawn mower," he said, and he pointed at the ground in front of his feet.

"The *what?*" I said.

"The lawn mower!" he growled, again indicating the spot directly in front of him.

Shaking my head, I pushed my rusty bicycle with one hand and cleared away a plastic porch chair with the other. I helplessly watched the bike's front wheel shift unexpectedly and the bike crash on the concrete floor. Finally I reached the back of the garage and reached out for the stainless steel handle of the green walk-behind power mower. I yanked the mower

from the musty corner and pulled it out of the garage. Tipping it back on its rear wheels, and spinning it toward my father, I rolled it across the yard and parallel parked it in front of him. “Now what?” I wondered.

To my amazement he cautiously pushed himself up from the steps, straddled the mower, and sat down facing forward on top of the Briggs & Stratton engine. He pointed about twenty feet away to the flowerbed in the middle of the back yard. “Push,” he commanded. As I rolled him across the uneven lawn, he balanced himself by holding onto both sides of the handle behind and letting his feet skim the grass out front. I thought of the Saturday mornings I had fussed at him for disturbing my slumber when he insisted on getting the lawn cut at nine o’ clock. Then it dawned on me, “He wouldn’t get in a wheelchair or be seen with a walker. Those are for sick people. But getting a ride on a lawnmower--that was okay.”

I rolled his thin 150 pounds where his finger told me, and we stopped alongside the flowerbed. Without leaving his perch on the engine, he leaned right, reached down to the edge of the bed with his fingers, and dug several small holes in the dirt. Next he stuck several fingers in his sweater pocket, pulled out a pack of seeds, and dropped some in the holes. Finally I was able to guess what he was thinking, “No tomatoes this year. But there will be zinnias.”

This man wasn’t dying. He was living!

Watching him work with his fingers made me think of one thing my father did for me as a kid that I’ve never heard of another father doing. When I was in roughly the first grade, I was not allowed to ride my bike to the elementary school ball field, but I was old enough to play Round Tip and Roll-a-Bat out front in the street. The asphalt was extremely hard on our cowhide hardballs and softballs, though, and it wasn’t long before the threads wore through. As the threads broke and the stitch after stitch pulled apart, the covers gaped opened at the seams. Eventually the loose covers flop-flop-flopped as the balls rolled on the asphalt and spun through the air. Well, my father found a spool of stout green thread, bought needles four inches long, settled into his folding chair under the oak tree in the back yard, puffed his stinky panatelas, and, working two threaded needles crosswise, sowed the covers back on the balls.

Two weeks after planting those zinnias my father began coughing a lot and spitting out thick, dark yellow fluid. The visiting nurse readily identified the problem as pneumonia. The only thing she could do for him was order a portable electric suction pump to help him remove the fluid from his mouth and throat.

That night at bedtime he was still coughing. From my back bedroom I could hear the frequent working of the pump motor, my father’s coughing, and my mother’s wailing. “Oh, Fulton! Fulton!” she kept pleading. Hysterical, she kept getting on and off their double bed, and wringing and throwing up her hands, not knowing what to do.

The commotion kept me wide awake, and my parents could not settle down. Finally I got out of bed and pushed open their bedroom door. In the dim glow of the small lamp on the nightstand I saw my father sitting up on the bed working in his mouth with the end of the suction tube, and my mother standing beside the bed perspiring. Around the perimeter of the room on the vanity, dresser, and cedar chest were scattered towels, rumpled clothes, and a couple open packages of Depends. “Why don’t you sleep in my bedroom?” I urged my mother. “I’ll spend tonight in bed with Dad.” She nodded and plodded down the hall toward my bedroom, and I turned off the lamp.

As I settled into my mother’s spot on the bed with my head turned away from him, my father tapped me twice on the shoulder with two fingertips. That was the last thing he said.

Paradise

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Luke 23:43

Pain shot like lightning from the nails in my hands up to my elbows. My arms out of joint, they had become useless for lifting my body. To open my chest and breathe, I now pushed solely on the nail through my feet. My tongue was parched sheepskin. My organs melted wax. Six hours on this cross. How much longer?

Jesus? He was already out of his misery. Nearly an hour ago his head had flopped on his chest, and His crown of thorns had fallen to the ground. His shredded body hung motionless with blood and fluid still oozing from it, like raw meat in a butcher shop. Pooled blood was sinking into the dirt. But He was in his true kingdom now. Alongside God His Father. “In paradise,” as had He said to me. “Truly. . . with Me. . . . paradise!” were His words.

Earlier a crowd had gathered for the spectacle. This Place of a Skull was filled with taunts and jeers, both from the Romans and from rulers of my own people, all gloating over their triumph. “Come on down, Jesus!” they had mocked. Jesus’ dazed followers looked on, defeated and dumbfounded. Sturdy fishermen wept. Women covered their tear-streaked faces and lowered their eyes. Their Messiah, their everlasting Light, was out.

Why couldn’t they see, as I did, that Jesus still was our King, only ruling in His true kingdom above. He was finished here. For now. But there is surely more to come. I would join Him soon “. . . in Paradise,” as He had promised. “Today!” Again and again His words echoed in my mind. “Today”. “With me”. “Paradise.” I longed to lift my face to heaven, but my head was too heavy to raise.

This trembling! My cross shaking with the ground! “Earthquake!” someone yelled. The tremors made my feet rub on the nails. Rocks on the bluff split before my eyes, and the pieces tumbled down.

Sounds of alarm from inside the city walls! What was happening I couldn’t tell. The centurions guarding the crosses remained crouched and huddled around their small fires flickering in the ominous midday darkness. They kept their voices low, done with their insults and tossing of dice. Eventually one soldier dutifully speared Jesus’s side and watched as water and blood flowed out. “Clearly, this was God’s Son,” he declared.

Hurried footsteps! An Emperor’s courier appeared over the rise and strode toward the centurions. Catching his breath, he delivered his message. There was urgency in his voice, but I could not make out the words. Glancing my way, a large and muscular centurion set down his lance and picked up a crude iron rod. He approached, hands clenching the rod and his eyes on my legs. I knew what was coming. He was to get this execution over with--and the bodies hauled away before sunset--before the Sabbath, when no work was allowed.

With three swings of the rod, he crushed my shins, my ankles, my knees. “Jesus!” I cried, as my body sagged. I gasped for breath, writhed in desperation. The earth swirled, and darkness fell on me like a stone wall.

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I was brought to my senses by a rustle of leaves and water running in a brook. A gentle breeze cooled my cheeks. Although the sun had fallen below the treetops, rays of “Today” still shone through upper branches. Jesus beckoned me to a table, nail print in his hand. It was a table fully prepared. My mouth watered. I knew where I was.

Why?

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46

In December of 1958, when I was seven, the must-have Christmas present for every boy was the Fanner 50 Shootin’ Shell Cowboy Pistol. For weeks our black and white TVs had shown us “the most authentic looking toy pistol ever made”. For weeks we had seen demonstrations of how to put Greenie Stick’em Caps on the rear end of six shells, attach the plastic bullets, and load the rotary chamber. For weeks we had watched boys with their low slung, fast draw leather holsters whirl and fire, rapidly fanning the extra wide hammer, just like real cowboys reacting to an unanticipated attack. For weeks we had watched on TV as the Fanner 50 fired, and bullets smacked aces of spades targets across the table. For weeks we had heard the ads close with, “If it’s Mattel, it’s swell!”

So what was in the box I unwrapped on Christmas Day? A pair of Brand X pistols in double holsters, gaudy with juvenile strands of rawhide and silver beads. Why? Why had Santa done this to me? I said thank you to my parents without looking up. I knew I would be laughed out of the saloon.

Well, in a matter of days those trademark wide plastic fanners broke off, limiting the Fanner 50 owners to trigger firing. The plastic bullet tips were pretty nifty, but only till they got wedged behind a radiator, or mamma’s seized them away before an eye was put out. Those greenie caps limited consecutive shooting to six shots before the Fanner cowboy had to take cover and re-load. In the meantime I was able to keep blasting away whole rolls of caps. And with my Brand X’s nearly every single cap exploded. When they came out of those guns, the red, perforated rolls of caps were shredded and blackened by the completely exploded gunpowder. Finally, it wasn’t long before those authentic Fanners lay in broken to plastic pieces, while my metal Brand X’s withstood impacts on concrete and under boot soles. It was I who emerged as the last man standing in Tombstone, and I could see that Santa Clause had had reasons that weren’t so dumb after all.

In the case of the Brand X pistols, I soon got a clear and understandable answer as to why I did not get what I had wanted and pleaded for. In fact I saw that I received something better. When Jesus cried out “Why?” in his last minutes from the cross, however, no answer came from heaven. No delivering angels were sent. And so Jesus felt full force the cruel crucifixion and, worse, the dreaded separation from His Father. That was his destiny. It had to be.

Like everyone else, I have had disappointments. I always thought I would someday be the Granddaddy, and sit at the head of the dining table in the wide chair with curved arms, say grace for the family, and carve the turkey. I always expected and desired to have children, but I have none. I married very late and divorced a few years later. So now I eat microwave fare daily, at a table set for one. Despite graduating from the Naval Academy I did not make the grade as a young naval officer. I was trained to be a missionary-linguist but lacked the confidence to go to the field. Bipolar Disorder has hospitalized me twice, and my obsessive-compulsiveness has been an albatross my entire adult life. When I finally loved someone and knew it, I found that I had loved myself into an impossible situation. When I hurt to the point of asking, “Why,” I am given no further reasons or explanation. I must settle for the same response to “Why” that Jesus did.

“Because.”

Centurion

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Luke 23:46

“Two more tomorrow,” I muttered, checking the schedule of executions. “Crooks, crazies, and crucifixion.” I stretched out on my bunk and was about to drop off to sleep when a fellow officer swung open the door with a bang and thudded across the barracks. I bristled as his loud talking at the far end of the room continued to annoy me.

“Those lousy Jews. Again!” he announced to several Roman soldiers sitting up to listen. “They corralled a controversial teacher in some garden this evening, and there was pushing and shoving. It’s getting around that somebody’s ear was slashed off, too. But that the teacher being arrested by the temple guards put the ear back on.”

“Yeah, right,” I mumbled, turning my face into my pillow. Soon I was asleep.

Before I had finished getting into my uniform the next morning, my captain stuck his head through the doorway. “Be flexible. There may be three today, lieutenant. The chief priests have been harassing some poor guy all night. Are dragging him before Pilate first thing this morning. They want him crucified. Crucified! Can you imagine? And will accept nothing less.”

“Rome is big enough to handle that, don’t you think, sir?” I said.

The Execution Squad was a specialized unit of my Second Cohort. Eight hardened, handpicked, disciplined soldiers, with crucifixion as its primary task. My first business of that day, though, was to inventory weapons and body armor. Disappearance of a couple short swords and sheathes required that an officer and one soldier take a complete inventory and submit a report immediately. Fortunately, we found nothing else missing.

By the time I finally reached Pilate’s court it was mid-morning. I found the Execution Squad in custody of the two convicts scheduled for crucifixion that day. The court was crammed with shouting Jews, mainly religious leaders.

“What’s going on?” I asked the soldier beside me.

“It’s inexplicable, sir,” he said. “It’s about the guy they nabbed last night, Jesus of Nazareth. Probably you’ve heard of him. The mob is demanding crucifixion. They say he claims to be God, and he doesn’t deny it. Is the guy insane? I don’t know. Is he an insurrectionist? Definitely not. He’s not cursing or making insults and threats like the fanatics we usually deal with. He’s been roughed up, but he’s composed. You can see he doesn’t have the bulk and strength to intimidate anyone. Pilate ruled him innocent once this morning and sent him to Herod, who concurred. Now he’s back before Pilate.

“So what’s the problem?”

“Pilate thinks he’s innocent,” the soldier continued, “and wants to have him flogged and let go. You know, enough for them to see blood. But that’s not enough for this crowd. They want him crucified.”

“What’s he done that’s made them so upset?”

“They are angered by his teachings and envious of his popularity with the masses. The common people say he is some great leader king promised in their scriptures, who will free them from the oppression of Rome. But these loudmouth priests, the ones who should know, are vehement that he is not that king. So it’s a religious dispute. Nothing that matters under Roman law! In fact, we were told that the disciple who was bribed to lead the temple guards to him begged to give back the blood money. And then hanged himself! The rest of his followers are harmless, and scattering. Jesus of Nazareth is clearly no threat to Caesar.”

“Strange,” I said.

The crowd drowned out more of Pilate’s offers to have him flogged and released. As curses and threats became louder, and the waving of fists at him more vigorous, Pilate perspired profusely. Armed and armored Roman soldiers were quietly maneuvering to rush, if ordered, between Pilate and the crowd, which inched forward with each outbreak of outrage.

“He opposes tribute to Caesar,” one accuser shouted.

“He says he’s our king,” screamed another.

“He claims he’s God!”

“A king?” I thought. “God?” Could Rome handle that?

I saw Pilate wash his hands. Obviously he intended to do something unconscionable without having to take the blame! I knew what he was thinking. Better for Jesus of Nazareth to die unjustly than to have this explode into a riot calling for reinforcements from throughout the province. Plus, Pilate badly wanted a tranquil Passover. He needed this over with.

Pilate held his hands high to settle the crowd and pronounced his sentence. “Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews, will be crucified. This day.”

Jesus was turned over to my Execution Squad and led away. They might sass the man and have some fun at his expense for a while, but before long they would get serious and do their work with unfeeling precision and efficiency. Guilty or innocent, just or unjust, fair or unfair--that was not their concern. Nor mine.

“But could he actually be a king? A god?” I wondered.

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Noon. The darkness was eerie and inexplicable.

“Maybe Rome cannot deal with this.” I whispered to myself.

Later, I climbed the hill outside the city to observe the progress of the day’s executions and to be on hand for the end. Typically, once the nailing and hoisting were done, my men gleefully threw dice and swapped crude jokes, or trumped each other’s boasts about loose women and raucous nights on the town. Instead I found them huddled in silence, staring at the ground. One nervously scraped the dirt with a nail. All were tense, as if awaiting an assault by some overpowering enemy against which they had no defense.

Three naked men agonized on their crosses, the criminals weakening, Jesus scarcely able to inhale. He had been less sturdy than the others to start with, and he had bled profusely from the wounds of flogging--gashes to the bone that crisscrossed his back--before the first nail was driven. He was finished. As I stood looking up at him, he loudly shouted that out.

A moment later, His body dangling from the nails, he raised his head one last time and gazed into the sky. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” he cried out. His head dropped like a dead weight, his body sagged, and he hung limp. Still.

I yelled out what everyone had known all along, “This man was innocent!”

He was indeed a king. He was God.

I knew.

And Rome became small.