The Centurion

By William Lynes, MD

The centurion kissed the token and placed it on the small altar. He closed his eyes and prayed to the heavens.

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

As he rose from kneeling, his old knee cracked painfully. The man respectfully touched his chest over his heart in worship. He placed the galea with reverence on his closely cropped head and fastened the leather chin straps.

With a mirror, he would be proud of his image. On his head sat the galea, the helmut with the transversely arranged ostrich plume. It was beautiful in his mind and signified the overwhelming power of the Roman Empire. In addition, his ensemble included the bronze stadios or chest plate, draping his imposing chest, humeralia or shoulder guards, and his recently sharpened gladius sword.

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

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

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

Cassius took the document from the messenger with some disdain. His recent clash with Felix, the primus pilus, was displeasing. He unrolled the manuscript and scanned it.

"This is from Felix?"

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

 Cassius turned away, looking somewhat perplexed. What the message instructed him to do this morning was odd, so out of routine. His centuriae always disciplined the legionnaires, the working men of the legion, who happened to disobey the military law. The document instructed him to support the capital punishment of three miscreants, Jewish criminals charged with various offenses. The sentence was death. Pontius Pilate himself was evidently involved in the judgment.

The Jews constantly battled with their conquerors, religious leaders, and themselves. They seemed to Cassius to be a disagreeable lot, content with nothing. But crucifixion? It was a severe and gruesome punishment. 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 were the words that truly applied. May the gods be with those scoundrels.

Cassius began calling his men, rounding them up, and marching to the instructed rendezvous spot indicated in Felix's order. They were to assemble at the foot of a miserable rocky hill of disrepute. It seemed to the centurion that it was a site of an evil presence, an absence of divine sanction. Nothing ever came to good at the skull of Golgotha.

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When they arrived, the crowd was already large and unruly. There was a growing mob, a swarm of a most disagreeable horde. Before Cassius stood the grimy rabble that made up this unpleasant city of Jerusalem. Hundreds of the lowly class were gathering at the base of the road. There were fights, shouting, and thrown rocks. What was happening, 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 mob 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. Immediately 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 light color, strangely one-piece tunic. A torn and dragging shawl draped his shoulders. He was beaten, bruised, and bleeding, with a crown 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 mob 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. Ha, 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. Instantly, there was an intense burn 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 brain. There was harmony in the Roman's heart. It replaced a formerly stony constitution, where the absence of peace was present, always before. What was happening? Cassius was surprised and unsure. The word Messiah stuck in the centurion's mind.

 There was an older woman on the edge of the crowd. She was dressed in dark blue with an overwhelming sadness on her face. She seemed surrounded and protected by a group of Jews. In front of her, however, was a fool of a man. He was laughing and carrying on. His intoxication was evident, his disrespect of the woman apparent. Cassius felt angry, and he grabbed the man and pushed him away to the ground. Brandishing his sword, he threatened him. "Leave her alone." He then looked 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' assignment was to control the mob. The centurion left this post, deserting his men. Against routine, he trailed the prisoners to the top of the so-called skull. Drawn to the scene and overwhelmed, he felt no choice.

 A stony clearing crowned the apex of Golgotha. The mob surrounded the sight with gleeful merriment. Disruptive and angry spectators crowded onto the scene. There was a festive atmosphere from some vendors who peddled their fare with light-hearted hilarity.

Cassius was overwhelmed, however, with despair. The sadness he felt looking at the Messiah's treatment disturbed his usually robust character. The centurion was forlorn with feelings of mourning and lamentation.

 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 spike was driven gruesomely through his limbs.

 Cassius was tearful, and he fell to his knees as he watched. The scene was overpowering, hideous, and cruel. As he struggled to rise, his old knee cracked loudly. He felt lost as he stood helplessly at the edge of the crucifixion.

 One soldier began urinating on Jesus. Anger blasted through Cassius' soul. He limped over and grabbed the soldier throwing him to the ground. Standing over the man, he roared. "You scoundrel, have you no honor? Here is the Jewish Messiah!"

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: *The King of the Jews.* The legionnaires then cast lots for his garments to decide who would keep what.  They offered wine mingled with myrrh to Jesus. He shunned it forthrightly and did not take it.

The chief priests were about; such an arrogant group. They mocked Jesus 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 shook the earth, with 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 of man's history began that day.

Cassius stood before the cross. Tears rolled down from the centurion's eyes. He recalled the 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 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 away, off Golgotha.

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