

The Gift
by
Matthew A. Nelson



For God so loved the world that He gave is only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.
John 3:16-17

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Even Patricius, the seasoned Roman centurion on guard duty felt the bitter cold that windy night. He didn't want to be in Bethlehem. He would much rather have been at home in Roma with his wife Rebecca and Claudius, his one-year old son. But a Roman Legionnaire doesn't question duty assignments anywhere in the Empire, especially when the lure of foreign travel is the very thing that enticed one to join the Legion. Perhaps his next assignment would be in Britannia. Until then, he had to be content to watch weary travelers return to their home cities to pay their taxes.

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed ...And all went to be taxed, each one to his own city.” Luke 2:1, 3

Off in the distance hills he heard the bleating of sheep, and the laughter of shepherds, whom he envied for their simple lifestyle. He remembered roaming with his grandfather's sheep in the hills overlooking Roma, and sharing the laughter and wine of his grandfather's friends during shearing season. The first time he visited these Bethlehem shepherds, they fell silent and suspicious. Then one meekly offered him the wine flask. Another gave him some roasted lamb and bread. The Roman and the shepherds spoke different languages with their tongues, but smiles from the heart transcended such barriers. Gradually, over the next few months, the centurion started learning Hebrew. They told him about their belief in one God, and soon, a Messiah would be coming. It actually made more sense to him than all the stories about the little gods that the Romans worshipped. He had often thought that there was a connection between living people and animals, trees, rocks, water, the sun and the moon, and stars.

At the inn, the boisterous crowd mocked Patricius. He had hoped to warm himself, but felt their cold contempt. Quietly, he left, and continued walking down the road that led towards Jerusalem. In two hours he would be able to warm up in the sheepskin that the shepherds had given him. Just as the centurion reached the edge of town, he saw emerging from the darkness a very pregnant lady riding on a donkey, led by a tired looking man. Even their shadows seemed tired. The centurion waited until they could be more clearly seen in the candlelight illuminating the window of the last house on the road, and then asked them to stop as they came abreast of the well. The dust on the man's sandals indicated that they had been traveling for several hours. In Hebrew, the Roman asked their names. “Joseph, and this is my wife Mary. She is about ready to give birth. We have come here to pay our taxes. We are going to the inn.” He told them that the inn looked crowded, and then he asked them if they would like some water from the well, and offered them what little food he had. Graciously, they accepted. As Mary drank the water, the Roman caught a good glimpse of her from the flickering candle. He gasped! Never, in his life, had he seen any woman with such an iridescent radiant beauty. He thought to himself, “I wonder if she is the mother of the Messiah that the shepherds talk about. Her happiness is from within. It is like I have seen in her face all of the good in the world, all of its beauty, and even, all of its sorrow. It is like she knows that her baby is a special gift from this One God of the Hebrews.”

The Roman walked with Mary and Joseph to the inn. He expected that there would be no room, but was surprised when the innkeeper told them that they could stay in the stable. These good people deserved better. If nothing else, the innkeeper could give

them his own room. He was about ready to talk to the innkeeper, but Joseph said that it was all right. Perhaps it was because they were so tired, but it seemed like they really didn't mind. They appeared to be less bothered by the stable than he did. The stable certainly was more peaceful than having to listen to the drunken crowd in the inn. By the time they were settled in the stable, his relief appeared. But he couldn't sleep. How could he snugly wrap up in the sheepskin when there was a woman having a baby in a cold stable? Mary smiled gratefully when the Roman came back to the stable and offered her the sheepskin.

Patricius didn't know anything about delivering babies. That is what midwives did. Joseph told the centurion not to worry; God would take care of them. So he reluctantly left, recognizing that this husband needed some time to be alone with his wife, and that Mary was somewhat nervous about delivering her baby with him there. As he walked away, he looked back at the stable, surprised to see such a glow emitting from the candle hanging near the back. The tranquility of the place gave him an inner peace that he had never known. Never had he seen the night sky so clearly. The stars shined so brightly that it seemed as if all they exerted their own power on him, draining him of all anger and bitterness.

"I have to go tell the shepherds", Patricius thought. On this night he took no notice of the sharp rocks along the path to the hills, nor did his legs ache with muscle strain. Five minutes before he arrived he could hear their excitement. At first he thought that they had been passing the wine flask, but when he arrived he could tell that something besides wine inspired these poor men. They happily greeted him, and then told him that an angel of the Lord had just visited them. Initially, they were frightened, but the angel had calmed their fears.

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Luke 2:8 -14

Just as he started to tell them of this lady on the donkey, a hush descended upon the land. All the sheep became quiet, the music in the inn subsided, there was a single dog bark, and then, the wind stopped blowing. A baby's cry broke the silence.

At that moment, the air filled with such a chorus of music, more beautiful than all of sweetest melodies of all the birds he had ever heard, and the sky illuminated with all the colors of the rainbow: a fiery red, a blue that shined clearer than the emperor's diamond, a green more lush than the spring meadows, a yellow brighter than the sun. A royal purple only fit for a King, one born in a stable. Through this dancing, vibrant, brilliant, live, colorful, and beautiful light, the centurion saw the stable as the only man-made building. His chest seemed ready to burst with a joy that bathed his heart.

"And God said, let there be light: and there was light."
Genesis 1:3

“I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”

St. John 8:12

“And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us. And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, with the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.”

St. Luke 2:15-18.

Leaving the sheep untended, trusting in their God that they would suffer no harm, the shepherds asked the centurion to go with them to meet the Messiah. He felt unworthy, but the shepherds insisted that he go with them. Upon arriving back at the stable, the centurion witnessed the most ethereal baby and mother he had ever seen in his life. Mortal words cannot describe the luminous beauty and peace emanating from that humble stable. In all of his years, he had never felt such a feeling of being near Holiness. Even Joseph seemed appalled. Just as the shepherds kneeled at the feet of Mary, who held the baby as if He were God’s gift to the world, the centurion heard the Legion’s commander calling his name. “Come, you must help keep order in the inn. Everyone is excited about this strange light. What are you doing here, anyway?” Before he could answer, the commander turned away. The centurion turned to look at the baby, who seemed to look back at him and say, *“Go, I will be with thee, always”*. Mary and Joseph both gave their thanks, as did the shepherds. Patricius asked, “What name shall be given to this Holy Child?” Joseph responded, “JESUS”.

“The angel of the Lord appeared unto him (Joseph) in a dream, saying Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shall call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.” St. Matthew 1: 20-21

“And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for though hast found favor with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name JESUS.”

St. Luke 1: 30-31

“But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.”

St. Luke 2:19

Despite his intentions to visit this family again, the centurion’s duties kept him away. Several days later, while on guard duty on the Jerusalem road, he stopped three men riding camels. These men were obviously foreigners, but very well dressed. They looked like royalty themselves. Curious, he inquired about their designation. “We have come to worship the newborn King, and to bring Him gifts. We have been guided by a strange and wonderful light, like a new star, which we saw for the first time just a few days ago in the east.” These men not only appeared rich, but also, well educated and traveled, for they talked to him in Latin. The centurion pointed the direction of the stable, but felt foolish as he did so, for if these men could travel many days and miles on their own, they certainly did not need his help to find their way around Bethlehem. But they graciously gave him thanks, and did not act as though he acted foolishly. If anything, they

seemed more surprised that he treated them with courtesy, because of the reputation centurions had for treating foreigners.

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, are not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt...Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.”

St. Matthew 2: 1-14, 16

Only once more did the centurion see this child. Just a day or two after the three men riding camels made their inquiries, he stood night watch. During the darkest part of the night, when neither man nor beast stirred, and he was near the point of dozing off to sleep, his eyes saw a dim glow, of the same colors as what he had seen the night Jesus was born. Again, a man led a donkey carrying a woman and a child. Somehow, he knew they were the same people, and his heart leapt for joy. Still, it bothered him to see travelers at this time of night. Wondering why they traveled at night, he stopped them. Recognizing each other, everyone relaxed. On this night Patricius had nothing to offer them. Joseph told him that God appeared in a dream and told him to take his family and leave, for Jesus was in danger. By now, the centurion had encountered so many strange instances about this Jewish God and seen the beautiful, wonderful light that surrounded this child, he had no doubt Joseph told the truth. In fact, he felt that this Jewish God was also his God. Again, they accepted his offer for water. He fumbled into his cloak pocket and found two small coins, which he gave to Joseph, and then apologized for not having any more to give. He knelt to the ground and kissed the hand of Jesus, who looked directly into his eyes and smiled. The centurion had been around Jesus twice now; each time he felt the greatest sense of peace that he had ever experienced in his entire life. Mary asked if he would like to hold Jesus. It had been several months since he had held his own son Claudius; this moment is one that he

would treasure for the rest of his life, for while Jesus was in his arms, he felt an ecstatic surge of radiant energy through his body. As he handed Jesus back to Mary, he told Joseph of an alternate route south, one that the other soldiers seldom watched. God had spoken to him through this Holy child; he realized that no matter what happened to him in this life, by following this Child he would meet God after his own death. He watched them as they rode away, straining his eyes until the glow that surrounded them completely diminished.

About three days later the order came down from King Herod to kill all male children under the age of two years old. The king had heard that a new-borne male child might be the King of the Jews. Some of the other centurions laughed with joy at this order. Patricius knew it wasn't right, and the thought of having either Jesus or his own son murdered by the sword greatly troubled him. When the Legion commander gave the order to kill the children in Bethlehem, the centurion refused, knowing that his own life and the lives of his family were at risk. He was almost beheaded on the spot. Just as the swordsman raised his blade, the commander yelled, "Stop!" The commander actually admired the centurion's courage, and was ashamed of his own fear of not being able to stand up against orders that also went against his grain. A soldier's duty is to blindly follow orders, without questioning them.

Until this incidence, the centurion had always been a good and faithful soldier, and the two men had served together for many years. They liked and trusted each other. However, the centurion's disobedience to orders could not be tolerated, or else others would refuse to follow the commander. Immediately, the commander decided to let the centurion live, but strip him of his status of a centurion and make him his personal slave. He commanded that the centurion be bound to a tree, and then preceded to personally use his horsewhip on him. After several strikes of the whip, the commander stopped for a breath, asked for salt, which he threw upon the man's bleeding back and legs. Screaming in agony, the former centurion hugged the tree. As he closed his eyes, the image of Jesus appeared, with the same intensity of light as on the night of His birth. That was the last thing Patricius remembered before he passed out.

Grateful to still be alive, with an inner peace that filled his soul, the new slave took to his duties cheerfully. Whereas before, the commander had treated him decently, now he talked to him contemptuously. But the slave never complained, even doing more than what was demanded. The slave recognized he was the target for the commander's own revulsion of the baby killing, and he had to take his anger out on someone. There were no more whippings. Every dirty job that came along naturally went to this slave. Gradually, the intensity of the commander's hatred lessened. Even when Patricius served as a centurion, there had been no doubt in either person's mind who was the boss, so some things had not really changed.

Within a few months, the time came for the commander to go back to Roma. Marched in chains to the port city of Tel Aviv-Yafo, the slave stumbled many times. On this journey he did not have the pleasure of staying on the top deck, enjoying the cool breezes, as he had when he first departed Roma as a centurion. Instead, he sweated and puked with the other slaves in the bottom of the ship as it rocked and rolled.

Seeing Rebecca holding Claudius near the dock saddened Patricius, for this was not the homecoming he have envisioned. She waited impatiently for him leave the ship with the other centurions. Her anxiety grew as she looked around for him. For some reason, she stuck around long enough to see the slaves disembark. She certainly wasn't expecting to see him bound in chains, attached to the other slaves. Nor did she expect the stench. Allowed to hug him, she quickly stood a few feet away, while Claudius cried,

afraid of this stranger. Then the commander ordered his slaves to carry his gear to his villa. She watched in despair as her husband, whom she long had awaited, struggled to carry a heavy trunk, as his chains clinked on the stone road.

It was another week before she was allowed to see him. The chains were gone. He had bathed, so she could stand to be near him, but she had no understanding of what had happened. After he told her the story, she loved her husband more than she thought possible. She no longer had the status of a centurion's wife, but she was not a slave herself. Perhaps the guilt of the commander for killing babies is what made him decide that Claudius needed to be with his father. No one will ever know. So he offered his slave the opportunity to have his wife and child stay with him, in their own small villa, if the slave would agree to serve him faithfully until the death of either man.

Both the slave and master knew the weakness of the other. One man could not kill, the other felt guilty because he himself was not strong enough to say no to an immoral order. The two men developed somewhat of a strained friendship again. The slave shined the commander's shield and sword, and performed many other tasks on his own, without being asked. Over thirty years passed. One night the old commander wept in front of the slave, after drinking too much wine. He said he was sorry for the beating, and that he respected the courage of the slave. The slave said simply, "I forgive you, and if you ask the one God, He will also do the same." By this time, the story of Jesus' ministry, and His words of love and forgiveness, and that He was the Son of God, had filtered back to them. That night, the former centurion, now slave, told the commander the story of baby Jesus. The commander said he recognized that there had to have been a special reason for former centurion's refusal to carry out his order.

Usually, the son of a slave was not allowed to join the Roman Legions. But Claudius had caught the attention of the old commander years earlier, and he had the power to make recommendations that others took as orders. The slave had not wanted Claudius to go into the Legions, but Claudius didn't care what his father thought, for he had been very angry with his father for many years. This anger had started when he was old enough to know that his father had once been one of Caesar's centurions, but did something bad enough to be demoted into slavery. Claudius knew that sons of centurions lived much better than he did. He had been taunted by the others for a long time. There was one by the name of Marcus whom he hated the most. He did not want to hear his father talk about Jesus, the Son of God, for that is all he had heard while growing up. If this Jesus was so great, why did Claudius have to live such a bad life? Jumping at the chance to be a better centurion than his father, Claudius hugged his mother but avoided his father's eyes. He didn't even tell his father goodbye; just walked off, glad to prove his own manhood. Anything had to be better than being a cursed ex-centurion's son.

Sadly, the former centurion watched his son depart. His wife hid her tears, but he knew her heart was breaking. Every so often they would receive word about his whereabouts, usually from the old commander. Once, he sent a missive to his mother from Britannia, telling her that he was well. Having grown tough by fighting the sons of centurions, and finding little acceptance in the Legion, because of his father's status, Claudius became even tougher, and meaner. He relished combat and rough postings. As he boarded the ship to Jerusalem, he thought about the irony of his going to the same area of the world that changed his father's life. "Well, if I meet this Jesus character, things will be much different", he thought, as he looked with disgust upon the slaves who would be rowing at the bottom of the boat.

Although most of the soldiers in the Legion disliked Claudius, those above him had gradually promoted him over the years. By the time he went to Jerusalem, he had risen high enough in the Legion to be assigned as one of the centurions guarding Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Judea. Pontius Pilate welcomed him upon his arrival, and then proceeded to brief him about some of the reported activities in Galilee. Jesus of Nazareth was preaching peace and love, saying He was the Son of God, which troubled the priests and Pharisees of the Temple, but at the same time, appealed to many of the ordinary people, for they thought their long awaited Messiah was Jesus. Pilate asked Claudius to monitor the situation. Claudius hoped that his professional manner did not betray his emotions. At last, he would finally have a chance to meet the person that destroyed his life. It was time for revenge.

Pilate didn't seem to notice, as he gave Claudius a brief history of the Roman occupation of Jerusalem: "It is not unusual for the Roman Centurions to be seen by the Jewish people. They don't like it, but Jerusalem had been under Roman rule since Pompey had captured it, approximately one hundred years ago. Fifteen years later, Julius Caesar defeated Pompey, and became the absolute Roman ruler. He appointed Antipater to be the ruler of Palestine. The words, "King of the Jews" that some are calling Jesus, alerted me to potential rebellion, for Herod, son of Antipater, had carried that title for about thirty-six years before the birth of Jesus. It was during Herod's reign that Augustus Caesar became the Roman Emperor. Herod died about thirty-three years ago. His three sons, Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Phillip, ruled Judea, Galilee, and the Northeast region, respectively. Twenty-four years ago, Augustus removed Archelaus, and put Judea under Roman prefect. As you know, Tiberius Caesar succeeded Augustus seventeen years ago. I arrived here four years ago, under special appointment by Tiberius to be the prefect, or as some say, the Governor. Jesus has been teaching for about three years, and his popularity is rising. Personally, I think He is harmless, but He has agitated the high priests of the Jews. It is rumored that He will be riding into Jerusalem during the upcoming Passover, and some say that He might then proclaim Himself as "The King of the Jews". So you can see, Roma takes a high interest in this particular case. I want you to observe this Jesus, and report his activities to me." In all of his years with the Legion, never had Claudius relished an assignment as much as he did this one.

Although Claudius held a personal grudge against Jesus, the rumors fascinated him. Yeah, Right! He raises people from the dead, makes wine out of water, heals lepers (why would He even want to associate with those people?), and makes blind people see and crippled people walk. Then He says things like, "Love your enemies". That would make you a dead man. Fourteen years in the Legion had taught Claudius to be patient and silent if the situation warranted it. He also had learned to study and respect an adversary, learn his habits, and to never under-estimate him.

As Pilate had said, the Jews didn't like the Romans, but they tolerated the presence of the foreign army. Once in a while one of the Jews would rebel, or try and cause a riot, but justice was quickly served with a sword or the cross. Over all, though, the Romans stayed to themselves and the Jews would just walk on the other side of the road to avoid conflict. When Jesus started preaching to the multitudes, the Romans quietly and distantly attended the gatherings, sending just enough men to remind the Jews that Caesar ruled them, but never forgetting themselves that their swords were no matches against an angry mob.

"And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord: hosanna in

the highest. And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.”

St. Matthew 21: 8-11

So it came to be that Claudius first saw Jesus the day he rode into Jerusalem on a colt. He almost knocked one woman down to the ground when she accidentally brushed his face with a tree branch that she was waving. His neck muscles bulged, his jaw tightened, and he felt his anger turning his face red. But then, he didn't want to start a riot, so he just gave her his worst glare, and she melted into the crowd. Shortly thereafter, he looked up into the eyes of Jesus. In all of his life, he had never such a kind and warm face. A translucent, iridescent glow emitted from His countenance. A cold shiver ran down Claudius's back. Less than a spear's length sat the man on the colt that had caused his life to be miserable. Claudius experienced mixed emotions. How could he be angry towards this gentle person? His mind flashed back to the beatings and taunts from the sons of the Centurions. He reminded himself that he was now a Centurion. He was in charge. So he asked Jesus where He was heading. *“To the temple”*, Jesus said with a humble manner, speaking Latin with a strong, resonant voice. Then, to Claudius's greater astonishment, Jesus said, *“Your father is a very good man, whom I am well pleased. One day, he and I shall meet in my Kingdom.”* Claudius asked, “How do you know my father?” even though he knew the answer in his heart. “Oh, that's right, you are King of the Jews!” he sardonically muttered. Jesus didn't say anything, but expressed a great sadness in his eyes. Descending from the Mount of Olives, Jesus rode through the Kidron Valley, crossing over the Cedron brook, on past the Garden of Gethsemane, into the East gate of Jerusalem.

Following Him in silence, Claudius waited to see what Jesus would do next, not quite expecting to see the emotional change in Him:

“And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves. And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves. And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple; and he healed them.”

St. Matthew 21: 12-14

Claudius stood dumbfounded, not quite believing that the men claiming to have gained their sight and lost their crippledness weren't just actors.

During the next few days, Claudius followed Jesus, staying far enough away that he could hear His words, but not so close as to look into His eyes. He observed the Pharisees always trying to trick Him, but his ears perked up at this question:

“Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto Him a penny. And He saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto Him, Caesar's. Then saith He unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.”

St. Matthew 21:18–21

Claudius murmured to himself, "All things are Caesars", while the voice inside his head reminded him of the many times he had heard his father talk about this one God.

This one God concept, readily accepted by his father, didn't always agree with Claudius. Still, he had to give Jesus credit. He never wavered, couldn't be tricked, and constantly talked about the one God and His Kingdom. Claudius surprised himself by giving Jesus the benefit of doubt. If there is one God, what Jesus said made sense to the Centurion.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

St. Matthew 21: 37-40

As the name implied, a centurion usually was the leader of about one hundred men, most of whom were foot soldiers, and it took years in the Legion to reach the position of centurion. Being assigned to Pilate's staff was considered an honor for the centurions and the men under their command. However, only the centurions were permitted to have direct contact with Governor Pilate. Because of their elite status, and the separation that usually occurred between the centurions and the soldiers, the centurions formed their own tightly knit group. Claudius was pleased the evening they asked him to go with them to the chariot races around the outside walls of Jerusalem. For the first time in his life he finally felt acceptance. He had followed Jesus around most of the day; now that he was off duty he was glad to have the chance to relax at the races. In Jerusalem, only the centurions were high enough in the Legion to warrant the chariots. Claudius thought of himself as a good chariot driver, because he grew up around chariots, since one of the duties his father had as a slave of the Roman Legion Commander was to take care of the horses and chariots.

Just as he approached the East Gate, he thought of seeing Jesus riding through there a few days earlier. Maybe his thoughts about Jesus took his mind off the racing, or maybe he just didn't see the rock that caused a wheel on his chariot to break. Whatever the reason, Claudius found himself on the ground, sitting near the fragments of one wheel while watching the other one slow its spinning as the frightened horse bolted away, dragging the chariot's broken tongue.

Dazed, but unhurt, Claudius stood up. A few minutes later a servant of another centurion brought his horse back. Obviously, the servant was in good physical shape if he could run and catch a spooked horse. The centurion told him that his servant was a good chariot mechanic, and that he could soon fix the broken chariot. While the servant repaired the chariot, the two centurions struck up a conversation. Claudius told the other one that Pilate had ordered him to keep tabs on this Jesus guy, and asked him if he knew anything about Jesus. The man became quiet for a moment, and then burst out with a grin that betrayed his excitement. Claudius was amazed at the adoration expressed in his friend's eyes. He said, "That man working on your chariot is one of the miracles of Jesus. He was sick, almost to the point of death. I asked Jesus to heal him, and He did, even though He didn't even touch his hands upon my slave. I tell you, I have never seen anything like it. I have heard that He is the Son of God, and I for one, believe it." Claudius had heard that statement before, from his father.

"Now when he had ended all his sayings in the audience of the people, he entered into Capernaum. And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick, and ready to die. And when he heard of Jesus, he

*send unto Him the elders of the Jews, beseeching Him that He would come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they besought Him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this: For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue. Then Jesus went with them. And when He was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying unto Him, Lord, trouble not Thyself; for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof: Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed Him, **I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel.** And they that were sent, returning to the house, found the servant whole that had been sick.”*

St. Luke 7:1–10.

Claudius continued to follow Jesus when He preached. Jesus preached about love, the forgiveness of sins, and always told little stories. Seeing Roman soldiers was such a common sight that no one paid much attention to Claudius, as they hungered to hear the words of Jesus. Claudius felt intrigued, glad that Pilate had told him to keep tabs on Jesus. Initially, spying on Jesus was nothing but an intelligence-gathering mission, a way that Claudius could size up his opponent. But as the week progressed, he found that he actually wanted to hear Jesus talk more. Listening to Jesus, he began to struggle internally, for here was the man that had ruined his life, but he craved to hear and see more of Him. Listening to Jesus, Claudius began to feel a sense of peace he had never felt before. But all of this talk about forgiveness had to be for others, for how could he be forgiven for the ways he himself had treated people?

However, no matter what he felt, a soldier could not trust an enemy just because He spoke nice words. Money always talks, and the more it talks, the more that people who covet it are likely to talk. Claudius had an idea: Why not give some money to one of the priests thrown out from the Temple by Jesus for information on the priests' plans about Jesus? It worked. Warned that the priests planned on capturing Jesus on Thursday night, after the Passover dinner, which Jesus would be eating with His disciples, Claudius told Pilate what he knew. Pilate told him to make sure that he had enough men with him to take action if required, whether it be against the priests, or the common Jews, but not to interfere with their internal religious matters, unless any riots started to break out. Pilate didn't want to take any chances with sword-wielding Jews, and it didn't matter if the priests were the ones carrying the swords, as they were sometimes observed to do.

Standing in the shadows, Claudius watched the upper room where Jesus ate dinner with His disciples. He almost wished that he could be in that room himself, for he felt hungry. Claudius could see the men sitting at the long table, with Jesus sitting in the center. But they were too far away for him to hear anything, except a low murmur, and an occasional laugh. The men seemed solemn. After a while, he saw one of them quickly leave the room, furtively glancing back, as if afraid someone might see him. The disciples left the room, trailing after Jesus. Shortly, thereafter, the priests gathered. The Roman followed the priests into the Garden of Gethsemane, led by one of Jesus' disciples, called Judas Iscariot. He was the one Claudius had observed sneaking away. While Claudius considered Jesus a respectful adversary, he felt utter revulsion at Judas. One does not betray friends.

“And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, Master; and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.”

St. Matthew 26: 49-50 and St. Luke 22: 48

“Then Simon Peter having a sword drew it, and smote the high priest’s servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant’s name was Malchus.”

St. John 18: 10

“And Jesus answered and said, Suffer ye thus far. And He touched his ear, and healed him.”

St. Luke 22: 51

“Then said Jesus unto him (Peter), Put up again thy sword into his place: for all that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”

St. Matthew 26: 52

Claudius drew his sword upon seeing Peter’s action, but placed it back into its scabbard when he saw Jesus heal the ear of Malchus. He remained alert, though, as the priests bound the hands of Jesus and led him away to the high priest named Caiaphas. This time, Claudius did not avert his eyes when Jesus turned and looked at him. Never, in all of his life had he seen a man looking so sad. Sad, but strangely, not fearful, despite the bindings and rough treatment. It was as though he carried the weight of the world on His shoulders, resigned to accept His fate of a probable death.

At the palace of Caiaphas, Claudius had been asked if he could make an introduction to Pontius Pilate, so that Jesus might be taken there. Agreeing to do so, Claudius waited all night for the priests to interrogate Jesus. This was an internal religious matter. He was surprised to overhear Peter denying that he knew Jesus. “How can he do that, when just a few hours ago he cut off a man’s ear during the arrest of Jesus?” thought Claudius. Just before dawn he was asked to take Jesus and the priests to Pilate. As Jesus was led outdoors, Claudius heard Peter make another denial about knowing Jesus, and then, a rooster crowed. Claudius didn’t know what had transpired between Jesus and Peter, but obviously it had been important enough that Peter bitterly wept when he saw Jesus. Claudius guessed that Jesus had foretold of Peter’s denials.

Jesus remained silent during the walk up to Pilate’s Palace. It was obvious that He was tired, and in pain. Resigned to His fate, He offered no resistance. But He didn’t show a condemned man’s fear. Since this was still an internal matter with the Jews, Claudius walked along, but did not interfere with the priests. The last few days around Jesus had softened Claudius a little. For the first time in his life he felt some sympathy towards another person. Waiting near the well for the gates of the palace to be opened, Claudius found himself once again looking into the eyes of Jesus, as he offered Him a drink of water. Jesus smiled His thanks. Their fingers touched as Claudius handed Jesus the cup. Claudius felt a strange, wonderful, joyous sensation go through his body, as if Jesus had given him the gift of the Holy Spirit that Claudius had often heard Him talk about. How could a man who was probably living His last day on earth give him such a sense of peace?

Alerted that Jesus was coming, Pontius Pilate met the crowd as soon as the gates were opened. The soldiers and centurions had been summoned to protect him. Caiaphas and the other priests almost knocked Claudius to the ground in their hurry to see Pilate. No introduction was needed between Caiaphas and Pilate, for they both recognized each other, although they had never met before. Claudius silently stood by Pilate, wondering what was going to happen next.

*“And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that He himself is Christ a King. And Pilate asked Him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And He answered him and said, **Thou sayest it.**”*

Luke 23:1-3

*“Pilate therefore said unto Him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, **Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. Pilate saith unto Him, What is truth? (And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.**” – John 8:32)*

“And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in Him no fault at all. But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the Passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews? Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.”

John 18: 37-40

“And they cried out all at once, saying, Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas: (Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.) Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. But they cried, saying, crucify Him, Crucify Him.”

St. Luke 23: 18-21

“Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let Him be crucified. And the governor said, Why, what evil hath He done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let Him be crucified. “And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged Him, to be crucified.”

St. Mark 15: 15

Over the years, Claudius had whipped his share of men. In his opinion, they had always deserved it. If he saw other centurions beating men, he didn't give it much thought. They too, must have deserved it. Jesus did not deserve to be beat. As the whip opened up the flesh on His back, Claudius thought of his own father's back, still heavily scarred. It wasn't the first time he had thought about what it must have been like for his father, but it was the worst time. After hearing the snap of the whip a couple of times, he blurted out to Pilate, “Stop!” without thinking of the potential consequences. But Pilate's heart wasn't interested in beating Jesus; he silently welcomed the intrusion. Glaring at Claudius, he said, “Have your soldiers prepare Him for the crucifixion. I want you to stay here, because I don't trust that crowd.” Claudius expected to be disciplined, but no action was taken, and the subject of his disrespect never came up again.

“And the soldiers led Him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they call together the whole band. And they clothed Him with purple, and plated a crown of thorns, and put it about His head. And began to salute Him, Hail, King of the Jews! And they smote Him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon Him, and bowing their knees worshipped Him.”

St. Mark 15: 16-19

Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring Him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in Him. Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man! When the chief priests therefore and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, Crucify Him, crucify Him. Pilate

*saith unto them, Take ye Him, and crucify Him: for I find no fault in Him. The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he was the more afraid; And went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, Whence art thou: But Jesus gave him no answer. Then saith Pilate unto Him, Speakest thou not unto me? Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, **Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.** And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release Him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King! But they cried out, Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar."*

St. John 19: 4-15

"When Pilate that the he could prevail nothing but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of his just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children."

St. Matthew 27: 22-25

Jesus still wore the purple robe. Pilate handed Him over to the soldiers. *"And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from Him, and put His own raiment on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him."*

St. Matthew 27: 31

Claudius felt sorry for Jesus. He was angry with the soldiers for beating Him as they had. He wanted to take off the crown of thorns, and despised his own weakness for not doing it. When Jesus was led outdoors, stumbling under the weight of the cross, Claudius saw a healthy man and two boys, presumably his sons, walking by, and commanded that he carry the cross.

"And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear His cross."

St. Mark 15: 21

Claudius walked with Jesus up to Golgotha, called the place of the skull, and thought, "What a fitting place for dead men. But why this Man, who has done nothing wrong? A week ago I would have gladly killed Him myself. Who would have ever thought that this Man could change my life? But now that He is condemned to die, I want to prevent it so badly, but feel so helpless. Maybe His God will help Him." Jesus looked at him, and quietly said, **"Claudius, I forgive thee of thy sins. I thank thee for thy help. Trust in Me. Follow Me. I don't want to go up this hill, but it is God's will that I do so. After I die, I would like thee to stand watch over my tomb until the third day. Thou will see a glorification of God that thou could never have dreamed, or thought possible. Go in peace."**

Upon reaching the top of the hill, Simon fell down, exhausted and in great pain. His arms were bloodied, his muscles twitched uncontrollably. Alexander and Rufus were almost in tears as they saw their strong father struggle against the weight of the cross. Jesus looked at Simon, and simply said, **"Thank you."** Instantly, the cross-bearer looked

and felt better, even better than before he started carrying the cross. He had no pain. His wife, whom had been sick for a long time, was healed at the same hour.

In all of the years that Claudius had served in the Legion, he had never actually witnessed an actual crucifixion. He had seen others hanging on a cross, but they were already dead. As the nails were driven into Jesus' hands and feet, Claudius almost felt the pain himself. Even though he had slain others with his sword, and had participated in beatings, he was appalled at man's inhumanity to man when he saw Jesus being nailed to the cross. The soldiers performing the work had done it before; to them, He was just another man sentenced to die. Two thieves were also crucified, one on either side of Jesus. As the clouds threatened a heavy rain, the soldiers just wanted to have it over so they wouldn't be drenched, and could go back to their drinking.

Pilate rode up the hill to watch. The cross to which Jesus was nailed still lay on the ground. Jesus didn't say anything, but looked directly at Pilate as he stepped out of his chariot. Pilate told Him that he was sorry. Then after placing the sign on the cross, he gave the go-ahead for all the crosses to be raised.

“And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city, and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that He said, I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written. Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also His coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rent it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did.”

St. John 19: 19-24

“They gave Him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: And when He had tasted thereof, He would not drink.”

St. Matthew 27:34

Watching the soldiers fight over the garments of Jesus disgusted Claudius, as did their giving Him vinegar to drink. Knowing that later that night the soldiers would use the raiment of Jesus as a war trophy, he offered to buy it from the soldier who had won it. The soldier had no emotional attachment to the coat of the man he had just nailed to the cross; for him, it was nothing but a ticket for more wine. But he didn't like centurions, so he doubled the price of what the centurion offered. Surprised that the centurion accepted the inflated price, the soldier thought he should ask for more, but decided against it when he saw the look on Claudius's face. As he took the raiment from the soldier, he heard the priests and one of the thieves hanging on a cross mock Jesus:

“He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He be the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He will have Him: for He said, I am the Son of God.”

St. Matthew 27: 42-43

*“Then said Jesus, **Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.**”* St. Luke 23:34

*“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, **Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.** And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.”*

St. Luke 23: 39-44

*“Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, He saith unto His mother, **Woman, behold thy son!** Then saith he to the disciple, **Behold thy mother!** And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.”*

St. John 19: 25-27

By now, Mary was an old woman. Claudius looked upon her in amazement. He had never seen such radiance and beauty from any other woman. Although distraught at her Son’s imminent death, for the time being she was controlling her emotions. He recognized Mary Magdalene, for she was the same woman he had almost knocked to the ground because she had waved the tree branch in his face, the day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the colt.

*“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, **Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?** That is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias. The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save Him.”*

St. Matthew 27: 46, 47, 49

Claudius thought that was a strange statement, but then he thought that Jesus would never have uttered such words if He hadn’t been in such excruciating pain. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to endure it himself.

*“After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, **I thirst.**” Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, **It is finished: Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.** And having said thus, He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost.”*

St. John 19: 28-30 and St. Luke 23: 46

At that exact moment, there was an earthquake, lightening angrily lit the entire sky, the thunder was louder and more frightening than anyone remembered, and no one escaped the tormenting rains that had not been seen since Noah’s time. One lightning strike illuminated the body of Judas Iscariot, who had hung himself after betraying Jesus. Pilate’s palace leaked.

“And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. And when the centurion, which stood over against Him, saw that He so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God.”

St. Mark 15: 38-39

Claudius wept. A week ago he despised anyone, including his own father, for calling Jesus the Son of God. But he knew that his own grief could not compare with that of Mary, mother of Jesus. Completely distraught, her tears were even bigger than the gigantic raindrops. The ache in her heart could not be comforted by the disciple holding her. Claudius walked over to her. Both she and Mary Magdalene showed fear, for Mary Magdalene recognized him immediately. He handed Mary the raiment of Jesus. For a moment she stopped her crying. Then she gasped. This man standing before her looked exactly like Patricius, the centurion who was with her the night Jesus was born. Sobbing, she said, "Thank you. You must be Claudius. Your father is a good man. He helped me on the night Jesus was born. How is he?"

"This woman had just lost her son, and she is asking about my father," thought Claudius. "Quite a lady!" Ashamed, he told her that he didn't know, for he had not contacted his father in several years. At that moment, in their deepest despair, they gave each other a tight hug. He had sought to comfort Mary; she instead seemed to be the one giving him strength. Mary looked at him softly, and asked if they may have Jesus to bury Him. He told them to take shelter from the rain, and that he would find her after he talked with Pilate. Mary then departed with the others; as she left, she said, "Go in peace," as tears of agony erupted from her broken heart.

The crowd dispersed quickly with everyone trying to find relief from the unrelenting rain. Some of the Jews remained behind, asking for the body of Jesus.

"The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the Sabbath day, besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that He was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pieced His side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe."

St. John 19: 31-34

When the soldier with the spear pieced the side of Jesus, Claudius was standing directly under Jesus. Although it was still raining very hard, the blood of Jesus splattered right onto his face and arms. It seemed that the water, which came out of Jesus' side, was Holy water. Once again, Claudius felt like the Holy Spirit entered his body, for each drop of this water had a different texture than the rain, and seemed to burn his soul with the same feeling and intensity he felt when his fingers touched those of Jesus when he gave Jesus a drink of water.

Another man, by the name of Joseph of Arimathea, asked Claudius for Jesus' body, that he might bury Him. Claudius referred him to Pilate, who asked if Jesus was dead. Upon hearing his answer, Pilate asked Joseph where he planned on taking the Body. "To my own tomb, which is cut out of the rock at the bottom of the hill," replied Joseph.

"And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, an honorable counselor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus. And Pilate marveled if He

were already dead: and calling unto him the centurion, he asked him whether He had been any while dead. And when he know it of the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph.”

St. Mark 15: 42-45

“And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.”

St. John 19: 39-42

“And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre.”

St. Matthew 27: 59-61

Claudius watched the last of the crowd disperse, then walked by himself down to where Joseph of Arimathea had said the tomb was located. By the time he arrived, Mary Magdalene and another Mary were at the tomb, helping Nicodemus and Joseph wrap the body of Jesus in the linen cloth and spices. The spices had a sweet smell to them. Mary Magdalene did not now look upon him with fear. The tomb itself was a small room carved out of the rock, with a ledge wide enough to hold the body. The sepulchre was colored similar to the shade of freshly cut pine. Inside, the temperature was cool. It took several men an hour to roll the six-foot stone across the small entrance. The stone kept bogging down in the mud. When it was in place, everybody left, saying that they would seal the tomb in the morning.

Afterwards, Claudius went to his quarters, exhausted. It took a long time for him to fall asleep, but he woke up several times during the night. Finally, he settled into a deep sleep, only to be waken shortly thereafter by one of Pilate’s servants. Pilate feared the priests clamoring at the doors of the palace early in the morning.

“Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, Saying, Sir, we remembered that that deceiver said, while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night, and steal Him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.”

St. Matthew 27: 59-66

Upon hearing the priests asking for a watch, Claudius violated the First Law of Soldiering: Never Volunteer! But he did. He asked Pilate that he be one of the soldiers whom would watch the tomb. Pilate had noticed that Claudius seemed more morose than a week earlier, but if this man wanted to stand out in the rain, he didn’t care. There were a few other soldiers chosen to guard the tomb, but Claudius dismissed them, telling them to come back in the evening, for he wanted to be alone.

For the first time since Jesus had ridden into the city the preceding Sunday, Claudius had some time to himself. By now, the rain had stopped, and the winds off the Mediterranean had diminished to a cool breeze. It was still cloudy, but that was all right with Claudius. As he looked up at the hill that Jesus had been crucified, he thought he knew now why it was called Golgotha, the place of the skull. The hill actually resembled a skull due to its shape and the placement of the rocks. During the next several hours he reflected upon the events of the past week, and also of his own life. It dawned on him that his own father had been living a life that followed the teachings of Jesus. Patricius really was a very good person; Claudius regretted that he had never appreciated that fact before. All of a sudden, he had a deep yearning to go home and see his mother and father, and to ask his father for forgiveness.

Surprisingly, the day had been quiet. Some people had walked by the tomb, but most stayed away. While Claudius was glad for the peace and quiet, he wondered where were the crowds of people that had welcomed Jesus a week earlier. When the other soldiers came back, Claudius ate dinner and grabbed a few hours of more sleep. Remembering that Jesus had asked him to be there until the third day, Claudius was back at the tomb at midnight. By then, the clouds had cleared, and the stars brightly sparkled.

The other soldiers did not want to hear, nor did they believe Claudius, about his words that Jesus was the Son of God. They thought it strange that a centurion stood watch, anyway. They kept their distance from him, but he seemed better than most centurions, although somewhat strange because he wanted to tell them all about this one God and His son Jesus. Everyone knew that there was a god for thunder, one that watched over the sea, and many more, each with his own function.

As long as one soldier remained alert, Claudius did not object when the others played a game tossing the road rocks, which were cut like a cube and marked with black dots. Each side had a number of dots, ranging from one dot to six dots that the soldiers had painted on. They had found these rock cubes in the road that led to the Garden of Gethsemane. Each side of the cube was cut about the width of a man's finger. Claudius himself had placed one inside his tunic, after seeing Jesus walk on it two nights earlier. It was just one of those things he felt compelled to do.

As dawn approached, Claudius saw two women walking towards the sepulchre. He recognized Mary Magdalene and the other one, also named Mary. The other soldiers looked upon them with suspicion, but Claudius waved at them. Just at that moment, Claudius gasped in astonishment as he saw a man dressed in brilliantly white clothes descend from the sky, and roll the stone away from the tomb, which seemed to cause the earth to shake like it had done the day Jesus died. Then he shook in fear, and fell down, unconscious.

“In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.”

St. Matthew 28: 1

“And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?”

St. Mark 16: 3

“And behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.”

St. Matthew 28: 2-4

(Speaking of the two women named Mary): *“And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments.”*

St. Luke 24: 2-4

“But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeing two angels in white sitting, the one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain, And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.”

St. John 20: 11-13

*And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead: and, behold, He goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see Him: lo, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, **All hail.** And they came and held Him by the feet, and worshipped Him. Then said Jesus unto them, **Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.** Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying Say ye, His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we slept. And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw Him they worshipped Him, but some doubted. ‘*

St. Matthew 28: 5-17

One of the worst things a soldier can do is to fall asleep while on guard duty. But that is what Claudius and each of the other soldiers did. They all slept like dead men. When Pilate questioned Claudius and the soldiers later as to what had happened, they had no answer, except to tell of seeing a man dressed in white rolling the stone away, and that cause the earthquake. At any rate, Jesus was missing from the tomb. Some of the guards tried to tell Pilate that His disciples stole Him away. He scorned them. Any other time, Pilate would have had a guard whipped for falling asleep while on duty, but by now he was beginning to think that Jesus did have some kind of power. After all, if He could make dead men walk, His God might be able to resurrect Him, perhaps just like some of the Jews were now saying. And that scared Pilate. Things had been in turmoil since Thursday night; now it was Sunday morning. He figured that the men were exhausted, and perhaps even this God had made them fall asleep; he wisely thought it best not to punish them.

Claudius’ dream kept reappearing to him. He remembered seeing Mary Magdalene and the other Mary walking towards the tomb; he could remember seeing the Angel of God roll the stone away, or what it an earthquake? But he couldn’t recall anything until he woke and found the tomb empty, and nobody around. The other soldiers seemed to have all fallen asleep, also. But what were they going to tell Pilate? Claudius had been taught to tell the truth in his youth. He had done many mean things to people over the years, but at the same time, he hadn’t lied to protect himself, nor had he lied against others, even his

enemies. He knew that the other soldiers lied to Pilate when they said the disciples had stolen Jesus from the tomb, but Pilate saw through it all. Pilate dismissed the rest of the soldiers, and waved the other centurions out of the room, and then asked Claudius why he had said that Jesus was the Son of God after Jesus died, and what did he know about the disappearance of Jesus. Claudius wondered if Pilate would really believe him. Taking a deep breath, he told Pilate that a week earlier he would have gladly crucified Jesus himself, but since then, had listened to His words, and accepted those words in his heart. He couldn't explain it, but now felt that not only had he accepted the words, but had accepted Jesus in his heart.

"Last night was strange. When this person, whom I call an angel, came and rolled the stone away, I immediately fell into a deep sleep. But then it seemed that while I was sleeping, I had a dream that I witnessed Jesus the Christ rising from where He lay in the tomb, in a most brilliant white light. He looked at me and smiled. The dream seemed so real. When I woke, the tomb was empty, and nobody was there, except for the soldiers. I dismissed them, and hadn't seen them until just now."

Pilate still had to face the priests, but told Claudius to leave. Walking through the streets of Jerusalem, he silently watched the crowds. Many people walked by the empty tomb. Everyone talked about the Risen Lord. The Pharisees tried to convince people that the disciples stole the body of Jesus. Claudius mused about the temperament of the people. A week ago they shouted "Hosanna" to Jesus; two days ago they shouted "Crucify Him", and today, they were all talking about the "Risen Lord".

Claudius knew that people usually sought the familiar places in their lives, when confronting events they don't fully understand. He wanted to talk to the disciples about Jesus, so as he could learn more about Him. So he went to the upper room, where they had eaten the Last Supper with Jesus. Mary Magdalene calmed the others when they fearfully open the door to the centurion. After hours of listening to their stories, the centurion stood up to leave. Jesus appeared to them, right after Peter begged Claudius to hear the prayer that Jesus had taught them:

"Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, Amen."

St. Matthew 6: 9-13

"After that He appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country."

St. Mark 16: 12

*"And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they told what things were done in the way, and how He was known of them in breaking of bread. And as they thus spake, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, *Peace be unto you.* But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And He said unto them, *Why are ye troubled? And why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hat not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.* And when He had thus spoken, He shewed them His hands and His feet."*

St. Luke 24: 33-40

*“Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, **Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.** And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, **Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.**”*

St. John 20: 20-23

“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.”

St.

Mark 16: 15-18

“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

St. Matthew

28: 18-20

“And He led them out as far as to Bethany, and He lifted up His hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.”

St. Luke 24: 50-51

and St. Mark 16: 19

Witnessing both the death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ had a deep and profound impact upon Claudius. The disciples accepted him, especially after he told them the story his father had told of the Birth of Christ. Claudius still was a centurion, and had his own duties to perform. But as the months went by, he was more tolerant of the soldiers. Whereas before meeting Jesus the Christ, he would flog a soldier without hesitation, now he simply assigned extra duty to a soldier that had minor infractions. It took a long time, but finally, he was able to earn the respect of the soldiers and the other centurions. Pilate even asked him one time to tell him the story of Jesus.

One year later, the time came for Claudius to go home. Soldiers who had previous shunned him now shook his hand. A week before his departure, he talked the captain of the ship into releasing into his custody the slaves whom would row the ship. Warning the slaves that the Roman Legion would hunt them down if they escaped, he bought them food with his own money. He told them he wanted for them to wash down the inside of the boat, to improve their living conditions. He also convinced the captain to work the slaves only for a few hours, and then swap their rowing duties with the other slaves whom had been allowed to rest. Once the ship was underway, the slaves actually rowed better. They were allowed to come up to the rear of the ship and enjoy the fresh breezes. The captain marveled at the change in the attitude of the slaves.

But Claudius still had difficulties in life. Following Jesus did not automatically reduce his problems. In fact, it seemed like his faith was always being tested. He had been really praying hard to find a woman to marry him, but the ones he loved always rejected him. His next-to-the-greatest test came after the ship had stopped in Athena. One new slave boarded in chains. His name was Marcus, the son of the centurion whom had mocked him when he lived with his parents. Both recognized the other. Marcus snarled at him, and the old feelings of hate engulfed Claudius to the point the taste of bile filled his throat. After having a bad day, Claudius prayed to Jesus for guidance. Words that the disciples told him filled his head:

“Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which He saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them. And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

St. Mark 11: 22-26

The next morning, Claudius commanded that the chains be removed from Marcus, and that he be fed well, and given new clothes. Marcus was suspicious, but was glad to have food, clothes, and be rid of the chains. During the rest of the journey Marcus continued to snarl at Claudius, but every time he did, Claudius did something nice in return. The weight of hate lifted off his shoulders once he forgave Marcus. Marcus knew why Claudius had reason to hate him, so he didn't trust the actions of Claudius. Near the end of the trip, he asked Claudius why the change. Claudius told him of Jesus. Then he took Marcus completely off guard when he said, "Marcus, I forgive you." One thing that Claudius realized is that he had grown up with a loving father and mother, while Marcus had suffered many beatings from his own father. The other things which dawned upon Claudius is that Jesus was a gift from God, and it was rather ironic that the word "Forgive" contains the word, "Give". Marcus humbly apologized to Claudius for his past sins. They shook hands, and were friends for the rest of their lives.

Having found peace in serving Jesus, Claudius couldn't wait to tell his father. He anticipated the time for about a year. His greatest test of faith came when he learned that his father had died, on the same day that he arrived home. He missed seeing his father alive by four hours. Claudius felt angry with God. Why couldn't God wait another few hours? What difference would it make in eternity? As he tried sorting these things out, he met a beautiful lady, whom showed a genuine concern for him. Her name was Elizabeth. It took a while for Claudius to stop being angry with God, but he felt that God had big enough shoulders to understand that humans felt these emotions. Elizabeth asked questions of Jesus, which gave Claudius cause for reflection, and led him back to prayer and remembering the words Jesus had spoken to His disciples. A few months later, God gave Claudius and Elizabeth their own child, whom they named Patricius.

“And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”

St. Luke 11:

9-10

“For the Son of man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then He shall reward every man according to his works.”

St. Matthew 16: 27

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted

they the prophets which were before you
St. Matthew 5: 3-12
“Peace be unto you”

St. John 24:36