

Simon of Cyrene

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I could not believe they were about to do this to me. I'd heard about the Romans conscription where they grabbed people off the street to do their will. But this? It would ruin everything. All my dreams and plans would be shattered. I would surely touch his blood that stained his cross. Then I could not enter the temple courts! And I'd travelled all this way just to do that. But the Romans didn't care. They had their dirty work to do and forced me to do part of it. So I picked up the cross and looked at my boys. Now what would we do?

Oh, but let me introduce myself. My name is Simon. I come from a city called Cyrene on the North Coast of Africa. I grew up in a devout Jewish family. We participated in the vibrant Jewish community in Cyrene during the first century. I got married and had a family. Sometimes we heard news from in the homeland brought by merchant traders or travelling Rabbis. That year, one told the story of a new teacher from Galilee called Jesus. There were rumors he could do great wonders. There was one particularly powerful story of him raising someone named Lazarus from the dead after he'd been in the tomb for four days. But I was not too concerned with all of this. I dreamed to one day take my boys to Jerusalem to experience the holy festival of Passover. They were finally the age to go with me into the temple courts to offer sacrifice and worship.

All we had to do was make the journey to Jerusalem. And we had to ensure we were ritually clean prior to the Passover celebration. That meant no touching of a dead body, staying away from anything abominable in God's eyes and preparing one's heart for this encounter with God. We would have to be careful on the journey not to violate any of these regulations.

I saved and prepared for the long journey. It would take over a month to get there by land. But the Lord blesses and all the plans and details come together. Alexander and Rufus, my sons, could not wait to get going. We said goodbye to my wife and the younger children and set off for the journey.

We saw many amazing things along the way. The highlight for the boys was of course the pyramids in Egypt. Though the days were long and the sun was hot, they showed great spirit in keeping going. The journey also showed them some of the hard realities of the world. We saw people living in great poverty on the outskirts of Egypt's great cities. I needed to remain vigilant at night. Desert raiders always provoked the vulnerable travelers. But God protected us.

Once we made it through Egypt and the Nile Delta, our excitement grew. Every step was one-step closer to Jerusalem. Many other pilgrims joined the route. We met fellow Jews from all over Africa who were travelling to Jerusalem for the same reason we were. They were going to celebrate the Lord's great deliverance for us as a nation from slavery.

Many years ago, Egypt enslaved our forefathers. But the Lord raised up a deliverer called Moses. Through him God sent 10 plagues on the Egyptians to force them to give us freedom. The last plague was death of the firstborn. The death angel would come across Egypt and strike every firstborn of every family – Egyptian, Israelite, anyone. But God said that if we sacrificed a lamb and painted our door frames with the blood of the lamb, the death angel would pass over our homes and spare our first born children. And that's what happened. The lamb's blood protected us. The Egyptians suffered great loss. ; The next day, the Egyptians released our forefathers. Ever since, our people have remembered this great deliverance on Passover.

The day before we arrived in Jerusalem, the boys could hardly contain their excitement. I'm not sure they slept much that night. And I don't think I slept much either. I couldn't believe that my dream was about to be fulfilled. We would buy a lamb from one of the merchants in the morning. Then we would offer it as a sacrifice at the actual temple and eat our Passover meal in Jerusalem that evening!

As soon as the sun cracked the early morning sky, the boys were up. We had a quick breakfast and started on our way into Jerusalem. The road was already crowded with many other travelers. Some were from far away and some local people. And then we came over the crest of a hill and saw it; Jerusalem in all its shining glory with the temple at the highest point. The boys yelled their enthusiasm out. I could hardly contain my tears. We had made it. I knew this would be a day that I'd never forget.

But as we got closer to the city, the sounds of celebration started to get drowned out by another sound. It was the sound of anger and weeping. Soon the festive sound of the pilgrims coming into the city stopped. Everyone went silent as they heard the tension. "Crucify Him," shouted one. "No, he is innocent," shouted another. The crowd stopped moving. People started to ask. "What's happening? Who's being crucified?" The question made their way to the front of crowd coming in from the country. Those at the front answered back. "The Romans are crucifying 3 criminals. 2 rebels and the teacher from Galilee they call Jesus."

Did the Romans have to carry out their miserable executions during the Passover? I had heard they showed mercy during the Passover. Then I remembered that I had heard that name before. "Jesus." He was the great teacher who apparently did wonders. He was the one who some said raised Lazarus from the dead! I wondered what he looked like. I craned my neck to try to get a better view.

But suddenly the crowd began to part in front of us. It turned out we were in the path of the execution detail. They were taking these criminals to a place called skull hill down the path that we stood on. Before I knew it, my boys and I were at the front of the crowd as the soldiers continued to push people out of the way.

Then I saw him, or what was left of him. I had never seen anyone that badly beaten. He was barely recognizable as human. A crown of thorns was pushed down on his head causing blood to flow down his face and neck. He could barely stand up under the weight of his cross beam. The Romans brutally cursed the prisoners and whipped them to keep going. I looked down at Alexander and Rufus and said, "Boys, look away, show the man mercy." But they both gasped and I looked up just as he went down. His cross beam tumbled off his shoulders. It hit the ground right in front of us and bounced once before settling in the dust.

"Get up prisoner and pick up your cross," yelled the centurion in charge. One of the soldiers struck a whip across Jesus' back. But Jesus could barely stand, let alone carry something that heavy. I was holding my boys, one on each side, trying to protect them from this horror. After all the travel we'd gone through, I thought Jerusalem would be the highlight of their trip. But now this would become part of their nightmares.

Then I noticed everyone in the crowd started looking at me. What are they looking at me for? I heard the centurion call out. "You there, carry his cross." Who? I looked at the centurion. He was looking at me. "No, I can't. I've got my boys to look after. And we're going to Passover. I can't touch him." But two of the soldiers came up behind me and pushed me hard on my back. I flew forward and landed beside Jesus. My hand grazed his back.

Then I pulled it back in horror. For I didn't feel a solid surface but just shreds of skin and blood. I was suddenly defiled. I would have to go through the 7 day cleansing ceremony before I could come anywhere near the temple. All my dreams and plans were ruined. Everything I'd worked for and saved for was suddenly gone. I was furious with Romans and with this man who had to be crucified on this day when I was going to take my boys to Passover in the temple.

But it was no use resisting. The Romans had their swords drawn and if I didn't comply they might harm me or even my boys. So I got up and raised Jesus' crossbeam onto my own shoulders. Jesus shakily stood up. Then he began to take shaky step after shaky step towards skull hill. The sneering and mocking started again. But this time, I was in the middle of it. Instead of a casual observer, I walked right behind the object of their anger. Unlike the other criminals who hurled back curses to the crowd, Jesus said nothing. He just put one foot after another as if he was determined to get to that hill and get on the cross.

Rufus and Alexander tried to walk beside me as best they could. Tears streamed down their faces as they mourned my suffering and their loss of going to the temple. Or was that what they were crying about? They looked more at Jesus and seemed moved by his resolve to keep going. Even the soldiers seemed surprised at the willingness of this criminal to meet his fate.

Finally, we got to the hill and the centurion pointed to where I was to put down the crossbeam. I laid it down and begged to leave quickly. The centurion gruffly responded "get out of here." But as I turned to go, there stood Jesus with two soldiers behind him. They were about to nail him to that cross. Yet though his eyes were filled with sorrow, I sensed thanks from him for my service.

I made my way down the hill and looked for my sons. I found them and we embraced weeping. "I am so sorry boys. I am so sorry. Now we can't go to the temple. I will have to go, wash, and begin the cleansing ceremonies. But Rufus said, "Dad, do you have to do that right now? I think we should stay and pray for that man." Just at that moment, they raised Jesus up on his cross for all to see. I could not believe my sons wanted to stay for this. Yet there was something right in what they said.

I noticed a group of women and a few men who were different than anyone else. They didn't mock. They weren't angry. They wept. So we went near them and sat down and prayed. And a little while later, I heard Jesus talking to someone in the crowd. From the cross, he said "Woman, behold your son." Oh, that one was his mother. How awful for her to witness this terrible day. Then Jesus said to the young man standing with the women – "Behold, your mother!" Jesus was giving the young man responsibility to care for the mother. The hours dragged on. Jesus uttered more anguished cries.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!” “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” How could he forgive them? “I thirst.” “It is finished.” And with that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. His mother and the women wept with sorrow and a little relief that it was finally over.

Then the earth quaked. And the sky was dark. It was like the whole city would come apart. So I clutched my sons and wondered whether this would be our last day as well. But then things settled a bit. The mockers began to disperse. The weeping crowd remained. Jesus was dead and the other two criminals still lived. It would be hours yet. But I noticed someone approaching us. It was Jesus’ mother. “Thank you for carrying his cross,” she whispered. I just bowed and I surprisingly answered “It was my privilege.”

We said our farewells and learned where they were staying. They invited us to come for a mourning time the next day. We found a place to camp. Then I went to start the process of cleansing from my defilement. It had taken over a month to get here. Another 7 days wait before we could worship in the temple would not be the end of the world. The next day we tried to find those who were weeping including Jesus’ mother.

But no one was there. The whole city seemed on edge as the temple guards patrolled the streets. It was like they were looking for Jesus’ followers. So we went back to our camp and remained there for the evening. But then came the next day – the day you call Sunday. Everything changed. We ran into the young man who had been at the cross that day. He said, “Jesus’ tomb is empty! I saw it myself this morning. The grave clothes were folded up as if Jesus was alive and didn’t need them anymore.”

Soon the rumors began flying through the city that Jesus’ tomb was empty. Then came another – “the disciples stole the body.” Jesus had appeared to the disciples. Jesus was alive.” How could that be? I’d seen him die with my own eyes – until I saw him with my own eyes alive. He was no longer bruised and blooded. He was no longer weak and exhausted. He was alive and glorious. He gave us the privilege of seeing him. My sons and I became believers there and then. We didn’t know what this all meant. But I had no urge to go through with all the ceremonial cleansing rituals. I sensed the forgiveness and cleansing of God through my encounter with Jesus.

So that day we first came into Jerusalem turned out to be one I did remember the rest of my life. The day I carried my savior’s cross on which He would soon die to save me. Now none of you will ever have to carry Jesus’ cross. That needed to happen only once and God gave me that privilege – though I didn’t think it was a privilege at that time. But

Jesus did say that anyone who would come after him must take up your cross daily and follow him – like I did that day. I followed one who resolutely went to his cross out of love and a desire to purchase our salvation. I realized that I needed to keep my eyes on Jesus and His cross to keep life perspective. You never know when you will have to take up a cross. You might see it coming. Or it might come on your suddenly like it did for me. But I learned that even though things looked bleak and broken that day, Jesus had the power to transform it into something good. He will give you strength and power to carry the crosses in your life until you also see Him face to face.