

# What I Carried

A Novel

By Jacob Orr

As they led him away, they seized Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, and laid the cross on him to carry behind Jesus.

*Luke 23:26*

# CHAPTER ONE

*33 A.D. Yom Shishi (Friday, about the second hour)*

*On the Jaffa Road, West of Jerusalem*

The sun had only just crested the horizon, but we had been walking well before it appeared ahead, beckoning us toward Jerusalem. The earthy aroma of dust and travel irritated my throat and nostrils, and now my brow began to perspire as the day's heat slowly set in.

Amit, the poor beast, trudged slowly along. The road was well-worn from its centuries of use, but the occasional stone still jutted up the path, making the way more cumbersome than just from ruts worn into the road by carts like the one our donkey pulled. Rufus, my eldest, held the rein and walked alongside. His eyes bleared sleepily, and his shoulders hunched. It had been a long journey. Thankfully, we had only a few more miles to go.

Alexander sat atop the cart watching so that no oil spilled from our wares. I brought up the rear of our little party, keeping one hand on the cart to steady it along the bumpy road. Beads of sweat dripped down my temple and into the curls of my raven beard. I wiped my face with my free hand.

“You would think,” I muttered, “that after so many pilgrimages of our people, they would have discovered a way to make this road smoother.”

“Papa,” Alexander teased, “The road looks fine from up here. Maybe it’s Amit’s clumsy feet.” The boy smiled down at me, his dark olive complexion glowing with excitement.

“Is Jerusalem a big city, Papa?”

“Well, yes and no, my boy.” He scanned the road ahead, craning for his first glance at the holy city. “It is smaller than other cities we have visited in other provinces of Rome. But with Passover, the city will be much more crowded. You boys must stay close. And stay alert. The holy days bring more than God-fearers to the streets. There are sure to be more Roman soldiers in the city this week.”

“And the temple, Papa. What is it like?”

“I’ve already described the temple to you, Alexander.”

“Tell us again, Papa.”

“It’s beautiful. Just as described by the scribes of our holy scrolls. The wise King Solomon saw to it that it would be fit for a king of the heavens and the earth. The grandest place for Adonai to dwell with His people.

There will be many people there from all over. All here to offer their sacrifices and celebrate our people’s freedom from slavery and the workings of God Himself in our midst.”

“Will there be other merchant families... like ours there?” Rufus asked.

“There will be many hundreds of us. Oil merchants, cloth merchants, tanners, potters, herdsman, and farmers. They’ll all be there.”

“I hope there’ll be bakers, Papa. I can almost smell the honey cakes now,” Alexander sighed.

“I don’t smell any honey cakes, Alexander,” Rufus replied. “I only smell Amit. And he smells like donkey.”

“Yes, there will be bakers, “ I continued. “Maybe we will make it into town by midday and have ourselves a nice lunch of barley loaves and some nice fish, hmm?”

Alexander tugged on Amit’s lead, guiding him around a dip in the road. Traveling with young children tended to slow merchants down on long journeys, but my boys had proven themselves to be of great help to me.

And a great comfort.

Still, time was running out to capitalize on the festival taking place in Jerusalem. We only had until sundown to reach the city, find lodging, and make ready for the Sabbath.

*If only we had arrived earlier in the week. I think to myself. We could have sold half of these jars before Shabbat. Now, we’ll be blessed to reach the city before sundown. We should have taken a different route.*

I had intended for us to sail from Cyrene three weeks before the Festival began, but poor weather had delayed our ship's departure.

"How much further, Papa?" Alexander calls from ahead. "You said this was the fastest way from Joppa."

"We are close now."

"Yes. Very close indeed." Another voice echoed just behind us.

I turned to find a man, short in stature and 20 years my senior, making his way up the road. His clothes were somewhat dingier than ours, and his sandals looked worn. He had clearly been walking longer than even we had, if you could call it that. Favoring his left leg with an uneven gait, he hobbled closer toward us with some effort. He carried a walking stick in his hand to lean upon and a satchel made of camel hide over his shoulders.

"Shalom, my friend, Peace to you and yours," he said with a smile. His sun-leathered cheeks crinkled as he did so.

"Peace to you, also."

"Coming to celebrate Passover in the holy city, I presume?" He sidled up to me as we continued walking.

"Yes, sir. And to sell our family's oil."

"Oil, you say?"

"Yes, sir, Olive oil from the finest trees in Cyrene."

“Oh my. You have made a journey. Well, you and your young lads look fit for a thousand-days’ journey.”

“Thankfully, Adonai has not sent us that far.”

“Indeed.” The old man began to walk with greater effort, and I sensed his weariness as his breathing began to quicken.

“And you, sir. How far have you come?”

“Ah... Old Jonathan has traveled from Sidon. Not as far as Cyrene, mind you, but when an old man must walk and lacks two good, strong legs, it does take some time.”

“Sidon? But that’s further north. Shouldn’t you have taken another road? The Jaffa Road seems a bit out of the way.”

“Yes, a different road. And a shorter one perhaps. But I had business in Joppa before arriving in Jerusalem, so here I am on the Jaffa Road. Now, I’ve told you my name, Jonathan, as I said. What, may I ask, is yours?”

“Apologies, my lord Jonathan,” I nod deferentially. “I am called Simon, son of Joseph, of the tribe of Reuben. These are my two boys, Alexander and Rufus.” The boys bowed respectfully to the elder man.

“Good to know you, Simon, and your family. It has been some years since I last came to Jerusalem for Passover. It will be good to see the holy city again.” Jonathan’s gait slowed as he caught his breath.

“You must be exhausted. Please, won’t you allow us to carry you on our family’s cart for a while?”

“That is very kind of you. Thank you.”

“Amit. Whoa!” I called. The donkey slowed to a stop. Alexander kept hold of the reins, but he seemed grateful for the brief pause, too. I instructed him to switch with his brother so that he could help me lift Jonathan onto the cart. A few moments later, we were on our way again with the old man resting his back against the wooden side of his new escort. Rufus, now with Amit’s lead, kept his eyes ahead, hoping to see the outer walls beyond every bend in the road. He didn’t have as good a vantage point as from atop the cart, but at least he was still up front.

“Ah..” Jonathan exhaled, settling deeper into his recline. “Much obliged to you, my friend. Hopefully, soon, I shall no longer need to accept rides from new friends and strangers.”

“It’s no trouble. But what do you mean?” I asked. “Is your leg on the mend from an injury? Are you meeting a physician here in the city?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There is a rabbi whom the people say is doing some wondrous things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Miracles, my boy! Miracles! I intend to find him and ask him to heal me of this cursed ailment.” He waved his walking stick over his left side. “They say he came to the city for the festival himself just a few days ago. And quite a welcome he received! Some say he may even be the Promised One we’ve been waiting on.”

“Messiah? Here? In Jerusalem now?”

“And why shouldn’t he be?! We’ve dealt with these cursed Romans long enough. It’s time the LORD sent someone to put them in their place and send them back to Rome. Or better yet...Sheol itself! They’re how I got this roughed up leg in the first place, mind you.”

“What happened?” asked Alexander. The old man had clearly piqued my son’s curiosity.

“Well, I was a builder by trade there in Sidon. A stone mason. I was repairing a wall near the marketplace in the city center. It had been neglected for quite some time and needed new mortar, and a few stones needed replacing, too. Fine work I did back then. Fine work.

So anyway, there I am minding my own business, doing my work, as any good man should. But, unfortunately, that day happened to be the day one particular centurion’s men came round to shake the local vendors down. A nasty bunch, this squad. They stole pomegranates from the fruit vendors and lamb right off the spit from the meat sellers. And their superior

took no notice of these things, so long as general order was maintained in the town.

Occasionally, they'd want to have a little fun and rough up some of the women in the square and push some of our little ones into the mud. But could we do about the brutes, am I right? Well, on this day of all days, as I was mixing my mortar for the wall, one of these dogs came around the corner and wasn't looking where he was going and slipped right into my mix. Oh, what is sight! He was covered in putty. Sand and water slime from head to toe!"

Rufus and Alesander giggled at the thought of such a funny image. And Jonathan struck a smile back at them in response.

"I bet everyone was laughing at him." Rufus chortled.

"Oh yes, everyone was laughing. Everyone, that is, for the poor, Roman fool himself. He didn't find it funny in the least. And pride would not let him admit he was in that mess by his own doing. The Scroll of Wisdom says, 'Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.' Well, pride must linger for some after the fall, too, I suppose and this soldier decided I was to blame and needed to be punished."

"What did he do?" Alexander asked.

"Took his broad sword and swiped at me! By the Lord's protection, he couldn't see well from the mud in his eyes and didn't take my leg clean

off. But, he cracked me good enough that I was laid up in bed for weeks. And well, never really been the same since. Ten years it's been. Agh, Maker rid us of these savages, the lot of them!"

Alexander looked down at me from where he sat next to Jonathan in the cart.

"When Messiah comes, he'll overthrow Rome, won't he, Papa?"

"That's what some people say. But in the meantime, stay away from those Gentiles as best you can. Eyes down, Chin up."

"Eyes down. Chin up," the boys repeat solemnly.

Jonathan peered down at me. "Sage advice"

"I think so. Don't make eye contact with the enemy. Don't draw attention to yourself. The best way for me to keep my family safe is for us to mind our own affairs and nothing more. I had to learn that the hard way."

"Ah...and what if someone else's affair is thrust upon you?" I don't answer as he removes a skin from his satchel and takes a few sips of water. My thoughts drifted to a day before I lived by that maxim. Before I lost control. Before she...

Well, she was gone now, and I was left to raise our boys alone. She was dead. My wife was dead. My Rachel.

The day was really warming up, but I spotted some darkening clouds drifting in from the north. I whispered a prayer that the city walls would not be too far ahead.

“But if this rabbi they talk about really is the Messiah, we shouldn’t have to be under Caesar’s thumb for much longer,” Jonathan went on. “I’ve even heard stories of this man casting out evil spirits. Surely, King Herod, the demon himself, will be no problem.”

“Perhaps it is best not to say such things aloud until it comes to pass,” I warned.

“Perhaps.”

“What other things has this rabbi done?” Rufus asked.

“Oh, marvelous things, my boy. They say he has made blind men see and deaf men hear. Crowds flock from all over just to hear him teach. And then after teaching them all day, he turns around and blesses a few fish and loaves, and the whole assembly eats what he provides. Thousands of them have plenty, with just one of his prayers!”

“That seems like quite a tall tale. All this done by one man?” I gave the cart a firm push to help one of the wheels out of a particularly deep rut.

“If the Lord wills it, so it shall be. At any rate, if half the things they say about him are true, I figure a bum leg is not that difficult a problem for him to solve.”

“What else do they say about him?”

“Is the rabbi kind? Is he strong?” Rufus and Alexander were now fully transfixed with Jonathan’s “rabbi.”

“Oh, they say he is very kind. Very kind indeed. They say he looks into the crowd and sees the least of us. They say that when he looks at you, it is as if he has known you your whole life. Knows your very soul, even its darkest secrets, and yet they say he has a love in his eyes that can not quite rightly be described. At least, that’s what they say.”

“And you’ve never met this rabbi for yourself?” Alexander asks beside him. “You’ve never heard him teach?”

“If I had met a miracle worker like that before now, my boy, I would not be sitting in your cart. I would be walking on too good legs and making my own way.”

“I suppose. So how do you know if any of this is true?”

“Faith, my boy. I have faith.”

“I trust what I can see.” Alexander looks out across the dusty landscape, then looks back at me. “And I trust what’s written in the Holy Scriptures, just like Papa teaches us.”

“And so you should, dear boy. But when you live as long as I have, you find that not everything we need to trust in can be seen. And there may be some things yet to be written.”

“If the LORD meant for us to know it and believe it, he would have already had one of the prophets or lawgivers write it down for us.”

“Perhaps. But don’t you think the Promised One might have something new from the Lord to say when he comes? Hmm?”

“Perhaps. And what is this magnificent rabbi’s name?”

“He is called Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Nazareth? I thought Nazareth was full of liars and cheats. That nothing good could come from that place.”

We continued making our way as the name, *Jesus*, reverberated in my mind. My senses began to pick up on some new sounds, however. People. *We must be nearing the city*, I thought..

“Do you know where you will be staying when we arrive in Jerusalem, Simon?” Jonathan asked, changing the subject.

“Not yet. We will find lodging first thing.”

“Oh, but you will never find lodging in Jerusalem this close to Passover, not before Shabbat. I tell you what. For your generosity, I insist you stay with me in return.”

“That is very generous, Jonathan. Thank you. You have a home in Jerusalem?”

“I have family that lives here. A cousin, Mary. She is expecting me before Shabbat. You must come and stay with us. She will have the room, and it is better to stay with friends.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

As we traveled on, the noise continued to grow. More rapidly than was normal for a slow approach into town. *The city’s festivities must really be a boisterous affair this year.*

But the sound was not exactly a happy crowd. The shouting sounded angry rather than celebratory.

Suddenly Rufus cried out, “Papa! People are coming this way! Lots of people!”

“I looked ahead, shielding my eyes from the eastern sun’s glare, and my heart sank.”

“That’s not just people. That looks like an entire Roman Praetorian Guard! And a whole mob with them. What in the world is going on?” Then I saw. And shuddered.

The wooden beams towered over the heads of the soldiers. A Roman cross. Someone was being crucified this morning. And they were heading our way.

## CHAPTER TWO

*33 A.D.            Yom Shishi (Friday, about the third hour)  
On the Jaffa Road, West of Jerusalem*

“Rufus, hand me the lead and climb up with your brother! Quickly!” I rushed to the head of poor Amit, whose temperament seemed to match my own nervousness. I worked to lead him off the beaten path to the side of the road.

*There’s no avoiding this crowd. Best to give them the space to pass.  
Adonai, please protect us,* I prayed.

“What’s happening, Papa?” Alexander asked from behind me. I could hear the fear in his voice.

“Roman soldiers. Stay put. Hopefully, they’ll pass us by and not give us any trouble.” Amit pulled the cart off the road as far as the wheels would allow, but we were still too close to the oncoming mob’s path. There was nowhere to hide. I did not want my sons’ young eyes to witness an execution today. But what could I do?

Jonathan patted Rufus’s head. “Here, lad. Just in case those dogs try to bite.” He handed the child his walking stick.

“There will be no violence from you, son—none from any of us. We will stay quiet and let them pass. Don’t even look a soldier in the eye, if you can manage it.”

*Adonai, protect us.* I must have repeated that prayer a dozen times. The mob marched forward. The noise began to crescendo as they grew closer. I could smell their torches. I could feel the vibrations of the hundreds of feet stomping our way. The shouting rang in my ears louder and louder by the moment.

I glared at the horrific scene. A mass of Roman armor, simple robes, torches, and the dust cloud from so many people. And were those Pharisees with them? Yes, one of the men was even wearing a high priest’s ephod - not a robe used for temple sacrifices, but certainly a garment reserved for God’s priests. All surrounding a man stripped and bloody, bearing the weight of a massive cross. Who could have caused such an uproar that even the temple elders were leading the charge? Surely, this was a blasphemous lawbreaker to the highest degree.

I glanced over at the boys and Jonathan, who all watched in horror as the dark parade drew nearer. Alexander’s eyes filled with tears. Rufus trembled, gripping the staff the old man had lent him.

When the shouts and threats became close enough to understand, I was finally able to learn the name of the man and the crime he had

committed as the mob exclaimed, “Hail Jesus! King of the Jews! Crucify him! Death to Jesus!” So it was blasphemy after all.

“Jesus?!” Jonathan gasped. “It cannot be!”

“Jesus? The rabbi?” Alexander puzzled.

“But all those things you said about him, lord Jonathan. Why would anyone want to hurt him?” Rufus turned to me, and his eyes turned his question into a silent request. *Papa, do something.*

But there wasn't anything I could do for the poor man. The only thing I could do was try to keep my children safe. Try to avoid any interaction with the Roman guard. It was bad enough that they would be passing by us so close. I ached for the man. He was on his way to a brutal and painful death. From the looks of him, he had already endured a torturous beating from these rough executioners. I ached for my two sons, who were forced to witness such a terrifying scene. I reached out and squeezed Alexander's shoulder, then put my hand on Rufus's to comfort him.

“Papa?” Rufus finally squeaked out. The pandemonian march was nearly upon us.

“We aren't here to get involved in the political affairs of the city. There's nothing to be done. Eyes down. Chin up.”

“Yes, Papa,” I heard Alexander whimper back on his brother’s behalf. Hopefully, the mob would pass soon, and it would all be over. Amit shuffled nervously as the uproar was less than a stone’s throw away now.

Rufus was not the only one crying, I noticed. There were women in the middle of the chaos, weeping and crying out for Jesus. The mourning had already begun for the rabbi. He was a dead man walking, if you could call it that. He struggled painfully under the weight of that heavy cross. Each step was a slow torture.

Suddenly, Jonathan let out a cry of surprise, “Mary?!” His torso leaned over the edge of the cart as he pushed himself upward and over. Pain spread across his face from the abrupt use of his weary legs. He clambered down from the back of the cart, calling out again, more loudly, “Mary! Mary! Over here!”

A faint reply came, muffled by the persistent shouting. “Jonathan!” A puffy-eyed woman broke from the melee. She appeared closer to my age than the older man, but the weariness in her demeanor and the fear in her countenance alluded to a sleepless night behind and a difficult day ahead.

They embraced one another as the head crowd began to pass on.

“Oh, Jonathan. It’s absolutely terrible! They’ve condemned the rabbi. The people have all turned against him. They’re going to kill him,

Jonathan. Jesus is going to be crucified. They are taking him to Golgotha. I cannot find any of his disciples but John. What are we going to do?"

Her crying was escalating into hysteria with every word. "Come, dear cousin. There, there. Come away from this mob. Let's just breathe for a moment," Jonathan did his best to console the woman, whom I had gathered to be the cousin he was to visit and lodge with in the city.

I could barely take in everything all at once. It was a cacophony of stimuli. The Roman march. The shouts of condemnation. The sight of a beaten and bloody man. The mocking. The jeering. The horror on my children's faces. The weeping women. The scraping of that terrible, terrible wooden contraption against the dusty street. The horror reached its height as Jesus stood only a few meters from us. It was all too much to bear.

Suddenly, as if he had been waiting to reach us, the poo man finally succumbed to the weight he bore, stumbling a final time and dropping to the ground. One guard cracked a whip against him, shouting, "Get up, king! You've got a cross to carry!" He groaned, pushing up the weight for a moment, then buckled once more, unable to rise. No amount of prodding from the soldiers was able to convince him to take another step. The man looked absolutely spent. He had already been beaten so badly, he barely looked like a preston at all. He would not last long on that cross.

I felt deeply sorry for him. Was any crime so terrible that it warranted this kind of treatment for your fellow man? As much as I wanted to recoil from this bloody scene, I couldn't. My eyes wouldn't allow me to look anywhere else but at this poor wretch. I was gripped by what was happening before me.

I wished I could do something to help him, but more than anything, I just wanted to hide. I wanted to grab my boys and run in the opposite direction. Get as far away from here as possible. Away from the shouting. Away from the wailing. Away from the violence. I was tempted to do just that, but I knew I couldn't do anything that would draw attention to myself. If we just stay right here off to the side of the road, these soldiers would be gone in a few minutes. We would stay out of this. We would stay unseen. Stay hidden.

“YOU!” someone screamed.

I looked up, and a single, beefy finger was pointed at me.

*Uh oh.*

The soldier was of ordinary rank, but he had an intimidating presence. This ensign was a full head taller than me, with broad shoulders and rough hands. He quickly stepped up to me and grabbed me by the arm and yanked me over to where Jesus lay collapsed under the cross. I was too stunned to object.

“YOU CARRY HIS CROSS!”

And just like that, our uncomfortable predicament transformed into an impossible situation. This man was condemned to die. It was less than a day before the Sabbath, and I was traveling with only my young children. I felt sorry for the rabbi, but if I touched him or this cross, I would become *tamé*, ceremonially unclean.

*Who would care for Alexander and young Rufus? Where would we spend the Passover now?* As much pity as I had for the man, I couldn't possibly defile myself so close to Shabbat.

“Sir, “ I finally spoke, “I have two young sons, I must stay pure for Shabbat, for their sake.”

“I said pick it up!” he growled back. Once again, his callous hands were on me and shoved me into Jesus' bloody side.

“Papa!” I heard from behind me.

“Stay where you are!” I called back. “Jonathan, please take care of my family.” There was no going back now. By the Romans' hands, I was already spoiled for Sabbath.

*Always the Romans*, I thought.

“Don't you worry. They will be safe, my friend. Your children, your things. Even the donkey.” Jonathan still held his cousin, whose crying had quieted to only steady tears.

I nodded a thanks and turned back to the bleeding man on the ground. I slipped my arms under the cross. My hands felt the coarse beam that dug into his back and shoulder. I took a deep breath and grunted it out as I slowly hoisted it up. It was heavier than I expected. *How had he carried it so far on his own?*

My face pointed toward the dust and the man in it as the weight bore down on top of me. Above me was a heavy cross, a tool for the Romans' twisted pleasure and my people's pain. My ears dulled to the shouts surrounding us as all of my focus was concentrated now on simply staying upright under this vicious thing.

But beneath me, I found a set of eyes looking back up. I should have been disgusted at the man smiling up at me. His flesh was torn so terribly that I could see sections of exposed bone and entrails. His skin was flayed so extremely that it was difficult to find a portion that didn't have some sort of mark or slash to varying degrees. With his palms pressing into the dirt, He had lifted himself enough to look up at me. He peered out from under a mess of dark hair, dried streaks of blood that trailed down his brow, and a crown fashioned out of large, sharp thorns. The kingly mocking he had received seemed to know no limits. And yet...

His eyes. They were the eyes of a man whose face was so mishapen by his tormentors, it could scarcely be called a face. And that face...smiled at me.

I didn't know it yet, but it was a smile that would change my life forever. That smile was strangely placed in such a violent setting, yet it didn't feel out of place - not on this man. It was peaceful yet belonged to one who was nearing an excruciating death. It was full of gratitude yet didn't seem to contain an ounce of self-pity. It seemed to speak to me a thousand words in the blink of an eye. I would have stayed under that cross to look at that singular smile for a thousand days. That brief moment felt like a thousand days to me, too. But it was, in fact, just a moment.

“Alright. On with it,” the guard insisted.

With some effort, I began the trudge to the execution site. I didn't know where this “Golgotha” was or how long I would have to carry this wretched thing. I simply marched behind some of the guards, keeping my eyes down on the street ahead of me. The foot of the beam dragged along behind me, scraping the street in an eerie and constant sound. Briefly, its scratching in my ears was the only sensation my body was processing: that, and the intense pressure bearing down on my shoulder.

Then, behind me, I heard two of the brutes grab Jesus and pull him to his feet, one on each arm. This violent swarm was on the move again. I

glanced to my right long enough to see Alexander and Rufus still on the cart. Alexander put his arm around his younger brother, looking worried. Rufus had his face buried in his brother's side. Jonathan stood by Amit, his staff in one hand again, the donkey's reins in the other. Resigned to my task, I turned away from my family, breathing a prayer of protection over them as the distance between us widened.

The women behind us continued to weep for Jesus. They had clearly loved this man. And he was clearly hated by many others. *What kind of man could create such extreme sentiments in people?*

But then I heard him speak for the first time. Turning to the mourning women, he said with a voice stronger than his failing body should have been able to muster, **“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children. Look, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the women without children, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”**

Such strange words to give on his way to be killed. But there seemed to be a calm that enveloped the crowd as he spoke to them. Even the northerly breeze seemed to die down. Surrounded by Gentile executioners

and his own people who had cried out for his crucifixion just moments before, this man strangely commanded a respect. No, more like a reverence. He spoke with an authority that in no way matched his current appearance and situation. And his words were a lament for the mourners and not himself.

*Who was this man?*

Our depressing party veered off the Jaffa road, turning to a hill that I instinctively recognized as our destination. Golgotha. *The place of the skull.* It was obvious why it was called that. The hill itself resembled a skull. This was, indeed, a place marked for death.

As I struggled under the cross, Jesus and his escorts overtook my pace. Soon, they walked ahead of me rather than behind. My mind raced with thoughts about this man as I watched him march to his execution spot.

If this man really were a rabbi, a teacher of our Law, why would he have blasphemed against Yahweh? Why did these women weep for a man who had betrayed God? Some even denounced his sentence, claiming he was innocent. That seemed to fit with what I saw in this man. His compassion. His gentleness. The smile he gave me. *But would the chief priests want an innocent man dead so vehemently?*

I've seen Roman soldiers handle men as they dragged them to their death. They would resist frantically in desperation. It was always a futile

effort, but they pleaded for their lives nonetheless. But this man said nothing in his defense. He did not cry out. He did not beg for mercy. He did not resist death coming for him at all.

*Truly*, I asked myself. *Who is this man?*

Finally, we reached the crest of the hill. The soldier who had first grabbed me and forced this burden on me barked, “Alright, man, drop that here!”

Dripping with sweat, I gave the cross one final shove off my shoulder and let it fall to the ground with an echoing thud. And with that, his palm met my chest as he forced me back into the midst of the crowd as if I was not meant to be there

“This is wrong,” I found myself saying out loud. “He doesn’t deserve this.”

“No, he doesn’t. Not at all. Thank you. For helping my son.” The small voice came from an even smaller woman beside me. She trembled as she stood in the melee. The eyes that met mine were filled with complete heartbreak.

“That is your son?” I asked in shock.

She nodded. “Thank you for your kindness,” she repeated.

I didn’t reply. I had been forced to carry the cross of a dying man. I had aided the Romans in killing someone I now thought was undeserving of

death. I had acted against my will, yes. But what I had done did not feel like a kindness.

It felt like a betrayal.

All of a sudden, the ringing of hammer against metal pierced through all other noises on the hillside. Exhausted and overwhelmed, I dropped to my knees...

...and wept.