

Compelled to Believe — The Longinus Story

April 5, 2015 — Easter

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, everyone loved him. They wanted him to be king and wear a crown. By the end of the week things changed. They hated him. They wanted him dead. They wanted him to wear a cross.

My story moves the opposite direction. When Jesus entered Jerusalem I mocked him. After watching him die, I worshipped him.

My name is Longinus. I am the centurion that was in charge of putting Jesus to death. Today, they asked me to tell my story.

As a Roman centurion, I was in charge of 100 soldiers. I am the highest ranking officer on the ground in charge of the men. My job was to keep the peace in Jerusalem. Part of keeping the peace meant carrying out executions. I put many men to death. Jesus' death was different. Let me take you back to those days to show you why.

It was Passover in Jerusalem. As usual, there was tension between the Jewish leaders and the Romans. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. This Passover was different. There was a third player in the game. It was a new Jewish teacher. His name was Jesus. He was a small-town carpenter turned teacher turned rabbi. The people loved him. The religious leaders hated him. They schemed to destroy him. It wasn't because of anything Jesus had done against them but it was more out of jealousy. The crowds that threw palm

branches in front of him earlier in the week as they shouted “Hosanna in the highest” left them green with envy.

They eventually found the break they wanted. One of the men in Jesus’ inner circle, a man named Judas, agreed to betray him for a mere 30 pieces of silver. They needed to find out when Jesus was away from the crowds, when he was away from the city. They needed to find a time when Jesus was alone. On Thursday, Judas saw his moment. It was late. Most of the city was asleep. Jesus and his disciples were enjoying some time away at the Mount of Olives to be alone.

I wasn’t involved in the arrest. It was carried out by the temple guards (Matthew 26:47). Even though there was only Jesus and his 11 disciples, the temple guards came dressed for war with swords, clubs and knives.

That night they first took him to the house of Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest. Later they took him to the home of the high priest Caiphas for questioning. They grilled him with false witnesses trying to find charges against him (John 18:13). Nothing stuck. Jesus was a man of pristine character and words. The only charges that stuck were his claims to be the very son of God.

This late-night cross examination was anything but friendly. The next day I saw what they had done. His hair was matted from where they spat in his face. His face was red and bruised where they slapped him again and again. They played a game with him. The guards covered his eyes, and they took turns punching him with all their might. They said, “Prophecy, who struck you?” (Mark 14:65).

This wasn't a questioning. The Jewish leaders treated him with utter brutality. His eyes were swollen shut. His lips were split and bleeding. Blood was crusted on his nose and beard. No one beside the Roman soldiers had the legal right to treat someone this way. Why had they done it?

His claim to be the son of God surfaced their demonic rage. They were determined to make him pay. They beat his face to the point of unrecognizable disfigurement. (Isaiah 52:14)

While they could get away with beating him, they couldn't get away with killing him. That would bring the wrath of Rome. By dawn they hatched a plan to get the Romans to take care of their hearts' evil desires.

That is when I met him. Early Friday morning they led him from Caiaphas' house to the governor's headquarters (John 18:28). There he was transferred into my custody. As we put the chains on his wrists and feet, from temple guard to Romans, we were shocked at what they had done to this gentle teacher. He was so deformed he didn't even look human (Isaiah 52:14).

The Jewish leaders came before Pilot and made their accusations. They accused Jesus of misleading the nation, of telling people not to pay their taxes and of claiming to be Christ, a king. As a centurion charged with patrolling the streets of Jerusalem, I knew those charges weren't true. Many people on the street were talking about Jesus. They were talking about his healings and forgiveness. There were stories of blind people regaining their sight from Jesus. Lame people could walk once again after meeting Jesus. There were even stories of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands with just a little boy's lunch.

Recently, we heard he raised a man from the dead by calling his name. Jesus wasn't encouraging rebellion or forbidding the paying of taxes. These were trumped up charges designed to push Pilate to action. Thankfully, Pilate was smart enough to not be manipulated.

One of the charges caught Pilate's ear. King of the Jews? That was interesting. He asked Jesus, "Is it true? Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus didn't deny it. He simply said, "You have said so." At that point Pilate knew Jesus was not a threat to Rome. His popularity was a threat to the Jewish leaders who were afraid of losing control to this simple carpenter turned teacher turned rabbi. Pilate told them, "I find no guilt in this man." Pilate planned to set Jesus free but the Jewish leaders put up a fuss and threatened to riot. During Passover when Jerusalem was bursting with Jews, we would do anything to avoid a riot. A riot would be a bloody confrontation everyone wanted to avoid. Pilate had to think fast and do something.

When he realized Jesus was from Galilee he remembered that King Herod, the ruler of Galilee, was in town for the feast. Perhaps he could sidestep this controversy by sending Jesus to Herod for a decision (Luke 23:6).

The soldiers and I took him to Herod's house. Herod was glad to meet him. He heard much about Jesus. He was hoping Jesus would perform a miracle so he could tell his friends. He questioned Jesus for a long time but Jesus remained silent while the Scribes and the Pharisees leveled accusation after accusation against him. Finding nothing he had done wrong, Herod wanted to avoid a controversy with the Jews so he sent Jesus back to Pilate.

We transported Jesus back to the governor's headquarters where Pilate came before the Jews a second time saying that Jesus has done nothing deserving of death. Both Pilate and Herod examined him and found him innocent. Herod would punish Jesus and set him free. The Jewish leaders didn't accept his suggestion. They whipped the crowds into a frenzy. Everyone was getting nervous as we moved closer to a riot once again.

Finally, Pilate hit on another idea. He could overrule the Jewish leaders who were manipulating the crowds as they sought Jesus' death. At Passover it was the Roman custom to release a Jewish prisoner. In jail there was only one Jewish prisoner — a notorious criminal named Barabbas, a cold-blooded murderer. Pilate appealed to the people. Surely they would choose Jesus over Barabbas. It was just days earlier when they were hailing Jesus as their king (Matthew 27:15).

Pilate's plan backfired. When he gave the crowds the choice of Barabbas or Jesus, the Jewish leaders had seeded the crowds with people asking for Barabbas' release. Again and again the crowds called for Barabbas the murderer over Jesus the innocent. For the third time, Pilate appealed to the crowds. "I find no guilt in this Jesus. Let me punish him and release him." Their voices prevailed (Luke 23:22). So Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

Deep in my heart I wondered what would happen when he suffered. They say pain reveals a man's inner thoughts. The cursing. The hate-filled words. The sadistic thoughts of the mind are all laid bare in torture. I wondered what was in the heart of the innocent man named Jesus.

Jesus' face was disfigured beyond recognition, then my soldiers disfigured his body. He was stripped naked. His hands were chained to a post. The soldiers took whips that they struck across his back. Again and again they struck him, tearing his flesh flooding his body with searing pain (John 19:1).

Jesus was different. While he shook in agony, he didn't cuss. He didn't threaten revenge. There were no words of hate that came from his mouth.

After the flogging, we took him back to the governor's headquarters where the whole battalion of several hundred gathered around him. They stripped him naked, put a scarlet robe on his back and twisted together a crown of thorns and pressed it into his skull. Then they put a reed in his hand. The entire battalion mocked him in worship. They spit on him. They took the reed from his hand and struck him. They struck him with their fists again and again. The Jews destroyed his face. The flogging and the beating of the soldiers destroyed his body. The mocking of hundreds of soldiers sought to destroy his mind (John 19:2-3; Mark 15:16-20).

After Jesus was beaten so he could barely walk, Pilate brought the stumbling Jesus, wearing his blood-soaked robe and crown of thorns before the people. Pilate said, "This is the man. I find no guilt in him." The pathetic broken Jesus should have drawn their empathy. The Jewish leaders had poisoned the crowd. Instead of sympathy, they called out, "Crucify him!" Eventually their voices prevailed. Pilate handed Jesus over to be led to his death (John 19:4-6).

In Roman punishment there are three levels of scourging. We had already scourged Jesus with whips. Before crucifixion we deliver our most severe

scourging with a cat-o-nine tails. That is a whip with nine leather strands. In the strands are metal balls to bruise and tenderize the flesh. There are also metal hooks to attach themselves to the flesh. When the whip is ripped across the back, it tears off chunks, and even sheets, of skin. It is common for a man's muscles, bones and organs to be exposed in this scourging. This is what we did to Jesus before we led him away to be crucified.

Although in unimaginable agony, he never threatened his tormentors or sinned with his mouth or uttered hate-filled words (Isaiah 53:7). Not seeing his will broken, my men whipped him harder, tearing away more flesh. I had never seen anything like this. He was a man of gentleness but absolute strength. Although we brought him to the edge of death from pain, he refused to break.

After this severe whipping that takes criminals close to the point of death, we led Jesus away to be crucified. In typical Roman practice, I assigned four soldiers per criminal to supervise their deaths from beginning to end. One of the soldiers walked in front of the criminals, carrying a white board with the charges against the condemned written on it for all to see. Typically the charges said, "Murderer", "Thief" or "Treason." The charges against Jesus simply read, "The king of the Jews." This is the first time I put someone to death on those charges.

With Jesus there were two other criminals. We fastened the crossbeams that weighed about 100 pounds to their shoulders. We tied ropes around the beam and their upper arms so they couldn't be dropped. We chained the cross beams to each another to keep the prisoner's together as we wound our way through the city streets. I rode behind the condemned on my horse.

Being a feast day, the shops were closed and the crowds were looking for something to do. It didn't take long for them to gather, especially as we went through the shopping district.

We crucified them at Golgotha, just outside the city walls to the north. Those traveling into Jerusalem for the Passover saw them dying on the crest of the hill. Hopefully that discouraged an uprising during the holiday.

Part way there, Jesus collapsed. This was understandable. He was beaten the night before by the palace guard. He was whipped by Pilate and beaten with the fists of hundreds of a battalion of Roman soldiers. He was scourged with a cat-o-nine-tails before his crucifixion. He had nothing left to give.

To keep the procession moving, we grabbed a Jewish traveler coming into the city for Passover, a man named Simon. We forced him to carry the crossbeam the rest of the way up Golgotha hill while my soldiers dragged Jesus to the top.

When we arrived, we offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh. That is a sedative we sometimes give to dull the pain. When Jesus tasted it and realized what it was, he refused. It was as if he wanted to experience the full extent of the pain that lay before him (Mark 15:23).

The soldiers began their gruesome task. They fastened the crossbeam to the main beam. Using ropes around Jesus' wrists, they stretched Jesus' arms apart, putting their feet on the crossbeams and pulling his hands as far apart as they could go. A third soldier held his wrists to the beam. The fourth soldier used a steel mallet to pound large spikes through his wrists, first his right and then his

left. The ringing sound of the mallet on the nail coupled with the sound of tearing through flesh is a sound you never forget. Just thinking about it today sends chills down my spine.

It is in those moments of crucifixion men let out blood-curdling screams of pain. It is in those moments the dark evil of their hearts is revealed for all to see through their mouths.

Jesus was different. In silence he faced the interrogations of Pilate and Herod. Without hatred or evil he suffered his whipping, his scourging and a beating by a battalion of soldiers. Without hatred or evil coming from his mouth we nailed his wrists and his feet to the cross as he quivered in unimaginable agony and pain. No darkness burst from the deep recesses of his heart. When he finally spoke, he said something I never expected to hear, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Jesus was praying for me and my soldiers as we tortured and killed him.

His execution was becoming stranger by the moment. Jesus was an innocent man who claimed to be God. He suffered in silence without hatred. He was obviously the most god-like man I had seen. The Jewish leaders were the most godless men I had ever seen. That sick feeling in the pit of my stomach continued to grow as I realized how wrong things had become. Who were we killing? If he wasn't God, he was the closest man to God I had ever met.

The criminals hung on his left and right. One mocked him but the other reached out, calling for help and forgiveness. Jesus reached back saying that "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Before him, he saw his own mother. He entrusted her into the hands of one of his disciples.

This may not sound significant to you but you need to understand that when people are tortured like this and they are hanging on a cross they don't care about anybody but themselves. Jesus was the first person on a cross that cared more about people he loved than himself. He cared about and prayed for me and my men. He cared about the thief dying next to him. He cared about his own mother. Against my will, I was being forced to conclude that Jesus was indeed something different. Maybe he was king of the Jews. Maybe he was the son of God.

As the sun reached its noon peak and we were melting in the heat, suddenly darkness covered the land. From noon until 3 p.m. it was pitch dark, like the middle of the night. Some think it was an eclipse but an eclipse can't happen during Passover. It was as if creation was connected to Jesus. Creation was shuddering as Jesus endured his pain.

I had never seen anything like this. Who were we crucifying? A man that suffered unspeakable agonies in silence, a man who prayed for us as we took him through torture, a man who that cared more about his mother and others than himself, a man whose agony was seen in the groaning of creation itself — Jesus was no ordinary man.

About 3 p.m., Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" One of my men, knowing that Jesus' mouth was dry and he could barely talk, went and took a sponge. He dipped it in the cheap wine my

soldiers drank and put it on a stick so he could wet Jesus' lips. Everyone wanted to hear what he had to say (Matthew 27:48).

He said "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Then he said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). He bowed his head, breathed his last. He gave up his life.

Nobody was prepared for what happened next. The last three hours were filled with supernatural darkness. His death unleashed a massive earthquake. Boulders split in half. Graves opened. Later we saw dead people who came back to life. It was as if death was torn and leaking when it swallowed Jesus.

The great curtain in the temple that separated the most holy place of God's presence from the rest of us was torn in two from top to bottom. For the first time, anybody could see the holiness of God. That was no ordinary curtain. It was 60 feet long by 30 feet high. It is made of fabric thicker than a man's hand. Even an earthquake could not tear it apart. They say it was torn in half by the very hand of God.

My soldiers had never seen anything like this. We were filled with terror. What had we done? Against my will I could only come to one conclusion, "Truly this man was the son of God" (Matthew 27:54).

From 3 p.m. until evening the bodies hung. The men and I were charged with guarding them as we waited for their deaths. To hasten the deaths and get on with the Passover season, the Jews asked for the criminals' legs to be broken. We broke the legs of the criminal on the left and the criminal on the right, but Jesus' legs we did not break. He was already dead. To ensure his death, one of

my men thrust his spear into his side, piercing his heart, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

Just before nightfall, Pilate called me. A man named Joseph of Arimathea was asking for Jesus body. Joseph was a good man who had not taken part in Jesus' condemnation. Pilate asked if it was true. Had Jesus died quickly? I confirmed it.

Joseph and a man named Nicodemus, another ruler of the Jews, took his body. They wrapped it in strips of linen and spices. They laid Jesus in Joseph's own tomb in a nearby garden. Nothing would happen on Saturday because that was a Sabbath.

That night I slept in terror. Who had we killed? Seeing Jesus die, we knew we killed the son of God. No one endured the pain like him. Nobody cared for others while suffering like him. Never before had creation writhed in pain as someone died on a cross. It was as if creation was connected to him. The problem is Jesus was dead. The son of God was gone. We killed him. Where was our hope? I couldn't sleep on Friday night or Saturday. I was terrified. What had we done?

Later, I heard the Jews requested soldiers guard the tomb. They wanted to ensure the disciples didn't steal the body. I couldn't see that happening but Herod amused them. He gave them the soldiers they requested.

As I stewed in guilt and bewilderment, three days later, on Sunday morning, the strangest reports came in. Jesus was alive. The soldiers guarding the tomb reported that an angel came down and rolled away the stone. The

battle-hardened soldiers became like dead men in the angel's presence (Matthew 28:4). The angel showed them that the tomb was empty. The grave clothes were there but Jesus was gone. Jesus was alive. Next we heard Jesus appeared alive to his disciples. He appeared in Jerusalem multiple times. He appeared in his old fishing village to the north in Galilee. He even ate meals with people, proving he wasn't a ghost. He let them touch him so they knew he was real. He even appeared to more than 500 people at the same time. The Jesus I killed was alive! Against my will I was forced to conclude that Jesus is indeed the son of God.

Why? Why had Jesus, the son of God died? Why had Jesus not defended himself before Pilate, Herod and the Jews? If he had the power to conquer death, why didn't he stop us from taking his life?

I ask Jesus' followers what all this meant. They explained that Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment from God the Father that I deserved because he loves me. Jesus died so he could break the power of death by rising again. If I repented of my sins, asked God's forgiveness and asked Jesus to be the king of my life like he was now king of creation, I would no longer pay for my sins and I would live forever with him.

Against my will I was forced to conclude that Jesus was indeed the son of God. The evidence compelled me, being there compelled me to believe.

I know if you were there, like myself and my soldiers, you too could come to no other conclusion than Jesus is indeed the son of God. You too would become Christians. Today, as I shared my story, I hope having a chance to walk

in my shoes you will come to the same conclusion I did. Surely this man is the son of God and Jesus is alive.

Thank you for letting me share my story.



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