

The Good Thief
Good Friday 2011

No one saw him, at least that's what he thought at the time. The Roman soldier had come out of the darkened house in the back alley of Jerusalem, still buckling on his uniform after his few moments of pleasure. The soldier had ignored him as they approached one another; after all, he was just one of the hated Jews. But he knew what kind of house it was the soldier exited, knew that ruined Jewish girls were its inmates (Oh Rachel, Rachel, my sister Rachel, wailed his heart). He knew what had been happening. He didn't even remember the knife in his hand, the balance and heft of it. but he could remember how easily it had slid into the soldier's chest, between the ribs, deep into the heart. He'd heard the man's surprised grunt, felt the warm blood splatter his hand and wrist, felt the body collapse to the ground. Searching the twitching corpse for money or other valuables had been only second nature to him, thief that he was. Then he melted into the covering night.

But someone had seen, had remarked the small, hunched, distinctive blacker blot against the night. Someone had reported him to the authorities and the soldier's money bag hidden at his waist had confirmed his guilt. The Romans hadn't even bothered with a trial; the Procurator had simply snapped, "Crucifixion," and turned away.

Thrown into a cell deep in Fortress Antonia, he had felt rather than seen the presence of another man. Throughout the night they had talked enough to know one another to be fellow thieves, brothers in kind. They had known the dawn of the day of their death by the changing of the guard at the cells. He glowered at the dumb guards in the dim light of their lantern and had listened to the sussuration of some large, angry crowd as the whispering sound insinuated itself into the bowels of the Fortress. They had been pulled roughly from the cell and kicked up the stairs out into the blinding mid-morning light.

When finally he could open his eyes without the pain of light, he saw a corporal of the guard beating another Prisoner. The Prisoner bled profusely from terrible wounds around His head and the filthy rag around His shoulders could not cover the flesh flayed raw by an earlier flogging. Spittle and unspeakable filth clung to His beard. The quiet dignity of the Prisoner seemed to enrage the brutish corporal who struck savagely with a heavy club. The thief knew the kind. Greying beard, lined face, low rank combined to reveal to the knowing eye an undisciplined animal nature that even Rome could scarcely control. Some men loved inflicting pain and humiliation; this was one such. Rome had broken him in rank often, but the lesson never took. He was well suited to the place of corporal of the crucifixion guard. The only time he smiled was on execution day.

The Prisoner flinched with pain at each blow but otherwise seemed not to notice. The thief marveled that He even stood, for the Man swayed from pain, weakness, and humiliation. The corporal stopped his abuse long enough to motion sharply to three men standing in the background. The thief curled his lip in disgust at the Jewish carpenters who had hacked the

rough beams of the crosses. The traitorous woodworkers laid a beam on each of the condemned men. The thief gasped at the weight of his own and looked up just as the beaten Prisoner collapsed onto the pavement. Impatiently, the corporal grabbed a stunned by-stander and loaded the cross onto him. Then, in amused disgust, he grabbed the fallen Man by the hair and yanked Him to His feet. The long march to the place of the crucifixion, the place of the skulls, began. The corporal shouted expletives, rained blows, and kicked each of them, yet seemed to have a special malice for the beaten Man. On Him fell the greatest of the abuse.

The sun flogged them mercilessly. The crowd was savage, the heat unendurable, the air still. Dust clogged nose and grabbed the throat. The smell of unwashed bodies and rotten breath polluted the air. The crowd's hatred poisoned each one in the hapless group, Roman guard and Jewish prisoner alike. The climb up the hill made his ears roar and his temples pound. The thief thought it was a real question whether or not he would die before they reached the crest of the hill.

Then they were there. The traitorous carpenters threw the beams roughly to the ground and the corporal no less coarsely kicked each prisoner into place. The thief felt the nails bite home, screamed as annihilating pain seared his body, and sobbed with anguish as his cross was rammed home into the socket dug out of the rock. Moments passed and the thief slowly emerged from the red haze of pain that would accompany him to his death. He saw his cell-mate hanging across from him.

For a moment his rage and hatred kept him from seeing what was happening. The savagely beaten Man was not yet hanging from His cross. He was stretched out on the beam; the hammers were raised, ready to drive the nails through flesh and bone, crush them into the wood. But movement had stopped on the hill. All eyes were fixed on the churlish corporal. The man's face had turned a leaden grey. He'd grabbed his chest and collapsed to the ground, right beside the Nazarene Prisoner. Pop-eyed, he was gasping vainly for breath. Chest heaved, mouth gaped, hands scrabbled. The thief smiled through his misery. He knew this, had seen it before. The corporal had but moments to live. Soon all breath, all movement, all life would be still. The thief grimaced even more broadly. The corporal would accompany the three crucified men into whatever terrors Hades held in store for the newly dead.

Just then, a shout yanked all eyes from the agonized corporal. The centurion in charge of the crucifixion party was only now becoming aware that something was wrong. All eyes turned to him as he strode commandingly into the circle of soldiers.

So it was that no one saw, except the thief. Too weak to move his head, he kept looking at the corporal lying next to the beaten Prisoner. Only he saw the Prisoner's hand move over and touch the corporal's chest, there, just over where the heart lies, and then move back to lie quietly, expectantly, on the beam. The corporal's eyes regained their usual squint, his breath began to come in great gusts through laboring lungs, the color returned to his face, and the pain that had convulsed his body seemed to move over into the body of the Prisoner who now

writhed in agony as the hammers drove the nails home. No one saw the touch, no one except the thief.

The Nazarene Prisoner's cross was raised and shot home into its slot. His body bounced and then lay against the splintered surface of the wood. His head was snapped back and for a moment the thief looked deep into His eyes. What moved there was only love.

What more the thief saw there we will have to wait until after our own crucifixion to find out. But what was there touched him. What it was healed the thief, saved him from himself, melted the core of hatred and contempt, lighted the darkness of need, filled the emptiness of unlove, moved him to sorrow for all the wrong in his life.

The thief gasped, "Remember me..."

And the Nazarene caressed him with these words, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."