

It would be a lie to say he haven't heard of him. *Everyone* has heard of him these days. If it wasn't about some miracle he had performed, it was about something he had said, some argument that had happened with some of the local officials. He had to admit that for awhile, as the rumors had just begun to circulate, he had kind of felt like the guy was asking for trouble, like he was just begging to get arrested. I mean you can't expect to go toe to toe with Empire and win these days, let's be honest, both of their current situations spoke volumes to that statement.

On top of the begging for trouble, in the beginning, he thought the guy sounded like a freak, or at least like one of those run of the mill magicians who roamed the countryside bilking poor people out of their few denarii with the promise of miracle healing. It frustrated him, seeing the poor get poorer, people playing on their needs and their emotions, but then people started saying that this guy supported the poor, that he was saying things about how he was doing what he was doing specifically *for* the poor. He wasn't asking for money, he wasn't asking for anything beyond people just doing the right thing it seemed like. Well, and then ya know, the whole God thing. He definitely had an angle there. It wasn't just about doing the right thing, it was about doing the kingdom of God thing. People seemed to go in for that sort of thing. He couldn't blame them really...the world had kind of

lost its collective mind lately, between the Roman occupation, the religious leaders getting more corrupt by the second, and people just seeming to be more and more out for themselves, everyone needed a bit of a reminder about God. He knew he did. I mean he wasn't the most faithful guy, but he also wasn't entirely faithless. So yeah...he could get behind taking care of the poor, showing Rome who was boss a little bit, and getting people back to some sort of baseline with God. That made sense... The rest of it though, where they all found themselves now, where this Jesus guy in particular found himself now. Well that...that didn't make any sense.

Ok, sure, from the Romans perspective it made sense. The guy's followers were calling him king, he had a parade through Jerusalem like some triumphant emperor for goodness sake, he knew what he had done was treason sure, but that...that was like next level treason with a bit of blasphemy to boot depending on your perspective. But...if he was honest...he hadn't just heard the healing, teaching, get back to God rumors about this guy. He'd heard *the rumor*, the rumor that got him here, hanging beside him on a cross. *King of the Jews. The Messiah. The Savior.* It was a big declaration, but then again, raising a guy from the dead was also a pretty big action, and one of his buddies had told him that this guy had done just that a few days ago before he arrived in town. He knew he should probably

be focused on the pain he was in, but that word just kept circling around his head, *Messiah...Messiah...Messiah*. But...if he was the Messiah...how...how was he here? How was he on the brink of death? Was that a thing the Messiah could do? Would do?

There was no doubt the crowds and the *other guy* here with them felt that it was all a bunch of jibberish, a hoax, a means to poke fun, deride, punish, humiliate Jesus. Even in the midst of his own reality, his own crucifixion, he saw the crown of thorns on Jesus' head, he saw the soldiers play their silly little game to see who got his clothes, and there was no way he could block out all the screaming, the yelling, the vitriol and mocking that were being thrown at Jesus. That word, *Messiah*, so sacred to God's people being used to mock him. The soldiers, the crowd, the other guy all lambasting him over and over, if you're the Messiah save yourself. The other guy adding a bit of self-serving thought to his derision, save yourself and us! Us?! As though he wanted any part of the hatred being lobbed at Jesus. Sure, he wasn't 100% certain how he felt, but he wasn't going to be lumped in with this guy demanded salvation with clearly not a modicum of belief behind it. He wasn't the most faithful guy, but he also wouldn't sink that low as to disrespect a man who was clearly a man of God, if not the Son of God. No, leave him out of it.

He knew the other guy was scared. He didn't blame him for that. He was scared too, how could he not be? Death wasn't exactly something he was looking forward to, but he wasn't going to leave this world with mockery on his lips. No, if that little spark of faith that was within him was telling the truth, he wasn't about to enter whatever afterlife awaited him with his last words being harshness thrown at the man who was potentially God's son, that just really didn't seem like a good way to go out. He tried to just block out the noise, focus on getting his mind, his soul in the right place for what was to come, but eventually he just couldn't take it anymore. That guy said it again, save us! And he just couldn't do it anymore.

The words flew out of him with a strength he wasn't quite sure was possible. He could barely breathe let alone talk and yet he couldn't stop himself, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" He sucked in another breath, "And we have indeed been condemned justly," thoughts of his own crimes which brought him here flashed through his mind, he wasn't sure if death was just, but he wasn't innocent, he knew that. "We," if that guy was going to lump him into his statements, he would do the same thing, "are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." In that moment, he knew. He couldn't explain why or how, but he knew, this Jesus...he wasn't just

hanging beside any normal man. He was a king...*the* king. He was the Messiah, and if he was the Messiah, well...he would use his final prayer for what he saw as real salvation. He locked eyes with Jesus, building up one last burst of courage to talk, “Jesus,” the word felt holy on his lips, “remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

He didn't expect him to say anything. He hadn't said much through it all, and who could blame him. He was in far worse shape than the rest of them, it was a wonder he was still alive. Yet, when he had spoken...he had spoken of forgiveness. He had prayed...he had prayed for those who mocked him, who had signed his death warrant, who didn't believe in him, maybe didn't even believe in God. He had prayed that they would be forgiven. How was that possible? To ask for forgiveness for those who had done so much harm? And yet...that's what he had done. Maybe that's why he had mustered up that last big of courage for his own prayer. If Jesus could offer forgiveness to the rest of the world, maybe...maybe he could offer forgiveness to him too. Maybe he could die with hope. That there would be something more beyond this. That salvation would be for him too. That he could be forgiven for all of those things he most certainly had known he was doing.

Few people get the luxury of their prayer being directly answered, spoken to them in return, and yet, here he was, being crucified and God responded... This Jesus looked at him and said, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise. It seemed impossible. And yet...he believed. He wasn't quite sure why or how or when his flicker of faith had become a flame, but he trusted the words spoken to him. It didn't stop the pain, the reality, but it gave him a gift, the ability to die in peace, knowing that this was not the end...there was something more...Jesus would be there. He wouldn't be alone. He wanted to weep with relief. Paradise.

He went quiet from that point on. He heard the crowds continue on in their raucous anger. He heard Jesus mumble a few more things, but nothing stuck. Paradise. Paradise would be his. He had lived his entire life under the oppression of occupation, knowing what it was to serve at the pleasure of the king. Mostly kings who were selfish, self-righteous, treasonous in their own ways. Kings who didn't care about their people. Kings who were only out for themselves. Kings who were more interested in lavish palaces and purple robes than what was actually happening in the world around them, *their kingdom* around them. Yet...he felt that word take on new meaning in his heart, as his eyes once again caught that crown of thorns. A king... A king of peace. A king of hope. A king of forgiveness. A king of Paradise.

A king...who was willing to die so that his people might live. It was something he'd never seen before, never heard of before. Sure they all dreamed of a king like King David to return, but this was even above and beyond his shining example. A king who would die for his people. A king who would offer forgiveness even when it was undeserved. A king whose last act on earth was one of hope. He had seen a lot of things in his life, but this...this was something new...and in his last few hours of life he knew...he would soon be in Paradise with a king, his king, who was like no other. **AMEN!!!**