



Robin J. Lewis

THE CAPTAIN'S
STORY



Dear Brother Felix,

I am writing this letter to you as something dramatic has happened here where we are stationed in Judea. It changed my life completely!

As you know, this is now my second year as centurion in Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish nation. The guard of 100 men under my authority are the best team I have ever managed: they are tough, strong, and good with the sword. We have been assigned to Governor Pontius Pilate since the last Jewish uprising under Barabbas, The Zealot. We were able to keep the peace and the Jewish leaders worked well alongside us until a few weeks ago . . .





It all happened during *Passover*, the first of a series of religious feasts of the Jews. This is usually the busiest time of the year, as all their men must come to Jerusalem to worship and pray to their god.

Until now, it never made sense to me to go to an empty temple. The Jews worship an invisible god, and I am told that their temple does not contain any statue of their god. He has given them a law of *Ten Rules*, one of which says that they are not to make any idols that represent their god and worship it.

At the beginning of the feast, the Jewish leaders brought a man to the Governor for execution. Their high priest and their council accused the man of blasphemy. He apparently claimed to be their *Messiah*. The Greeks call it 'Christ', meaning the Anointed One, the Son of their invisible God! Something like Hercules . . .



I must admit, at first, he did not look like an aristocrat, much less a king!

They accused this man of usurping the throne the Jews believed belonged to their *true* king. Every now and then some Jewish freedom fighter appears, claiming to be the so-called saviour-king of the Jews. If he truly was their king, that would have caused quite a stir,

and we would have needed to quash this uprising very fast. Pilate had already upset the Senate and Caesar when one of these freedom fighters called Barabbas rebelled and committed murder in the capital, Jerusalem.

The man brought before Pontius Pilate was accused of stirring up the people with

his teachings all the way from Galilee up to here in Jerusalem, in Judea. They called him ‘son of David’ (after their famous king). It is said that he healed the sick and even raised the dead! Some said he was a god.

According to their religious rules, humans claiming to be God are to be executed, but no one has such authority except the Roman governor. So, the Jewish leaders brought this man to Pontius Pilate to be executed on their behalf. As Governor of Jerusalem and head of the judicial system, our prefect has duties that extend beyond military matters; therefore, my troops were assigned to be a police force rather than a military power.

The Jews were so excited and unruly, I had to gather my men to barricade the entrance to the palace to protect the safety of the Governor. We took the man inside the palace for the Governor to interrogate.

When asked whether he *was* the king of the Jews, his answer was strangely positive: ‘It is as *you* say.’ He stated that his kingdom is not of *this* world, and that his followers are not freedom fighters as we would understand it.

This man was from Nazareth of Galilee, under the jurisdiction of the Jewish King, Herod Antipas. Our governor sent the prisoner to him to shift the problem, avoiding a new crisis in Judea. Conveniently for us, Herod was also in Jerusalem for the feast. The king seemed quite amused at first by this man, and asked him to perform some



miracles. When the man did not do so, Herod quickly changed attitude. In the presence of his men of war, he dressed the prisoner as a king, draping him in a purple robe, and had him mocked and humiliated. King Herod ordered the accused to be sent back to Governor Pilate with greetings for having the honour of interviewing this pathetic 'king of the Jews'.

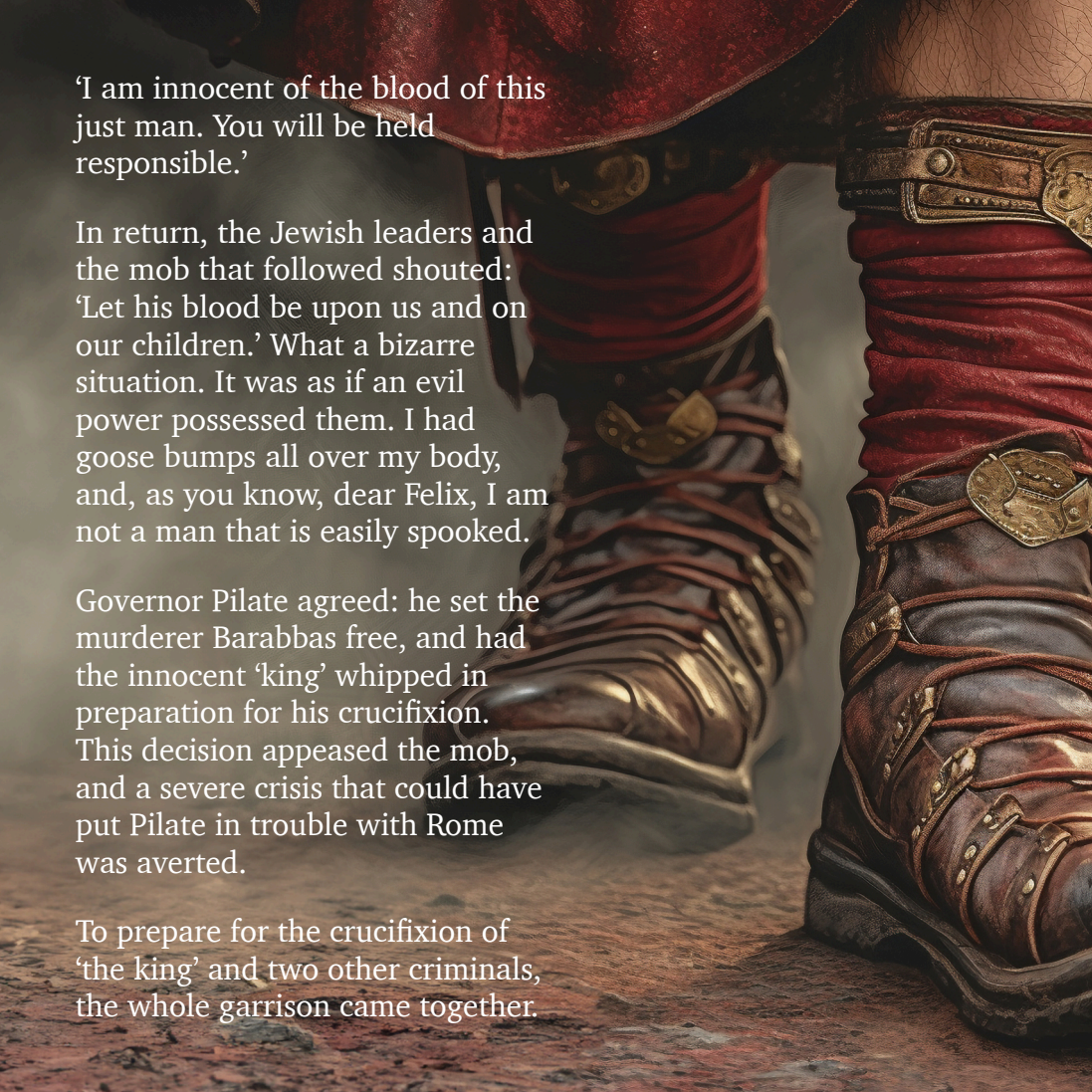
One thing I noticed: this man did not speak to defend himself, while the Jewish leaders vehemently attacked him with all sorts of hollow accusations. He remained calm and collected, showing a noble presence, as if he could foresee his future.

With the Jewish leaders in tow, I took 'the king of the Jews', as he was now called, back to the Governor's palace. Visibly agitated to have the crisis back, Pilate had a long discussion with the Jewish

leaders regarding the execution they demanded. One thing was clear: neither Herod nor Pilate found anything in this man that deserved the death penalty.

Hearing that the Governor wanted to set the prisoner free, the Jewish leaders did not want any of it, accusing the Governor of insurrection to the Emperor. They demanded that Barabbas be released, and 'the king' be executed. Three times Pilate tried to set 'the king' free, but they resisted that thought vehemently. Like a mob of rioters shouting together, they cried, 'Crucify him, crucify him!'

Governor Pilate, in the end, succumbed to their demands, but not before he washed his hands in a bowl, saying:



'I am innocent of the blood of this just man. You will be held responsible.'

In return, the Jewish leaders and the mob that followed shouted: 'Let his blood be upon us and on our children.' What a bizarre situation. It was as if an evil power possessed them. I had goose bumps all over my body, and, as you know, dear Felix, I am not a man that is easily spooked.

Governor Pilate agreed: he set the murderer Barabbas free, and had the innocent 'king' whipped in preparation for his crucifixion. This decision appeased the mob, and a severe crisis that could have put Pilate in trouble with Rome was averted.

To prepare for the crucifixion of 'the king' and two other criminals, the whole garrison came together.



I had the soldiers strip 'the king' of his clothes to be flogged. But the soldiers first put a scarlet robe around him. They made a crown of thorns and pressed it on his head, and put a reed in his right hand. I watched in disgust as they knelt before him mockingly, and said, 'Hail, king of the Jews.'

Their laughter changed quickly into hatred. They spat on him, hit him on the head, slapped him and said, 'Prophecy: who was it that slapped you?' while sneering and joking.

With such a surreal spectacle, I called for order and had the prisoners flogged before their crucifixion. They were then led outside the city to the Place of the Skull (*Golgotha*, in their language).

‘The king’ impressed me with the way he accepted his fate, as if he was a sheep ready to be slaughtered. All this time he said nothing! He did not plead; neither did he accuse his enemies. Amidst curses, the other prisoners fiercely resisted their execution, but they were quickly subdued.

Pilate made a plaque and had it put on the cross of ‘the king’ with an inscription written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin: *The King of the Jews*. The Jewish leaders complained strongly about the title, but Pilate stood his ground. Stripped naked, nailed to the cross, *the King of the Jews* was raised up and brutally planted between the two criminals.

The main road to Damascus ran close by, and many

travellers coming to and going from Jerusalem mocked ‘the king’ specifically, as did the Jewish leaders, who seemed to revel in his execution. When the soldiers shared the garments of ‘the king’ among themselves, I heard him whisper, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’, as if to say that he was talking to his god in heaven.

An argument ensued between the crucified thieves on either side of ‘the king’, one accusing him of not using his power to free himself and them. The other thief, more afraid of the judgement upon them, acknowledged that ‘the king’ was innocent, while they deserved their punishment.

Turning to ‘the king’, he said, ‘Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ ‘The king’, looking at this repentant criminal, said, ‘You will be with me in Paradise.’



Felix, my brother, such words of hope to a criminal fated to die are unbelievable! How could 'the king' give hope to another while he himself was sure to die as well?!

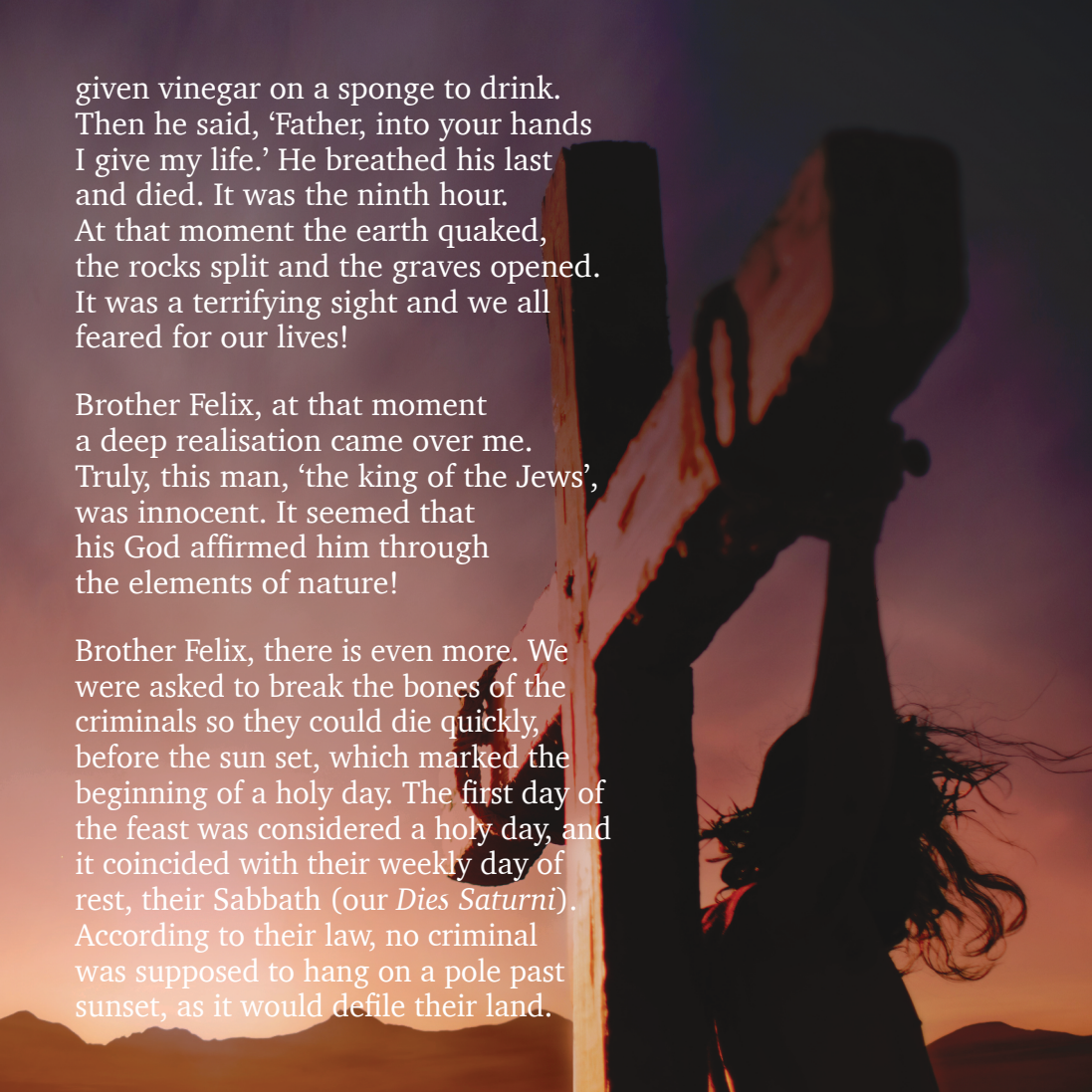
It was noon, and the sun was beating down quite hard for this time of the year. A few crying women stood nearby the cross of 'the king'. A young man took the older among them to see 'the king'. She seemed to be his mother. It must have been terrible to see her own son hanging naked in public and tormented by the crowd.

She cried and kept calling his name, 'Jesus, my son, oh Jesus, what have they done to you?' I asked them, 'Who is this man you call Jesus?' She said an angel gave him the name *Jesus* ('God saves'). He said it means that he would save the world from their sins.

I really felt sick and sad for this mother who had to see her son in this terrible state. What a tragedy to lose your hope like this . . .

Suddenly, the sky became very dark; the sun seemed to hide 'King Jesus' from the terrible presence of his haters, who spat, swore, and accused him of being a false messiah. For three hours it remained dark. Felix, believe me, we could not see anything for the duration of the darkness.

When the light was slowly breaking through the darkness, I heard 'King Jesus' cry: 'Eli (My God), why have you forsaken me?' There was a commotion among the crowd, who were saying that the crucified was calling to a prophet named Elijah to save him. Being thirsty, he was

A silhouette of a person on a cross against a sunset sky. The person is on the right side of the cross, with their arms outstretched. The sky is a mix of purple, pink, and orange, suggesting the time is either dawn or dusk. The cross is made of two wooden beams. The person's hair is blowing in the wind.

given vinegar on a sponge to drink.
Then he said, 'Father, into your hands
I give my life.' He breathed his last
and died. It was the ninth hour.
At that moment the earth quaked,
the rocks split and the graves opened.
It was a terrifying sight and we all
feared for our lives!

Brother Felix, at that moment
a deep realisation came over me.
Truly, this man, 'the king of the Jews',
was innocent. It seemed that
his God affirmed him through
the elements of nature!

Brother Felix, there is even more. We
were asked to break the bones of the
criminals so they could die quickly,
before the sun set, which marked the
beginning of a holy day. The first day of
the feast was considered a holy day, and
it coincided with their weekly day of
rest, their Sabbath (our *Dies Saturni*).
According to their law, no criminal
was supposed to hang on a pole past
sunset, as it would defile their land.

We broke their bones, but when we came to 'King Jesus', he was already dead. Just to make sure, one of my soldiers pierced his side with a spear: water and blood gushed from the wound; the man Jesus was dead. After a while, a rich Jewish leader came and took 'the king' from the cross to a nearby grave. He was buried in the rich man's cave.

Tired, we went back to our barracks. It felt like such a long day. Very early next day we were summoned to the Governor's palace. The Jewish leaders were in an argument with Pilate again. This time they wanted a Roman seal to secure the entrance to the grave. Apparently, 'the king' had said he would rise from the dead on the third day! I thought to myself, 'If this man rises from the dead in three days, then truly *he is the Son of God!*'

I had the stone at the entrance sealed with the Governor's seal and placed some soldiers on guard. We were in anticipation to see what would happen on that third day, the venerable day of the Sun. I decided to join my soldiers, sleeping right next to the sealed stone. Wasn't I the captain of the guard?

Felix, I confess, I was restless; my mind struggled to understand the commotion that had happened during the early days of the feast. Who was this man, and why was he a threat to the Jewish leaders? Who is this 'Father' he addressed when he neared the end of his life? Then there was the earthquake; the dead that rose from their graves; the deep darkness – what did all of this mean? With these thoughts I sank into a profound sleep . . .

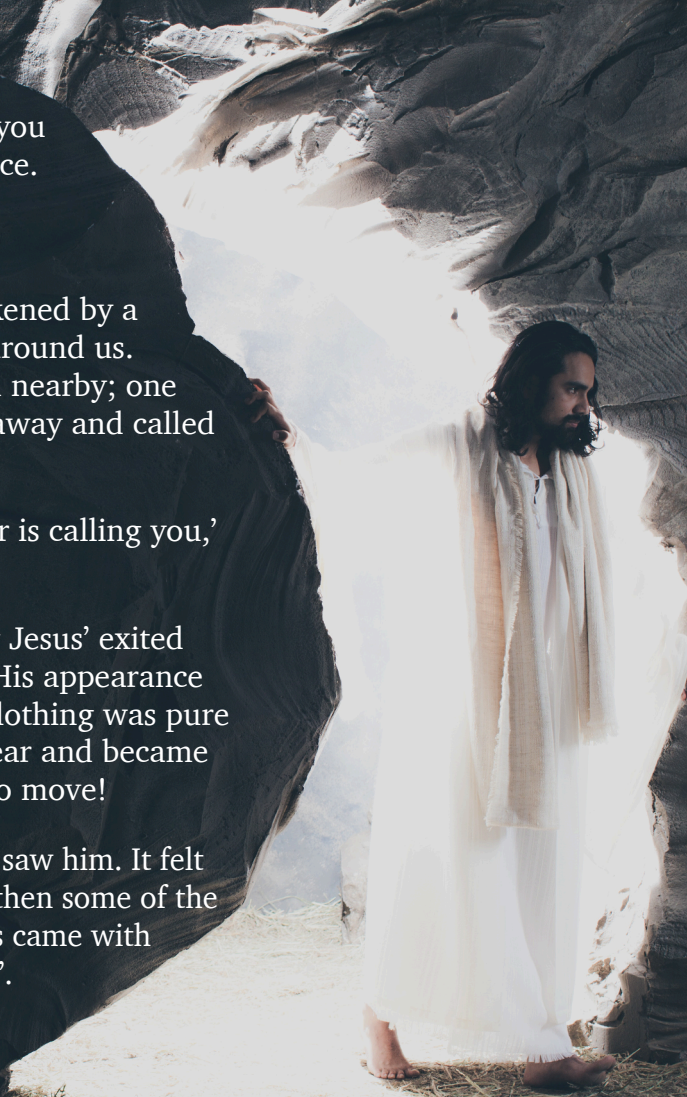
Dear Brother Felix,
what I am about to tell you
now is of vital importance.
Believe me.

We suddenly were awakened by a
bright light shining all around us.
Two men in white stood nearby; one
rolled the sealed stone away and called
to 'the king'.

'Arise, Jesus! Your Father is calling you,'
he said.

The next moment, 'King Jesus' exited
the mouth of the cave. His appearance
was like lightning; his clothing was pure
white! We shook with fear and became
like dead men, unable to move!

My soldiers and I, we all saw him. It felt
like time stood still. But then some of the
women I saw at the cross came with
spices to anoint the 'king'.
Then he was gone.



The two men in white spoke to the women: 'Do not be afraid, for we know that you seek Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead, and indeed he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him.'

We were completely powerless until the men disappeared from our sight. As we gained our strength, we got up and a fear came over us and we started to run for our lives.

We just ran!

Closer to the city, as the moment of shock passed away, I stopped to gain my breath, my composure, and my sanity. The words I had uttered at the cross came back with more power: 'Truly, "the king" is the Son of God!'



**Felix, I saw him
that day as surely
as you hold this
letter and you
read these words!**

And I learned that Jesus appeared again, over the next 40 days, speaking to his followers. Fifty days after his crucifixion, at the next Jewish feast, which they call *Pentecost*, his disciples bravely spread the good news that 'King Jesus' had become the Saviour of the world. He had conquered sin and broken the power of death on humanity's behalf.

I heard them saying to all in Jerusalem that 'God so loved humanity that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

With all that has happened these last days, I believe those words to be true. I have seen and experienced the presence of ‘King Jesus’, the Son of God, with my own eyes, ears, and body. I saw him alive, and dead, and alive again.

The conviction to change my life around was overwhelming. A few days ago I asked his disciples if I could also become a follower of ‘King Jesus’, the Saviour of the world, the Son of God.

I am a new person, Felix! The rough legionary captain in me has been ‘buried’ (so to speak), and I feel as if I have been ‘resurrected’ to a new life.


My dear brother,
‘what I have seen and heard,
I declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with all of us who believe in *King Jesus* and his Father in heaven. My heart is full; therefore I wrote these things to you, so that your joy may be full too.’

Please send my greetings to Priscilla, your wife, and to all our friends in Rome. I hope that none of you will be ashamed by my story, but that all of you will come to know ‘the king’ as I have.

*Your brother,
Andronicus Plinius*

*Captain of the Guard, assigned to
the Governor of Judea Province,
in Jerusalem*





*‘When the Roman centurion,
overseeing the execution
saw what had happened,
he worshipped God and said,
“Surely this man was innocent.” ’*

(Luke 23:47)

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