

I have been at my trade for a good many years, but until today I thought I could say I had seen it all. You see, my family has been forging metals for generations now. I have been standing at this anvil every day for nearly 43 years. So, between me and my father, his father, his father's father and so on ...we have worked with just about every kind of metal and we have forged just about anything to be used for just about any kind of purpose I could think of under the sun. Well, that's what I would have said until today.

Can you see what I'm making here? Those of you who are close may recognize that I am hammering out a nail. It's a simple procedure, really. All you do is heat the soft iron until it glows an orange-red glow. A good forger of metals will know when the metal is just right for shaping because the iron will become like the color of the sun just as it is about to pass under the earth. Then when the iron is heated you shape it with your hammer, using the anvil to straighten it upon. I have made many nails in my 43 years. I have forged nails out of every conceivable metal, silver and gold. I have forged them out of bronze and brass. Usually, I forge nails out of the black metal iron, like this one. So, you see, I have made a lifetime of nails, and like I said earlier, there is nothing I thought I hadn't seen ...until today. What would you think if you were requested to make nails for the purpose of pounding them through human flesh? Ah, you see, you would be stunned as well as I... but that's what happened to me earlier this morning.

I was lighting the forge to begin my day's work. One of the soldiers from the Roman guard came into my workshop with a request that I make something quite unusual for him. At first I thought he must have seen the beautiful bronze breastplate I had just completed for another soldier. But he assured me his request was much more simple. He wanted me to make three nails for him. That's all. How easy, I thought, as I handed him three simple nails which I had already made the day before. He handed them back, saying they were too small. Then he described just exactly what it was he came to get from me. I couldn't believe my ears. The soldier said that later in the morning there was going to be an execution ...another crucifixion. He said that the man whom they were to execute was sent to them under a very unusual circumstance. The soldier said that they were not going to simply hang him as they normally do, with his hands and feet secured to the beams of a cross by rope. Are you aware of the common practice of crucifying a criminal? Perhaps before I continue I should explain.

The criminal is bound with rope by the wrists and ankles securely to a cross. In order to take a breath, he must push up with his feet and pull with his arms. Eventually, the criminal falls prey to fatigue and once that happens, he no longer has the strength to push with his legs or pull with his arms to take a breath, so he suffocates. It usually takes several days to die that way. This is the common practice for an execution by crucifixion. But, according to this soldier, they not only wanted to fasten this unusual criminal to the cross with rope, they also wanted to drive nails through both his hands and feet. Yes, that's why I couldn't believe my ears when he told me he wanted me to make nails for this purpose ...I've never received such a request.

I asked the soldier what the man's crime was to deserve this bonus torture. Do you know what the soldier said in his response? He said, "I'm not certain." "I'm not certain?" I repeated back to him. "You're going to hammer nails into a man and you don't even know why?" "Well," the soldier thought for a moment, "it has something to do with this man thinking he's God, or something. I guess he's stirring up a lot of problems in Jerusalem among his own people, the Jews," the soldier continued to say. I considered what the soldier said. In light of some of the most recent outbreaks of rioting and the population's general discontent, it wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility that the Romans would execute a Jewish militant. So I said to the soldier, "Is this Jewish man you are going to execute trying to lead a revolt against Rome?" The soldier said, "I don't think so. Really, I think his crime is that he says he is God, or the Son of God or something." I replied, "You're right. This is an unusual circumstance."

Well, it took me only a short time to forge the nails he wanted. Like I said, it's a fairly simple procedure. And while I was pounding the nails out, the soldier and I talked about our impression of how volatile our society seems to be these days. The Jewish people are a very proud people and they obviously haven't taken too well to the Roman occupation of this area ...especially Jerusalem. There is a lot of tension over this issue. The Jewish people are also an extremely religious-oriented people and it seems that everything the Romans do disturbs their religious way of life. In fact, there have been several uprisings among the people lately led by a militant band of armed gypsies promising to take back what they say is rightfully theirs ..."The land God gave to us," they claim.

I also mentioned to the soldier that I have heard about a man from Galilee, a Jewish person who was gaining quite a substantial following in the area for his religious teachings. The people call him a rabbi, which I believe is a teacher. But what I have been hearing, none of which the soldier knew anything about, is that this rabbi has been leading a sort of peace movement amongst his people, particularly here in Jerusalem. Although this rabbi seems to levy a considerable amount of criticism concerning the Roman occupation, even more strange than that, he highly criticizes the religious leaders of his own people. Now, from what I understand, this rabbi is constantly challenging the religious leaders, saying they are not being faithful to God. He says they are after their own gains and only out for their own self-interests. Well, the reason why I tell you this is that, in the midst of talking with the soldier about all that's happening, and especially this impending crucifixion, it occurred to me that I have heard of this rabbi from Galilee I speak of being referred to as the one sent by God. He's even been called the Son of God. So, I asked the soldier if he thought it might be this particular rabbi who they would be executing. He said he didn't think so, but he added that he really didn't know much about the specifics. Maybe he was ...maybe not. He didn't know. The soldier did say that his impression of the man is that he is not much of a leader. He said that most of the people who were witnessing his execution trial before the governor seemed to be against him and they also seemed satisfied with the proceedings toward crucifixion.

After the soldier left with the nails, I got to thinking about people in general and this rabbi specifically. Now, it may or may not be the rabbi I'm thinking of whom they are executing today. But if it is, I would really have to question why. From what I have heard and I admit I only hear bits and pieces from people who come into my workshop ...but what I hear is this rabbi from Galilee speaks about a Kingdom of God. Now, even though I may look sooty and sweaty from my work, I pride myself on being a philosopher of sorts. I can afford a lot of time applied toward philosophical thinking while I stand here pounding on metal. So what this rabbi has to say about a Kingdom of God ...well, it intrigues me. Now, the rabbi says that this Kingdom is not of this world but it is the Kingdom of Heaven. However, the rabbi also suggests that people can be a part of this kingdom even as they live in this world. How, you might ask? Well, this is where I would question the legitimacy of his execution. This rabbi says that people can be a part of the kingdom of God by loving their enemies; by giving to poor people; by being humble; and by believing in him. Now, does any of that sound like justification for an execution? Not in my mind. It sounds to me like this rabbi is simply promoting an attitude for living a peaceful life. So, you see, it makes me wonder about people. If it is, in fact, this particular rabbi they are executing for claiming to be the Son of God as the soldier said, then what do people want? If they truly want to live in peace, then why don't they listen to this rabbi? Instead, they choose to have him killed? They must be like the soldier who came for those nails ...they don't have a clue about what they are doing or why. Well, if it is this rabbi from Galilee, it would be interesting to know what he thinks about these people who are doing this to him. My guess is he's given up on this peace movement, and now he's cursing the people all the way to the cross and, I'm certain, even to his dying breath.