

THESE WATCHED HIM DIE

LESLIE HARDINGE



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To my daughter
Judy
and all the young in heart
to whom I would reveal
JESUS
in His loving compassion
I dedicate this book

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Introduction

All humanity was gathered at the cross. All humanity made final decisions in its shadow.

The story of the Crucifixion is a microcosm of the last judgment. The persons who clustered about the dying Savior were representatives of us all. As we think of these people and consider what made them what they were, let us recognize that they mirror our thoughts and feelings and dispositions. Their varied attitudes represent our own reactions.

They gathered about the crosses, these faceless ones, attracted there by the morbid feelings that impel men to witness executions. Some stood and stared stolidly. Some moved uneasily, emotionally involved in the agony of dying men. Others impassively watched the soldiers methodically going about their grisly task of ceremonially ending three lives. Then there were those who seemed to be enjoying the sights and sounds of a blood-mad crowd. Their satisfaction sprang from feelings of vengeance. Justice was being met! A traitor, a murderer, a brigand, were receiving due recompense for their crimes.

The Romans were there. Their role was to see that Caesar's might was felt and Caesar's laws were carried out to the letter. No question as to Rome's authority might be raised with impunity when they were around! As procurator of Judea, Pilate bore the authority of Tiberius himself. His judgment was final. He had acted. The law, as he interpreted it, was being enforced.

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The centurion was there with his soldiers. They were getting some satisfaction in thinking of the perquisites they would receive. They sat down under the cross to wait it out. As the blood fell, they cast lots for old clothes, and perhaps wondered how quickly they could get to the pawnbroker with their loot.

Herod was there in spirit. The Herods held a position that was complicated. They were part of the Roman government, and yet they were natives of Palestine. As Edomites they were hated by the Jews, but as benefactors, one of whom had rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem on a lavish scale, they were tolerated by the people. Licentious and cruel, politic and callous, the Herods had slain the babes of Bethlehem and the Baptist in the dungeon. Herod Antipas must have gained sadistic satisfaction in the ending of a virtuous life by which his vice was condemned.

The Sanhedrin was there. Caiaphas, and possibly Annas, and chief representatives postured in the forefront of the crowd. These men stood for the religious power of their nation. They were the guardians of faith and morals. No query regarding God and His law, worship, or ritual might be mooted without opposition while they were around. No question of orthodoxy, which they upheld, was ever permitted. Their views had been criticized by this Nazarene. Their popularity with the people had waned because of His deeds. Their power and prestige were in jeopardy because of His life. As they watched Jesus being nailed ignominiously to a cross they gloated that the cause of their discomfort was being removed forever.

His companions in death were there. The thieves, receiving the just deserts for their deeds, were resisting the soldiers and seeking relief by cursing their executioners. They were obviously guilty, and few in the crowd felt sorry for them.

The disciples were there. Ashamed and scared, some of them

had slunk back to the place of the execution. John was nearest to the cross. Ardent and helpless, he stood close by. Alone, his heart was seeking the peace of forgiveness in solitude in the multitude. Mary of Bethany was at the foot of the cross. But gifts of love and tears of grief were impotent now. Mary of Nazareth, with her mother heart breaking, was watching her hopes and ambitions, her thoughtfulness and devotion, being extinguished with each passing moment by the cross. This was that to which Simeon had referred when he said, “Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also” (Luke 2:35).

And then there were people, people everywhere. Faces, nameless faces of anonymous people, coming and going. Shouting and laughing, confronted by the most solemn issues that humanity had ever faced, would ever face, they ambled childishly, thoughtlessly, in holiday mood at the foot of the cross.

All men and women stood around the cross that day. All men and women were in its shadow deciding for eternity as the Son of God was being executed. You and I were there. You and I are there. And in our watching today, we settle, without any question, the final destiny that will one day be ours.

Chapter 1

Simon the Conscripted

African Farmer—"He Bore the Cross"

Jesus stood before the governor with His back torn and lacerated by the scourge. Then Pilate the cowardly washed his hands of the whole affair. Shrugging to a soldier to do as the priests wished, the governor left Jesus to His fate and went to breakfast. With the blood-drunk crowd and the soldiers our Lord staggered out of the judgment hail on His way to Old Skull Face to be crucified.

As they started out, the executioners tried to force Him to carry His cross. He fell fainting under its weight. They probably threw some water over His face. When He felt better, they dragged Him up and put the cross on Him once more. Down He fell, and they tried to revive Him again. A man in the crowd expressed his sympathy. His name was Simon.

Simon, the farmer, was a stranger. He had come from Cyrene in North Africa. What had brought him to Palestine we are not told. The Gospel writer informs us that he had two boys, Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). Perhaps this Rufus is the one to whom Paul sent greetings in the last chapter of Romans. But this we do not know for certain. We are told nothing of Simon's wife (Rom. 16:13), but she might have been in Jerusalem with her husband. This stranger, this North African, found himself on Passover day coming into Jerusalem from his field outside the city. Passing through the open gate, he met the huge crowd noisily moving out. He was suddenly surrounded by the cruel mob, bent

on murder. He stopped and watched the cross laid upon the broken shoulders of a dying Man. He shuddered as He collapsed under the load. “He hears the taunts and ribaldry of the crowd; he hears the words contemptuously repeated, Make way for the King of the Jews! He stops in astonishment at the scene; and as he expresses his compassion, they seize him and place the cross upon his shoulders” (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 742). Because he voiced his sympathy, he was immediately commandeered to carry the instrument of torture himself.

Simon has heard about Jesus. While his two sons, Alexander and Rufus, had decided to accept Jesus as the Messiah (*ibid.*), Simon himself “had not (yet) openly professed faith in Christ” (*Early Writings*, p. 175). Had he been challenged he might well have declared himself a follower.

And so Simon, the African, finds himself suddenly conscripted into royal service. He was a helper of the King. I wonder whether he realized his privilege! Everyone in Palestine had heard about John’s declaration that Jesus was the Messiah. Did Simon sense the contribution he was making in bringing the ministry of the Savior to its consummation?

But Simon had no choice in the matter. He had been conscripted. They had forcibly laid the cross upon him. As he staggered under its weight, the One who was to die upon it stumbled by his side. Around Simon men jeered. Ribald jokes and foolish banter were on many tongues. The air was filled with angry shouts. With the cross on his back Simon was alone with his thoughts. “His sympathies were deeply stirred in favor of Jesus; and the events of Calvary, and the words uttered by the Savior, caused him to acknowledge that He was the Son of God” (*The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, on Matt. 27:32, p. 1107).

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“The bearing of the cross to Calvary was a blessing to Simon, and he was ever after grateful for this providence. It led him to take upon himself the cross of Christ from choice, and ever cheerfully stand beneath its burden” (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 742).

I often think of the wonderful circumstances that had brought Simon to where he was at that time. His home was in Africa. But he had taken a dirty, inconvenient journey to Palestine. The dusty tracks of Libya, the sandy pathways across the Nile Valley, and the desert rocks of the coastal region were passed in turn. Crossing the highlands of the wilderness of Judea, he had come at last to the environs of Jerusalem. Somewhere near he had obtained a job. He had worked hard to support his sons, and perhaps his wife. He was a stranger in a strange land.

And then that Friday morning he trudged in from the fields outside Jerusalem. Here he met Jesus on His way to His sacrifice on the hill of execution. Had he reached that spot on the road five minutes earlier, he would have slipped into the gate unobserved, and perhaps we would never have heard about him. Five minutes later and the procession would have passed on its way to Calvary, and the executioners would have started on their grisly work. But he was neither five minutes early nor five minutes late. He was there at the right moment.

After His condemnation Jesus had passed on a little way from Pilate’s judgment hall—possibly in the Castle of Antonia. Perhaps His fainting had occurred while He stumbled along the Pavement. Today the pilgrims bow low to kiss what might well be those very stones. They have been worn smooth and polished by the lips of unnumbered pious persons during the past 15 centuries, since Helena, Constantine’s mother, made pilgrimages to holy places fashionable. Perhaps Jesus saw, carved in the Pavement itself, the games of the soldiers played with dice.

Simon took in the whole scene. Simon's heart was full of pity, and Simon's tongue spoke what Simon's heart felt. And as he spoke in sympathy he was conscripted by the soldiers. Perhaps he had at first wondered, Why didn't I keep my mouth closed? Perhaps someone in the crowd had shouted, "That goes for talking too much!" Whatever he thought, he carried the cross to Calvary and laid it down for Christ where the soldiers told him to.

Simon watched the executioners wrestle with the brigands. He shuddered as the Prisoner, whom he had helped, lay down voluntarily and stretched out His arms. He heard the sickening blow as the executioner's maul drove the spike through the bloody hand. His heart was torn by the sobbing of the mother. He heard the prayer, such as no man had ever prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Did he feel that he was included in that petition? Did he sense a sudden increase of light? Had he, too, failed to understand what he had done when he had borne, perhaps resentfully at first, the cross to the place? Was he now learning that he too needed forgiveness? Did he remember the skepticism of yesterday, when he had heard the gospel and refused to obey? Did he recall the look in his sons' faces when they had eagerly affirmed, "Dad, this Man is the Messiah!" and he had refused to surrender? I like to think Christ's prayer embraced him, too. He was very near the cross. His was a grandstand view. He heard the gasping sob as the cross was thrust into the hole prepared for it. But still the Man neither complained or moaned, but only prayed. Simon heard, and Simon's heart was broken, and Simon surrendered. Ever after he carried Christ's cross joyously. Its cruel hardness had pressed against his back. But One had died for him. He sensed the grand and glorious truth that when he bore the cross the Other would die for him! So long as he believed, the Other would bleed. And Simon learned to believe with all his heart.

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I like to think that Simon stood there by the cross, alone even in the midst of that mad crowd, absorbed for hours by the One whom he had helped. Then God turned out His light. Was this that His Son's final agony should be witnessed by none? Simon probably remained there in the darkness believing more and more fully as the hours went slowly by.

Have you ever wondered whether Jesus thanked Simon for bearing His cross? Do you think Simon expected thanks for his deed? I think not! He actually was grateful for the privilege! Grateful that he had been forced to carry the cross. Perhaps he remembered whispers of Christ's words quoted to him by his sons, "If any man will come after me, let him . . . take up his cross, and follow me." Simon never expected thanks; he gave thanks! As he looked back along the road over which God had led his feet he rejoiced. Everything had worked out so well in the end. The events of his life had come into focus.

There are some of us today who are thus dramatically confronted with the Crucified and His cross. We find ourselves where we are compelled to carry it! The cross is being thrust upon us against our wills. Like Simon, we too are "compelled" to carry out Christian acts. Let us carefully analyze our reactions. Do you fight the right because you want the wrong?

Perhaps your name is Simon—and you have to carry the cross. Then you hear a prayer, and you know you are part of that prayer. Nothing in life comes by blind chance. As you look back at today from the vantage point of tomorrow you will discern that God's providences have eyes "before and behind." No circumstance of your life is hidden from His scrutiny. The Spirit of God speaks to your heart and appeals to your mind and whispers in your soul. "This is the way, walk ye in it." Occasionally it may seem that you are actually being conscripted. Sometimes you may

feel that you are being loaded with the cross against your desires. Remember Simon! Ever after he was grateful! He wanted no thanks. He requested no payment. The privilege was his entirely. Temporal and eternal benefits came with the burden he bore. For Simon, Old Skull Face no longer leered. It became the smile of God to his soul. It will for you, too, my friend.

The cross that was laid upon Simon is our cross. He made a contribution to the plan of our salvation like that made by no one since. Jesus might have said, "Wherever the gospel story is told, the story of Simon and the cross will be told also." Simon did not preach at Pentecost. We are not told that he went to the ends of the earth and established churches. In fact, we are not told that he did anything after Calvary. But this we know: He eased Christ's burden. He made our Lord's pain less by sharing His cross. He sets us a worthy example. Jesus tells us now, "If any man will come after me, let him . . . take up his cross . . ." Are you ready to do this?

I want you to look into your own heart now. Can you see there, with the light of the Spirit shining into your mind, anything that will destroy you if it is not destroyed? Does some hidden sin that you have not yet placed on the cross lurk in the darkness of your soul? Are you ready to give it to Jesus now? Can you see some task you ought to do but which you have postponed because the price is too great? Take it up today. He will satisfy your every longing. Do not delay. Pray, "Lord Jesus, here are my sins. Nail them to the cross. Give me power to do Thy will. I lay the consequences at Thy feet, and take Thy cross and follow Thee."

Chapter 2

Herod the Crafty

Edomite King—“That Fox”

The encounter of Herod with Jesus was a dramatic moment in history. Jesus, the lowly Nazarene and the representative of God’s chosen people, was descended from Jacob. Herod, the proud and wily half Edomite, was a scion of the nations that had sprung from Esau. He might have enjoyed the privileges and blessings that came from the Abrahamic covenant. But like his ancestor Esau, he was a profane person. And the enmity that had existed between Esau and Jacob, and which had often flared up among their descendants during the intervening years, reached a new focus at our Lord’s trial. Herod and Jesus confronted each other in the palace of the Edomite king. Here Herod’s feelings against Jesus were clearly revealed.

The factors that made this encounter even more dramatic had begun some years previously. The father of this Herod had sought to destroy the baby Jesus. His plans had been frustrated by an angel of the Lord. The authority and jurisdiction of the father had been divided among several of his sons. The lives of the families of the Herods were dissolute and evil in the extreme. Murder and intrigue, disloyalty and impurity, characterized their conduct.

Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea when John the Baptist preached. We know from the story of the Gospels how he had amorously snatched away the wife of his brother Philip. This woman, Herodias, cruel, wicked, scheming—the New Tes-