

**ENCOUNTERS**

**WITH**

**JESUS**



Number Eleven:

**THE CENTURION'S TALE**

**FULFILMENT**

## *ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE-FULFILMENT*

*Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."*

## *THE CENTURION'S TALE-FULFILMENT*

We've been in Caesarea for eighteen months now but I still recall that day as vividly as if I were standing on the hill outside Jerusalem right now. Two years have passed in total; and much has happened, but that day—the day I stood by as the Son of God died—is still with me.

Not that I miss Jerusalem with all its intrigues and petty politics. Life here is much better and it's good to be beside water again, though life in Pilate's Caesarea is much more lively than sleepy Capernaum.

But thinking back to that terrible day on Skull Rock, I am reminded again of the curious thing which happened after it was all done. It was evening; I had returned from the city and I was trying to unwind with Petunia. We are reclining at dinner when Aratus enters. "Sir, there is a messenger at the gate. Apparently, the Prefect wishes to see you right away."

I curse and stumble to my feet. Damn the man, hasn't he done enough this day? What in Jupiter's name could he possibly want with me this evening? So I dress, thankful that Aratus always keeps my armour shining bright, and make my way to the Praetorium. The guards are expecting me and escort me straight into his presence. He dismisses them, then looks at me with a quizzical face, and finally, almost diffidently, he speaks: "Ah, centurion, you did well today. A difficult business... Yes, indeed. You did well to avoid trouble. Yes... I had wondered..."

This is not the Pontius Pilate I know; a man who knows his own mind and is never short of an opinion. Whatever has got into him? And suddenly I realise: it's that Jesus, that's what. Jesus of Nazareth has got the Prefect really rattled.

"The thing is... The thing is, are you absolutely certain that he is dead? Could there have been some kind of mistake? Was he really dead when you left him on the cross at the end of your duty?"

What kind of question is that? Is he questioning my professional ability? In all my years of service I have never heard of anyone being asked a question like that. But no, I don't think this is about me. It's about him. He is looking for reassurance.

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“Yes, sir, I have absolutely no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth is dead. I saw him die with my own eyes and I know death when I see it.” I try to keep my voice level and professional even though I am in tumult inside. But I think that Pilate hears a little of it for he gives me a sharp look and then a little nod.

“Furthermore, sir, when we broke the legs of the other two he was already dead but just to make extra sure one of my lads plunged a spear into his side. There was no response at all except the blood and water flowing out from the wound.” Again my voice catches and again he notices and ignores it.

“Thank you, centurion, you have confirmed what I was certain to be the case. I will hand over his body now so that it can be buried before the Sabbath. I’m sorry to have disturbed your evening. Do please pass on my good wishes to your lady.”

And with these unusually gracious words I am dismissed. It was the end of the matter I thought. But a few days later my informants start bringing me reports of strange rumours. Jesus of Nazareth is not dead, they say. He has been seen in Jerusalem and up in Galilee. Some people are saying that it’s his ghost; some are saying that he never died at all (well, I can scotch that one!); and some are saying that he has been bodily resurrected.

I know a bit from my Jewish studies: the party of the Pharisees believe in just such a resurrection—strange though that seems to Greek or Roman thought—but they say that this will only happen at the end of the age; and the age has clearly not ended yet.

But, oh, I would so dearly like it to be true! The rumours continue for a few weeks and then they stop, to be replaced by a new set. Jesus, they say, has now gone to be with his Father and in his place the spirit of God has been manifesting itself in the lives of his followers. What is more, they say that lots of people are joining this ‘Jesus movement’. Yet more idle tales from Jerusalem, the city of idle tales? I can’t help wondering, though.

The city gradually returns to normal as the Passover visitors return to their home countries and Pilate returns to Caesarea as usual. The return of routine is welcome after such a turbulent time. But the routine does not last for long. Out of the blue I get new orders. I am to

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join Pilate in Caesarea. This is most unexpected, though not unwelcome. It is a plum posting and not one which I could reasonably have expected; such postings usually go to richer or better-connected soldiers than me.

I do wonder, briefly, if this has anything to do with that crucifixion and the awkwardly intimate interview which followed it. But no matter; speculation gets you nowhere and being here in Caesarea is very pleasant.

We continue to study the Jewish scriptures here and we're learning more and more about the LORD. Quite a little group have come together: Petunia and the children, Aratus and some of the other slaves; and some of the soldiers as well. We pray the prayers; observe the Sabbath as well as we can (duty permitting); attend synagogue when we can and give alms to the poor and the local Jewish community.

'God-fearers' they call us and that is a good enough name. Had it been possible, some of us might have converted fully but, frankly, the price is too high. It's not so much the cutting of delicate flesh, nor the ritual bath but, according to the strictest rules, it also involves the putting aside of all previous relationships. I do not see how cutting off all my friends can possibly be God's will and I will not do it.

And then there is Jesus; Jesus of Nazareth. His followers are still around, still maintaining that he has come back from the dead. We hear that a number of God-fearers have joined 'The Way', as these Jesus people are called and I must admit that I long to know more about them myself, especially as I have seen Jesus, both living and dying. Finding out more is not easy; the Jewish folk we know will have nothing to do with The Way, calling it a heresy. Whether they are right I cannot tell but it would be good to be able to hear more and decide for myself.

It stays like that until today. At first it seems like any other day. When times are quiet and the routine is never broken, one day can merge into the next in a kind of blur. So this afternoon, at the ninth hour, I am sitting alone in my parlour relaxing, gently saying my prayers when suddenly I am not alone.

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There is a blinding light and a creature—an angel, I guess—appears to me. “Cornelius!” I am terrified. I’ve been scared on the field of battle, believe me, but at least there you know what you’re up against. This was ten times worse. What is an angel, a messenger of the LORD, I assume, doing here? What can it want with me? My throat is dry and my heart is beating fit to burst. I sink to the ground. “What is it LORD?”

The angel answers in a gentle and powerful voice, “Do not be afraid. Your prayers and your good deeds have been answered and God is pleased with you. Send now to Joppa and ask for a man called Simon, also known as Peter. He is staying by the sea in the house of Simon the tanner.”

With that the angel disappears. I am left shaking and drained but also exultant: ‘I have seen an angel. He brought me a message from God, from the one true God. To me! He brought a message from God to me!’ I can’t get over it; I can’t make myself believe it. Not that I doubt that it happened. Never for a moment do I think that it was a dream or a hallucination or fevered imagining. No, I know ‘real’ when I encounter it and this was as real as it gets.

The meaning, though—what does it mean? The message was clear enough: send for a man called Simon Peter to come here. I’ve heard of him. He was a friend of Jesus of Nazareth and is one of the leaders of The Way. But why? Because God is pleased with us and has answered our prayers? Which prayers? Perhaps to know more about Jesus and The Way; we’ve certainly been praying about that recently. Maybe Simon Peter could come and teach us. I just don’t know but I do know an order when I hear one so I quickly gather together as many of our little ‘God-fearing’ group as I can.

I tell them what has just happened. All are amazed and excited; no-one doubts or challenges what I have told them. I decide to send Aratus and Decimus, two of my most trusted slaves, together with Adrianus who was with me on crucifixion duty on that day of both blessed and cursed memory. It’s about a twelve-hour journey to Joppa; they will have to stay overnight; and then a day or so back. All being well they will be here tomorrow or the day after.

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The question on my mind, though, is whether this Simon will be with them. The angel said to ask him, it didn't say that he would come. But surely that was implied? Time will tell.

We wait. Two days pass and there is no sign of them. The tension in the household is palpable. Everyone is excited. Will he come, this Simon, and what does he know of Jesus and The Way? Day three comes and the shadows lengthen. We are about to give up for the day when one of the slaves rushes in.

"Your pardon, sir, but they are coming! They have probably reached the gate of the city by now. There are seven of them from Joppa and their leader is Simon Peter, who was with Jesus from the beginning."

This is good news; and also not such good news. This Simon will undoubtedly be able to tell us much about Jesus. He is also, undoubtedly, a Jew and will not be able to enter the house or share our hospitality.

No regrets. I must gather our little band together. We will meet Simon Peter and his companions outside the gates of the villa. In that way we will be able to talk. So we stand waiting. We see them approach. As they reach us, I drop to my knees, not caring who sees: "Exalted sir, companion of Jesus, you do us great honour by your visit."

Simon looks appalled for a moment then bursts into huge and hearty laughter. "Stand up, man. I am a man like you and nothing more." Then he gestures towards the villa. "Now to business. You know that we Jews should not eat with you or stay under your roof but God has shown me—has *just* shown me—that we are to call nothing he has made 'unclean'. So let us go inside, out of this fading sun, and inquire together into the new things that God is doing in these days."

Somewhat stunned and bewildered we all, Jew and Gentile, go into my villa where the servants take care of our guests, offering them the usual morsels of hospitality, which they eat without demur. Finally, Peter turns to me. "May I ask why you sent for me?" I tell him all about the vision and the angel's command. That I sent three men to him straight away. "And you, Simon Peter, have been good enough to come. Please share with us what you know of Jesus of Nazareth, whom some—rightly—have called Son of God."

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Peter smiles and begins with rough eloquence to tell us what he knows. He starts with wonderful news: that God is not partial, but accepts everyone, no matter who they are; those who seek after him, who try to do what is right, and who acknowledge him as LORD. That could be us! We worship God and try to do what is right, we really do. And this man, this friend of Jesus, is telling us that this is what counts, not ritual bathing, not cutting of flesh, certainly not putting off old relationships. This is good news indeed. But there is more, much more.

Peter tells us that Jesus was sent by God to tell of a message of love and a new kingdom and that he, Jesus, is Lord of all; that he was filled with God's Holy Spirit when he was baptized—washed in water by John the Baptizer; that he went about healing people. As he says this, I look over at Aratus and he catches my eye. Oh yes, we know about the healings, don't we?

Then Peter says something really telling: that he and the others had been witnesses of all this from the very beginning. That means he must have been in the crowd that day I went to hear Jesus in Capernaum; that he had probably been one of those who had been standing nearby on that Friday. As if catching my thought he starts speaking of that day. "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree." (As he speaks I suddenly remember that somewhere in Scripture it says, 'Cursed be he who hangs on a tree.')

Peter doesn't say who 'they' were but I feel myself welling up inside. 'It was me and my household,' I want to say, 'the people sitting with you in this room.' I don't, though I am sure that others are similarly moved.

But Peter hasn't finished. "On the third day, God raised Jesus up and we all saw him and ate with him and drank with him." I can feel the tension building and building within me: guilt and relief and joy and awe and wonder and gratitude—so much, so deep, so strong that I can hardly keep it in.

Peter continues. "He told us to tell people about him, to tell them that he is the righteous judge and that through him they can have forgiveness for all their sins."

That does it! The dam bursts and I can hold it in no longer. I find myself praising God in words that I never knew existed. It is ecstatic speech



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such as some of the Sibyls were supposed to utter but this is pure devotion to the one true God and his one true son, Jesus.

I can't help myself; I don't want to help myself. I never knew the meaning of the word 'bliss' until this moment and I want the moment to last forever. But it ebbs gently and beautifully away.

As I start to regain my equilibrium I come to realise that I have not been alone. Others, many others, have been praising God just as I have. Even my dear Petunia has tears in her eyes and a smile on her lips. I reach out for her and we embrace and share this sweet secret together.

Suddenly we are all hugging in an ecstasy of new communion—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, adult and child—all together in a new community of love. We laugh and hug and kiss and share until we are all weak with joy.

Then Peter says to his companions, "See, the Holy Spirit has come upon these, just as it has done for us. Can we then withhold the water of baptism from them?"

"There is a pool in the grounds of the villa," I say eagerly and we all process out to the water. Here, one by one, we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, anointed one of God and hope of the whole world. I wait until last, as seems fitting somehow.

Finally, it is my turn. As I enter the water I panic briefly: 'Will I come back up? Will I die?' I do come back up, the water rushing off my face to cheers and praises. I think to myself, 'Yes, I did die and now I have been born again. Born to a wonderful new life in Jesus.' I cannot keep silent and I hear myself shouting, "Oh yes! Hallelujah! Amen!"

### NOTES

The account of the centurion's conversion can be found in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, the author of the gospel of that name. You can find it in chapter ten. Luke names the centurion as Cornelius, of the 'Italian cohort'. A unit called *Cohors il Italica* is known to have been in Caesarea from 69 AD to 157 AD. It was composed of troops mustered in Italy and holding Roman citizenship. However, the Cornelius incident must have taken place many years before 69 AD. Whether Luke is right about Cornelius being part of an Italian cohort in Caesarea at that time remains an open question.

I have again taken a liberty by making Cornelius the same centurion who was in Capernaum and also supervising the crucifixion of Jesus. There is no evidence to support this but it makes dramatic sense.

Pontius Pilate's headquarters was not in Jerusalem but in Caesarea Maritima, on the Mediterranean coast, about half way between modern day Tel Aviv and Haifa.

Jesus was crucified on 'Skull Rock', *Golgotha* in Hebrew.

Some have wondered whether a Roman centurion would be allowed to become a Christian. There is no certainty about this, and we don't know what happened to Cornelius after his conversion but Min Lee, in a MA thesis for the University of Birmingham argues that it was a possibility.

### REFERENCES

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[www.encounterswithjesus.net](http://www.encounterswithjesus.net)

[encounterswithjesus1@gmail.com](mailto:encounterswithjesus1@gmail.com)