

Yes, I was present at the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The soldiers forced me to carry the cross when Jesus fell to the ground on the way up the hill. My name's Simon – Simon of Cyrene – and I was coming in to Jerusalem from the country that morning together with other Jews from my region of north Africa. Word had got out about the arrest and trial of the great rabbi and we had received a terrible report that, giving way to the demands of the crowd, Pilate had handed him over to be crucified and had released a murderer in his place. It was the Feast of Passover but could this really be true?

Yes, I was there and watched from a distance as the soldiers drove the nails into his hands and feet. It was unbearably brutal. They had already whipped him to get up and stumble the final few yards to the hill of Golgotha where he had collapsed again under the weight of their blows and the venom of their curses. His crown of thorns now lay torn and bloody on the ground as the soldiers hauled him on to the Cross and set about their murderous torture. Then they turned their attention to the other two criminals who were to die with him. The Romans had introduced crucifixion as their chosen method of execution across the Empire. Yet what had Jesus done to deserve such a barbaric death?

Now I have admitted I was forced to carry his cross but I was also profoundly sorry for him. The Synoptic Gospel writers don't give me credit for showing any sympathy but, please believe me, I was horrified at what I witnessed and I readily levered that heavy beam onto my shoulder when the soldiers pushed me towards it. We Cyrenian Jews had a synagogue in Jerusalem and I wasn't the only one to have heard amazing reports of this Jesus of Nazareth and to have wondered if he was the one we were expecting. I couldn't bear to stay and watch Jesus die but I heard afterwards that it happened around the ninth hour with darkness covering the whole land.

I went away and hid for several weeks for fear of the Jews who may have hated me for helping Jesus even though I was acting under duress. Many of them had come and sneered at him as he hung upon the cross. But then at the Feast of Pentecost I plucked up courage to mingle again with my fellow Cyrenians and fellow Jews from all over the Mediterranean world. Suddenly there came a rushing wind and what seemed like tongues of fire and we were able to hear the disciples of Jesus (all of them Galileans) declare the wonders of God in our own languages. We Jews from Cyrene could hear them speaking in our dialect but at the same time, by some miracle, Parthians, Medes and all the others could hear the same words in their languages too. It was Simon Peter then who stood up and addressed us all, telling us about how God had raised up Jesus of Nazareth from the dead and what we should do in response. That man whose cross I had carried was proclaimed as Lord and Christ! Peter's message was clear – repent and be baptised in Jesus's name for the forgiveness of sins. I had felt the pain of the cross drop from my body on Calvary. Now I felt a far greater weight of guilt lifted from my soul.

Yes, I was there.

