To Er is Human, to Forgive is Divine

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Er of Pamphylia was a troubled youth in his younger days. His father, Armenios, an honorable Roman citizen, died when Er was only seven years old. It was too soon for Er. His death left a hole in his heart. In his teens, he rebelled at everything, his family, school, and eventually, his friends. Hoping to die a heroic death, he joined the Roman army, eventually becoming part of the 9th Legion. Wars and battles left him empty inside. But something began to dawn on him. Through every bloody combat, every battle scar, every enemy that died beneath his blade, he came to a stark realization – he was still alive.

Yet, with each victory, the triumphs seemed to grow less important. Er remained a hollow shell. Eventually, he wondered to himself, "Is this all that there to life?"

One day, Er received word that his mother was terminally ill, so he took a leave of absence and returned home to help her until she passed. She died early one spring morning by his side as they sat under the flowering apple trees in their family orchard, marveling at the abundance of bees. Er never forgot, feeling her grip on his hand lessen and release as her soul took flight with the winged creatures floating about them. It was then that he thought he needed a change. All the reasons for rebelling were gone. The hurt he felt as a child had been replaced by battlefield nightmares.

He needed a fresh start.

Er transferred from the 9th to an outpost in Philippi, where he became a guard at the prison. He met a beautiful young woman named Martha, married, and then started a family. It felt good to settle down. As time passed, the officers overseeing the prison from Rome noticed Er to be a reliable, trustworthy man. He quickly rose through the ranks until he reached that of Centurion, the head of the prison. But with each promotion, something still seemed to be missing in his life.

It was late one evening when Er was making the final rounds before the night shift that there was an enormous disturbance at the prison entrance. He rushed to the sound of an angry mob to find one of his officers, an Optio, who was second in rank to Er, speaking to Jewish leaders and magistrates from the city. Many people were shouting and yelling, some protesting, others screaming obscenities at their captives. It was then he noticed the pair. One was much older than the other, both naked except for their bloodied tunics, and their backs were raw and bleeding from recently beaten. Their legs and arms were already bound with shackles and chains.

Er tried to listen between the commotion as the Pharisees insisted that these men be confined. "The city's leaders want these men off the street before their presence creates an even bigger problem. They will likely start a riot, and we can't have that! If the Praetor were to find out that we allowed these men to start a revolution, we all would be dead men. Besides, we are committing them partly for their own safety and not just that of the city."

"Right," nodded the officer, unbelieving, slipping a slide glance in Er's direction and then back to the mob.

"Who beat them," the Optio questioned. There was a shamed silence as the Jewish leaders looked at one another momentarily, then back at the officer. "Let's just say it was justified by Jewish law," one of the elders responded harshly and without feeling. The Pharisee continued, "But let it be known that if these men escape, the Praetor would want the heads of the guards watching over them. This is how important it is that they be incarcerated. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly," the Optio responded, showing signs of agitation at the ordeal. Knowing that the two men had been mistreated for some odd Jewish litigation and that the Praetor's threat held far more weight in his decision, he was forced to take them. Besides, they looked like they had already served their punishment far beyond its intent.

"Centurion, I'm glad you're here. What should we do? There seems to be some controversy regarding their confinement?"

"Well, we don't want anything to happen to them, seeing as they're such threats to the city's civility," he said, winking at his second-hand man.

The Er paused, catching the officer's eye with a formidable stare, "But Optio, for the sake of the gods, we can't let them escape. It will cost someone their life. Are we clear?"

"Yes sir," he said, saluting and then returning to the crowd summoning a couple of other soldiers to help him take them from the prison's entrance. As the other guards took hold of their new prisoners, one turned to the Optio and asked, "Sir, where are we taking them?" He then turned and looked at Er.

Er replied to the soldier, "Since they are of such importance, I'll lead the way. But, Optio, you stay here with some of the men and secure the entrance. And for the gods' sake, get these people out of my jail."

"Sir, yes sir," the Optio said, saluting Er and returning to the mob.

"We'll put them in the inner prison for the night," Er said, turning to the other soldiers who were with him, holding onto the prisoner's chains. "There's too much at stake with the temperament of the city's magistrates and these Jewish leaders."

Er didn't say what was really on his mind as the clink of the prisoner's chains and the shuffle of their sandaled feet followed behind him as he led the way. He had yet to hear them speak. Slowing his pace, he stepped aside until they were beside him then he continued walking with them at their pace. The elder looked as if he had been a soldier once. The edges of his muscular frame seemed aged and worn, yet beneath that aging façade, he could sense something strong and unrelenting. Yet, an aura of peace seemed to envelop his being.

"You men aren't from around here, are you?"

"No sir, we are not."

"What's your name?"

"My name is Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ."

"And who is your friend?"

"His name is Silas. He's also a brother in Christ."

"Well, Paul, I would say welcome to you and Silas, but under the circumstances, there isn't anything welcoming about this place."

"It's no problem, but I'm sorry I didn't catch your name?"

"I'm Er of Pamphylia, the head jailer of Philippi."

"Well, I'm honored to have met you, Er. God has brought us here for a reason, and with time, we shall know why. Until then, may the good Lord bless you." Er nodded in agreement to this last, but curiously he wondered about the other. How could a man who had already been severely beaten say that his god had brought him here to jail? Why were the authorities so adamant about imprisoning these seemingly harmless men? There were just too many inconsistencies.

Finally reaching the innermost holding chambers, Er directed his men to place Paul and his companion in one of the empty cells so that they wouldn't be bothered by some of the city's hardened criminals, the ones that really needed to be incarcerated. "Make them as comfortable as possible, but Paul, I must have you shackled and chained to the wall just to be safe. Trust me. It's more for our mutual benefit. Should something happen to you, it would not only cost you your life, but it would cost me my job and my life as well. Now we wouldn't want any of those things to happen. Do we?"

"Of course not, Centurion."

After the soldiers were done, they closed and locked the door behind them. Er glanced back one more time before retreating to the outer reaches of the dungeon. He stopped. What he saw was unlike anything he had seen before. Both men were smiling and talking while seated on the cold dungeon floor, chains draped around them, connecting their iron shackles to the cold stone wall. Their demeanor was no different than if they had been sitting on a veranda enjoying their afternoon tea. Then as much as they were enjoying their conversation, they stopped abruptly and noticed his gaze. Immediately, both men smiled, looked at each other, and whispered something. Then they did something most unusual. Both men bowed their heads. There was no more movement, no more talk. Simple silence. "What was this?" Curious, he had to ask. "Hey, what are you doing? Is something wrong?" Paul looked up and smiled, "Nothing is wrong, my friend. We are simply saying a prayer for you and your men."

"But why?"

"We seek to help those who don't know Jesus Christ to know his love. We pray for you and your men so that your hearts may be opened to that unconditional love of the Father."

"I've heard of this, Jesus. I also know about the uproar he created when they claimed he arose from the grave."

"That's right, my friend, he died for the sins of the world, and then three days, he arose from the grave defeating death, and now he sits at the right hand of God the Father."

"Well, thank you for the prayers. I guess we could all use them." At this, Er motioned to his men to continue. The dimly lit cell didn't dampen their voices. As the Centurion and his men distanced themselves through the various passages leading out of the inner dungeon, they could still hear Paul and Silas carrying on as if they had never been beaten or imprisoned. In fact, to Er, it almost felt as if they were just along for the ride and that something or someone else was in charge.

Knowing that he would get little sleep if he were to go home, Er decided to stay the night. He gave his men orders to be on double duty, overlapping their watches so that nobody would fall asleep lest something transpire and the two men escape. Late into the night, Paul and Silas seemed to become more energized as time wore on. The other prisoners were perplexed at the two men who acted as if they weren't chained against a dark, dank prison wall; but rather were leading a congregation in worship. Nevertheless, those other inmates' spirits were lifted with a sense of hope - hope for something they didn't understand – some force or compelling spirit seemed to invite them to join. The rats even felt the power that kept them hidden in the dark shadows instead of tormenting the convicts. It was nearly midnight when Paul and Silas broke out in song, their voices reaching even the outer reaches of the jail.

Er eventually retired to his office, taking a nap on his bunk in the corner. The distant echoes of voices singing, as crazy as it sounded, seemed to lull him into a sense of peace. Sleep overcame him as the voices began to drift away. Before he knew it, he was standing at the edge of an abyss. The crater was a mile or more deep, with a clear blue pool of water at the bottom. Surrounding the opening was an arid desert wasteland - nothing but sagebrush and the occasional cactus as far as the eye could see. Suddenly, the ground began to shake. Alarmed, he looked behind him to see a herd of cattle stampeding toward him. Their eyes were red, and their nostrils shot out flames of rage. There was no retreat, nowhere to run. He quickly had a decision to make - die beneath the hooves of the demonic beasts or die jumping into the pit.

Closing his eyes, he leaped into the void.

Er continued to feel the vibrations of the thundering herd. Yet, "How could this be," his mind tried to reason. "He had leaped into the chasm. How could he feel the earth?" The ground continued to shake violently as Er slowly began to wake up. It was then he realized it was no dream. Sitting up on the edge of his bed, he looked dismayed as the earth beneath him seemed to roll like the waves on a sea.

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