

The Burden Bearer

Some things you never forget. They sink so deep inside you, you wonder how you could ever get them out if you wanted to. Someone comes along, and an ordinary day that starts like every other becomes *the* day in your mind...

I watched my mother's hands massaging the dough. Her heels burrowed into its softness, and she grunted. Her fingers folded the dough back toward her rounded belly where my next brother or sister was now making itself obvious. Father was praying for another boy. After me, there'd been only a string of girls. And me...well, we both knew I wasn't the kind of son any man wanted. A flick of Mama's wrist turned the dough, and her heels dove in again. Push-grunt-turn, push-grunt-turn. It was the same every day.

Except today, shout and curses and laughter drifted in through the windows. The narrow street where we lived always had a certain hum of activity, a low-level buzz that was the backdrop to life in our home. But this being Passover week, our street burst with energy and excitement, locals and travelers mingling in a noisy din.

The door burst open, slamming against the wall. My father rushed in like a storm.

"Nissa, he's here. He's coming." He pounded a fist on the table, making the dough jiggle furiously. "Finally, we will rid ourselves of the Roman stink that fouls our land." He grabbed mama's elbows, pulling her hands from the dough. "Don't you see? We will rule ourselves again."

Mama just looked at him. "Haven't I been telling you about this man, Nissa? They say he has healed many people. Some even say he has raised the dead. Think of it! A man who could do that could do anything. Even the Roman pigs with all their training could not withstand a man with that kind of power. I am telling you, God has sent us a deliverer!"

He dropped mama's arms and reached for mine. "Come, Amasai. You will go with me, and we will see this man."

I winced as he pulled me toward the door, pain rushing up my leg every time my right foot came down on the dusty floor. I gulped a breath to keep from crying out and focused on making every step with my left foot count. The more distance I covered with that foot, the better. I glanced at the toes of my right foot, mere inches from my left ankle. My eyes followed them back to the twisted joint that was my right ankle. Crooked in a world of straight. I cursed inwardly for the thousandth time whatever god had made me this way.

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But I clenched my teeth, determined to keep up because something was different about this day. My father *wanted* me with him. Outside. In the street. Where others could see us and know that I was his. I would not ruin this chance for any amount of pain. There would be time enough to hurt later. But now...now I would focus on the strange, warm feeling spiraling through me.

He pulled me through the streets so fast, I nearly screamed with the effort. But I pushed it down, afraid any cry of mine would break whatever spell had come over my father. I did not know who this man was that we were going to see. But if he could provoke such a change in my father, he truly was a man of miracles.

We exited the city gate and came to the road leading down from the Mount of Olives. It was choked with people. Men, women, children laughing and shouting. Roman soldiers dotted the scene, towering over the crowds on their horses. But even their presence, so often fearful and domineering, was diluted by the throngs of people singing and clapping.

Father pushed his way through the crowd, dragging me in his wake until we stood right at the edge of a narrow strip of dusty street, the only open path in sight. People were stripping branches from the palm trees and waving them, shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David!" They were tearing off their robes and spreading them over the street, crying "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Their shouts merged into a throbbing, pulsing beat, my heart thudding with the press of the crowd.

It was then that I saw him. He was sitting on top of a scraggly young donkey, so small the man's feet nearly drug the ground. He didn't look like anything special to me. Certainly not a conqueror. Certainly not worth all this fuss. Yet people pushed in to touch him as he passed and then fell in behind him, closing every available space around him just to be near.

The man began to weep. His lips moved though I couldn't tell what he was saying for all the noise. He seemed sad, heartbroken. A strange reaction to an adoring, worshipful crowd of people. He had this city on its feet, hailing him as a king, yet he cried. I didn't get it.

As he came close to us, the shouts rose louder. I could hear my father yelling exuberantly, "Hosanna!" Some were almost screaming it now, carried away by the heady, fierce energy swirling through the masses. I wanted to escape. I wasn't used to all the people. And the noise. I yearned to be at home, listening to the comforting thuds of my mother punching the dough. Pinned in place by the crowds, I could only look up at the man they were all crazed about.

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His eyes grabbed mine. It could only have been a few seconds, so quickly he passed by. I knew there was no way he could see my poor foot in all the press of people, but there was such knowing in his look. It was as if everyone else had vanished, and only he and I were on the road together, my foot and all the rest of me bare before him. I waited for the revulsion or the laughter or just the hurried glance that noticed and skittered away as if I might infect him too. But his gaze caught and rested, long and full, as if it were passing over every inch of me in thorough appraisal. I waited to be found wanting. But his expression only gentled even more as his tears increased. Who was this man who made me feel like my deformed foot hardly mattered in light of my deformed soul? Because that is what he made me feel. There was something wrong with me that he could fix, and it wasn't my foot.

The donkey plodded past us, and the crowds swallowed up any sight of him as he continued toward Jerusalem. Perhaps that's all he would have been...a strange blip of something mysterious in my ordinary life except for what happened over the next few days.

Father told me the man's name was Jesus. He was certain Jesus had come to Jerusalem to lead a revolt against the Romans and drive them from God's city. "What better time for a rebellion than Passover? This year, we will celebrate God's deliverance from Egypt *and* the Romans!"

Father took me through the city the next day in search of Jesus. "This man is said to have healed many people. We will see what he can do about your foot." Imagine. Father wanted me with him two days in a row. Of course, if this man could not heal my foot, I had a feeling things would return to the way they always were—father pretending that if he didn't look at me or my foot he wouldn't feel the shame and me pretending that his rejection didn't hurt. I didn't have much hope that Jesus could help, but I would at least enjoy this one last day of camaraderie with my father.

It was not hard to find Jesus. Even in a crowded city filling up fast for Passover, he drew the biggest crowd. He was at the temple, people bunched around him watching as a line of the maimed and broken passed before him. You couldn't see what was happening inside that circle, but the line of people needing healing stretched outside it. Shouts went up now and then, but I wasn't sure that meant anything. Father pushed me in behind a cripple being dragged forward by his friends. The man's legs were shriveled, twisted sticks trailing behind him, completely useless. I felt sorry for the man, partly for his condition but mostly for the hope blooming in his face. I hated to see it dashed. Better to be like me and have none.

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The heat wrapped around me in a suffocating cloak as the line slowly inched forward. My foot ached from all the standing, bearing my weight as poorly as it did. I yearned to lean against my father and find some small relief but dared not. It would look weak, and my father despised weakness.

The wait dragged on. Things must not be going well. After all, how long did it take to heal a person? Jesus seemed like a compassionate man. He must be consoling the ones he couldn't help. Finally, we drew closer to where he was inside the knot of people. I could hear cries of joy and laughter. I felt hope bubbling up, and I desperately tried to squelch it. I was more scared of being disappointed than not being healed.

However, it was not until they dragged the cripple in front of me before Jesus that I was close enough to see what was happening. I couldn't hear what Jesus was saying, but he talked to the man. He cupped the cripple's face in his hands as if the man were a child. As he spoke, I watched as the man's limbs were transformed. Healing washed over them like water pouring down his legs. His thighs became firm and muscular. His knees unknotted and unbent. His calves flexed with strength as he stood to his feet. He shrieked with joy, throwing himself at Jesus, his arms coming around the healer's neck in a tight hug. The man held on, crying and dancing with agile feet, as he and Jesus turned in slow circles. I began to tremble. What power was this that could drive away such deformity, create wholeness out of brokenness?

And then it was my turn. Father pushing me forward. Jesus reaching for me.

He smiled, so gentle and so compelling at the same time. "You don't believe. You've been doubting all morning. But now you begin to. Amasai, your name means burden bearer. I know the burden you bear, and I have come to take it away."

I thought, *The burden of my foot or my heart?*

"Both."

His single word jolted me. How could he know?

"I have searched you and known you, Amasai. Before a word is on your tongue, I know it completely."

His hands rested on my head, his fingers sliding down through my hair until they rested on my cheeks. He wiped at the tears sliding down my face.

"Amasai."

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I have never heard my name sound like that before or since. Love in every syllable, as if he were calling to my heart, summoning my spirit to meet with his. Something welled up in me, indescribable and comforting all at once. I clutched at his robe. I wanted to hang on to him forever. Or maybe I just wanted him to hang on to me forever. I looked into those eyes that saw, and for the first time in my life, I *wanted* to be seen.

“Amasai, do you know I can do this? Do you know I *will* do this?”

“Yes.” One word, but it released a wave of his power, no a wave of him, over me. I did not even have to look down to know. The pain was gone. As if it had never been. I shouted and leapt into his arms. I could care less if Jesus defeated the Romans or not. He had driven out the thing that defeated me. I was healed, and I thought that was the end. I could not have been more wrong.

My mother screamed and laughed when she saw me come tearing in the door. She hugged me as hard as she could, her hands pulling my head tight against her hard, swollen belly.

Father boasted, “Didn’t I tell you, Nissa, that this Jesus was a powerful man? See what he has done for Amasai. It is nothing to what he will do to the Romans. You should have seen it, Nissa. Everywhere he goes, the people are with him. He will make his move any day now. We will be free before this Passover week is finished. See if I’m not right!”

Events did unfold over that Passover week, but not exactly the way my father expected.

It was a few days later. My father had gone out very early in the morning. He returned just as my mother was preparing breakfast. The door slammed. His rage was barely veiled. I saw his sharp eyes and ruddy face and stood up to leave the room.

“Amasai! You are coming with me.” He turned toward my mother. Her frightened eyes darted between me and my father. “Jesus went and got himself arrested last night. Got himself messed up with the chief priests, the whole Sanhedrin. They’ve convicted him of blasphemy and handed him over to Pilate. I’m not sure who is the bigger fool—Jesus or those of us who believed he would be our liberator. Some king—he can’t keep himself out of trouble. He had everything. Everything. People were willing to follow him to victory. And he squandered his chance. Now who knows when we will see an end to the Roman rats. There’s talk of crucifying him.”

“No!” The word erupted from me. My father turned on me, clearly displeased at my outburst. I lowered my gaze from his.

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“And why not? It’d be nothing less than he deserves for building up everyone’s hope when he’s nothing more than a fraud.”

I was scared, but I would take this chance for the man who had healed me. I boldly looked my father in the eyes. “But Father, he healed me.”

“Yes, and what kind of demon spell did he put on you to make it so? God does not work through liars, and that is what he is. He made us all believe, and he can’t even keep himself out of a Roman jail. Let’s hope he hasn’t ruined you!”

“Father, how can you say such things? You saw what he...” My father’s open palm slammed into my cheek, cutting off my words.

“How dare you talk back to me? You are coming with me, so you can see for yourself what manner of man this Jesus is. Perhaps it will break whatever spell he put over you.”

Father dragged me through the streets once again. This time, it wasn’t that I couldn’t keep up. I didn’t *want* to. But he locked his fingers around my arm like a vise and kept me with him. We approached near the governor’s palace. Crowds of people had gathered. But this time, there was no joy or laughter as when Jesus had come into the city. Just thousands of angry, hate-filled faces, fists pumping in the air, curses flying on the hot breeze. I could see some of the religious leaders snaking through the crowd, the jeering and mocking building in their wake. What poison were they spreading to so incite people against Jesus? How many of these people like my father had worshiped him just days before?

A hush rippled through the crowd. I looked up and saw Pilate stepping out on his balcony above us. He raised his arms, and the hush became complete. I knew who Pilate was, but I’d never seen him before that morning. He looked haggard and troubled. Had he seen the same thing in Jesus I saw? That holy, powerful knowing? It was what made me certain he was innocent of whatever the priests said he did. Anyway, they were stuffy, cranky men with their noses up in the air. Why would anyone believe them over Jesus?

Pilate spoke, shattering the silence. “You brought me this man, this Jesus. I have examined him and have found no basis for your charges against him. As you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.” An angry murmur began to build among the people. Pilate spoke louder, “It is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release Jesus who is called the Christ, the king of the Jews?”

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I barely had time to hope before the crowd began to scream wildly for Barabbas. Everyone knew him—a murderous leader of a gang of freedom fighters who had rebelled against Rome and gotten caught. I knew my people wanted their freedom, but hadn't Jesus freed me and perhaps some of them in ways that were more important than our release from Rome's chokehold?

The people continued to yell for Barabbas with frenzied shouts, chanting his name over and over. Pilate looked a thousand years old. His face was colorless as he nodded his assent and retreated inside. I realized Pilate didn't want Jesus dead any more than I did.

My father and I stayed in the crowd. He chanted for Jesus' death, while I wept, scared and confused. A short while later, Pilate came out and again the crowd's noise died down, but this time it was not because of Pilate's presence.

Had I not known it was him, I never would have recognized him. His face was black and bleeding, his beard horribly plucked. They had impaled a circle of thorns around his head, the blood tracking down from what remained of his hair. I couldn't see the rest of his body. A purple robe covered him. Looking again at his face, if that's what you could still call it, I shuddered to think what lay underneath that robe. Even the crowd calling for his death was hushed by his condition.

Pilate stepped forward. "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." He waved his hand toward Jesus "Here is the man!"

I held my breath, daring to hope. But then one of the chief priests shouted "Crucify him! Crucify him!" The crowd took up the chant, mad with hate.

Pilate called back, "Why? What crime has he committed?"

The chants grew into a roar. The crowd began to surge toward the palace. The Roman guards reached toward their swords. I could feel the tension about to explode. The movement of the crowd began to push my father and I forward. Just when I thought a riot would start, Pilate hushed the crowd and called for a basin of water. He methodically washed his hands in front of us all.

"I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility!"

The crowd screamed back, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

I wept as they shouted those words, drowning in a rending grief. But it was nothing to the terror that shook me as I realized my own father was screaming those words. I didn't want Jesus crucified. And I certainly didn't want it to be my fault.

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What happened next was worse than any nightmare you could conjure. You think you know what the crucifixion was like because you've heard the story over and over. But the truth is familiarity has numbed you to how horrible that day was. You didn't see him like I did—whole and perfect one day, pouring himself out for the people who came to him, then mangled and shredded a few days later, enduring the abuse, the violence with an unearthly silence.

I watched a crazed mob destroy the most amazing man I'd ever encountered. I watched the one who had mended me crushed. I watched the one who had restored me to life brutally killed. And through it all, two questions spun in my head until they pushed out everything else.

Why did he just take it? The insults, the beatings, the mocking, the jeers, the curses, the thorns, the nails, the cross, the hate? I looked at my foot, strong and whole. No ordinary man was dying up there. He had tremendous power. He had wielded it lavishly on my behalf and others. Why not for himself? Couldn't he see the world needed him? Didn't he know there were other people who needed a miracle just as much as I did? Why did he let it go on and on? Didn't he know they wouldn't stop until they killed him?

And why could I not find words to scream out my love for him just as so many were shouting their hate? Why could I not run to the foot of his cross and defend him, daring them all to kill me too? How could I just stand there and silently watch, standing comfortably on two good feet that had carried me to the top of this hill to witness his death?

You might say "You were just a boy. You were only one. What could you do against the violent will of an angry mob?" But if you had seen him, you would know what I know. They are just excuses, hollow and feeble, a thin veneer over my fear.

My father always talked about the Roman stink. He despised everything about them and swore their stench tainted our land. But it was nothing to the stink that fouled Jerusalem the day they crucified him. Ugly, nasty, filthy hate. It saturated the air, raced through the streets, hung over the roofs of everything from Pilate's palace to the lowliest hovel, and threaded its way to his very cross. It was as if the whole of hell were coming against him and heaven was turned away, suffering it to happen.

It was nothing to the stink of my own father who stood beside me, hurling insults till the end. He was so disappointed that Jesus hadn't been the king *he* wanted that he didn't have any gratitude that Jesus had been the healer *I* needed. In that moment, I hated my father. I swore I would never forgive him for killing Jesus. I would never forgive him for dragging me along to see it.

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As I felt the hate surge and begin to fill every crack in my relationship with my father, I heard Jesus cry out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Those words broke me. I dropped to the ground and sobbed. With hate filling every inch of Jerusalem that day, *he* still found room for love. No, that’s not right. He *made* room for love. His love overcame the hate the same way his power had made my bones right again. While I stood there hating my father, Jesus hung there loving him. It wasn’t just my father or the mob or the soldiers or Pilate who stank, *I* stank.

For hours, I lay there on the rocky hillside watching his struggle, hoping for a miracle. It didn’t come. At least not when I expected it. When he took his last breath, I was shattered because I didn’t know how to make it right. I didn’t know how to love like he did. I wasn’t even sure who he was. Some were saying he was the Son of God. When I thought about how he had healed me, I thought that might be true. But when I thought about his broken body in a grave, I thought there was no way it could be true. God can’t die—it’s the completely wrong ending.

Of course, *you* know it wasn’t the end at all. And when the word of his resurrection began to spread, I quickly became a true believer. You see, Jesus was right. He had come to take away the burden of my maimed foot, but he had also come to take away the greater burden of my maimed heart.

My father was wrong about a lot of things. He never did believe in Jesus. But he was right about one thing. He had told my mother, “He will make his move any day now. We will be free before this Passover week is finished.” Jesus did make his move. It just wasn’t the one we all expected. And because he did, anyone who wanted to be free could be before that Passover week was finished.

I know now why Jesus stayed on that cross. He knew it was more important to be the king we *needed* than the king we *wanted*.