

Simon of Cyrene

Introduction to Simon the Cyrene

The drama you are about to see is based on accounts in the Bible during the times of Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection, and the beginning of the church. While we don't know if Simon observed all the events in the drama, most of the events are recorded in the Gospels. The following passages and information are the main sources:

Simon of Cyrene had come in to Jerusalem from the countryside and was forced to carry the cross of Jesus to the place of crucifixion. Matthew 27:32; Luke 23:26

Archeologists discovered evidence of a Greek speaking synagogue from the times of Christ. It may be the synagogue of the Freedmen mentioned in Acts 6:9 as belonging to the Jews of Cyrene.

Mark 15:21 identified Simon by his sons Rufus and Alexander who most likely became influential ministers of the church. The passage would not identify Simon by his sons unless the sons were well known to the church.

Romans 16:13 mention of Rufus in Rome as Simon's son.

In Acts 11:20 men of Cyrene and Cyprus preached to the Greeks in Antioch. They were the first Jewish group mentioned that took the Gospel to the Greek speaking world.

A burial cave in Kidron Valley discovered in 1941 by E. L. Sukenik, belonging to Cyrenian Jews and dating before AD 70, was found to have an ossuary inscribed twice in Greek "Alexander Son of Simon."

Go back in time now as the congregation Sidon being visited by Simon of Cyrene.

Act 1

O Lord God King of the universe, blessed art thou for sending Thy Son, Yeshua ha Mashiach, Jesus our Savior, to save us from our sins and make us acceptable in Thy sight. Let the words of my mouth...

Greetings brothers and sisters in Christ! I am Simon from Cyrene. When the Apostle Paul heard I was returning to his sending church, Antioch, he sent me a letter which read, "Aperchomai eis Sidona ekklesia..." What? You say it sounds like Greek to you? Well that's what it is. Oh, you don't understand. He was asking that I stop here on my way and share my story with Sidon church and then visit the church of Tyre and pump up the brothers there. Paul sends his greetings to you.

It wasn't that long ago I wouldn't set foot in a Gentile gathering, but that's all changed. You know what a big heart Paul has for you Gentiles. It's a passion we Cyrenians have caught, Greek being our main language. His burden is strong for you, even after that

rock party in Lystra! And does that man have hutzpah! After being stoned and left for dead, our Lord raised him up and he went right back into that town. I trust your reception will be gentler!

Three hundred years ago, Ptolemy Soter, King of Egypt, forced a 100,000 of us Jews to relocate to Cyrene in North Africa. That group included my ancestors. Soter means savior. If that was salvation I'm glad his mama didn't name him Wrath. My family made their living specializing in ship design and construction. I try to save enough money to make at least one of the feasts of Israel every year or two. It keeps our faith alive and fresh. Just seeing that magnificent temple reminds us of God living among us and our hope to see the promises of a Messiah fulfilled.

I had made the trip for Passover two years before I met Jesus. One month away from family and work is difficult, but it is more than worth it. I'm fortunate to be able to travel by ship which cuts travel time in half. Most ships going that direction will dock at Caesarea, a marvel of Herod's construction. The gigantic statue of Augustus stands before the temple dedicated to him, greeting you as you pull into the harbor. Most of us Jews enjoying spitting in that direction before leaving the docks. From there the journey to Jerusalem is only a few days. If you don't arrive early enough, the roads become very crowded with people headed to the feast. Traffic jams! Makes people irritable. Especially if you get stuck behind a donkey! Oivay! Even though we sing the Hallel Psalms, there is an undercurrent of frustration with the slow moving crowd. It may be hard for you Gentiles to relate.

As much as I love the feast days of worship and the sight of the temple glistening white and golden, there had been one other annoyance. During the High Priesthood of Annas, the sale of sacrificial animals moved from the streets into the outer courtyard, along with the money changers. The prices for everything didn't just go up, they multiplied. If you brought your own sacrificial lamb, the priests were bound to find a blemish and reject it. Privately, we Jews began to call this "Annas' Bazaar." Instead of a place of prayer for the nations, it had become a market that overcharged everyone for our necessary sacrifices. Loud vendors compete for customers: "Best price for preapproved lambs!" "I change Syrian coins for the temple tax coin!" You can imagine how conducive that was to worship. We hated this practice, but what could we do?

But that time when I arrived at the temple, entering in through the southern steps (go up on the platform) and going up to the temple's outer courtyard, chaos had erupted. Sheep and oxen were running down the steps with their keepers trying to catch them. People were screaming. It was a mixture of cheers and alongside cries of anger. Reaching the outer court, I could see through the throng a man with a whip flipping a money changer's table. That's when I joined in with those cheering this man on. "Amen. Throw the merchants out!" Someone finally had had enough. I tried to get closer to see who this brave man was.

That's when the priests appeared at the balustrade with their temple guards. The current High Priest Caiaphas, who was Annas son-in-law, held his hands up and the crowd grew silent. Then he yelled out, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" The man with the whip answered, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Immediately the priest shot back "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will *you* raise it up in *three* days?" He motioned for the guards to take the man, but the crowd stood like a wall between the guards and the man as he exited through the Triple Gate. Cheers went up as the priests turned and retreated into the temple.

I had no idea what the man meant, but I certainly admired his hutzpah. Come to think of it, that must be where Paul got it. Asking around, I found the man was Jesus of Nazareth, a builder like myself, but also a teacher who had some disciples. (down right)

I went to our synagogue to see if I could find out more. We have our own Cyrenian Greek speaking synagogue in Jerusalem. Most of us thought it was about time this happened. Others thought He might even be the Messiah, while a few argued that it would only mean trouble with the Romans, but then everything means trouble with them. One man said he was at the Jordan River and heard the Baptist declare this Jesus was the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. During the rest of my stay in Jerusalem I heard rumors of Jesus healing people from illnesses and even casting out a demon. I tried to find him before I returned to Cyrene, but he had gone north through Samaria to Galilee.

The next year I was unable to return to Jerusalem. A contract to finish a ship took longer than expected. But as men of Cyrene returned from the feasts they brought more stories of Jesus of Nazareth doing miracles, healing a man who was blind from birth, even challenging the religious authorities. Maybe he really is the Messiah. Speculation filled the Jewish communities. I knew I had to go to the next Passover.

That next year as I approached Jerusalem, I could see it was an especially crowded Passover. Jerusalem had swollen to almost a million pilgrims. Everyone was talking about a man named Lazarus who they say Jesus had raised from death after he'd been four days in a tomb. I had journeyed late into the night and made it to the outskirts of the city.

The next morning I joined the crowds moving toward the temple. People were talking about the arrest of Jesus by the Sanhedrin, our ruling council. I couldn't believe our own people would arrest him. There had been another temple cleansing, and perhaps Annas and Caiaphas were losing too much money. But why did the people stand for it? Then I learned the arrest had taken place late at night, along with an illegal nighttime trial.

Someone came out of the city gate shouting that Jesus had been condemned by Pilate to crucifixion. The slow moving crowd stopped. A procession was coming from the other direction. Roman soldiers were clearing the crowd off the road. Behind them was a condemned man with his crossbeam on his shoulders. The man next to me translated the sign in Latin around the condemned man's neck. He told me it read, "Robber of Rome." Then another came through the gate. This one was beaten so badly he could barely walk. There was hardly a place on his robe that was not blood soaked. Then I heard someone yell, "It's Jesus the blasphemer!" At first I couldn't believe it. I pushed my way to the edge of the street to be sure. (middle stage) Some people were weeping. Others were cursing and throwing things at Him. The sign that hung round his neck was in Greek and two other languages. It read, "King of the Jews." NO! What had they done to Him? The crown of thorns had been pressed into His scalp causing blood to streak over His badly bruised face. He staggered and then right in front of me collapsed under the weight of the crossbeam. Arms tied to the cross, He could not break his fall.

Without thinking I started yelling at the soldiers. "Stop this. He's a good man! Look what you've done to Him. God will judge you for this!" And suddenly a sword lay against my neck. What had I done!? What about my boys and wife back home. "Sympathetic are you? Fine! Then you will be glad to carry the beam," the guard yelled. (Kneel –staff on ground) I untied the cords that bound His arms to the beam, lifting it off His shoulders I could see the blood began to ooze afresh through his robe. I laid the beam to the side and lifted Jesus to His knees. He looked into my eyes and a faint smile appeared on His face. Those eyes; I've never seen anything like them. Love, peace, gratitude, in the midst of that horrible setting. How could that be?

"Hurry it up!" the guard yelled. I hugged Jesus to lift him to his feet, as gently as possible. I could smell myrrh, the scent of a king! For just a moment his mouth was by my ear and He whispered, words I'll never forget, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." It wasn't until later that I understood. I picked up the beam and followed Jesus as He staggered up the hill called The Skull, Golgotha. (Go up the steps and drop the rod center – stay left)

We were met there by some Jewish women. They came weeping and offered Jesus a pain deadening concoction. He refused the drink. ²⁸... *turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"* Luke 23:28-31 (ESV) He spoke it like a prophet. Beloved, we must remember that, and watch for it. He was warning us.

At the top of the hill the first criminal was pushed over backward. Top heavy with the beam on his shoulders and tied to his arms, he landed hard on his back, knocking the wind out of him. A guard stripped him and in unison two soldiers held him on the beam each with one knee on the man's shoulders and the other on his forearms. Each guard pulled a nail out from their bags, as long as a hand width, and then practice precision drove them in threw powerful blows through the man's wrists. The thief screamed and then went unconscious. The guards lifted him by the crossbeam up onto the post. He was unconscious until they nailed his feet in place. Screams and curses began again.

I had laid Jesus' crossbeam on the ground when we had reached Golgatha. I couldn't take my eyes of the crucifixion of the first man, but when I finally turned back from the screams... I saw Jesus had put his clothes in a pile and lain down on the beam and stretched His arms out. The guard cried out, "Ha! The king is ready to give his life for his people!" I was close enough to hear Jesus say, "And for you." The guard looked shocked, and then his face hardened and they drove the spikes in... No sound came from Jesus' lips, but His face was in even more agony than before. He was raised and lifted up. He never lost consciousness. Then His feet, too, were pierced.

I was so angry and brokenhearted at the same time. I began to look for an opportunity to grab a sword or spear from one of the guards. To my shock and rebuke I saw sadness in Jesus eyes as He looked down on those soldiers. I heard Jesus pray, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." How is that possible? How could He forgive them, forgive us for not doing more to stop this madness?

The other thief was crucified in the same manner. The guards pushed me back into the crowd (down far right on step). The two thieves began to mock Jesus, asking if He really was a king to save himself and them. Some pious Jews taunted Jesus by telling the crowd, "He saved others; let Him save Himself!" # Jesus fixed His gaze on the first thief. The countenance of that thief began to change. That thief told the other one that they were getting what they deserved, but that Jesus had done nothing wrong. But the other thief just continued his cursing, now mocking them both. Then the first thief asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Jesus told him, "*Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*" Crucifixions can last for days. How did He know they both would die that day?

Two people came forward below Jesus' cross. A man in the crowd told me they were a disciple of Jesus named Yohanan and Jesus' mother Miriam. Jesus told her John was now her son, and told John she was now his mother. Jesus was in great agony, yet was still making sure his mother would be cared for.

As I looked on his suffering, I remembered the psalm of David in which he said his hands and feet were pierced, that his bones stared at him. To my shock, at that very moment, Jesus quoted the first line of that psalm, "*God, my God, why have you*

forsaken me?" The soldiers were gambling at the foot of Jesus' cross for His clothes, another prophetic line from the same psalm.

And suddenly it grew dark, (lights fade I move to center and pick up staff) a darkness that you could feel, a thick blackness It felt... evil and seemed to last forever. Everyone just stood quietly in place or sat on the ground waiting. As we waited, we wondered in silence what it all meant. Would God intervene? Occasional cries of agony from the crosses pierced the silence. I thought of the curse of darkness that came upon the Egyptians before the Exodus. Had we become cursed? About three hours later it lifted and we began to see again.

Jesus was gasping for each breath. Then He whispered, "I thirst." A soldier dipped a sponge on the end of his spear into some sour wine and lifted up to His parched lips. (Lights fade in.) Act this part out: "*It's finished!*" His eyes looked up to heaven as He whispered, "*Into your hands I commit my Spirit.*" His body went limp. (Pause). - At that moment the shofar from the temple sounded, announcing the afternoon sacrifice had been slain. I remembered the prophecy of the Baptist, "He is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." The ground began to tremble. If we didn't know we had been witnessing the supernatural, we knew it then! When the shaking stopped, the captain of the guard said, "Truly this was the Son of God."

A couple of the religious leaders went to see if they could take away Jesus' body. The crowd began to dwindle. The two thieves clung to life. But before long, a guard came with orders to end their lives. He used an iron bar to break their leg bones between the ankles and knees. Shoulders out of joint and unable to push themselves up by their legs to exhale, the robbers quickly suffocated. The second thief's face appeared as if he saw something dread approaching. (Center stage) When the soldier came to Jesus, he could see He was already dead. He took a spear and thrust it up into His heart. Blood and water poured out. I could hear Mary's sobbing begin again.

It would be some time before I really understood that Jesus had died for me. All I could see was injustice. I didn't know it was *perfect* justice, for *my* sins... and yours. I came to Jerusalem to choose a Passover lamb, and found God's Passover lamb. Some time later, the disciples told me we were to remember what Jesus had done for us with bread and wine. Let us now remember the price He paid, how as the Lamb of God His body was broken and blood poured out that we might have eternal life. (to floor center)
Communion

I will be back on the Lord's Day between the 4th and 5th hour. To you Gentiles, that is 10:30 Sunday morning. Don't miss the rest of the story, the best part. Let me leave you with this: If you knew Him, you would have wished to have had my honor, and you still can. He hung on that cross for you, now you can carry your cross, following Him, to

those who don't know His love, who have no purpose, no life. Strange that carrying a cross could bring one such honor. But then, God works in mysterious ways. Shalom.