

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES . . . IMPOSSIBLE?

A STORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN ANCIENT ROME

JOSHUA STOOD AT THE EDGE of his potato field and wiped the sweat from his forehead. His hands ached from holding the rough hoe, but satisfaction flowed through him like the soft spring breeze as he gazed at the neatly cultivated rows of soil. *Hard work, but good results.*

“Daddy, can we take a break for lunch soon?” begged his five-year-old son, leaning heavily on his own hoe which was much taller than he was.

Joshua smiled down into the child’s eager face. “Sure thing, Paul. I think we’ve done enough this morning. Are you as tired as I am?”

“More! Because you’re a big man and I’m just a little boy,” Paul explained with sober emphasis. His big brown eyes were serious.

“Makes sense,” Joshua laughed. He playfully tousled his son’s sandy hair. “Oh, look, here comes Timothy. I think your mother must be calling us for lunch.”

They dropped their hoes, letting them sink into the rich, dark soil, as three-year-old Timothy came dancing across the field. He waved his chubby arms into the air as he shouted with exaggerated urgency, “Time to eat right now!”

Paul opened his mouth to start an argument with his little brother, but Joshua quickly stopped it by taking each of the boys’ hands in one of his own and responding, “Thank you, Timothy. Let’s go inside.”

As they walked across the field to their little country cottage, Joshua squinted up at the blue sky overhead. *Father in Heaven, what a gorgeous world You’ve created.* The prayer rose from a grateful heart.

As the little trio stepped into the cottage, they were greeted by the tantalizing aroma of steaming potato soup. Joshua’s wife Abigail turned from where she was stirring the soup over the fire with a sleeping baby James slung over her shoulder. Her eyes smiled a loving welcome to her husband. “Did the work go well this morning?”

“Yes, very well,” Joshua walked over to the washbowl to wash his dirt-stained hands. “Abigail, we’re so blessed. These are dangerous times in Rome—with Emperor Diocletian killing thousands of our fellow believers—and yet our family

has remained unharmed to this day. Every day I get another chance to work outside and spend time with my precious sons, my heart just sings with joy.”

“I feel the same way! What a life of blessings we have,” Abigail agreed. “Yet if anything should ever change and we *would* have to suffer for our faith, I hope we would keep on trusting Him with the same joy.”

“Mommy, what’s ‘suffer’ mean?” little Paul’s voice interjected.

“Oh, it’s nothing you need to fret about, dear,” his mother replied, stooping to plant a kiss on his sunburned forehead. “It just means that someday harder things might happen to us, but God will always keep us safe. Don’t worry about it.”

Everyone gathered around the table to enjoy another of Abigail’s home-cooked meals. Joshua held his infant son and cuddled him close in one arm while eating with the other. “As usual, a delicious meal, Abigail,” he praised her.

She smiled again. “Thank you, Joshua!”

A knock sounded on the front door.

“Knock, knock! Someone’s here!” Timothy shouted. He dropped his spoon dramatically into his soup bowl.

“Timothy. Don’t yell,” his mother hushed him.

Pushing his chair back, Joshua handed the baby to his wife, stood up, and headed for the door. A quick glance through the front window told him it was their neighbor Rufus. He suppressed a sigh. Rufus—the rich landowner—always trying to pick fights. How many times had he come over just to argue with Joshua over some trivial border discrepancy? And if he wasn’t arguing over land, how many times had he tried to stir up strife over his humble neighbors’ Christian beliefs? Ever treating them with a condescending hatred, Rufus was definitely one of those people whom Joshua would consider “hard to love.”

But now was not the time for these melancholy musings. With a forced smile, Joshua opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. “Good day, Rufus! How are you?”

“Fine, I’m doing fine.” Rufus was dressed as fancily as ever, his rich clothes betraying his status as a high-class Roman citizen. He wrinkled his nose at his simple peasant neighbor, as if he could hardly believe anyone could be dressed so plainly. Then he stayed loftily, “I come with magnificent tidings!”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I have been appointed by the emperor himself as a centurion in the Roman army!” Rufus lifted his head high, smug with pride over his new position. “Magnificent tidings indeed, don’t you think?”

“Wow!” Joshua stared at his neighbor. “Are you happy about that?”

"Happy? Of course I'm happy! Why shouldn't I be happy?" Rufus glared down at Joshua, enraged that a poor farmer would dare to challenge his excitement. "The emperor favors me, and I'll be given plenteous wages. I'll be head of a hundred Roman soldiers. My wife and children will never go hungry like yours!" He threw his head back and roared with mocking laughter.

"My wife and children have never gone hungry," Joshua answered calmly. "We work hard, and the Lord provides."

Rufus snorted in disgust. "They *would* be going hungry, Joshua Marcius, if the emperor knew you were a criminal and a traitor! If I ever get a notion to report you to the emperor, you'd be tossed into prison in no time, and surely killed soon after. And *then*, you'd better believe, they'd be going hungry!"

Joshua kept silent. For the umpteenth time he wondered, why *hadn't* Rufus ever reported them to the emperor? He was one of the few people who knew the Marcius family were Christians; yet for some odd reason, he had never told on them. Abigail thought it was because he enjoyed taunting them too much.

"Anyway," Rufus's haughty voice continued, "you haven't congratulated me on my new position."

"I guess it's good news for you." Joshua smiled. "You'll be making more money for sure."

"What about my position as a centurion? Aren't you pleased about that part?"

"Well . . ." Joshua hesitated, sensing Rufus's desire to argue. Finally he stated, "If it were me, I wouldn't be pleased, because I don't believe in fighting. But I can see how you would be pleased."

Rufus gasped loudly, feigning shock. "Is that a new one? Don't believe in *fighting!* Phew! Now what kind of crazy notion is *that?*"

"Like the rest of my beliefs, a Christian one—and no, it's not new. Jesus said nearly three hundred years ago, 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you,'" Joshua said. "If I love my enemies, I can't kill them. I wouldn't ever fight in the army. And you know that."

Rufus snickered. "Oh, this is a good one! Love your *enemies?* Love your enemies! Really! No one's ever done that, Joshua Marcius, and you know it! No lying Christian has ever lived by a rule like that!"

"I live by it." Joshua kept his voice soft. "I hope I can show you sometime what it really means."

"Ha! Won't ever happen! Your senseless religion is a bunch of hypocrisy. We'll, I've debated with this ignorant peasant long enough. I'm off to make a grand life in the army!" Rufus spun around to go.

Joshua replied simply, "Farewell, Rufus."

Rufus didn't answer as he hurried away. Even after his kingly form had disappeared down the winding dirt road, Joshua stood looking sorrowfully after him. *Rufus doesn't believe a man can love his enemies. Oh, Lord, I wish I could show him otherwise! He doesn't understand that I have far greater riches than he does, and I long to share them with him.*

Throughout the summer months, Joshua saw no more of his neighbor. He continued to enjoy his peaceable life on the farm—working with his sons in the field, spending companionable evenings with his wife, playing with his adorable baby, and training his children in the knowledge of God. *My richest treasures, he often thought. Second only to my faith in Christ.*

It was a bright, invigorating fall morning when everything changed.

Joshua was out in the field, inhaling the cool air as he worked on harvesting the bountiful crop of potatoes with Paul and Timothy. Suddenly he stopped his work to listen. Faintly at first, but steadily gaining volume, a sound like rolling thunder reached his ears. Then the sight came into view. A large group of Roman soldiers came marching down the road past their farm. When they spied Joshua, they turned in the direction of the field.

"Hey!" one soldier shouted. "Come here."

Setting down his half-filled bucket of potatoes, Joshua spoke quietly to the boys. "Go inside to your mother."

Fear flashed across the boys' faces. They instantly fled toward the haven of the house. Uncertainly, Joshua walked toward the soldiers.

"How old are you?" the soldier asked.

"Thirty."

"Thirty—young and strong! Good news for you, poor fellow—the emperor wants you in his army. You'll be given an honorable position with excellent wages to send home to your family. No more of this miserable, drab existence pulling potatoes!"

Joshua stared in silent horror. Serve in the emperor's army? That was impossible! Here he had been expecting the emperor to arrest him for his faith any day, but instead he was to be taken as a soldier. Far better would it be to die fighting for Christ than to live fighting for the godless, heathen emperor! Heartsick, he trudged toward the house to bid his family farewell.

Abigail sobbed on his shoulder. "No, Joshua, don't leave us! Hide so they can't get you!"

"There is no place to hide." Joshua shook his head dejectedly. "They're waiting for me outside. Abigail—I—I can't do this." His voice broke. "This is against my convictions! What will I do?"

"Don't fight. Live out the Lord's teachings of love and forgiveness every day." Abigail wiped her tears. "Oh, my husband, I don't know how we'll ever live without you!"

"The Lord will be faithful as always." Joshua sighed. "My dear, we can't allow ourselves to be so depressed. God knew this was going to happen, and He allowed it, so He can bring good out of it as well. Let's pray and trust Him to take care of us even now."

"Jesus will be with you, Daddy," Paul offered.

"Yes—and with you, too! Come, let's gather close and pray." Joshua picked up little James and wrapped his other arm around Paul and Timothy, who clung to his legs. Then he prayed with labored calmness, boosting his own faith as well as his family's. Right now he was sure of nothing in this world except his heavenly Father's care. But what else mattered?

Nevertheless, it was a subdued and saddened man that followed the Roman soldiers down the road to the city. *Dear Father, You can see what's happening. Control this situation,* he prayed repeatedly.

Once inside Rome, the soldiers entered the army headquarters. Joshua was assigned a bunk inside one of the sleeping buildings. With a sigh, he collapsed on the rock-hard mattress. Here he was—fighting for Emperor Diocletian—that pagan, idol-worshipping ruler who had taken thousands of faithful Christians' lives! Never in his wildest dreams had Joshua pictured himself in this man's service!

Long, soul-trying days elapsed. Joshua refused to carry a sword, so he was given hard manual labor instead. Day after dreary day he worked as a slave—carrying buckets of water, brushing and feeding horses, scrubbing floors, and performing countless other physical tasks. Sometimes he carried important military messages to the emperor. Though he disliked the task, the very idea amused him. *Imagine! Emperor Diocletian would never guess that his faithful messenger boy is a hated Christian!*

One winter morning when the sky was gray, Joshua knelt in the fresh snow, repairing a board that had broken on the fence gate. He sighed in frustration as for the third time the nail slipped from his numb, red fingers instead of driving into the frost-covered board. Finally he jammed the hammer into the snow. Dropping his head into his hands, he tried to envision his family sitting around the crackling fire at home, enjoying its warmth. *Today would be a good day to rest inside a cozy house. To read the Bible and sing together. To rest, pray, and forget about hardships . . .*

In his intense longing, Joshua could almost see his sons' precious faces and his wife's promising smile. Tears burned in his eyes. *God! I have no idea why You have me here. Don't You see this isn't where I'm needed?*

A shout from behind startled him from his sorrow. Frantic, but not daring to turn around, he grabbed the hammer and nail again. But then he heard the door from the nearest building slam, and running footsteps approached him.

"Daddy!" a childish voice squealed.

Joshua scrambled to his feet and turned around. A cry of astonishment escaped his lips as Timothy sprang into his arms! "Timothy! How did you get here?" For a long, sweet moment, he held his son in a close embrace.

"We came!" Timothy laughed. "To see you!"

All of a sudden, Abigail was there too, with James in her arms and Paul at her side. Joshua hugged them all, and then he swung Timothy up onto his strong shoulders. He gazed with joy into his wife's sparkling eyes. "Dearest, this is such a surprise. Tell me what's going on at home!"

Abigail smiled. "We have enough to eat. Paul and I work hard in the fields, and the Lord is providing faithfully," she stated. "But that doesn't keep us from missing you terribly."

"Daddy, will you come home with us today?" Paul pleaded. His large, innocent eyes shone with hope.

"Oh, little son, I can't today."

"Someday soon, Paul," Abigail comforted.

Joshua sighed. "You know, I just can't seem to understand God's aim for letting me be here. But I know that no situation of our lives is lost on Him. I believe He has the best in store, even though sometimes I find myself discouraged. I was feeling quite downhearted today in particular. Pray for me, won't you?"

"We do every day, dear," Abigail assured him.

Joshua tickled baby James's fat chin. "Look at you big boy! I bet you don't know this strange man, do you?"

"He remembers you," insisted Abigail. Joshua doubted the truth of that statement, but he smiled at his wife's certainty.

"Well, I sure do miss you guys a lot. Come see me again," he urged, and he kissed them each in turn.

"We will!" his family chorused.

However, the very next day, Joshua was given new orders. A legion of soldiers was commissioned by the emperor to a conquest in the far south, and Joshua was to be among them. By all appearances, he would not be seeing his loved ones again anytime soon.

During the following days, Joshua's feet ached with pain as he walked long hours in the burning sun with thousands of the other soldiers. Wherever they set up camp, he was given countless menial duties that lasted all day and much of the night, from cooking porridge to polishing swords. Though he was treated roughly, he was thankful to be spared from the actual fighting.

When the soldiers went into battle, Joshua was kept busy bandaging the wounds of the injured men. He longed to go help the enemy soldiers, too. But when he ventured his request to the chief captain, he was met with a snarling, "Yeah, sure! Like we love our enemies in this camp?"

Early one morning, Joshua was awakened from his bed on the ground by rough shouts. He pulled himself up on one elbow and looked around their forest camp. "What's going on? Another battle?" he asked the soldier next to him.

"No. One of the top centurions stole a large sum of money from the chief," the soldier replied. "He'll be flogged within an inch of his life."

Joshua lay back down, feeling heartily sorry for whoever the offender was. He had seen enough army beatings to know that they usually left the victim dead. The thief was obviously unsaved. But what could Joshua do but pray?

Suddenly he sat up straight again. Without even knowing why he was asking, he blurted out of impulse, "Hey! What's the guy's name?"

"Who? The thief?"

"Yeah."

"I think they called him Rufus, or something." The soldier shrugged. "Nobody cares."

Rufus? No! Joshua's chest tightened until he felt he couldn't breathe. His lips went dry and his heart raced. Could it be possible? The centurion was Rufus! Joshua had forgotten that his old neighbor was here in the army. But why had Rufus stolen money? Greedy, likely. Rufus had always been greedy.

"Oh, God, what shall I do?" Joshua whispered. He stood up and strained his neck till he could see the group of soldiers leading a bound prisoner toward the edge of the camp. One of the men carried a heavy cat-o'-nine-tails. Joshua's head spun. This was happening too fast!

They could *not* do this to Rufus—that much he knew. Whatever was happening, Rufus was not prepared to die under the extreme torture of that horrible whip. Joshua had heard the soldiers' screams of pain all too many times as they writhed helplessly beneath this standard army punishment.

Desperate, he turned tear-filled eyes to the morning sunrise. *My Lord, is there nothing I can do?*

Instantly a verse from Scripture sprang to his mind: *“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”*

That was it—his answer! There was no time to think; Joshua knew what he must do. Without a second thought, he took off running past the rows of soldiers to the edge of the camp. He ran until his breath was gone, and still he kept on running on some kind of supernatural strength. Only one thought filled his mind: *Rufus must not die!*

Soldiers were already tying their criminal to a tree. “Stop! Stop!” Joshua cried. He yanked the whip out of the soldier’s arm who held it.

The soldier whirled around to glare at him. “Whaddya think you’re doing? We have orders from the chief to beat this rebel. Back up, or you’ll get hit!” Picking up his whip again, he raised it to the sky.

“No . . . you can’t!” Joshua fell on his knees, panting with exhaustion. “Please, please stop. Please don’t. I want—I want to take his punishment!”

“You—*what?*”

Slowly the soldier lowered his arm and stared at Joshua. The silence that descended on the morning air felt thick enough to touch.

“You mean that?” the soldier questioned.

Joshua nodded. “I mean it. Let me, please. I want to. He can’t die. He’s not ready!”

“Well!” The soldier turned to Rufus, who was twisting his head in astonishment to see who his benefactor was. Rufus’s face was pale and his eyes wide open. “Do you hear that, Rufus?” the soldier exclaimed. “Do you want to accept that?”

“What’s the delay here?” a third voice barked. The chief strode up to the scene, hands on his hips.

“That soldier wants to take this rebel’s whipping.” The soldier pointed at Joshua. “Is that allowed?”

“No! It’s certainly not!” The chief glared at Joshua. “Why ever would you want to do *that?*”

Joshua stumbled to his feet and tried to regain his breath. “Because I’m a Christian, sir. I believe in Jesus’ words, ‘Love your enemies; bless them that curse you, do good..’ ”

“Impossible!” the chief breathed. He stared at Joshua for a long moment, and then at Rufus. Finally he ordered, “Untie the prisoner.”

The soldiers untied Rufus, who sank pale-faced and trembling to the ground. Joshua turned pleading eyes to the chief. “Please, sir, won’t you let me?”

"No." The chief was firm. "I won't allow that. You are innocent, though I admire your bold convictions."

"Then won't you let Rufus go free? I'm sure he's sorry for whatever he's done wrong. *Please, sir,*" Joshua intreated with as much emphasis as he could rally.

A crowd of soldiers had gathered and were looking on in astonishment. Then a cry rang out through the air. "Let them free! Let the Christian and the thief go home free!" And soon the whole crowd of soldiers was shouting, "Let them free! The thief is sorry! Let them free!"

The chief turned back to Joshua and Rufus. "Do you both desire this?" Before either could answer, he added, "I suppose neither a Christian nor a thief is of any benefit to the emperor's army."

Joshua could hardly believe his ears. Go free? Go home? Home to his family? Of *course* that's what he wanted! "Yes, sir!" he exclaimed, a huge smile spreading over his face.

Rufus still looked paralyzed with fright. Joshua lent a hand to help him to his feet. Finally Rufus whispered with shaking lips, "Yes, chief, if you will kindly pardon me, I'll never steal from anyone again. I'm very sorry."

"Go free then." The chief waved his hand. "Let us never see either of you again."

It wasn't till the two men were out of the forest and on the road that they spoke to each other. Rufus turned to face Joshua, his fearful eyes still betraying the horror he had felt in the face of death. "My brother," he faltered. "*Why* would you do this for me? What good or kindness have I ever shown you that would warrant you taking my death place?"

Joshua's heart swelled with deep thankfulness to his heavenly Father. For a moment he was silent, seeking the right words to say. At last he said, "Rufus, you once laughed when I told you Jesus commanded me to love my enemies. But now you see it's possible, by His power alone and not by any of mine. The fact is, someone else already shed much greater blood, and He was faultless. Can I tell you what He did for you and me?"