

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL

THE VEIL

a special issue for Resurrection Sunday

“And behold, the veil of the temple
was torn in two from top to bottom...”

The wrap of darkness was of my own choosing. I had too much to lose—and, as I thought, too little to gain—from this dangerous investigation. Were I to be found out, my reputation, my political standing—my office in the temple would not just be risked, but surely lost. The object of my search, this rogue teacher, was becoming an unbearable nuisance to the Sanhedrin. Other considerations were being set aside as overheated arguments about the man predominated our Council meetings. No longer just an irritating mosquito droning about our ears, this man's teaching had become a squawking bird of prey, noisily flapping and beating its wings, driving us all mad with its pecking beak.

Others in the Council were content to know Him no further than by reputation, but that wasn't enough for me. I could feel the momentum driving us all toward an inevitable confrontation; I would not sit in judgment of someone without learning more of the truth about Him.

In different times I may have made conversation with the teacher in the light of day. It would be easy, since He was in the temple environs every day, attracting larger and larger crowds with His curious and inflammatory doctrine. But because of His notoriety, it was necessary for me to seek Him out after hours, under the protection of darkness. So I had sought an interview with the rabbi through one of His disciples, one whose face was familiar around the temple: Judas bar Simon, from Kerioth. For an agreeable price Judas had given me an hour and an address.

After the venomous debate over Him in the Council, I expected a protective entourage to be in His company, but passing down a darkened alleyway and entering a small courtyard, I found simply the man, sitting quietly on a bench under a gnarled oak tree. I identified myself quickly to Him.

"Rabbi, thank You for seeing me."

"You are welcome, Councilor," He smiled graciously. "Please, sit down."

"I am Nicodemus."

"And I am honored by a member of the Sanhedrin. But what brings you at such a late hour?"

It would do no good to lie to Him, and I didn't want to anyway. "Discretion," I answered, trying not to look sheepish.

"Ah, yes. Discretion," He said knowingly.

"Please don't think ill of me. I have to be careful. I already have my detractors; there are those who wouldn't be pleased with my speaking to You."

"Then why *have* you come to speak with Me? And in the middle of the night?"

Where to begin? I had tried to set in some order the queries I would pose to this learned, albeit dangerous man. Even though I had heard little but vitriol against Him, I felt no personal animosity against the Nazarene. And there was nothing about His appearance or behavior to change my mind. His demeanor was pleasant enough, at ease with Himself as well as with anyone around Him.

"I've come with questions," I began. "My *own* questions. I can't trust the information that falls on my ears at the temple. Too many around me offer answers that have little to do with the truth. And I want to know the truth—the truth about *You*."

"Are you sure? The truth can be, at times, disturbing."

"More disturbing than the Council?" I snorted sarcastically, but immediately regretted the liberty. I couldn't afford to be so familiar—at least until I knew more about this one so full of mystery.

"Tell Me," he said, ignoring my caustic remark, "what do you think is the truth about Me?"

"Well," I began, feeling like the prosecutor at a trial, "we know that You've come as a teacher from God. I should say that *some* of us know; there are others who say You've sprung from the bowels of hell. But surely, with the miracles You've performed, You *must* be of God. I don't believe—as others have said—that You're simply a crafty magician. No, God is with You."

"I tell you the truth," he answered soberly, "unless one is born again, he cannot even see the kingdom of God."

"Yes, they warned me You would speak in mysteries! All right. My first question is this: How can a man be 'born' when he is already old? Is this one

of Your mysteries? Have You devised a way for a man to re-enter his mother's womb and be born for a second time?"

He answered matter-of-factly, as if describing something of no more weight than the day's weather. "You are born of your mother once. But unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you'll not enter the kingdom of God."

I wanted to press my question with greater detail, but He held up His hand to stop me.

"No, listen. You came seeking the truth, and the truth is: That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit, is Spirit."

Born of the Spirit. What did He mean by that? How was one 'born' of the Spirit? But I was distracted by another word He used. "You said 'water.' Now, we Jews have always had the baptism by water. Is this what You refer to? Must one be a Jew first?"

"But we only baptize those new to the faith."

"Yes, You're right, of course. It's only for the Gentiles. But many have associated You with the baptizer, John. Is *this* the water You speak of?"

"Those who are baptized by John, do so as a symbol of their repentance. It is an act of submission to God. And with that repentance comes the Spirit. Don't try to reason through it, Nicodemus. When the wind hits your face and you hear it whistle by your ears, you know it is a real thing, don't you? Yet, you have no idea of its origin—or its destination. You only know that it is real. The Spirit is from God. You cannot see it, or touch it, or know where it is going. But you can feel it. It is real."

I had never before heard anyone speak like this. He spoke as if the grand mysteries of the universe were something so common to Him that He car-

ried them around in His purse. And from His purse He brought them forth—not to dazzle and impress, but to comfort and explain. In appearance He was just another man; in behavior, He was different; but in the words that flowed out from His mind, He was a source of answers for questions not yet asked.

"Rabbi, I mean no disrespect, but—how can this be? Your words leave me breathless. You are either the wisest man who has ever lived, or, well, uh, that is—"

"And you, the teacher of Israel, don't understand these things? You came to Me for truth."

"I came to You for *answers*."

"Do you wish only those answers that are pleasing to the ear? I tell you what I know and have seen and you still don't believe Me!"

"But I *want* to believe."

"Nicodemus," he said kindly, "I've spoken to you of earthly things and you don't believe. How then can I speak to you of heavenly things?"

Oh, I was so desperate to hear the truth about heavenly things. But why was I seeking it here, in a backwater hovel from an itinerant preacher? Weren't such things to be discovered in God's temple? "From where do You get Your knowledge of heavenly things?"

The Nazarene rose and leaned back against the trunk of the oak tree. I had the impression that He was choosing carefully the words to His answer. Then He turned to look at me, and said, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who *came* from heaven: the Son of Man."

Once again I was finding it difficult to breathe. "And You are—"

"Nicodemus, you know it already. That's why you came to Me tonight." He moved toward me, close

enough to embrace, and spoke with his hands. “You knew it up here—in your mind; you came tonight so that you might know it here—in your heart.”

The compounded logic inside my head roared back in defiance of what my heart struggled to accept. He was right: I had come to Him this night because, intellectually, I believed what my colleagues in the Sanhedrin were so eager to reject. To admit it to them would mean the end of me. The cool logic that had always ruled my life argued continually against this utterly illogical position. But still, I had to know more—I had to know the *truth*. And again, I suppose He was right: The missing component—the one final step that would move me from intellectual agreement to faith—was the condition of my heart.

I was exhausted. I felt as if I had just run a marathon. “Do You realize what You are saying?” I said stupidly.

“Yes, *I* know. Do you, Nicodemus?” He was close enough for me to see into His eyes. In the dim light of the courtyard they seemed to radiate a warmth that embraced a heart grown cold and cynical by the trappings of religion. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so too, the Son of Man must be lifted up—so that whoever believes in Him, may have eternal life. God loved the world so much, that He gave that world His one and only Son, that anyone who would believe in Him would not perish, but have eternal life! Nicodemus,” he whispered to me, “listen to your heart.”

The interview was over. As I made my way back to my house, I struggled to understand the change that had come over me. But I could not. I could not describe it. I knew only that I was now different from the man who had walked this same street an hour before. ✎

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

John 3:17-21

“You’re a fool, Nicodemus!” Malchiah growled at me as we stepped into the antechamber off the room where the Council had been arguing over the fate of Jesus. “How much longer do you think you can keep this up?”

It was late on a Thursday night. We had been called for a mysterious late-night meeting at the palace of Caiaphas. I attended, but with a sickening bile rising from my belly. I was becoming tired—sick and tired of the desperate machinations that the religious and political powers were putting us all through in their attempt to rid themselves of this inconvenient man whose gentle teaching was leaving them all so miserable. And now, on this night, there was within the room an atmosphere of finality—that this finally was the moment to act. As a consequence, my position was now precarious. Soon I would have to decide: either for or against.

One vote was safe—the other would change my life.

“Will you now give me away?” I asked my old friend.

He shook his head violently side-to-side, as if convincing himself to believe his own words. “No. I’ll not give you away. You’re still my friend. But I should. If you persist in this you’ll bring us all down with you.”

“Why should you worry? You didn’t vote with me.”

“I’m implicated by your confidence in me!” He hissed, pulling me further away from the door. “I take a chance by simply leaving the room with you.”

“Then why not vote with me? Why can’t you see it, Malchiah?”

“And I would ask you the same, my misguided friend.”

“You were with me that day He spoke—”

“There have been *many* days He has spoken. Too many.”

“Yes, many. He’s given us every opportunity to

understand, and still some refuse.”

“There’s no need to get personal!” Malchiah snapped.

“But that’s precisely what Jesus has been telling us! Malchiah, are you just like the rest? We keep going to Him, we learned and wise men of the Sanhedrin, trying to *debate* the man into submission. When will it end?”

My friend stalked about the room, trying to release the built-up frustrations of the last few days.

“This man is a disruption!”

“And just what is He disrupting?”

“Well,” he sputtered, “our way of life. The way we do things here—our, well, our *traditions*.”

Here was my opening. “Yes—our traditions. And I thank God He is disrupting our traditions.”

“Don’t press your luck, Nicodemus,” he said, as much as a warning as to put me in my place. I knew Malchiah was earnestly zealous for our heritage. I couldn’t fault him for that. But now, in the heat of the exchanges that had been taking place within the Council, he was being forced to choose sides. It was now clear that he had chosen the side opposite mine. I had to find a way to win him back.

“It was quite some time ago,” I began quietly. “A group of us had sought out Jesus to once again argue trivialities. A report had come to the Council that the disciples of Jesus had been observed eating without having washed their hands.”

“Yes, I remember,” Malchiah chimed in. “He refused the challenge, as I recall.” His face wore an unpleasant smugness I had never seen before.

“Jesus simply refused to join in our petty bickering—”

“Petty bickering?” Malchiah exploded. “It is the law!”

“Your memory fails you,” I answered as evenly as

I could, trying to defuse his temper, “as does your scholarship. We didn’t challenge Him on the law. We asked Jesus why His disciples transgress the tradition of the elders.”

He was innocent in his ignorance. “Yes?” Malchiah said, his arms upraised to show that from his perspective there was no difference.

I shouldn’t have been surprised, but the confirmation of my worst fears cut deeply. “Well, I see that you are still one of them.”

“One of *them*?” He practically screamed at me. “One of *them*?” He gestured toward the closed door that led to the large room where the rest of the Council still sat in debate. “Nicodemus, *you* are one of them.”

I could no longer hide my melancholy. “Not any more. Not since that day.”

The man I still considered to be my friend grasped my shoulders. I could feel his passion in the insistent strength of his hands. “Don’t take this any further. You are a respected Councilor, a member of the Sanhedrin. Don’t jeopardize your standing for the ravings of a deranged prophet—an accused blasphemer.”

Malchiah was still my friend, but I could no longer be gracious against his surrender to the political pressures that threatened Jesus. “I’m told there is an animal down in Ethiopia that has a habit of hiding its head in the sand when challenged by an adversary. When I heard Jesus that day, I heard the truth—as if for the first time. Don’t you feel the hunger, Malchiah? Don’t you hunger for the truth?”

“I *know* the truth,” he said stiffly.

“Do you think Jesus serves a God other than ours?”

“Don’t quiz *me* on the twisted contents of His

mind!” He spat at me. “My faith has been tested by time and was given by the very hand of God.”

I couldn’t let him go. “But it’s those very commandments God handed down to us that have become twisted,” I pleaded with him. “We have designed for ourselves such a maze of regulations that we’ve lost sight of who God really is! All Jesus has done is cut through the confusion to show us that our relationship with God must be personal. It cannot be founded on regulations.”

He wasn’t going to give an inch. Malchiah’s resolve was impenetrable. “He called us hypocrites!”

“And he backed it up by quoting Isaiah,” I reminded him. “‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ Tradition, Malchiah. Just empty, selfish tradition.”

“Don’t quote the Scriptures to me.” His face glowered darkly, and I realized I had now lost him.

“Why not?” I retorted. “You seem to have forgotten them!”

“All right!” He exploded. “Go follow your miniature God. I’ll not stand in your way—and I’ll not expose you to the rest of the Council.” His voice was icy, bitter. “But I’ll not vote with you. And I’ll *not* be your friend.” ❧

Not long after, the final vote came. Now it had been done—and now I found myself, as expected, on the wrong side from the majority. It was as if a great blade had come down from heaven and cleaved the group. On the one side were most of the members of the Sanhedrin: religionists, traditionalists—some good men and true who were convinced they were serving the hand of God; others with darker motives, who felt threatened by the new words and ideas of Jesus, who felt their power and influence slipping further away with every utterance from His lips. And on the other side, a small group of nervous souls who heard truth when Jesus spoke, who felt the hand of God within Him.

Now an untraversable breach had opened up between us, dividing not only judicial positions, but hearts and minds. A tremulous darkness hovered over the proceeding. There were no shouts of victory, no sense of satisfaction from a job well-done; only a foreboding that something unsavory but necessary had been accomplished. In the minds of those in the majority, something evil was about to be purged from our midst. They had soiled their hands, but the community had been protected.

I can't say I was in my right mind. What I hoped to prove, I wasn't sure, but out of desperation I asked for a private word with Caiaphas, the high priest.

"As if I hadn't enough occupying my mind," he muttered as we entered his private chamber.

"Lord Caiaphas—"

"And you really think you can successfully plead this man's case where He Himself failed so miserably?"

"I can't improve upon His eloquence."

"Eloquence?" He laughed out loud. "The man is a joke. A buffoon."

"You don't believe that."

"How *dare* you!" He said, enraged by my impertinence.

"You don't put to death buffoons."

Caiaphas moved away from me, as if with all his power he was still afraid of me, afraid of my grim determination. Or was it just surprise? Was he surprised that anyone would take such an unpopular stand, surprised that even after the vote, someone would be willing to risk it all for the condemned?

"No one takes this sad person seriously," he said uneasily and dropped wearily into a chair.

I could see it now. It was clear that Caiaphas—the great and powerful ruler who held sway over

every judicial, political, and religious segment of Israel—was afraid. But not of me; Caiaphas was terrified of Jesus.

"You're afraid of Him," I said out loud, and he stiffened with indignation. "You're afraid of Him, Caiaphas. He's not a buffoon, but a threat—a threat to your power."

"How *dare* you abuse this office so!"

I felt a reassuring calm pass through me—the peaceful calm, I suppose, of someone who has nothing more to lose. "It no longer matters. I renounce my standing as a member of the Council."

"You what?"

I was no longer afraid to look him in the eye. "I now claim as my Master this one you have just consigned to death."

His face reddened, and Caiaphas pushed himself up from his chair, as if collecting his strength to do me physical violence. "You are not only insulting, but making a very dangerous—and costly—mistake."

After all of it, I was still more saddened than angry by his response. "I was hoping that you might see—"

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing it *to* you—or anyone else, for that matter. I'm doing it *for* me."

Caiaphas paced about the room, letting his anger dissipate before addressing me. And though when he finally did, the brittle anger was gone, it had been replaced by a dark menace that was even more terrifying.

"Nicodemus," he began quietly, almost purring. "I care nothing for you or your precious new faith. If you choose to believe the blasphemous rants of this man, then proceed—at your own risk. And if there were no other considerations, I would run

you out of town myself, gladly." His eyes shifted nervously, and the politician emerged. "But there *are* considerations. The Council is much bigger than the collection of its members. And the Council is much more important than the soiled reputation of *one* of its members." No matter how hard he tried to contain it, his fierce anger had reawakened. "I will *not* have this august body compromised by your preposterous loyalties. I would gladly bring upon you disgrace of the most public kind," he spat venomously, "but I will not. I will not subject our governing Council to such infamy. You represent all that is the worst of your generation! You care nothing for our rich heritage. You so easily discard centuries of tradition for something still in its infancy! You and your kind are never satisfied. And your sedition infects us like a cancer. I detest you. And I detest this Jesus and what He has done to us."

A part of me was still terrified by Caiaphas and his power. But now the greater part was even more convinced than before that what I was doing was right—not only right for me, but right for everyone.

"You've done it to yourself, Caiaphas," I said, surprised by my calm. "You won't allow yourself to see

the truth in what Jesus says. He *is* the Christ—and you resent the fact that He is without your permission."

"You will regret this, Nicodemus," he retorted, his face twisting into an ugly mask. "You've been blinded."

"Yes. I guess I have. Blinded by His light."

"Get out of here!" He exploded.

I gladly made for the door, but then stopped. "You think you're still in charge. You think all this is your doing. For once God really is in control. You've just done exactly what He intended. You have just fulfilled the destiny of His Son—and established the end of your meaningless traditions." And as I left the chambers, my thoughts slipped back to the teachings of the prophets so long before. Seven hundred years ago Isaiah had warned us of the change coming. He warned that the house of Israel would stumble over the Son of Man. And now, when faced with its reality, the fulfillment of the prophecy—our long-awaited Messiah—was so complete we were blind to it. Most of us were so locked into our mindless traditions we feared to let go. But some—little people, here and there—dared to believe, some dared to rejoice in His light. ✎

The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them...
There will be no end to the in-
crease of His government or
of peace,

On the throne of David and
over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it
with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will
accomplish this.

Isaiah 9:2,7

I don't know why I stayed in the city instead of following the procession that carried Jesus out to Golgotha, the place of execution. On the face of it, I certainly had no interest in being a spectator at one more Roman crucifixion. It was an ugly way to die—that was the point of it, you see. By attending I felt that I was playing into the hands of our oppressors, who wished us all to observe and be intimidated by this singular demonstration of their might.

Then too, I realized that in this one instance, the Roman authorities were themselves only pawns in this sick drama of death. They cared nothing about Jesus; they had few opinions of Him either way. What did they care that there was one more prophet in a land of prophets, and what did they care that a man claimed to be God? But they had been enlisted, because in their empire only they could inflict the death penalty.

No, I knew that it was that most pious and dignified body of which I was a part that wished Jesus dead. In a land of religion it was the religious leaders who ruled, and it was religion that felt threatened by the teachings of Christ. Centuries of tradition, infrastructure, habits, and corruption were being threatened by one who taught that God dwelt as much in the heart as in a temple of stone. And if Messiah had truly come, what use remained, then, for priests and scholars? No, Jesus had to go, and His blood was on their hands.

I did feel an obligation to my Lord, as if it were my duty to watch Him die. But as the city emptied to witness the crucifixion of Jesus and the criminals, my feet took me, instead, to the house of God. Jesus had given me a new relationship with Yahweh—a relationship so new and different that I was still trying to sort it out—and it was to the Father I was compelled to go. It was during one of His earlier discourses that Jesus had introduced this new relationship. We had gathered around Him, on the side of a hill, and as He taught us how we should live, He gave us clues as to how we should now think of God.

“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the

streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:2–15)

To someone like myself, raised on temple worship, where access to the holy place was strictly limited

to the priesthood, and where only the high priest could enter into the presence of God—and then only once per year—this was a shocking concept. The idea of God as a Father with whom we could enjoy a more intimate relationship was hard to accept. One day Jesus was teaching His disciples within earshot of several members of the Sanhedrin, and He went even further in describing God the Father to us.

Jesus told a parable of a profligate young man who took his inheritance and squandered it on a fast and immoral life. Eventually the young man, having lost everything and now reduced to abject poverty, returned to his father in humility, wishing only to be thought of as another of his servants. But in describing the reaction of the father to this prodigal son, Jesus drew for us a picture of how our heavenly Father lovingly responds to us.

“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf

because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.’”

(Luke 15:21–32)

Here was a picture of a God who no longer insisted on an intermediary. Here was a Father who embraced the individual—even the sinner—without the need of a priest or blood sacrifice. This new teaching spread like wildfire, drawing people from all walks of life to hear Jesus.

It also ensured His doom. ❧

Around midday the sky suddenly darkened into an angry, churning heap of blackened clouds, like the approach of a terrible thunderstorm. Yet I had never seen a storm such as this—so menacing and mean. The streets of Jerusalem darkened as if a woolen blanket had just been wrapped around the sun. There seemed to be no natural explanation for the phenomenon, and though I had no other evidence, something deep in my belly told me that the cause would be traced to the bloody figure of Jesus now hanging on a cross.

As I was close to the temple complex, I continued on, ascending the grand but familiar stairway that rose from the city to the southwest gate in the wall. There were but a few stragglers in the broad Court of the Gentiles—the only area of the complex open to non-Jews. For the most part, everything was deserted, and I met no one else as I passed through the columns of the perimeter, around to Solomon’s Porch, where Jesus so often spoke to the crowds of people that flocked to hear His marvelous words.

It seemed almost impossible, but everything had grown darker still, as black as midnight. A cold wind blew out of the north, whistling through the columns that supported the long roof over my head. With nowhere else to go, I huddled where I was, my back against the thick wall that surrounded the vast courtyard. Directly across from me were the steps that led up to the impressive bronze doors that we referred to as the Beautiful Gate. These doors gave entrance to the temple itself.

I couldn’t resolve the two. Here before me was the sublime home of my faith, the root of my heritage. Here Israel met with her God. Here—and only here—we sacrificed and paid homage to Him. All of this was conducted according to His precise instruction; it was He who created the method and design of acceptable worship. It was *His* idea! Yet now God’s Son had come and made Himself a sacrifice. He had told me Himself, at our first meeting.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.” (John 3:14–15)

He was now to be the substitutionary sacrifice. *He* was the spotless lamb. And I didn’t pretend to understand it all. I wasn’t stupid: I could understand the words, even the concepts. But it was all still too overwhelming to digest in such a short period of time.

There was still a deep charcoal blackness enveloping everything. The wind had picked up, and lightning was beginning to illuminate the sky in the west. Time was swimming past me with blinding speed. I must have sat there, huddled against the stone, for several hours. At last I pushed myself upright and made for the tall bronze doors before me. In the dim light they seemed even more imposing than in their warm glow of morning sunlight. Balanced exquisitely on its pins, one door easily swung open at my touch, and I entered the open Court of Women. Like the Gentile Court outside, it too was deserted. The dark sky pressed down into the space, a heavy weight come down from heaven. God wanted our attention and, for once, He had it. His Son was about to die. Things were about to change.

A white arc of lightning crashed nearby, illuminating the beautiful cream-colored stone facade of the holy place. My heart beat wildly as I ascended the curved steps that rose toward the Court of Israel, where the men of Israel came to worship. I passed through the doorway and stopped. Only once each year, during the Feast of Tabernacles, were men permitted past this point. Before me stood the great stone altar, the place where so much blood had been shed for the remission of sins—next to it, the bronze laver containing the water for washing. Everything before me seemed so cold and institutional in the fierce darkness.

A constant angry rumble of thunder filled the air around me, as if the Lord God was pounding His fists upon the earth, pounding upon the place where He had invested so much of His mercy, His fierce wrath, His grace. What was He saying? Was it more anger—or just more screaming for us to finally get it? We never seemed to. No matter what the Lord tried, man would always adulterate His methods with himself. Man would always spoil holiness, ruining what came down pure from heaven.

I don’t know what pushed me into the court of the priests. It may have been simple curiosity, but I think it was really a desire, at this pivotal moment, to be in attendance at the navel of our faith. Jesus had declared that everything in this place would, somehow, be changed. This was the place where God came down to meet with man. Here is where He would be manifested in this hour.

Begging His forgiveness, but half expecting His anger to descend upon me, I hesitantly stepped into the court and made my way around the huge, unhewn altar. To my left was the laver, pitched above me like a great bowl, cold and hard in the explosive darkness. Then, my heart in my throat, I fearfully ascended the steps that led into the holy place. At the top, my legs shaking, I pushed aside the veil at the entrance, but halted, not daring to proceed further. Before me lay the sanctuary—where only the priests could go—containing the golden lampstands, the table for the showbread, the incense altar, and all the paraphernalia of worship and sacrifice. Here were all the pieces the Lord had had made as far back as Moses, and the first tabernacle.

The terrible, crescendoing storm filled me with an overwhelming urge to run into the sanctuary for shelter—but nothing could drive me into that

holy place reserved for the Levite priesthood. I could not. But each flash of lightning illuminated its interior, back into its dark recesses where the massive veil divided the holy from the most holy. The veil was patterned after the original the Lord dictated for Moses to have made for the original tabernacle.

No one but the high priest could pass beyond that veil—and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when he made sacrifice for the sins of all Israel. On this day we were reminded that our monthly, weekly, even daily sacrifices were insufficient to atone for all of our sins. Once a year the high priest would enter the most holy place and sprinkle blood upon the mercy seat to atone for the sins of the priests, and the sins of the nation as a whole.

To the people of Israel, this veil represented the last barrier between them and the Lord. The mercy seat represented His presence; the veil represented our inability to step into His presence.

I heard the rumbling begin in the distance, beyond the hills, beyond the Mount of Olives. It gathered and swirled, circling the city as its epicenter. It passed beneath my feet, then came around again, like a subterranean whirlpool circling a drain. The heavens erupted, lightning coursed across the blackened sky, and rain descended in a hard sheet. I pressed my body against the outside wall of the sanctuary, seeking some shelter without actually going inside. It seemed as if the world was coming to an end.

The massive stone blocks that marked the entrance were alive with the groanings that rocked the whole city. Rain was spilling down from the parapet that crowned the temple, drenching me. So I edged just around the corner, to gain shelter

from the thick wall without actually stepping inside the holy place.

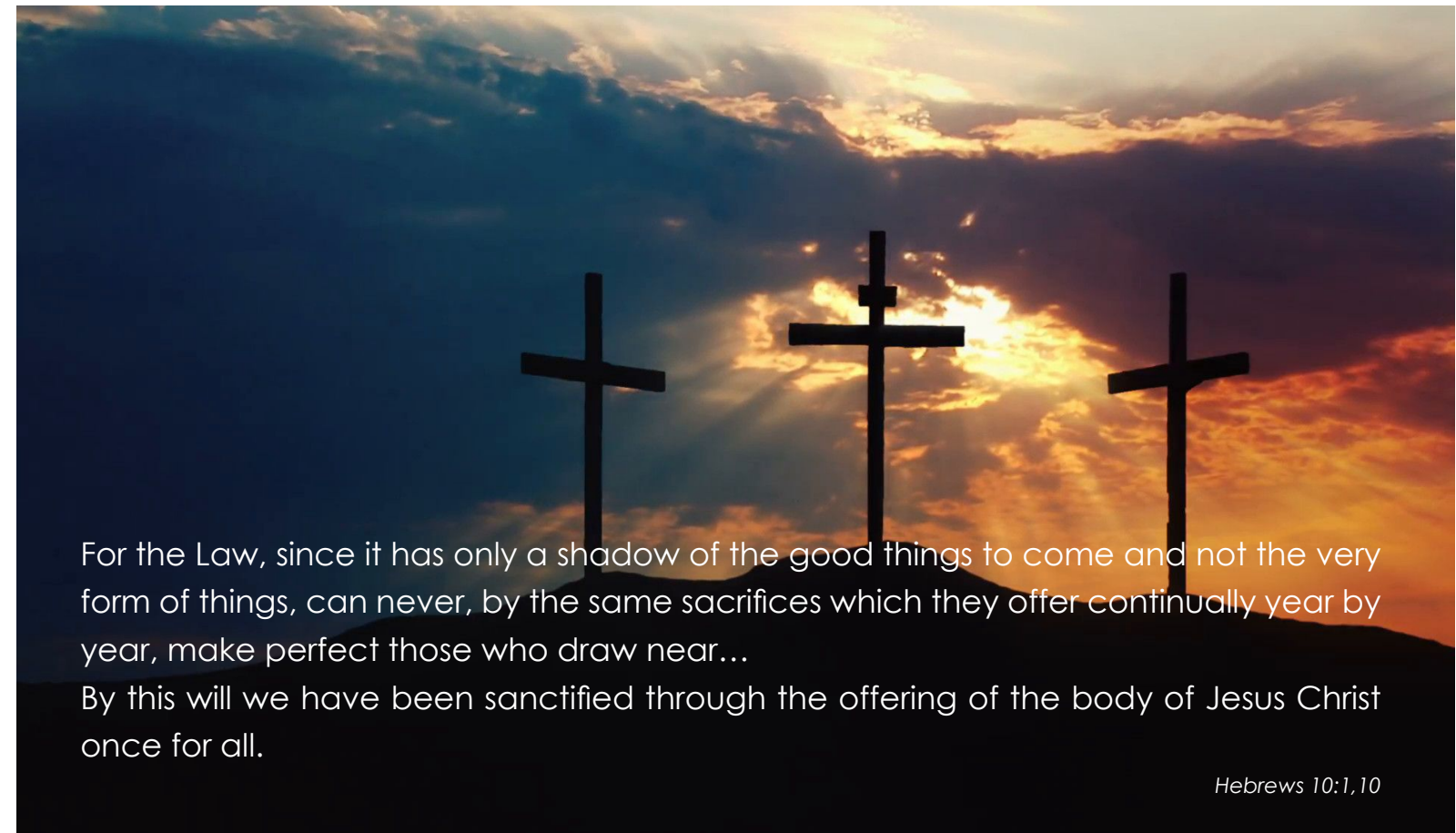
Just then the sky exploded in a terrifying symphony of thunder and lightning. The lightning bolts came so fast that their illumination was constant. Everything around me was bathed in a hard, silvery light sent from another world. I turned my head to peer into the holy place, and everything inside was lit as if by a thousand lamps. The heavy veil at the far end of the room was shaking side to side from the tremulous vibrations passing through the structure.

The vibrations increased. The stone beneath my feet trembled like quicksand, as if someone had taken hold of the building and was angrily shaking it. The veil began to dance and quiver with a life of its own. The air was filled with a horrible shrieking, and as I watched in stunned silence, the veil began

tearing in two. Beginning at the top, the heavy fabric that was humanly impossible to tear, began separating as if a great and mighty hand had taken hold of the top hem. I couldn't believe my eyes, but they weren't lying to me. The huge veil that had for so long hid from sight the holy of holies was being ripped in two. The tearing continued, steadily, until the bottom hem was reached, and the last thread holding together the two halves was snapped.

And there it was! With the two pieces of the torn veil flapping in the wind, the most holy place, the place where God came down to meet with man; where God came down once a year to accept the blood sacrifice of atonement for all the people—there it was.

Open for all! ☞



For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near...

By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Hebrews 10:1, 10