Shriveled Heart

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by John Driver

A Short Novel
Chapter 1

Dreams

Desert sands are endless. They are the cresting foam in the ocean, stretching eternally across a sea of wilderness. I have often dreamed of being lost in their wake. I long to be lost as a single grain of sand in the sea, unnoticed and untouched by the world; oblivious to its pain. I have no desire to be known, only to blend; that is what I want from life.

I am much like the desert. Nowhere else does the sun shine quite as brightly and with so much blistering heat. My life is illuminated by the flickers of light that burn in every person’s eyes; eyes that stare and gaze upon me- one grain of desert sand. Like the desert, my life is filled with unbearably cold and frozen dreams when the sun sinks back to its home beyond the mountains. The night is a lonely place; so lonely that I even miss, and long for, the heat of the day that I despise more than anything else. And so, I am satisfied with nothing and by nothing. Like the sand, I feel the heat and the cold; unlike the sand, I do not blend. However, what I long for most is to be one with the sand, the only consolation for a meaningless life filled with unbearably painful days and frigid, comfortless nights. Someday, oneness with the sand will come, and I will not resist it. So let life continue to trample over me, for each day is one step closer to the inevitable. And I say, the faster it ends, the better.

"Wake up, Jeremiah!"

The voice seems louder today than usual. Years of repetition have not lessened the volume of my mother’s voice in the morning; nor have they lessened how much it annoys me. Maybe it’s just my own frustration- the frustration of a twenty-one year old man still living with his parents; or maybe I’m just tired.
Either way, in a tone that my father would definitely call “disrespectful,” I shout, “Leave me alone, I’m not going to synagogue this morning!”

Every Sabbath seems the same. It’s not that I don’t want to go to synagogue; in fact, I have trouble waking up every morning. I am definitely a hard sleeper, but there is something more to the intensity of my nightly hibernation. I have always dreaded my parents’ voices in the morning mainly because they are the voices that call me away from my dreams, my favorite places to be. My dreams are not like other twenty-one years olds’ who dream of their work at the marketplace or a future journey to a relative’s home. No, instead my dreams resemble the dreams of a child. In all of my dreams, I am twelve years old. I always see myself walking down the street on my way home. While walking, I pass another group of children who are about my age and are playing with some sort of small ball in the street. Every night, the dream is the same: somehow, while playing catch, one of the children overthrows the ball and it speeds towards me, heading straight for the back of my head. It is always the back of my head because my back is turned so that I can’t see the ball coming. The children yell for me to watch out and I turn around in just enough time to hold up my right hand and catch the ball; my long, lanky fingers wrapping around it like the two were made to be together.

Indeed, a dream like this would not be very thrilling to most twenty-one year old men, but I am no ordinary man. I am a man of average stature and weight (although I put on a few pounds every year at the Passover Celebration.) Furthermore, my facial features are not what you would call striking, but I’m fairly pleasant-looking. I work for the local blacksmith, not as an apprentice or assistant, but simply as a bookkeeper. My days consist of sitting in the back of the shop and writing down the orders and payments of the
blacksmith’s customers. I’m not particularly talented at being organized or figuring up
numbers and totals, but my job makes me some money and that’s why I do it; in fact, it’s
the only reason I do it. If I had it my way, I would never wake up from my dreams. I
don’t necessarily want to die right now; I just want to sleep so I can be safely hidden
from the eyes of the world. I dread the ominous toil of everyday life. All I do all day is
write, and always with my left hand.

I am indeed left-handed, not by nature, but by necessity. The fact of the matter is
that I was born with a deformed right hand. When I was born, the rest of my body was
completely normal, and I am thankful for that. In fact, there were a lot of other things
that could have been wrong with me that are much worse than a shrunken hand. I could
have been born blind or deaf. I could have been mentally disabled and unable to
understand or communicate with the people around me. In fact, there have been many
times that I have longed for this very thing: to not know what the people around me are
saying and to not realize that everyone is staring. Sometimes I can feel their gaze, almost
as if there is one pair of eyes looking at me. It doesn’t matter how many of them there
are, all I feel is the one pair of eyes- the eyes of humanity gazing upon my shame.

I wonder what emotions are captured in these eyes. Indeed, I have come to
realize that it is the eyes that reveal to me what people are thinking. Over the years, I’ve
become a talented reader of thoughts, able to see through external words and cloaked
expressions. People may try to hide, but the eyes always reveal their hiding place and
what it holds. Sometimes when I am writing up an order at the shop, I can feel
someone’s eyes investigating my hand. Of course, when I look up, they are looking at
my eyes or looking away nonchalantly, but I can see in their eyes that they have invaded
my pain and are glad to leave it to me to bear alone. The way I am shaped is something that all good mothers and fathers pray to God will never happen to their child. Truly, I would not wish this upon anyone else, but my bitterness sometimes desires a companion. Of course, what companion could possibly relate to the way that I feel?

Sympathy holds different meanings for me than for most other “normal” people. Certainly I have learned to live with my affliction and those around me have accepted it just as easily. Besides, I try to keep it hidden under my cloak as often as possible. I am not blatantly worried about what people will think; I just hate the way I feel when people see my hand and realize that I realize they are staring. They always make awkward expressions as if to say, “Poor man, how does he cope?” I don’t want pity; I’ve coped quite fine all these years.

It is no surprise that my dreams are about children, considering that at the center of my anguish is my childhood. If normal children can be cruel, the little Jewish kids in my neighborhood were quite vicious. I have spent much of my life trying to drown out the whispers around me, which seek to determine the cause of my affliction. Our culture views physical handicaps as signs of demonic possession or perhaps some inconceivable sin that my parents had committed. As far as I know, my parents have done nothing worse than anyone else.

As the months and years of my childhood were quickly dissolved into time’s vacuum, the rumors took their toll on my heart. Eventually, I learned to just block people out. Getting to know me was about as easy as breaking through a stone wall. Once, I let my wall down just enough to let someone peek in; or should I say, he broke right through it. His name was Jephthah and I first met him when we were both about sixteen years
old. I was not “well-versed” in the art of friendmaking since I could count my friends on my one good hand. Yet Jephthah was different from anyone I had ever met.

I can remember it like it was yesterday. The butterflies in my stomach seemed to be dancing a jig. No one of my age had ever reached out to me before; no one had ever really cared. Sure, lots of people felt sorry for me. But having little girls say, “Poor Jeremiah, he looks so sad,” did not count as actual human contact. However, I was not sure, at first, if Jephthah was really interested in me or if he was just a player in one of the organized jokes that were often played on me by the other kids. There seemed to be something different about Jephthah that made me quickly realize that I could probably trust him not to be involved with the other kids. You see, Jephthah was a lot like me: an outcast, but for different reasons.

Our first encounter came in the street one day. All of the other kids were playing a game and I had assumed my usual position by the wall, watching and dreaming of catching the ball. One of the kids, Matthew, had already begun his daily routine of calling me the familiar, humiliating names. I had learned, by that time, to not let them see how upset I really was at their remarks, but I was incredibly frustrated that day. As a dog snarls at the smell of fear, Matthew picked up the scent of my emotional pain and continued mercilessly, much to the amusement of the other boys standing there. Finally, something in me snapped and I shouted angrily, “I only need one good hand to beat you, you worthless coward!” The words just darted out of my mouth without the consent of my brain.

Matthew was not the kind of kid you would usually yell at. The typical bully, he rarely had to back up his bark because those whom he chose to challenge were usually no
match for him physically. Of course, I was no exception to the rule. He wouldn’t have to try very hard to beat me because of my bad hand. After I had issued my challenge, my stomach turned so many times that my head became dizzy. Matthew began to slowly walk my direction. When he was about three steps away from me, he said, “I’ll give you one second to take that back you sorry cripple!”

Well, like any fearless sixteen year old, I knew that I could not back down, no matter what the consequences. I scrolled the list of brave insults in my brain, probing for the right words that would prove my courage and hopefully, turn back my attacker, but no words came. I figured that once again I would just back down and let the world roll over me; but as I opened my mouth, a low, powerful voice rang out over me, drowning out my words and rescuing my hopes.

“If there’s one thing I hate more than bullies, it’s bullies that look as stupid as you!”

The crowd that had by this time gathered around our little drama quickly shifted around to face the new hero that had just arrived on the scene; and to their dismay, he was no hero, only Jephthah. Jephthah had a reputation for being a rough one, much rougher than Matthew. Jephthah, unlike Matthew, was more action than talk.

“I believe what this guy says,” Jephthah said, walking slowly towards Matthew with every word. When he was very close to Matthew, he leaned forward into his face. Matthew, leaning back, was visibly shaken. Jephthah continued, “I bet he could whip you with one hand, but I just think that I would enjoy it more if I did it myself! What do you think?”
I think that the only person present whose heart was beating faster and louder than mine was Matthew. This new addition to our teenage game of strategic intimidation had trumped him, and he knew it. My fear caused me to instinctively hide my hand under my cloak, but I remained as confident-looking as I could. Time stood still as the wheels turned in Matthew’s head. He wasn’t very intelligent, but he knew that he didn’t want to fight Jephthah, especially over something as insignificant as me.

Matthew breathed unconfidently, “Why do you care what I do to this freak? I don’t have a problem with you.”

Jephthah, squeezing out the rest of Matthew’s dignity, said, “You shouldn’t worry about why I’m going to do it, you should only worry about who’s going to carry you home to your mother when I’m through with you.”

The other kids quickly turned back to Matthew, realizing that Jephthah was a superior insulter, which was the highest honor among teenage boys.

Matthew said, “I’m not wasting my time on this trash.”

But his attempt to save face was futile. Everyone knew that he had been beaten even though there was never a fight. Matthew and his followers slowly disappeared towards their homes, and Jephthah and I were left alone.

“Thanks,” I said, still searching my mind for the right words to say.

“No problem,” said Jephthah, “I’ve never liked that guy anyway.” He leaned against the wall and crossed his feet in front of him. “If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to your hand anyway?”

The question usually pushed me into emotional reclusion, but for some reason I felt ok talking about it to Jephthah; after all, he had just put his neck on the line for me.
“I was born this way. I don’t know why; I guess I’m the lucky one who gets to be stared at his whole life.”

“Well, you’re not the only one,” said Jephthah.

I didn’t have to wonder what he was talking about. Everyone knew about Jephthah. In the world of teenagers, rumors like Jephthah’s travel fast and are very effective in defining your place in the social caste system. Jephthah’s stigma left him at the bottom of the pile. I didn’t want to ask him about it because I already knew. At least my deformity was a physical one, but Jephthah could do nothing about his. It really wasn’t his fault, but people usually don’t see it that way. In our culture, family is everything. Just take a look at our race, the descendents of Abraham. Being a child of Abraham automatically includes you in all of the benefits that Abraham had. But Jephthah wasn’t even considered a full-fledged Israelite like the rest of us. No one really knew if he was or not. When your mother is the local prostitute, who can say who your father is. Our conversation turned awkward when Jephthah said that I wasn’t the only one who gets stared at. He stared at his feet as if he thought they might disappear if he looked away. The truth was that he knew that I knew and there was no need to discuss it.

I broke the silence: “Do you really think that I could have taken that guy?”

“Sure I do. Guys like that just need someone to stand up to them. Besides, you can do a lot of damage with one good hand and two good legs.”

We both laughed. It seemed nice to have someone be open with me about me hand. Usually people were too embarrassed to admit that anything was even wrong with it. Of course, most sixteen year olds are not hesitant to say what they mean, and I liked that about Jephthah. I guess I liked it because I was the same way. My father used to say
that my mouth could peel the whitewash off a building, and he was probably right.

Usually, though, what my mouth did to get me into trouble, my hand would do to get me out of it. It was almost like the rules were different for me. I could say whatever I wanted, to whomever I wanted, and usually no one, besides my parents, would have anything to say about it. I mean, who wants to punish or confront a child in my "condition." Of course, I became spoiled socially and I had few true friends. I wasn't unfriendly, just too honest.

Well, this trait made me fast friends with the other central outcast of the neighborhood. He was never afraid of anything or anybody. Needless to say, the nameless, faceless bully that had followed me since birth disappeared because he was no longer picking on me, but also on Jephthah; and no teenage boy in his right mind was willing to do that. Of course, I was just thankful that he was my friend and not my enemy.

I often wondered what made him reach out to me. When we first became friends, I quickly realized that I didn’t look at him in the same way that everyone else did. As far as I was concerned, the fact that his mother was a prostitute was none of my business. Maybe I was just desperate for human contact. Maybe I was one of the very few people who realized that his situation was not his fault. It’s not like he asked to be born to a prostitute no more than I asked to be born with a deformed hand. I guess we both realized that we were the same and we both could use a friend.

After that, I continued to have the same dream. However, I didn’t mind as much waking up. I didn’t dread life as much, since I at least had a friend to hang out with. The thing was, I also started having other dreams as well. I was still deformed in these
dreams, but I guess that I had learned that maybe someone could accept me the way that I was.
Chapter 2

Synagogue Thoughts

Sometimes life is more than hard, it’s impossible. Like a fisherman on a frozen lake, sometimes it’s easy to get stranded in the cold. Fast-life is so fast with its never-ending waves. Up and down goes success and disaster, emotional seasickness is the norm: my life is no different.

I’m sure that many think I have grown accustomed to my handicap; that life is the same for me in my own little world as it is for everyone else’s in theirs. The paradox is, however, that life is not the same for anyone. I’m not one to swim in the sea of pity, but I taken my own share of midnight dips. Sometimes, as a teenager, I felt like my life was the only one filled with hardship; the only one that was hard to understand. Jephthah changed all of that.

For a sixteen year old, Jephthah was more mature than anyone I had ever met. Unfortunately, his maturity was not a matter of choice. A boy in his situation had no choice but to grow up fast, and hard. He trusted no one, cared for no one, and let no one in; that is, except me. It was truly an unlikely pairing that happened between us.

Looking back, I think that both of us were at the point in our lives when lacking a true friend any longer would seal our fate; if not physically, then emotionally. Without Jephthah, life would have raced by, the conscious coma of my existence ending with much anticipated rest. I was drowning and Jephthah was like a buoy- still in the same deep ocean as me, but somehow able to keep me afloat.

Life is not a fairy tale, or even a good story. At first, Jephthah and I hung out just because we needed someone to hang out with. Now, five years later, we are both twenty-one and we have found true friendship. Don’t get me wrong, we would never say these
things to each other- it's not a man's way to blubber and cry over another man about how
close they are. However, to me it is obvious that we both realize our worth to each other,
even if others don't.

When I was sixteen, the subject finally came up with my parents and they did not
seem share my enthusiasm about my newfound friendship.

"Where are you going again, to the marketplace? said my mother, "I thought you
hated it there because of all the people."

"I'm not going alone, I'm meeting a friend."

"You've got a friend?" said my mother, "I mean...uh...who...who is it?"

The damage was already inadvertently done, though. I knew that she didn't mean
it and I couldn't blame her asking. I had never had a friend, or at least one who was not
ashamed of going out in public with me.

"His name is Jephthah," I said, trying to avoid the subject. My parents were not
stuck up, but they were definitely not accepting of everyone. I guess that they were just
like all people, born with their own touches of pride and prejudice. Their issue was that
they had seen the hurt in my eyes so many times; someone who I thought would be a real
friend to me ended up like all the others. Since childhood, my mother was overly
interested, to the point of being nosy, about my friends (or lack thereof).

"What does he do?" she asked, trying not to sound suspicious.

"Uh, well, he sells...stuff." I said in the most nonchalant tone I could muster.

The truth was, Jephthah lived in a neighborhood close to ours, but still far enough away
to be a different world. In his neighborhood, gathering discarded items from the garbage
heap made for a legitimate living. This trash could be cleaned up and resold on the
streets. Jephthah was a street vendor, and a very good one. He could convince anyone that an old oil lamp was a priceless commodity. He did very well in his business, probably because he had been doing it since he was six years old. Of course, most of his profits went to support his mother who was laid up in their shack most of the time, racked with pain and disease - fruits of her profession. Jephthah worked very hard to support her, he truly loved her despite all of the mistakes she had made.

“What kind of stuff does he sell?” Mother pried.

“Mother, it doesn’t matter and I’m going to be late!” I snapped. I resented her persistence. I wasn’t going to let anyone mess up my one chance at having a good time. I literally ran out the door because I knew what the next question would be, and I refused to tell her what Jephthah’s parents did for a living and I never have. In fact, I’ve never even let my parents meet Jephthah, not because that I’m ashamed, but because I would be ashamed of what my parents might say or ask. “Parents”, in Jephthah’s case, is somewhat a contradiction in term because he has no idea who his real father is. A normal, everyday walk down the street is very difficult for him. The way the shopkeeper smiles or the strong arms of the carpenter are all telltale signs of paternity. Of course, no one has ever come forward to claim ownership of a troublemaker like Jephthah.

The only person who knows the truth isn’t talking: his mother. Her name is Deborah and she is a very beautiful woman in the technical sense. She has very delicate facial features that define her beauty. Likewise, her body is curvy and attractive. However, the contradiction lies in her eyes. Her beauty is almost a thing of spite to herself and others. She is like a priceless love letter, forever lost in a bottle on a sea of rejection, eternally waiting for the waves to bring her to a shore of peace and acceptance.
But the waves have only left her cold and wrinkled in the rain. By now her beauty is a memory of the past, long sold for a piece of bread that was gone in an instant. She had once been married, but an unfaithful husband crushed her dreams of family and security. She then picked up the fragments of her hopes and bestowed them upon many men, hoping they could somehow manage to mend them back together. But instead, they have taken them and ran away until Deborah has been left with only scattered memories of the person she had once hoped to be.

Her only joy in life is Jephthah. Who else would care for someone as despicable as her. She raised him herself on the streets. Her job is nothing for a young child to behold, so she spent many years convincing the naïve little boy that she simply had a lot of men who were her friends and that they didn’t like to be talked to by little boys. Of course, when Jephthah became old enough to realize the truth, he was devastated. He left his mother at the age of thirteen and lived on his own for two years. He hated the one who had given birth to him and he hated the fact that every time he looked in the mirror, he saw her eyes. But the thing he hated the most was that he also saw a stranger’s eyes in his own, some mysterious man out there, probably unwilling to admit that he had even touched Deborah, much less that this ruddy young man was his son.

Eventually, Deborah became very sick, even to the point of death. When Jephthah heard about it, he broke down and ran to her side, and he has stayed there ever since. Unfortunately, when she got better, she went back to work- tearing Jephthah’s heart out. But this time he decided not to leave her, but to love her. Every time she came home with a busted lip or a bruised cheek, he became her savior. The men of the town had all learned their lessons from being whipped into line by the stark raving mad son of
a mistreated prostitute. Her sicknesses never really left, they were only suppressed for several months or weeks at a time, but each time she returned to “work,” Jephthah lost another little piece of his heart.

I can remember our first conversations about these things. It took some time before he told me all about his mother. I just sat there, staring at him in disbelief.

“What, you think I’m too messed up to talk to now?” he said.

Realizing my rudeness I turned away from his eyes and wrote my name in the sand with a stick. I searched for the right words to say; words that would not jeopardize the only true friendship I had ever known.

“No, that’s not it,” I said, “I just can’t believe all that you have been through. I’m not sure that I would know how to handle it.”

“Well, life doesn’t usually ask you if you think you can handle what it’s about to throw at you,” he said. “That’s not its way, or at least for people like me. Take a look at those other guys who play in the street. They play now, but by this time next year, their fathers will have all found them a job and possibly a wife. What are the odds that anything like that will ever happen to me... hmmm... I say they’re pretty slim. I mean, who’s gonna offer a real job to trash like me. Everybody knows who I am and, more importantly, who my mother is. People like me don’t get the same breaks as everyone else. I didn’t ask for any of this and I wish I could just return my pathetic little life back to God where it came from. He is obviously just playing a cruel joke on me. In fact, I think God might have made a mistake; nobody could be so stupid as to make someone the way I am.”
His waltz with blasphemy shifted my feet uncomfortably. "Jephthah," I said, "I don’t think you should say things like that. God is listening you know. Besides, the law doesn’t allow it."

"Whatever! What rock have you been hiding under?" he shouted indignantly. "If God was really listening, then He would hear what I hear at night when my mother cries herself to sleep. She cries, Jeremiah, she cries because of me! I hear her say that she’s sorry for being the kind of mother that she is and that she’s sorry for the kind of life that I have to live because of her. Well, I’m not sorry! I haven’t done anything wrong! As far as I’m concerned, my mother and I were just dealt a bad hand, and I’m not so sure that the Dealer didn’t know what He was doing."

His words, shocking to me at first, began to make more and more sense as I saw the pain that had nursed them for so many years. Cautiously I asked, "Is that why you don’t go to synagogue on the Sabbath?"

"Synagogue, are you crazy? Why would I want to give my time to a bunch of hypocrites? What do they know about me? All they’ve ever known are soft robes and cushy seats. If you ask me, I think God made a big mistake when He put people like that in charge of His house. I wouldn’t let those men within fifty feet of my shack, and I’ve got nothing they would want to steal. Every Sabbath, everyone flocks to the town performance. I’ll tell you what, I think the best actors in Jerusalem are those priests and Pharisees and I’m not afraid to tell them!"

By this time, his face was red and his eyes were quadruple their normal size. I could hear his heart beating out of his chest. I quickly tried to change the subject, but he wouldn’t let me.
He shouted loudly, “Gehazi!”

“What?” I asked curiously, certain that he had lost his sanity.

“Gehazi is the Pharisee that hates me the most. When I was a little boy, I tried to go to the synagogue because I had heard all the other kids talk about it. I wondered what went on there. So, I woke up early and told my mother I was going to the dump to get a lamp I had seen earlier which I thought I could get a good price for. How ironic, I was lying so I could go to synagogue. Anyway, the doorkeeper reluctantly let me in. I stood there the entire time and soaked in all of the service. Jeremiah, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. There were intricate mosaic designs that tweaked my childhood interest more than anything ever had. Furthermore, there was a beautiful monorah at the front of the synagogue- I remember thinking how much I could sell it for. I loved the splendor of the service and the beauty of the tradition. The rabbi read from a book called Isaiah. He kept talking about the Messiah. My mother had once told me about the Messiah, how God would send a great prophet who would free us from the Romans. I remember wondering if this prophet could keep my mother’s “friends” from hitting her and if He would bring us meat to eat everyday. By the end of the service, I was so attached to the beauty of the synagogue and the excitement of the promised Messiah that I didn’t want to leave. One of the Pharisees noticed me and walked over to where I was. He seemed like a nice man and I suppose that my appearance was curious to him.”

“He introduced himself as Gehazi and said, ‘Why are you still here? The service is over.’”

“I was just waiting for the Messiah,” I said innocently, “the rabbi said that He could come at any time. Are you expecting Him any time today?”"
“Gehazi laughed out loud and said, ‘I’ll tell you what, if the Messiah comes, I’ll be sure to send for you, but don’t hold your breath.’”

“I remember wishing that he would hold his breath because it stunk so badly. His answer made me uncomfortable, but I still didn’t completely realize how he was mocking me. I was only a little boy.”

“He said, ‘Where is your mother?’”

“‘She’s still sleeping,’ I said, ‘she was out pretty late with one of her friends.’”

“My answer brought a confused look to his face and he said, ‘Then where is your father?’”

When Jephthah reached this part of the story, he paused, as if the pain of it would not let him go on. I could tell he was battling the tears that were striving to show their faces on his face. He continued, “So I said, ‘Sir, I really don’t know who my father is.’”

“At this statement, Gehazi became infuriated. His eyes squinted and his voice became raspy, ‘what does your mother do for a living?’ However, I know that he already knew the answer. The next thing I knew, I was being dragged by my ears and thrown into the street. I’ll never forget his words: ‘Get out of here you unclean little animal! Keep your filthy little self away from this place or I’ll have the synagogue guard throw you and your whore mother in prison! Do you hear me you...’ As I ran away, he was still yelling, cursing at me and calling my mother names that I was too young to understand; some Pharisee, cursing and swearing at a little boy! May God curse me if I ever have anything to do with those people or that synagogue again!”

Jephthah became quiet and stared at the wall, still replaying the scene in his mind. Pain and resentment oozed from his eyes and I now realized why he had such an aversion
to the synagogue and anything religious. I also understood why he was so angry with
God. In his mind, the Pharisees were supposed to know and represent God, but the
religious system, stamped with God’s seal of approval, had only treated he and his
mother with malice and contempt.

“Besides,” Jephthah said, “it’s not like God has been totally fair to you either.”
He was calming down now. I could tell that he didn’t repeat his story very often. “How
many times,” he continued, “have you asked God why you were born with a deformed
hand? Or more importantly, how many times have you asked God to heal you? Has He
ever once answered your prayers or even let you know that He heard them? No. If God
is there, He only listens to other people, not to rejects like us.”

The sad thing was, Jephthah’s arguments made sense to me. I mean, he was right,
I couldn’t count the number of nights that I had laid awake in my bed and begged God
that I would wake up with a new hand in the morning. However, each morning had
always brought the same disappointment, as faithful as the sunshine through my window.
Also, like Jephthah, I hadn’t asked to be born this way. Why should I suffer more than
anyone else? God must have made a mistake or He was playing a joke on me as well.

Slowly, but surely, the conversations between Jephthah and I pulled us closer in
our friendship, but drove wedges between my heart and my faith. Growing up in a strict
Jewish household had caused me to hesitate before questioning the things I had always
been taught by my parents. Jephthah was the catalyst I needed to pull me out of my
religious shell and let me see the world as it really was- awful. Religion, more and more,
became a symbol of denial. Acknowledging tradition and assuming the ancient
principles were true only made one oblivious to the true disaster and meaninglessness of
human existence. Most other people at least had two good hands to enjoy while they were here. However, I was stuck with a symbol of God’s rejection, hidden under my cloak. Over time, though, I stopped hiding my hand when I was around Jephthah. In the same token, Jephthah didn’t hide the fact that his mother was a prostitute and terminally ill from the diseases of her patrons. This mutual understanding has lasted the past five years, and we are still the best of friends today.

It is interesting to me that Jephthah’s experiences in the synagogue have been so different than mine. I’ve always thought I had it the worst. When I go to the synagogue with my parents, we usually try to arrive just before the beginning of the service. There is a large door at the back of the synagogue that is kept by doorkeeper. This door is shut and secured as soon as the service begins, but the doorkeeper knows us well enough that he usually lets us in just a few seconds late so that we can stand in the back and avoid the stares of my jury. Of course, every once and a while, a small child will catch a glimpse of my hand and run to his mother screaming, “Monster! Monster!”

It seems I will never escape the cruelty of little children. They have a sixth sense when it comes to detecting insecurity. What bothers me the most is I realize that children usually say what adults are too “mature” to say out loud. This means everyone is probably repulsed by me, not just the children who are too naïve to keep quiet. In spite of this fact, I always go to the synagogue on the Sabbath anyway. Basically, my parents don’t leave me much of a choice. If I want a place to live, I have to abide by their rules. I may be twenty-one years old- a man, but my special condition causes me to be confined to the living conditions of a child. It has become a way of life for me and I no longer resent the stares quite as much. In fact, most of the stares have ceased as people have
become more and more comfortable around me. However, there is always the new person who has just moved into town or is visiting a relative, who can’t help but stare at me the way everyone did the first time they laid eyes on me.

Unlike Jephthah’s mother, my parents think the Sabbath is the most important event of the week. Besides, what would people say if we missed the service? Everything is like that for my parents. They are always more interested in what other people think than in what is really important. Usually, they are just trying to protect me by being so religiously ritualized that we don’t stick out, or should I say, my hand doesn’t stick out. However, in all fairness, my parents truly love the synagogue and they cling to the old traditions and laws as reminders of the way things have been, and will be, for years.

I suppose that I am definitely their son because I have taken on the very thing that I hate about them the most: the overwhelming concern about the opinion of others. Dancing to a song played in time with the world’s opinion doesn’t leave much room for fancy footwork. No, the dance becomes quite spastic and ungraceful as the music changes key with every note. More importantly, the dancer becomes tired and disheartened, unable to master the song everyone else waltzes with ease. I am the dancer and I have lost time. Time has passed quickly, yet so slow there seems to be an eternity between the beatings of my heart. There have been many times that I have wished my heart to would stop keeping time and the song would end so my tired legs could rest.

I have found comfort, though, in Jephthah. Though the world plays its own tune, Jephthah seems to dance to mine. We are two wanderers crossing different deserts, but is there really much difference between the sun in one desert and the sun in another? The
rejection of the world beats down on us, or should I say, beats us down, much in the same way. I have found some shade in Jephthah, but I am still blistered here in my desert.
Chapter 3

Eyes

I am indeed left-handed, not by nature, but by necessity. The fact of the matter is that I was born with a deformed right hand. When I was born, the rest of my body was completely normal, and I am thankful for that. In fact, there were a lot of other things that could have been wrong with me that are much worse than a shriveled hand. I could have been born blind or deaf. I could have been mentally disabled and unable to understand or communicate with the people around me. In fact, there have been many times that I have longed for this very thing: to not know what the people around me are saying and to not realize that everyone is staring. Sometimes I can feel their gaze, almost as if there is one pair of eyes looking at me. It doesn’t matter how many of them there are, all I feel is the one pair of eyes—the eyes of humanity gazing upon my shame.

Mother continues to yell at me to get up, but I really don’t care. What is the point, I have made my own decision about this whole religious thing and I have decided to give it all up. I’ve celebrated my Bar Mitzvah and I can do whatever I please. They can kick me out of their house for all I care; I’m done pretending!

“Jeremiah,” says my mother, “please come to the synagogue with us.” There are tears in her eyes and they take me by surprise.

“Mother, what’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing, I just have this funny feeling about today. I haven’t slept very well the last couple of nights; I keep having this weird dream.”
Oh great, some weird dream is supposed to justify the continuation of our family hypocrisy. All I need is mother’s paranoia and useless worrying. I say, “Mother, why are you crying over a dream? Are you sick or something?”

“Jeremiah,” she says, still wrestling with the tears, “please just do what I ask, just this one time and I’ll never pressure you to go again. I know that you’re a full-grown man now and you can make your own decisions, but your father and I just worry about you sometimes because of... well, you know...”

“My hand!” I say loudly and with impatience. “All you care about is how things look to other people in that stupid, old temple; so let me just save us both the embarrassment by not going at all!” I can see that my words hit like a dozen stones upon her heart, but that is what I wanted. I need her to understand that I no longer care what people think about me.

“Jeremiah, look at me.” She says as I keep my gaze fixed upon the rug on my floor. “You didn’t let me finish. I realize that you’re frustrated with us and with the synagogue and I’m sorry that you feel that way, but if you come this morning, I promise I will never ask you again.”

I shuffle my feet and contemplate the value of her statement. That is exactly what I am looking for- the salvation from the ritual I have always been forced to follow. I answer, “Ok, I’ll go, but I’ll never make it on time, so go on without me and I’ll just slip in the back late.”

There is immediate relief on her face, but the tears remain in her eyes. She says nothing, but with a simple nod lets me know that she agrees and that she is thankful. What a strange morning this is. Maybe she ate some bad fish before she went to sleep.
Whatever’s going on, I’m not going to miss my big chance to get out of the traditional
drama forever.

By the time I get ready, my parents have been gone for a while. This is great, my
last time in the synagogue and I am only going to have to endure through the last little bit
of the service. I walk out my door and into the street, heading towards the synagogue.
The city looks like a ghost town with not a soul to be seen in any direction. It seems sort
of spooky to me, but then again, I don’t mind that there are less people around to stare at
my hand. The road to the temple is a long distance from my house. As I walk, I see
some dogs fighting over some food behind one of the buildings. It’s interesting to me
that dogs never put on masks for one another. If they want something, they fight over it
and the matter is settled. If only people could be so simple. Instead, you have to wonder
and guess what they are really thinking behind their smug smiles and practiced
presentations. However, the eyes always give them away.

As I watch the dogs, something behind them catches my eye. There’s a man
sitting on the corner: it is Jephthah. I decide to be funny and sneak around the back of the
building where he can’t see me. When I get close to him, I say in my most raspy voice,
“Hey you, give me all you got, or else!”

He doesn’t even turn around, but simply stares forward. As he reaches in his
pocket to get his money, I quickly realize the error of my jest. The next thing I know,
I’m pinned down on the street with a knife to my throat and bloodshot eyes staring at me
with curious madness. He says in a loud voice, “Man, that’s not funny! I should cut you
anyway!”
I laugh nervously, hoping that he is joking, but there is no humor in his eyes, only reckless anger. I say cautiously, "Hey man, I was just playing; calm down! What's the matter with you anyway?"

He smiles just a little, as if he was joking the entire time; but the pain and anger never leave his eyes. However, he lets me up, so I'm content to still be breathing.

"Sorry, man," he says, "you just took me by surprise. I'm not feeling very well today."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but you nearly took my ear off! That would really help- a man with a deformed hand and one ear- I bet all the kids would laugh at that." My sarcasm cracks a smile on his face, but he doesn't give it much room to breathe. "What gives?" I say, "You look like you just lost your favorite lamp or something."

"I really don't want to talk about it; and besides, you probably wouldn't understand anyway. No one would understand." His words are spoken with all the tear-restraining strength he can muster. This seems a bit strange to me. Jephthah and I no longer keep secrets from each other and his deliberate concealment of his problem wounds me, but I'm not giving up that easily. I say, "Don't you trust me anymore? I was just curious."

"Jeremiah, don't be so weepy all the time. It's not a matter of trust, it's a matter of fact; and the fact is that there is nothing you can do for me. Besides, it's not about me, it's about my mother."

"Is she alright?" I ask in a tone revived by his limited revelation. "Is she real sick this time?"

"No, that's not it at all. In fact, she's feeling better than ever."
“Well, then that’s great news,” I say with a false sense of enthusiasm, but his expression doesn’t change.

He raises his head and says, “Let me explain to you what happens when a prostitute gets better—she goes back to work—that’s what happens! Jeremiah, she’s not really better, but since she had a good day yesterday and the pain was more bearable than usual, she’s back on the street this morning. I tried to talk her into not going. You see, I take care of her everyday, especially since she’s been sick, but now she’s right back out there again and she doesn’t even care what I think about it.”

I stand speechless. I don’t have the words to comfort him because I’ve never been in any situation like his. All I can think to say is, “sorry.”

Jephthah continues to stare at the ground in front of him. One, solitary tear drops quickly from his eye and creates a miniature crater in the dust, turning it to mud. It is all that I can do not to cry myself, but he has already said once today that I was too weepy, so I decide to be the strong one here and not to show my weakness; besides, it would only complicate matters.

After an eternity, he finally says, “It’s alright, it’s not your fault. And I’m sorry that I almost decapitated you earlier, although it would probably be an improvement.”

We both laugh a little. I say, “Listen, let’s hang out today, just you and me.”

“That sounds fine,” he replies, “maybe we could go down to the dump or watch the girls when they come out of the synagogue after the service.”

“Synagogue!” I yell. “Oh no, I just remembered that I promised my mother I would go to the synagogue this morning.”
"But I thought you said that we could hang out today, just you and me; you know, watch the girls and stuff."

"I'm sorry," I say, "but I made a promise and besides, this is the last time that I'm ever going to have to go."

He replies in a monotonous tone, "Whatever. You're always going to be a mother's boy; always cowering down to whatever she wants you to do. I guess it's ok to break a promise to your best friend so you can keep one to your precious mother. Is that what you're saying?"

"That's stupid, Jephthah, you know it's not like that. I just have to go."

"Whatever! I thought that you were different, but I guess you are just like everyone else! Well, make a 'good impression' for me since that's the only reason you go anyway! I'm sorry that a living friend is not worth more than a dead God!"

He doesn't even give me time to respond since he has already ran out of earshot before he finishes his last sentence. I'm angry with my mother. How could she be so inconsiderate as to make me promise to come on the one morning that someone else really needs me? All of these years no one has ever really needed me to be there, and now this. However, somehow amidst my anger, I also feel somewhat guilty because I realize that I have talked to Jephthah so long that the service is surely over by now.

Basically, I have let Jephthah and my mother down. Once again, the failure of my existence is proven.

However, I decide I will walk to the synagogue anyway and try to catch my parents on their way out. Maybe I could make up some convincing excuse for missing, but I doubt if they will ever believe it. This must be the worst day of my life. I've let
down the only two people in my life who have any concern for me. Why God, why have
You made my life so difficult? Do You even care? Deformities aside, do You even care
about the way that I feel inside? When I was a baby, I was safe because I was
unconscious of the pain and disgrace that I held in my hand. Did You see me then? Did
you hear me cry? When is it my turn for something good to happen? Maybe Jephthah is
right, You don’t listen to me; maybe even You think I’m too ugly to acknowledge. Well,
this is the last day that I will ever pay You my respects, since You’ve never paid any to
me. I wish that it didn’t have to be this way, but I’ve asked You over and over again for
just a word, just one star to twinkle or one leaf to fall- one sign to let me know that
You’ve heard me all these years. I’ve waited and waited, but I don’t think that I can wait
any longer. I’ve made my decision and I won’t waste my time, or Yours, any longer.

As I approach the door to the synagogue, I expect to see all the people coming
out, but the steps are still empty. I’ve missed the service completely and everyone has
already left. It must have ended early and I know that my mother is never going to
forgive me. I figure I will peak inside the door, just to see if there is anyone left whom I
might know.

I knock on the door quietly. The doorkeeper cracks the door and I can see inside.
I am astounded to find that the synagogue is still filled with people, although there is
complete silence. The doorkeeper knows me, so he lets me in despite my late arrival.
The only thing I can hear is the sound of the speaker’s voice. Well, at least I won’t have
to let my mother down. I turn to find a place to stand in the back, but there is no room
anywhere; I’ve never seen a service with so many people. I immediately begin to feel a
little shaky and I reach to hide my hand in my cloak, but I realize that in my hurriedness I
have left it at home. I scan the crowd, searching for a place to blend, but I find none. Suddenly, the speaker shouts, “You, come and stand here.”

In an instant, my worst fears turn into reality. Every eye in the entire synagogue turns and stares at me. I feel weak and boxed in. I have no way to hide my deformity and everyone is staring at me. I turn to leave as quickly as I can, but the voice rings out again, “Jeremiah, come and stand here.”

I turn quickly and gaze down the aisle to the origin of the voice. How did he know my name? I squint, but I’m almost positive that I don’t recognize him. But somehow, I feel like I know him. His voice sounds familiar to me. However, I am still terrified. This is the very thing that I’ve always been afraid of: being exposed with nowhere to hide. The voice, however, continues to resound not just in my ears, but somewhere deeper inside. I can’t help but be drawn to it. It seems bigger than me. It is hard to understand, but I find myself wanting to walk towards it.

Without my mind’s permission, my left foot is in front of me and my right one is quickly following. As I walk down, I see the people’s faces. They are staring at me, especially at my hand. I stop, paralyzed with fear and paranoia. But the voice replays in my mind, “Come and stand here.” For some reason, at this moment in time, there is nowhere else that I’d rather be than standing where the voice told me to stand. Now, I can see its origin. He is a man about my height and definitely bigger. In fact, he doesn’t look like someone who would be teaching in a synagogue, he looks more like someone who works with his hands. His shoulders are broad and his skin is dry and tough, as if he has worked in the sun for many years. Who is he?
As I continue to walk, I finish my assessment of the rest of him and finally reach the most important feature: his eyes. I immediately want to look away, but I can’t. It’s like staring at lightning: a remarkable display of unbridled beauty too bright to behold. The brightness is not something that my eyes comprehend, but something which my soul cannot resist. I don’t know who he is, but the time I have spent in his eyes has already brought me to the front of the room. It is as if there is no one else here but just he and I. The stranger is smiling at me, as if he knows something that I don’t. However, his smile reveals much more than just happiness. He is smiling as if he understands my life and the pain I face, yet he still sees in it something worth smiling about. It is a smile of hope, a hope that I’ve never seen before; especially not in my life. I still feel the butterflies, but the terror of my exposure is gone. For the first time in my life, I feel safe.

The man says, “I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil; to save life or to destroy?”

My eyes open wide. Does he expect me to answer this? I remain speechless, as does everyone else. Then he turns to me and says, “Stretch out your hand.”

I am puzzled by his command, but I take my left hand and stretch it out to him. He says, “No, your other one, Jeremiah.”

Fire shoots through my chest. What does he mean? Why should I hold my hand out for everyone to see? Am I not already shamed enough? However, something inside urges me to trust this stranger. It is as if he knows what I feel, yet he is still willing to walk through my despair with me. He isn’t looking anywhere else but in my eyes. His eyes are so deep and full of love. They encourage me, urging me to try. At this moment in time, the decision is mine: do I face my biggest fear, or do I turn and walk away. I
decide that enough is enough. I don’t know why, but if this man wants me to stretch out my deformed hand, then I guess I’ll do it.

I feel like I am standing on the ledge of a cliff, leaning over the edge. Below are all the jagged rocks and relentless waves of my fears. I didn’t ask to be put here on this ledge, but the only way off is to dive directly into the thing that I most dread. However, this day is different because I have found safety in his eyes. The stranger reaches out his hand towards me, beckoning me to inch further to the edge. I stay adhered to his eyes, realizing that they are giving me courage that I’ve never known before. I begin to lift my arm, but I am stopped by a strange sensation in my wrist. It feels like someone is pouring warm oil all across my hand. When I look down, my hand is normal! My hand is normal! But how is this possible? I’m speechless for a moment, then engulfed in a sea of shouts as the people in the temple make the same realization as I do: I am healed!

I just stand here, staring at my new hand. I hold it up to the other one and wiggle my ten fingers in unison. They are the same! “I don’t believe it!” I say with awestruck exclamation.

The stranger takes my new hand, looks deep into my eyes, and says, “Jeremiah, just believe it; it’s real. God Himself has healed you today; give Him the credit He deserves.” There is a tear in his eye, but I don’t think it is from sadness. I could possibly imagine someone crying over the sorrow of my deformity, but never the joy of my healing. This stranger knows me. I don’t know how, but he knows me deeper than I know myself.

I say, “Th.. thank you.” My tears refuse to be held back. “You have no idea what this means to me.”
"I think you might be surprised how much I do know you." He winks at me and pats me on the back. He is very strong. He walks past me into the crowd that is still gawking over the miracle. I, however, am awestruck by the presence of the man I just met. Who is he?

I hear a familiar voice behind me saying, "Oh, Jeremiah!"

I turn to see my mother and father running towards me. My mother is a nervous wreck and my father is more emotional than I have ever seen him in my entire life. We embrace in a collision of laughs and tears as my mother jumps up and down. My father takes my new hand and examines every last inch of it. Then, he looks me in the eyes with tears streaming down his face and says, "Amazing! Simply amazing, son!"

My mother continues to scream, "I just can't believe it!"

I take her by the arm and say, "Mother, just believe it. I am healed." We embrace for a long time. I feel like a famous man because there is a crowd of people around me shouting praises to God and asking to see my new hand.

Then, a staunch, old man draped in religious garb walks up to the crowd and says, "What's the meaning of all of this? What's going on here?"

My mother excitedly proclaims, "My son is healed! My son is healed!"

The man retorts back, "Who healed him?"

She shouts, "Jesus of Nazareth healed him!" The crowd erupts into cheers. Jesus of Nazareth: so that's his name. It is a common enough name and Nazareth is certainly a common enough place.

The mildewed-looking man the throws a righteous finger high into the air and loudly announces, "Jesus of Nazareth, huh? Well, I say this: any man who doesn't
understand the law enough to know that it is forbidden to do such a thing on the Sabbath certainly cannot be from God.”

My father emphatically replies, “Are you saying that Beezelbub did this awesome miracle here today? Look, I don’t know what kind of prophet this Jesus of Nazareth is, but I know that my son had a withered hand and now he is healed. Can you explain that?”

The man shouts in anger, “You dare to address to a rabbi of the most high God in such a manner. I should have you excommunicated for such disrespect!” His words obviously affect my father because he doesn’t say another word to the man; nor does anyone else. I look around for Jesus, but he is already gone. So, we all just simply leave.

As we walk home, I ask my mother, “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? I’ve never even heard of him before.”

My mother replies, “He is a great prophet. In fact, some even believe him to be the Messiah that is coming to save us from the Romans.”

I stretch out my hand in front of me, caressing my new limb with my other hand. I say, “Well, he certainly has my vote.”

My mother continues, “Jesus has started traveling all around these parts, preaching to thousands of people at a time. Everywhere he goes, there are thousands of miracles that happen just like yours.”

I say, “Is that why you were so adamant in making sure that I came today?”

She takes hold of my hand and says, “Yes, son. I had heard that Jesus was going to be preaching in the synagogue and I just had this feeling that I had to get you there; like that this would be some kind of last chance for you.”
“Last chance?” I ask. “What would make you think that?”

Tears fill her eyes and she says, “Well, Jeremiah, I had this dream last night. It was so strange, yet so real. I dreamed that you were walking down the street. You were a little boy again. As you were walking, the other children were throwing a ball in the street and...” She stops talking, caught by her own emotions. I remain amazed, hanging on her every familiar word. She continues, “Sorry. Anyway, as you were walking, one of the kids threw the ball over another’s head and it was heading straight for you. I tried to yell so that you would dodge it, but you couldn’t seem to hear. I was screaming with all of my might, but it wasn’t doing any good. Just then, another voice rang out, gently saying your name. When I heard it, I just had this feeling that it was this Jesus that I had been hearing about. When you heard his voice, you turned just in time to see the ball. Then,” her voice cracks; I am crying now too. “You reached up your hand and caught it! Your hand was normal and you caught it. Then I woke up.”

I have stopped walking now and I just stand here amazed at her dream. It is almost exactly like the one that I have had for all of these years. I have never told anyone about it. I say, “Mother, I’m going to find this Jesus again. I must go and thank him for what he’s done. Tomorrow, I will find out where he is.”

As I lie down to sleep, I hold up my hand in front of the candlelight. The shadows from my fingers look like animals on my wall. As I drift off to sleep, I thank God for my healing. Jesus had said that God Himself had healed me. I believe it. For the first time in my life, I believe. Tomorrow, I will find Jesus.
Chapter 4

One Boy’s Lunch

The day after a miracle is an unexpected one. A life is spent hoping and wishing only to lose hope to the reality of what was hoped for; but I sure don’t mind. However, I have no idea what’s supposed to be next. The focus of my life has been changed and now I’m unsure of what my two good hands are supposed to do. It has only taken a few moments for me to realize one thing: I must find this man Jesus and thank Him again for what He has done. Life’s meaning is still somewhat blurry, but I know that Jesus holds some of the answers. I decide that nothing else matters except to find Him and figure out what He is all about. I wonder what Jephthah will say when he sees me...

My eyes are filled again with tears as I remember how Jephthah had left angry yesterday. His words are like searing hot irons, branding their permanent scars upon my ears and my heart. I wonder what would have happened if I would have broken my promise to my mother and went with Jephthah. I hope I haven’t traded healing for my best friend. Will he ever believe what happened right after he went storming away? Will he understand or will he only be awestruck, as I still am? How will I explain to someone who doesn’t acknowledge God that God has totally healed me? At least I know it will be interesting and I am greatly anticipating it, despite my anxiety. With this fresh in my mind, I set out on a mission to find Jephthah. I search in all of the usual places, but he is nowhere to be found. He isn’t at the garbage dump or at the marketplace. I hope that he hasn’t done anything drastic; he was pretty upset.
My search continues to be exhaustive, yet fruitless. He just isn’t in any of the usual places. The life of a street vendor visits many roads. As I walk to these places, I notice that no one is staring at me. It’s almost like I’m normal. I may appear normal, but I feel anything but normal. I feel excited, yet a little bit overwhelmed and definitely a little afraid. Now, life is no longer predictable and my losing fate is no longer certain. Every once and a while, I catch myself still hiding my hand under my cloak. Life is different now and I no longer need to act the same way. I search all day long, but I can’t find him. At his shack, I find only the fleas that infest his clothes. Suddenly, I am overtaken by a greater intensity of guilt and fear. I can still clearly see the disappointment on his face when he ran away yesterday. I am truly his only friend and I have truly let him down. Surely he won’t do something crazy or hurt himself. My thoughts torment me for hours, as do my feet.

As the sun and my heart sink low, my search comes to an end. I find him at the outskirts of the city, near the gates, lying on his face in the mud. His clothes are torn and his hair is matted. I run to him, fearing the worst. I say his name and turn him over, only to be greeted by the overwhelming stench of a drunk man’s breath. His lip is bleeding and his eye is swollen. From the looks of it, he has taken on every man in the city and has lost. “Jephthah!” I say, “can you hear me?” But he produces no sound except a low, raspy groan. I am glad that he’s ok, but I know that I need to get him home. Then, I remember that there is no one at his home to take care of him, especially if what he said earlier about his mother is true. Beating down the thoughts of my parents’ discomfort, I decide to take him to my home.
One who has always had two good hands probably doesn’t realize how valuable they are. I am surprised by how easily I can carry him and I imagine the impossibility of the task just twenty-four hours earlier. Nevertheless, my newfound excitement of two-handed work quickly fades into exhaustion by the time I finally reach home. It’s pitch black as I open the door and lug his motionless body inside. My mother is waiting up for me with a perplexed look on her face.

"Bringing home a friend tonight? Looks pretty tired." She pauses and then says in a whisper, "smells like used wine."

"Look, he’s been beaten up and he’s passed out. Will you help me take care of him or not?" I say with urgency.

Noticing my exhaustion and the desperation in my voice, she says reluctantly, yet with increasing sincerity, "His name is Jephthah, isn’t it?" We have never talked about him before, but I guess my mother isn’t completely clueless. "I guess any friend of yours is a friend of mine." She smiles a narrow grin as she takes one of his arms and wraps it around her neck, helping me carry him to my room.

I am truly surprised by her words and her newfound eagerness to help. Maybe I have been wrong about the way I expected her to react to Jephthah, or perhaps there has been such a drastic change in her that she is no longer judgmental. Whatever the reason, for Jephthah’s sake, I am glad. We clean him up and I put him to sleep in my bed, while I wrap up in a blanket on the floor. I have trouble sleeping because I keep thinking about how I feel somewhat responsible for the way he felt. In a way, I drove him to get so sloppy drunk. I try to imagine what it would be like if my mother was a prostitute. The thought makes the hairs on my arms stand up- there would be so much anger that I would
feel towards all those who hurt her. I would also be angry towards her for not changing her own life. I wonder how Jephthah loves his mother the way that she is; it is beyond my comprehension. More than that, I would feel such shame in not knowing who my real father was. This, in itself, seems truly unbearable. The more I think, the more I realize that I will never truly know Jephthah’s pain, and that the cards are not stacked in his favor. His future is as dark as the wilderness after sunset. I’m his only friend; I must bring him some light. But where can I find the light he needs? The only real light I have ever seen was in Jesus’ eyes yesterday when He gazed upon my pain and shared it. I decide that I must take Jephthah to Jesus.

I am awakened the next morning by a slew of groans and the most colorful display of curse words I have ever heard. Jephthah sits up slowly and asks, “Where am I? Jeremiah, is that you?”

“Yea, it’s me. How do you feel?”

“Put it this way, I don’t know which one of you I should answer.”

We laugh a little, although I think it makes his headache worse. Watching him try to get moving makes my head hurt too. I say, “You got pretty drunk and it looks like you lost about five fights at one time. I’m sorry for leaving you, I didn’t want to. I know that you needed me right then; you know, with your mother and all.”

The mention of his mother seems to sober him up quickly. He says, “Don’t mention it. I didn’t mean to blow up at you. I can’t expect you to understand what my life is like. No one can understand, except me.” His words make me feel like an outsider. The next few moments are an awkward silence. Then he says, “Listen, I better
be getting on home. My mother will probably need me. Could you hand me that towel so I can wipe my face.”

“Sure,” I say.

I reach over with my new, right hand and hold the towel out towards him. He reaches out to take it and then suddenly sees my hand. He jumps back about three steps and yells, “Whoa, man! What in the world? I don’t... I don’t... what happened, Jeremiah?”

I smile and say, “What do you mean?” I can’t help but have a little fun with him.

He says, “Either I am still really drunk, or your hand is normal! I mean, why is your hand normal? I mean...” His tone fades into utter terror.

I finally end the charade and say, “You’re not drunk, Jephthah. I’ve been healed.”

“Healed?” He sputters, “what do you mean you’ve been healed?”

“Yesterday, when I left you, I went to the temple. Well, there was this man there named Jesus of Nazareth. He called me down to the front of the room in front of everyone. Jephthah, you know how I am around big crowds; but for some reason, I did it. To make a long story short, He healed me.”

Jephthah’s mouth is hanging open so wide that I could fit my fist into it. He says, “Ok, man, what’s the gag?”

I say, “No gag, Jephthah. Here, see for yourself.” He reaches out and gingerly touches my new hand, as if it is going to bite him. I say, “Don’t be afraid, Jephthah, it’s real. Believe me, I was more surprised than you are, but it is real. Jesus has healed me.”

Jephthah’s face is totally white. He sits down and puts his face into his hands and says, “Oh, boy. Just when you thought things couldn’t get any weirder.” He then looks
up suddenly and says, “I mean, don’t get me wrong man. Congratulations! This is awesome! I’m so happy for you. It’s just that... well, it’s just that this is the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. I guess that I’m just shocked.”

“I am too, Jephthah. Listen, many people around here think that this Jesus is the Messiah; you know, the One who is going to save us from the Romans. He travels all around teaching and healing people just like me. Today, I’m going to go and find Him. I don’t know much about Him, but I know that He holds the key to the answers that I’ve been searching for. And you never know, he may hold some answers for you. Why don’t you come and go with me.”

Jephthah quickly responds, “Hey, slow down there, tiger. You know how I feel about all of that religious junk. It’s all fake. I don’t want to go hear some magician tickle my ears. I may not be the most intellectual man in Jerusalem, but I’m not a religious fanatic either.”

His words wound me. I say, “Hey, man, it can’t all be fake. Here I am, living proof. You can believe what you want, but all I know is that yesterday I had a deformed hand and today I don’t. I may not know everything about this Jesus of Nazareth, but I’m determined to learn a whole lot more. You can stay or go, but really what do you have to lose? All I’ve lost is my deformed hand.”

My speech is very convincing, even to myself. Jephthah gazes at my hand and shifts nervously about, trying to avoid the inevitable. Finally, he sighs loudly and says, “Alright, Jeremiah, you win. I’ll go, but just to keep you safe on the road. You wouldn’t last a second without me. You know that, right?”
“Sure, I do,” I say with deliberate sarcasm and a smirk. We both know that I have won.

He says, “And one more thing: we are just going to listen. I’m not getting involved in some weird, emotional experience. I’m just going because you are my best friend. Got it?” I nod and smile again.

I had heard that Jesus was near Bethsaida, but we really don’t have to guess. We only need to follow the crowds. I have never seen so many people; there must be thousands, all walking towards where Jesus is rumored to be. Many are limping on canes and some are being carried on stretchers. Children run ahead with their friends and are scolded from behind (and in their behinds) by their parents, warning them not to roam too far. I see one old man who has no one to help him. He is inching along at snail-like velocity, getting slower every step. I remember my recent affliction and my heart reaches out to him. I take him by the arm and begin to help him as he walks. He looks at me with steadfast goodness in his eyes and smiles.

I say, “My name is Jeremiah. What’s yours, sir?”

He replies with a voice whose tone whispers wisdom as much as the words that come though it, “My name is Simeon. I am on my way to see Jesus.”

“Are you sick?” I ask. Most of the people who are traveling today are on missions to obtain healing, and I can’t blame them. If I would have known about Jesus and His power, I would have sought Him out a long time ago, instead of the other way around.

Simeon replies with a little chuckle, “No, not sick, just old. I know that it’s hard for you young people to tell the difference sometimes.” His grandfather-like attitude and
pleasantness are refreshing to me and we walk together the rest of the way. Jephthah follows close behind us, but says little. He listens intently to every word that Simeon and I say to each other. We pass, and are passed, by other groups of people. Some of them tell us that Jesus is starting up the hills near the Sea of Galilee. The journey becomes more and more physically demanding upon all of us, but especially Simeon. He must be in his eighties. We have to stop every few miles to let him rest. I have brought along some water and I give him some. He’s very thankful.

After our seventh stop, Jephthah pulls me aside behind a tree, while Simeon is resting on a rock. Jephthah says, “Don’t you ever want to get there? It’ll be dark by the time we get there if we keep waiting on ‘grandfather’ over there.”

“Stop being so selfish,” I whisper with intense emotion, “we have plenty of time. Besides, he’s old and he’ll never make it without us. Look around you, we are in a desolate place and the hills are getting steeper and steeper. We’re almost there.”

Jephthah sighs with heavy frustration. He says, “You said that you wanted to get close enough to talk to Jesus, but we’ll be in the very back of the crowd at the rate we’re going. I just don’t get you. All of the sudden, you’re this bleeding-heart do-gooder. You’ve changed.”

“Of course I changed!” I retort. “I promise you I’ll never be the same. I’ve just been given two good hands and I’m not going to waste my miracle by messing around my whole life with things that don’t matter and things that I cannot change.”

My preachiness irritates him and surprises me, but the more I think about it, the more I believe every word. Our journey resumes and I am correct; we arrive in less than an hour. However, Jephthah is correct as well. The crowds are so great that we can’t see
anything, but we can hear the words of Jesus through men who are perched high on
boulders and in trees, relaying the words throughout the entire crowd. Their words create
a chain of communication throughout the people, who remain mostly quiet so they can
hear.

"We can't even see Him," Jephthah complains. "How do you expect to talk to
Him?" He has a point, it does seem that my plan is thwarted, but then something
interesting happens. The frail arm that I am holding suddenly flexes new muscles,
showing abnormal strength. I turn and look at Simeon and he looks back at me, but his
eyes have changed. They reveal a man who is fifty years younger. There is a gleam in
them that promises hope. Simeon says, "Follow me, I'll take you there."

Jephthah and I look at each other with blank stares, but we are too surprised to
object. So, we follow him. Walking behind Simeon is like following Moses as he parts
the Red Sea. He doesn't even have to say a word, but all the people simply step out of
the way and let us through. In almost no time at all, we are all the way to the front of the
crowd and only several steps from Jesus and His disciples. We arrive just as Jesus is
finishing with His words. Simeon, with reckless boldness, continues towards Jesus as if
he knows the exact words at which He will stop speaking; and indeed he does seem to
know because as soon as he reaches Jesus, Jesus finishes His sermon. Jesus walks
toward Simeon, as if the two had choreographed their moves days before. They
exchange smiles and embrace one another. Jephthah and I are speechless, again.

By this time, it is getting dark. Jesus turns to one of His disciples and asks,
"Philip, where can we buy bread to feed all of these people?" The young man looks
stunned by the question and glances around at the other disciples, searching for logic on their faces, but finding none. Philip replies, “It would take a small fortune to feed them.”

Jesus nods His head as if Philip’s answer does not surprise Him. He turns and looks at an older, rougher looking man. Jesus says nothing, but only raises His eyebrows and turns His head slightly, asking this man the same question with His body language. The man replies in a deep, raspy voice, “There’s a young boy here with five barley loaves and two small fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?” Jesus folds His arms and puts His hand close to His face, softly stroking His beard as if He is in deep thought. Everyone around waits to see what strange or wonderful thing He will say next. He closes His eyes and holds them tightly shut. Then, He opens them and smiles as if He suddenly remembered something important.

Jesus turns and says to His disciples, “Tell everyone to sit down on the grass.” He waves the disciples aside, parting them down the middle. Behind them stands a little boy, eyes wide open and feet nervously kicking the grass. Jesus’ smile somehow becomes even wider as He kneels down and opens His arms towards the little boy. The boy suddenly runs as fast as he can into Jesus’ arms and they embrace as if they were the best of friends. Jesus picks up the little boy and sets him on His knee. Jesus asks him where he had come from and where his parents were. The boy tells Jesus that he had come with his older brother to see Jesus do miracles.

Jesus smiles, pulls the boy close and says, “Well, I think you’re one of the best miracles I’ve seen all day.” The boy giggles as Jesus tickles his ribs. Then Jesus says, “I need to ask you a favor. I need to borrow your lunch.” Without hesitation the boy hands
it over to Jesus. Jesus laughs and says, “Don’t you even want to ask me what I need it for?”

The boy innocently shakes his head and says, “I don’t care. I think that if I ever asked You for Your lunch that You would give it to me, so why should I not give mine to You?”

His response greatly pleases Jesus. He kisses the boy on the forehead, puts him down on his feet, and winks at him as He steps back with the food. The five loaves are quite narrow and long, and the two fish are pretty old, as evidenced by their stench. Together, they are not much food; only barely enough to feed just this small boy, but not at all enough to feed a grown man. Jesus holds the small snack high in the air and says, “Thank you, Father, for giving us all that we need. Bless this food.”

None of us know what to expect and even Jesus’ disciples look baffled. Jephthah leans in to me and whispers, “Some great prophet; He steals little boy’s lunches to eat Himself.” Jephthah’s words anger me at first, but I also understand his bitterness towards religious men. In his mind, Jesus is religious and that automatically makes Him fake. It is as if Jephthah cannot accept the miracle of my new hand, even though it is right in front of him. His bitterness seems even more powerful than the facts. Jephthah’s rage towards Gehazi over the years has tainted his view of all those who claim to know God.

As soon as Jephthah says the words, Jesus turns and looks at him, as if He has heard what Jephthah has said. It seems impossible, though, because we are standing a considerable distance from Jesus. Jesus looks stern, focusing His eyes intently on Jephthah. He begins to walk towards him. All eyes focus on Jephthah and their stares are taking their toll on him. He begins to visibly shake a bit. I’m not sure if it is out of
embarrassment or out of fear. I am afraid. I know that this Man holds incredible power and I wish that Jephthah would respect it. When Jesus has come only inches away from him, He suddenly smiles and holds out the food to Jephthah. “Hungry?” He says with a grin.

“Uhh, that’s alright. Thanks anyway.” Jephthah’s stuttering comes across with as much dignity as he can muster. Jesus nods and turns around. He calls His disciples to Him and they form a circle around Him. I see one disciple walk away with the food the little boy had given Jesus. This confuses me: why has Jesus given the food to this particular disciple? Perhaps He has given him instructions to take it to someone else in the crowd. However, something strange happens: another disciple walks away with some food and goes towards the crowd, following the previous disciple. I guess the boy must have had more food than I had originally thought. Then, another walks away from Jesus, then another. I look at Jephthah and he looks back at me in astonishment. We both have our mouths wide open. How can this be? Is Jesus really making food come out of nowhere?

Neither of us says anything; honestly, we can’t. Jesus sends His disciples to the back of the crowd first and they work their way towards the front. I still can’t see Jesus because He is surrounded by the circle of His disciples, but I decide that I have to catch a glimpse of what He is doing. So, I slowly make my way and peak into the circle. I can’t see His hands, but I see His face. He’s laughing out loud as He continues to hand food to the men. I have never seen someone so happy. It is as if this thing brings Him more joy than anything else.
Eventually, everyone is served. Jephthah, Simeon, and I sit together as we eat and talk about the wonderful event that has just happened. As we are eating, someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn and almost choke on my fish as Jesus stands only inches from me with some food in His hands. He says, “Is this spot taken?” I shake my head and Jephthah and I make room for Him between us. As he sits down, He lets out a long yawn as if He is very tired, then He begins to eat. He doesn’t eat like I thought someone great would; He just sits in the grass and eats with His fingers just like I do. He takes a big bite and says something to me, but His mouth is so full that I can’t understand Him. He covers His mouth and laughs, realizing what He has done. “Sorry,” He says, “catch any balls in the street lately?”

His words take me by surprise. How does He know about my dreams? I smile and say, “No, I guess no one’s thrown any to me yet.” He nods and continues to eat. He says, “Jeremiah, you seem different than you were than the first day we met. My friend Simeon tells me that you were very kind to him and helped him make the long journey here to see Me. What’s changed about you?”

His question seems illogical to me; of course I’m different. I say, “You healed my hand, remember?”

“Of course I remember, but there seems to be something more.” He holds up His right hand and waves over the thousands that are seated around us and says, “Why do you think that I travel around healing people like I healed you? Sure, now you have two good hands, but that’s only your hand, not your heart. What I am truly interested in is the healing of hearts, not arms and legs. There are many around who have no physical deformities or diseases. In fact, they seem fully alive. However, I say they are dead
inside. They are like whitewashed tombs; clean on the outside, but filled with dead men’s bones on the inside. Many of these people will follow me after today, wanting more bread and fish, but I believe you came for different reasons. In fact, many who eat here now will someday mock and hurl curses at the Son of God, spitting on Him with the same mouths they praise Him with today. Likewise, many here today who are drinking water with me will thirst again, but the water I give will make springs inside you and you will never thirst again.”

The words He speaks are truly like water, quenching the hot desert sands of my soul. He continues to look directly into my eyes, as if my thoughts are laid out bare and open before Him. He continues, “You can have this eternal water if you believe in Me and My Father who sent me. Do you believe that I am from the Father, and that the Father and I are one, Jeremiah?”

I pause for a moment, then I say, “I don’t understand everything about You, but when I hear Your words, I know in my heart that I’m listening to the voice of God. You must be the Messiah, the one whom the scriptures tell about. I do believe.”

Jesus has tears in His eyes, just like I do, and he joyfully continues, “Then today is a celebration, for in you is the evidence of a new birth- a brand new creation!”

Out of nowhere, Jephthah emphatically says, “A new birth? What are you talking about, Rabbi? He’s got a new hand, but he’s still the same old Jeremiah.”

Jesus turns to him and gently says, “You are looking at the outside, but I look at the inside. Unless someone has been born again, like Jeremiah, they cannot see the Kingdom of God.”
Jephthah looks puzzled, “How can someone who is grown go back in their mother’s womb and be born again? That’s impossible.”

Jesus replies, “With God, all things are possible.”

Jesus’s response obviously troubles Jephthah. He says, “Rabbi, I don’t understand all of Your stories and riddles, but I’ve learned that there are some things that are impossible. Life is hard and there’s nothing anyone can do about it. All things may be possible for You, but You are obviously a prophet and God has chosen for some reason to give You a good life. But it doesn’t happen that way for all of us. God didn’t choose to make me like You; God made me a nobody, from a family of nobodies.”

Jesus says, “Let me tell you a story. One of my ancestors who lived in the ancient times was a great hero of Israel. God used her to help Israel defeat one of its greatest enemies.”

Jephthah cuts him off, but still respectfully says, “See, Rabbi, Your family was born to be great. That’s exactly what I’m saying. God chooses who will be great and who will be wretched. I just happened to be from a family of wretched losers.

Jesus continues, “You didn’t let me finish. My ancestor’s name was Rahab and she was a prostitute. Jephthah, I come from the ancestral line of a prostitute.” Jesus looks sincere as He gazes into Jephthah’s eyes. Jephthah’s face turns red and tears begin to stream down his cheeks. He is speechless and for a moment it seems as though the huge wall that is so fortified inside him begins to crumble.

He resists the change, though. He grits his teeth together, throws down his food, jumps to his feet and screams, “I don’t know who told You my name and who told You about my mother, but it’s not fair for you to try to play games with my mind like this.
Thank You for the food, but I have to be going!” He walks away from us and stands by a tree facing the opposite direction, waiting on me to leave. He quickly wipes the tears from his face, as if they are embarrassing him.

Jesus doesn’t act surprised, He just looks at me and smiles with loving confidence, as if he isn’t angry for Jephthah’s outburst. He says, “I guess that you should be going then.” I open my mouth to apologize, but He hold up His hand and keeps me silent. He says, “It’s alright; it’s late and it’s time for us to leave as well. I will see you again. Go on home with Jephthah and Simeon.” So I walk away, contemplating each of the day’s events with every step.

Simeon, Jephthah, and I start back down the mountain together. Simeon seems to walk much easier now than before; the food must have done him good. We travel a great distance without saying anything. Finally, I can take it no longer. I say, “Jephthah, I didn’t tell Him your name or anything about your mother. You know that right?” Jephthah remains stoically silent. I continue, “Besides, He was just trying to help. He would probably even be willing to heal her disease.”

Jephthah replies spitefully, “Magic tricks and fortune-tellers won’t help my mother. Nothing can help her. She’s not just sick, Jephthah, she’s a prostitute. You wouldn’t understand.”

His words hurt me. It is as if now he feels alone in his pain, especially since mine has been removed. When we get to the edge of town, Simeon stops. He has been carrying a basket ever since we had left the mountain. He turns to Jephthah and says, “Jephthah, after Jesus fed all of those people, His disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of
leftovers. Just before we left, He gave me one of them and asked me if I would give it to you and your mother to eat for the next couple of days.”

Jephthah and I look at each other in amazement, but he is definitely more surprised than I am. He says, “Didn’t He hear the things that I said?”

I answer, “I guess that He didn’t care.” As we turn back to Simeon, he is gone! There is nowhere to search because the road is deserted. There aren’t even any trees or plants around for him to hide behind. I pick up the basket off the road and hand it to Jephthah. He takes it with the most puzzled and guilty expression I have ever seen. The rest of our journey is silent. When we reach my home, we say goodbye and agree to meet the next day. Jephthah still seems flabbergasted, as we both are. As he walks away, he carries the basket of food in his hand; it is the first gift he has ever received from Jesus.
Although we haven’t talked about it over the last couple of weeks, it is all that I can think about. The events that have changed my life forever are still very fresh on my mind, as they will probably remain for the rest of my life. One can’t easily forget a miracle such as the one that has happened to me. The personality of Jesus intrigues me like nothing else ever has. I can’t understand how a man who holds such power and authority could also sit down in the grass and eat with someone like me. The mystery of Jesus has become the focus of my thoughts, as well as my life. I’ll never forget the words he spoke to me that day on the mountain. I really do believe that He’s the Messiah, and I really do feel born again. I feel like a newborn child; for the first time, aware of life as it is meant to be, yet still ignorant of what it takes to grow. Most everyone around me believes as well, but most believe only because of the miracles Jesus has done. For me, the miracle is just the catalyst of a new life-giving process that is at work within me. It’s hard to explain, but I don’t have to have an explanation. Finding someone who truly loves me, and who has the power to change me, is enough for now and for eternity.

My relationship with my parents has also changed. They, too, believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They are also very pleased that I have decided to follow Him. Now that I’m healed, it hasn’t fixed all of the problems in my life, but it has given them all a new perspective. Every night, I find myself kneeling by my bedside, pouring out my heart to a Friend who has always been there, watching me over my shoulder, but whom I have never known. Now, I don’t question the fact that He hears me and has heard me all of
these years. I remember what I had told Him outside the temple, just before I met Jesus.

I had been so angry with Him; so confused. Now I can see that so much more was
deformed than just my hand. My whole life, I have always neglected the wonderful gifts
that God has bestowed upon me. Jesus has restored more than just a simple five-fingered
end of a limb, he has restored the innocence and vigor of a child-like faith and trust in an
all-knowing, loving Father. I repent, God, for the things I said to You that day. I can’t
believe that I tried to throw away the gift that you were moments away from giving me.
More than that, I can’t believe that You still gave it to me! You are truly a mystery that I
don’t understand, but of which I am loving and longing to discover more of.

I now travel to see Jesus wherever He is. Not only I, but thousands like me,
touched by His hand, all flock to His location. Many come for many different reasons.
Many desire to be healed. Others desire to have demons cast out of themselves, their
friends, or their family. I have to admit, I didn’t used to believe that demons were
working so much in people’s lives. I’ve always thought that religious people just over­
spiritualized everything, making even a stubbed toe the work of a demon. Indeed, Jesus
has never reinforced these false assumptions. To most, He brings healing; to all He
brings simple and undeserved love, which brings the most healing. In other cases, there
are real demonic forces controlling someone’s life. In these cases, I see Jesus turn from
one with incredibly gentle love, to one with incredible power. I’ve seen many people
under demonic oppression brought to Jesus, and my first inclination is to dismiss their
problems as false or delusional. However, the spirits at work with these people cannot
even endure to be near Jesus. It is as if they come into the presence of a great King and
they have to choice but to bow. They scream out for mercy, begging Jesus not to destroy
them or to torture them. It seems like they have had former encounters with Jesus in another time or place. Jesus always wastes no time in delivering the person under demonic oppression, and the demons waste no time in leaving. No matter what I have believed up to now, now I can see that there certainly is another realm that is very real and of which I know very little. In that realm, Jesus seems more well known than He is even here in Israel.

I often wonder why Jesus, who is obviously the Messiah and filled with great power, doesn’t do what I’ve always heard that He will do. We are still under the rule of the Romans, still paying high taxes and still under much oppression. I wonder why Jesus doesn’t even seem to notice these things. In fact, I’ve even seen Him support the idea of paying taxes to the Romans. Doesn’t He realize how evil they are— that they worship false gods and conquer the innocent? The more I am inclined to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the more He seems to be an unlikely choice. Still, I cannot and will not deny His power and the true love I’ve found in His eyes. I just want to be near to Him. I choose to follow Him.

Jephthah has not made the same choice. In fact, my choice seems to be putting up walls between us. How could he not believe? I wonder what he is thinking. We still see each other every couple of days, but he refuses to travel with me to see Jesus. When I asked him why he said, “I just don’t trust religious leaders, Jeremiah; you wouldn’t understand.” Jephthah has seen some of the miracles and he’s even sat and ate with Jesus, but he still refuses to believe. In fact, I have a feeling that even if he went with me and witnessed the marvels of Jesus’ ministry that he still wouldn’t believe, probably because at the end of the day no matter how much good Jesus does, Jephthah still has to
go home to a mother who is a prostitute. The chasm between us seems to be expanding every time we are together. Maybe he is afraid because of the harsh words he spoke to Jesus that day on the mountain; I guess I would be afraid too. As much as I wish that they weren’t, my healing and my newfound faith are definitely obstructions to our friendship. Sometimes I wonder if I should be acting differently, if I should not flaunt my new beliefs in front of him. I imagine how it must make him feel. He has not changed and neither has his mother. He can’t deny the miracle of my hand and the change within me, but he also can’t deny the absence of miracles and changes within his own life. Still, I will not hide what Jesus has done for me. I can only hope that that same love that illuminates from Jesus’ eyes will gleam in mine as well. It is that love that broke down the walls of bitterness in my life, and I pray that it breaks down the walls in Jephthah’s life as well.

This morning is a good morning. I awaken before the sunrise, excited as a child. It is the day after the feast of Tabernacles, a weeklong annual celebration. This holiday is unlike any other. The streets of Jerusalem swell with people because the festival requires every Jewish family within twenty miles of the city to move out of their homes and live in a booth or tent in remembrance of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness. This is a time of family reunions and parties, alternating with religious ceremonies and processions. I have gone every morning to the temple to hear Jesus teach. Yesterday was the last day and what a day it was. At the end of one of the main ceremonies, Jesus stood up in front of all of the crowds and declared, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” The magnitude of such a statement was gargantuan. Jesus basically declared
Himself to be the Messiah to all of Jerusalem, and He made His declaration in the most sacred place, the temple. He has never publicly made such a statement in such an arena as this. I could hear some in the crowd say, "Truly this is the Prophet" and "This is the Christ."

However, some of the Pharisees stood up and said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was from?"

The people were divided. Some believed in what Jesus said and others denied it. Most of the common people were the ones who believed; and many, like myself, had healing and miracles to prove it. Most of those who denied it were the religious leaders and the Pharisees, whose popularity had declined since the growth of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ declaration was punishable by death. One is not allowed to make oneself equal with God. In fact, some of them began to cry out for His arrest. The crowd became restless. However, I knew that Jesus really was the Son of God. I just knew that He had an answer for the Pharisees’ accusations and that this was the time for His revelation and the beginning of the new kingdom. Indeed, soon the sides that were divided would be united forever when Jesus would demonstrate His power. But He never did. He just stood there. He didn’t respond to the Pharisees’ accusations and He didn’t call down fire out of heaven or anything else to prove His deity. This annoyed me. Why would He wait? Now was the time, but He hesitated.

The intensity of the moment was more than I could bear and I cried out, "Jesus! Show them who You are! Now’s the time! Hosanna to the Messiah!"
Suddenly, Jesus held up His hand and silenced my outburst. I became excited again, expecting Him to take power. Again, He hesitated. Then suddenly, the situated diffused by itself. Jesus never did anything to prove that He was the Messiah and the religious leaders never seized Him. Jesus simply seemed to disappear into the crowd. However, the damage was done and I could see worry on the faces of the religious leaders. Jesus had finally made His declaration, and for whatever reason He didn’t assert His authority on that day, I am sure that soon He will.

Maybe it will be this morning. It takes me no time at all to get ready. As I leave my home, I can see the sun peaking over the tops of the mountains. Today may be the day! Jerusalem is still packed with people from the festival and most of them will be preparing to leave today. As I walk through the marketplace on the way to the temple, I see Jephthah, who is just finishing a sale to an out-of-towner. The festival is always a staple time of sales for him because of the large influx of visitors to the city, eager to take home merchandise from their journeys.

I walk up to him and say, “Hey, man. Is it a good morning to be salesman?”

He is merry this morning. He replies with a wide and mischievous smile, “I’ve never seen so many suckers. That lady just paid an arm and a leg for a piece of junk that I’ve not been able to sell in about five years. I love holidays!” He laughs as he places his new money in his pouch that hangs at his thigh. He says, “Well early bird, what are you doing up at this hour?”

“I’m going to the temple to hear Jesus.” I reply. My answer brings a solemn smirk to his face.

He replies, “Jesus, huh? Is He in town or something?”
I reply with enthusiasm, “Is He in town? Haven’t you heard anything?

Yesterday, He made it public that He is the Messiah. He said it in the temple, right in front of the leaders and Pharisees. He wasn’t afraid of them and He didn’t back down, even when they threatened Him. You should have seen it.”

He looks up with some interest in his eyes. “He faced down the Pharisees, huh? I kind of wish I could have seen that. I didn’t know that He had that side to Him.”

I continue, “Man, I’ve seen him call them ‘brood of vipers’ and ‘murderers’ right to their faces and they haven’t dared to even touch Him because they know better.”

My tough portrayal of Jesus seems to really interest Jephthah. He says, “So what’s going on today?”

“I don’t know, but I think Jesus will be teaching again, and something’s bound to go down.” I hesitate, but decide to take a chance. “You ought to come and go with me and see what happens. I think the Pharisees are shaking in their boots.”

He laughs to himself and counts his money as he contemplates my proposal. He says, “Well, I guess since I’ve done so well this week and business is slowing down anyway that I could get away for a few hours.”

As we start out, I feel a little guilty for baiting Jephthah like I did, but I’m happy he’s with me again. Who knows, maybe he’ll get to talk to Jesus again. As we approach the steps of the temple, I can hear a crowd of people behind me. As I turn around, I see hundreds of people, all on their way to the temple. They must have the same idea that I have, that today is going to be a special day. I turn to Jephthah and say, “Looks like we are just ahead of the crowd; you picked a good day to come.” He smiles a little, still nervous about seeing Jesus again. Who would want to be on the bad side of the Man who
may destroy the Roman Empire today? As we enter, I can see Jesus. He is standing on some steps, teaching a small group of onlookers. He must have awakened very early to get here at this hour. As we lead the crowd in, we find a good spot, right up near the front. When Jesus sees me, He smiles that familiar smile that I can now clearly visualize in my mind, even in my sleep. He also smiles and nods to Jephthah, who returns the favor with a relieved expression. The crowd is virtually silent as Jesus continues to teach.

Suddenly, a dull roar arises from behind us, getting louder. Men are shouting, causing all of the business of the temple to come to a virtual standstill. Then, a group of Pharisees, along with the temple guard, drag a woman into the midst of the crowd. She is not resisting, but is still being handled roughly by the Pharisees. She is scantily clad, with only a thin purple garment covering her. She holds to the end of the garment, trying to maintain her dignity among this crowd, which divides to let the group by. Across her face is a mark, indicating that she has been recently struck across the cheek. As the entourage reaches Jesus, one of the bigger men throw the woman to the ground in front of Him, causing her to whimper a little from the pain of the fall. All of the Pharisees stand around her with stones in their hands.

In all of the commotion, I don’t notice that Jephthah is no longer standing beside me. The next thing I know, I see him dive full force into the man that just threw the woman to the ground, knocking the man down. Jephthah pulls back and lands a solid punch with his full fist directly on the man’s nose, bringing forth a fountain of blood. Another man tries to pull Jephthah off of the first one, but he too is sent flying to the ground. I’ve never seen someone in such a fit of rage; then I realize why: the woman
lying on the ground is Deborah, Jephthah’s mother! I must’ve not recognized her at first.
Jephthah is now in a fight with all of the temple guard, throwing a slew of obscenities
with every wild punch. He fights them off for a moment, but is finally overcome by
about five or six guards, who hold him and beat him with their fists until he is unable to
fight effectively anymore. They stand him up and hold him securely, making sure that he
doesn’t get away.

The crowd is restless, but begins to quiet down in order to hear what is going on.
Jesus has been standing silent the whole time with an uneasy look on his face. One of the
guards pulls back to lend Jephthah another blow, but Jesus reaches out and catches his
fist in the palm of His hand, bringing the man’s swing to a standstill. I am surprised at
how strong Jesus must be to stop the punch, especially since the guard is a very large and
bulky man. Simultaneously, Jesus says, “Stop!” His voice rings out like thunder,
echoing off of the temple walls, though He doesn’t seem to speak very loudly. The face
of the guard becomes very pale, as if he will become nauseous at any moment.
Consequently, the guard does not strike Jephthah again.

One of the Pharisees emerges from the group. He is dressed in traditional garb.
His face is covered in wrinkles and his lips are very dry. He has a smug expression on
his face, colorless and lacking emotion. His smirky smile is stationary, never widening
or narrowing. He says, “Rabbi, perhaps I can enlighten you to the situation. This woman
is named Deborah, and she is known to be a whore here in Jerusalem! This morning, she
was caught in the very act of adultery! Furthermore, I remember this troublemaking
young man as well! He once tried to bring his filthy self into our sacred temple some
years ago. He is the son of this whore, as unclean as she is! He will surely be punished
for striking God’s chosen! Teacher, now Moses, in the law commanded us that such a woman as this should be stoned. What do You say?”

Jephthah, hearing this man’s words, is suddenly filled with new fire. He somehow musters the strength to overpower the guards and darts towards this Pharisee. He screams in reckless anger, “I’ll kill you, Gehazi! You lay a finger on my mother and I swear by Almighty God that I’ll have your head! You hear me!”

He never reaches Gehazi, who has now stepped back. He is tackled once again by the guards and held more violently and securely this time. In all of the excitement, I have forgotten to breathe. I’m sweating and panting, but not as much as Jephthah. Gehazi still stands in front of the Pharisees; his expression has not changed. It is now obvious that the political stage is set and Jesus is on the spot. I had told Jephthah that something was going to happen today, but I had no idea it would be this. I know enough about the law to know that Deborah does deserve to die, and Jephthah will probably be thrown in jail and possibly executed for his violence. The worst part is that Gehazi has put the executioner’s sword in Jesus’ hand, which has never been known to condemn anyone but the Pharisees and religious leaders themselves. Jesus always speaks of grace and forgiveness, but now He has no choice but to pronounce condemnation. His claim yesterday to be the Messiah will become moot if He contradicts the ancient laws of Moses today. All eyes are upon Jesus, now more than ever.

As I return from my infinite thoughts of fear and anxiety, I focus upon Jesus with the rest of the crowd. Surprisingly, He looks calm and confident, as if there is no problem at all. He says nothing, but instead stoops down and begins to draw in the dirt with His finger. His coolness even disturbs Gehazi. Gehazi impatiently says, “Rabbi,
didn’t you hear me? What do You say about this? Are you going to resist God’s law? What is Your answer?”

Jesus doesn’t look up at him, but continues to draw in the dust. Time seems to stand still, but Jesus doesn’t look worried. He stands up and calmly addresses Gehazi and the rest of the Pharisees: “Fine, stone her.”

A rumble explodes from the crowd and the men raise their stones, ready to hurl them. I am confused and torn. Jephthah’s face is helpless and full of anger as He gazes at Jesus with reckless hatred.

Jesus abruptly continues, “However, he who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” He stoops back down and continues to write in the dirt.

The silence becomes deafening as each one considers the magnitude and wisdom of Jesus’ words. All eyes remain focused on Jesus and what He is drawing in the dirt. Jephthah looks more stunned than anyone else. His angry expression quickly changes into a river of tears. He no longer appears tough, but childlike instead. Deborah looks up with tears in her eyes towards Jesus, realizing that her life lies in His hands.

After a few brief moments, the guard that is holding Jephthah’s right arm reaches up and brushes a tear away from his own eye. He lets go of Jephthah and slowly walks away with his head hung low. Stones that were meant to kill Deborah begin to fall to the ground, resounding like horses’ hooves departing. One by one, the Pharisees and religious leaders file out, beginning with the older men. However, the last one left is Gehazi, who gazes at Jesus with hatred in his eyes. However, even he is trumped by Jesus’ wisdom. Jesus has finished drawing in the dust, but remains stooped down with His eyes closed and His lips mouthing words that none of us could hear.
After the last one has left, Jesus stands up and walks over to Deborah. By this
time, Jephthah has picked himself up off the ground and walks to Deborah as well. He
takes Deborah’s right arm and Jesus takes her left arm and they lift her to her feet. She is
crying, but softly. Her posture is crooked. She is always hunched over a bit, usually
because of the pain she feels from her disease. Her head remains hung low and she is
obviously embarrassed and ashamed in front of such a holy Man. Jesus, disregarding that
it is forbidden to touch such a woman, gingerly strokes over the mark on her face, and it
disappears! The color returns to her face and she stands up straight without any pain.
Even the redness in her eyes disappears. He says, “Woman, where are those accusers of
yours? Has no one condemned you?”

She looks up at Jesus, realizing that He is without sin and truly has the power to
condemn her to the fate she knows she deserves. She says very softly, “No one, Lord.”

With tears again in His eyes, Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin
no more.” Jesus turns to Jephthah who has been standing next to Him during the whole
conversation. Jephthah is shaking, struggling with all that is within him to control the
tears that are restrained behind the floodgates of his eyes. Jesus puts His hand on his
shoulder and says, “Jephthah, is this enough for you to believe?”

Jephthah collapses to the ground, clinging to Jesus’ feet. He cries, “Yes Lord, I
do believe. You truly are the Messiah. Forgive me for the way that I’ve treated You. I
don’t deserve to live. I’ve been walking in darkness for so long.”

Jesus reaches down, taking Jephthah by the arm. He raises him to his feet, looks
him straight in the eyes and says, “Jephthah, I am the light of the world. He who follows
Me doesn’t have to walk in darkness, but he will have the light of life!” Jesus embraces
him, holding tightly to him like he is a son who has returned home. Jephthah continues, “I’ll follow You wherever You go, Jesus!”

Jesus says, “That’s what I wanted to hear; but for now, I’m hungry. So, I’m going to follow you to your home. Deborah, would you mind making breakfast for my disciples and I? We would like to dine at your house this morning.”

Deborah, still wide-eyed and saying very little, suddenly turns red. She says, “Master, I’ve only a small shack where Jephthah and I live. I’m not sure that I could even fit You and all of your disciples inside. Besides, I don’t have enough money to buy food for all of these people. Please forgive me, I would love to have you.” A shameful tear falls from her eye.

Jesus turns to one of His disciples and says, “Judas, take some money from the treasury, go into the marketplace and buy what Deborah will need to make breakfast. Buy her all that she wants.”

Judas replies, “Go with her into the marketplace?”

Jesus says, “Is there something wrong with that, Judas?”

Judas shakes his head and says, “No Lord, I just didn’t understand what You meant. Come along, Deborah.”

Jesus turns to me and says, “Jeremiah, are you going to join us?”

“Yes, Lord,” I reply, “I will catch up with You shortly, if that is alright?”

Jesus smiles and nods. He puts His arm around Jephthah’s shoulder as they walk away towards Deborah’s house. As I watch them leave, I see Jesus pull Jephthah’s head down under His arm and rub the top of his head. Jephthah jumps away and the two laugh like they are the best of friends. What a curious sight this is to me. Earlier this morning,
Jephthah would rather have spit on Jesus than talk to Him. Once again, Jesus has changed everything.

I remain behind because I want to see what Jesus had been writing in the dirt. I wonder if he wrote the name of the man who had been caught in adultery with Deborah, or if He has written some great bit of wisdom that had confounded the Pharisees. I walk over and stand beside the spot where Jesus had been. He had written nothing. He had only drawn the outline of a man with his arms outstretched and his legs together. This puzzles me. \textit{God, what does this mean?}

Suddenly, in my heart a revelation hits like a bolt of lightning. I can see in my mind the sixth day of time, when God Almighty reached down and drew the outline of a man, Adam, in the dust. I fall to my knees beside Jesus’ work of art. I realize that Jesus has shown all those present that it is His finger that has traced the lines of our existence. Once again today, God has drawn the outline of a man, a new man, in the dirt. Jesus has breathed new life, just like He did at the beginning of time. He has rescued two more souls from the dust. No one could stay in the presence of I AM; they have all left, realizing their unworthiness. However, somewhere in my heart, a voice whispers that there is more to this revelation than I can understand now; but I may understand later.
Chapter 6  Devotion, Truth, and Devastation

The last few months have been filled with wonder and excitement. I have my best friend back. Jephthah and I have reunited in a different context, with Jesus as the central theme. Jephthah no longer sells on the streets everyday, and I don’t work at the shop anymore. Instead, we spend most of our time on the road, following the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. In fact, I have become their personal cook. There haven’t been too many things in life that I am that good at, but I’ve always had a talent for cooking. Needless to say, Jesus and His disciples have enormous appetites, so our needs fit nicely. They need food, and I need to be near Jesus. I don’t mind the hard work; in fact, I rather enjoy it. Furthermore, Jephthah doesn’t mind tagging along and helping me out. We get paid a little money each week, but I would definitely do it for free.

Jesus’ ministry has expanded and He is becoming more and more famous each day. There have been countless thousands who have been healed or delivered since Jesus first started preaching. Jephthah and I are now much closer to Jesus and His disciples. Although we don’t actually stay with them everywhere they go, Jesus has permitted us to stay close to them most of the time. We often eat with Jesus. Many times, however, Jesus travels alone to desolate places to pray. It is in these times that Jephthah and I have the opportunity to find out more about the disciples.

We have spent all of today with Jesus. There have been four or five thousand people here and somehow Jesus has managed to heal them all. So, we can expect that they will go home for the night, but a new batch will return first thing in the morning, searching for Jesus. One part of our job is going into the closest town to buy food and
supplies. Also, Jesus sometimes sends us to take money to the poor. Because of our extensive responsibilities that involve the payment of money, the disciple with whom we have the most contact is Judas Iscariot.

I like Judas. He’s a very intelligent man. Jesus obviously thinks very highly of him since He has entrusted him with the money; and there is a lot of money that comes through. Many times, the richest people of a town will make contributions to Jesus’ ministry after they see the good that He does there. Jesus wisely uses the money to pay for the expenses of a traveling ministry. He also gives an unbelievable percentage of this income to the poor whom we meet on our journeys. I remember once He told us that there was more to being a light in the world than just preaching and healing. He said that many would stand and be condemned on the Day of Judgment because they didn’t give food to the hungry, help care for the sick, or visit those in prison. He said that doing these things to others was the same as doing them to Him. He truly practices these things. He shows genuine compassion to anyone and everyone who comes His way.

To me, Judas is second, next to Jesus, in having the most compassion. Judas spends much of his time caring for the poor and buying food and supplies for those who need it. It is no small task to be responsible for such a large amount of money. I can tell that Judas holds a special place in Jesus’ heart.

Today, Judas has been responsible for giving massive amounts of money and food to the poor. After almost all the people have left, Jesus turns to Judas and says, “Judas, take Jephthah and Jeremiah and go into town to buy food for the next couple of days. Try not to let these two eat it all before you get back; you know what kind of appetites
they have.” Everyone laughs at Jesus’ latest little joke. He seems to never run out of funny things to say.

Judas responds, “Alright, Lord, but I can’t be held responsible for their gluttony.”

Jesus laughs out loud and gives Judas a hug, patting him on the back three times, as men do sometimes. All of the disciples seem very tired, as does Jesus.

Jesus says, “Why don’t the rest of you try to catch a nap while I head up the mountain for a while. I’ll see you later tonight, ok?”

All of the disciples agree and begin to position themselves by the fire, searching for comfortable spots. Judas just smiles and sighs; he is obviously tired as well.

However, when you hold such a responsibility as his, you don’t always get to rest as much as everyone else. The sun has just disappeared behind the second highest mountain on the horizon. As we travel down the side of the hill, I can feel the temperature drop with each step. Jephthah and Judas are very chatty tonight and I remain fairly quiet, listening to their discussion.

“What do you mean it will be very soon? You’ve been saying that forever now,” says Jephthah. “How can Jesus expect the world to believe He’s the Messiah when only a few of us truly know. Why won’t He let His power do the talking?”

Judas replies, “Jephthah, you don’t know Jesus like I do. He is the most compassionate man I’ve ever met. However, there are times when He knows how to clean house. Sometimes, I think He has to feel threatened before He’ll act. You know what I mean?”

Jephthah curiously replies, “No, I don’t.”
Judas continues, “Like that time in the temple, remember? Jesus transformed from the compassionate Messiah into the confrontational King. He is very strong and when He gets mad, you better watch out. He cracked that whip and every one of those moneychangers ran like they had seen a ghost. Remember what He said: ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves!’ Was he hot! No one dared oppose Him. Why was He so upset, Jephthah?”

Jephthah thinks for a moment and then replies, “I don’t know, I guess He thought they were desecrating the temple, right?”

“Right,” Judas says, “and what is the temple in relation to Jesus.”

“It’s His father’s house.” Jephthah says with a sudden assurance. “Jesus only gets upset when they come against His father. Like all of those times He told the Pharisees that they didn’t know Him because they didn’t know His father; and He’s always saying that He only does what He sees the father doing.”

Judas is shaking his head, affirming Jephthah. He says, “Now you’ve got it. Jesus is very protective of His father, and well He should be. Those men are coming against Almighty God, and Jesus won’t stand for it. I figure that it’s only a matter of time before Jesus is forced to demonstrate His power for the sake of the honor of God. He’ll only let the Pharisees and religious leaders push Him so far. I mean, He can’t just keep magically disappearing into crowds when things get heated. A showdown is definitely coming and I’m glad that we’re on the right team. It won’t be long now until Jesus will establish His earthly kingdom to go along with the heavenly one. What an honor it will be for Him, and us, on that day.”
Jephthah agrees with Judas, but I’m not sure that I do; although I don’t vocalize my opinion. I guess that I don’t think Jesus has any reason to be protective of God. He’s God; what can anyone possibly do to Him? No, it seems more likely that Jesus does just what He says he does: only what God tells Him to do. However, eventually something must give in this unstable face-off and I have no doubt that Jesus will emerge as the victor. I wonder what our places will be in His new kingdom. Maybe since He healed me, I’ll get to rule over a city or something. Why should I not? I’ve spent time with the Messiah. We are friends. Surely I will share in His power and majesty when it comes.

Jephthah and Judas are both quiet, obviously lost in thoughts similar to mine. Before I know it, we have reached the town. Judas opens up the moneybag and pays for everything we’ve loaded up. The merchant counts the change and gives it to Judas, who puts it his own pocket. He must have plans to put it back later when his hands aren’t full of supplies.

As we are leaving, a man runs up to us. He seems delirious. He grabs Judas by the arm and says, “Aren’t you one of Jesus’ disciples?”

Judas is alarmed by how aggressive the man is and subconsciously steps back a few paces, giving himself some room to breathe. He says, “I am. Why do you ask?”

The man raises his hands to the sky and cries aloud, “Thank you, Almighty God!” He then turns back to Judas and says, “My youngest daughter has become very ill, just in the past two hours. She is burning up with fever and is now barely breathing. Will you come and pray for her?”

Jephthah leans over to Judas and says, “The Master is expecting us to be back with this food. I don’t think we have the time.”
Judas casts a sober glance at him and gently rebukes, “Jephthah, we always have time to do something good. Haven’t you learned anything from being with Jesus for all of this time?” Jephthah looks a little ashamed, but nods his head confirming that he understands the lesson. Judas takes the man by the back of the arm and says, “Sir, lead us to your daughter.”

We follow the man only a few streets to a two-story dwelling. The man leads us up the stairs and pauses in front of a closed door. He leans in towards us and whispers, “She’s in here. Please do something; she’s my youngest child.” He begins to shed tears as he pleads. My heart shares his pain and I wipe the tears from my own eyes.

Judas says with confidence, “Show us where she is.”

The man opens the door and we are met with the stench of the little girl’s sickness. She has obviously defecated herself and the smell is almost unbearable. I begin to feel a little nauseous and I can see that Jephthah shares my sentiments. Judas, however, showing no sign of weakness, walks over to the mother who is caressing the little girl’s forehead with a damp cloth. He leans in and asks, “How is she doing?”

The mother looks up at him with hopeless eyes and shakes her head, without saying a word. Judas says, “Will you leave us alone with her, just for a moment?”

The mother hesitates at first, then reluctantly stands up to leave. She kisses the little girl on the forehead and leaves, closing the door behind her. We are left alone with the dying little girl. Judas closes his eyes and I see a tear roll down his cheek. The little girl is not more than eight years old. Her face is so sunken and pale that she almost looks lifeless. I can hear her little breath, barely discernable. Judas sits on the edge of her bed and takes her by the hand. She doesn’t even know that we are present. He takes his other
hand and strokes her forehead, wiping away the beads of water left by her mother's damp cloth. Judas bows his head, so we do as well. He says, "Father, demonstrate Your glory here tonight, I pray. By the power of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, be healed!"

That is all he says. I don't know if I am supposed to peak now, or what. I open one eye slightly and see that the little girl is still lying there with her eyes shut. Judas is still clinging to her hand, mouthing words with his lips. We wait for what seems like an eternity, yet nothing happens. Jephthah and I are now standing here with our eyes open, hoping and praying that something will happen. If only Jesus were here, He would know what to do.

Then suddenly, the little girl sneezes! Her sputum goes all over Judas' face. He cringes his eyes shut and reaches for the end of his robe to wipe his face off. Then we hear a little laugh. The girl is now sitting up in bed and is laughing at the mess that is all over Judas. Judas can't help but crack a smile. When her parents, who are standing outside the door, hear the girl laughing, they run into the room and snatch her into their arms, crying and stroking her hair. She is fine now. The color has returned to her face and she is no longer sweating from her fever. Jephthah and I look at one another and cry, rejoicing at the wonderful sight. Judas receives many hugs from the parents, which he humbly returns.

When we reach the camp sight where Jesus and all of the disciples are, we immediately tell everyone of the adventure that we experienced. Judas goes through every detail, and the ones he misses, Jephthah and I fill in. The disciples listen intently and Jesus sings a praise song to God for His mighty power. We all join in. For a bunch of rejects and fishermen, our little chorus doesn't sound half bad. After supper, we sit
around the fire and talk awhile. Jesus says little tonight. When I am in the middle of a sentence, a loud noise interrupts me- it is Jesus snoring! We all chuckle, but quietly as not to wake Him; although the disciples tell me that even a storm can’t wake Him up. He is obviously very tired, more than the rest of us.

Slowly, but surely, all of the rest of disciples begin to wind down; one by one falling asleep. I am nearing the threshold of sleep and I notice that the last two left awake are Judas and Jephthah. Their sleeping areas are next to each other and they are still discussing what is to happen with the coming revelation of Jesus’ power. As I close my eyes, I am thankful to be here; thankful to be sleeping near the Messiah and His disciples.

I am awakened by the sound of birds chirping. As I raise up, I notice that mostly everyone is still asleep. I immediately look to find Jesus, but He is already gone to His morning prayer time. So, I get up and stir the coals that used to be last night’s fire, rekindling them with new wood. I take the food that we purchased last night and begin to make breakfast while everyone else remains asleep.

I hear a voice behind me. It says, “Smells good.”

I turn to see Jesus who has just returned from the mountain. He looks wide awake, but I am still a little groggy. “Good morning,” I say, “it’s almost ready.”

“Take your time,” he says kindly, “I appreciate your work.” Jesus always makes sure that everyone knows his worth. “Jeremiah,” he continues, “do you ever think about the way your life used to be?”

I stop stirring the food for a moment and consider his question. I say, “You know, to be honest, I don’t think about it much anymore. I’ve had two good hands now...
for a while and I guess I don’t see any purpose in dwelling on who I used to be in the past.”

Jesus says, “You know, you should always remember how you were before you were healed; and I don’t just mean your hand. Living as a light sometimes requires you to learn about the darkness before you can truly understand what someone feels like who lives in that darkness. I’ve not always been here. I’ve not always been confined to this human body, but for now I choose to live in it. I have seen that mankind’s darkness is great. But they no longer need to live and die in darkness, because I will have lived and died in the darkness for them.”

Die, what does he mean? I say, “You’re the Messiah, you’re not going to die. There is no darkness when You’re here.”

“Jeremiah, you can’t understand everything now, but there is darkness yet to come. I must endure the ultimate pain and darkness for the sake of mankind and eternity. You won’t understand now. However, there is darkness still left for you as well. When that time comes, remember the words I speak now. Remember that I am paying the price so you can live in light.”

His words confuse me, as He said they would. He changes the subject and continues, “What about Jephthah? How has his life changed?”

I am quick to answer such an easy question. I say, “Well, you forgave his mother and then healed her disease. You also reached out to Jephthah, even though he tried to reject You. I would say that his life is totally changed, even more than mine. Now his mother earns money by cooking for the Roman soldiers that are stationed in Jerusalem. Her life is also totally changed.”
“You speak the truth, Jeremiah,” Jesus says, “but I must tell you that there are rough waters ahead for Jephthah as well. It is no accident that you were his only friend for so long; and he, yours. You needed each other. Without you, he would have never come to know me. Jeremiah, remember that true love never fails. It is not based on emotion and it is not based on whether or not someone truly deserves it; it is based on the grace and perfect love of God. That is the change that I want to continue to see in you. So many wander this life with no physical deformities, but there hearts are withered; shriveled up inside them like an unwatered fig tree. Love heals more than withered hands; it heals withered hearts as well. Don’t give up on Jephthah, no matter what happens. Believe me, it will seem that you should; but remember how I have loved you. Even so, love everyone else the same.”

I have been listening so intently that I don’t realize that the food is burning. I quickly remove it and examine it. It is scorched, but edible. Jesus doesn’t laugh, though; He just looks at me and says, “Remember, ok?”

I say, “Ok, Lord. I’ll do my best.” There is so much that He has said that I spend the next week in deep contemplation of it all. What does He mean that rough waters are ahead? Everything seems perfect. We have found the Messiah and we are safe with Him. Soon, He will be ruler over all things. Yet, Jesus has planted a seed inside of me that I cannot uproot. After a while, I force myself to push these things to the back of my mind; I can make no sense of them anyway.

A week later, Jesus pulls Jephthah and I aside and says to us, “You guys have been out with us a long time. Go home for a few weeks and rest. We will meet up with you outside of the city before the Passover Celebration starts.”
Jephthah and I really don’t want to go, but we don’t question Jesus. Jephthah and I make the journey home together. As we travel, our conversation covers all of the events of the past couple of months. Jephthah is truly a new and different person. His heart is now completely consumed and utterly focused on God. Every word from his mouth is about Jesus or some wonderful thing that He has said or done. I am thankful for the change in Jephthah’s life. I am thankful that he’s my best friend.

“Paradise!” says Jephthah, interrupting my thoughts. “I really think that my life has become paradise since I met Jesus. My mother is healed and I have a purpose for living. It just feels like paradise.”

“I know what you mean,” I reply, “I can’t believe how different we are now compared to the way we used to be. Who would have guessed it? You and I, traveling companions with the Son of God.”

“Not me, that’s for sure,” says Jephthah, “I never thought I would do anything but sell those dirty, old lamps. If only those kids that we used to fight in the streets could see us now.”

After much more conversation, we finally reach his home. “Well,” I say, “I guess I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

Jephthah replies, “Jeremiah, why don’t you come over to my house and eat supper with my mother and I tonight? I would like to repay you for all of your kindness to me.”

I stop and think a moment, then respond, “Alright. Are you sure that I’m not imposing?”

“You know me better than that; you’re like my brother, Jeremiah.”
As we enter his little shack, Deborah meets us at the door. She looks like a totally different woman now, compared to the way she looked the first time I beheld her. She is dressed modestly and the house is clean and straight. She hugs us like we have been gone forever. She says, “Oh boys! I thought you would never come home. Jeremiah, are you staying for supper tonight?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say politely. I never thought in a thousand years that I would be sitting down to eat with Jephthah and his mother at their home, but I am very happy to be here now. We sit down to eat. Our conversation is mostly one-sided, with Jephthah and I telling of all the amazing things we have seen in our time with Jesus. Deborah is extremely interested in every detail. She cries when we tell her about the little girl that was healed when Judas prayed for her. As we finish, Deborah becomes extremely quiet and distracted, totally different from her previous behavior.

Jephthah asks, “Mother, is something wrong? You seem like something is bothering you.”

Deborah replies, “I have been praying ever since you left, Jephthah, and I have gotten my answer from God. I’m just having a hard time coming to terms with what I have to do.”

Jephthah stands up and walks over to his mother, putting his arms around her and pulling her head close to his chest. As he does, she begins to cry steadily. He says, “Mother, whatever it is, I’m sure that it’ll be alright. Will you tell me what’s bothering you?”

“That’s the issue, son,” she says in a low tone, “what I have to do is tell you something.”
"Tell me something?" Jephthah asks inquisitively. "What could you possibly have to tell me that would make you this upset?"

Deborah takes a deep breath and finally says, "I've waited all these years, hiding things from you. I watched you grow up rough in an environment that no child should ever see. I worried about you and cried over you every day. Until I met Jesus, you were the only one who ever loved me and I've never wanted to do anything to hurt you . . ."

Jephthah cuts her off, "Mother, it's ok. See, I turned out fine. There's no need for you to still feel bad about the past. Everything's fine, ok?"

"You didn't let me finish, son," she continues somberly, "all of these years, I've never told you about your father."

Her words stop Jephthah's breathing. He stands straight up and remains motionless, with his mouth hanging wide open. "Father?" he whispers, "what about my father?"

She takes him by the hand and quietly continues, "I've never told you anything because I knew how much it would hurt you. But since Jesus began this change in my life, I can't help but feel that I've not been completely honest with you. Jephthah, it has eaten me up inside for a long time now. I can't sleep at night. I feel like I've done you a great injustice, but I swear that I've only tried to protect you, not hurt you. I swear . . ."

She trails off into a soft whimper, composes herself and continues: "When I was younger, I met a man that I shouldn't have been interested in, but I was. He was married, but he told me that he loved me, so I began to live in sin with him, hiding it from his wife and everyone else at the same time. Well, I eventually became pregnant. When I realized it, I went to him and told him. Suddenly, he changed into a monster, throwing things and
hitting me. He accused me of deliberately becoming pregnant and trying to ruin his
image. I told him that it wasn’t true, that I truly loved him, but he would hear nothing of
it.”

Jephthah remains stoic; his eyes aren’t even blinking. Deborah is obviously upset
as well, but she continues: “You see, he was a man of power and reputation, and I was a
nobody. He was a leader in Jerusalem and his image couldn’t withstand such a scandal.
So, he put me out on my own and told me that if I ever revealed his identity as your
father that he would have me killed for being an adulteress. I’ve never spoken to anyone
of these things. After you were born, I took you to the temple where he was and tried to
show you to him, hoping that your adorable face would perhaps melt his heart. Instead,
he pulled me into a corner, grabbed my throat and told me that he had no son named
Jephthah and that if he ever saw you again, he would certainly dispose of you.”

The air is very thick in this little room. The veins in Jepthah’s forehead are
popping out. However, Deborah finds the strength to continue, “He was a Pharisee,
Jephthah. His name is Gehazi, the man who tried to stone me at the temple that day. He
is your father, Jephthah.”

Jephthah eyes remain focused on the wall. He is still motionless and I don’t think
he has breathed yet. I say, “Jephthah, are you ok?” He doesn’t reply.

An eternity passes, then without turning to her he says, “You mean, you’ve
known this all of these years and you haven’t told me. Gehazi is my father?”

Deborah reaches up, takes hold of his hand, and says, “I’m sorry son, but it’s true.
Now I can have peace because I don’t have to lie to you anymore. I love you, Jephthah,
more than my own life. Please tell me we can get through this. Look at all of the good
that has happened lately. This doesn’t have to end all of that.”

Jephthah continues to stare. Suddenly, he jerks his hand away from his mother
and lifts his hand as if to strike her. She covers her face and backs away to avoid the
blow. I am paralyzed in my seat. Jephthah just stands there, his hand held high in the air
and a hatred in his eyes that I haven’t seen since the day Jesus healed Deborah. He
screams, “You whore! Why didn’t you tell me! How could you do this to me! Gehazi!
Gehazi!

But he never strikes her. She is crying and screaming, “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!
Please forgive me, son!”

Jephthah looks at me with desperation in his eyes. I try to speak, but nothing will
come from my mouth. Jephthah turns and runs out the door as fast as he can. I run to the
doors to follow, but he has always been faster than me and he has already disappeared into
the darkness. I turn to see Deborah collapsed on the floor, weeping violently and saying
over and over again, “God, please forgive me! God, please forgive me!”

I walk over and help her back into the seat, putting my arms around her and
embracing her as I would my own mother. I say, “God has already forgiven you,
remember? Just because Jephthah is angry doesn’t mean that God is. I must tell Jesus
about this. He’ll know what to do. Try to get some rest, it’ll be ok.”

She looks up at me and nods, drying her face with a towel that is lying on the
table. I quickly approach the door, trying to appear strong. As I leave, I turn to see her
still sitting there crying and praying. She says loudly, “You’re right. It’ll be ok. God has
brought us too far to leave us now.”
I am impressed by her faith, but we are both afraid. When I reach the street, my restrained tears make their late appearance. My heart hurts for Jephthah. He was so happy. So much for paradise. This could ruin everything that has happened over the past few months. I think about looking for him, but I know that I’ll never find him this time.

So, I resolve not to go home, but to go straight back to find Jesus. As I walk off into the cold night, it begins to rain. The cool rain brings little clouds of steam from the hot stones of the buildings. As the steam rises like smoke into the night sky, so do my prayers for Jephthah.
Chapter 7

Bethany and Ephraim

My journey begins. The rain has been relentless and I am soaked to the bone. I wonder if Jephthah has found a place to sleep, or if he has slept at all. It’s been several hours since I left Deborah crying at her table and the rain has been my constant companion. I know where to go. Jesus and His disciples are supposed to leave for Bethany this morning. I figure that if I head for Bethany, I should arrive at about the same time they do. Then I can tell Jesus what has happened to Jephthah.

My journey is not a very long one and I arrive in Bethany just as the sun is coming up. The morning air smells sweet; the rain has stopped. Everything feels clean, washed by the long rain. I feel a little better, but I still can’t stop thinking about Jephthah and what he must be thinking at this very moment. I’ve never seen someone so furious. I just pray that he won’t forget the things he has seen and heard with Jesus.

It’s no mystery where Jesus will go when He arrives at Bethany. For years now, He and His disciples stay at Bethany a couple times every few months. Bethany is the home of some of Jesus’ closest friends: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. I remember coming here several times while traveling with Jesus. Since my job usually involves preparing food or gathering supplies, I found myself to be fast friends with Martha. Martha is a sweet lady, but still full of fire. Martha’s word is the final word in the household, no questions asked. Lazarus and Mary are always teasing her about it. They call her names like “warden” and “mother” when she issues a decree; and truly her requests come across like decrees. Her voice is naturally loud and commanding, and her personality is extremely no-nonsense. When there is work to be done, and sometimes when there isn’t,
she is on task. Usually, when we arrive at her house, the tension in the air is almost tangible. Mary and Lazarus always have the same looks on their faces: the expressions of whipped puppies. It's always obvious that Martha has been on a cooking or cleaning rampage and that no one in the house can relax or breathe until it has run its full course.

As usual, Jesus is usually in on the joke. He lovingly pokes and prods at Martha, teasing her about her nervousness and resourcefulness. She usually turns red, shaking her head while the rest of us have a good laugh. However, Jesus never makes her feel uncomfortable and He is always quick to thank her for all of her hard work. I remember one time Jesus jumped up after dinner and helped Martha with the cleanup. We all tried to stop Him; I mean, he is the Master and he shouldn't be doing housework. But He wouldn't let us get a word in. Martha also tried to stop Him, but instead He made everyone leave them alone to do the work. It was a large job, but I could hear Martha and Jesus talking the whole time, until the job was finished. Jesus always makes a way and finds time to talk to those He loves; and I've never met anyone He doesn't love.

As I approach the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, I see a group of about ten women, dressed in black, standing outside the door. As I get closer, I can tell that they are mourners, and my heart drops within me. I wonder what has happened here; I hope everyone is ok. As I enter the door, Martha sees me and runs across the room to meet me. Her face is red and it's obvious that she has been crying. She grabs my arms and excitedly says, "Jeremiah, thank God you're here. Is Jesus close behind you?"

I say, "I don't know. Jephthah and I left Jesus yesterday. He said that He planned to come here today. I'm sure that He will be here soon. What's going on, Martha? Has something bad happened?"
My words bring new tears to her eyes and she says, “Jeremiah, I don’t know how to tell you this, but Lazarus. . . he is dead.”

“Dead!” I reply in shock. “How did he die?”

She says, “It happened about four days ago, but he was sick for several days before that. I’ve sent several messengers to Jesus over the past week or so, but He never came. I know that He’s aware of everything that has been happening, but He still hasn’t shown. I was hoping that you knew something about why He has delayed.”

I stand here stunned. I say, “Martha, now that you mention it, I do remember some of the disciples asking Jesus about Lazarus. I had been out buying food and I didn’t know that a messenger had come. I didn’t worry about it or even ask because Jesus didn’t act like there was anything to fear.” I pause and run my fingers through my hair, trying to make sense of my thoughts. I continue, “That explains the confused expressions that some of the disciples had on their faces. I remember Jesus saying, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ I guess I figured Jesus meant he wasn’t very sick or that he was going to get better soon.

I’m so sorry, Martha. Where’s Mary?”

“She’s sitting in the upstairs room where Lazarus was before he died. She’s pretty devastated. Jeremiah, I don’t get it. I don’t doubt for one moment that Jesus is the Messiah, but why would He wait? Why would He not come and heal Lazarus as soon as He had heard that he was sick? You know how they were such good friends. This just doesn’t make sense.”
Martha makes sense. This just doesn’t all add up. Just then, a young boy runs in the door and finds Martha saying, “Martha! I found Jesus; He’s just entered town. I found Him just like you told me to.”

Martha pats the boy on the back and quickly walks toward the door. I follow her. As we walk down the street, I can see Jesus in the distance, followed by the disciples. Martha runs up to Him and says, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.”

I wonder to myself what she means by this. Jesus says, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha replies, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus looks deep into her eyes and says, “Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

His words stir up something within me. The way that He speaks of resurrection and life reaffirm to me that He knows them both very well. Martha, as strong and unbending as ever, says, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” I can tell that her belief in Jesus is very strong. She is saying these words, even while her only brother lies dead in a tomb somewhere near here. She suddenly turns and runs back to her house. As she runs she calls out behind her, “Stay here. I’ll go and get Mary.”

After she has left, Jesus sees me. He says, “Jeremiah, why are you here?”

I have forgotten about Jephthah in the midst of all the commotion. I say, “Rabbi, it’s Jephthah!”
Jesus says, “Is he sick?” His tone indicates that He already knows the answer.

I reply, “In a way, Lord.” By this time, Martha has returned with Mary, who is crying. Mary falls down before Jesus while her tears fall on His feet. She says, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” Many of the Jews that were mourning at her house are now standing near us in the street, mourning aloud as Mary is. The corporate, conglomerate sound of all of their cries together creates quite a loud noise. People all around pause and watch us, stunned by the enormous noise of the mourners. I look at Jesus and I see something happen in Him. He gazes down at Mary, still bawling at His feet. He then looks at all of the Jews who are crying. He begins to look deeply troubled. I have never seen Him very upset. He handles most life and death situations with complete composure. It’s not that He lacks emotion, but He rarely looks surprised. I see a wet gleam in His eyes and He asks Martha, “Where have they laid him?”

She replies, “Lord, come and see.”

We begin our procession in the direction of the tomb and the roar of the crying increases with each step. Bethany is not a very large place, so we arrive very quickly. Lazarus’ tomb is in a cave with a huge stone lying against the entrance. When Jesus beholds the tomb, He falls to His knees and begins to cry bitterly. I put my hand on His shoulder and say, “Master?” But He says nothing, continuing to sob.

I hear some of the Jews, who are there mourning, say, “See how He loved him.” Indeed it seems that Jesus is truly devastated by Lazarus’ death. He has cried now for about ten minutes. One of the mourners walks over to Martha and says, “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept Lazarus from dying?” Martha, full of passion and strength, turns and lunges a sharp rebuke from the fiery wells of her
eyes as if to say, 'He is the Master, He can do anything He chooses!' The woman, surprised and clueless, quickly retreats back to her place among the crowd.

Finally, Jesus pulls it together enough to stand to His feet. He walks toward the tomb and leans his head against the stone. Then, He turns and says to those of us standing around, "Take away the stone." We all look at one another with puzzled expressions. Take away the stone, is He crazy?

Martha, still trusting, yet unsure of Jesus' state of mind, walks toward Him and says, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days."

Jesus looks up at her and says, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?"

Martha looks speechless, which is unusual for her. She contemplates for a moment, then faithfully resumes her role. She looks at us and says with an authoritative tone in her voice, "Well, you heard Him; remove the stone!"

For the first time since I've been healed, I wish that I still had a deformed hand. Peter turns to the eleven, myself, and a few others and says in a loud voice, "Alright boys, you over there get on the right side and the rest of us will take the left. When I say go, you push and the rest of us will pull." So we all assume our positions. The stone is huge and it will not be easy to move. We all grab on to our part of the stone and wait for the signal. I can see Peter. He has his hands on the stone, but his eyes on Jesus. His expression is one of complete confusion, but Jesus nods him into action. Peter takes a deep breath and says, "Ok, on my count: one, two, push!"

All of the grunts go up as one excruciating cry. I am pushing as hard as I can, but I have yet to feel the stone move even one inch. Peter yells, "Stop! It's not working.
The stone has laid here for four days and it has sunk into the ground a bit. So, we are going to have to rock it back and forth in order to get it to move. You guys over there push and then pull and we’ll alternate. Everybody ready?"

We all say yes and then Peter yells, “Go!” Again the travail begins. We push and pull in unison, alternating with the other side. Sure enough, the stone begins to rock with us. Peter yells, “That’s it! Don’t stop.” So we continue until the stone is moving more easily. Peter yells, “Alright, that’s enough! Now you guys push again and we’ll pull.” So we do and the stone begins to roll.

Martha was right. As soon as a little space of the entrance is exposed, a smell of monstrous proportions hits us like a slap in the face. Most of the men around me are fisherman and are used to the smell of death. But Matthew used to be a tax collector and he is not familiar with such a stench. Needless to say, he quickly finds himself losing his lunch in the bushes next to the cave. After we have rolled the stone all the way over, we step away where the air is cleaner. The crowd that has now gathered around is buzzing, speaking lowly to one another about what is happening. Jesus, however, has remained silent while we have worked, still looking a bit troubled, yet more composed than before.

He lifts His eyes up to the sky and says, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I have said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.” He pauses and takes a deep breath. The troubled expression that He had carried ever since we arrived suddenly leaves and the familiar smile returns, wider than ever. He suddenly cries out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!”
My heart leaps within me at His words, yet not a word is uttered throughout the crowd. All eyes gaze upon the tomb. Nothing happens. I gaze to see, but everything is dark within the cave. We all continue to wait, but still nothing happens. Then, I notice something. The stench is gone. I turn to Matthew and he is no longer sick, but is gazing at the tomb with the rest of us. Suddenly, it happens! Lazarus comes inching out, taking baby steps. His whole body, including his legs, are bound up with the graveclothes. The whole crowd gasps. One woman screams. For a moment, no one knows how to react, but Jesus breaks the silence.

He says, “Loose him and let him go!”

Peter, always the first to obey, runs up to Lazarus and begins to pull off the cloth that is covering Lazarus’ face. When it comes off, Lazarus is smiling from ear to ear. He begins to shout praises to God saying, “Blessed be the name of the Lord!” Others come and help to unravel the graveclothes. Martha sends the same boy back to her home to get a robe for Lazarus to wear after all of the clothes are removed. Mary and Martha then run and embrace their risen brother and the three fall to the ground since his feet are still bound together. They all just lay there laughing and crying together.

They are interrupted as Jesus says, “Lazarus.” He is standing over them with His hand held out to Lazarus and new tears streaming down His face. “If these women will let you up, I’ll help you.”

Lazarus smiles and holds out his hand as Jesus pulls him up. The two embrace and laugh together, giving praise to God for the miracle that has just occurred. Jesus says, “How do you feel now?”
Lazarus looks down at his feet and says, “I feel like a new man, but I still can’t walk.”

Jesus then stoops down and begins to unravel the cloth Himself. Soon, Lazarus is wearing the robe that the boy has brought and we are all returning back to his house. The rest of the afternoon is spent in celebration and feasting. Jesus and Lazarus have always enjoyed eating and fellowshipping together, so they take some time to catch up. I man my usual post, preparing the meal. This time however, Martha hardly helps at all, only showing me where the cooking utensils are. She remains seated beside Mary at Jesus’ feet, laughing and listening to the conversations going on between Jesus and Lazarus. I guess that even she would rather listen than work on a day like today.

After supper, we all sit talking. The day is wearing down and so are the disciples. It is now late and the sun has long since set. As we are all preparing to sleep, there is a knock at the door. Martha answers the door, letting a man dressed in a robe come inside. He enters quietly, keeping his head down. He is wearing a hood and none of us can see his face.

Jesus leans forwards and says, “Nicodemus, why have you come?”

The man removes his hood and wipes his face with his hands. He is a Pharisee named Nicodemus. In all of the times that Jesus had confronted the Pharisees, I have never seen him before. Nicodemus says, “Master, the news of what happened here today has already reached Jerusalem. Everyone is talking about it and many believe that You are the Messiah. Furthermore, the Pharisees and chief priests called an emergency meeting tonight.”

Jesus says, “Come, sit down and rest, friend.”
Nicodemus takes off his cloak and sits next to Jesus. He continues, “They called a meeting to decide what to do. They say that the many signs You are performing are causing everyone to believe in You. They think that if they don’t do something that the Romans will come and take away their authority and eventually the whole nation. Caiaphas, the high priest, was furious. He said that we didn’t understand that it would be better if one man would die for the whole nation than for the whole nation to be destroyed.”

Jesus strokes His beard and says, “Caiaphas is correct. It is better that one Man die for all, than for all to die.”

We all look at one another in confusion. Peter says, “Lord, you should stop talking like that! You’ve been speaking death for a while now. It’s useless to talk of such things. You’re not going to die. You’re the Messiah!”

Jesus looks sternly at Peter and says, “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Peter hangs his head low and says, “I’m sorry, my Lord.”

Jesus takes his hand and says, “I forgive you. When I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto Myself. There is much suffering that is to come, Peter, but Caiaphas is right. One Man must die for all.”

None of us really understand what He is talking about. I mean, he just raised a man from the dead and now He speaks of His own death? Surely His words are another parable. He is the Messiah. Nicodemus continues, “Master, they are plotting now to arrest You and eventually to kill You. This miracle was the last straw for them.” He
turns to Lazarus and says, "They are also planning to take your life as well because many believe in Jesus because of your miracle."

Lazarus leans back, puts his hands behind his head, and says, "Let them come. I've already been dead once."

Nicodemus continues, speaking to Jesus now, "You must avoid coming to places where they can seize You, because they will. In fact, they have issued an order that if anyone knows where You are, they are required to report it so that they can arrest You!"

Peter, who has regained his courage by now, says, "They can't do such a thing! We will all fight for Him. They have wanted to seize Him many times, but they don't have the power or the authority. Jesus doesn't have to hide like some child!"

Jesus cuts him off saying, "My time has not yet come, Peter. Indeed, we will not walk openly among the Jews until it is the right time for the Father to glorify the Son. Tomorrow, we will go to Ephraim near the wilderness and remain there until the appointed time."

All of the disciples are now roused by Peter's declarations of valor. They all agree that they will fight for Jesus' safety, but Jesus doesn't seem interested in their pledges of loyalty. He simply commands us all to rest because there is much ahead to face. He thanks Nicodemus for his faithfulness and sends him on his way back home.

Everyone lies down and goes to sleep, but I can't sleep. I keep thinking about Jephthah. I wonder where he is tonight. After we have all lied there about an hour, I see Jesus get up. He looks around to see if everyone is sleeping. I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep. Jesus then tiptoes His way around the sleeping disciples and walks out the door. I figure that He is going to find a place to pray. None of us have ever followed
Him when He goes to pray, but I feel that I must talk with Him, so I get up and sneak out behind Him.

I follow Him to a hill near Bethany. He is on His knees at the top of the mountain. From where we are, you can see Jerusalem by the light of the moon. The city is only two miles or so from Bethany. I stand far behind Him, not wanting to disturb Him. He is praying and crying. It is obvious to me that He is very troubled by something. I bow my head to pray silently, for I can feel that the presence of Almighty God is here on this mountain. I find myself praying for Jephthah, praying for his comfort and healing. I get lost in prayer for Him. I can see Him in my mind, running away into the rainy night. Rejected by His own father, who is the exact person he hates the most. A tear falls from my eye for him. It hits the dirt beside my shoe. As if Jesus hears the tear drop, He doesn’t turn around but simply says, “Where do you think he is right now, Jeremiah?”

I am surprised by His words and I respond, “I don’t know, Lord. That’s what I was just wondering.”

“I know,” He says. “He feels alone and cold right now. He feels rejected and his mind is not thinking good thoughts.”

“Lord,” I say, “You’ve known about Gehazi all of this time, right?”

“Yes.” He replies.

I continue, “Why didn’t you tell him, then? Why did you let him find out this way? You sent us home knowing that Deborah was going to tell him.”

Jesus continues to look out over the city. He waves His hand and says, “We all must walk through valleys, sometimes. I didn’t come to take you out of the world and
out of your problems, but to keep you while you’re in the world and to give you a hope. I have overcome the world, but I too must walk through my own valley. You can’t understand now, but soon you will. Fire either consumes or purifies; and that is your choice.”

I consider His wisdom. “But Lord,” I say, “it just doesn’t seem fair that Jephthah has to go through all of this. I don’t have to go through it. In fact, I can’t think of anyone who knows how he feels.”

Jesus replies, “I know what it feels like to have everything and have to leave it all. I know what it’s like to be rejected by your own Father, and my rejection draws near. But after it’s all over, no one will ever have to suffer rejection from the Father again. I am the Door and anyone will be able to have access to the Father, as long as they enter by Me.”

His words confuse me again. It’s like He is talking about something totally different. He begins to walk back towards the house, so I walk with Him. He says, “Jeremiah, I know that now you don’t understand everything I am talking about. Trust Me, I am more concerned about Jephthah than you are. But what I have to do is for his sake, your sake, and the sake of everyone in the world. There is something even worse than the things someone may face on this earth, and that is the destruction that awaits someone when they leave this world. I must face this.”

We are back at the house. I can think of nothing else to say. Jesus says, “Sleep now. Sleep in peace. Tomorrow is another day and we will face it when it gets here.”

So I find my spot and lie down again. I close my eyes, but I still find trouble sleeping. What does He mean, He must “face the destruction?” I don’t understand, but
my thoughts slowly rock me to sleep. I wake up in the middle of the night and glance
over at where Jesus is sleeping, but He is gone again.
Chapter 8

Perfume and Palm Branches

I am awakened by the sound Jesus' voice. He says, "Get up, my friends. We must be going to Ephraim."

I can't believe how tired I am this morning, if it's even morning at all; it is still dark outside. I wonder if Jesus ever slept. It doesn't take long for everyone to get up and get ready. Jesus turns to me and says, "No breakfast this morning, Jeremiah." I nod in agreement.

John speaks up and says, "Master, are we going to say goodbye to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus before we leave?"

Jesus replies, "Let them sleep. We will see them again soon. For now, we must lay low in Ephraim."

Ephraim is about a day's journey away. It is unusual for us to go an entire day without seeing enormous crowds of people. By the time we arrive, it is becoming dark again. We are all very tired. Jesus calls for Judas and I and sends us ahead to find our contact within that city, a man named Simon. We enter the city discreetly and find our way to his home. We knock on the door and are greeted by a very large fellow.

He says, "Judas! How are you brother? What brings you to Ephraim?"

Judas replies, "Simon, the Lord bless and keep you! The Master needs a place to stay for a couple of days. Could you oblige us?"

Without hesitation, Simon says, "Well, of course I can! Anything for Jesus. Just let me get a few things prepared."
Judas says, "Excellent, the Master will be arriving in the next hour. Oh, by the way, there is one more thing that He wanted me to ask of you. Our treasury is a little short this month because we haven't been involved in public ministry quite as much. Jesus wants to know if you have any extra money you could spare, just to help out a little bit."

Simon thinks for a moment and says, "Well, sure Judas... I guess. Uhh, how much do you need."

"Oh, just whatever you can spare," Judas says nonchalantly.

Simon reaches into his pocket and pulls out a little pouch. He says, "Here are my wages for this week's work. If Jesus really needs them, then take them."

Judas reaches out and takes the pouch from him and says, "Thank you, brother. Remember that God knows what you need and He sees everything. He won't let you be in need. We will be back in about an hour or so with the Master. Try to have everything ready, ok?"

Simon is not as cheerful as he originally was, but he forces himself to crack a little smile and say, "Sure thing, brother. It'll all be ready when you arrive."

Judas says, "Great! Let's go Jeremiah."

As we are walking away I look at Judas and say, "Judas, I didn't know that we are lacking money in the treasury. How long has it been this way?"

"Uhh, not very long. Jesus didn't want you guys to worry so He just told me."

This seems very strange to me. I have traveled with Jesus for a while now and I know that we have never lacked for money because people are always donating to our
ministry. I pry a little more, "It just seems impossible. I know for a fact that we take in a lot of money."

Judas stops suddenly, turns to me and angrily says, "Look, Jeremiah! Jesus doesn’t tell you everything that He tells me. Why should our cook know everything that I know! You just keep your mouth shut about this; it’s none of your business!"

I stare into his malicious eyes; they are different now. There is anger and resentment there that I have never seen before. He is literally shaking and his face is flushed. Whatever I have said, I have really upset him. I say, "Ok, Judas. I’m sorry. You’re right, I’m just the cook and I don’t know everything. I was just curious, that’s all. I didn’t mean to make you angry."

He calms as quickly as he erupted and says, "I’m not angry at you, Jeremiah, I’m just under a lot of pressure. It’s ok, I forgive you."

I shake my head to affirm my thanks for his forgiveness, but deep down inside I’m not sure that I need it. Our journey is silent as we go back to get Jesus. When we reach Him and the other disciples, Jesus says, "Judas, is everything ready?"

Judas responds, "Yes, Lord. All will be ready by the time we arrive."

Jesus looks at him with great interest and says, "Were there any problems?"

"No, Lord. Everything went smoothly."

Jesus doesn’t look convinced, but He says, "Fine, let us be going." So we all start out towards Ephraim. I guess that Jesus was cueing Judas as to whether or not he got the money. I can see how Jesus wouldn’t want everyone knowing about it. When we arrive, it is as Simon said and all is ready. We eat supper and lie down to rest. I am awakened in the middle of the night by the low hum of a conversation. I look up to see Jesus and
Simon sitting at a small table and talking. I see Jesus reach into His pocket and pull out a pouch. He hands it to Simon, who refuses at first, but then reluctantly accepts it. It is Jesus’ own pouch. It is late and I fall back to sleep, wondering what it all means.

The next few days are relatively uneventful. We are not accustomed to just sitting around. Some of the disciples are getting restless. They have gotten used to the traveling lifestyle and being near large crowds. This time of waiting is boring them to tears. We rarely leave Simon’s home and no one in the city knows that we are here. It is now seven days before the Passover celebration. None of us expect to go because we know that Jesus is in danger and He wants to lay low and avoid the religious leaders. As I am sitting and thinking about all of this, Jesus calls us all together and says, “It’s time for us to go down to Jerusalem and all the things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked, insulted, and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. But on the third day, He will rise again.” I turn and stare at John, but his face is as blank as mine. None of us understand what He is talking about. He just isn’t making any sense.

So, we leave and travel through Jericho. Jesus is definitely not trying to be inconspicuous anymore. As soon as we reach the gate of the city, Jesus heals the first crippled beggar that is lying there. Soon, all the multitudes run to meet us. Judas turns to Peter and says, “He’s back!” Peter returns the gesture with a wink and a smile. This is more like what we are used to. Jesus walks among the crowds and heals many of the sick. The crowd is pressing in on us now. It is so loud that I can barely withstand the noise. However, above the crowd, I hear one distinct voice. It says, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”
I press my way toward the voice, but I can’t seem to find where it is coming from. It continues, louder than ever, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” As I break through the ranks of the crowd, I spot its origin: a blind beggar is yelling with all of his might. Just then, a man turns and kicks the beggar in the leg and says, “Be quiet, you fool! He’s not going to hear you!”

Anger rises within me. I walk over and grab the man by the collar of his robe and pull him up into my face. He is very short, so I feel overly confident in being confrontational. I lean in to him and say, “Why don’t you try kicking someone who isn’t blind!”

The man looks surprised at first, then furious. He shoves me away and we stand across from each other in a face-off, expecting trouble. However, the beggar just continues to yell, even louder than before. I hear Jesus shout, “Quiet! Where is that voice coming from?” The crowd parts and only the man and I stand between Jesus and the beggar. The man quickly dissolves into the crowd. I am left alone between Jesus and the beggar, my fists clinched in front of me. Jesus looks at me with disappointment in His eyes and I lower my fists, moving to the side slowly. I am very ashamed; I am not acting like one of His followers. I am about to fight someone with the fist that Jesus mercifully healed. Jesus walks past me and over to the beggar. He says, “Friend, what do you want Me to do for You?”

The beggar begins to cry and he sniffles out, “Lord, that I may receive my sight.”

Now I feel very ashamed at the purity in Jesus’ actions versus the stupidity of mine. Jesus, with those familiar tears of compassion in His eyes, says, “Ok. Receive your sight; your faith has made you well.”
Immediately, the man screams out, “My God! I can see! I can see!” He jumps up and runs throughout the crowd grabbing people by their arms and screaming into their faces, “I can see! I can see!” A corporate cry of praise goes up from the crowd as Jesus walks back to the middle of the street and continues the procession. After we walk a short distance down the road, Jesus holds up His hand, halting and quieting the crowd. He turns His focus to the branches of a nearby tree. In unison, the whole crowd turns and looks up into the tree. Sure enough, there is someone sitting on one of the branches. None of us has him noticed because of the size of the crowd. Jesus yells to the man in the tree, “Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down! Today, I must stay at your house.”

The man immediately leaps from the tree, stumbling and almost hurting himself in the landing. He brushes himself off and stands before Jesus. He is very short. Suddenly, I realize that it’s the same guy that I tried to fight earlier. I wish I could just disappear. Jesus looks at me, smiling as if He feels sorry for me. Then He winks, causing me to continue to turn red. The man is crying, as everyone seems to do when they meet Jesus. We all follow the man to his house, which is more like a mansion. Zacchaeus is very rich because he is a tax collector. This explains some of the reason that it was so easy for me to dislike him. What could be worse than a tax collector, especially the chief tax collector?

I am still very ashamed. I don’t have to prepare the meal because Zacchaeus has his own servants to do the work. We spend the entire day here with him. Jesus seems to be very interested in this man for some reason. He asks him many questions about his family and his work, and He listens very attentively to all of the stories Zacchaeus has to tell. Jesus explains the concept of the new birth to him, as He does to all that He meets.
Zacchaeus seems confused, as most are, but is willing to accept everything that Jesus says. So, after we finish supper, Zacchaeus stands up and says, “Look, Lord, I am going to give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I will restore it four times over.” I am impressed by his repentance and generosity. I glance at Judas just in time to see him roll his eyes.

Jesus says, “Today, salvation has come to this house, for the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost.” Jesus and Zacchaeus embrace.

I can take it no longer. I approach Zacchaeus and say, “Sir, I just wanted to apologize for the way I acted in the street today.”

Zacchaeus, no longer the same man I had confronted earlier, smiles and embraces me as well saying, “You shouldn’t apologize! It is I who needs to apologize. I can’t believe that I used to treat people the way that I did. It is no problem, my brother.” I glance at Jesus and He seems pleased with my apology, so I feel better.

We stay until dark and until all of the crowds have gone home. Then, we thank Zacchaeus and set out towards Bethany, en route to Jerusalem. We stop and sleep under the stars, awaking very early again. It is now six days until the Passover celebration. We reach Bethany in the morning and are met with enthusiasm by the crowds there, which are still buzzing with excitement over the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection. We spend the day in Bethany, with Jesus working miracles openly. Some of us are concerned that being so close to Jerusalem the religious leaders will surely hear about Jesus’ location. However, Jesus doesn’t seem to be concerned any more. He is dead-set on going to Jerusalem, no matter what the cost.
When the time to eat arrives, Martha and I prepare supper as usual. Mary is more quiet than usual. Lazarus and Jesus talk as usual, but Mary remains totally silent. In fact, she looks as though she could burst into tears at any time. She leaves the room and returns with some sort of container. As she walks closer, I recognized that it is an alabaster flask. Jephthah had once acquired one that sold for a lot of money. The room becomes silent and Mary is crying steadily now. She walks across the room and kneels before Jesus. She looks up at Him and He nods to her approvingly. She breaks off the top of the flask and begins to pour its contents onto Jesus’ feet. An breathtaking fragrance quickly fills the entire room and I recognize it as oil of spikenard, a very expensive perfume. After she has poured out all of the perfume onto His feet, she takes her long hair in her hands and begins to wipe His feet with it. It is a solemn moment and no one speaks. Jesus closes His eyes and lets her complete what she is doing.

Suddenly, Judas breaks the silence: “Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor? What a waste of money!”

Mary begins to cry. She is very sensitive and is obviously hurt by his outburst. Jesus stands up quickly and points His finger at Judas saying, “Leave her alone! Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. You will always have the poor among you, and whenever you wish, you can do them good; but Me you do not always have. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint my body for burial. Truly, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.”

Judas turns red and sits down quickly, folding his arms and holding them together tightly. The smell of the perfume is overwhelming. It smells wonderful. We all go to
sleep as usual, and as usual I have trouble. I awake in the middle of the night and instinctively look over to where Jesus is supposed to be. He is gone again. I also notice that Judas is gone, also. Maybe they are out together. Soon, weariness overtakes me again and I fall asleep.

The next morning, Jesus wakes Philip and I before the rest. It is now five days before the Passover. Jesus says, “You two go into that village that is near here and as soon as you enter, you will find a donkey’s colt tied to a post. The colt has never been ridden. Loose it and bring it here. If anyone asks you anything about it, just say, ‘the Lord has need of it.’”

So, we get ready and leave before the other disciples even stir. I notice that Judas is asleep as the rest of them. We arrive in the village as the sun is beginning to become hot. Sure enough, we see a colt, just as Jesus has described. Feeling a little strange about the whole thing, I begin to untie the colt. A man yells out from his house, “Excuse me! What do you think you’re doing?”

Philip and I are startled by his voice and we are both a little jumpy. I answer him awkwardly, “Uhh, the Lord has need of it?” My voice cracks and I clear my throat.

The man now steps out of his door and says, “What did you say?”

I say again, louder this time, “The Lord has need of it.”

“Oh,” the man says, “Ok.” Then he turns around and goes back inside the house. Philip and I look at each other and let out a little laugh. We have learned to be surprised by few things, but this one was kind of funny. We start out with the colt toward Bethany to meet the Lord, but the colt doesn’t seem to want to cooperate. I pull on the rope as hard as I can, but the colt just lets out a “he-haw” and doesn’t budge. So, Philip gets
behind and begins to push on the colt’s backside, but again only a “he-haw” ensues. Now we are beginning to feel a little foolish. Jesus is waiting on us and we can’t even get the colt to move. So, I decide to become resourceful. I pick up a stick off of the ground and tie an apple to it with some string I brought from home. I tie it so that the fruit hangs down from the stick. Then, I hold it out in front of the colt, teasing my stubborn traveling companion with the tantalizing aroma. Slowly, the colt walks forward towards the food, deceived by my ingenious plan. As we walk through the streets of the small village, we arouse the interest of a crowd of small boys, amused by our parade. They follow us, laughing and pointing at us. Philip and I can’t help but laugh at ourselves. I remember all of those years that the little boys used to laugh at me and I realize how much my life has been changed.

We eventually reach Jesus and the disciples, who find our charade just as amusing as the little boys did. I pull the colt up to Jesus with all of my might. He just looks at me and smiles and says, “Having trouble, Jeremiah?” Everyone laughs out loud.

I say, “Very funny.”

Jesus smiles and gives me a little playful punch in the arm. Peter and John walk over and drape their coats on the colt’s back. Jesus then lifts himself up and sits on the colt. He says, “Let’s go!” I pull as hard as I can on the rope, preparing to drag the colt all the way to Jerusalem; but at Jesus’ word, the colt takes off walking on its own at a steady pace and I fall to the ground from the inertia of my own tug. Once again, everyone laughs. I get up, dust myself off, and follow after them.

When we reach the gate of Jerusalem, it is obvious that the crowds already know that we are coming. Thousands of people line the streets, waving their hands in the air.
Jesus is received like a hero! The crowds are shouting praises and cheering Him as they would a general returning from a great battle. I see many pulling the branches off of the surrounding palm trees and waving them in the air. People everywhere are shouting.

One man shouts above the rest, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the King of Israel!” Soon, this chant catches on and it becomes our traveling song. As we ride through the streets, people are taking off their coats and laying them in our path. Even the children are running around and praising Jesus. Surely, today is the day that we have all waited for! Today, Jesus will be revealed as the King of Israel! It is obvious that the people love Him and accept Him as the Messiah. All of the waiting has been for this. This is our finest hour.

The palm branches are interesting to me. Everyone seems to be caught up in this divine moment. The trees around the street are beginning to look bare and empty because of the removal of so many of their branches. I can remember Jesus saying once, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” Somehow, it seems like these palm branches represent something much deeper. They show that the branches can be removed, but the tree remains. It’s like the branches are paying homage to the tree, finally realizing that He is the only true source of life. I look down at my hands, my new hands. Everyone else is waving their “palms,” but few have such reason to wave them as I do. My miracle becomes new again, as if it had just happened today. Here I am, standing in the middle of Jerusalem, a servant to the Messiah. I raise my palms in the air as well, waving them with the whole world. I will worship the Tree, my Giver of life. I leave the branches alone and lift my two good hands in the air as a testimony and a praise to Jesus. What I raise is much more than branches; it is an actual miracle.
I look up at Jesus. His expression is solemn. The celebration is unbelievable, the most magnificent one ever seen in Jerusalem. We march straight through the streets and right up to the entrance of the temple. Jesus dismounts the colt and walks up the steps of the temple as if He owns them. We all follow in tow, proud of our positions as disciples of the Son of God. The Pharisees and religious leaders are standing together at the entrance, watching the celebration that surrounds Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. I recognize Gehazi and he says to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples for what they are saying. There is only one King over Israel!”

Jesus smiles and loudly says, “I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.” The crowd erupts in shouts and applause at His words. This is the showdown they have waited for and Jesus has not backed down. The Pharisees look at one another with concern. They are obviously contemplating whether or not they should seize Jesus. I watch with great nervousness as they talk among themselves. As they discuss, the crowds only praise Jesus even louder, much to the Pharisees’ chagrin. It doesn’t take a genius to realize that taking Him now would cause a riot because He is loved by the masses.

I turn in joy to look at the crowd. As I pan the people, I catch a familiar pair of eyes; it is Jephthah! I yell, “Jephthah! Over here!”

I know that he sees me, but he quickly blends back into the crowd. I run down the steps and look for him, but he is gone. My heart is racing. I only saw him for a moment and he didn’t look good. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was matted. He looked as if he had not slept since the last time I saw him. But now he is gone again.
I turn back to the entrance and I hear a great commotion in the temple. Suddenly, merchants and moneychangers begin to run out and handfuls of change follow behind them, landing in the streets. Little children run and gather the money. Gehazi and the other leaders stand outside the temple, talking to one another. All of the other disciples have gone inside to watch the Lord “clean out His Father’s house.” As I walk up the steps, I see Judas come out of temple entrance. He doesn’t see me, since I am mingled among the crowd that is still gathered around. He goes over and begins to talk to the religious leaders. As he walks, he steps on some of the money that is lying on the temple steps. He stops and picks up one silver coin, examining it in his hand, then tucking it away beneath his robe. I can’t hear what Judas and the Pharisees are talking about, but their conversation seems intense and I assume that the religious leaders are threatening Judas over what Jesus has done here today. Judas doesn’t seem to be backing down; he seems very confident, as usual.
Chapter 9

Supper and Sleep

We spend the next several days with Jesus in the temple. He is teaching and working miracles more than ever while the political arena is constantly becoming more and more volatile. With every word, He cuts apart the inner being of the religious system and its leaders. Jerusalem is growing closer to a kindled fire as Jesus blows harder and harder each day upon the coals that are simmering in the temple halls. The entire atmosphere of the temple has changed. Jesus has driven out all of the moneychangers and merchants, bringing the business of the religious leaders to a standstill. The temple is now only a place of teaching and sacrifice, as it is supposed to be.

We are gathered with Jesus and the crowds as He is teaching. As Jesus is speaking, a group of Pharisees, chief priests, and scribes all enter together. Their pomp and piety resemble a solemn funeral procession. Their robes are clean and covered with the traditional ornaments that are required to be worn with ancient, priestly garb. My stomach turns as they enter. Gehazi is with them. I have acquired quite an aversion to him. To me, he exhibits everything about religion that I hate. Hypocrisy, judgment, false humility: he is the personification of these things. I have learned enough from Jesus to know that I shouldn’t hate him, but sometimes it takes all that is within me to prevent it. Because of him, I have lost my best friend, maybe forever.

These “righteous” men walk up to the Master, showing fake reverence that is more disrespectful than direct cursing. No longer even addressing Him as Rabbi, Gehazi says, “Tell us, by what authority are You doing these things? Or, better yet, who gave You this authority?”
Jesus immediately answers, “I also ask you one thing, and answer Me: the baptism of John- was it from heaven or from men?”

Jesus’ question takes them completely by surprise, and they are lost in its depth. There is obviously not an answer that they can say. If they say “from heaven,” then Jesus will ask them why they didn’t believe the things that John said. Conversely, if they say “from men,” the great crowd of people around us will most likely start a riot because most of them are persuaded that John was a prophet. These men, usually fast and fluent in the right kinds of speech and the most impressive, extensive vocabularies, talk it over among themselves; but very quietly so that we cannot hear.

Finally, a flustered Gehazi emerges from their conference and says, “We don’t know where it was from.”

Jesus smiles and says, “Well then, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Gehazi’s face turns blood red from anger, but there is nothing he can say. So, they all file out the same way that they came in, aware of their defeat. However, I feel inside that there is more confrontation to come. Nonetheless, I am confident that Jesus can handle them with ease; He always has.

Jesus continues to teach the people. At the end of His sermon, the time arrives for the giving of money into the treasury. It is quite a familiar occasion in the temple service and it happens virtually the same way each time: first, the rich and religiously powerful enter and approach the treasury box very slowly, making sure that everyone present is aware of their presence. They usually count the money in front of every one, depositing each coin individually. By the time they finish, everyone knows how much they gave.
Today is no different. The rich and powerful have just completed their financial dramas before all the audience. Next, the normal people file in. They are those who work hard and usually have very little to show for it. They come one by one, walking faster and dropping their money in all at once, since most of them don’t have that much to give.

At the very end of their line tiptoes a very elderly woman. She is hunched over as she walks snail-like down the aisle. There is no one to help her and she is, no doubt, a widow. Normally, no one takes time to behold the “common” people as they drop in their measly contributions, but this woman is taking so long to walk down and is so striking in her appearance that everyone stops to observe. After her long journey down the aisle is finally complete and she is standing near the box, she stretches out a wrinkled, sun-baked hand and drops two small copper coins into the box. She is unaware of the eyes that are giving her notoriety today. The sound of the falling coins echoes a high-pitched chime off of the walls. She doesn’t immediately turn around, but instead she stoically stares down at the huge amount of money before her, of which her contribution didn’t even make a dent. She sighs, which itself seems to be a chore for her wrinkled shell of a body. As she turns to walk away, her tear has darkened the shade of the wood of the moneybox in front of her.

As we are watching her, Jesus says, "Truly, this poor widow has put in more than everyone else here. Everyone else here has given out of their abundance, but she has given out of her poverty everything that she has." His words make sense to me, although I never would have seen it that way. As we are leaving, Jesus calls me to the side and says, "Jeremiah, I want you to help that precious woman to her home and give her this.” He hands me a pouch that is obviously filled with money.
I say, “Lord, should I get money from Judas out of the treasury?”

“No, not this time, Jeremiah; not this time.” He gazes off into space for several seconds, but then regains consciousness of our conversation. He continues, “Anyway, after you help her home and give her the money, meet back with us, ok?”

“Yes, Lord,” I reply. As I walk to the woman, she greets me with a tenderness that only an elderly woman can show. Her grandparent-like smile reminds me of Simeon, except that she can’t hear a word I say. Finally after shouting, “Can I walk you home, ma’am?” about five times in her good ear, she understands what I mean and she takes my hand, my new hand. I wonder if she would take it if she would have seen it before. I bet she would, but it doesn’t matter now. Our journey is not silent, despite her deafness; however, communication is not mutual. Basically, she rambles on the entire time and I nod my head and smile at the end of every sentence. She seems extremely excited to have someone to listen to her. She tells me that her husband died five years ago and she has no children to take care of her. She also says that the priests at the temple won’t help her because she was married to a wealthy man and they feel that she should have managed her wealth more responsibly, making prior arrangements for her widowhood. This seems absurd to both of us, and I let her know I agree by shaking my head very fervently.

Finally, we reach her home and she invites me to come in to sit and “talk” with her, but I somehow communicate to her that I have to be going. Before I leave, I reach in my pocket, take out the pouch, and hand it to her. I tell her that Jesus has sent it for her. Her eyes light up and, defying politeness, she quickly opens the bag and counts the money. I don’t obtain a completely accurate count, but I know it’s close to enough
money to provide for her needs for the next six months. She thanks me with many tears and many more kisses on my forehead. I find myself shedding a few tears too, thankful to witness such joy in someone’s life. When I finally leave, I feel somewhat guilty. I know that I just gave her the money that she needs, but I can’t help but feel that she needs more than just a pouch of money. I realize why she has talked my ear off: when I leave, she is left alone in silence again. I say a prayer and release my guilt, feeling badly about how easy it is to let it go. When I arrive back where Jesus and the disciples are, it is late and most of them are already asleep. As I close my eyes, I can’t get the little old lady out of my mind, but sleep finally comes.

Today is the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb must be killed. We all awaken and some begin to ask Jesus where we are going to go to prepare and eat the Passover tonight. Jesus responds, “Peter, John, take Jeremiah and go prepare the Passover for us.”

Peter says, “Sure, Lord, but where do You want us to prepare it?”

Jesus says, “Go into the city. When you enter, you will see a man carrying a pitcher of water, follow him into the house that he enters. When you enter the house, say to the owner, ‘The Teacher says, “Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”’ He will take you to a large, furnished upper room. You can prepare the supper there.”

So, we agree to what Jesus has said and leave to get everything ready. When we enter the city, sure enough we find the man with the pitcher and the upper room just as Jesus has said. I really like Peter and John, although I like John more. Peter is just a little too zealous for me. He is always blurting out his mind without thinking first.
Shriveled Heart

Sometimes I wonder why Jesus seems to consider Peter the leader of the disciples; it seems to me that Judas would be much more qualified. Peter is not very educated, while Judas seems to have excellent knowledge of money and business. Furthermore, Peter lets his temper control his actions. Often, Peter blows up at the other disciples, making his loyalty to Jesus some competitive thing. Furthermore, he is one of the only two disciples who carry swords with them at all times, as if we are some sort of army. Maybe I’m mistaken, but Jesus just doesn’t seem very militant to me. When His kingdom comes, I don’t think Peter’s sword is going to make much of a difference. Judas, on the other hand, is very well tempered and mild-mannered. He is always thinking of practical ways to advance Jesus into new levels of popularity and success. Judas is a natural leader, while Peter is a natural loser. I like Peter as a person; I just think that he is a little over-the-top most of the time.

John is about my age. He doesn’t say much, but he cries a lot. I don’t think that he’s a weak man, he’s just very tender. On most occasions, John cries after every single miracle that Jesus performs. Jesus always just looks at him and smiles. Jesus and John are very close friends. I have a lot of respect for John because he is always trying to help me when I am preparing food or doing other things for the rest of the group. We don’t talk much, usually. John doesn’t usually have much to say, but when he does speak, every word is sounds like he has thought it out for hours. It’s hard to explain, but he is like a poet, even when he talks in regular conversation. I have learned from him the wisdom of saying little, and saying something meaningful when speaking. I have learned this in theory, but I still struggle in practice. However, even John speaks out of turn sometimes. Once, he and his brother James came to Jesus and asked to someday sit on
thrones to His right and His left in heaven. The nerve of such a request, as if the rest of us didn’t even exist! Jesus just said that they didn’t know what they were asking. He then asked them if they were willing to drink from the cup that He must drink from. They said they were willing and although John upset the rest of us that day, I think that he is truly willing.

Peter, John, and I work for a long time. Preparing the Passover meal for fourteen people is quite an undertaking. When we finally finish, Jesus and the rest of the disciples arrive and they all sit down and begin to eat. After they have finished, Jesus quiets them down and says, “With fervent desire I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I will no longer eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Jesus picks up a piece of the unleavened bread and lifts it up to heaven, much the same way He did that day on the mountain. He says, “Father, thank You for this bread that is broken to feed many.” He then begins to break the bread into pieces and pass it around the table. He says, “This is My body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” There is a tone of finality in His words and all the disciples pick up on it. Jesus just doesn’t seem the same tonight. After this, Jesus takes a cup of wine and passes it around the table. He says, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.”

This is not the first time that Jesus has talked about eating His body and drinking His blood. One day, He spoke like this to a crowd of people and all of them left, appalled by his seemingly cannibalistic language. However, there is something sacred and precious in His words tonight and none of us dare question Him on the subject. The atmosphere of the room is very thick. I glance down at my hand and find it shaking. There is something mysterious in the air tonight.
Jesus bows His head low as if something is deeply troubling Him. After a long pause, He looks up and solemnly says, “One of you will betray Me.” I almost choke on my bread. All of the disciples love Jesus so much, who could possibly betray Him?

Apparently, the disciples feel the same way because in an uproar, they all begin to ask Jesus if they are the betrayer. John is leaning on Jesus, as he usually does. Peter leans in and whispers something to John, who, in turn, whispers something to Jesus. Jesus holds up His hands and says, “It is one whom has dipped the bread with me.” But almost everyone has dipped with Jesus, so we all remain perplexed. Jesus then says, “All of you will be made to stumble tonight because of Me, because it is written, ‘I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.’”

Peter jumps up from his seat, draws his sword, and boisterously proclaims, “Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be!”

Jesus remains calm. He looks Peter in the eyes and says, “I’m sorry, Peter, but before the rooster crows this morning, you will have denied me three times.”

There is a silent gasp among all of the disciples. Not Peter! He may be loud and obnoxious sometimes, but he would never deny Jesus. Peter looks devastated and tears begin to run down his face. He screams, “Never! I will never deny You, Lord! Don’t you know me at all? Don’t you know how much I love You? Can’t You trust me after all of these years that we’ve been together? I will never deny You!” Indeed, Peter looks as if he feels betrayed. But to me, it makes some sense. I mean, Peter is the one who is always getting himself into trouble with his mouth. Even so, I would never have guessed that he would be the one who would betray Jesus. There is a lingering silence around the
table and Peter has resumed his position in his seat with a hopeless expression chiseled into his face by Jesus’ words.

Jesus turns to Judas and says, “Judas, what you have to do, do quickly.”

Judas quickly arises and leaves in a hurry. None of us know why, but he probably is going to buy supplies for the feast or to give money to the poor.

After he has left, Jesus turns back to Peter and the rest of us and says, “When I am risen, I will go before you to Galilee; meet me there. Don’t let your heart be troubled; I know that you believe in God, but believe also in Me. In my Father’s house are many mansions and if it weren’t so, I would just tell you plainly. I am leaving to prepare a place for you. So, if I’m going to prepare a place, you can rest assured that I am coming again to receive you to Myself. Where I am, that’s where you are going to be also. You know where I am going and you know how to get there.”

Thomas speaks up and says, “Lord, we have no idea where You are going, so how are we supposed to know the way?”

Jesus says to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

There is much confusion and pain in the disciples’ eyes, especially Peter’s. Jesus then breaks out in a hymn of praise, one that we are all familiar with. A song seems very out-of-place, but we all reluctantly join in and sing anyway. My hand is still shaking. When we have finished singing, Jesus says, “Let’s go to Gethsemane, my friends. Jeremiah, you stay and clean up, ok?”

“Yes, Lord,” I respond. They leave and I am left with the job of cleaning. I clean up and put everything in its proper place. Then, I lay down to sleep because it’s late. I
close my eyes, but as usual I can't sleep. I lie here, thinking about Jesus' words. I wonder what He meant by all of that. I wonder what could make Peter do such a thing as betray Jesus. Then, my thoughts turn to Jephthah. It's been a long time since I've actually spoken with him. I wonder where he is right now. My insomnia tweaks my curiosity and I decide that I will go out and find Jesus and the disciples at Gethsemane. I know the way because Jesus takes us there all the time to pray and to get away from the crowds. As a boy, I used to sneak out at night and go there. There is no place like it. It's like the stars are twice as bright there. I used to spend hours there, staring up at the heavens and spending time alone with my thoughts. So, I get up, wrap my blanket around me, and make my way to Gethsemane.

The night is very cold and I am thankful for my blanket. I make my way to our familiar spot. When I arrive, I see all of the disciples asleep on the ground; all except Peter, James, John, and Judas; who is, of course, still gone doing whatever the Lord had told him to do earlier. I walk over to Philip, reach down, and shake him. I say, "Philip, wake up. Where's Jesus?"

Philip sits up suddenly and looks around with wild eyes, as if he has been having a nightmare. He says, "Oh, Jeremiah, it's only you. I must have fallen asleep."

I snicker a little and sarcastically say, "Yea, I'd say so. Where's Jesus?"

Philip says, "Oh, He took Peter, James, and John and went up that way into the garden to pray. He told us to stay here and pray for him, so that we won't fall into temptation. But the only temptation I'm facing is the temptation to fall asleep. It's been such a long week and it's so late."
"Well," I say, "it’s not any of my business, but I think that if I were you I would do what Jesus asks."

Philip responds, "Yea, you’re right, it is none your business." He is tired and cranky and definitely not wanting to be corrected by a servant. However, realizing his rudeness he reluctantly says, "Sorry, Jeremiah. I’ll wake up and do my best to pray, ok?"

I accept his apology and walk on. A short distance ahead I find Peter, James, and John in similar states- all fast asleep. I don’t even attempt to wake them because I can see Jesus just ahead. He is on His knees, leaned up against a huge boulder with his face buried in His hands. As I approach Him, suddenly a bright light appears all around Him. It startles me so much that I jump behind a tree and hide. I am only a few feet from Jesus. I can’t tell what the light is because I can only view it through squinted eyes. It is the brightest light I have ever seen; like a thousand fires burning brightly all at once! I look back at Peter, James, and John, but they are all still asleep. As I turn back towards the light, my eyes adjust somewhat and I can make out a body within the light. He must be an angel! He is huge, clothed in white and carrying a large, flaming sword. The angel bows next to Jesus, paying his allegiance. Then, enormous white wings come from behind the angel’s back and cover the both of them in a fortress of light. The wings envelope them for several minutes, then as suddenly as the angel appeared, he quickly disappears; seemingly dissolving into thin air. I remain hidden behind the tree, my knees shaking and my breath nonexistent.

After the angel disappears, Jesus is still in the exact same position, as if He had never moved. I dare not move or speak, but I watch and listen intently in this divine moment that I am witnessing. It is quiet. Suddenly, Jesus cries out in with intense
emotion. “Father, if it’s Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done.” His voice is a raspy cry of agony and despair, but there is no answer from heaven, or at least one that I can hear. My hands are shaking so severely that I am making the bushes next to me rustle. So, I quickly fold my arms and try to keep quiet because I don’t want to bother Jesus when He is so troubled. However, I don’t think it matters how loud I am; Jesus is in another world. I can hear Him saying over and over again, “Abba,” crying out for His Daddy. My heart breaks for Him, yet I don’t understand what could trouble Him so much. All of this talk of betrayal and death, but He is immortal, the eternal One. He is untouchable, even unapproachable. He is the personification of power and authority. I am troubled and confused. Why is my Lord so upset? If He’s upset, I should probably be terrified.

Jesus composes Himself and stands to His feet, with the semblance of renewed vigor. I assume that He has heard from His “Abba.” He doesn’t appear to notice me, although I am certain He knows I’m here because He’s omniscient. He ignores me, but I’m not hurt. I’m too curious to care. He walks over to Peter, James, and John and says, “Are you still sleeping? It’s enough! The hour has come for the Son of Man to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let’s go. Look, My betrayer is at hand.”

No sooner than Jesus has finished His sentence, immediately a mob of men appears in the distance, walking quickly towards our position. Their torches light up the night sky and the smoke from their flames rises into the treetops. There are many men and most of them are armed with clubs and swords. Peter jumps up and screams at the other disciples, “Wake up, everybody! We’ve got trouble!” The other disciples are startled out of their sleep and they jump up very quickly, nervously moving and flinching
about, trying to figure out what to do. I remain silent, hidden behind the safety of my
tree. In a few short moments, the crowd reaches our position. Jesus doesn’t look scared
anymore, but completely calm and composed.

When their lights reach us, I recognize two of the men. One is easily
recognizable. It is Gehazi, walking with his usual pious swagger. The other is...but it
can’t be...it’s Judas! Perhaps he has been captured by the mob, but he isn’t in shackles.
With coolness, he walks up to Jesus and kisses Him on the cheek. Jesus says, “Judas, are
you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”

Judas won’t look Jesus in the eyes. Betray! Judas is the traitor? It can’t be! But it
is. As soon as Judas has kissed Jesus, the guards walk over and grab Jesus roughly by
His arm, turning Him around and putting shackles on His hands. I watch in horror at the
scene before me, still remaining as silent as possible. I look over at Peter, the one I had
once thought was the traitor. His face is blood red and his eyes are filled with lightening,
ready to bolt at any second. Suddenly, they do and Peter follows them, swinging a sword
at one of the men. Peter is obviously not a soldier; his attack is awkward and desperate,
but his motives are pure and courageous. I wish I was the one swinging the sword, but I
remain hidden. Peter misses the guards all together and his blade quickly passes the head
of one of the servants standing there. The man begins to scream, “My ear! My ear!”
Blood begins to gush from the side of his head, quickly soaking into his garment.

Another man runs to servant, who is now crumpled on the ground like a piece of
discarded parchment. The man yells, “Malchus! Malchus! Are you ok?” Malchus
continues to bleed. He is clinging to the side of his head and screaming. Peter’s face
suddenly turns from red to white as he realizes the magnitude of what he has just done.
Immediately, a guard delivers a quick blow to his stomach and in a matter of seconds, he is completely detained.

Suddenly, Jesus yells, “Peter! Put away your sword!” His words echo throughout the garden like thunder and I recognize their familiar tone of divine power. The shackles that are on Jesus’ hands fall to the ground. The soldiers jump away from Him, obviously fearing Him. Jesus walks over to Malchus. He reaches down and lays His right hand on his shoulder. Malchus stops screaming and looks up at Jesus. Jesus then reaches a few feet beside him and picks up the mutilated ear that Peter had cut off. It is bloody and covered in dirt, but Jesus doesn’t flinch at its repulsiveness. His eyes stay focused in Malchus’ eyes, just like the day the He healed me. Jesus raises the torn ear up to the side of Malchus’ head, holding it there for a short moment, then removing His hand. The ear stays in place; it is completely restored! There isn’t even a trace of blood or dirt on the ear. Malchus is speechless, as are the rest of the soldiers. Half of the disciples have already fled. During the commotion, the guards lose hold of Peter and he runs away as fast as he can, with the rest of remaining disciples running close behind. Jesus is left completely alone with the mob.

Jesus turns around and walks back to his previous position. He stoops down and picks up the shackles that had fallen from His hands and gives them back to the guard that had previously put them on Him. Jesus says, “Have you come out to get me as you would capture a criminal, with swords and clubs? When I was teaching daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, the hour of darkness.”
The guard does not even try to put the shackles back on Him, but simply takes Him by the arm. As they begin to lead Him away, someone suddenly shouts, “Look, there in the bushes! Who is that? Come on out from there!”

I am discovered! A young guard reaches for me, but I quickly duck from his grasp. I turn around and run with all of my might, but the young guard is very fast. He stays close behind me as I run and I can hear the sound of his heavy breathing only inches behind me. This is it; I’ll surely be arrested! A hand grabs my back, so I spin around, letting go of my blanket in the turn. Almost stumbling from my acrobatics, I regain my footing and continue running with reckless abandon, zig-zagging in different directions to disorient my pursuer. As I look back, the young soldier is standing there holding the blanket that I let go of. One of the guards yells, “Hey, let him go! We’ve got who we want!”

My legs keep moving with all the energy I can muster. As I glance back over my shoulder again, I see the host of torches in the distance leading Jesus away; so many torches, yet it’s the darkest night I’ve ever seen. I hadn’t put on my clothes when I came to the garden, but only my blanket to keep me warm. I’m too scared to stop, so I just continue to run, completely naked, disappearing under the cloak of darkness.
Chapter 10  

Traits in the Garden and the Palace

My first inclination is to find clothes. It is very late and there are not many people out in the city. As I leave the garden, I attain a few leafy branches and use them to cover my nudity. However, I still jump from shadow to shadow, slowly making my way back to the upper room where we ate the Passover just a few hours ago. When I arrive, I hear voices that I recognize coming from behind the door. I reach for the doorknob, but it is locked. I knock, bringing some sh’s from inside. After a few moments of silence, a grim voice answers, “Who’s there?”

“Thomas,” I whisper, “it’s me.” The door cracks and a brown eyeball peers through the opening. I remain hunched over with the branches covering me. It’s cold and I’m shaking.

Thomas says, “Jeremiah, is that you? Where are your clothes?”

“Never mind that,” I say, “just let me in, will you?” Thomas slowly opens the door and I make my uncomfortable entrance. The faces of the disciples are so downcast that they don’t even crack a smile, though normally there would be uproarious laughter at such an entrance. However, laughter is far from their minds. I quickly retrieve my clothes and put them on. After I’m dressed, I look around and notice that Peter and John are not present. “Where are Peter and John?” I say.

“They went back out looking for Jesus,” says Philip. Finally he asks the obvious, “Where have you been and why are you naked?”
I sit down and tell them the entire story of how I had been in the garden and how I had witnessed the entire thing from my front row seat behind the tree. I even tell them about the angel. Matthew says, “I didn’t see any angel? We must have fallen asleep.”

I become indignant and say, “You most definitely did fall asleep, all of you! Jesus specifically asked you to stay awake and you didn’t!”

Matthew stands up, points across the room and says, “James, you were right there with Him and you couldn’t stay awake either. Maybe if you would have been His ‘right hand man’ like you’re supposed to be, then Jesus wouldn’t have gotten arrested!”

The room erupts into angry shouts and accusations, each accusing another of being lazy or cowardice. I finally raise my voice and shout, “Enough! It doesn’t matter now. There’s no reason to bicker like little children.”

Philip stands up abruptly and says, “Who are you to lecture us, Jeremiah? You’ve gotten awfully bold lately. Don’t forget what you’re role is here: you’re just our servant-nothing more. Besides, I didn’t exactly see you jump from behind that tree you were hiding behind and rescue anyone. You’re standing here lecturing us and Roman soldiers could bust through that door at any moment and take us away as well. We’ll see how courageous you are then.”

I remain silent. This is obviously getting us nowhere fast. We all cast blank stares at the floor, each with his own shame to bear. I finally break the silence and say, “Look, you’re right. I wasn’t exactly the most heroic one tonight either, but what about right now? I’m going out to help Jesus! Who’s with me?”

No one says anything. They all just look down with ashamed expressions on their faces. I throw my hands up in the air and shout, “Fine! All just go by myself!” I walk
over to Matthew and take the sword out of his hand and say, "I’m sure you won’t need
this!" I run to the door and slam it behind me as hard as I can. Cowards! I guess I have
more to be thankful for than they do. I don’t care, though. I’m not going to let Jesus
down. I decide to go back through Gethsemane to try to follow the direction that the
guards took Jesus. I am now clothed with my robe and boldness. I have ran once, but I
won’t run again! I will stand with Jesus until the end. When I reach the spot where we
had been earlier, there is no one left. I walk over to the boulder where Jesus had been
praying. There is a wet spot on the rock; proof of Jesus’ prayer. Now I understand some
of His anguish. He knew that everyone would desert Him and that Judas would betray
Him. However, I still don’t understand why He would let something like this happen.
Even in His capture, He demonstrated His power. Why won’t He use that power to
overcome His enemies? For a moment, I become frustrated and angry with Jesus for
being so stubborn and not taking His proper role in the world like we have all known He
should for a long time.

As I continue to walk and contemplate these things, I hear someone behind me.
The noise startles me and I whirl around with my sword in hand, ready to face my
attacker. A very surprised Peter leaps back and shouts, "Wait, Jeremiah! It’s just me,
Peter!"

I slowly put the sword back in its sheath and say, "Peter, what are you doing here?
I though that you were following after Jesus."

Peter’s face is crimson and covered with dirty streaks of many dried tears. He
says, "Jeremiah, He was right. Everything Jesus said would happen, happened."
“What do you mean,” I say, “now we all know that Judas was the betrayer, not you.”

Peter bitterly continues, “No, Jeremiah.” He pauses to wipe his nose with his sleeve in between the words. “Tonight, Jesus has faced two betrayals; two traitors.”

“What happened, Peter?” I ask.

Peter eyes are cautiously focused upward, as if He expects the hand of God to strike at any moment. After a long delay, he says, “After I escaped from the guards, John and I met up and decided to follow the detachment of soldiers at a distance and look for an opportunity to rescue Jesus. What I don’t understand, Jeremiah, is that He wouldn’t let me defend Him. I tried! I cut off a man’s ear, for God’s sake! I tried to defend Him, I swear it!”

I try to calm him, “I know, Peter, you were very brave.”

Sporadically, he continues, “He healed him; He healed His own attacker and made me look foolish. He could have run, Jeremiah, but instead He healed Him. It must have been the best thing; I mean, Jesus always does what is right, and I never do.”

Peter’s mental anguish is almost unbearable. He goes on, “When we got to the courtyard of the high priest, John knew someone at the door who would let us in. John went somewhere else to watch the trial and I went over and warmed myself by the fire with the servants. Then, all of these liars came forward and started making up all kinds of things about Jesus. None of them told the truth, but Jesus didn’t say a word in His own defence. His silence was really frustrating Caiaphas, the high priest. Caiaphas finally screamed out in desperation, ‘I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!’ Jesus replied, ‘It is as you have said. Nevertheless, I tell you that
hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God, coming in the clouds of heaven.’ Caiaphas practically dove to the ground from his elevated chair, falling on his face in protest. He even tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Now we have all heard His blasphemy! What do you think?’ Everyone then began to cry out for Jesus’ death in unison!”

My heart is in my throat. I say, “His death? You mean it’s come to that? What happened next?”

Peter still focuses on the sky and says, “Well, I had been listening the entire time, trying to figure out what to do. Apparently, my emotions were showing more than I knew, as usual, because some little servant girl said she recognized me as being with Jesus. I denied it and made a point to loudly proclaim that I had no idea what she was talking about. I didn’t even realize what I was doing. I was just trying to retain my cover, especially since they were probably already looking for me because of what I had done to that servant in the garden. Then, someone else recognized me and started trying to point me out to everyone. I then made an oath by heaven that I did not know Jesus. I have to be honest, I was no longer trying to plan a rescue, I was just trying to save my own skin.”

I stand here shocked. It’s hard for me to believe that Peter would ever deny Jesus. Peter continues, “Then, the Pharisees and guards took Jesus and blindfolded Him. They gathered around Him like a pack of wild dogs and began to spit on Him and punch Him with their fists. They made fun of Him and told Him to prophesy about which one struck Him. I became so upset that I began to cry, but I tried to hide it. They were beating
Jesus, Jeremiah! They were hitting our Jesus, the Messiah! I was terrified. I didn’t know what to do. Then, another girl approached me and screamed out that I was one of His disciples and that my Galilean accent gave me away. I lost it! I began to curse and swear and yell out that I didn’t know Him!” Peter is weeping now as he speaks, and his tears fly off of his lips as he vehemently tells his story. He continues, “As I finished my ranting, the rooster crowed. The rooster crowed! I realized what I had done and I remembered what Jesus had said. I turned quickly and saw Jesus receiving a blow from one of the guards. He hit Him so hard that His blindfold came flying off. When Jesus raised His head, He looked directly at me, wiping the blood from his nose and mouth. His eyes pierced through me like a sword, straight to my soul. I blew it, Jeremiah! He was right, I denied Him, even cursed Him! I let Him down at the very time He needed me the most. He didn’t look mad. He looked like the most rejected man I’ve ever seen. He looked like His best friend had turned his back on Him; and He had. Some “rock” I turned out to be!”

I am captivated by Peter’s story and I have nothing to say. My face is now drenched from my own tears. I can’t believe that they are beating Jesus. I ask, “Where is He now?” Peter just moans bitterly. I grab him by his arms and shake him saying, “Peter! Where is He now? You’ve got to tell me!”

Peter wakes up some and says, “I don’t know! I ran out of there after the rooster crowed!” Peter then jerks away from my grasp and runs off into the forest. I can hear him screaming and yelling as he goes. Quickly, he disappears into the night. I am left alone again, so I turn around and begin to run towards the house of the high priest. Maybe if I hurry, I can get there before they take Jesus away. I don’t know what will
happen next and I don’t know what I’m going to do when I get there, but I know that I
have to get there. I run with more speed than ever, tripping and stomping my way down
the path. I can feel my heart jumping out of my chest and my stomach aching within me,
but I don’t slow down, not even for a moment. The leaves of the trees of the garden whiz
past me as I sprint and I glance down to make sure that I don’t trip and fall on any tree
roots.

Suddenly, I collide with someone else who is running the opposite direction! We
both fall to the ground, letting out mutual cries of pain. I see some glistening spots for a
moment, then they disappear. I am lying on my side. Quickly, pain lassoes my hand to
my forehead, where I feel something wet just below my hairline. I examine the red liquid
on my fingers and I realize that I have cut my head. I look over and see the culprit
weapon, a slightly sharp stone, lying next to me. I must have fallen on it. When I regain
some of my senses, I look over at the other man. He is still lying there, moaning. So, I
get up and walk over to him. He seems ok, just a little disoriented. I take him by the
hand and lift him to his feet. “Are you alright, friend?” I ask.

He answers, “I don’t know.”

His voice is very familiar- it’s Judas! Judas is standing in front of me. Losing my
sanity, I sling a fist as hard as I can at his nose, but it lands directly on his cheekbone
instead. He cries out in pain and falls back to the ground. Simultaneously, I yell out
from the pain of the punch. It is my first fight and I don’t think I like it. I’m still a
madman, though, and I jump down on Judas, pinning his arms behind his head with my
knees. I scream, “Traitor! How could you do this? How could you betray Jesus?”

“You’re right!” he whines.
His response takes me by surprise, but I don’t let him up. I say, “What do you mean ‘You’re right’? You knowingly and deliberately betrayed Jesus, and with a kiss! You don’t deserve to live!”

“It’s true,” he continues to weep, “everything you’re saying is true. I don’t deserve to live!”

“You’re not making much sense, Judas! You better start making some soon!”

My hatred is unbridled. “What in the world would cause you to do such a despicable thing?

“You wouldn’t understand!” He cries out.

“Try me!” I scream back.

“I can’t talk while you’re holding me down like this!”

I pull some of my weight off of him, but continue to hold him down securely.

“That’s the best you’re going to get, you heartless traitor! Now, start talking!”

He tries to move, but I have him. He groans, “Listen, we have all been waiting for Jesus to stand up and prove to the world that He is the Messiah. Even you and I have talked about it.”

I say, “What’s your point?”

He continues, “We’ve been waiting so long for Him to take over the government and end the Roman oppression. But, Jeremiah, you know as well as I do how frustrating it has been when He just walks away from His opponents, never demonstrating His royal power.”
I naturally pull some of my weight off of him, probably feeling the guilt of sharing these frustrations at times. Still holding him, I ask, “Yea, but what could cause you to do what you did, Judas? I just don’t get it.”

He spits some blood out of his mouth and says, “It all started back when Jesus asked me to be in charge of the treasury. I’ve always dreamed of being rich. When I was a little boy, my parents never had much and we lived off of anything that they could scrounge up from garbage dumps or what they could beg from rich Pharisees. In my mind, those Pharisees were the richest men on the face of the earth because they could eat whatever they wanted and buy whatever their hearts desired. When I became a man, my drive to become rich became an obsession for me. I’ve tried to not focus on money, but I just couldn’t help it. So, anyway, when Jesus put me in charge of the treasury, I began to steal from it every once in a while. Not all the time; just every once and a while. I only took what I knew no one would notice.”

“You had the nerve to steal from our treasury? You took ministry money- holy money- and kept it for yourself? How could we not have known?”

“No one knew, I thought. I just couldn’t get enough. I started taking more and more. Eventually, I began to hustle people, telling them that Jesus wanted money from them when He really had not said a word about it.”

“You mean, you stole from Simon that day in Ephraim? How could you do it, Judas? How could you steal from Jesus?”

Judas remains silent for a moment, his inner thoughts obviously tearing his soul apart. He continues, “I don’t know why I did it. But eventually, I became so infuriated because Jesus wouldn’t hurry up and begin His kingdom that I decided I would hurry it
along myself. Do you remember that day that He told us about the kingdom, about how we were going to rule and reign with Him? All I could think about is how rich I would be when I was ruling with Him. So, I began to talk to some of the Pharisees in private. They were very excited that I was even talking to them. Right off the bat, Gehazi offered me thirty pieces of silver if I would give away Jesus’ location at a time when the crowds were not present. I figured it was easy money; I mean, He’s Jesus and no one can lay a finger on Him. What could they possibly do to the Messiah? Nothing! Besides, this would probably give Jesus the nudge He needed to take His kingdom by force and then all would be well and we would rule with Him. But that’s not what happened. When I kissed Him in the garden and the guards grabbed Him, He didn’t call down angels like I thought He would. He didn’t even resist or strike them with blindness or anything! He just stood there and let them arrest Him.” Judas’ words trail off into nothingness.

“Thirty pieces of silver!” I shout. “You sold Jesus for thirty pieces of silver! I hate you Judas!” I reach back and slap him again. Blood begins to slowly ooze from his upper lip, but he does not retaliate or even try to block the blows. He doesn’t even wipe the blood from his lip. He just closes his eyes and mumbles something to himself.

Suddenly, he shouts, “Jeremiah! Let me finish! When they took Him to the courtyard of the high priest, I figured that He would end this charade at any moment. They accused Him, but He wouldn’t even defend Himself. They beat Him with their fists and mocked Him, but He still wouldn’t retaliate. Then, they sentenced Him to death for the sin of blasphemy. Suddenly, it hit me! He had been telling us that He would die, but none of us believed Him! He had been telling us all along that one of us would betray Him, but I didn’t know it would be me! So, I went back to the religious leaders and tried
to return the money! I told them that I had betrayed an innocent man, but they wouldn’t
listen to me. I told them that I didn’t want their ‘blood money,’ but they didn’t care.
They said that it was my problem, not theirs. So I threw the money down on the floor
and ran here.” His gaze is distant and hopeless. He continues, “He’s going to die,
Jeremiah, and it’s all my fault!”

“Shut up!” I scream. “He’s not going to die! He can’t die- He’s the Messiah!” I
jump off of him pace around with my arms folded, trying to think of what to do. I say,
“Where is He now?”

Judas replies, “They’ve taken Him to Pilate to get permission to execute Him.
I’m sorry, Jeremiah. For all it’s worth, I’m sorry. I let greed get the best of me. Now, I
don’t deserve to live. Don’t worry, you will never have to see me again.”

He picks himself up off of the ground and turns to run away. My heart is
somewhat touched by his remorseful words, but I can’t bring myself to follow him, so I
don’t. I turn and continue my mission, but now to the palace of Pilate. It is still dark, but
I know that soon the sun will peak over the mountains. As I run, I reach up and gingerly
touch the gash on my head; the bleeding has stopped. As I reach the steps of the Palace,
there is a large crowd gathered. I look over and see Jesus in shackles. His face is
bleeding badly from the beating He has taken. I’m only a servant, so I’m in no danger of
anyone recognizing me. As I look around the crowd, I see John. I walk over to him and
touch him on the shoulder. He spasmodically turns around, and then sighs from relief. He
says, “Whew, Jeremiah, it’s just you.”

“What’s going on?” I say.
John says, “The religious leaders have sentenced Jesus to death, but they need Pilate to approve their request. They won’t go into the palace because it would defile them, so Pilate has walked out just now to talk with them.”

I raise my eyes to see a man in a white robe that covered by a purple outer garment descend the steps of the palace with his entourage of Roman officials and servants. He looks tired and is rubbing his eyes. He appears frustrated, probably because it is so early in the morning. When he sees how large the crowd is, he suddenly becomes more awake. He sits down on his royal chair, stretching and yawning, but becoming more focused every moment. He reaches over and takes a large goblet from a tray that a nearby servant is holding. He takes a long, satisfying drink while some drops of wine run down his chin. He is a fat man, full of wine and himself. He nonchalantly says, “Ok, what charges are you bringing against this man?” His tone is degrading, as if he is speaking to a group of children who have been misbehaving.

Caiaphas, the high priest, in full ceremonial garb, thrusts a crooked finger forward and says, “If He were not a criminal, we would not have brought Him to you. We have found Him guilty of subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ—a King!”

The direction that the religious leaders are going is obvious. They are trying to create the illusion that Jesus has some plan to destroy the Roman Empire. Indeed, we have all hoped for this, but Jesus Himself has never indicated any such scheme. Politically, however, if they can prove to Pilate that Jesus has attempted to exalt Himself above Caesar, then that would force Pilate’s hand, especially since Pilate has to answer to
Caesar. Pilate rolls his eyes, not looking very impressed or worried. He says, “Jesus, are You the King of the Jews?”

The crowd becomes silent. Jesus replies, “Yes, it is as you say.”

The crowd erupts into shouts. Some shout that Jesus’ words are heresy; others seem to shout just to shout. I don’t understand where all of these people have come from.

Jesus is hallowed among the common people in Jerusalem and almost everyone acknowledges Him as at least a prophet.

Pilate massages his own temples as if the noise has intensified his morning hangover. He raises his hands to quiet the commotion and says, “Look, I find no basis for a charge against this man.”

However, the people become even more avid in their accusations. Caiaphas speaks up and says, “He stirs up the people all over Judea by His teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.”

When Pilate hears this, he raises his hands again and says, “So, He is a Galilean, is He? Well then, your bark is going up the wrong tree. Galilee is under Herod’s jurisdiction. However, it just so happens that Herod is here as well.” Pilate turns to a servant and says, “Go, wake up Herod. Tell him that Jesus of Nazareth awaits his judgment.”

The servant respectfully replies, “But master, Herod becomes very angry when he is awakened.”

Pilate smiles mischievously and says, “Oh, really? Well then, I’m sorry but he’ll just have to get up anyway!” The servant nods and goes to fulfill his orders.
John leans in to me and says, “Everyone knows that Pilate and Herod hate each other and they always have. Every year, Pilate invites Herod to be his guest at the palace, but solely for political reasons. They barely even speak to each other when Herod is here.”

I nod, but say nothing. I am focused on Jesus. He looks weak, but ok. I wonder what’s going to happen. My heart rate hasn’t slowed since the soldier chased me in the garden. I’ve got to do something! There are only two of us here: John and I. I am hiding the sword under my cloak. I focus on Jesus. If I’m going to act, it has to be now. The Pharisees are distracted, waiting on Herod; and there is only one guard holding Jesus. If I could take him out, we could possibly make an escape. My stomach stirs within me and I shake even worse than before. I slide my hand under my cloak and grip the handle of the sword. It feels ice cold and my hand slips off of it because it is so drenched from my sweat. My face is burning and I ready myself. I plan the attack in my mind. I’ll move on the count of three. One, two, three! But nothing happens. I’m frozen. I can’t move; paralyzed by my fear. I finally release the sword handle and bow my head in shame. I’m nothing but a coward, just like the rest. I’m no better than the ones I just accused back in the upper room.

My emotions are interrupted by a most intriguing event. A voice shouts from behind the crowd, “Help!” We all turn around suddenly just in time to see a man collapse on the ground, clinging in pain to his head with both hands. I recognize him- it is Gehazi! I haven’t noticed, but Gehazi has not been present with the rest of the Pharisees. There is blood pouring from his nose and his face is badly bruised. The Pharisees and some Roman soldiers run over to him quickly, creating a circle around him. There is
much noise among the crowd and I can’t hear what the Gehazi is saying to the Pharisees, but I see his finger point to the east. One of the soldiers looks across the courtyard and signals the other soldiers to come. Ten soldiers immediately dash toward their leader, following him down the street in the direction that Gehazi had pointed. They are running in full attack formation, with their swords unsheathed.

As I turn to back to Gehazi, he has now been pulled to his feet. Unfortunately, he is ok. I don’t know what happened, but it doesn’t matter now because Herod has just walked out of the palace door. He is wide-awake, almost as if he is excited about the drama before him. When the Pharisees see him, they, now with a limping Gehazi, run speedily and resume their former positions. As they begin to hurl their accusations, Herod talks over them saying, “Silence! Don’t trouble me with your petty accusations. I’m the judge here!” The Pharisees shut up quickly. Herod sits down on the throne that has been brought out for him. He adjusts himself to a comfortable position and, taking his time, takes a long drink of wine from his royal cup, as well. He breathes deeply and smiles. He says, “Now, I’m ready. So, this is the Jesus of Nazareth that I have heard so much about. The ‘miracle-worker.’ I’ve heard many stories about You. I’ve hoped that we could meet and talk, one man of great power to another.”

Jesus remains silent. The Pharisees appear to be very agitated that Herod is talking to Jesus as if he doesn’t even care about their accusations. Once again, and now even in silence, Jesus is showing them up. Herod continues, “Well, Jesus, I’m here. Show me what You got.” Jesus just looks at him, saying nothing. Herod laughs a little and shifts uncomfortably in his chair. He says to one of his officials, “Maybe He’s hard of hearing. Hello! Jesus! I’m talking to You!” Herod makes hand gestures as He
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speaks and all of the surrounding officials laugh at the gag. Jesus says nothing. Herod continues, “I, as the king, command You to answer me!” His tone is demanding and malicious now, but Jesus says nothing. Herod’s face is solemn. He says, “I don’t understand You, Jesus. It seems to me that Your own people are pretty upset with You and You could use some help. I have the power to help You. I already like You and I could care less what these little peons (he points to the Pharisees) are mad at You about. Why won’t You answer me?”

The crowd is silent, listening intently for a response from Jesus, but none comes. Herod turns to Pilate who has been standing beside his throne the entire time and sarcastically says, “Another great entertainer you’ve brought me, Pilate.” Pilate shrugs his shoulder and laughs along with the rest of the officials. Herod then stands up next to Pilate. He reaches out and touches the purple garment that Pilate is wearing over his white robe. Rubbing the material back and forth between his fingers he says, “Very nice material, Pilate.” He then jerks the garment from around Pilate’s neck. The material makes a sliding noise as it comes off. Herod begins to walk toward Jesus, still examining the material as he walks. He says, “Very nice indeed. Fit for a king, don’t you think?” Jesus says nothing. Herod continues in a declarative tone, as if he were making an elaborate speech, “Hear ye, hear ye, all you peoples of Jerusalem! Behold your King, the King of the Jews! Herod then wraps the garment around Jesus and bows down in submissive mockery at His feet. Pilate and all of the Roman officials explode into hearty laughter, as do some of the Pharisees. Herod then stands up and faces Jesus. He takes his hand and places it on Jesus’ face, squeezing his cheek very hard between two of his fingers. He says, “Hail, my King!” He then reaches back with the same hand and slaps
Jesus hard; the slap echoes off of the palace walls and the crowd breaks into applause at Herod's performance. Herod walks back up and steps and says, "Pilate, I don't think someone who won't even talk can be that much of a threat. You can handle it; I'm going back to bed." Pilate laughs out loud as does everyone else. Herod and his officials then disappear back into the palace.

Pilate walks forward and addresses the crowd saying, "You brought me this Man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined Him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against Him. Neither has Herod; see, he has left the matter up to me. As you can clearly see, this Man has done nothing to deserve death. As you know, it is my custom once a year at this time to release to you anyone you want. Therefore, I will punish Jesus and release Him."

A roar arises from the crowd and seemingly with one voice, they cry out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" John and I look at one another with horrified expressions and simultaneously say, "Barrabas?" Everyone knows who Barabbas is. He had taken part in an attempted insurrection against the Roman government and had killed men for his cause. He is somewhat a hero among the common people, but I still can't believe that they would choose him over Jesus. I look around at the people in the crowd in disbelief. Just then, I see several of the Pharisees going from person to person, whispering in their ears. That's why the crowd is so unrelenting! The Pharisees are stirring up the crowd to rally against Jesus!

Pilate looks flabbergasted at the crowd's response and says, "Then, what do you want me to do with the One who is called the King of the Jews?"
Gehazi begins to chant with renewed vigor, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" The rest of the Pharisees quickly join in the chorus, as do the people whom they have been manipulating.

Pilate yells out over the noise of the mob, "But why? What crime has He committed?" However, their riotous chant is overwhelming.

Then, one of the religious leaders shouts out, "If you let this Man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar!"

Pilate's face turns red as the mob shouts louder and louder. He looks afraid. He flips frantically through the book of Roman law that is open before him, but the crowd is incorrigible. The matter has now become political, and Pilate's cowardice is in full bloom. There is a basin in front of him, and he slowly walks over to it. He roles up his sleeves and shouts, "Silence! I demand it!" The roar slowly decreases and Pilate continues, "I, your ruler, decree this day that Jesus of Nazareth will be crucified!" The crowd erupts once again and once again Pilate demands silence. He places his hands down in the basin and begins to wash them. He says, "But, let it be known I am innocent of this Man's blood."

A woman in the crowd cries out, "Let His blood be on us and our children!" A corporate cheer goes up like a parade. I recognize the woman who spoke- she was one of the people who was waving palm branches when Jesus had entered Jerusalem just a few days ago! However, everything has changed now. John and I look at each other in terror. They are going to crucify Him! I begin to cry uncontrollably. How could this be? I look back at Jesus and the soldiers have begun to tie him to a whipping post as the people are gathering around. They rip the purple robe off of His back. A very large man reaches
into a bag and pulls out a whip. It has a wooden handle with nine strips of leather hanging from it. Everyone around here knows what a “cat of nine tails” is. The ends of the strips have very sharp pieces of bone and glass tied to them. Some men have died from being flogged with this whip. Jesus is tied up tightly, his olive back bare and exposed to the soldier with the whip. The crowds have quadrupled in size now, especially since the sun has been up for a while. They gather around in a very large circle, stirring and preparing for the beating, as if it is a game. I am infuriated and I reach back inside my cloak and grasp the handle of my sword again.

The soldier takes off his outer garment, exposing his extremely muscular chest and arms; I let go of the handle. He takes a piece of leather out of the bag and has another soldier tie it tightly around his wrist and the handle of the whip so that he won’t drop it. He steps back away from Jesus and takes a deep breath. He has a smug expression on his face and looks as if he is going to enjoy this. I hate him. He raises the whip in the air with one hand and gestures a cheer out of the crowd with the other. The crowd lets out a loud shout and holds it, waiting for the drop of the whip. Then, with all of his might, he swings the whip and tears into Jesus’ back, the ends of the whip ripping into His skin and staying imbedded there. As he swings the crowd yells, “One!” and cheers after the blow is delivered. Jesus’ body convulses from the pain, but I can’t hear His scream over the crowd. The soldier then jerks the whip from his back, bringing a wide spray of blood and flesh back on himself. The crowd cheers. The soldier reaches up and wipes the blood from his face as the crowd applauds his accomplishments.

I turn to John and scream, “We’ve got to do something!”

The crowd yells, “Two!”
John won’t look at me. He stares at the spectacle, his face cover in tears and his knees knocking together so loudly that I can hear them over the crowd. I grab him and repeat my exclamation, but he remains silent, as if he has lost his sanity.

The crowd yells, “Three!”

I push him away in frustration. I’m not a soldier. Even if I took out my sword, I couldn’t get past two or three soldiers because I’m not a fighter.

The crowd yells, “Four!”

I can be a coward no longer! I’ve got to do something!

The crowd yells, “Five!”

I’m not a fighter, but I know someone who is! Together, we could probably do some damage, even if we lose our lives. At least Jesus would never doubt my love for Him.”

The crowd yells, “Six!”

I turn and run toward the garbage dump. I don’t know how I’m going to do it, but I’ve got to find Jephthah. I don’t know anyone else who would have the courage or the nerve to fight with me.

The crowd yells, “Seven!”

I’m now running in desperation. I got to find Jephthah. Only Jephthah can help me now.

The crowd yells, “Eight!”

I’ve got to find Jephthah before they crucify the Messiah; before they crucify Jesus!
Chapter 11

Darkness

As I run, I can hear the crowd still counting. There is no time to waste. I go to the marketplace and Jephthah’s usual selling spot, but he is not there. So, I run to his shack. I knock on the door, but there is no answer. Deborah doesn’t have locks on her doors because there are few people who would ever want to enter. So, I open the door and step inside saying, “Hello? Anybody here? Jephthah? Deborah?” There is no answer. As I look around, I notice that all of their makeshift furniture and secondhand utensils are gone. The shack is deserted. I sit down on the floor and cover my face with my hands. I am trying to fight off the tears, but they won’t wait. It just doesn’t seem fair. For a moment, I feel guilty for leaving Jesus to find Jephthah. I know that the odds of finding him are next to none. Maybe, I just couldn’t endure seeing Jesus being tortured. Perhaps, I was just scared. It doesn’t matter now, though. If I can’t find Jephthah, then I am hopeless to do anything. Besides, even if I did find him, it would still be hopeless.

For a moment, I remember the old days. Jephthah was never afraid of anything. He wasn’t afraid of bullies, so he never had any. He wasn’t afraid of robbers, so he was never robbed. I guess that I am searching for him with the desperate aspiration that he could somehow be fearless in this situation too. Maybe his reckless attitude could reverse the tragedy that is going on even as I sit here. His confidence has always covered my fear. However, even Jesus is afraid today; I saw His tears in the garden.

My search is fruitless. I take out the sword and look at it. It is very sharp and skillfully made, but it is useless in my hands. I throw it to the ground in desperation. What a waste! Why did Jesus ever come and do all that He did if it was just going to turn out like this? I know that He is the Christ, but I don’t understand what is happening
today. I can't just sit here, though. I may not be able to rescue Jesus, but I can sure stand near Him. I refuse to hide in obscure places like the others. I will go and stand next to the only true friend I've ever known in life.

I set out again. I don't run this time, though. When I reach the place where they beat Him, it is deserted. I see the post He had been tied to. I walk over and examine it. There is so much blood on the ground around it that soil is completely saturated and has formed quite a large puddle. My stomach turns and I begin to dry heave, but my heaving is unproductive, probably because I haven't eaten in such a long time. I've cried so much by now that I haven't any tears left. My eyes ache.

I don't have to wonder where Jesus is now. I know where men are taken to be crucified. It is a place known as the Skull, located just outside the city on a hill. Many men have died there. However, even if I didn't know this, all I would have to do is follow the trail of blood. The other telltale sign is the rumble of the crowd of people I can hear in the distance. So, hesitating at first, I begin my walk to the Skull.

Crucifixions are common around here. The Romans have no problem making examples out of troublemakers. In fact, for many, crucifixions are entertaining. The display of a gruesome death excites some to cheers; I've never really understood why. I am walking; I've no strength left to run. There is nothing I can do anyway. Without the other disciples or Jephthah, I am helpless. Besides, there is such a large amount of blood on the ground, Jesus is probably dead already. Death from flogging is not an uncommon thing. In our Jewish culture, the leaders are only allowed to give someone thirty-nine stripes. The Romans, however, are not quite as civil. They rejoice in the pain of their
conquered people. They will beat a man until they are too tired to swing the whip. I feel sick to my stomach, but I must go and see.

After a short walk, I reach the back of the crowd. The morning has been very sunny, but a sudden storm has blown in. The sky is completely overcast and a strong wind is blowing discarded palm branches through the streets. It's cold, so I pull my cloak up to my neck, covering the lower part of my face. As I reach the crowd, the journey is already complete. We have arrived at the Skull. I glance down at the ground. No grass grows here; the abundant bloodshed prevents it. It is a desolate place. I can't see Jesus because of the crowds. I begin to push my way through all of the people. My boldness is no longer something conscious. I have no choice; I must see Jesus. The crowd is no longer shouting. I think the storm has spooked them a bit, but there is no rain.

"Excuse me!" I say sharply, pushing past a large, burly man. The man looks at me angrily, but he moves anyway. "Coming through!" I continue. A vast array of contemptuous glances and shifting feet part the sea of people in front of me. I hate these people! They aren't worried about anything but their own entertainment. However, I notice that the group is more than quiet; they are dead silent. Their silence sends an eerie chill up my spine, causing my whole body to shiver, but the chill never leaves. I hear nothing but a gentle roll of thunder. As I continue to pry through the crowd, I hear someone ahead breathing hard. My heart drops within me- I recognize the voice behind the breath. I've heard Him breathe so many times. I break through the crowd just in time to see Jesus being thrown to the ground next to His cross.

If it wasn't for His voice, I don't think I would recognize Him. In fact, I'm not sure anyone would even recognize Him as human. I can't believe that He's still alive!
He is lying facedown on His stomach. His back looks like mutilated meat from the market. They must have beaten Him more times than usual. I can actually see some of His muscles exposed from the deep lacerations! I feel faint and weak. He lets out a little moan, proving that He's still alive, although I don't see how. He is completely surrounded by soldiers. One of them reaches down and grabs His arm, but the soldier's hand quickly slips off because of the massive volume of blood that is covering His body. I search for one trace of His olive skin, but I can find nothing but blood and tissue; He has been beaten beyond recovery. As usual, there are other crosses already erected on the hill, probably holding local criminals. There are two of them. I now realize why the people are not cheering anymore- I don't think anyone can believe that one Man has taken such inhumane punishment. However, it is not over yet.

The soldier finally gets a good grip on Jesus' arm and jerks Him roughly, rolling His body over onto the cross. Jesus yells in pain, although his voice sounds more like sandpaper. I wince myself, just imagining the intense agony He must be feeling- the splinters of the wood burrowing into the open wound of His back! He is completely dehydrated and his body has turned gray like a dead man. There is a twisted crown of thorns on His head. The thorns are long and razor sharp, bringing a steady flow of blood from his head; some of it is runs into His eyes, which are swollen shut from the slew of punches and slaps He has endured since last night. Parts of His beard are missing in clumps, as if someone has jerked them out. There is dried mucus and saliva on His lips; not His own saliva, but the spit of the soldiers and the crowd. He is the most horrid thing I've ever seen. I can't believe that this is the same Man whose loving eyes led me down a synagogue aisle and offered me my healing and a new life.
I glance down at my hand. It is still normal. If it wasn’t, I wonder if I would be one of these who have laughed and mocked at Him. How can the miracle survive while the source of the miracle is brutally murdered? Two soldiers take hold of Jesus’ right arm and stretch it out across the crossbeam of the cross. Three others hold His left arm securely. Jesus doesn’t open His eyes or resist at all. He just remains completely still, totally exhausted. I can see His chest slowly rise and fall, so I know that there is still breath in Him. An officer, a centurion, appears from behind another soldier and walks over to where the two soldiers are holding His right arm. The officer is carrying three long spikes in his left hand and a huge metal hammer in the right. My instincts try to persuade me to look away, but I can’t. I stay glued to Jesus, as if this is a dream and I have no choice but the watch every second of it. The officer gives one of the spikes to one of the soldiers holding Jesus’ arm. The soldier lines up the sharp end of the spike at the base of Jesus’ hand. I’ve seen crucifixions before. Sometimes, if the spikes aren’t lined up just right, the weight of the body will rip the spike through the victim’s hand and the body will fall halfway from the cross. Usually, however, Roman soldiers are very efficient killers.

Jesus lies seemingly unconscious and oblivious to what is about to happen. The centurion tightly grips the long handle of the hammer with two hands. As he raises it high into the air, he puts one hand at the top of the handle, near the head, and the other at the bottom. My instincts tell me to scream and warn Jesus of what is about to happen, but I decide that it is better if He doesn’t know. Suddenly, the hammer falls with great force as the centurion’s hands slide together down the handle. The spike is thrust into His hand and He comes to life again with an excruciating cry of agony. His body
convulses and the other three soldiers are lifted into the air by the reflexive force of his powerful, unnailed arm. They quickly overpower His one arm, though, slamming it back down on the splintered cross. The power of the hammer’s force sends a stream of blood shooting high into the air, landing on the sleeve of the uniform of the Roman centurion. He tries to wipe it off, but it has already stained. The streaming crest of the blood quickly falls, squirting up not quite as high, but in alternating intervals with the beating of His pulse. He is still screaming, as am I. However, we are not heard over the shouts of the crowd, revived in morbid entertainment. I shut my eyes, though I’ve already seen the horror.

I can hear the loud noise of metal pounding metal and the screams of my Jesus. Please God! Do something! Why won’t You do something? Nothing happens. The angel I saw last night doesn’t return; it only gets darker. The gentle thunder begins to rumble with greater dynamics, as if a storm is getting closer by the second, but still there is no rain.

The screaming evolves into a low, steady moan. I unclinch my eyelids, hoping the nightmare will be over, but it is not. Jesus is now completely nailed down. Two spikes are driven into His hands and one through the base of His ankles. Puddles of blood form around His hands and feet, still being fed by the tributaries that are flowing from the entry wounds. I look at my hand; then I look at His. Mine used to be deformed; now His is mauled worse than mine ever was. He is trading His hand for mine! If He would not have healed people like me, then the religious leaders would never have been threatened. If He would not have spoken a message of salvation and healing to so many thousands of people, then this would not be happening. They would not have sought his
dernise. My anger transforms into despair. I am helpless and now hopeless, watching my only Hope suffer as all of creation stands idly by. The sky rolls into a darker shade of gray. Still, there is no rain.

The soldiers gather around the cross. There is a hole that has been dug in the ground near to where the cross is lying. It takes about eight of them. They each take hold of a section of the cross, and on the centurion’s count, they hoist it upwards with a corporate grunt. Then, with one last heave, they drop the end of the bottom beam into the hole. It lands with a quick thud. Simultaneously, Jesus cries out again. I can see the nails in His hands stretching the skin from the weight of His body. More blood flows, dripping through the air from His hands and oozing from His feet down the cracks of the wooden beam. He looks up and struggles to open His eyes through the swollen, bloody mess of His face. The whites of His eyes create a striking contrast with the rest of His body, like the lightning that spastically and momentarily turns the black horizon into day. His eyes illuminate the darkened landscape that is His bloody, bruised figure. These eyes have always lit up the darkness, even from one of the very first commands that they orchestrated: “let there be light.” However, the darkness rules this day.

He is completely naked, but He is covered in so much blood that it looks like He’s wearing a red, form-fitting robe. I think about last night. I was naked, but covered by the darkness. Today, He is naked, yet exposed by the darkness. What shame. The soldiers have taken His clothes and made a small pile of them on the ground in front of the cross. I see His familiar tunic. It is worth a lot of money because it is woven with one seam from the top to bottom. I hear the centurion say, “Let’s not rip it. We’ll cast lots for it.”
The other soldiers smile and laugh, eager for the chance to gamble for profit at a Jew’s expense.

I haven’t noticed, but the Pharisees are gathered behind us. They stand in their familiar stance, assembled as a panel of judges. They mock Jesus even more. One of them says, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen One of God.” The crowd erupts into laughter, repeating similar mockeries. The soldiers have now completed their gamble. One of them folds up his prize and tucks it away under a shield that is lying on the ground next to his sword. I hate them all! They mock and gamble for a garment that I would give my life for. Still, I can’t help but wonder if there is some truth to their accusations. Jesus truly did save others; why won’t He save Himself? I’m crying again. I bow my head, staring at the miniature river of blood that is now flowing between my feet. Suddenly, an uncommon scent takes hold of my attention. It smells like perfume! I look around to see where it is coming from, then I realize it’s coming from Jesus. It is the perfume that Mary had put on Him that day. I remember Him saying something about His burial when she did it. The smell is very much out of place, like a songbird in the winter.

One of the criminals on another cross cries out so that everyone can hear, “They’re right! If You really are the Christ, save Yourself- and us!” His voice drops off into a moan; his pain is great.

The Pharisees explode into laughter. Gehazi, his eye black from the earlier attack, shouts out, “Even the criminals know you’re a fake! Come down from there, Christ!”

Laughter arises like smoke from a burning building, filling the air around us. I feel like I
could choke. Taking the Pharisees’ and the criminal’s lead, others begin to shout similar remarks. The roar of mockery becomes louder and louder.

“Come down, King!”

I drop to my knees.

“King of the Jews! All hail the King of the Jews!”

I bury my face in my hands.

The same criminal screams, “Save us, You fake! You’re nothing but a hoax!”

Pandemonium! The crowd is all shouting and pointing! A raindrop falls on my cheek, feeling much colder than my tears.

Suddenly, the other criminal cries out in a most wretched tone, “Stop it!”

His voice rings out like a resounding clap of thunder. The crowd instantly becomes silent. I keep my head down. The criminal continues, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? We deserve to be here! We are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong!”

That voice! I recognize that voice! Jephthah? I quickly look up. My premonition is correct; Jephthah is hanging on the cross to the left of Jesus! “Jephthah!” I shout. “No, it can’t be! It can’t be!” I shake and cry as my words echo through the crowd. Forgetting to be afraid, I frantically run to the foot of Jephthah’s cross shouting, “No!”

A soldier quickly grabs my arm, throwing me back forcefully. I struggle with him, but I have no strength. I stand still, gazing up at my best friend being crucified before me. I haven’t even looked at the other crosses since I’ve been here, so I haven’t
noticed Jephthah until now. Why is he here? There must be some sort of mistake! What could possibly have happened?

Jephthah looks down at me. He is crying bitterly. His face is swollen and bleeding, although not nearly as bad as Jesus'. His eyes cast the darkness of the deepest torture, the despair of his soul. He stares at me, and I at him. The crowd remains silent, attentive to our every move. Jephthah lifts his head, licking the sweat that drips down from his forehead. He gasps for a breath. So do I. Every breath is torture. He struggles to lift his body in order to breathe. Crucifixion is a cruel and time-consuming death. His breath is being stolen away, getting harder to find with every gasp. More raindrops hit my face, but I hardly notice them. I look around and see Deborah. She is standing alone near the crosses, gazing at her dying son and dying Savior through an ocean of her own tears.

Jephthah slowly turns his head, focusing on Jesus. Jesus' head is down and His eyes are closed. Two tears fall simultaneously from Jephthah’s eyes. He gazes at Jesus, looking Him up and down and examining the terrible disfiguration of His body. Jephthah cries harder. There is great love and affection for Jesus in his expression. I cry too, remembering the day Jesus gave Jephthah all that food and the day He healed Deborah. I know that this is what Jephthah is remembering as well. However, he has turned His back on Jesus, and all three of us know it. Jephthah has always been the defender of the weak, having a soft spot for those who experience injustice. However, that familiar hero's face is now a face of intense remorse. Jesus is almost dead and the last thing Jephthah has ever done to Him is to abandon Him. Jephthah's guilt appears to be unbearable.
Jephthah pulls himself up for a deep breath, wincing from the pain. He whispers, "Jesus?"

Jesus does not move. Jephthah exhales with frustration. He pulls up again, even further this time. He says a little louder, "Jesus?" He gazes upon Jesus' face, waiting for a response. Several raindrops hit the dirt in spurts.

Jesus, with all the strength He has left, turns His head towards Jephthah. His breaths are short now. I am surprised that He is still breathing. Jesus responds, "Jephthah." His voice is weak and breathy. His teeth shine again from under the carnage of His beaten face.

Jephthah remains focused on Jesus. His breathing is a bit faster now. He says, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

Jesus' eyes are wide open now. His forehead crinkles and His eyebrows raise, just like they used to when He would meet a sick person. His expression makes Him looks like Jesus again. Then, somehow, he smiles! His tone is familiar and comforting; I've heard it so many times before. He says loudly, "Jephthah, I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise!"

It's now raining steadily. Jephthah turns to me. Though his physical pain is intense, new peace explodes in his eyes. He says, "Here that, Jeremiah? Paradise! Paradise at last!" I nod my head and try to hide my tears. Jephthah's words are cut short by his own violent coughing, but his eyes don't lose their shine.

I turn and look at the crowd. There is not a dry eye among them, except maybe among the Pharisees. The rain is getting harder. I gaze up at Jesus. His eyes are still
wide open and He seems to be breathing easier. He cries out, “Father! Forgive them! They don’t know what they are doing!”

The thunder gently rolls, as do the words among the people in the crowd. No one has ever before cried out for the forgiveness of his own executioners. There are no shouts now; the mocking has ceased. Even the soldiers are staring up at Jesus in amazement. The crowd slowly begins to disappear, just like the day that Jesus said, “You who have no sin cast the first stone.” Everyone realizes their sin and they can’t stand to look upon Jesus anymore. I look around and only John; Jesus’ mother, Mary; and some other mourners remain. The Pharisees are leaving together, leaving to find cover from the weather. Gehazi limps behind them.

Suddenly, Jephthah cries out, “Father!”

The whole procession of Pharisees stops and they all turn and look at Jephthah. Gehazi turns with them. His face is solemn. One of the Pharisees says, “Who is that fool talking to? It sounds like he’s yelling in our direction.” Gehazi says nothing.

Jephthah pulls up for more air and shouts again, “Gehazi! My father! Hear me now! Hear me one last time!”

Gehazi turns as red as the blood on the ground around us. The Pharisees whisper among themselves in Gehazi’s direction. Gehazi maintains his stoic demeanor. Jephthah continues, “Father, forgive your son! Forgive me for trying to kill you yesterday! Please, father, forgive me!” The wind is blowing violently now, creating a high-pitched whistle as it blows past the crosses. Jephthah’s voice is difficult to hear over the rising storm, but everyone hears it; especially Gehazi.
Gehazi looks disturbed for a moment, but regains his composure. His image is in danger. He shouts back, “You are not my son!” His voice echoes like the growl of an angry dog. His finger is pointing in Jephthah’s direction; his violent passion visible in the bloodshot tributaries of his eyes.

There is silence for a brief moment. Jephthah hangs still, still rejected. Now I understand what happened to Gehazi. Jephthah has been consumed with anger his entire life. He tried to end his anger by ending his father’s life. Now he hangs here, vehemently dejected for the last time. His face is downcast. He turns and looks at Jesus. Jesus is staring back at him. Jephthah looks intently into Jesus’ eyes, then his countenance transforms into a smile. He looks up into the sky, the rain washing the bloodstains from his body and his soul. He opens his mouth and takes a drink. The Pharisees are still paused. Jephthah cries out, “Father! If that’s the way it must be; then so be it. But know this: You may not choose me as your son this day, but I choose you as my father. I choose to forgive you, father!”

Gehazi doesn’t flinch. I am astounded by the magnitude of Jephthah’s statement. Then, amazingly, a tear falls from Gehazi’s eye, running slowly down his cheek. There is so much rain that the tear is hidden with water on his face. He doesn’t wipe it away. Saying nothing more, he turns and walks directly through the crowd of Pharisees, parting them to two sides. Eventually, they all leave behind him.

After they leave, Jesus suddenly cries out in a loud voice, “It is finished! Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!”

At the end of His exclamation, deafening thunder crashes with the loudest boom I’ve ever heard! The ground begins to shake and all of us lose our balance, stumbling to
the dirt. Even the soldiers, strong and steady in their physiques, can’t maintain their footing. I look up from the ground to see Jesus’ gasping end and His broken body drop, hanging lifeless on the cross. A cry goes up from Mary, His mother. She lifts herself from the ground and runs to the foot of the cross, caressing His feet. His blood smears all over her garment, but she doesn’t seem to notice. The soldiers don’t stop her.

I stand up. I can’t believe it- He’s dead! Jesus is really dead! Suddenly, my fear revives and my last hopes leave. The soldiers all lift themselves from the ground with terrified expressions on their faces. The ground has stopped shaking, but the sky is pitch black! It is night already, but how can it be? The rain and wind are almost blinding. The centurion stands up and brushes himself off. As he brushes his shoulder, he sees the blood stain from earlier. He stares at it intensely; then looking up at Jesus’ lifeless form, he says, “Surely this was the Son of God!” The other soldiers stare at him in amazement.

A bolt of lightning strikes a tree on a nearby hill, causing sparks and branches to fall to the ground.

One of the soldiers asks another, “Is He dead?”

The young soldier says, “I think so, but I’ll find out for sure.” He pulls out his sword and walks up to the cross.

Mary cries out, “No! Leave Him alone!”

The soldier yells, “Out of my way!” He pushes her aside. He then plunges the sword into Jesus’ side. Jesus doesn’t flinch; He is definitely dead. A fountain of blood and water comes gushing from His side. The soldier quickly jumps to the side to avoid it. I fall on my knees once again and cry.
The storm intensifies. I assess the moment. I stand before three crosses. Wind blows through Jesus’ hair, matted and discolored with dried blood. Rolls of thunder roar in simultaneous succession, as if they are one perpetual thunderclap. Three crosses; and two fathers turn their backs on their sons, hanging in shame for all to see. One deserves death; the Other has never walked out of righteousness’ path even a second in His life. Hailstones begin to knock on the wood of the crosses. Three crosses; and two mothers mourn and weep at the feet of their dead and dying sons. One mother weeps because her Son is innocent; another weeps though she knows her son is not.

The centurion screams over the storm, “Jesus is dead, but the others are still alive! We’re going to have to break their legs so they’ll die quickly! The storm is getting too strong!”

The Romans break crucifixion victims’ legs if they want to speed up the death process. When their legs are broken, they can’t pull themselves up to take breaths and they suffocate more quickly. I look up at Jephthah. He heard what the centurion has said. He looks at me with anxiety in his eyes, realizing that he’s about to die. With the familiar courage that I’ve always depended on, He cries out, “It’s ok, Jeremiah! I’m going to paradise!”

The soldiers are hurrying now. The weather is freakishly violent. They pull out a block of wood. One of them walks over to Jephthah’s cross and holds the wood up to the side of his kneecap. Another picks up the large hammer and begins walking over to finish the job. I can’t watch!

“Goodbye, Jephthah!”
I yell it as loud as I can as I run away. The rain and hail falls unbelievably fast, stinging my face as I sprint away from this hill of horror. The thunder continues to shake Jerusalem and I run with all of my might. This is the darkest day of my existence- of all existence. There is no comfort, only injustice. There is no victory, only the defeat of the invincible. Today, God Himself has died before my eyes! In the distance, over the sound of the storm, I hear a familiar voice shouting, "Paradise! Paradise!"

But there is no paradise here; only darkness.
Chapter 12

Emmaus

Darkness. I am walking down the street again. The kids are playing, but, as usual, I’m not interested. I hear a familiar voice.

“Jeremiah!”

I turn to see the ball heading for me. Like all the times before, I raise my hand to catch it. But wait, something’s wrong; there is blood on my hand!

“Jeremiah!”

I turn my hand over and look at the gaping wound- nail wounds! There is blood everywhere! I look up at the ball, but I can’t catch it! It’s going to hit me! I cringe!

“Jeremiah! Wake up! It’s another earthquake!”

The ground shakes below me, waking me from a deep sleep. It’s still dark outside. Thomas continues to yell, as do the other disciples. I quickly dart under a nearby table to keep from being hit by debris. The small quake ends as suddenly as it has begun. There have not been any aftershocks since three days ago when they murdered Jesus. Three days and I’ve eaten nothing. Three days and I’ve had the same nightmare every night. Three days and they still haven’t come to take us all away. It’s only a matter of time.

I crawl out from under the table and pan the room. The other disciples still look groggy. Peter turns to John and says, “Stupid earthquake! That was the first time that I’ve slept since...since...well, you know.”

John looks down at the floor and says, “Yea, I know. Just try to go back to sleep, ok?”
We all rearrange ourselves to go back to sleep. I close my eyes. Please, God, don’t let me have that dream again; I don’t think I can bear it. It doesn’t matter anymore anyway. I’m drifting. Soon, I will be safely away from the real world in my favorite places: my dreams. However, I can’t even seem to find peace there anymore. I wish I could close my eyes for good.

Suddenly, there is a loud knock at the door. We all jump up as if the house is on fire. Peter whispers loudly, “They’re here! They’ve finally found us!” I see him reach under his pillow and pull out a blade, reflecting the moonlight outside. This is it. The knocking continues, but none of us have the courage to answer it. They’ll have to break it down.

Then a woman’s voice yells, “Peter! Open up the door! It’s me, Mary!”

Peter turns to John and says, “Mary? Why is she here?” John shrugs his shoulders. Peter tiptoes over to the door, his sword hidden behind his back, just in case Mary’s not alone. He cracks the door. Mary bursts through the door, looking like she just saw a ghost. It’s Mary Magdalene, one of the women who used to follow Jesus before He died. Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. Peter opens the door and looks out into the street both ways, making sure that she wasn’t followed. He then turns to Mary and says, “Mary, you know better that to do this! What if they would have followed you? Some hideout we’ve got here!”

Mary lunges forward and grabs Peter’s arm and shouts, “Be quiet, Peter! Listen to me!”

Peter’s face falls to befuddlement at Mary’s outburst. Mary doesn’t miss a beat. She continues, “Some of us got up early this morning to go and anoint Jesus’ body. Well,
you know that tomb that Joseph of Arimathea donated for Jesus, we all saw it when they put Him in it. It took ten soldiers to roll a huge stone in front of the entrance. So, anyway, we weren’t sure how we were going to move that stone. We were hoping that some of the soldiers there would help us, but we were wrong. When we got there, they hadn’t yet been relieved from keeping watch on their all-night shift. Needless to say, they were pretty cranky. Anyway, they argued with us and made fun of us when we asked for their help. We finally gave up and turned around to walk away. But as we were going, the ground started shaking!”

Peter cuts in, “Yea, we know. That stupid earthquake woke us up.”

Mary screams, “Will you please let me finish, Peter?” Peter shuts up quickly.

Mary continues, “As I was saying, the ground was shaking so much that we fell down. Then, a bright light appeared and drowned out the torchlight of the soldiers. I couldn’t look at it at first, but then my eyes adjusted a bit. The soldiers were all lying on the ground, as if they were dead. I shielded my eyes and looked at the light. He must’ve been an angel! That huge stone was rolled to one side and the angel was sitting on it. He was smiling. I stayed on the ground with my face in the dirt, trying to pretend I wasn’t conscious, but then he spoke to me. He said, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.’ We sat up and nodded, not daring to say anything to him. He continued, ‘Jesus is not here; for He is risen, as He said He would. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.’ So we slowly got up, still trembling and speechless. I was the only one who had the nerve to walk into the tomb itself. The others stayed outside. When I got inside, it didn’t smell like a tomb at all; more like perfume. I couldn’t see anything in
the darkness, but when the angel walked to the entrance of the cave and the light around him lit up the tomb, I could see clearly. He was gone! Peter, His body was gone!”

Peter’s face turns white and none of says a word. Mary continues, “Then the angel said, ‘Go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you into Galilee. There you will see Him, as He said to you.’ So, I have come straight here to tell you.”

Peter buries his face in his hands. He turns to John and says, “It’s impossible! You said you saw Him die, John. You said that He was definitely dead.”

John replies, “He was, Peter; I swear it!”

Peter stares at the ceiling and says, “I should have... I should have been there. I should have been standing by Him, but instead I was here hiding like some cowardly woman!” Mary rolls her eyes. Peter continues, “While all of these women were near Him. I don’t believe it! I denied Him and deserted Him too. Mary, are you sure? We’ve all been going through a lot lately, maybe you just got...”

Mary shouts, “Peter! How could I make something like this up! The angel specifically said to tell you about what has happened. You don’t have to believe me, go see for yourself!”

Peter turns to John and says, “Well, let’s go!” John nods and they quickly prepare themselves and run out the door. My heart is beating rapidly. Could Mary be right?

I take her by the arm. She is shaking and frantic. I say, “Mary, are you alright?”

She smiles, “Of course I’m alright! This is the best day of my life! He’s alive, I know it.”

I reply, “Why don’t you sit down, Mary. Listen, there’s no reason to get our hopes up. False hope will only make up feel worse.”
Mary jerks away from my hand and says, “False hope? What’s that? Either you have hope or you don’t. There’s no such thing as false hope. Look at yourself, Jeremiah. You, of all people, should be the first to hope in something that seems impossible.”

She grabs my hand and pulls it between us. I stare at it. I say, “I want to believe, Mary, but I still can’t believe that they were able to kill Him. I can’t explain why I still have a normal hand, but the fact that He died and left us here alone is even harder to understand. What kind of Messiah is that? You understand what I mean, right?”

Mary drops my hand and says, “No, Jeremiah, I don’t understand. I don’t have to understand. The Messiah doesn’t have to live up to my expectations or yours or anyone else’s for that matter. He’s the Son of God and He doesn’t have to explain Himself to any of us. I can’t believe that you’re so quick to stop believing in Him. Have you already forgotten who He is?”

I become angry and shout, “Look, Mary, I don’t need your sermons! I just lost my two best friends in the same day! It’s just not so easy for me to believe anymore!”

Mary replies, “Well, I’m sure glad that Jesus didn’t stop believing in any of us when we seemed hopeless!”

I have nothing to say. I feel ashamed. I wish that I had the faith that she has, but I have no reason left to believe. The other disciples all have similar feelings. Mary must be crazy. We all know that He’s dead and we are not going to be disappointed again by putting our faith in something that is impossible. Mary finds a place to sit, huffing at our unbelief. We all wait in silence. The sun is up now and it is a bright and sunny day outside. Too bad I won’t enjoy it.
In a little while, the door flings open, startling us all. Peter and John quickly walk in and shut the door, checking behind them to see if they have been followed. Peter says, "Well, Mary, you are right, He's gone."

The room bustles loudly at his declaration. Peter holds up his hands, quieting the disruption. He says, "But, just because He's gone doesn't mean that He's alive, Mary. Someone may have stolen His body. We can't jump to conclusions."

Mary retorts, "Are you all deaf? An angel told me that He is alive! Why won't you believe?"

Peter says, "We didn't see any angel!"

Mary is completely flustered now. She looks at John and says, "John, what do you think?"

As usual, there are tears in John's eyes. All eyes focus on him. He hesitates, then says, "Mary, I don't know. I want to believe, but you and I both saw Him dead. We saw Him stop breathing and we saw them pierce His side. He is dead, Mary; that's the fact. I want to believe; He was the best friend I had in the world."

Mary gently comforts him and says, "Then just believe, John. He was dead, but now He's alive."

John won't look at her. She pans the room and says, "Will anyone believe me? Not one of the mighty disciples has the faith to believe?" There is silence and we all avoid her stare. She finally throws her hands up in desperation and walks to the door. She says nothing else, but simply leaves, slamming the door behind her.

Peter finds a seat and says, "We need to think. What should we do?"
Matthew speaks up and says, “I don’t know what we should do about this missing body business, but someone should probably find Thomas and tell him what has happened.” Thomas left the day Jesus died. He was too afraid to stay in Jerusalem. He said that we were foolish for hiding out where they would surely find us. He went to a little village called Emmaus, about a two-hour walk away.

John says, “Look, guys. If someone stole His body, they’re going to assume that we did it. Think about it, we would have the most to gain.”

Peter says, “You know what that means: they’re going to look for us first!”

James nervously says, “We’ve got to get out of Jerusalem! Right now!”

Peter says, “Not just yet! We split up before and look what happened. We have to stay together. That means someone needs to go and get Thomas at Emmaus and bring him back here. Then, we’ll all leave together. This way, we can be sure that all of us are safe.”

James replies, “Yeah, but, who’s going to go get him? They know who all of us are.”

Immediately everyone turns and looks at me. I shift nervously and say, “I don’t know guys. I was there when they crucified Him. What if someone recognizes me?”

Peter says, “Jeremiah, you have a much better chance of not being recognized than any of us. We have to stay together, that’s the only way we are going to survive this mess.”

I reply, “So, what you’re saying is, that in order for us to stay together, I have to leave everyone and go by myself. Oh yeah, that makes a lot of sense!”
Peter says, "Look, Jeremiah, there's no other way. Someone's got to get Thomas."

"I'll go with him." The voice comes from across the room. It is Cleopas, the owner of the house we are hiding out in.

Peter says, "You don't have to do that, Cleopas; you've already done enough just letting us stay here.

Cleopas answers, "I loved Jesus too. Now He's dead and there's nothing I can do for Him, but if there's something I can do for His disciples, I'm going to do it. Besides, no one will recognize me."

James and Peter look at each other for a moment, then reluctantly nod. Peter says, "Well, Jeremiah, how about it?"

I take a deep breath and say, "Well, I guess it's our only choice."

So, Cleopas and I set out for Emmaus. We walk through the streets of Jerusalem, trying to look inconspicuous. No one seems to notice us. I look down and notice that I have my hand hidden under my cloak, just like I used to do when I wanted to blend. This seems curious to me. Eventually, we reach the outskirts of Jerusalem and are alone on the road that leads to Emmaus.

Now that we are alone, we can talk freely. I say, "What do you think about what Mary said this morning? Do you think she's crazy?"

He replies, "I don't know what to think. If they've stolen His body, He has experienced even more shame than ever."
I reply, “I know what you mean. I’m ready just to move on with my life. Jesus is dead, but they just won’t let Him die. I say the quicker we move on, the quicker we’ll feel better.”

Cleopas says, “Yea, but you know, it’s still a tragedy. Why can’t they just leave His body alone?”

His words take root in me. Suddenly, my sadness overpowers my adrenaline. I consider the despair of what has happened. Not only did they kill Him, they have now even denied Him a proper burial. A tear falls from my eye, probably the ten-thousandth one in the last three days. We are walking quickly, still nervous about our situation. In the distance, we begin to approach other travelers heading our same direction.

We continue to talk about these things and I am getting more depressed with each step. We pass several people. We pass another man who is alone. We must be visibly upset because he says, “Excuse me, but what are you talking about that makes both of you look so sad?”

We are now walking in stride with the man. Cleopas whispers to me, “What if he is a spy or something? Do you think we can talk to him about it?”

I whisper back, “A spy heading for Emmaus? It’s very doubtful. We’re not that important. Besides, everyone already knows what happened, why not talk to him.” We agree.

Cleopas addresses the man, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem that hasn’t heard of what’s been going on the last couple of days?”

The man asks inquisitively, “What things?”

I say, “Surely, you have heard! You know, the things about Jesus of Nazareth?”
The man raises his eyebrows and shrugs as if this name is completely foreign to him. Cleopas shakes his head in disbelief of the man's ignorance. Cleopas says, "Jesus was a mighty Prophet. He wasn't just a preacher; He performed many miracles and signs as well. He healed thousands of people and even demons would retreat when He spoke."

I say, "You see my right hand?"

The man nods. I continue, "It used to be shriveled, you know, deformed. I couldn't even walk down the street without everyone staring at me. But Jesus, with one word, told me to stretch it out. When I did, it became completely normal!"

"Amazing!" the man exclaims.

Cleopas chimes in, feeling a desire to satisfy the man’s extreme interest. He says, "Well, the Pharisees and religious leaders were very intimidated by Him. They felt threatened by His popularity. So, they devised this plan to kill Him."

We both continue for a long time, telling the man of Judas' betrayal and every detail of Jesus' crucifixion. Then I say, "We were really hoping that He was going to deliver us from the Romans. Today is only the third day since He died and just this morning, some women from our group told us that His body is gone and that a vision of angels told them He is alive. Some of our group went to look and sure enough, His body is gone. But they found no angels or any trace of His body, only the linens that had been wrapped around His body."

The man replies, "How can you be so foolish? Didn't the Messiah have to suffer all these things so He could enter His glory?"

Astonished, Cleopas and I look at one another, but the man continues, "You told the story to me yourselves, but I've already heard it. It's in all of Moses' writings and the
writings of the prophets. Remember what Moses wrote. God said that the serpent would bruise Eve’s Seed’s heel, but that the Seed would crush the serpent’s head. Do you not understand that the Son of Man had to be bruised before He could crush the head of the Prince of Darkness. What about David? Did David not describe the crucifixion that you just described to me? David wrote, ‘I am poured out like water, and all of my bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it has melted within Me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to my jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all of My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.’ Did this Messiah you speak of not suffer all of these things? Were any of His bones broken?”

I answer, “No, they would have broken His legs, but He was already dead.”

“Right!” the man exclaims. He is very adamant. Cleopas and I listen in awe to what he is saying. He continues, “And what about Isaiah. Didn’t he write, ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.’ Was this Messiah’s mother a virgin when she conceived Him?”

“So we are told,” Cleopas responds. “But if you are right and this is all in the scriptures, why did He have to die?” This is the great question. Both of us listen intently to see if the stranger can explain.

The stranger replies, “Your answer lies in Isaiah as well. He wrote, ‘He shall grow up as a tender plant and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness. When we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our
faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has born our grieves and carried our sorrows. Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted.’ And here’s your answer: ‘But He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All of us, like sheep, have gone astray and have turned to our own way. But the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.’ That’s why the Messiah had to die. He was the only perfect man to ever live, but He chose to take the punishment for everyone else. God put the punishment on Him so that anyone who believes in Him, won’t have to be punished because the Christ has already paid the price.”

Cleopas and I are speechless. It makes perfect sense now. I have never realized all of these things from the scriptures before this man explained them like he has. We look up and realize that we have reached our destination. It is almost dark. We don’t know where to find Thomas, so we decide to stay in an inn for the night and find him in the morning. As we turn aside to enter the inn, the man waves and begins to walk away.

I yell, “Wait! Sir, it’s late. Why don’t you just stay here for the night? We’ll share our food with you.”

The man says, “That’s ok. I’ll just keep going. Thanks anyway.”

I persist, “But it’s almost dark. We would be honored to have you. It’s obvious that you’re some sort of teacher. We would love to hear more of what you have to say.”

The man reluctantly says, “Ok. I guess it couldn’t hurt.” So, we all go inside and I prepare the bread and fish that we had packed before we left Jerusalem.

Cleopas turns to me and says, “So, where should we start looking tomorrow?”
I reply, "I don't know. It's not a very large village, so it shouldn't be too hard to find him."

I take out the bread and hand it to the stranger. He is sitting in between Cleopas and I. He takes the bread and lifts it high above His head. As he lifts up his arms, the sleeves of his robe falls downs from his wrists. There are huge wounds at the bases of his hands. They are open, yet they don't look fresh or scabbed. I begin to question him about them, but He suddenly says, "Father, thank You for this food and thank You that You always give us everything we need."

Instantly, I recognize the familiar voice. I open my eyes quickly and turn to Him, but He is gone! Two pieces of bread lie broken on the table in front of Cleopas and I. Cleopas is also staring at the empty seat, but actually we are staring at each other since He has disappeared. Both our mouths hang wide open in disbelief. We sit speechless, staring at the place where Jesus had sat just one blink earlier. There is no denying the truth any longer: Jesus is alive!
We are back on the road, even though it is very late. We are walking at a very fast pace. We must get back and tell the others about what has happened. Jesus is alive! I can’t believe it. It all makes sense now. Now I understand why Jesus had cried so hard at Lazarus’ tomb that day. It wasn’t just because His good friend was dead, but Jesus realized that the miracle He was about to perform would be the deciding factor of the religious leaders’ plot to kill Him. One man’s resurrection would cause another Man’s death. Indeed, from what Jesus has told us about the scriptures, His death will bring about all of our resurrections. He traded more than just His hand for my hand; He traded His life for mine. What will the disciples say? Will Mary ever forgive me for my unbelief?

We arrive at Cleopas’ home well into the dark hours of the morning. Cleopas has a key so we simply open the door. Suddenly, a light shines from a nearby lamp and Peter stands before us in attack position with his infamous sword drawn. John yells, “Peter! Will you please put that sword away? You’re really going to hurt someone someday, you know.” Peter puts the sword down.

He says, “Where’s Thomas?”

I say, “I don’t know, but you will not believe what has happened to us. We saw Jesus! He’s alive! He walked with us, but we didn’t know who He was. He explained His death and resurrection to us by telling us all the scriptures of Moses and the prophets

Chapter 13

Revelation

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that talked about the Messiah. He laid it all out and now it all makes sense. He’s alive, Peter! It’s not a lie; Mary was telling the truth!”

All of the disciples stir from their sleep. Quickly, several lamps are lit and the room is awake. Peter solemnly says, “He’s alive. I can’t believe it. I can’t believe I denied Him.”

We all look at Peter. Beads of sweat are forming on his forehead. He is truly scared and ashamed. I sniff and say, “What’s that smell? It smells like perfume.”

Suddenly, a voice behind me says, “Peace to you.”

I whirl around to see Jesus standing in the room with us. John screams in terror, startled by Jesus’ sudden appearance. Jesus says, “Why are you troubled and why do doubts still arise in your hearts? It’s me. I’m not a ghost, John.”

John calms down, but is still shaky. Jesus holds out His hand to him and says, “Look, John, look at my hands and feet. It’s Me. Touch Me and see; a ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones as you can see I have.”

John cautiously inches his way toward Jesus, his hand outstretched, slowly reaching for Jesus’ hand. He touches it, barely breathing. Then his eyes fill with tears and he says, “Oh, my Lord!” Jesus and John embrace each other, crying together in joy.

Most of the other disciples slowly come around, each touching Jesus and embracing their risen Lord and friend.

Jesus turns to me and says, “Jeremiah, my friend, do you want to touch my hands too?”

I look at Jesus and smile. I hold up my right hand and say, “I don’t have to touch Your hand to believe, Lord. I can simply look at my own and know that you’re the
Jesus smiles and says, "Come here, my friend." I walk over and He puts His arms around me, patting me on the back like we were lifelong friends. As I wrap my arms around Him, I can feel a hollow place in His side, where they pierced Him with the sword. I can't believe that I'm embracing the same Man who I saw brutally murdered just a few days ago.

As our embrace ends, Jesus looks past me at Peter. Peter is separated from the rest of the disciples. He is leaning up against the door and staring at the floor. Jesus says, "Peter, why are you over there by yourself? This is a time to rejoice! Why are you so sad?"

Peter can't look at Him. Peter whispers, "I didn't figure You would want to see me, Lord. You know what happened that night."

"Yes, Peter," Jesus replies, "I know what happened. Now get over here and hug your best friend!"

Peter begins to cry as he walks across the room. He collapses into Jesus' arms and cries, "I'm sorry, Lord. I'm so sorry."

Jesus simply says, "Simon Peter, I love you. I always will."

They remain in their embrace for a long time, finally releasing. Peter wipes the tears from his face and sniffs. Jesus smiles and says, "Do you have anything to eat?"

John says, "That's sounds more like the Jesus I know." Everyone laughs.

Someone gives Jesus a piece of fish and some honeycomb. We all sit down, but Jesus is the only One who eats. The rest of us are too excited. Jesus begins to explain the
scriptures to them all, just as He did to Cleopas and I on the road to Emmaus. The room is silent while Jesus talks. Everyone is totally engrossed in the revelation that we have never been able to grasp before now. The mystery is complete. Jesus’ hints about death and dying all make sense now.

After He has expounded upon the scriptures and the purpose of His life and death, He says, “It’s late, my friends. Sleep now, I will see you again soon.” We all agree and in an instant, Jesus is gone again. We are so excited that we stay up talking for a long time. Finally, emotional weariness and physical exhaustion take their toll and we fall asleep.

We are awakened in the morning by another knock on our door. Peter opens it with much less paranoia; it is Thomas. Peter grabs him by his arm and flings him inside violently. We all jump up and bombard him with the good news. He is obviously overwhelmed by our outcry and finally screams, “Wait a minute! One at a time!” The noise quiets down and Thomas continues, “Now, tell me what happened.”

“Jesus is alive, Thomas!” John bursts out in excitement. Thomas’ face looks like all of ours did when we first found out.

Thomas says, “He’s alive? What do you mean He’s alive?”

Peter says, “I mean He’s a living, breathing, eating man just like before; except that He appears and disappears now. We all saw Him. Jeremiah and Cleopas went to Emmaus to find you and Jesus appeared out of nowhere and walked with them, except that He didn’t reveal who He was until later. Then, just this morning He appeared to us. It’s the truth, Thomas!”
Thomas reaches out and supports himself on the back of a chair. He says, "Alive? Jesus?"

I chime in, "Don’t you remember now how He told us that He would die and be raised. We didn’t understand then, but now it all makes sense."

Thomas paces across the room. He turns and says, "Why? Why are you doing this to yourself and me? I know that it hurt all of us, but being delusional doesn’t help. Look at yourselves, all grinning and giggling like little children. It’s just not right and I won’t be a part of it."

Peter says, "Thomas! Listen to me! We saw Him and He’s alive and . . .""

Thomas interrupts him saying, "And what Peter! Did He do magic tricks for you as well?" Thomas mockingly laughs to himself, shaking his head in disbelief of our alleged delusion. He continues, "I don’t believe it, not even for a second."

John shouts angrily, "You know what, Thomas, just because you don’t believe something doesn’t make it any less true! You can call us liars or crazy or whatever you want, but you’re the only one missing out here, not us!"

Thomas sarcastically replies, "Look everybody, the ‘son of thunder’ is angry! Oh no, I better not upset him or he might try to call down fire on me like he tried to on that village that time. Look, I would love to believe what you’re saying, but what’s the point? You guys have been wrong so many times before, why should I believe you now?"

Peter, trying to mediate, says, "Ok, Thomas, that’s fine. Don’t believe us. We don’t have to prove it to you. Jesus will probably prove it to you Himself."

Thomas laughs and says, "Great! I’ll look forward to seeing Him. I’ll tell you what, unless I see His hands and the print of the nails, I won’t believe." He steps back
and then suddenly interjects an even more clever idea. He says, “Better yet, unless I can put my finger into the print of the nails, and my hand into His side, mark my words, I will never believe.”

He continues to step backwards saying, “Better yet, unless I can . . .” He runs into someone behind him. He says, “Excuse me.”

Jesus replies, “It’s quite alright, Thomas.”

All the color drains away from Thomas’ face. He turns and finds himself standing nose to nose with Jesus. Jesus smiles that familiar, mischievous grin.

Thomas jumps straight into the air, letting out a very high-pitched scream. Jesus says, “Peace to you!” Thomas stands motionless, staring at Jesus, looking His risen body up and down. Jesus says, “Thomas, come here.”

Thomas hesitates at first, but slowly obeys, making his short journey to Jesus. Jesus takes his hand and says, “Put your finger here and look at My hands.” Thomas slowly places his index finger on the wound, but pulls it away suddenly, as if he is startled. Then he touches it again. Jesus says, “Now, reach your hand here and put it into my side.” Thomas reaches his arm around Jesus’ waist and touches his side gently. Jesus reaches back and forcefully pushes his hand into the wound. Thomas takes a short breath, obviously moved by the intensity of the moment. Jesus looks Thomas squarely in the eyes and says, “Do not be unbelieving, but believe.”

Huge tears are now streaming down Thomas’ face. He fights to hold them off, but it is useless. He swallows for a long time, then quietly says, “My Lord and My God.”

Jesus takes him into His arms and the two embrace. Jesus then says, “Thomas, you believe in Me because you have seen Me. Blessed are those who have not seen and
yet have believed.” Thomas buries his face into Jesus’ shoulder, crying uncontrollably. The lesson is learned.

The rest of the afternoon is spent with Jesus, as are many days afterwards. Jesus comes and goes at different times. There are many people who see him, all of them believers. I often think of what He told Thomas. There are many who have never seen Him and may never see Him. I wonder what will make them believe.

It has been several days now since we have seen Jesus. We are all still together. Peter turns to me and says, “Jeremiah, will you take a walk with me?”

I am surprised by his request, but I agree. We begin to walk towards the Sea of Galilee. Peter says, “I wanted to talk to you about something. Do you remember the night that Jesus was betrayed?”

I say, “Of course I remember. How could I ever forget?”

“Well,” Peter continues, “I can’t go a day without thinking about it. All of it: the bread and wine, the garden, the kiss; everything is still so fresh in my mind.”

I reply, “Yea, I think that most of us feel that way.”

We have reached the edge of the shore now. Peter reaches down and picks up a small rock and skips it across the water. He continues, “I remember one night, before you were with us, that we were out there in our boat. I will never forget how it happened. Jesus said that He would meet us on the other side. I wondered how He was going to meet us without a boat, but later I realized that He didn’t need a boat.”

I interrupt, “I’ve heard the whole story many times, Peter. It got real stormy and your boat was about to go under when you saw Jesus walking on the water.”
Peter chuckles a little bit and says, "No kidding. We all thought He was a ghost. Jeremiah, He was actually walking on the water-it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen; well, up to that point. Anyway, when He called out to us and reassured us who He was, I got real brave. Ok, maybe I got a little too brave. Jeremiah, I've never wanted anything more in my life than to just make Jesus proud. My father never really cared about anything except fishing."

I reply, "My father never really cared about anything except making sure I didn't stand out in a crowd."

Peter nods in agreement and says, "I know what you mean. All my life, I've been the hothead of the family. I've always had a problem with my temper. I can remember when I was a little boy, the bullies used to pick on this one kid. He was very, very small for his age and they used to tease and harass him endlessly every day. Well, one day I had had enough. I walked up to the bully and said, 'Hey, what's that in your pocket?' When he looked down, I rared back and let him have it, right in the nose. Needless to say, he didn't pick on anyone anymore. I've always been that way, except it wasn't always in a good way. My mouth has gotten me into more trouble than I would have time to talk about."

His story reminds me of Jephthah. I say, "Jephthah was a lot like you, Peter."

Peter is a little surprised by my comparison. He says, "Jephthah? Like me?"

"Sure," I continue, "that's how we met. I was the kid being picked on and one day he took up for me. I look out over the water, replaying the day in my mind with fondness. But, my momentary happiness leaves when I consider how it all ended:"
Jephthah is dead. I say, “But I guess none of that matters now. Jephthah’s temper finally caught up with him and he paid the ultimate price for being a hothead.”

Peter looks up at me and says, “Wait a minute, Jeremiah, why are you talking like Jephthah’s life had a bad ending?”

I am confused. I say, “Peter, I know you weren’t there, but they crucified him. He’s dead! He tried to kill someone and got caught. I don’t exactly call that a happy ending.”

Peter says, “Yea, but what about what he said to Jesus before he died. And what about what Jesus said back to him. I mean, to me that makes for a pretty happy ending.”

His words stir something in me. I’ve been completely depressed every time I’ve thought about Jephthah. I say, “You know, Peter, I’ve never really thought of it like that. I’ve only been thinking of the tragedy of Jephthah’s life, not the miracle at his death.”

Peter continues, “Look, Jeremiah. I don’t know everything, but I know Jesus. If He said Jephthah’s in paradise, he’s in paradise; murderer or not.”

I reach up and wipe my face, restraining the tears. “He was my best friend, Peter, and now he’s gone. I feel like it’s my fault. If I would never had taken him to Jesus, he would have never found out about Gehazi and he might still be alive today.”

Peter says, “Yea, but if you would have never taken him to Jesus, he wouldn’t be alive today. Now he has real life. Not like me; I’ve lost everything.”

I say, “Peter, what are you talking about?” His head is hung low.

He replies, “Jeremiah, you were the only one in the garden that night. Remember when we talked. I told you everything I did. I was the hothead again. All I wanted in life was to show my loyalty to Jesus. But when the time came, I couldn’t do it. I thought
I would do it with my fists and a sword, but Jesus wouldn’t let me. I was willing to die for Jesus, but I wasn’t willing to live for Him that night.”

His words sink deep into my heart. I feel his pain. I say, “Peter, you did mess up, there’s no doubt about that; but we all messed up that night.”

“Not like me, Jeremiah. All of you didn’t curse Him to His face! I am no better than Judas! At least he did it with a kiss; I did it with swearing and cursing.” Peter sits down on a rock and stares out across the lake. He whispers, “Fisher of men...”

“What?”

“Fisher of men! That’s what Jesus said I would be the first day He called me: a fisher of men. I love fishing, Jeremiah. It’s all I’ve ever done in life. I can’t screw it up with my temper. In fact, the more stubborn I am, the more fish I can catch. I don’t know why Jesus called me that first day, but I’ll never forget it. I had fished all night and not even gotten one nibble on the bait. This stranger told me to cast out on the other side of the boat. I thought He was crazy. I told him that we had fished all night, but I did what He said anyway. There were so many fish that they tore our nets! That’s when I decided to follow Jesus, but why did He choose me? He knew what I would do. Jesus said I would be a rock. I just don’t understand. Why would He tell me that when He knew that I couldn’t do it. It feels like He set me up to fall.”

“Peter,” I say with admonition in my voice, “you don’t mean that.”

He continues, “No, not really; but kind of. It’s just like that one night out on the water. I asked Him if I could walk out on the water with Him. I just wanted to make Him proud and let Him know that if no one else trusted Him, I did. He let me do it and what happened? I fell just like every other time in my life. He set me up and I sunk. But
I know it’s not His fault for having too much faith in me; it’s my fault for having too much faith in myself.”

I say, “Peter, you just got finished telling me that if Jesus said Jephthah is in paradise that I could believe it. Why can’t you believe that about yourself? Jesus said you are a rock. Wouldn’t He know?”

“Yeah, but rocks can’t float on water! That’s what I’m saying. He may have been right; maybe I could have been that rock that He wanted me to be, but I fouled the whole thing up, just like always. I had my chance to do my one big thing in life, and I failed. Jesus and I can never have the same relationship again. It’s not His fault, it’s mine.”

I say, “Peter, if He can forgive a hothead like Jephthah while He is hanging on the cross, I’m sure that He can forgive one of His best friends.”

“That’s the difference, Jeremiah. No offense, but Jesus and Jephthah weren’t exactly close. I mean, none of us were surprised when Jephthah turned his back on Jesus. What do you expect from someone like that?”

I am offended by his abrasiveness. He sees the hurt in my eyes and says, “I did it again, didn’t I? That didn’t come out like I meant it to, Jeremiah. I’m sorry.”

I say, “It’s ok, I understand what you mean.”

Peter continues, “But Jesus and I were the best of friends. He could expect everyone else to betray Him, but not me. I was supposed to be His rock! Jephthah barely even knew Him, but I was one of His best friends. It would be easy for Jesus to forgive someone whom He had no reason to trust; He did that all the time. But someone like me, how is it ever supposed to be the same?”
I say, "Well, Jesus hasn’t acted like anything is different between you, has He?"

Peter says, "Of course not. You know Jesus, He’s probably just looking for a way to let me know nicely that I don’t deserve to be called a rock anymore." He stands up and walks down to the very edge of the water, letting his toes go under. He says solemnly, "I was going to ask your advice, but now I have my answer."

“What do you mean?” I ask with concern in my voice.

He says, "Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything stupid. I’m just going to go back to fishing again."

“Fishing?” I exclaim in astonishment, "But you haven’t fished professionally in three years."

“Yea, I know.” He stoops down and dips his hand in the water. “I miss it. Fishing was the one thing I never failed at.”

I say, "I don’t know, Peter. What about Jesus?"

“I still love Jesus very much. It’s just that I know it will never be the same; it can’t be. This will make things much easier on everyone else. I’m a liability, Jeremiah. Don’t you see, I’m always the one opening my big mouth or doing something stupid. And to top it all off, I denied Jesus openly.”

“I think you may be overreacting, Peter. Why don’t you think about it awhile.”

“I’ve been thinking about it ever since Jesus came back, Jeremiah. I know that He’s acting like everything’s ok, but how can He ever trust me to be what He wants me to be. This way, I can’t let anyone down.”

“You can’t just quit something so you won’t fail at it,” I plead.
‘I’ll still support Jesus’ ministry and keep in touch with everybody. I most certainly believe that He’s the Messiah. I just won’t be one of His main disciples. There are plenty of other men out there whom He can pick who will be faithful and won’t let Him down, but I’m just not capable of that kind of faithfulness. Believe me, I wish that I was.’

“Well, I can’t stop you, but I really think you’re making the wrong decision, Peter. I think you should ask Jesus about it.”

“I will be the most successful fisherman around these parts. You know why?”

I squint in confusion and say, “Why?”

“Because it’s something I know, that’s why! I tried to be some preacher and I tried to be all holy, but that’s just not something I know. I failed; that’s it! I’m going to do something that I won’t fail at. I can’t endure failing Jesus again. This conversation is over, Jeremiah. Thank you for your advice, but my mind is made up. I’m going to be who I am: Simon the fisherman, not Peter the preacher.”

I don’t try to convince him anymore; his stubbornness almost always prevails anyway.
Chapter 14  Fish and Bread

“Psst, hey, wake up!” Peter is whispering. I roll over to face him. He is standing over me with a piece of rope in his hand. He says, “Hey, some of us are going fishing, do you want to go?”

I sit up and say, “We just laid down to go to sleep. It’s not even midnight yet and you want to go fishing at this hour?”

Peter shrugs and says, “There’s no time like the present. Me, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and a few others are going. You’re welcome to come along or you can go back to sleep.”

I lie here thinking. Peter gives up on me and is making his way out the door. I say, “Wait! I’ll go. Just give me second to get up.”

Peter says, “Fine. We’ll wait outside.” Half an hour later we are launching out onto the Sea of Galilee. The smell of dead fish in the boat is quite repulsive, yet it seems to bring about a feeling of excitement in me. Before I was healed, I’d never been able to go fishing and actually help with the catch. But, here I am tonight, out here with real fishermen, about to have my first professional fishing experience.

Peter yells out over the sound of the crashing waves that are getting farther and farther away, “What a night, boys! It’s a perfect night to bring in the catch of the year!”

I look up at the sky; Peter is right. It is the clearest night I’ve ever seen. There is not a cloud in the sky and the moon is full. The stars seem extra bright and their reflections are dancing across the waves. Peter continues, “Alright, Jeremiah, here’s your first fishing
lesson: good fishermen don’t care about eating, sleeping, or anything else when there are
good conditions. You picked quite a night to come: I have this feeling that you’re going
to see the most fish you’ve ever seen in your whole life!”

There is a general air of adventurous expectancy among us. What a night it is
indeed. After we have sailed a considerable distance from the shore, Peter exclaims, “It’s
now or never, boys! Let’s do what we do well!”

The stench intensifies as each man pulls out large hunks of bait and begins to
impale them on the sharp hooks spread throughout the nets. Trying not to look lost, I
reach down and pick up a piece of dead fish and pull a hook through it, getting blood and
fish innards all over my hands. Peter laughs and says, “Not bad, rookie, but you might
want to stick it this way, or else your bait will fall off the hook before it ever hits the
water.” I quietly thank him for the advice and try again. John is holding a net with two
hands and another end of it in his mouth. He is standing near the edge of the boat,
examining the water below. Suddenly, he throws the net out with one, clean motion and
it opens up in the air like a flock of wild birds. It lands on the water in a perfect circle
and quickly sinks below the surface. John stands over it, holding the end of the rope with
both hands, waiting for the right moment. The other men all pause to watch. Peter says,
“Alright, fellows, this is the first cast of the night. Get ready for the catch!”

I never knew how good they are at this. Each one’s motions are so fluid and
flawless. I only see a knotted mess, but when they pick it up, it transforms into a net.
Peter was right: he is a fantastic fisherman. The moment of truth has come and we all
watch with great anticipation. John begins pulling the rope, crossing over with both
hands until it is coiled up inside the boat like a giant snake. When the net reaches the
surface, John gives it one last heave and throws it the boat. I feel the cold spray of water from the net. Nathanael grabs the lantern and holds it close to the net. Peter picks up sections of it and examines each, but there are no fish. Peter laughs and says, "That's ok, John, why don't you let a real fisherman try it. I'm sure the fish could tell that they were swimming near a boy's net and not a man's." The whole boat erupts into laughter and John smacks Peter's leg playfully. I love it here. I can't wait to see some fish. What a night!

Peter takes hold of another net and casts it out the same way. In a few seconds, he pulls it up and throws it into the boat, but there are still no fish. The spirits are not lowered one bit, though. Everyone is still quite jovial, enjoying our time and knowing that the fish will soon come. Peter glances at me and says, "Ok, rookie, let's see what you got!"

I shake my head and say, "No, that's ok."

Peter interrupts me, "I won't take no for an answer! You can't expect to eat any of these fish if you don't catch any of them. Come on, you can do it!"

I reluctantly accept. It is awkward for me because everyone is watching, but I really don't mind. Their laughs are like those of a big brother, not a big bully. Peter directs me and I take hold of the ends of the net. Then, he sticks another end in my mouth. The taste is so awful that I instinctively spit it out, bringing a roar of laughter. Peter says, "Come on rookie, don't you like the taste of rotten fish; you'll get used to it."

He puts the net back into my mouth and I endure it this time. I step to the edge of the boat and prepare to cast. Peter says, "Ok, now listen. All you have to do is rotate your hips around with your arms at the same time, then release. Got it?"
I shake my head. How hard could this be- I just saw Peter and John both do it easily. So, I pull back and swing my arms around with all of my might releasing at the last moment. The momentum from my swing calls me to fall forward with the inertia of my weight and I plunge head first into the water. The water is so cold and unexpected that it feels like little sharp knives poking at every inch of my body. It’s not unbearable, though. Underwater, I look up and see the torchlight of the boat above. I dread swimming up because I know the reception that I will receive, but I’m running out of air. When I break the plane of the water’s surface, I am welcomed by a hyena-like noise. Peter is laughing so hard that he’s hunched over. He asks, “Are you ok, rookie?”

I know that my face is red, but I can’t help but laugh with them. John is doubled over in the boat, gasping for breath. Peter and James take hold of my arms and pull me up. As they are pulling, James says, “Look guys, I caught a big one!” The incessant laughing increases. James gasps and says, “I don’t know, though, he’s kind of ugly; better throw him back!”

I’m thankful that it’s not cold outside. I sit down in the corner of the boat and take their playful ridicule gracefully. My first attempt at fishing is definitely something that will be memorable. I sit dripping and drying while the jokes continue along with the fishing. Net after net is thrown out, but no fish. An hour passes, and Peter finally says, “This spot must be a dud, boys. James, let’s move to another one. I know the fish are just dying to jump into our boat.” So, we move and begin fishing in another place, but still no luck. I have been watching for several hours now, but my initial interest is dwindling. Peter looks a little frustrated, but more determined than ever. He is a very
experienced fisherman and I’m sure he’s gone through “dry” spells before. It is very late, though, and I’m very sleepy. I find myself nodding off.

“I’ve got one! I’ve got one!” The shouts wake me up abruptly. I jump up and gather around the net with the rest of the guys. James sorts through the net and I can see a dark object under the grid of rope. James reaches down and picks the fish up. It doesn’t move. He says, “No, it can’t be! It’s a rock!”

Peter says, “You idiot! You’ve been dragging the bottom! You caught a rock!”

James reaches over and grabs Peter by his collar and says, “Who are you calling an idiot, Peter? Don’t forget who you are talking to! I won’t back down like everyone else. I know you!”

Peter’s face is red and there is fire in his eyes. He opens his mouth to retaliate, but John jumps between them saying, “Come on guys, this has been a long trip and everyone’s just tired. Let’s go home. We could probably catch a few hours of sleep before daylight. Lord knows that’s probably all we could catch tonight.”

Peter jerks away from James and says, “No! I’m not going back and neither are any of you! I brought you out here and I’m leading this trip. We’re not leaving until this boat is filled with fish. I’m the best fishermen around here and I’m not giving up that easily!”

Everyone rolls their eyes, but accepts his words: he is the leader. I lay back in my spot, thankful that I’m not a fisherman and my help is not needed. It is still dark, so I slowly drift back to sleep.
"Get it out! Get it out! Ahhhhh!" The screams startle me. I jump up and see James and John gathered around Peter. They are holding and looking at his hand. I look past them and see that he has a hook stuck in his finger. He is wincing from the pain.

John says sternly, "Hold still, Peter! I can’t get it out with you squirming like that." He suddenly jerks his hand back and the hook comes out. Peter shouts in pain. He stands there cradling his wounded hand in his good one. There is a lot of blood running down his arm.

Peter says, "That’s great! Now I won’t be able to do anything!"

I say, "That’s not true, Peter. It’s just your finger."

He snaps back, "Look, don’t lecture me, Jeremiah! You don’t know what it feels like! Now there’s no way I’ll be able to fish, now!"

I say, "Actually, I do know what it feels like! Remember?"

Peter regains his composure and says, "Oh yeah, sorry." It’s now barely light outside and the boat is still empty. Peter and the others have bags under their eyes and are covered in blood and bait. They smell terrible. Peter throws up his hands and says, "What a night! We fished all night for nothing and now this. I won’t be able to use my hand for a few weeks; the hook went pretty deep. Let’s go home, boys; this is the worst trip ever."

Everyone agrees and begins to pack up the gear. Just then, a voice rings out from the shore saying, "Boys, any luck?"

Peter stands up and shouts, "No! Not even a bite! Thanks for asking, though."

His bitterness comes out through his sarcasm.
The stranger shouts back, "Why don't you try casting your net out on the right side of the boat; I bet you'll find some there."

Peter glances over at John with wide eyes. John returns the gesture. Peter turns to Nathanael and nods. Nathanael takes one of the nets and throws it out in perfect, fisherman style. He begins to pull the rope with ease; there is obviously nothing in the net. Just then, the tension of the rope pulls hard, almost pulling Nathanael out of the boat. James and I lunge forward and catch him before he falls out. The net is so heavy that Nathanael yells, "I think it's hung on something!" We all continue to pull, making slow progress. I look up at Peter, but he is not even paying attention to our dramatic struggle; his eyes are focused on the shore. We pull the top of the net to the surface of the water, and sure enough, it is full of huge fish! We all pull as hard as we can, but we can't seem to manhandle such a large catch.

John and Peter are both gazing at the shore now. Suddenly, John screams with excitement, "It is the Lord!"

Peter immediately reaches down and picks up his outer garment, putting it back on. Then, he puts his foot up on the edge of the boat. I say, "Uh, Peter, what are you doing?" But he doesn't answer. We are all still trying to bring in the fish and I am soaked from their resistance. Then I hear something fall into the water. I turn and see Peter swimming fast towards the shore. At first it startles me, but then I realize that he is a fisherman and he knows how to swim. James has called for another boat nearby to come and help us bring in some of the fish.

John says, "Hurry up, guys. Jesus is on the shore!"
Nathanael says, “We’re going as fast as we can; there’s just so many of them. I can’t believe that this net is holding.” None of us can believe it; it’s a remarkable catch.

I turn to John and say, “Not bad for my first day, huh?”

John laughs and says, “Whatever, like you had anything to do with this. Don’t get cocky, rookie.” We share a laugh. By this time, the other boat has reached us and the fish are finally out of the water. We then begin to make our way to the shore. When we finally get out of the boat, Jesus and Peter are sitting by a fire with fish and bread cooking on it; enough to feed us all. The smell of the food is intoxicating because we haven’t eaten anything all night long.

Jesus says, “Come and eat breakfast.” We all immediately sit down and begin to partake of the shoreside feast. Jesus is eating with us. I don’t think I’ve ever been so satisfied in all of my life. It’s just like the old days; just us guys, together with Jesus. In fact, this is the first time since Jesus died that we’ve all been together and Jesus hasn’t had to prove Himself to someone. At first it was to all of us, then just to Thomas. Now, however, none of us has to ask Jesus if it is really Him. We now have every reason to believe. The conversation is light-hearted between everyone. Peter is sitting next to Jesus, eating fish and bread, but he’s not saying much. He’s just staring off into space as if there is something plaguing his mind. He’s probably thinking about what I’m thinking about. This is so similar to how Peter and Jesus first met; so I’ve heard. Everything about the water, the shore, the fish—everything is similar. Peter is always the first one to step out of the boat and today is no different. Twice now Jesus has called Peter to step out of the boat, and both times he has obeyed. The first time, he stepped onto dry land and followed Jesus. The second time, he walked on the water. But the third time, Peter
didn’t even wait for Jesus to tell him to step out; he just dove right in. From land to waves to underwater, Peter has always been willing to go a little deeper for Jesus. But now, here we sit. I know that Jesus knows Peter’s thoughts; how he’s planning on quitting. I’m sure that Peter is just waiting for the right moment to break it to Him. Peter has never kept anything from Jesus; what’s the use anyway.

Peter is still staring, now stroking his beard. Suddenly, he sits up straight and clears his throat as if he is going to say something. Here it comes; he’s about to tell Jesus that he’s giving up. Cutting Peter off, Jesus speaks out at the same time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than anyone else?”

Peter is floored by the question. He gazes directly into Jesus’ eyes and says, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

Jesus shakes His head and says, “Feed my lambs.” We all sit quietly, finishing our last couple of bites and trying to decipher the discourse between Jesus and Peter.

Peter gathers himself, and tries once more, but once more Jesus cuts him off saying, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?”

Peter’s expression is absolute confusion. His eyebrows raise and he gingerly says, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

Jesus nods again and says, “Tend My sheep.” Peter helplessly drops his head. He doesn’t look up, but instead contemplates what Jesus is saying.

Jesus says again, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Just then, a rooster crows! It suddenly becomes clear. Three times Peter had denied; three times Jesus has asked him this question. This is the issue. Peter had once thought that he loved Jesus enough to die for Him at any moment. Peter used to be convinced that the relationship
they had could never be broken, but he never counted on the possibility that he, himself, would be the one to break it. Peter’s face is downcast. What is he supposed to say? Last time he promised his love and loyalty, he fell. Now, Jesus is bringing up this same issue. The rooster crows again. This is the moment of truth. Jesus stares into Peter’s eyes with the expression of a father teaching his son to walk. He can’t carry him any longer, he has to make the decision to take a step whether he falls or not.

Peter remains stoic in his posture. His eyes suddenly raise, yet his expression doesn’t change. There are tears streaming down his face, but he doesn’t seem to even notice them. He looks at Jesus with surrender and says, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.”

Jesus reaches over, takes Peter by the hand and says, “Then feed my sheep, Peter. Now’s not the time to quit. When you were young, you did things the way you wanted, coming and going as you pleased. But when you are old, others are going to impose their will upon you and lead you places that you don’t want to go, for My name’s sake.”

Peter’s face is flushed and wet. He has stepped out, and once again Jesus has caught him. Now it is all clear. Three times Jesus has called Peter. Yet, now Peter understands that it’s not about his own love or loyalty, it’s about Jesus’ love. That day on the water, it was Jesus who kept him from sinking. It is Jesus who has brought these huge catches of fish. Likewise, it is Jesus who is calling him now, once again, to be a fisher of men. All of his life, he has done things through his own stubbornness and will; and like last night, he has caught nothing. It is only if he is willing to cast away his life at Jesus’ word that the massive catch will come. Peter is a rock, but only because Jesus has called him to be. I can see why Jesus would call Peter to lead. Peter is now broken. His
will has been crushed over and over again, until he has finally surrendered to the fact that it is Jesus alone who "knows all things." Jesus can now trust Peter because Peter understands that he can do nothing except what Jesus directs him to do; and because if Jesus calls him, Jesus will provide what is necessary for the mission, even if that means walking on water.

Suddenly, the life returns to Peter's face as new light illuminates his heart. Jesus has fixed everything; even Peter's own failure of denial. Peter is now free to walk upon the waters of faith because even if he starts to sink, Jesus is with him on the water. When Jesus lets go of Peter's hand, the wound from the hook is gone and his hand is completely healed! Jesus and Peter stand up and embrace just like old times. Jesus then turns to the rest of us and says, "It is time for Me to return to my Father. Go and tell the rest to meet me in Bethany later today." He points towards Bethany and we all turn and look in that direction. When we turn back around, He is gone!
Chapter 15

Unexpected Friend

The afternoon finds us at Bethany with Jesus. Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are here. Likewise, all of the disciples and many other followers of Jesus have gathered here, as Jesus requested. None of us know what to expect. It is interesting to me that even though Jesus has been raised from the dead that He still has not overthrown the Romans or even spoke of the end of our bondage to them. None of us have had the audacity to ask Him, though. There have been just too many amazing things that have happened and Jesus hasn't seemed concerned about it. However, I can sense that many of the disciples are getting antsy about it. Jesus has been risen for forty days now, and still nothing has come of it except that we have regained our hope in life and His resurrection has been covered up by the authorities.

It was Nicodemus who told us what happened. He said that the soldiers who were on guard at Jesus' tomb that morning ran into the city and reported what had happened to the religious leaders. They, in turn, consulted together and decided to give a large some sum of money to the soldiers in exchange for their perjury. The soldiers agreed, of course. They not only received forgiveness for their failure to guard the tomb, they received money as well. The story that has been passed around is that we, His disciples, came and stole His body while the soldiers were sleeping. Of course, this is absurd to me since only three days earlier, all of the disciples had ran from the soldiers. How could a bunch of terrified, unarmed fishermen have the courage to face trained, professional killers? Also, it had taken many men to move a stone of that size, so how were we supposed to do that kind of project without waking the sleeping soldiers who were only a
few feet away? Furthermore, Roman soldiers are renowned for their efficiency and stamina, so the odds of all of them falling into such a deep sleep at the same time so that none of them would hear us are pretty slim. Nevertheless, the religious leaders will stop at nothing to try to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. It doesn’t matter, though. There have been so many people that have seen Him and talked with Him that many around the region believe.

Now, here we are. Jesus is surrounded by His friends and is talking and laughing with them; but we don’t know what He is about to do. What did He mean, “It’s time for Me to return to the Father”? Surely, He’s not leaving us; He just came back. And besides, how is He going to end the Roman oppression if He leaves; furthermore, how is the world going to find out about Him if He isn’t here to show them? We are all restless, anticipating the coming events.

Peter is restored now. There is an obvious change in his demeanor, yet he realizes, with all the rest of us, that we are still the scared men that denied and ran just a few days ago. Sure, Jesus is back, but if He leaves, we are nothing without Him. Peter’s face reveals this anxiety, especially since he has accepted the call to be the leader. How is he supposed to, “Feed My sheep” is Jesus isn’t here to help and teach him. This just doesn’t make any sense. As the noise of the various conversations begin to subside, Jesus lifts His hands and says, “Friends, the time has come for Me to go back to the Father. I must leave you now.”

A corporate gasp goes up from the small crowd. Thomas yells out, “What do You mean, Jesus? Why are You leaving us when we need You the most?” Others cry out in similar fashion.
Jesus speaks out over them, “Don’t let your heart be troubled. I know that you believe in God, but now believe in Me, too. In My Father’s house are many mansions. I’m speaking plainly to you now and I would tell you if I wasn’t. I’m going away to prepare a place for you.” The crowd continues to lament. Jesus continues to comfort, “Listen, if I go and prepare a place for you, I will surely come again and receive you to Myself. Wherever I am for eternity, you will be there also. We will always be together. And besides, you know where I am going and you know the way to get there.”

Thomas says, “Lord, we don’t know where You are going so how are we supposed to know the way?”

Jesus reaches out his hand and gently places it on Thomas’ shoulder. He says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Peter’s face is bubbling like a frightened child. He finally bursts out saying, “But Jesus, if You are the way, why are You leaving us? Don’t You know that we can’t do anything without You? How am I supposed to make it without You? You told me to be this leader, but if You leave, I’m just a fisherman.” The intensity of his remarks ripple throughout the crowd. His sincerity is the realization of his worthlessness without Jesus. I feel the same way. In all reality, we are just nobody’s without Jesus. We were nobody’s before Jesus came and we’ll be nobody’s if He leaves.

Jesus smiles as he grabs Peter’s arm. He says, “Peter, you have finally got it.” Peter’s expression demonstrates his confusion, as does all the rest of ours. Jesus continues, “You are a rock, Peter. I know you don’t feel like it and I know that you are afraid of falling again, but now you are a rock because you realize that you can only be
strong through Me. Now, there is no sea that you can’t walk across because I know you wouldn’t try without Me. Nevertheless, I still have to leave you.”

Jesus steps back and addresses all of us, “When I go, I will ask the Father to send you another Helper, a Comforter; He will stay with You forever. He is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. He is My Spirit; so He is Me. You already know Him, because You know Me. He dwells with you now, but soon He will be in You and You will be in Him. I’m not going to leave you as orphans, I’m going to come back and take you with Me. But before that, I’m going to come to You through My Spirit. That’s why I can say, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”

The crowd is silent as we contemplate His words. The Holy Spirit? Up to now, we’ve been able to see and touch Jesus, but how are we supposed to communicate with a Spirit that we can’t see or touch. This still doesn’t make sense to me.

Jesus continues, “Listen, it is better for you if I go away, but all you see is the sorrow of My departure. Nevertheless, if I don’t leave, the Comforter will not come to you. However, if I do go away, I will send Him to you.” He turns to Peter and says, “Listen, I know that you don’t feel like you’re ready to take on the world. I know you feel like you’re worthless and helpless. I know that you’re afraid of just falling over and over again until you just can’t get up anymore; but that’s why I’m sending My Spirit to guide you. When He comes, He will teach you everything you need to know. Furthermore, He will bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. Therefore, you don’t have to be troubled because I am leaving my peace with you.” Peter’s face lightens a bit. Suddenly, I start to feel better too. It’s a strange feeling, but it is so real. It’s a peace that I can’t understand; nevertheless, I’m glad it’s here.
Jesus continues, "I am sending you out into all the world. Go, tell everyone you meet of this Good News: that if they will believe in Me, they will become Mine, even as You are. Listen, you are not going out under your power or your authority, but My Spirit will go before you and make your paths straight. Furthermore, He will guide you into all truth and tell you what words to say and what to do. He will draw the people to Me. He will convict them through your words and through His own working in their hearts. You see, it's not your power, so you don't have to be afraid. But before you can receive this power, you must wait in Jerusalem until I send the Promise of the Holy Spirit. You are going to be baptized- submerged- in the Holy Spirit and in fire." His words are spoken with a certain intensity that sends a chill up my neck. He continues, "You can't do these things I've told you under your own power; you must wait for the Holy Spirit that I am about to send to you."

Philip, attempting to understand this power and seeking to know what we all want to know, says, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus responds quickly, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But listen, this is what's important. You are going to receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. This power will enable you to be witnesses of Me as I have commanded you. This power will carry your witness of Me throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and eventually to all the ends of the earth." There is silence, but a new peace. The closure of the issue of the Romans is comforting in itself. Even though we don't know, we know that God has a plan and that we don't have to know. Jesus says, "Friends, the time has come."
Jesus begins walking from disciple to disciple, exchanging hugs and words. When He reaches me, He says, “Jeremiah, My friend. I know that you miss Jephthah, but understand that he truly is in paradise. Also, understand that he wouldn’t be there without your friendship and concern for him. You will be great, Jeremiah, because you have learned to be a servant. Don’t forget what it is like to be an outcast because there are millions of outcasts out there that I am sending you to. Now, I know what it feels like too. Don’t forget what you’ve seen. Don’t forget the Deborahs, the Simeons, the Zaccheuses, the little old widows, or the Jephthahs. They are the ones who need Me the most. The doctor didn’t come for the people who are well, but for the sick.” His eyes are so familiar to me now that I know in my heart that they will be the part of Jesus that I will remember most clearly, until I look into them again someday.

We embrace and I tell Him goodbye. After a few more goodbyes, Jesus steps back from us. We waves and winks at me in His old, mischievous way. Then, somehow He isn’t standing on the grass anymore, but on top of the grass! He is actually rising into the air! Suddenly, He is so far away that He disappears into the clouds. All of us just stand here, gazing upwards searching for just one last glimpse, but He is gone. Just then, someone says, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here, gazing up at the sky?” We all look at the man. He and his companion are dressed in white robes and it is obvious that they are not from around here. He continues, “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you saw Him leave.”

Peter turns to the rest of us and says, “Well everybody, why should we stay here. Let’s go do what Jesus said. Let’s go wait for this Promise in Jerusalem.”
I am awakened by a knock at the door. I lean up and look around me. It is the middle of the day, but I had dozed off, probably exhausted from the events of the last few days. We have been in this upper room now for ten days, praying and waiting for the Promise that Jesus told us about. There are many of us, probably over one hundred, but I haven’t counted. All of the disciples are here as well as many of the men and women who had followed Jesus from the beginning. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are here as well as Deborah. Deborah and I have been talking some, but not much. It is still painful for her and I to realize that Jephthah is gone. However, my pain is not because I don’t know where he is, but only that I miss him.

John opens the door. Deborah and I are sitting along the wall that is adjacent to the door, so we can’t see the person who knocked. We can, however, see John and Peter’s expressions. John says, “What do you want with us?”

The stranger replies, “I just wanted to know if I could wait here with you.” His answer obviously surprises John. He turns to Peter and shrugs his shoulders. Peter then says, “Sure, this isn’t a closed meeting. If you want to be here, we are happy to have you.” Peter’s words are very gracious; they sound like something Jesus would say.

The stranger enters. He is wearing a hood, the same kind of hood that Nicodemus wore that night he visited Jesus. The stranger reaches up his hands and removes the hood, exposing his identity—it is Gehazi! I am speechless. So is Deborah. She reaches over and squeezes my hand so hard that I think it might break. Gehazi must have heard our gasps because he is now facing us. He walks right up to us and says, “It anyone sitting here?”
Deborah replies angrily, "There's no room here for murderers! Not to mention, murderers who kill their own sons!"

Gehazi lowers his head and a stream of tears fall from his eyes. He says, "I know that you're right, Deborah. It's all true! I can't get his words out of my head. He forgave me! He forgave me in front of the whole world! I had him killed, but he forgave me! My own son was hanging on a cross that I practically built for him, and he still forgave me!" He is sobbing now, only mouthing the words to himself as the tears drench his lips and chin. His remorse takes us all by surprise. The room is silent, listening to our encounter with the one whom we thought was our greatest enemy. He is weeping and shaking like a little child. He continues, speaking now to everyone in the room, "I just knew that all of you were crazy. How could you follow some carpenter and call Him the Messiah. I thought the Messiah would come and destroy our enemies and set up His kingdom. Now, though, I realize that I am the enemy. I am the one who is blind. I never saw how real His power really was. But that day, when He and my son were hanging before me on two crosses made from my own bitterness, I heard true power for the first time in my life. Both of them forgave me in front of the whole world. How can I reject that? How can I reject a love that would forgive a fake like me?" We are all stunned, but I still don't trust him. Can a leopard change his spots?

Gehazi continues, now speaking directly to Deborah, "What I am saying, I guess, is that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for abandoning you and I'm sorry for abandoning our son."

Then, he turns to Peter and says, "And I'm sorry for rejecting Jesus; I just didn't realize who He was. Now I believe." Peter says nothing, probably because he doesn't know what to say. Gehazi lowers his head again and says, "But, I know that it is too late. I've
killed the Messiah and my fate is sealed. I just want you to know how I feel; that I would make it all right if I could; but I can’t, and for that I’m sorry.” He turns and walks toward the door.

As he starts to close it behind him, Deborah speaks up, “Wait!” Gehazi turns around quickly, full of curiosity. Deborah continues, “Do you remember that day when you tried to have me stoned and Jesus saved me?” Gehazi nods his head in shame. Deborah continues, “I was the guiltiest person in the world that day. I was a shameful woman, acquainted with filthiness and unfaithfulness, but Jesus just forgave me. He just forgave me, despite the fact that by law I deserved to die. He just forgave me, even though I would have even agreed with the stoning. Even I realized my fault, but Jesus still had a different plan. I know that you don’t deserve to live. You have caused more pain and despair to my family and I than anyone else on the face of the earth. But, today, I don’t know why, but I choose to forgive you. I guess if Jesus can forgive a whore like me, there is nothing you could do that could warrant my unforgiveness.”

There is seemingly a physical load that is lifted from Gehazi’s shoulders. He says, “I do believe.” He turns to Peter and says, “I know that I am the last person on earth that you would want to pray with, but do you think I could become a follower of Jesus?”

Peter stretches out his hand and says, “Friend, anyone who believes can come to Jesus.”

Gehazi falls to his knees right in the doorway and cries, “Oh, Jesus, I believe! I believe! Please forgive me!” Peter walks over to him and helps him to his feet. The two embrace for a moment as Gehazi continues to cry. Peter says, “Gehazi, when Jesus left,
he commanded us to wait here for the Promise of the Holy Spirit. We’ve been waiting now for about ten days, you’re welcome to wait with us.”

Gehazi dries his eyes and says, “Thank you. I would be honored to wait and pray with you.” Each person resumes praying as Gehazi walks beside the wall towards me; finding the seat beside me to be the only one vacant. He says, “Would you mind if I sit next to you?”

I say, “I guess that would be alright.” He sits and settles himself, still wiping the tears from his face.

He says, “Excuse me, but I couldn’t help but notice that you were there that day at the cross and that my son, Jephthah, was talking to you. Did you know him very well?”

I say, “I sure did. He was my best friend.”

Gehazi remorsefully says, “Oh, I’m sorry.” There is an awkward silence. He continues, “If it wouldn’t hurt you too much, would you mind telling me about him? I never really knew him.”

I take a deep breath. As I sit in this upper room, telling my new, unexpected friend about Jephthah, I am confronted with the realization of the changes that have occurred in my life. I used to long for life to end so that I could be done with the pain it brings, but now I look forward to each new day, despite the pain they sometimes bring. Now, I know that there is nothing in life that I cannot face because there is nothing in life that Jesus hasn’t already faced. Across this room, there are the fruits of Jesus’ life. Some have been healed physically; some have been healed mentally; but all have been changed forever. So many changed and so many changes yet to come. I used to think that the most formidable obstacle in my life was my shrieveled hand. I thought that it was the
cause of all the pain and rejection that I faced. However, now I can see that there was something else that was missing from my life: life. I also figured out that it was missing from most other people's, as well. My world was filled with villains and victims, but no hero. Now, however, I realize that I wasn't just a victim; I was also a villain. I realize that I held the same bitterness and rejection in my own heart that I despised others for having, but that I couldn't see mine because it was well hidden under layers of pain and rejection. But, like a parasite, it had eaten away at my soul. It wasn't until I met Someone who didn't have the same heart disease as the rest of us that I found hope; or should I say, hope found me. Now life is clean. Life is new. Life is life, as it is meant to be. I still have problems for today and fears of the future; but their roles are different now. They used to revolve around my outward deformity and physical limitations, but now they are secondary to my inward completeness. Jesus has done more than heal the flesh and bones of a shriveled hand; he has breathed new life into the hopes and dreams of a shriveled heart.