The trek back to Capernaum in the middle of the afternoon sapped the energy of the disciples, but for Jesus the hardship was the last thing on his mind. He was anxious to meet a man who even then was searching him out. A few moments after they entered the city, a group of Jewish elders met him.

The disciples were cautious. Jesus was not.

“What can I do for you brothers?” Jesus asked, recognizing them from his many synagogue meetings.

“Rabbi, there is a Roman army officer here in our town who has a beloved slave on his deathbed.”

“You mediate for an oppressor?” Jesus tested them.

The elders shifted nervously. “Please, Rabbi, hear us out. This man loves the Jewish people and is worthy of you to grant this of him. He built our synagogue for us.”

“Where is he?”

They pointed to the compound above the town nestled on the hillside. “Up there.”

“I’ll go.”

“Thank you, Rabbi. You have answered our prayers.”

Jesus and his band set off to climb the hill through the streets of the city, and a group of men met them less than halfway. They bowed before him and lifted their worried eyes to his.

“What is it, friends?”

The spokesman replied, “Our friend’s favorite slave is dying and he implores you to come to heal him.”

“Who are you?”

“His friends.”

“Why didn’t he come to ask me himself?” Jesus asked.

“He said he is not worthy for you to come under his roof.”

“Yes.”

“Hurry to him and tell him I must talk with him.”

Jesus continued up the incline as the men scurried ahead. In a short time the entourage came down the hill toward Jesus and his disciples and the ever-present crowd.

In the distance the leader, a centurion, bowed to one knee in respect for the authority he knew rested in the Nazarene. He waited, head down, for Jesus to arrive.

Jesus reached down and squeezed his shoulder. He loved this man and the respect he showed. “I heard about your slave,” he said softly.

Without raising his eyes, he explained, “Lord, my young servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented.”

“I’ll come and heal him.”

“Lord, I’m not worthy for you to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed.”
“How can you be so certain?” Jesus asked the man.

Still on one knee, He looked up to Jesus. “I also am a man under authority, with one hundred soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.”

Jesus turned to his disciples and the crowd looking on. “I tell you the truth, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.” Then spotting a small group of Pharisees among the crowd, he took the opportunity to teach them directly.

“I say to you many will come from the east and west, and will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

He turned back to the centurion and lifted him to his feet. “Return home, my friend. It shall be done for you as you have believed.”

The large Roman gripped the Jewish teacher’s shoulders firmly in a show of gratitude.

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Stephen approached the market highly charged with excitement. He thought back to the time he had entered Jerusalem, when he had fallen in with this large family of food merchants with business ties all over the country, especially in the fertile region of Galilee, the very place Jesus had concentrated his ministry. Silas and Leah, the second and third of the siblings, had become best friends with Stephen and his sister Prisca, befriending them during a chance encounter at one of their several kiosks in the city. Stephen determined if he were to discover the truth about Jesus, he had to go to Galilee and see him in person, and there was no one better to join him than someone with ties to the region – a food vendor with a heart for spiritual things. Silas fit the description perfectly.

Silas hastily unloaded a donkey full of dates and figs for his younger brothers to stock. Stephen, as he knew to do, jumped into the work and did his part in order to grab Silas’s ear.

“Stephen! Good to see you out in the open,” Silas teased his studious friend. “Hey, guess what? I get two months off from school.” “Why?”

“To research Jesus of Galilee.” Silas stopped unloading and turned to Stephen. “Are you kidding? How did you arrange that?”

“My father agreed to it. He made me promise to tell him everything I find out.”


“About what?”

“You want to come with me? You said you were serious about tracking him.” Silas stopped unloading and looked at his friend, and saw he was serious.

“I’ll have to mix in some business.”

“That’ll work. You’re always on the prowl for new suppliers. Tell your father
you’ll make good use of your time. You have plenty of brothers to take up the slack,” Stephen argued.
“Count me in.”

In Capernaum the news spread like a thunderclap. The centurion’s slave revived to full health, and the next morning the crowd thronged the market place where Jesus and his men bought supplies for the next few days. He mingled with the crowd, talking with some, healing others, until he excused himself to help carry supplies up to his house.

“We need to get away,” he mentioned to Simon Peter. “These people need to work instead of following us around all day.”
“I think it’s too late for that, Master,” Simon said. “They love you too much.” Jesus sighed. “You’re probably right. Why don’t we make our way to Nain?”
“Nain?”
“Sure. A couple days to get there. Pick up some new crowds. A nice peaceful place at the foot of the mountain.”
Simon agreed. “I’ll tell the guys. Tomorrow morning?”
“Yes. Early.”

As Jesus anticipated, large crowds followed him and his men toward the city of Nain. They were just about to enter the gate when the gate opened and out streamed a crowd of townsfolk bearing a coffin and wailing. Jesus stepped aside and watched the procession coming toward them. The woman near the coffin, obviously related to the deceased, wept bitterly and leaned heavily on the arms of two young men as they moved toward the graveyard.

From the side, John watched Jesus’ reaction to the scene. He saw the eyes of the master well up with tears. It was a somber and grievous event, another graphic reminder of the power of death over the lives of people. Jesus moved to intercept the procession and stopped the woman.

“Tell me about the man you are burying,” he said.
She gathered herself and said, “He was hardly a man. So young! He was my only son!”
Jesus caught her as she stumbled forward, and stabilized her. “Where is your husband?”
“Resting in his grave,” she sobbed. “I will bury my son next to him.” She began weeping convulsively, straining to maintain composure, looking into the eyes of the stranger.
“Do not weep.”
“I cannot help it.”
Jesus took her by the hand and led her to the coffin. The large crowd fell completely silent except for the babies and young children. He reached up and touched the coffin. “Young man, I say to you, arise!”
The onlookers gasped when they saw the dead young man sit up and look
down. "Mother! Mother! Where am I?" he shrieked. The bearers lowered the coffin and quickly unwrapped him and covered him with a robe. Jesus took his hand and led him to his mother.

The reaction was immediate. The crowds cheered the great sign for a long time, many weeping as they watched the mother fall into the arms of her beloved son. The disciples listened to the exclamations from the people. Most notable were those like these: "A great prophet has arisen among us!" And, "God has visited his people!"

Matthew nudged Thomas. "Do you think this is what it was like when the prophets were around?"

"It had to be. This is wonderful!"

Jesus stood by and smiled broadly as he watched the mother and son wrap their arms around each other with tears and smiles and overwhelming joy.

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Nain was good to Jesus and his disciples. The town people took care of their needs and Jesus in turn healed their diseases and afflictions, drove out their evil spirits, gave sight to their blind. The city elders even provided space for Jesus to spend time during the day outside the city with his disciples, and then provided them with all they could eat at suppers in the town square. The thankful widows faithfully baked their best loaves each evening specifically for the great Healer.

One evening two men came to the city looking for Jesus. Andrew and John recognized them and brought them into the fellowship around the large table crowded with disciples and townsfolk.

"How is my cousin John?" Jesus asked.

"You know he's in prison, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. Are they treating him well?"

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. To be honest, he's discouraged. That's why we came."

"Talk to me. Maybe I can help."

"John wanted us to ask you if you are the expected one, or shall we look for someone else?"

The question hit Jesus hard. He didn't immediately reply, but turned to those at the table. "Simon Peter, you and the men go to the crowd outside the city and bring the infirm to me." Turning to the city fathers, he said, "You men bring me all those in town who have not been with me and need help."

In a short time the people pressed in upon Jesus from all sides, and in plain sight of the Baptist's disciples, he healed the sick, exorcised evil spirits, freed the paralyzed, opened the eyes of the blind. Hour after hour, until darkness prevailed, the Nazarene laid his hands on his people, and on some Gentiles, and drove out the ravages of the fallen human life, renewing health and adding years of useful life to many. At the end of the evening before everyone retired, Jesus turned his attention to the Baptist's disciples.

"Brothers, go and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight and the lame walk, and the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them," Jesus said. Then in
a mild rebuke, he added, “Blessed is he who does not take offense at me.”

Thaddeus whispered to Matthew, “What did he mean?”

Matthew answered, “I think John and Andrew would know more, but I think Jesus felt a sting when they asked the Baptist’s question. It might be that John the Baptist is offended that Jesus has not delivered him from prison.”

Matthew tugged on John’s sleeve and drew him into the conversation.

John listened to Matthew’s inquiry and added, “I know what Jesus told us about John, and I take his fellowship; but this inquiry confirms what I felt then.”

“But John is still languishing in prison,” Matthew contended. “He’s probably really discouraged.”

“No doubt he is, and it makes me sick; but I can’t shake the thought that it could have been prevented if he were here with us.”

“I don’t think Jesus would agree with you.”

“I know. Maybe I should stop my wishful thinking,” John conceded. “I love that man, and I want him here.”

“I don’t think he’ll ever get out of prison,” Matthew predicted.

John nodded. “Unfortunately, you’re probably right.”

“What about his disciples?” Matthew asked.

“We can only pray they see Jesus as their Messiah. They could be such an asset to the kingdom.”

The conversation did not go unnoticed, so Jesus reiterated what he had said previously, hoping John would come around to the right thinking concerning the Baptist.

“Friends, you are not considering everything about the Baptist,” Jesus said once John’s disciples went away. “He is in every way a faithful prophet of my Father, called for a certain purpose. Study the old prophets and you’ll find their flaws. John is no different. But he was called to bring the nation to repentance as groundwork for my ministry. Did he not do exactly that? I know you think he should be here with us, but he had a task to complete, and he’s completed it. Isn’t that enough for you? Shouldn’t you rather be praying for that dear man instead of second-guessing his decisions?”

The disciples, especially John, were convicted of their lack, and they examined themselves in the light of what Jesus said twice now about John and his dire situation. John and Andrew in particular felt the sting of Jesus’ rebuke, and they immediately brought their original mentor to the Father in prayer.

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The extended stay in the city of Nain was coming to a close. Jesus had healed any who came to him and had many fruitful sessions of teaching - the mornings with his disciples outside the city, and the evenings over supper with the people. Jesus wished in his heart every village and city in Israel would receive him as this one did.

There were a few detractors in the town, though; one of them was a Pharisee named Simon, who, though rigid concerning the law, wanted, nevertheless, to show his magnanimity toward the guests that his town had graciously received. He felt compelled to maintain his stature among them, so he made a move to
reassert himself – he extended an invitation to the thirteen men for dinner as well as to several of his own friends. Jesus accepted with the condition that Simon’s house would be opened to the people after the meal so he could thank them for their wonderful hospitality. Simon reluctantly agreed.

Simon and his friends watched every move Jesus made and were shocked when Jesus did not wash his hands before eating, the custom of every religious Jew. Jesus knew their thoughts and the hypocrisy burned him.

“You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but internally you are full of extortion and wickedness. Foolish ones! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? You better clean up the corruption in your hearts before you start worrying about my dirty hands!”

Simon’s face lost its blood. He had not bargained for this kind of denunciation. He couldn’t figure out how Jesus knew what they were thinking about his hands.

Jesus was relentless. “Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithes of mint and rue and every little garden herb, and yet you disregard justice and the love of God. You should deal with the great inward things before stooping down to pick tiny garden herbs for your tithe.

“You love your chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places, but really, you’re like concealed tombs men walk over unaware.”

A Pharisee could not restrain himself. “Teacher, when you say this, you insult us.”

Jesus shook his head in disgust. Should you not be insulted? “Woe to you teachers of the Law! You weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you won’t even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.

“Woe to you! You build up the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. You are witnesses of and approve the deeds of your fathers by building tombs for the prophets they killed”

Jesus waited for a response, but none dared. Everyone in the room was deathly still. He narrowed his eyes and honed in on the hypocrisy present around the table.

“For this reason - your wretched hypocrisy - my Father has sent to your fathers prophets, whom they killed, and to you apostles, whom you will persecute, so the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house! I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.

“Woe to you teachers of the Law! You have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter, and you hinder those who were entering.”

Jesus rose and left the room and went to the courtyard. He wanted to give them space to contemplate what he had just said. He wanted them to examine themselves, but instead they turned more bitter and hostile than ever. Jesus wasn’t deterred. He went back in to take the arranged meal.
After the meal Simon encouraged his guests to retire to the cooler and more spacious courtyard where he had arranged many smaller tables around the main one. He instructed the servants to open the gate to the people, thus fulfilling his obligation to Jesus. The tables were low to the ground surrounded by blankets and pillows, allowing those around them to stretch out, prop up on one elbow, and take food with their other hand. The crush of people pushed through the gate into the house to see the notorious Nazarene. Jesus noted the particularly distraught face of an attractive, but weary woman coming toward him and carrying something. He eased himself down to the table and took a piece of fruit, when he realized the grieving woman was standing near his feet weeping inconsolably.

Jesus glanced at his host across the table and the look of offense on Simon the Pharisee’s face captured his attention. By then the weeping woman had knelt at his feet and let her tears fall upon them and awkwardly tried to dry them with her long, black hair. Gripped by the apparent repentance in her heart, she ignored everyone in the place and began kissing the feet of the one person who had informed her evil lifestyle and wrought a change of heart in her. Then in a shocking display of gratitude, she poured out the perfume from an alabaster vial and bathed his feet in the ointment. The rich aroma quickly spread to the whole room. Everyone was incredulous, some disgusted, some weeping with her, some embarrassed.

But Jesus knew exactly what was going on. After receiving the woman’s gift, he turned back to his host. The room fell silent waiting for Jesus to comment.

“Simon, I have something to say to you.”

“Say it, Rabbi.”

“A moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?”

Simon gave the obvious answer. “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.”

“You have judged correctly.”

Jesus stood to his feet and put his hand on the shoulder of the small woman.

“Do you see this woman?”

Simon hesitated and nodded weakly.

“I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet, but this woman has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss my feet.”

Simon the Pharisee was shaken by the exposure of his nature before his guests and friends. But Jesus did not quit.

“You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with perfume. For this reason, I tell you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven; for she loved much. He who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Jesus turned away from the shamed Pharisee and looked into the eyes of the kneeling woman and said, “Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Jesus heard the murmurs around him but ignored them. “Who is this man who even forgives sins?” That would be a battle for another day.
The disciples noticed the way back home followed the western shoreline of the lake where many small villages and towns nestled quietly. One incident of note happened in Magdala, where in the crowd a violently possessed woman burst forth toward Jesus, snarling incoherently, and meaning to set upon him. Jesus put out his palm and stopped the woman in her place. “Come out of her! All of you!”

The disciples counted the screeching, the defamatory epithets, and the thrashings of each of the seven demons. When the final spirit, the seventh, departed, the woman collapsed to the ground and wept. Jesus helped her to her feet.

“You are free now. Follow me.” Jesus led her to the group of women who had taken up their places behind the disciples. “What is your name?”

“Mary.”

Jesus smiled. “Another Mary, Mary,” he teased a devotee of the same name. “Here is Joanna and this is Susanna.” He made the rounds of the several women who had taken it upon themselves to minister to the men of the Messiah and to the Messiah. Some were wealthy and found no greater purpose for their means than to sustain the group of men, freeing the disciples of the encumbering issue of food and its preparation and allowing them uncluttered time to learn the eternal truths of Jesus’ teachings.

Jesus rather enjoyed the discomfort of his disciples who had left their vocations and were dependent upon, of all things, women. When the women had joined the entourage a few months ago, some of the disciples groused, “ Couldn’t slaves take care of our needs?”

Jesus had answered them, “Would you rather be served by those who love me, or by those we hire? Stop being so proud.”

They did not answer, but learned gradually to appreciate the tender hands keeping them alive for a higher purpose.

The common folk of Capernaum received Jesus and his men like a mother receives her little children. They honored his space and learned the times of his comings and goings, approaching him only when he made himself available. He never chafed at their intrusions into his life, but rather stopped to heal, to comfort, to encourage each one. For several weeks, Jesus divided his days into intense training of the disciples and helping the poor and needy. The time came for another circuit through Galilee, and the growing entourage of aspiring disciples, with its usual crowd of onlookers, made its way from village to village. He was becoming familiar with the people of the villages who took the time to follow him until they had to return home, leaving others from the next village to fill their places. But Jesus noticed two new faces he hadn’t seen before, and took note of them.

Jesus never tired of dealing with the human condition, though it broke his heart many times. People of severe deformities came to him. Lepers came.
Epileptics came. Demoniacs came. Those unable to come on their own relied on friends or family to bring them. Matthew and John remembered one particular day they could never forget, and never ceased talking about it. It happened around noon when they had arrived at another village.

Jesus sat down in the town center to rest and eat. The women busily scoured the marketplace for the necessary ingredients and prepared lunch while Jesus held center stage, teaching, as usual, truth about the kingdom to come. The town people recognized who it was among them and began to converge. Notable among them was one particularly needy man, brought to Jesus by his family and friends of the family, who came with the triple affliction of blindness, muteness, and demon-possession.

Obvious among the onlookers were the Pharisees, forced by the exploits of the Galilean to travel from Judea to study his teachings and activities and to stem the rising tide of popularity among the common people. Jesus refused to confront them, pressing forward with his mission.

Jesus' heart ached for the severity of his people's condition, in this case, a Jew riddled with the evidence of satanic activity. Jesus took the man and placed him in front of him as the crowd pressed forward to see what he would do with one tormented beyond measure with physical infirmities.

"Depart from him!" Jesus demanded loudly and with authority. Without hesitation and without the usual screaming and contortion of the possessed body, the demon left. The man opened his eyes and found a face full of compassion.

"My Lord!" the man spoke clearly. He embraced his savior firmly, weeping for joy at his deliverance. Jesus presented him to his awestruck and speechless and thankful family. They ushered him away, joyfully praising the God of Israel.

The crowd was astonished, and both Matthew and John recorded in their notes a prominent question circulating among the spectators: "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?"

The leading Pharisee quenched the spirit of the crowd when he stepped forward and addressed the people. "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons."

The crowd gasped, the disciples were aghast, and Jesus' eyes narrowed and he clenched his jaw.

Jesus cringed at the suggestion by the leaders of Israel. You have gone too far! Pharisees, you have gone too far!

The disciples immediately looked at their mentor and teacher to assess his reaction. They had never seen such seriousness in him before, and when he rose and walked over to the offending religionists, they did not know what to expect. They knew he had the power to do anything he wanted. The crowd hushed and waited anxiously for his next words.

He approached them as a judge determined to expose their poisonous words, words that had just carried them and any in the nation who would follow them over a line too far, a line from which there was no retreat. Jesus stood before the group of five men, studying them carefully, including their thoughts. He gave
them much more than they deserved - a measured and reasoned response, one everyone in the audience could understand.

“Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?”

Jesus turned and gestured toward the twelve men standing behind him.

“These are your sons, are they not? They are sons of Israel. Tell me then, by whom do these cast out demons?”

Jesus paced in front of the anxious teachers of the Law whose argument had been shattered to pieces like a pottery jar on a rock. “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

The Pharisees shifted uneasily under the sharp glare of the former carpenter and the simple audience surrounding them. No sunlight had ever beaten upon them with more force, nor had any light pierced into their hearts of darkness like the words they had just heard.

“How can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house.” Jesus walked over and led the healed man to the group of detractors and had him stand with him. “Did I not bind Satan and take what he had possessed?” he asked sternly.

“I’ve never seen him like this,” John whispered to Matthew.

“I would hate to be those guys. Look at them squirm.”

The Pharisee had no choice but to look at the man standing before them. They had seen what he was like minutes before.

Jesus did not wait for a response, but launched into a scathing and penetrating rebuke. “He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters. Therefore I say unto you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.”

The word could not have been more lucid. Jesus knew it would spread throughout the ranks of the national leadership, exactly as he wanted it to. The teachers of the Law, the leaders of the people, were near a dangerous edge in their thinking and attitude, and if they persisted would lead the whole nation into wholesale rejection of their Messiah and into lengthy despair.

“Whoever speaks a word against the son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come,” Jesus warned clearly in defense of the third of the Trinity. “Shame on you men! You know my works! Ask the people! Am I evil? Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad. Which tree am I and which tree are you?” Jesus pointed his finger at them angrily. He put his arm around the man standing with him and continued to point his finger in their faces. “The tree is known by its fruit.” The man stood there as evidence of the good tree, and the Pharisees wanted to slink away, but could not. Jesus led the man back to his family and returned to the Pharisees and continued to excoriate them.

“You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of what fills the heart! You’ve called me a servant of Beelzebul. What is that? What is in your hearts?
"The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. What do the people say? Is my treasure good or evil? What is your treasure?"

The crowd agreed with the well-deserved discomfort of the five religionists, but they did not empathize with them. They had been too long under their influence and were glad to see them get some of their own treatment.

Jesus continued. "Every careless word people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

With that Jesus turned and went back to the table and finished his lunch with his disciples. The Pharisees quickly departed, smarting at the charge of being called a brood of vipers, and evil vipers at that, and even then began to plan retribution.

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While the disgraced and discredited Pharisees passed out of town on their way back to Jerusalem, another group of about ten came into town from the north in search of the Galilean radical. He was standing in the town square under the large fig tree teaching the simple folk who cared to listen.

The Pharisees, using their status to attract attention to themselves, caught Jesus' notice. One boldly called out, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

Jesus bristled at their boldness and their request. "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet."

"What do you mean?" the spokesman asked, trying to muster authority.

"Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

The Pharisees looked at each other in obvious darkness. "You're not explaining yourself, Jesus of Nazareth," one commented sardonically.

Jesus refused to satisfy their curiosity. "The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and someone greater than Jonah is here."

"The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and someone greater than Solomon is here."

"You have a pretty inflated view of yourself," they taunted.

Jesus signaled for the healed man to come forth again and stand with him in front of the leaders of his people. "What is your name?"

"Jacob."

"Have you ever seen these men before?" Jesus asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have been blind."

"What else were you?"

"Mute."
The Pharisees looked at the man up and down. “What made you blind and mute?” “I was possessed of a demon.”

Jesus’ eyes pierced into the souls of his opposition, and he decided to explain the activities and tactics of demons. “Listen very carefully, leaders of the Jews. When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first,” Jesus explained.

Jesus walked up closer to the men and said with authority, “That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.”

Jesus looked around at the crowd and felt grieved. These poor Jews had abysmal leadership and would follow him only as long as he gave them what they wanted. Signs from his hands, not the character of his person, impressed them and drew them day after day. The future for the nation was bleak and looking back at the Pharisees standing there in their false pride, he knew exactly why. They hated him because he told the truth and exposed their diabolical hypocrisy.

He returned to his table and sat down. The crowd was silent, as were the Pharisees. They had wanted a sign and received a blistering rebuke instead, and they knew Jesus was in no mood to play games with them, so they moved on.

When the Pharisees left the town gates, a man near the entrance shouted to Jesus, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to you.”

Jesus stood and considered this to be a teachable moment. His physical family was coming in the gate. His spiritual family of disciples sat by waiting for his next words of eternal life. His physical family – the Jewish nation – cared for signs and wonders and an outward and kingly Messiah; his spiritual family – the disciples and faithful servant women and various others who refused to leave off following him – cared for him as a person, not for what he could do for them, but for who he was.

Jesus shouted back at the man at the gate, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Gesturing toward the disciples, he said, “Behold my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

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The two men from Jerusalem entered Capernaum behind the entourage and headed for the center of town to get something to eat and drink, when up ahead three men hastily came their way.

“What? What?” Silas said nervously. “I don’t know. We’re in Galilee, don’t forget.”

They stopped and waited for the men to approach. “You men of Judea, what brings you here?”

Stephen was impressed. How did you know we’re from Judea?
“I’m a businessman dealing in food looking for new vendors,” Silas answered.
“Then I may be able to help,” Andrew said. “Come. Let’s have lunch together.”

The five men reclined in the shade around a low table to share a lunch together. Andrew and Silas shared their information quickly and settled in to the true reason they were there.

“Tell us, brothers, what do you want of Jesus?” John said without inhibition.

Stephen explained the nature of the tour in Galilee and why he and Silas came together. “We are best friends. My father is a temple priest. I attend Gamaliel’s school in Jerusalem. I’m scheduled to become a Pharisee, but before I do I want to know about the man who is causing such a stir in the nation.”

“Did you see the confrontation yesterday with the two groups of Pharisees?” Matthew asked.

“We did.”
“And?”
“I determined right then I would never become one of them,” Stephen confessed.

“Did you see the blind and mute demoniac get healed?”
“We did. Jesus must be the Messiah to do something like that,” Stephen said.
“Do you agree?” Andrew asked Silas.
“I do.”

The five men talked for over two hours about the details surrounding Jesus. At the end of the conversation, John asked, “How long will you men be in Galilee?”

“A little over six more weeks,” Stephen said.
“There is a steady stream of faithful following us from place to place,” Matthew explained. “Join in and listen. Jesus’ words will answer your questions, although it sounds as if you men are pretty informed already.”
“I don’t know about that,” Stephen said. “We have a lot to learn. We’ll stay close.”

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The old school master took his twenty-three year old student aside at the end of the day and gave him the greatest endorsement possible.

“Saul, the teachers approached me several days ago, and they asked if you were ready to step up into a new position. I said you were, and I believe it,” Gamaliel said. “Your class work is over. Now is the time to apply what you’ve learned.”

“Thank you, sir. I am anxious to take your lessons to the next level.”

Saul took the news with a sense of ecstasy, although he refused to show his emotion. This was the pinnacle of his learning so far. He would continue to prove himself, as he had done in his classes, and move to the top of the Pharisaical hierarchy. Nothing he could see in his future would stand in his way. The unexpected time windfall he would use to tackle the nagging problem floating around Judea, and especially Jerusalem – what to do with Jesus of Nazareth.
Jesus walked gingerly down the hill in the early morning from his rendezvous with his Father. I have to get new sandals, he thought to himself. It would be an important day of learning for his disciples. He had brought each before the Father and prayed over each at length.

After breakfast, with the crowd gathering, Jesus led his men down to the shore ahead of the multitude, larger and more aggressive than he expected. He stepped into a small boat at the shore and shoved out a little, giving him some needed space. He turned to the crowd standing on the shore eager to hear what he had to say to them, but he was focused on his disciples standing in front.

"A sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."

Jesus saw the puzzled looks on his disciples' faces. He allowed Thaddeus to ask what was on every mind. "Master, why do you speak to them in parables?"

In a shocking statement Jesus answered, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted."

John nudged Matthew and whispered, "He's talking about the Pharisees."

Matthew leaned over. "I think he's talking about the whole nation."

Jesus explained, "For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

"Thaddeus, does that answer your question?"

"Not fully, but I'm listening. This sounds like Isaiah to me, Master," Thaddeus commented.

Jesus nodded. "Indeed. In their case . . ."

"Master, allow me to interrupt, please," Thaddeus interjected.

"Go ahead."

"When you say 'they', are you referring to the nation?"

"I am. Let me quote the passage that even as I speak is being fulfilled. "You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them."

Jesus pointed at the disciples, the women, and the regular followers, now including Silas and Stephen from Jerusalem. "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."
“Now when I explain the parable of the sower, you should get it. You know how the Pharisees treat the word of the kingdom. You who follow me for healing or deliverance, you know your own heart and where you fit in. You know the nation as a whole, and where it fits in. Listen carefully and determine where you are.

“And consider yourselves fortunate to be here, because this word I speak is the origin of the kingdom. It starts with speaking, and what I am speaking is truth. This is how the kingdom begins. Let the words sink deep into your spirit.

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but is merely temporary. When affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.”

Jesus paused and looked around. “Does this resonate with anyone?”

Many hands timidly lifted to affirm.

“Thank you for being honest. There are more.

“The one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.” Jesus gestured to the crowd, and more hands went up.

“But there is another. Make sure you’re in this group.

“The one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.

“I beg you, my brothers and sisters of Galilee. . .” He glanced at the two new faces. “And of Judea, please hear what I’m saying and understand. It’s critical. Let me tell you another parable.

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. The slaves questioned what happened and what they should do, so the master told them to let them grow together instead of uprooting the tares and risk damage to the wheat. At the harvest the slaves would gather the tares with their black and toxic seeds and burn them, and gather the golden wheat into the barn.”

Jesus addressed the crowd. “Which are you? The golden grain of wheat good for feeding others, or the black seed of evil spreading death to others?”

The two Judeans felt the conviction of Jesus’ words, examined their hearts, and looked down from Jesus’ gaze.

He continued. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field. These are tiny seeds and produce an herb good for food. But it grew into a large tree, so large, in fact, the birds of the air came and nested in its branches.

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.”

Jesus finished speaking and waded back to shore, pulling the boat with him.
He and his group made their way back to the house, and the crowds dispersed because the heat of the day bore down.

**JULY 15**

Speaking in parables, Jesus had forced his disciples to go below the surface to understand and apprehend the truths of the kingdom. Having escaped the midday heat and the ever-present multitudes, the disciples took advantage of the opportunity to be alone with their mentor.

Matthew and John huddled in the courtyard over their notes, hastily recording what they had heard at the shore. They weren't finished when they heard Philip's distinctive voice ask Jesus a question. They quickly moved into the house to record the question and answer, hoping they wouldn't forget where they were.

“Master, please explain to us the parable of the tares of the field,” Philip boldly inquired.

“It's simple. The sower of the good seed is the son of man.”

“That's you,” Philip said.

“Correct.

“The field is the world. The good seed are the sons of the kingdom, and the tares are the sons of the evil one. Satan is the enemy who sowed them. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as tares are gathered up and burned, so shall it be at the end of the age.

“The son of man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness. They will throw these into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”

He repeated the admonition the disciples could not dismiss for its poignancy and frequency, “He who has ears, let him hear.”

He continued, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all he has and buys that field.” Jesus watched the eyes and could tell they understood that simple story.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all he had and bought it.” No explanation was necessary.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good into containers, but the bad they threw away.

“So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire.”

Jesus evaluated the men around him and asked, “Have you understood all these things?”

They nodded they had. Jesus didn't react, but thought how naïve was that simple nod of affirmation. If you brothers only knew how little you understand
right now. Wait until you have years of experience behind you.

“You shall become disciplined scribes of the kingdom, far exceeding the
scribes of the Law. You will be like a head of a household who brings out of his
treasure things new and old.”

“Can you explain that, Master?” James asked.

Jesus nodded. “Of course. Your treasure is what you’ve experienced of me in
your spirit and soul. That increasing knowledge of me and the kingdom will be
new today and old tomorrow, both extremely valuable in teaching others. You
will accumulate a treasure of priceless goods from the present and from the past
for those you will mentor during your lives, those under your care. You men are
at this moment in the process of acquiring a treasure to dispense to the world.”

“Thank you, Master. That helped.”

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The disciples could never pin a pattern on Jesus’ teachings or his behavior,
so they could never fall into a routine allowing for their comfort. After an early
supper with plenty of daylight remaining on the memorable day of the kingdom
parables, he said, “Let’s walk down to the shore.”

Experience told some of the disciples there was more to this innocuous
suggestion than met the ear. As usual the people of Capernaum saw Jesus’
entourage leave the house and the multitude crowded around them, hoping for a
sign or more authoritative teaching.

One man, a scribe of the Law, bolted out of the crowd and accosted him.
“Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go,” he said excitedly.

Jesus was not impressed, but saw an opportunist standing in front of him,
avariciously looking for an increase in his own personal stature. “The foxes have
holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his
head.”

The man interpreted that statement correctly. There was no glamour in
following a man who had no permanent dwelling. He did not follow, and as they
moved away, Nathaniel asked, “Master, your answer to the man is puzzling.”

“Don’t let it be, Nathaniel. My kingdom is not of this world, and to be a part
of it requires privation. Though even animals have homes, sometimes the
kingdom people will not. That scribe was not willing to sacrifice.”

Another man, a frequent follower and listener, came to the front and
walked alongside Jesus. “Lord, I will follow you, but permit me first to go and
bury my father.”

“No. You follow me. Allow the dead to bury their own dead,” Jesus said
sternly. The man considered the command and walked along for a while,
speechless, then peeled off into the crowd.

Jesus knew Nathaniel would ask about that reply, so he preempted him.

“His father is not dead.”

“So why did he ask that?”

“He wanted to divide his heart between a loved one and me. It can’t be
done,” Jesus said.

A third man came from the crowd and walked with Jesus. Nathaniel
listened carefully. "I will follow you, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home."

Jesus shook his head. "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Nathaniel and the other disciples understood.

By the time they got to the shore, the crowd pressed in upon them. The disciples thought Jesus would get into a boat and preach, but he surprised them.

"Let's head to the other side of the lake."

Simon Peter and Andrew looked at the threatening sky blowing in from the west and then at each other and then at Jesus.

He didn't flinch, and the two brothers, having several boats anchored at Capernaum, selected one of their largest and waved the disciples aboard and shoved off.

Less than a quarter mile from shore, a shout rang out from one of the disciples that directed all eyes behind them. "Look!"

Some of the multitude were taking to smaller boats and trying to follow. Jesus admired their spunk. Simon Peter did not. He was disgusted that untested men would attempt an evening crossing. He mentioned to Andrew, "We'll probably end up rescuing them from the water."

Jesus was not concerned and went to the stern of the boat and fell asleep on a cushion. The fishermen among the disciples who knew the lake well, manned the oars and took out into the wind.

As they progressed toward the middle of the lake, the skies darkened, a fierce gale rose up and drove waves over the sides of the boat, alarming even the veteran fishermen with the prospect of swamping.

"Simon, we're losing the battle!" James screamed over the din, fighting furiously to maintain the stability of the boat.

"Where is Jesus?" Simon yelled.

"Sleeping in back!"

"Sleeping? In this racket? Is he not fearful for his life?"

Simon Peter consulted with Andrew and they decided it was best to wake Jesus.

"Wake up Jesus!" Simon Peter demanded of the anxious passengers.

They scrambled to the back of the boat and nudged the sleeping man.

"Teacher!"

Jesus opened his eyes and saw the terror in the eyes. He did not spring up, but lay there with his eyes half opened.

"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Philip screamed over the noise of the storm.

Jesus got up slowly and sat for a minute. Then he walked to the front of the boat and raised his hand and yelled into the wind and darkness, "Peace! Be still!"

The wind died down and the water became like glass. Jesus stepped back and said, "Simon, find the other boats and make sure they're all right." Then he turned to the disciples and asked, "Why are you afraid? Do you have no faith?"

The reproof stung them with shame. After all they had seen of Jesus and knew of him, should they have been worried? Another lesson learned. The angry clouds swirling above them and the evening dim descending upon them had
blasted their faith, even though their boat carried a man who had spoken it all into being. They had fallen victim to the exact opposite emotion Jesus wanted of them.

When Jesus resumed his nap, Judas Iscariot whispered to Simon Zelotes, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

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By the time the passengers on the boat disembarked on the east side of the lake, the sun was in its final descent. The disciples were anxious about lodging in an unfamiliar town, but their anxieties were soon displaced by an egregious exhibition by the father of lies.

The men filed onto shore and were about to make their way into town, when in the evening shadows a rather large and naked and shrieking man came running down the steep mountain toward them from the tombs above the town, broken chains dangling from his bloodied wrists and ankles. He picked up stones and tore gashes across his chest, tearing off old scabs with his long nails.

The disciples instinctively backed away into the water, but Jesus stood his ground, waiting for the tormented man to arrive.

From a distance the man yelled out, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore you by God, do not torment me!”

Jesus shouted back, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!”

“What is your name?” Jesus asked.

“My name is Legion; for we are many. Please do not send us out of the country. Send us into the swine!”

Jesus looked up on the side of the nearby mountain at the large herd of swine. “Go! You have my permission.”

The spirits left the man and entered the swine and the swine rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned. The man sat up exhausted but in his right mind.

“Let’s get him cleaned up and put a robe on him,” Jesus said.

The disciples helped the man to the water and thoroughly washed the blood and grime away. Jesus watched the herdsmen race across the face of the mountain toward town, knowing it wouldn’t be long before they would come asking for him to leave their region before he destroyed their economy.

The townspeople rushed Jesus, upset at the fate of their pigs, and were ready for violence. Then they saw the demonic sitting clean and clothed and in his right mind. That sight slowed them down considerably. They looked at him, then at Jesus, then back at the man.

The spokesman said, “Please, sir, we don’t want any trouble here. We kindly ask you to leave.”

Jesus nodded and turned toward the boat. The healed man sprang to his feet and rushed to his savior and pleaded for him to take him with them. “No. You go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how he had mercy on you.”

With tears in his eyes he embraced Jesus firmly. “I will, my Lord. I will tell
The ride across the placid lake went smoothly, helped by a gentle tail wind. Everyone was tired and tried to doze, some more successfully than others. When they reached the other side at Capernaum, they could see through the setting sun another crowd awaited them.

Jesus knew the hearts of his twelve, and how they did not want to deal with the folks there to greet them; He would not let that attitude seep into their souls. These poor and needy were precious people and needed to be treated as such. Fatigue had to wait.

“I know you’re tired after this long day, but now’s the perfect time to deny your weariness and persevere for the sake of the kingdom,” Jesus admonished the disciples. “This is reality time.”

As the men waded ashore toward the pressing crowd, a man rushed forward and fell at Jesus’ feet.

“Jairus, is that you?” Jesus asked.

The synagogue official looked up at Jesus. It was.

Jesus knelt down. “What is it, my friend?” he asked, deeply concerned something bad had happened.

Jairus, a young man just beginning his service in the synagogue, got up on his knees and took much comfort from Jesus’ dark eyes. “My little daughter is at the point of death. Please come and lay your hands on her so she will get well and live,” he pleaded.

Jesus saw a desperate father in the face of his friend. He extended his hand and helped him to his feet. “Come, let us go to her.” He put his arm around his shoulder to help him gather himself.

The crowd pushed in against the Nazarene and his band as they walked to Jairus’ house in the evening shadows. Suddenly Jesus stopped and looked around him in every direction. “Who touched my garments?” he asked of those close by. James spoke for the disciples when he asked, “Master, you see the crowd pressing in on you, and you say, ‘Who touched me?’”

Jesus understood why James would ask that question, so he continued to look around and found the answer. A woman began to tremble and weep and came forward and fell down before Jesus.

“It was I who touched you,” she stammered. “The power flowing out of you healed me!”

“What did the power heal?” Jesus asked the pathetic but grateful woman.

The woman replied as best she could. “For twelve years I’ve had a hemorrhage and I’ve spent everything I had on physicians who have not helped me one bit but have made it worse.”

Jesus glanced at his disciples as if to say, “I told you so. We always have to be ready to do the Father’s will.”

He took the woman in his arms and let her sob for a while. Jairus stood by patiently, impressed by Jesus’ calm care of the needy, a trait he vowed to emulate.
“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction.”

Jesus turned around to continue the journey with Jairus, and noticed some talking with the official. He overheard them say to Jairus, “Your daughter has died; why trouble the teacher anymore?”

Jairus turned to Jesus with a parent’s worst pain etched on his face, and was at the point of collapse when he heard Jesus’ strong, even demanding word, take charge of the situation.

“Do not be afraid! Only believe!” Jesus said, taking the man by the arm until they arrived at the house where the loud wailing of the mourners created a distracting commotion. Jesus did not appreciate it. He turned to his men and selected Simon Peter, James, and his brother John, to accompany him into the house. “Jairus, get your wife and follow me.”

Jairus obeyed and arm in arm with the girl’s mother, followed Jesus. Jesus assessed the situation in the house and the excessive wailing, much of it without tears, angered him. “Why make a commotion and weep? The child has not died, but is asleep.”

The mourners’ showed their hypocrisy when they stopped wailing and began laughing at Jesus’ suggestion.

“Get out! Get out!” Jesus shouted at the so-called mourners, and drove them out of the house, leaving the six of them alone in the house with the twelve year-old girl.

Jesus led the way to the bedside and immediately took her hand and said tenderly, “Rise, my child.”

The little girl obeyed and left her bed, walking toward her mother and father. The warm hug was watered with the sweet tears of two parents’ love.

Jesus waited for a moment of silence and then instructed Jairus and his wife to tell no one the details of what had happened. “Keep this precious thing to yourselves. No one but the two of you needs to know. Get some food in her.”

Jairus’ wife embraced Jesus warmly. “Thank you, Jesus. I will never forget this.”

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“You see, brothers, all that happened yesterday is a lesson to you to be prepared for any situation,” Jesus taught. “Had we given in to our fatigue, we would have missed two important events. We have to be governed by our spirits, not by our bodies.”

For a week Jesus stayed in Capernaum, teaching the twelve and those who would not go away – around a hundred men aspiring to walk with him. At least once a day they would venture out into the city to meet with the crowds, to heal diseases and distresses. The supporting cast of caring women lived nearby in a rented house, and they prepared the noon meal, the largest of the day, for the men. These times of staying put served everyone well, helping them prepare for the road; although Jesus was careful not to let them fall into a familiar routine. He had his ways of shaking things up so they never got used to a pattern. He demanded freshness of the Spirit, not familiarity of the soul.
"We will visit my family in Nazareth," Jesus announced at lunch. "We'll see if anything has changed there."
"Tomorrow?"
"Yes. I want to get there for the Shabbat meeting."

They had not gone far out of Capernaum and were nearing Geneseret when Jesus stopped to heal two blind men who called out to him – "Have mercy on us, son of David!"
"Don't tell anyone about this," Jesus warned them, but he may as well have spoken to a rock. They went into town and told everyone and another crowd formed around the great healer.
Jesus did not want to get distracted from his goal of getting to Nazareth, but he couldn't turn away a mute demoniac. When he cast out the demon, the people were astonished, as usual, and that brought forth more needy ones. As much as he wanted to go on, his compassion for them compelled him to stay. "They are distressed and dispirited, like sheep without a shepherd," he mentioned to John.
When he rose to continue the journey, he gathered his disciples around him. "You see, my brothers, how plentiful is the harvest and how few are the workers. Beseech our Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest."

"Are you well, Mother?" Jesus asked, surprising her in her garden.
"Jesus!" She hurried to her oldest son and held him tightly, smiling widely, and burying her head in his chest. He stroked her hair. "I'm so glad to see you again."
"How are my brothers and sisters?"
"Busy. But they'll be here for Shabbat. Judas and Simon will bring their wives. You haven't met them yet."
"I can't wait. I wish I could have made the weddings."
"I know, and so do they. They know you're on a mission, so they didn't expect you."
"Did they get the wine?" Jesus asked.
"Oh, yes! It was better than the wine at Cana!"
Jesus mimicked shock. "Mother! I made that wine myself!
"Oh, I almost forgot," she teased.
"So how was the wine I didn't make?"
"It was wonderful. If you hadn't sent it, there would have been no wine at all. It was a perfect gift."
"Is business that tough right now?"
"The boys are having a hard time, but they're keeping food on the table. It's
hard for them to deal with the Romans. They’re not like you or your father, that’s for sure.”

“It takes a special breed,” Jesus agreed.

The reunion was sweet, and the family warmly included the disciples. It was especially fun when the brothers told stories about Jesus’ childhood. But Jesus struck back with stories of his own. The lightheartedness was what everyone needed at the time.

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The rabbi invited Jesus to give the Shabbat message.

“But, Rabbi, you know what happens when you give me this responsibility,” Jesus protested.

“I know, but it’s worth the risk. Maybe the old detractors will stay away this time. We need to hear you speak.”

“You’re more optimistic than I am.” Jesus graciously accepted the charge and taught from Exodus about the meaning of the sacrifices. Most of the Jews were astonished at the light pouring forth from their native son, but, as Jesus predicted, an aging Jew rose from a seat of prominence and questioned the wisdom of allowing Jesus to teach.

“Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to him? And what about the miracles he performs? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon?” He panned the audience and pointed at Jesus’ family. “Are not his sisters here with us?”

Jesus sadly watched the change come over the audience. They had been astounded and receptive during the teaching, and now they were confused, even offended by one of their respected elders. Jesus waited until the man sat down, and then ended his thoughts with this: “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and his own household.”

With that he sat down and waited for the rabbi to dismiss the meeting. Everyone left the synagogue quietly. Jesus stayed behind in case someone had any needs he could meet. Only a few came back, and he graciously healed them, but all in all Nazareth was a deep disappointment. Jesus was not surprised.

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After saying good-bye to his family, Jesus led his men back to the road, and before they met with the multitudes along the way, he gathered them under a grove of trees outside of town.

“It’s time for an escalation. What I mean is you men are going to do what I’ve been doing – healing and delivering and preaching. I’m sending you out to the towns and villages of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, not to the Gentiles or Samaritans.”

The disciples sat in shock. Do what the Master does? How? Where will we go? What if the people reject us? The questions crashed against their minds like waves crashing against the side of a boat. Jesus knew their consternation and was expecting it.
“As you go, preach the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You have freely received, now you must freely give.”

“But, Master, what about...?”
Jesus quieted their doubts. “Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff. The worker is worthy of his support.”

The thoughts of the unknown cascaded through twelve minds, tumbling onto the rocks of doubt. The worker is worthy of his support? What does that mean? Are the people going to support us? Matthew and John did their best to get down the main points, but it would take a lot of future fellowship to get it all.

“Whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it, and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the house, give it your greeting. If the house is worthy, give it your peace. If not, take back your peace. Whoever does not receive you, shake the dust off your feet. I send you out as sheep among wolves, so be as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men. They will scourge you. You will even be brought before governors as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.”

Gentiles? But, Master, you said not to go to the Gentiles. Is this a prophecy? Is this going to happen now?

“When they hand you over...”
Hand us over? What?
“...do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”

Jesus paused and let the initial shock pass through the men. He knew his words were hard to understand at this point, but like everything living, they would take time to become mature.

John used the opportunity to speak for the others when he asked, “Master, are you speaking of the distant future?”

“Not as distant as you might imagine,” Jesus answered. “You will see. Let’s move on. Try to grasp as much as you can.

“Brother will betray brother to death. Children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. You will be hated by all because of my name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

The end of what? Betray to death?
“A disciple is not above his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household?”

Wait. That’s what they called you, Master. Are we the members you are referring to?

“Therefore do not fear them. What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light. Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul, but rather him who is able to destroy both soul and body with fire.”

That must be the Father, Matthew thought to himself as he wrote down the quote. When he looked up, Jesus nodded to him.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And not one will fall to the ground apart from your Father. The very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not
fear! You are more valuable than many sparrows.”
Why is he saying this? Why the warning against fear?
“Therefore everyone who confesses me before men, I also confess him before my Father in heaven. Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven.”
Now we know why! Father, help us!
“Do not think I came to bring peace on the earth. I come bringing a sword to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother. A man’s enemies will be the members of his own house.”
The disciples thought of the situation in Nazareth.
“He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he who does not take his stake and follow after me is not worthy of me.”
The disciples heard the admonition again, and it seemed unmistakable Jesus meant the Roman execution stake. They scrambled to think according to the Spirit in order to understand what he was saying.
“He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for my sake will find it.”
What do you mean, Lord? How can we find a lost life?
“He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. He who receives a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward.”
This has to be something in the Spirit. Otherwise how can we be the same as you?
The disciples reeled under this change thrust upon them and the charge attached to it. They had to believe much of it applied to the future, and that alone made them uncomfortable. Wasn’t the kingdom about to be established? Wasn’t the kingdom of heaven at hand? What was this talk of death, and swords, and betrayal? They went forth with more questions than answers, exactly as Jesus intended. They had to learn the Spirit to project and defend the heavenly kingdom. The question remained: what would the nation of Israel do with the message and with the disciples when they went out to spread the message? The history of the world depended on Israel’s response.

The disciples of John the Baptist found Jesus in a village near Nazareth teaching the people in the common area of town. Jesus saw them coming and right away knew what had happened. He rose from his post and greeted them off to the side.
“What is it, my brothers?”
“John is dead,” one said, grieving.
“Herod?”
“Yes.”
Jesus sighed. He didn’t want to know the details, so didn’t ask. “What will you men do now?”
“Some of us will continue to baptize and call the nation to repentance. We’re not sure what the others will do. We may all join you.”
Jesus knew they didn’t have light enough to do what Andrew and John had done almost two years ago, and that is, to leave the Voice crying in the wilderness for the living Word from heaven. What would it take for them to join the disciples? Jesus wanted to tell them what to do, but those decisions had to come from them. “I wish you men well. I hope to see you again, perhaps joining with us.”

“That is very possible, Master,” the leader said.

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Early the following morning Jesus withdrew to the lake and took one of Andrew’s boats and rowed to a secluded place a few miles south of Bethsaida on the eastern shore of the lake. He anchored the boat and went up into the hills to one of his favorite places to be alone with his Father. The disciples knew the place well and were to meet him there after breakfast. The disciples had enjoyed their rendezvous at Simon Peter’s house the night before, talking about their experiences among the villages well into the night. They eagerly ate breakfast and after some sweet farewells to Simon Peter’s people, left to join Jesus.

After the short hike they found him alone among the rock outcroppings. He was waiting to hear every detail and to share in their triumphs, their failures, their insights. It was a happy and stimulating time and Jesus was pleased.

The only problem with the plan for seclusion was Jesus’ popularity. Some in the nearby village had seen him leave the boat and had followed him up the shore and located him with his disciples.

“There’s just no place to hide, is there?” Jesus asked rhetorically, smiling and sighing at the same time. “What needy people they are.”

The secluded place, so-called, became a place of healing and deliverance, because Jesus had too much compassion on the poor and couldn’t pull himself away. He devoted the whole day to the people, his heart aching for the poor condition of his people.

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A beautifully dressed evening made its entrance over the lake, enhancing a life-changing day for many dear folks who experienced the healing power and gentle words of the man from Nazareth. The time had come for the people to leave for their homes and dinner. The disciples clamored for Jesus to dismiss them from this remote place into the villages to buy food, but he refused. Instead he singled out Philip from the twelve.

“Philip, where are we to buy bread, so these may eat?” Jesus smiled knowingly.

Philip wondered what Jesus meant. You can’t be serious, Master. “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for everyone to receive even a little.”

“No. You feed them!”

Philip stammered, “But... Lord...”, and looked around at the disciples to rescue him from making a fool of himself. They let him squirm and Jesus laughed
at his disciple’s dilemma.

Finally Jesus asked them all, “What do you have?”

The people close by heard the conversation, and pushed a little boy up to Andrew who was standing in the back of the other disciples. The lad tugged at Andrew’s robe and got his attention. Andrew knelt down and asked, “What is it, child?”

“I have some food Jesus may have if he wants it,” the young boy offered timidly. He opened his bag and Andrew played along and looked in.

He smiled and shook his head. “Ah, my little friend, look how many people are around us. We’ll need more than five loaves and two fish, don’t you think?”

The little boy looked down, trying not to cry. Andrew knew he had disappointed the little one. He put his arm around his shoulder and made the decision to lead him to Jesus anyway. He stood up and announced to Jesus.

“Master, we have something here.” Andrew took the lad by the hand and led him to Jesus.

Jesus grinned when he saw the child. “What do you have there in your bag, little friend?”

The boy opened his bag and Jesus looked in. Andrew watched Jesus’ face brighten.

“I’ll take them,” Jesus said. The lad pulled out the five loaves and the two fish and gave them to Jesus.

“Have the people sit down on the grass in groups of hundreds and fifties,” Jesus instructed his disciples.

While some of the disciples organized the people, Jesus took the meager items and looked up to heaven in prayer, and blessed the food and started breaking the loaves and miraculously increasing the bread and the fish and passing them to the disciples, who in turn dispensed them to the people. An abundance flowed from his hands and in short order the people ate and were satisfied.

“All right, men, circulate among them and gather up the scraps,” Jesus instructed. “We don’t leave messes for others to clean up. And we don’t want to draw wild animals to us. Make sure the really needy take the scraps with them.” Jesus remembered something. “Oh, and Andrew, make sure the little guy takes home a full bag.”

They found twelve baskets among the people and gathered up the scraps, filling every one and distributing the bounty to the most needy.

Jesus listened to the whispers while the disciples carried out his instruction. “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world. What prevents him from becoming our king?” He didn’t like what he was hearing. The crowd intended to take him by force and make him their king. It could get ugly. When the disciples reassembled around him, he said, “I’m going to send the people back home. Cover me if they try anything.”

“Is there trouble, Master?” Simon Peter asked.

“There could be.”

Jesus said a final word to the people and bid them farewell. Fortunately they dispersed without incident. He returned to his men. “Very good, So, Philip, see what happens when even a child is willing?”

Philip nodded. “I wish I were more like him.”
“Faith takes practice,” Jesus taught. Jesus looked out over the lake. Clouds were gathering, promising a beautiful sunset. “I want you brothers to head home on the boat. I’m going to spend some time praying here. I’ll catch up to you.”

**JULY 16**

The disciples pushed away from the shore. The four fishermen had the oars, but Simon Peter didn’t like the look of the sky, and remembered the last time this had happened, only Jesus was with them then. “Did anyone get a count of the people?” Matthew asked, always taking account of things. “Around ten thousand, not counting kids,” Judas Iscariot answered. “Wow!” Simon Zelotes turned to John and Matthew. “I wish you well describing that.”

“It won’t be easy.” “It’s no wonder they want to make him king. Free food!” James said. “I hope they don’t start expecting it,” Thaddeus said. “Oh, they will,” Nathaniel predicted.

The wind started to kick up and the clouds lowered. The sunset gave way to darkness, and the four oarsmen struggled against the increasing headwind, making no progress. The disciples went silent when they saw the frustration in Simon Peter’s body language. The other three fishermen knew him well, and they knew when to suggest and when to shut up. This was no time for suggestions.

For three hours they battled the storm, and if anything, they were simply holding their own against the wind and waves. All the disciples were soaked to the bone. Matthew and John had left their writing at Simon Peter’s house in Bethsaida, thinking they would circle back through on their way to Capernaum—a fortuitous decision, seeing how drenched they were.

Midnight came and went and the boat remained virtually stationary, battered by the crashing waves pushing it away from its goal. Simon Peter and the three were so exhausted they could barely maintain direction, much less make any progress. Everyone began to have their doubts, and after a couple more hours of fruitless struggle, they let fear set in. They couldn’t see a thing and were buffeted by the watery gusts and were reduced to bailing water with their hands.

Finally, Simon Peter gave up and pulled his oar into the boat. The other three did the same. It was no use. The wind carried the boat wherever it would because there was no more strength to resist. “We’ve been on this lake our whole lives, and twice in a year we’ve been pushed beyond our strength,” Simon Peter said to his brother.

Andrew didn’t reply. He’d never seen his brother give up like this. He didn’t know what to do, but when he looked up and peered into the blackness, something glowed out on the water. Maybe exhaustion is getting to my head. I’m seeing things. “Simon, look out there. Do you see something on the water?”

Simon Peter raised his eyes to the scan the surface. “What is it?”
By then the rest of the disciples directed their gaze on the form coming toward them. "Father in heaven! What is it? Is it a ghost?" they cried out in fear as the terror set in. Adrift on the lake in a howling wind and a boat taking on water and now a demon! The disciples wanted to flee but could only sit in fear. And it kept creeping closer and closer, and hearts beat faster and faster, until the distinctive voice of Jesus called out, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Andrew was first to recognize the voice. "It's Jesus!"
Simon Peter reacted, "Are you sure?"
"Yes, I'm sure!"
Simon strained at the figure. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water!" he shouted.
"Come!" came the response.
Andrew grabbed his brother's forearm. "Don't you dare!"
"Why not?"
"If you fall in, we won't find you in this darkness!"
"You were first to recognize his voice, weren't you?" Simon questioned, while removing his sandals.
Andrew had to agree and then relented. "Simon, you're the only one of us who would do this."
"Don't worry! It's him!" He got up and stepped out of the boat and the water held. He walked toward Jesus whose appearance shimmered in the reflective glow of the hovering clouds. Simon kept his eyes set on his mentor and walked toward him, but as he approached he began to realize where he was and what he was doing - walking on water and tossed around by erratic gusts! Panic set in ten yards from the figure and he sank into the waves, dragged down by his water-soaked cloak. He plunged beneath the surface and sucked in some water and scrambled to the surface choking and spitting. "Lord, save me!" he coughed out.

Jesus calmly reached down and grabbed his hand. With the strength of a carpenter's grip, Jesus pulled his muscular disciple out of danger. Simon swung his arm around his waist and hung on.
"You of little faith, why did you doubt, Simon?" Jesus yelled into his ear over the storm's noise, and led him to the boat. They piled in, and Jesus, his aura subsiding, looked around at the frightened faces and laughed.
"You men act like you've seen a ghost!" The wind stopped and they were immediately at the dock in Geneseret. So much for getting home to Capernaum. The disciples were utterly bewildered once again. "You are truly the Son of God!" several said.
Jesus shook his head. Have you so soon forgotten the feeding of the thousands? Were you not convinced then? Jesus sighed and thought how high was the disciples' learning curve yet to be climbed. They tied the boat to the dock and walked to land, tired, hungry, chilled and wet; but the sun was rising, promising another hot day.
John sidled over to Matthew. "Here we are without our books," he said with a frown.
"I hope he heals all day and doesn't teach," Matthew added.
"Don't count on it."
“I won’t. Do you think we could round up some writing stuff?”
“Maybe, if there are any scribes in town. I’ll see if he’ll let us go look.”

John secured permission and the two of them rushed into town to see what they could find.

Meanwhile, some of the fishermen who were getting an early start on their day, recognized Jesus and his group of men and hurried into town to tell the people. As usual, another large crowd converged from the surrounding villages, carrying their sick and leading their infirm. There were so many desperate folks Jesus merely walked among them, allowing them to touch the fringe of his cloak for the healing they sought.

Jesus noticed several boats pull in behind him. He recognized them from the crowd the day before who received the bread and fish. They were the men who bothered him. He looked around for John and Matthew, knowing this encounter could lead to some valuable lessons. They had just returned, equipped and ready. But he also knew how tired they were.

The boatmen walked up the shore toward Jesus and greeted him. “Rabbi, when did you get here? We thought you were going to Capernaum.”

Jesus knew what they wanted, but did not oblige. “The truth is, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves yesterday and were filled.”

The men sobered up when they heard that rebuke, but Jesus was not finished.

“Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food enduring to eternal life. That’s the bread the son of man will give to you, for on him the Father has set his seal.”

“What shall we do to work the works of God?”

“The work of God is to believe on him whom he has sent.”

Jesus knew they were in the dark when they said, “What then do you do for a sign so we can see and believe in you?”

Come on, men! You ate on the hillside yesterday and you ask for another sign? When will you believe in me and not in something I do?

They continued. “What work do you perform? Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness. The Scriptures say Moses gave them bread out of heaven.”

Jesus responded vigorously. “It was not Moses who gave you bread out of heaven. My Father did and he has given you the true bread out of heaven.”

“What do you mean ‘true bread?’” they asked.

“The bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.”

They still didn’t get it, stuck in the physical realm like most Jews were.

“Lord, always give us this bread.”

Jesus wasn’t impressed by their request, holding out little hope for the mere talkers, but holding out much hope for the disciples and for those in the crowd whom he recognized as being sincere seekers of the truth. With as much emphasis as he dared, Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst.” He watched their faces. Their eyes were dull, but his resident scribes were feverishly copying, so he continued.
"You men have seen me, and yet do not believe. You think you need another sign in order to believe, and yet you ate from my hand yesterday." Jesus paused and paced in front of the men. "All whom the Father gives me will come to me, and I will certainly not cast them out; for I have come down from heaven to do the will of him who sent me."

Jesus looked up and saw Pharisees join the crowd, and knew this was not the day to contend with them. Matthew and John are too tired. We're all dead on our feet. We need to get home and get some rest. He wanted to get back home to the care of the serving women. He wanted most to visit with the sizeable contingent of aspiring disciples, like the two from Jerusalem.

Jesus thought, If these Pharisees want me, they'll have to come to Capernaum. He looked at the men whom he was engaging and gave them a last word. "This is the will of my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in him will have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

"Do you men understand any of this?" he asked. They nodded.

"Then go back home and work hard and believe in me and in my Father who sent me. Remember what happened yesterday and talk among yourselves until you receive light."

Jesus gathered his disciples and said, "Brothers, I'm tired, and I know you are after the long night. Let's head home and relax and get some rest. There's a lot ahead of us. The Pharisees are starting to patrol, so I guess the word is out in Jerusalem."

Reports of Jesus' activities in Galilee were causing a firestorm in Jerusalem. Then when news surfaced of the disciples replicating Jesus' works, the machinery of religion ramped up and Pharisees swarmed the hills of Galilee trying to dampen down the excitement burning in every hamlet and town around the big lake.

The band of Messianic brothers enjoyed several days of peaceful learning under the Master. The women, including Mary of Magdala, prepared a wonderful Passover meal in lieu of going up to Jerusalem this year. Jesus had just turned 32, so he knew his time was not yet; therefore, because of the increasing scrutiny and animus directed at him from the leaders, he decided to stay put. He and his men and his extended group of disciples, a few over a hundred now, would attend the synagogue the next morning. He was happy to see Stephen and Silas among them.

As Jesus suspected, the synagogue was packed and a good number of the attendees were Pharisees from Jerusalem sent to confront the Galilean. The aged rabbi, who respected Jesus because he had known him from a child, allowed him once again to teach the Scriptures, from which he chose the passage about the manna from heaven. When Jesus finished, the rabbi opened the meeting to
comments and questions, being afraid of neither.

A young Jerusalem Pharisee, who had researched Jesus extensively, jumped

to his feet and let go his fear of Jesus' ministrations. “I heard you say a few days

ago you are the bread that came down out of heaven. Are you the manna of

God?” he asked sarcastically.

Another shouted out before Jesus had a chance to answer. “No, he's not the

manna; he's the son of Joseph! We know his mother and father! How can he

possibly say that he came down out of heaven?”

Jesus stood up and calmed the room. “Do not grumble among yourselves.”

Jesus knew the time had come to draw the line of demarcation, to challenge in

clear terms the sentiments of each person in the audience, and to force them into

a decision. Many would misunderstand him, but he had no choice. Judaism had

come to take him on, and he would let the life of his Father rise up and conquer

the death spread by a carcass of traditions and regulations and shallow thinking.

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I

will raise him up on the last day.”

“Where do you get your authority to say such things?” one asked.

Jesus met the questioner straight on. “It is written in the prophets, ‘And

they shall all be taught of God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the

Father, comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the one who is

from God; he has seen the Father.” Jesus hesitated and then hit hard. “I tell you

truly, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.”

“That's a lie! The bread of life was the manna!”

The room buzzed loudly, but Jesus raised his hand and quieted the crowd.

“You’re only a man!” another shouted with rage.

Jesus shook his head and said loudly, “I am the living bread that came down

out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread (again, pointing to his chest with both

thumbs), he will live forever.” He paused briefly. “The bread which I will give for

the life of the world is my flesh.”

“You're flesh?”

“The bread of life is your flesh?” one shrieked above the murmur of the

audience.

“You're going to give us your flesh to eat?” another ridiculed.

Jesus glanced at his one hundred and some disciples and saw the

consternation. John and Matthew, heads down, wrote rapidly. Listen carefully,

friends. Don't fall into the trap. He walked away from the podium and

continued. “I tell you the truth that unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and

drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves.”

The reaction was loud, but Jesus held up his hand and quieted the room

again.

“He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise

him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. He

who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.”

John saw something and nudged Matthew and whispered. “He's not talking
about the physical."

"How do you know?"

"How can he abide in us and we in him if the bread is physical?"

Matthew turned to John and raised his eyebrows. He nodded, getting John's point.

Jesus continued. "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me, he also will live because of me." Again, for the third time, Jesus pointed to himself when he said, "This is the bread which came down out of heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. He who eats this bread will live forever."

Jesus sat down and the rabbi dismissed the meeting. The Pharisees and detractors and unbelievers left quickly, grousing to one another, disgusted they had heard words in a synagogue suggesting cannibalism. Even some of the disciples left, never to return.

Jesus led his contingent back to his house and settled in the courtyard to discuss the matter. It was apparent trouble was in the air. "All right, men, speak up," he urged, refusing to do damage control. "Let me hear what you're thinking.

Several voiced their opinion that the bread and flesh equation was too difficult to even listen to, much less understand.

Jesus did not back down. "What will you do then? Will you stumble over this? What if you see the son of man ascending to where he was before? Would that change your minds?"

Jesus rose and paced through the courtyard. He was noticeably bothered, but he knew the ranks would be thinned down. Whoever could be offended by the flesh and blood idea, had to be exposed right now. Brothers, don't play games with me. If you haven't been convinced by now I am the Messiah of Israel, then you need to go back to your traditions and join the opposition. Your corrupt religion and I cannot co-exist. You are of the earth and I am of heaven.

"Make your decision now, my brothers," he challenged the wafflers. "If eating my flesh and drinking my blood is too much for you to take, then leave. I'm not holding you here against your will. It's your choice." He waited patiently.

Many disciples rose and made their way to the gate, while others sat still, looking down at the ground, evaluating the challenge. It was an agonizing choice for them. When the gate closed, Jesus took a rough count. There were about seventy-five men left in the courtyard, not counting the twelve. Over forty had abandoned the group.

Jesus wasn't happy, but he pressed on. The time he had left demanded it. "Brothers, listen to me. You cannot allow the bread of life issue to throw you off track and confuse your thinking. It is the Spirit who gives life. Let me repeat that. It is the Spirit who gives life! The flesh profits nothing.

Simon Peter raised his hand. "Master, if the flesh profits nothing, then why did you say we had to eat it?"

"It's a legitimate question, Simon, but one coming from a mind not set on the spirit," Jesus gently chided. "If you are not thinking spiritually, then what sense does it make to eat my flesh? Do you think I'm advocating cannibalism! This meager body sure wouldn't go very far if I were.

"No, no! Think about it. I speak of the separation of my flesh and blood, by
saying you must eat my flesh and drink my blood in order to have life. What does that conjure up in your mind?"

The disciples and the aspiring disciples were completely confused and had no answer. Jesus paced and thought. "John and Andrew, stand up please. You served with John the Baptist. Do you remember what he called me when he first saw me?"

Andrew answered. "Yes. He said, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' I'll never forget it. And we both saw the Spirit in the form of a dove."

"Do you concur, John?"
"Yes."

Jesus had them sit back down. "All right, brothers, tell me how our ancient fathers were saved from Egypt."
"By the Passover lamb."
"What did the people do with those lambs?"
"They slaughtered them."
"For what purpose?"
"To spread the blood round the doors to ward off the death angel."
"What else?"
"To eat them."
"Why?"
"For strength for the journey."
"Precisely! Without eating the flesh of the lambs, they would have had no strength to leave the land. Their lives depended on those lambs. The lambs were their life, in the physical sense." Jesus waited briefly and then: "So was the Baptist correct in calling me the Lamb of God?"
"Yes."

"What happens to sacrificial lambs?"

The question met dead silence. Not even a murmur troubled the still air, almost as if the moment itself suddenly became too sacred for words. The disciples stared back, bewildered, some afraid of the answer.
"Let me ask again, in order for you to eat my flesh and drink my blood, what has to happen to me?"
Andrew replied in words no one wanted to hear. "You have to die, just like the Passover lambs." He bowed his head to the truth. Most of the disciples did the same.

Jesus nodded, and saw the sorrow sweep through his men. "Don't let this depress you, brothers. If I didn't die, how could you eat my flesh and drink my blood?" He waited. "If I didn't die, how could you abide in me?" He waited again, longer. "And how could I abide in you?"
Nathaniel saw the direction of Jesus' questions. "Then you have to come back to life."
"You got it, Nathaniel! In order for me to be the bread of life to you and to the world, I have to give my body as my Father's lamb. Without that sacrifice, there is no way you can be forgiven of your sins, and if I don't return from the grave, there's no way I can be eternal life to your spirits."

Stephen and Silas sat stunned at the simplicity of the words. "I can't believe
I’m hearing this,” Stephen whispered to his friend. “Jesus is the last of the sacrificial lambs! He is God’s Lamb!”

Silas agreed. “So this is why he always talks about the Spirit. The context of this whole question of the bread of life is the Spirit.”

The two friends were excited. Stephen added quietly, “This changes everything!”

Jesus watched lights go on in the audience, but knew he would have to do some more explaining. “All right, Matthew. Take a break from your notes and tell us what I’ve just explained. Stand up, please, so everyone can hear you. This is important.”

Matthew stood and Jesus motioned for him to join him in the front. He was somewhat nervous, not because of the men in front of him, but because of the man beside him.

“As I understand the bread of life, you are the reality of the manna in the wilderness.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jesus asked the former taxman.

“You have come to the earth from the Father to be his sacrificial lamb in order to die that we might live.”

“What of me will die?”

“Your flesh, your body.”

“What of you shall live?”

“Our spirits. Because you will abide in us.”

“How is that possible?”

“You return from the grave.” Matthew hesitated. “That’s where I get lost.”

“Why?”

“I don’t see how you get from the grave into us.”

“What have I been preaching of the kingdom since you joined us, Matthew?”

“That it’s the kingdom of heaven.”

“And what realm is that?”

“The realm of the Spirit.”

“Exactly! So when I resurrect, I’m no longer confined to the physical realm like I am now.”

“You’ll become the Spirit?”

“Yes! And as such, I can give life to you because I can enter into you and abide in your spirit.”

Matthew nodded. “I can see what you’re saying. Is that why you said the flesh profits nothing?”

“Yes! My flesh will die as the lambs do at Passover, but I’m the true Lamb of God. Once that sacrifice is complete and I return as the Spirit, then you can eat me as the bread of life. I become unlimited. You can take me into your spirit and I can dispense eternal life into you.”

Matthew kept seeing more. “So your blood will be poured out like the lambs of Passover?”

“Yes, of course. That blood will forever forgive your sins and make you clean so I can live in you as the Spirit.” Jesus looked around and asked his audience, “Does this make sense to you all?”

Maybe half agreed, the other half were still somewhat confused. Some of the
confused, five or so, got up and left, shaking their heads and grimacing. It was a bit of a distraction, but Jesus was pleased that the ones who remained, around seventy now, were getting the message. It was a watershed moment in his ministry, and one Jesus had anticipated for several years. He had a good foundation to build on with the men remaining in his courtyard.

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More and more Pharisees converged on Capernaum to confront the teacher, and that irritated the disciples, but to Jesus it was another opportunity to teach. He knew for the Father's will to be done, it had to be so. They came to scrutinize and criticize him and his disciples.

One morning the disciples went into the market place to buy some fruit and bread and dried lamb. On the return they helped themselves to a loaf of bread, passing it around. They didn't know the Pharisees were watching and taking notes.

It wasn't long after that the Pharisees brought up the matter to Jesus.

"Why," asked the spokesman, "do you and your men break the tradition of the elders and eat with unwashed hands?"

Jesus was quick to reply, "And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your traditions?"

"What do you mean?"

"God said explicitly, 'Honor your father and mother;' and 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' But you tell your needy fathers and mothers whatever you have to give for their support has already been vowed to God. Therefore you exempt yourselves from helping them. What is that?"

Without waiting for an answer, he grilled them. "Hypocrites! You don't honor your father and mother because of your traditions. Those worthless practices invalidate the word of God!"

The Pharisees were stunned by Jesus prescience. How did he know? Still they resisted. "That's not fair to say," they protested.

"Then I'll say it again. You hypocrites! Criticizing my disciples' dirty hands, while letting your parents flounder! Isaiah spoke accurately of you when he said, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me.' Have you memorized that passage?"

Jesus turned to the gathering crowd, some who had been listening to the rebuke. They could tell he was angry. "Hear and understand! It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth defiles the man."

The Pharisees took offense and left. The disciples approached Jesus, and James asked, "Do you know the Pharisees were offended at the statement?"

Jesus shrugged. "Every plant which my Father did not plant shall be uprooted. Leave them alone. They're blind guides of the blind, and they'll both fall into a pit."

Simon Peter didn't understand the rebuke and asked about it.

Jesus frowned at his confusion. "Simon, are you still lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand everything going into the mouth
passes into the stomach and is eliminated? But the things proceeding out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man, for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”

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The daily and wearisome confrontations with the religionists were reaching critical mass. “You can never enlighten the willfully ignorant,” Jesus said one morning after breakfast. “It’s time to hit the road for a long hike.”

The exhausted group realized what an understatement was “long hike” when they stood looking out over the pristine Mediterranean in the province of Syria. The town of Tyre stood off to the north.

“Judas, go get us some lodging in town, please,” Jesus said to his practical disciple who handled most of the details requiring the exchange of coins. “Don’t mention me, and keep a low profile.”

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The young people crowded around the chess tournament bracket recently posted on the wall of the general purpose building.

“You’re on the move, big boy,” Alexis said teasingly to her boyfriend. She felt the crowd behind her inching forward for a better look.

Marty smiled. “Maybe, but there are some guys in this tournament I don’t want to play.”


“Spoken by a fearless woman who would rather ride horses.”

“Hey, it’s not everyday that a horse lover like me can take lessons from someone as good as Tabi,” she explained playfully. “Which one are you afraid of?”

“Over there. Khalid. He’s ruthless and surgical. Zero emotion.”

“Can you beat him?”

“I haven’t yet. You saw him beat me in the first round. We might end up in the finals if I can keep winning.”

“I can’t watch you,” Alexis confessed. “It makes me too nervous.”

“Sounds like an excuse to get to the arena.” Marty teased.

She popped him hard on his arm. “It’s your fault for loving chess. It’s too tense for me.”

“And barrel racing isn’t? You’re a crazy woman, Alex.”

The chess tournament bracket was quickly becoming a big camp attraction. Even the three doctors and the Bulgarian staff and Tabi and her equestrian companions kept up to date. Before entering the cafeteria for breakfast, everyone checked the bracket to monitor the progress of the tournament. After three weeks of daily combat, except for the weekends, a pattern was taking shape. The Muslims and the Jews were dominating the competition. The Christians, for the most part, had made the losing bracket their domicile, and, aside from a few bright lights among them, were headed for elimination. Marty, Kael, Levi, and Holden were still in the mix. Marty had come back strong after his opening loss to Khalid and was steadily climbing up the losing bracket to challenge some who had lost for the first time. Kael was still undefeated, a surprise to the Jews and the Muslims. After a couple of shocking upsets, he demanded respect and the other teams were rendering it. Diego and Holden had won opening victories, but stumbled in their next matches, triumphing in their third. Diego lost his fourth and eighth matches and fell out of the tournament. Holden and Levi still had life.

The keen interest in the tournament was a source of relief for the whole camp. On the one hand, it kept the teams focused on something besides their glaring differences, and gave everyone some diversion
from the stress of the contest.

The Israelis, especially the men, played the game with little emotion, methodically countering foolish attempts to dispatch them. Trying to intimidate them was foolish strategy. The few Israeli women in the tournament were a bit too emotional and usually attacked when they should have been defending, and vice versa. Except for a few exceptions, the Muslims were true to themselves – overbearing, emotional attackers going for the knockout punch at the beginning. This strategy worked against the Christians who were not nearly as schooled in the art of chess as their counterparts, and tended to become flustered as a result. The Muslims who eschewed emotion and adhered to strategy were formidable, as were the Christians who were able to repel reckless advances.

The three doctors watched the proceedings carefully, studying the demeanor of the teams in general and the individuals in particular. It was a mother lode of information for their project, and in many ways a more lucid picture into the psyche of the three teams than the two daily sessions of debate. But Dr. Liebermann was a strong believer in the power of the spoken word, trusting in its power to exonerate or indict; so he would never think of forsaking the face-to-face jousting regardless how raucous it became. He was, however, impressed with the serendipitous emergence of a common board game to assist him and his colleagues in their assessment of the three teams.

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The disciples waited until dusk to move into the town of Tyre. Jesus wanted to spend some quality time with his men apart from the crowds of needy and the incorrigible Pharisees. This was about as far as he could get away without hiring passage across the big sea. The house was suitable and spacious enough, and had another smaller house in back for the serving women.

After supper, during the discussion before an early bedtime, a rap on the door distracted everyone. Philip answered it and saw a local woman, of Syrophonian descent, standing alone weeping. She gathered herself enough to cry out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly demon-possessed! Have mercy on me and on her!”

Her shrieking cries rang out through the neighborhood, and everyone in the house thought they had been discovered. Philip was baffled. Now what? How did she know where we were? He tried to think of some way to dismiss the desperate interloper when the other disciples converged and tried to calm her down and send her away.

The woman would have none of it. She shrieked even louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Over and over the plea rang out, and the disciples grew frustrated and returned to Jesus, begging him to send her away.

Instead he said, “Bring her in.”

The woman rushed to Jesus and fell at his feet and sobbed convulsively. Jesus reached down and touched her shoulder and raised her up.

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus explained to the Gentile woman.

As if not hearing him, she repeated her plight, “My little daughter has an unclean spirit! Please, please, cast it out of her!”

Jesus shook his head, and spoke firmly. “Let the children be satisfied first. It’s not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.”

The woman looked up at Jesus. “Yes, Lord; but even the little dogs feed on the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Jesus was amazed. “O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish. The demon has gone out of your daughter.”
The woman embraced Jesus and left the house and returned home to a daughter healed of the evil spirit. The bewildered disciples tried to pick up what was left of their shattered concepts.

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After a refreshing stay in Tyre, the men went home to Capernaum only to find the pressure mounting from the Pharisees. Like irritating horse flies, they seemed to be everywhere, and though repulsed time after time, and after being pushed into one retreat after another, they always returned to badger the worker of good deeds.

"I long for the crowds of the destitute," Jesus said after another fight with Judaism.

"Shall we take another long hike?" Thomas asked.

"We shall. Let's go where they aren't. Let's go to Decapolis."

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The region of Decapolis stood south and east of the Sea of Galilee, and it was populated with a mix of Jews and Gentiles who had co-existed respectfully for many years. Though the crowds were large and the diseases and distresses were unending, Jesus peacefully exercised his power to heal the deaf, the mute, the demoniac, the sick, the leper, the diseased, and any who would step forward. Though he asked those beneficiaries to tell no one, their excitement at their new condition overwhelmed their restraint.

He fed another four thousand, producing seven large baskets full of leftovers. It was a pleasant time for the men to see Jesus reaching out to the poorest of the nation, and to many of the Gentiles as well. He had told them frequently that though his mission was to the house of Israel, there was always room for the seeking Gentile. The Gentile woman who regarded herself as a dog just the day before was proof of that.

But it was time to return. Well into his thirty-second year of life, Jesus felt the time constraints a little heavier on his soul. He had more to do, more to teach, more to reveal; so he took his men around the south side of the lake and up the west coast to the plain of Geneseret. But waiting for him there were the dreaded and ubiquitous Pharisees.

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Jesus sighed deeply when he saw them. Both Pharisees and Sadducees were waiting at the front of the crowd to test him. They were more belligerent than usual, maybe because they were in league to oppose his threat.

"Show us a sign from heaven," they demanded.

Jesus folded his arms across his chest in a gesture of defiance. "When it is evening, you say it will be fair weather because of the red sky. In the morning, just the opposite. Red sky, stormy weather. Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but can't discern the signs of the times? An evil and
adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”
Jesus turned and walked away, joining his disciples. “Let’s get out of here.”
Andrew had a boat waiting and they took off to Bethsaida.

Jesus had slept most of the way across the lake, when the disciples realized they had forgotten to buy bread at Geneseret. When they disembarked, Jesus said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians.” He walked on ahead of them, leaving the thought behind.

“He said that because we forgot the bread,” James of Zebedee whispered to the group.

Jesus turned around and came back. “You men of little faith, why do you discuss the fact you forgot to buy bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart?” he asked pointedly.

Jesus’ rebuke had much meaning behind it, because it was another opportunity to get his disciples to view things from the Spirit, not from the fallen, natural realm. The leaven of the various groups had nothing to do with bread. It was a metaphor for a spiritual reality and they should have figured that out.

“Having eyes, do you not see? Having ears, do you not hear?” The quote from Jeremiah hit hard, but Jesus did not relent. These men would have to start grasping the Spirit while there was time and while he was around to help them. “Do you not remember when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand men? How many baskets full of scraps did you pick up?”

“Twelve.”

“What about the four thousand? How many?”

“Seven.”

“So if I can produce that much bread out of so little, and have loads left over, why would you men concern yourselves with bread and think I was referring to bread by warning you about the leaven of Pharisees and Sadducees? The disciples sat for a long time on the shore contemplating the lesson. The gentle swish of the waves helped them concentrate. Finally Thaddeus spoke up.

“Master, I think I got it.”

“Go ahead.”

“The leaven of the Pharisees is the doctrine they teach. It corrupts everything it touches.”

“Very good, Thaddeus. What do they teach?”

“They teach the Law and all the traditions. They are legalists, and, for the most part, hypocrites. They demand a lot of others, but cheat to get by for themselves.”

“Good. Now I want Philip to explain the leaven of the Sadducees to us.”

Philip thought a while before answering. He normally didn’t do that. “Sadducees teach there are no angels, no life after death, or anything real they can’t touch. They’re high-minded and non-spiritual.”

“That’s correct, Philip. Now Simon Zelotes, tell us about the leaven of the Herodians. You should know.”
Being of the Zealots, Simon knew the Herodians well. “They aren’t religious. They’re political, and politicians do everything to benefit themselves.”

Jesus was pleased. “I’m glad you men understand now I wasn’t talking about bread. What do these guys have to do with bread? Nothing! But their teachings are full of corruption, full of leaven, and they spread it everywhere they go. Just be aware of that when you’re teaching others.”

Jesus called it a day. It was a tough lesson for his men, and they had to endure a difficult rebuke for not being spiritually minded, but they survived. It did not kill them or discourage them, so they would come out stronger. He lay down and dozed under the bright moonlight with the soothing sound of the lapping water adding to the peacefulness.

JULY 17

After spending a week in Bethsaida with Simon Peter’s family at his and Andrew’s spacious home, everyone came away well rested and well tested by the teacher. His instructions were penetrating and effective, slowly driving out of their minds the propensity to look at everything from an earthly perspective instead of heavenly. They were gradually learning to see things from the Spirit, and that alone was gratifying to Jesus. He knew everything he came to accomplish could not succeed without a radical change in the concepts of these young Jews, and he was seeing daily evidence they were breaking through.

“Where are we going next, Master?” John asked over supper.

“We’ll do another circle around the lake and then we’re heading north, as far away from Jerusalem and the Pharisees as we can get,” Jesus replied. “Up to Mt. Hermon.”

“That’s Caesarea Phillipi,” the second James mentioned. “I’ve been there.”

“Is it nice up there?” Jesus asked.

“It’s beautiful. It’s where the river begins.” Then the disciple hesitated, as if he didn’t want to explain further.

Jesus caught him. “James, tell me what you know.”

James chose his words carefully. “Master, it’s a pagan center. The pagans believe the cave where the Jordan begins is the entrance to the underworld, where the demons come and go. They even built a temple there.”

“What’s it called?” Jesus asked.

“The Gates of Hades.”

Jesus narrowed his eyes and looked north. “Then we’re going right where we need to be. In two weeks we should be there."

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James was right. The lush vegetation at the source of the Jordan River was a welcome reprieve from the usual routine, but more than the natural beauty, the crowds were gone; the heat was moderate and the nights cool; and, best of all, there were no Pharisees to ask their endless and tedious questions. It was as if the air had cleared and the Lord and his disciples could breathe deeply again, and
relax for a time.

“I love this place,” Jesus said, expressing what the rest felt. “What if we never left?” he teased.

The men sat in a grove of oaks near the brook descending from the snowmelt on the three peaks of Mt. Hermon, collecting trickles and springs and other rivulets on its way to becoming the largest river in Israel. They would camp under the stars that night, and had gathered a stash of firewood for the small fire. They wished James hadn’t said anything about the gate and Hades and all that; because the evening shadows pressed in upon them, and their imaginations started working on them. Without Jesus there with them, they would never have chosen this place. It was too creepy once the sun started descending. Underworld stuff made them nervous, especially when they were sitting on top of the entrance to it. Evening turned to night, and the disciples’ minds began to clear of the day’s events, until Jesus surprised them all with what they thought was an innocuous question.

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Jesus asked.

“Some say you are John the Baptist,” Simon Zelotes answered.

“Some say Elijah,” James the second added.

“Others say you are Jeremiah, or one of the prophets,” added Nathaniel.

“But who do you say I am?” Jesus repeated.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus studied his leading disciple to see if he would qualify his statement. He stood firm. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my assembly of the called ones; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

Every disciple looked at Jesus when he said this, knowing close by was the temple of the underworld, the place where demons supposedly came and went.

Jesus used the term to emphasize his Father was not a dead pagan god, nor could any creature from the lifeless underworld threaten or subdue his holy congregation.

Jesus also wanted to emphasize the importance of Simon’s new name, because “Peter” meant a little stone, and he would be instrumental in building the congregation of the Lord’s people on the foundation of the divine revelation of the Christ.

“Peter, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth, shall have been loosed in heaven.” Jesus finished this statement knowing he had just opened up an evening’s worth of questions and answers. Father, open the spiritual eyes of these men. Help them see the truth of who I am.

John nudged Matthew and whispered. “Do you understand this?”

“No. Ask him,” Matthew urged.

John asked, “Master, are you the rock, then?”

“Yes, not only am I the rock, but the rock is also the revelation from the Father that I am his son. The revelation of who I am is the rock.”

“What do you mean ‘revelation’?” Thaddeus inquired.
Jesus answered, “Simply this. When the Father causes something to dawn on you regarding the truth, that dawning is His revelation. The Father gave Peter the insight to see I am the Christ, the anointed one from Yahweh, and I am the Son of the living God. It’s nothing Peter conjured up. He saw this wonderful fact because the Father revealed it to him. That is revelation, and that is what the gathering of the called is built upon. This epiphany is for all of you, not just for Peter.”

“So what is this congregation you’re building?” Philip asked. “Does it involve the nation?”

Jesus answered quickly. “Let me tell you this as clearly as I can.

“Some of you have known me from the beginning at my baptism, so you know the kingdom is of the heaven, of the Spirit, not of the earth. You are my witnesses that time after time I have offered this spiritual kingdom to the children of Israel and you men, my dear friends, have responded to it, along with the women and the other seventy disciples and a smattering of others, and you have taken me as Messiah of Israel. You and all who will follow in the years to come who receive me as the Messiah are part of that holy congregation. This assembly of called out ones will prevail to fulfill my purpose.”

“What is your purpose, Master?” Philip asked.

“I came to gather an assembly of believers who will be my enlargement on the earth. Right now I’m limited by this single body I live in, but when I’m free of its restraints, I’ll come and reside in all of you and you will be a larger form of me. I will expand myself by indwelling all the members of the congregation which my Father has called unto himself.”

“How does this work?” Peter asked.

“You become my mouthpiece, my hands, my feet. Essentially, you become my functioning body,” Jesus explained. “You will be my literal representative to the people.”

“This is a great responsibility on us,” Simon Zelotes observed.

Jesus smiled and nodded. “Indeed it is, Simon! That’s why I’ve been emphasizing the Spirit for so long. You know how strict the kingdom constitution is and how impossible it is to keep; but the Spirit makes it possible. I can keep the requirements because I wrote them and because I live by the life of my Father. Now you have to let me live my life through your life.”

The disciples noticed much excitement in their teacher, and it was certainly understandable. After almost two years of traveling around the country and doing good wherever he went, he didn’t have a lot to show for his efforts, but he was encouraged Peter had seen the vision of the Christ, the Son of the living God. Many would follow, he was certain. Trying to get earthbound people to lift their eyes to the heaven was a monumental task, but Jesus enjoyed this breakthrough. Physical beings so used to dealing in the tangible realm were hard to convince and harder to change; but Jesus never gave up, and today he would savor the moment. Day after day he was faithful to his mission and message, and he persevered, bringing along his followers step by step after him.

“Peter, you don’t know how happy I am for you, and, I think all of you are beginning to receive the epiphany from the Spirit. You will need this vision for what is to come.”
“What is to come, Lord?” James, brother of John, asked.

“Good question, James. This is what lies ahead. As I’ve told you before, I’m the Lamb of God, and, like all the sacrificial lambs, I’ll have to be scrutinized by the temple priests to see if there is a blemish in me. This process will entail a lot of suffering at the hands of the scribes and elders and the priests. In order to be the Passover Lamb, I’ll have to die at their hands.

“Remember how I told the Pharisees they would receive no sign except the sign of Jonah?”

“We remember,” Andrew answered.

“After my death I’ll be in the grave for three days and three nights, and then I’ll resurrect. I’ll be released from the body of this death,” he said, gripping his arms and legs to show them graphically how confined he was at the moment. "I will return as the Spirit to enter and live in your spirits. At that point those who receive me as the Spirit will live. Remember the bread of life.

“Now this is important. Those who receive me into their spirits will have a new life. John, you wrote down the story of Nicodemus. That’s exactly what I told him. That’s the basis of the kingdom. Nicodemus had to be born anew of the Spirit. When I resurrect, I will be in another form that will end all the limitations of this flesh and this physical world. I can then come and live and abide in you. Those who have this experience are the called out ones. I will know them as the gathering of the faithful, the gathering of the called ones. Those are the stones, like Peter, that will form my spiritual house, the true temple, built upon me, the true rock, as the foundation.

“This assembly built up into my Father’s spiritual house, the true temple, will result in the kingdom on this earth.”

Jesus rested from talking. He got up and walked up the mountain in order to leave the disciples to hash out this new light. They also got up to stretch their legs and to walk around, talking among themselves. Upon his return, he would know if they got the message or not.

Peter was not interested in the conversation because of the turmoil in his soul. He could not get beyond Jesus’ prediction of suffering and death in Jerusalem and what it would mean to him and to the disciples if they were discredited and disgraced and cast out of their religion and culture and if they became pariahs in Jewish society. So he followed and caught Jesus.

“What is it, Peter?” Jesus asked out of earshot of the others.

“What about it?”

“The Father forbid it, Master! This shall never happen to you!” he blurted out, determined to intervene to prevent it.

Jesus looked at Peter piercingly, shook his head, clenched his jaw, and narrowed his eyes. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but on man’s!”

Peter was crushed by the rebuke and sat down stunned. What have I done? What have I done? O Father, forgive me! The big man let his head drop into his hands and tearfully considered what he had said and what Jesus had said.

Jesus walked back to the disciples and interrupted their conversation, speaking loudly enough for Peter to hear. “Listen carefully, brothers. If anyone
wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his stake and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory, and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I will repay every man according to his deeds.”

The disciples were perplexed with the image of the Roman stake, the execution poles they nailed criminals to until death. Could he mean that?

“One other thing. There are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Jesus knew the disciples would be talking deep into the night with what he had told them. He also knew they had a couple weeks ahead of them on the mountain above Caesarea Philippi to talk all these things through. One thing was certain: they had heard, but few had grasped.

He continued his walk up the mountain, slipping past his distraught disciple, but not without reaching down to squeeze his shoulder. That single gesture restored hope in the deflated fisherman, something he needed desperately at that moment.

Six days after Peter’s confession and Jesus’ rebuke, Jesus selected from the twelve Peter, James, and John his brother to accompany him further up the mountain. Before they left, Matthew took his younger fellow scribe aside and charged him, “John, don’t you miss a thing! You hear me?”

John laughed. “You have my word.”

It was an arduous trek, but at the crest of the mountain, with its panorama, it was worth the effort. After a quick lunch together, Jesus and the three moved a little further on.

“Stay here, brothers.”

Jesus moved ahead and turned around, facing the three. An overwhelming peacefulness, one they had never experienced, enveloped the disciples as they watched Jesus’ face become as bright as the unimpeded sun in the afternoon sky. The veiled glory of the only begotten from the Father burst forth. Soon his garments glowed equally brightly with a white intensity causing the three to avert their eyes.

“This fulfills his word,” James said.

“What word?”

“That there would be some who would not taste death until they saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

“Do you think this is that?” his brother asked.

“I think it is,” Peter offered. “He’s the glorious king, isn’t he?”

Though the brightness pushed away their eyes, it was hard to not look, because their Lord was being transfigured before their eyes. They all thought, Who on earth had ever had such an experience? Who would ever have a similar experience? True to his promise to Matthew, John took in every detail, and while...
taking mental notes, two figures appeared in front of them, shading their eyes from Jesus’ gleaming brightness.

“Who are you?” James asked.
“I’m Moses.”
“Moses?”
“Yes. You seem surprised.”
The other man stepped forward and announced, “I’m Elijah.”
The disciples were speechless, and the two turned and walked to the light and embraced the incarnated Son of God. The disciples strained to hear their conversation, and heard talk of the future in Jerusalem and the suffering there and the impending death and resurrection.

Peter couldn’t restrain himself and let his excitement overrun his mouth. He called out, “Lord, it’s good for us to be here. If you will, let us make here three tabernacles – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Elijah’s name barely escaped Peter’s lips when a bright cloud formed and descended and overshadowed them all, producing a booming, fearsome voice shaking the ground under them.

“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him!”
The three disciples fell flat on their faces terrified, trembling, dreading the unknown, and well on the way to fainting from fear, when they felt a gentle touch.

“Arise, and don’t be afraid.” The voice was familiar and the three men dared to lift their eyes.

The comforting voice, like the arms of a loving mother, relieved the frightened souls of the three disciples. No relief, not even on the stormy lake, had been greater as when the three men looked up to their kindly mentor. No one else was around but Jesus. John later recalled the incident with Matthew, and the taxman saw something John hadn’t at the time. “Moses represented the Law. Elijah represented the prophets. But only Jesus remained. He fulfilled them both. He’s greater than the Law and the Prophets.”

John smiled. “Then that’s why the Father interrupted Peter.”

After spending the night on the mountain and during the hike down, the disciples were full of questions, none more important than James’ inquiry about Elijah and the kingdom.

“Why do the scribes say Elijah must come first?” he asked.
“Elijah is coming and will restore all things,” Jesus replied.
“When?”
Jesus answered, “Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished.”

Simon Peter recognized John the Baptist in the answer. “So you mean John the Baptist?”
“Yes, and they rejected him.”
“So if the nation rejects you, will Elijah come?”

Jesus liked Peter’s thinking. “The nation will reject me. I will suffer at their
hands and Elijah will come."

"Will the nation have time to repent?"

"Yes. You will teach them as I have taught you. You'll do all you can to
bring the nation to repentance."

"Will we succeed?"

"I will not tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to lose your edge or your hope. You must have
hope. If I tell you the future, you will adjust to it. I don't want that. You must
maintain your intensity. As long as the nation remains, there is hope the
kingdom can come to Israel."

The disciples sat dumbfounded at Jesus' words about Elijah. Would he come,
or not? Was John the Baptist really Elijah? Jesus knew their consternation, but he
also knew it was good for them to think about things for a while. After a good bit
of time passed and a lot of discussion, Jesus entered the conversation.

"Brothers, let me be as plain as I can. We know from Scripture that Elijah
must precede the Messiah. John the Baptist has preceded me. He has come in the
spirit and manner of Elijah, so we can say in truth that Elijah has come. If the
nation repents and accepts me, the kingdom will come to Israel." He stopped
there to see if the disciples were tracking with him. They were.

"What if the nation rejects you, Master?" Thaddeus wanted to know.

"Then I will return a second time."

"Will John the Baptist precede you again?"

"No. That time, Elijah will."

"You make it sound as if you'll be leaving us," Philip noted.

Jesus didn't answer. He didn't have to.

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When the four men approached the camp of the remaining disciples, they
noticed a large crowd had gathered around them.

"I guess Caesarea Philippi has discovered us," Jesus commented.

Before they got to the camp a man rushed up the hill and fell to his knees
before Jesus. "Lord, have mercy on my son!"

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's an epileptic and suffers terribly because of the evil spirit in him. He's
all the time falling into fire and into water."

Jesus questioned the crowd and the man. "Why didn't you take him to my
disciples?"

"I did! They couldn't cure him. Oh, please, my Lord! Heal him!"

Jesus grimaced. "Come with me."

They walked to the crowd and found the disciples arguing with scribes from
Jerusalem. Jesus was upset the Pharisees were distracting the disciples. How did
you find us all the way up here?

The disciples were struggling mightily when Jesus appeared with the man in
tow. "What about the boy?"

The man explained, "My son is mute and the spirit in him seizes him and
slams him to the ground and makes him foam and grind his teeth and stiffens him.”

The disciples looked at Jesus guiltily. The man told the truth. They were ashamed to tell him they could do nothing for him. He took them aside and frowned and scolded. “Did the Gates of Hades prevail?” he asked, pointing up the hill toward the mountain. “You unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?” Jesus sighed. He hadn’t wanted to rebuke his disciples, but they needed it. “Bring him to me.”

When the boy saw Jesus, the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began to roll around and foam at the mouth. Jesus asked the father next to him, “How long has this been happening?”

“From childhood. It has been a terrible ordeal. If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us!”

“All things are possible to him who believes.”

The father’s instant reply impressed all who heard it. “I do believe! Help my unbelief!”

Jesus turned his attention to the writhing boy and detested what the evil kingdom had done and was doing to the poor Jews, this one in particular. Anger welled up in him like a corrosive flame. “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again!”

The spirit responded by crying out and throwing the boy into terrible convulsions and left the body still on the ground, so still everyone looking on thought the boy was dead.

Jesus knelt down and considered how his impending death would forever break the yoke of the devil’s oppression on the human race. The promise to Eve that her seed would bruise the head of the serpent was rapidly coming to its fulfillment. He reached out and took the boy’s hand and raised him up to his feet and walked him back to his father. The crowd gathered around to marvel at the healing.

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Caesarea Philippi was good to the group. They had found good lodging and a better breakfast to send them on their way back to Capernaum.

Along the way Jesus took advantage of the opportunity to reiterate something he had told them before. “Let these words sink into your ears. The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.”

No matter how many times they had heard it, it was still hard to fathom. What they knew for sure was Jesus was the Messiah, that he was the Lamb of God, and the kingdom was at hand.

Jesus didn’t rebuke. He knew they would eventually see the light. He resolved to keep pressing on, like an ox under yoke pulling the plow. He would pull his disciples to the truth, no matter how difficult, during the time allotted him by his Father.

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Peter and Thaddeus and James the second shopped for groceries in the Capernaum market right after it opened in the early morning. Peter gathered his bags and looked for the other two, when a temple tax collector approached him.

"Does your teacher not pay the two drachma tax?"
"Of course he does," Peter answered gruffly, almost offended with the question.

"All right." The man left, and the other two disciples joined him.

"What was that all about?" Thaddeus asked.
"Oh, the guy wanted to know if Jesus paid the temple tax," Peter replied.
"What did you say?" James asked.
"I said of course he does. What a stupid question!"

James and Thaddeus looked at each other knowingly.

"Did you blow it again, Peter?"

Peter turned to his friends. "What do you mean?"

"You never asked Jesus."

"So, Jesus follows the ordinances," Peter argued. The two did not want to argue. "You better tell him, then."

Irritated, Peter said he would.

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"You what?" Jesus confronted Simon Peter.

"I said you paid the temple tax. He asked me."

"I thought that's what you said." Jesus sighed. It was time for another lesson for his impetuous disciple. "What do you think, Peter? From whom do the kings of the earth collect taxes, from their sons or from strangers?"

"From strangers."

"Then are the sons exempt?"

Peter felt the trap close. "Yes," he replied weakly.

Jesus was gracious but never missed a chance to teach. "However, so that we do not offend them, go to the lake and throw in a hook and take the first fish you catch. In its mouth you will find a shekel. Take it and give it to them for you and me."

Peter, disgusted with himself for his quick mouth and general impulsiveness, put his groceries on the table and left, figuring he would be back before the women had prepared breakfast.

After eight hours of soul searching and frustration and trying to find the fish with the coins and when he did, finding and paying the temple collector, he came back in time for the evening meal. Jesus looked up from the table and smiled. "And I thought you were a fisherman!"

Peter shook his head. "The lake was dead."

"Were the boats out?"

Sheepishly he admitted they were.

"Were they catching?" Jesus asked.

Peter nodded. Jesus laughed loudly, the others followed, and Peter couldn’t help joining the levity at his own expense. He was mostly glad to get back with his brothers after a tough lesson learned.
Jesus spent longer than usual on the hills behind the town. Breakfast was
close to ready, but he had not returned. It was hard to discern how the
conversation started, but it was obvious to sensitive John that it was not healthy,
because there was not one thought given to the Spirit, and yet the Spirit is what
Jesus emphasized over and over, day after day.

"Will he establish the kingdom soon?" Thomas asked no one in particular.
"I don’t see why not. What is preventing it?"
"Nothing that I can see," Andrew replied.
"Well, if that’s true, does anyone have any idea who will be greatest among
us?" James the second asked.
"It’s obvious that Peter is greatest," Simon Zelotes said, looking at the
leading disciple.
Peter said nothing, although he thought it was obvious too.
"He should be making that designation soon, I would think," Judas said.
"Why do you say that?"
"Because the next time he’s in Jerusalem, he’ll declare himself king. That’s
my prediction."
Nathaniel spoke boldly. "But, with all due respect, Peter, I don’t think you
should be first among us."
Peter felt the sting. "No. It should be you, Nathaniel. After all, you walked
on water," he shot back sardonically.

Just then Jesus walked in, and the room fell silent. He knew something was
up. He looked around at the guilty faces. "What were you brothers discussing?"
No one said a thing, so he waited until someone did. Finally, the youngest
spoke up.
"We were arguing about who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," he
confessed.
Jesus disgustedly shook his head, and moved his eyes from face to guilty
face. He dropped his eyes in disappointment, and then summoned one of the
women and whispered in her ear. She left the house.

Jesus’ quiet presence among them made the silence almost unbearable. They
had done something grievous and they knew it. What they didn’t know was the
lesson they were about to learn. When the serving woman walked in with the
neighbor mother and her daughter, they knew some discipline was coming their
way.
"Come here, sweetheart," Jesus said to the seven year-old, extending his hand
to her. She came reluctantly, but he took her into his arms, and she relaxed
because she trusted him. He had always been a good neighbor. "Brothers, unless
you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of
heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the
kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in my name receives
me," Jesus said, and noticed John and Philip express some concern.
"What is it, brothers?"
Philip led off. "I don’t want to forget my question, so if I could, may I ask
“Certainl – it?” "Certainly.

“You said ‘whoever receives one such child...’ and so forth. Are you talking about children like the one you’re holding?”

Jesus looked at John. “Is that your question, John?” “Yes. Sort of. When someone humbles himself and becomes converted, does he become the child you’re talking about?”

Jesus smiled. “Excellent observation, brothers! The humble who enter into the kingdom are the children born anew by the Spirit. We, as leaders, have to receive every such child. If you do, you receive me, because I will be dwelling in them.

“Now the fact remains, and an important one. No one will receive me and be born anew and enter the kingdom without humility. So yes, a person who seeks to enter the kingdom must humble himself and receive the Spirit for the new birth. This makes him a child of the kingdom and you must receive him.

“John, what does this remind you of?” Jesus asked.

“Nicodemus.”

“Very good. Any other comments?” Jesus waited and continued.

“Now let me put the fear of the Father into you.” Jesus assessed the studious faces of his disciples. They were paying attention. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

“Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!

“Do you understand this, men?”

Most nodded agreement.

He released the little girl back to her mother. “Thank you, dear.” Jesus held out a bowl of dried fruits for the little girl to help herself, and watched her fill her two little hands.

“Thank you, Jesus,” she said shyly. He squeezed her cheek and rose to escort the mother and daughter to the door and wished them well, then returned.

“I and my Father care intensely for the new believers. I want you to exercise the same care. Do not offend them! If your hand or foot causes you to stumble so you offend them, then cut it off and throw it from you. It’s better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire.”

Jesus saw the fear spread over the faces in front of him, exactly what he wanted. John, in particular, showed trouble in his face. “What is it, John?”

“These words hit hard. When we went out to preach and heal, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, so we tried to prevent him because he was not following us. I think we offended a child of the kingdom.”

“You’re right, you did. You shouldn’t hinder such a one, because no one who performs a miracle in my name will be able to soon after speak evil of me. He who is not against us is for us. Remember, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you follow the Christ, shall not lose his reward.

“John, you brothers saw something and your reaction caused you to stumble
and to offend the little one casting out the demons. If your eye causes you to stumble and offend one of the little ones, pluck it out and throw it from you. It’s better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into fiery hell. See you do not despise one of these little one, for I say to you their angels in heaven continually see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

John saw immediately Jesus was not talking of a literal, physical mutilation of the body; but he was, as always, speaking in the realm of the Spirit.

“You see, brothers, I came to save the lost ones. Think about it. If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one who is straying? If it turns out he finds it, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that have not gone astray. So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”

Most of the disciples realized by now without being told their little squabble about being the greatest in the kingdom was embarrassingly selfish. Isn’t it enough that we have been chosen in the first place?

Jesus had more to say. “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he doesn’t listen to you, then take one or two more with you, so by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the assembly; and if he refuses to listen even to the congregation, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus looked over at Matthew to see if he would react. He didn’t. He knew well how hated he had been and was glad to be free of that vocation. He kept taking notes without looking up.

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. If two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst.”

Jesus rested for a while and let the words penetrate. Then, “So, brothers, what’s the upshot of all this?”

Peter spoke for them all. “I can’t do it, Master.”

“What do you mean, Peter?”

“This is the same as the constitution of the kingdom. I can’t do that and I can’t do this,” he explained.

“But this is my kingdom and I require it,” Jesus tested.

“But I don’t have the strength to do it.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Peter shifted uneasily. “I have to go back to Nicodemus. Only the eternal life can keep these requirements, especially what you just said about offending new believers. I know how offensive I am just by being alive,” Peter admitted.

Jesus laughed, and opened the door for the others to laugh off some of the tension. “I didn’t know that about you, Peter,” Jesus joked.

He watched Peter take it all in stride. That was one of the things he liked about Peter – the ability to laugh at himself.

“Seriously, Peter, what you said is true for all your friends here,” Jesus said, changing the tone. “None of you has the strength to keep these requirements. You
all have to learn to live by another higher life outside of yourselves. This is a
spiritual problem with a spiritual solution. Your reference to Nicodemus is
appropriate. Entering my kingdom and living in it requires the highest life, and
that is in the Spirit.”

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The next morning Peter intercepted Jesus as he was coming down from
prayer. “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up
to seven times?”

Jesus took his disciple by the arm and continued down the hill. “Can I
answer this over breakfast?”

“I suppose.”

“But I don’t want to embarrass you.”

Peter shrugged. “Will it help the others?”

“Most certainly. That’s why I want to answer in front of them.”

Peter nodded. “I have nothing to hide. I’m too messed up already to get
embarrassed. I know it and they know it.”

Jesus wouldn’t allow that to stand. “Peter, don’t get down on yourself. You
are who you are, and, like everyone else, you’re in the process of change. But
don’t give up! You’re starting to see what you are, and that’s the place where
change begins. Keep looking to me.”

They walked into the house and reclined at breakfast. Jesus started in.

“Peter asked me just now how often he should forgive his brother.” Jesus
looked at Andrew and smiled. “Not just you, Andrew.”

Andrew laughed. “I think he should forgive me all the time.”

Everyone chuckled.

“Anyway, how many times?” Jesus asked the rest.

They felt a trap coming on, so they remained silent.

“Seven times?” Jesus waited. “Come on, men. You should have the answer.

Peter asked about seven times.”

“That’s plenty, I should think,” Matthew chimed in.

“How about the rest of you? James the first? James the second?” Jesus
probed.

“I agree with Matthew and Peter,” James the second volunteered.

Jesus smirked. “If I could get you all to talk, you’d probably all agree. But I
don’t say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

“Let me tell you a story about a king who wished to settle accounts with his
slaves. The authorities brought a slave who owed the king ten thousand talents,
but since he had no means to repay the king, the king decreed that he, his wife,
and his children and everything he owned, be sold to pay his debt.

“The slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before the king, saying,
‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’

“The king looked at the man before him and had compassion and released
him and forgave him the debt. The slave went out and found one of his fellow
slaves who owed him a hundred denarii – a pittance – and seized him by the
throat and demanded he pay back what he owed. The man prostrated and pled
for mercy, but the forgiven slave refused and threw him in prison until he paid what he owed.

"His fellow slaves were deeply grieved by his behavior and went to the king and reported the matter.

"The king summoned the slave and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way I had mercy on you?'

"The king, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him."

Jesus turned to Peter eye to eye, then to all the disciples. "Brothers, hear me clearly. My Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Peter felt the truth of Jesus' words penetrate deeply. Forgiveness had nothing to do with numbers, even seventy times seven, but had everything to do with the attitude of the heart. A forgiving heart will have unlimited forgiveness, he thought, and then realized more than ever here was yet another kingdom requirement he would never meet. My Father, I am hopeless. These things are too hard for me. I need your life to fill me! He raised his head and saw Jesus nod almost imperceptibly at him, a vote of confidence he was on the right path. He felt relieved he had rightly judged his heart and had found his source of strength outside of himself.

JULY 18

After the synagogue meeting in Capernaum, Jesus' brothers in the flesh - Simon, Joseph, Judas and James - surprised and cornered him in the courtyard.

"Well, you brothers are a few miles from home," Jesus commented. Not willing to small talk, James said, "We need to talk."

"Go ahead. You came a long way, so you have my attention."

"We heard about the disciples who left you," Judas said.

Jesus didn't trust his brothers' motives. "What did you hear?"

"No details. Just that they went back to Judea."

Jesus nodded. "It's too bad. Their choice." He wasn't about to give them anything to use against him.

James asked, "Why don't you leave Galilee and go down to Judea?"

"They hate me there. It's too dangerous."

"But your disciples can see your works if you go there."

"They saw them up here and they left." What are you men angling for? You want me to put myself out there so you can benefit somehow? Why do you care about disciples in Judea?"

James shook his head in frustration. How can you be the Messiah I hear so much about? Hiding out in the sticks in Galilee. You're going to have to convince the men in Jerusalem if you expect to bring the kingdom to Israel. "No one does anything in secret if he is seeking to be known openly."

"Is that what you think I'm doing, James? Do you really think I'm doing these things to be popular with men?"
“If you do these things, show yourself to the world. Go to the leaders in Jerusalem and perform these signs so they can believe,” Simon urged.

If I do these things? You brothers don’t even believe I’ve done what I’ve done? How long will you not believe? Jesus felt the anger build up. My own brothers think I’m a fraud! “My time is not yet come. You can come and go as you please, because no one is tracking you. Your Jewish world cannot hate you because you’re one of them. But it hates me because I expose them for the evil they do.”

“So what are you going to do?” Joseph asked. “Will you go or not?”

“You go up to the feast yourselves. I’m not going because my time is not yet fully come,” Jesus said, realizing his words about his “time” were falling on deaf ears.

“So what happened?” Dr. Shalat asked Jordan.

“He went up.”

“But he said he wasn’t going to.”

“He went up secretly.”

“And nobody recognized him?”

“We have the impression Jesus was taller or bigger than any other Jewish man, that he stood out from the crowd,” she explained; “But I don’t believe it. Sometimes he had to pass through a crowd and disappear. Had he been wearing a flowing white robe and sporting a halo and a peculiar glow about his face, that would have been impossible. He was a Jewish man and he blended in.”

One of the Jews asked, “What did he mean about his time was not yet come?”

“He was God’s lamb prepared for sacrifice. His time for offering was not yet. It had to happen on the Passover at just the right time.”

“So what was he afraid of?” David asked, “You say he was the Son of God, so why did he stay away from Jerusalem?”

Jordan took aim at the question. “Jesus walked the earth as the Son of Man and as a man he was subject to everything we are. The religious leaders were out to kill him, so he had to be careful, especially around Jerusalem.”

“So what happened at the feast?”

Jesus enjoyed breakfast with his disciples and wished he could remain with them without regard to time or obligation, but his mission demanded him to press forward. “You men head up to Jerusalem for the feast. I’m not going up publically because I want to read the sentiment of the people. I’ll eventually end up in the temple, but before that, hang around incognito. Don’t let the people know who you are. Just be a part of the crowd. John, you and Matthew be discreet with your note taking.

“I’ll give you a day head start.”

Jerusalem, as usual during the festivals, was a frenetic and teeming mass of Jews from everywhere in the Roman Empire. He crowded into a line at a roasted lamb kiosk below the temple plateau and listened to the banter of the people. He
wondered if they came for the festivities or to catch a glimpse of the carpenter from Galilee whom they had heard so much about. It didn't take him long to realize he was a popular item.

"He's a good man. I swear it," one said under his breath, looking around to see if the Pharisees or their informants were close by.

"No. He deceives the people."

'Deceives the people? Please! He feeds the people!"

"He also heals the sick. Everywhere he goes."

"I even heard he raises the dead."

"I know he's making the Pharisees and Sadducees nervous."

"I hope so. Sometimes they're worse than the Romans."

"They're a lot more expensive, that's for sure."

Jesus ate his meal around a table with strangers, listening to the conversations about him, asking pertinent questions to keep them thinking and talking, watching them catch themselves and look around for the Pharisee patrols. It was rather entertaining to him, and he would have liked to stay longer and talk, but he had work to do.

Jesus entered the temple area in the midst of the crush of people. He looked around for his disciples and found them scattered throughout the crowd. He lifted a scroll of Isaiah off the table and read a passage and returned it to its place. For a quarter hour he expounded the passage and astonished his listeners. He watched the crowd murmur, and heard some say, "How does this man know the Scriptures? He's a carpenter from Galilee. They don't have schools up there."

Jesus smiled at the questions, and addressed them. "My doctrine is not mine, but his who sent me."

"Who sent you? God? Speak plainly!"

"If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." He saw some temple priests and scribes join themselves to the crowd.

"What is his will?"

"To believe on the one whom he sent."

"Believe on you? How do we know you speak the truth?"

"He who speaks of himself seeks his own glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him, he is true and there is no unrighteousness in him."

A young Pharisee, whom Jesus had seen several times before in Galilee, rebutted. "There is only one who is true and righteous, and that is God!"

"Are you my judge? Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keeps the law."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why do you go about trying to kill me?"

The audience was shocked at the question, not knowing whom he was addressing. "You have a demon!" one taunted. "Who seeks to kill you?"

Jesus focused in on the belligerent Pharisee who had been a serial challenger to his teachings whenever he came to the temple. "I have done one work, and you all
marvel."

“What work?”

“The last time I was in Jerusalem I healed a man at the pool.”

“On Shabbat!” the Pharisee shouted, still rankled by the audacious act.

Jesus was undaunted by the loud retort. “Moses gave you circumcision, and if you, on the Sabbath day, receive circumcision so the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry at me because I have made a man entirely whole on the Sabbath day?”

“Judge not according to appearances, but according to righteousness.” The rebuke stung the detractors.

The crowd whispered about how Jesus had put down the leaders of the nation. Some thought they recognized who he was. “Is not this he, whom they seek to kill?”

“Do the rulers know this is the very Christ?”

The Pharisees heard the buzz and rejected it. “We know this man and where he’s from. When Christ comes, no man will know where he’s from.”

Jesus reacted loudly. “You know me and you know where I’m from! I have not come of myself, but he that sent me is true, whom you do not know! But I know him, for I am from him, and he has sent me!”

The Pharisees started to converge on the man, but the crowd moved in to protect him, and the leaders left the area to make contingency plans.

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“So Miss Hoffmaster, what came of this?” Dr. Shalat asked the pretty brunette.

“The Pharisees sent officers to take him, but Jesus told them to wait a little while, and, curiously, they did not arrest him.”

“Why do you suppose, when he was there for the taking?”

“It was simply a matter of timing. His mission required a certain amount of time, and he was not yet finished. Let me read what he said to them.

“Yet a little while am I with you, and then I will go unto him who sent me. You shall seek me, and shall not find me; and where I am, you cannot come.”

“What did they say to that?”

“The officers didn’t say anything, but the people started speculating about him going to the Jews dispersed among the Gentiles, and maybe to the Gentiles directly. They couldn’t figure it out.

“So was that all that happened at the feast?”

“No. At the very end Jesus reappeared.”

“Explain.”

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At the last day of the festival, Jesus, standing alone, (his disciples were scattered about as per his instructions), cried out to the milling crowd outside the temple. “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink! He that believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water!” With that he left the area. The people were quiet and gave him birth, wishing he would say more and elaborate on the living water. But he had said enough. The clear-minded and seeking would understand, and those constituted his real audience.
“That was it?” Dr. Shalat asked in surprise.
“Yes. He left. Those were the last words he spoke to the people at that feast,” Dieter replied, taking
over for Jordan.
“Was there any kind of reaction?”
“The people were divided, as usual. Some said he was the prophet, Elijah, I suppose. Others claimed
he was the Christ, but were refuted by others who questioned Galilee.”
“What do you mean?”
“They questioned whether the Christ would come out of Galilee. They pointed out how the Scriptures
made it clear the Christ would come out of the line of David and David was from Bethlehem, not from
Galilee.”
“Didn’t they know Jesus was born in Bethlehem?” Dr. Shalat asked.
“That was almost thirty-three years before this. I doubt anyone remembered. They probably didn’t
even know.”
Dr. Shalat frowned. “You’d think someone would take the time to find out something that important.”
Dieter shrugged. “Professor, you know the attention span of most people.”
Dr. Shalat laughed. “Yes, I do.
“Jordan mentioned those officers sent to take Jesus. Anything come of that?”
“They got back to the Pharisees and when asked where he was, they said no man had ever spoken like
him. The head Pharisees didn’t like that.”

The leading Pharisee looked at the men with contempt. “Are you also
deceived? Have any of the rulers or any Pharisees believed on him?” He waited
for a reply that did not come. He gestured toward the crowd whom Jesus had
addressed moments before. “This people, these rabble, who don’t know the law are
cursed”
Nicodemus felt embarrassed for the young spokesman. How can you feel
this way about the people? They are sheep in need of a shepherd. True shepherds
care about their sheep. They follow Jesus because he cares about them. Why don’t
you?” “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is
doing?” he asked of the leader.
The leader turned to the old man with scorn and derision. Old man, would
you dare challenge me? “Are you also of Galilee? Search, and see that no prophet
arises out of Galilee.”
Nicodemus bowed his head with humility. He knew where Jesus was born.
He also knew the young firebrand didn’t know Scriptures enough to hold his
position. Jonah the prophet came out of Galilee.

The disciples caught up to Jesus as he was ascending the Mount of Olives to
spend time in his favorite Jerusalem hideaway. They would spend another night
under the stars and enjoy a couple more small meals with their mentor. They
would be happy when they could go back home to the backwater where people
were civil and receptive, but they also knew Jesus had work to do in Jerusalem.
John and Matthew determined not to miss a thing.
Jesus nudged the disciples from their sleep. He had already been awake for two hours, spending them in prayer as per his custom. They ate a small, but adequate breakfast, and made their way into the city and up to the temple, a sure promise of conflict and controversy. Though the disciples dreaded the attitude of the national leaders, Jesus confronted it face on. He knew the fallacious nature of their corrupted religious practices and doctrines had to be exposed so the light of life could shine brightly to the people. He sat down and began teaching from Exodus, showing them how he was the reality and fulfillment of all the sacrifices. Barely into the meat of the matter, he saw the group enter the area leading a woman with a cloth over her head. He could tell she was reluctant to be there, but had no choice with all the men escorting her. The group of scribes and Pharisees rudely interrupted his teaching and pushed her to the ground in front of him. She sobbed into her hands covering her face.

"Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act," the leader of the group began. "Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned. What do you say?"

Jesus stooped down next to the woman and with his finger, began writing on the ground, ignoring the religionists. But they persisted in asking him over and over the same question, chiding him to respond. Finally he stood up and made eye contact with every one of them. "He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." He stooped down and wrote again.

The men were convicted in their consciences. They realized the truth of Jesus’ challenge, and turned and left; starting with the oldest, the one most familiar with his wretched condition, to the youngest, who thought there was some good in him. Jesus was alone with the woman. The crowd was silent and respectful.

Jesus looked up and saw no sign of the men. "Woman, where are your accusers? Has no man accused you?"

She pulled the shawl off her head and looked around, then back to Jesus. "No man, Lord," she replied weakly.

Gently lifting her off the ground, Jesus said graciously, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

"That’s a strange story," Dr. Shalat opined.

Dieter was puzzled by his response. "Why?"

"Well, think about it. You and your teammates have painted a pretty bleak picture of these ‘religionists,’ as you call them. Do you think they set up this woman?"

Dieter hadn’t thought about it and relinquished the podium to Levi. Levi answered, "She could have been framed, no doubt. How could they have caught her in the act otherwise?"

"That’s exactly my question," the doctor said. "Anyway move ahead, Mr. Schilt."

After the woman left the area, Jesus returned to teaching the people, and the Pharisees joined them to try to catch him in his words. Jesus had nothing to
hide or to fear.

“I am the light of the world; he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”

A Pharisee took issue. “You are testifying about yourself; your testimony is not true.”

Jesus rebuffed the opinion. “Even if I testify about myself, my testimony is true; for I know where I came from and where I am going. You do not know where I come from or where I am going.

“Even in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true. I am he who testifies about myself, and the Father who sent me testifies about me.”

“Where is your father?”

“You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also. I go away, and you will seek me, and will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” He heard the murmurs among some of the people about suicide, and other such nonsense. “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins, for unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins.”

This was an extraordinary statement, and it brought gasps from the crowd.

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“Levi, why was this so extraordinary?” Shalev asked.
Levi wondered how he should answer the captain of the Jews. This was rather sensitive, but truth is truth. “I won’t deceive you, Shalev. Jesus invoked the name of Yahweh, the name he revealed to Moses for his confrontation with Pharaoh.”

“Then doesn’t this prove Jesus is a blasphemer?” Shalev challenged, not convincingly and with little heart, something unusual for him.

“Or that he’s telling the truth,” Levi countered. “After all you’ve listened to, I think you know the truth.” Levi continued.

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“Who are you?” someone in the audience shouted out.

Jesus replied, “What have I been saying to you from the beginning? I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but he who sent me is true; and the things I heard from him, these I speak to the world.

“When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM, and I do nothing on my own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught me. He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” Jesus noticed a change in the crowd. They were unusually receptive to his words, even believing them and showing an eagerness for more.

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Dr. Shalat approached the Christian. “Mr. Schilt, explain to us what Jesus meant about being lifted up.”

“He was referring to his crucifixion.”
“Interesting. Continue.”

Encouraged by their openness, Jesus peered into the eyes of his listeners. More had joined. “If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

An old Pharisee reacted, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it you say, ‘You will become free?’”

Rather than point out two obvious enslavements in their history, Jesus made an irrefutable allegation. “I tell you the truth, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever.”

“Sorry to interrupt, Levi, but would you explain that last thought?” Batya asked.

“Sure. The Pharisees were arguing they were Abraham’s descendants and not slaves, but Jesus implied a slave to sin had no part in the Father’s house. Only the sons of God, those who believed in Jesus, had a permanent place in his house.”

“Is that true?”

“Is what true?”

“About slaves and sons.”

“Yes. Only a believer in Jesus has the right to become a son of God. He was telling the Jews it was far better to be a son of God than a son of Abraham,” Levi explained. “One is of the flesh and the earth; the other is of the spirit and heavenly.”

Jesus proclaimed, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” He specifically addressed the leaders of the people. “I know you are Abraham’s descendants; yet you seek to kill me, because my word has no place in you. I speak the things which I have seen with my Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father.”

“Abraham is our father!” the Pharisee insisted.

“If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham. As it is, you are seeking to kill me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father.”

The implication was obvious and stunning. The Pharisees reeled in shock. They knew well he was calling their father the devil. “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God!”

This sharp jab hurt the virgin-born Nazarene, but it did not distract him from his message. “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on my own initiative, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I am saying?” He waited for an answer that never came. “It is because you cannot hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe me.”
Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”

The disciples watched the faces and body language of the Pharisees, and they were worried the conversation would devolve into violence. The Pharisees countered harshly with an allegation they had used in the past. “Do we not say rightly you are a Samaritan and have a demon?”

Jesus stayed calm. “I don’t have a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. But I do not seek my glory; there is one who seeks and judges. Truly I tell you,” he said, lifting his eyes above the opposition and to the receptive crowd, “if anyone keeps my word he will never see death.”

The firestorm erupted. Even the disciples, who were used to the language of the Spirit, were shocked at the statement. The crowd enjoyed the words of life and the discomfort of the pompous Pharisees. The leading Pharisee shouted above the din, “Now we know you have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets too; and you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste of death!’ Surely you are not greater than our father Abraham who died?” he asked scornfully. “The prophets died too; whom do you make yourself out to be?”

“If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God,’ and you have not come to know him, but I know him. If I say I do not know him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad.”

The disciples braced for an onslaught, amazed at the surgical provocation of truth itself.

“You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”

Jesus had them exactly where he wanted them. He had pushed them to become the executioners, literally, of the Father’s eternal plan. “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I AM.”

Gazing at the blatant blasphemy of a man making himself out as the Eternal God, Yahweh, the Pharisee ran to a pile of stones in order to murder him on the spot. Jesus ducked through the crowd and the disciples quickly surrounded him to offer their protection and they all disappeared from the temple area.

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Three Jews – Barak, Sara, and Eli – stood waiting at the podium for Levi to finish up. Kael was next up for the Christians.

“Your questions,” Dr. Shalat said, gesturing toward the three.

Sara stepped up. “Kael, do you Christians expect us to accept what Jesus said to the Pharisees?”

“What are you referring to?”

“When he said he was the I AM.”

Kael pondered. “We expect nothing from you. We’re in the process of telling you what we believe is the truth. You’re obviously taking exception to the use of this term.”

“Shouldn’t we?” Eli asked loudly, with a hint of defiance.

“I don’t know. Is it the truth or not?” Kael asked.

“Jesus said he was the great I AM. That’s Yahweh!”

“I know. Again I ask, is it the truth or not?”

“Jesus was not Yahweh!” Barak retorted.
“That’s exactly what your Pharisees and scribes and elders said, so rather than take Nicodemus’ moderating word to hear Jesus out, they murdered him.”

“He provoked them!”

“So? Was that a reason to kill him?” Kael countered. “If Jesus was false, he would have amounted to nothing. But if he was true . . . no, I’ll state it plainly; if he was truth, and you killed him, then you can understand why Jerusalem and your temple and your nation were destroyed, and why the land turned desolate, and why Jews were dispersed throughout the earth. Jesus was telling the truth as your Messiah. You rejected him and lost everything for two millennia. That’s huge!” Kael did not back down.

“So Christians believe what the Romans did two thousand years ago was God’s judgment on us for what happened to Jesus?”

“I can’t speak for all Christians, but we thirty believe it.”

The Jews couldn’t respond, so they sat down. Kael continued the story.

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The entourage passed quickly to the Eastern gate on the way to their sanctuary on the eastern mountain, when Jesus caught sight of a blind man sitting against the wall of the city begging.

“Master, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”

James, a son of Zebedee, asked.

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but it was so the works of God might be displayed in him. I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. The night is coming when no one can work. As long as I’m in the world, I am the light of the world.” He stopped in front of the man and spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.”

“Who are you?” the man asked.

“I am Jesus. Go. Wash.”

The man struggled to his feet and found his cane and tapped his way to the pool.

“We'll stay here and mingle with the people until he gets back,” Jesus said. “There are some valuable lessons to learn from this.”

It wasn’t long before they saw a man running toward them, so excited he aroused the neighbors’ curiosity. By now a crowd had formed around the man to see why the commotion. He was feverishly trying to find the man who had anointed his eyes, but of course he didn’t recognize a soul.

“Is this not he that sat and begged?” a woman asked.

“Yes. He’s the one!”

“No, it’s not. He’s like him.”

The man utilized his new eyes and looked around at the people. “I am he!” he proclaimed.

“You are?”

“Yes!”

“How were your eyes opened?”

“A man named Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and told me to go wash in the pool of Siloam, and I went and washed and now I see!”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know! How could I know? I didn’t see him.”

“This is too mysterious. Let’s go to the Pharisees.”
The people compelled the man to tell the Pharisees what had happened to him. Jesus and the disciples blended in with the people and moved along with them. Finally they had the man face to face with the leaders of the city. The people excitedly told them what had just happened. They were not impressed. “Don’t you know this is Shabbat?” they grilled the man. He said nothing. This angered the leaders. “How did you receive your sight?” “A man called Jesus anointed my eyes with clay and told me to wash in the pool and I did and now I see!” he explained excitedly. Though he had never seen faces before in his life, he was, nevertheless, astonished by the glare of contempt coming from the leaders. He was flabbergasted when he heard their reply. “This man is not of God.” “Why not?” “Because he doesn’t keep the Shabbat.” The people who brought the man protested loudly. “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” The Pharisees could not answer, so they asked the man, “What do you say about him, since he opened your eyes?” The man did not hesitate. “He is a prophet!” The Pharisees scoffed at the answer and turned to the people. “Go get his parents.” Within minutes the parents stood in front of the leaders. They were frightened and astounded at the same time, looking back and forth between the stone-faced Pharisees and their ecstatic son. “Is this your son?” “Yes.” “Was he born blind?” “Yes.” “How does he now see?” The father did not take kindly to the grilling of his wife, so he answered. “We know this is our son, and that he was born blind, but how he now sees, we don’t know.” “You don’t know? Your own son?” The man set his jaw. “That’s what I said. We don’t know. Ask him. He’s old enough to tell you. Let him speak for himself.” The mother of the man took her husband’s arm to try to calm him down. She didn’t want any of her family put out of the synagogue, the overarching threat put forth by the temple leaders on anyone professing Jesus as the Christ. The Pharisees turned back to the man and said, “Give God the glory; we know this man who opened your eyes is a sinner.” The man shrugged. “Whether he is a sinner, I don’t know. One thing I do know: once I was blind, and now I see!” His excitement could not be contained. The disciples and the man responsible watched and listened and enjoyed every word. The Pharisees became frustrated with the whole affair. “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” The man reacted. “I told you already and you didn’t listen. Why do you want to hear it again?” The man’s mother gasped at her son’s audacity and
covered her mouth with her hands to muffle her expression. The man did not relent. “You don’t want to become his disciples too, do you?”

“You pathetic fool! You are a disgrace to every Jew! You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses!” they scoffed. “We know God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we don’t know where he’s from.”

That provoked the man to anger. “Well, this is an amazing thing! You don’t know where he’s from and yet he opened my eyes! We all know God does not hear sinners; but if anyone fears God and does his will, he hears him. Since the beginning of time no one has ever heard of a man born blind having his sight restored. If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.”

Said the Pharisees, “You were altogether born in sins, and you teach us? You’re out!” Most of the Pharisees turned and walked away, utterly unconcerned with the ramifications of their decision to ostracize the man from the synagogue. Others lingered to watch the drama play out.

People in the crowd huddled around the man and his family, seeking in some small way to support them. Jesus made his way to the distraught man, and got his attention. The people recognized who he was and backed away.

“Do you believe in the Son of God?” Jesus asked, staring into the man’s new eyes.

“Who is he, Lord, that I might believe in him?”

“You have seen him, and he is the one speaking to you now.”

The man gazed into Jesus’ eyes and studied the face of the one who had healed him and collapsed at his feet and worshiped him.

Jesus took the opportunity to instruct the people. “For judgment I came into this world, so those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

One of the remaining Pharisees asked, “We are not blind too, are we?”

He said, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

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Kael finished up and sat down. Dr. Shalat approached the next Christian at the podium. “Mr. Perez, I should ask Mr. Lundberg, but you may know. Was Jesus contrasting the poor Jews with their leaders when he answered them?”

“Certainly. I don’t know what the attitude was when the Pharisee asked if they were blind. It could have been mockingly or because of conviction, but Jesus told these ‘enlightened’ ones they were blind to their sin of rejecting their Messiah. The unenlightened rabble, disparaged by the Pharisees, readily received him and received light,” Juan explained. “This was the irony of the incarnation. The uneducated poor saw the light in Jesus; whereas the educated elite with their ancient pedigree became blind to him and his claims.”

“Very interesting indeed,” Dr. Shalat said, and sat down, leaving Juan to continue.

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The time was right and the situation perfect for the Messiah to teach a lasting lesson. The healed man was eagerly listening to every word; his mother and father flanked him; and his neighbors huddled around the healer and his disciples. Jesus saw the people in great need of spiritual help and guidance, and thought of the bitter irony these people lived out every day of their lives. Here
they were in Jerusalem under the shadow of the temple, and yet wandering aimlessly because of the abjection and dereliction of their shepherds - the scribes, the priests, and the Pharisees.

"I tell you truthfully, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep."

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“Question from Batya,” Dr. Shalat interrupted.
“Juan, please tell us what he means by the door into the fold.”
Juan shifted nervously. “I cannot tell you definitively, but I can tell you what I think.”
“Go ahead.”
“The Lord gave the Law through Moses to fold the sheep.”
“What do you mean ‘fold the sheep’?” she asked.
“The Law was a holding place for the Israelites. It kept them from being like the nations around them. It guarded them from degradation and corruption, from moral self-destruction. It protected them from outside influences.”
“So who are the thieves and robbers?”
“They are the misleaders of the people. They used the Law to subjugate the people and to plunder them. Jesus is the lawgiver who kept every requirement of it, so he qualified to be the door to approach the sheep. That’s what he was doing for his three-year ministry – entering into the sheepfold to minister to the sheep of Israel.”
Batya was impressed by the Christian’s grasp of the Law of Moses. She nodded and took her seat.
Juan continued.

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“To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When he puts forth his sheep, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” Then gesturing to a group of scribes passing by, he said, “A stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him, for they don’t know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus saw the vacant eyes and realized a lot of the people were not tracking with him, so he decided to speak without nuance. “I am the door of the sheep.”
Then glancing at the purveyors of Judaism, he made himself clear. “All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it superabundantly. I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

“He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep.” For the second time he repeated, “I am the good shepherd, and I know my own and my own know me, even as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

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“So is he talking about the crucifixion here?” Natan asked astutely.
“I would answer but it’s Tabi’s turn. She can tell you.” Juan returned to the bench.
Tabi asked Natan to repeat his question, and then proceeded. “He is. Jesus is not a hired hand, but is the good shepherd of Israel. He still is.”
“You can’t be sure.”
“If we can prove the resurrection, we can,” Tabi claimed.
Natan grimaced. “That’s a tall order.”
“Stay tuned.”

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“I have other sheep which are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from me, but I lay down my life so I may take it again.” Three Pharisees inched closer to hear what Jesus was saying, so he emphasized how he would give his life for the sheep. “No one has taken it away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from my Father.”

Jesus expected trouble and it came. The three Pharisees could not restrain themselves and tried to influence the people by shouting, “He has a demon and is insane! Why do you listen to him?”
The people shouted back, “These are not the sayings of one who is demon possessed! A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?” The Pharisees refused to answer. “Can he?” they shouted louder.
Jesus sensed the danger and used the occasion to depart quickly.

JULY 22

“Good morning to you all. I hope you had a good weekend,” Dr. Shalat greeted the teams. Wasting no time, he approached the Christians. “Let’s pick it up from last Thursday night. The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees when they called him demon-possessed, did that happen in Jerusalem?” Dr. Shalat asked.
“Yes,” Tabi answered for her team.
“And how old was he at that time?”
“It was about the time of his thirty-third birthday.”
“Did he stay there?”
“No. He went back to Galilee to say good-bye to everyone. Once he left Galilee, he never returned. Well, I should say before he died he never returned,” Tabi explained.
“Did anything happen there in Galilee?”
“No. We have no record, so I guess we can speculate he spent considerable time with his disciples and with the seventy. We are safe to assume he wasted no time. His family probably saw a good bit of him too. It was about two months later when he started his last trek to Jerusalem.”
“Anything of note?”
“When they got into Samaria, he sent some of the seventy ahead to make arrangements, but the Samaritans would not receive them.”
“Why not?”
“The ancient animosity between the Jews and Samaritans, I guess. John and James wanted to call fire down from heaven to consume them.”
“That could not have ended well.”
Tabi laughed. “Jesus saved the situation by rebuking the two disciples.”

“Anything else?”

“He sent out the seventy disciples in pairs to the towns and cities he would visit on his journey.”


“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go! I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.” Jesus revealed the detailed instructions, and ended with this: “The one who listens to you listens to me, and the one who rejects you rejects me; and he who rejects me, rejects the one who sent me.”

Jesus and the twelve watched them go out after a long prayer session.

“When they get back, we’ll start toward Jerusalem. I want to get there for the final feast of the year. We have a few more days here to relax, and then we’ll be busy.”

Without hearing a word, Jesus knew the seventy had met with success. He could read their body language as the first group came up the street.

“Master, even the demons are subject to us in your name.”

Jesus smiled and nodded. “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.

“However, as a caveat, brothers, don’t rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.”

Jesus excused himself, saying, “You brothers tell the twelve all the details while I’m gone. I’ll be back shortly.” While the disciples prepared to swap stories, he slipped off for some time with his Father, humbling himself as a man before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He treasured his special place of communion with his Father. He loved the Gethsemane garden on the Mount of Olives, but its proximity to Jerusalem added an element of discomfort that this Galilean rock outcropping overlooking the lake did not have. The times of refreshing he experienced in his Father’s presence apart from the demands of his daily routine was his lifeline, and one he would never forsake for any reason.

That was why he was an early riser, making his connection strong and solid with the Eternal Life long before the work of ministry began for the day. This day was a bit different with the return of the seventy.

“I praise you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well pleasing in your sight.” Jesus lifted his eyes to the clouds and contemplated his life and what he had seen during the last three plus years and what he faced in the months ahead. He was ecstatic the way everything had worked out, particularly with the people surrounding him at the moment – his inner circle, his outer circle, the caring women. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the son, and anyone to whom the son wills to reveal him. Thank you, Father.
Jesus returned to the house with an excited spirit of encouragement, and gathered everyone in the courtyard. "Brothers, listen to me. Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see, for I say to you, that many prophets and kings wished to see the things which you see; and did not see them, and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them."

“..." Dr. Shalat asked the tall brunette.
"They did, and in the first town, a scribe confronted Jesus with a test.”
“...”
Tabi laughed. “So true. This was a particularly memorable event because of Jesus’ answer. We’ll all recognize it.”

The entourage entered the village after a long day’s walk, but before they could make their way to their lodgings, a scribe sitting in the town square with his friends saw his opportunity. He stood up and walked boldly up to Jesus, his friends behind him to witness the action.

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus assessed the man and saw right through him. His insincerity reeked like garlic, but Jesus decided to use the occasion for the benefit of the audience.

“What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?”

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”
The scribe wasn’t satisfied, because he hadn’t caused Jesus any trouble, so he pressed the issue. “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus briefly smiled. The man wanted to take it to the next level and Jesus accommodated him. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. By chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’”

Jesus looked into the eyes of the scribe and asked, “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?”

“The one who showed mercy toward him,” the scribe answered weakly, refusing to acknowledge the detested Samaritan. He had the dreaded sense the trap was about to close on his disingenuous attempt to corner the Nazarene.

“Go and do the same,” Jesus said, and left the speechless scribe embarrassed in front of his friends.
Another in the crowd from the village stepped up and said, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance.”

Jesus frowned at the man and shook his head in disgust. “Man, who appointed me a judge or arbitrator over you?” He turned to the growing audience. “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”

Jesus sighed, hoping his listeners would get it. “The land of a rich man was very productive. He began reasoning to himself, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘this is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The disciples grew restless, but Jesus didn’t care. People were gathering around and he would not dismiss them. Another man stepped forward and told Jesus about Pilate’s slaughter of some rebel Galileans and how he mixed their blood with their temple sacrifices. Jesus asked the people, “Do you suppose these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?”

Jesus looked out over the crowd for anyone willing to answer. No one did. “I tell you, no. They were no greater sinners, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Do you suppose those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?” He knew no one would answer. “I tell you, they were no worse culprits.” With a gesture encompassing the whole crowd, and, by extension, the entire nation of Israel, Jesus said emphatically, “You will all likewise perish if you don’t repent.

“A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. He said to the vineyard keeper, ‘For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’ The vineyard keeper protested, ‘Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.”

The lesson was not lost on the disciples, although the crowd missed it. Jesus was into his fourth year looking for fruit from Israel and not finding any. They wondered if and when the nation would be cut down. There had been too many hints in Jesus’ teachings that such a thing was entirely possible without a national repentance.

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“That’s a rather radical idea, Tabi,” the doctor said when she finished.

“Do you mean the cutting down?”

“Yes.”

“But sir, it happened,” she reminded him.

Dr. Shalat extended his hand to Shalev to respond. He could only shake his head. It was now a fact of history, which made the Christians’ case for Jesus as Messiah that much more compelling. He predicted it
and it came to pass.

Tabi gave way to Breckin, who picked up the story, but before she began, Dr. Shalat ended the interesting session and began the weekend.

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The disciples had done a marvelous job of preaching and lining up venues for Jesus when he sent them out two by two. At the end of the day in one particular village east of the Jordan River, the residents had prepared the evening meal for the large group. Many of the invited guests busied themselves with securing places of honor, and Jesus watched the machinations with a blend of disgust and humor. After the meal Jesus stood and taught.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him. He who invited you will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place.

“But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

“A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.’ Another one said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused. Another one said, ‘I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.’

“And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’

“The slave said, ‘Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’

“The master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.”

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“Miss Fleischman, there’s more to these simple stories, is there not?” Dr. Shalat queried. “How do you interpret them?”

“I think it’s apparent Jesus is speaking to the nation of Israel in these stories. What we are starting to see are hints of the Gentiles coming in. If the nation rejects her Messiah, then he will open the door to the outsiders, to the poor and crippled and blind Gentiles in the highways and hedges,” Breckin explained.

“So as a Gentile, you must be happy,” Shalev said from the Jewish podium.

Breckin was a bit surprised at Shalev’s tone. “I’m not happy your nation rejected Jesus, but I am happy your rejection meant we Gentiles could have salvation. It’s too bad it had to be this way, but your forefathers made that choice. They didn’t have to.”

“I would like to refute everything you say about Jesus being our Messiah and how we rejected him, but the more I listen, the less I have it in me,” Shalev confessed. “We’ve been taught all our lives we are
waiting for the Messiah to come, and nothing I’ve heard any of you Christians say, including you, Breckin, has countered that belief. The only thing is, I can see how it could be Jesus.”

Breckin was shocked at this admission. “Shalev, you are so close! The Lord is seeking you and your team. I’m convinced. Listen.”

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As the night drew on Pharisees and scribes showed up and assessed the situation from their elitist view of the world. They saw rabble, sinful rabble, everywhere they looked, and Jesus right in the mix. They were provoked enough to comment about Jesus eating with sinners.

Jesus heard their less than subtle whispers, and that inspired him to stand up and walk toward his detractors and say, “What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. When he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’”

He maintained strict eye contact with them. “I tell you in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. He would have eaten the pods the swine were eating, because no one gave him a thing.

“Finally he came to his senses, and said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.’”

“So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.

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“I wish I could end the story right here,” Breckin said; “but I can’t. Shalev, please hear me.”
“Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. The servant said, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' But the older son became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. He answered, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’

“The father said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and is now alive, and was lost and has been found.'”

Breckin finished and looked across the arena at Shalev in particular, and the Jewish team sitting respectfully and watching her closely. “Shalev, you admitted it’s hard to deny what we’ve said about Jesus. You’ve heard us say over and over again how Jesus did everything he could do to convince the nation of Israel to repent of their sins and to receive and cling to him as the Messiah, the Christ, sent from Yahweh. I have the distinct feeling you will not do what the Pharisees did over and over again, and that was to reject every overture from the one who loved them. I think I can speak for my whole team when I say emphatically we want you to let him find you. He is looking for his lost lamb. Respond to his call. Even if you feel like the young, unclean Jewish prodigal living among the unclean pigs, whose own brother disowned him, he’s waiting for you to return home.”

Breckin sat down and Marlo continued the plea. “Shalev, though we’re Christians and follow Jesus, we realize how much we owe you Jews. Jesus is Jewish. He came out of Judah in the line of David. Because of the national rejection two thousand years ago, we Gentiles, we Christians, as a wild olive branch were grafted into Israel, the good olive tree, into you! Without your rejection, we wouldn’t be here; we would be lost. This is the mercy of our God, your Yahweh! But now it’s your turn to return to him. Lead your nation! We Christians are so much a part of you, and that’s why we want you to partake of your Christ, your anointed one, your Messiah, and our Jesus! Don’t be the ungrateful older son, who represents the cold, bitter Pharisees who examined and slaughtered the Lamb of God. Be the humble, thankful, younger son who returned from his long journey into darkness to his father’s house.”

Shalev stood up. “Marlo, and you, Breckin, and really all of you Christians, we, as a team, feel your passion directed at us. We have talked a lot about Jesus and explored the possibility he really is our Messiah. I know many of our countrymen have done exactly as you’ve suggested, and they are equally convinced of their faith in him. Maybe this is our future. In no way will we dismiss your pleas. We are open.”

Dr. Shalat stood and walked toward the Christians and addressed the petite, dark-haired Christian. “Miss Medina, perhaps a few more stories of Jesus will convince us all. Continue.”

After the early breakfast the disciples and the serving women hit the road before the heat of the day would drive them into the shade. Jesus chose to keep the conversation light, because he knew so many ears wouldn’t be able to hear if he taught. Every hour or so, he would stop in a grove of trees along the way and gather everyone around him. After telling a story of an unrighteous steward, Jesus warned the disciple, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will
hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the
other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Several Pharisees who were following, heard the story and the lesson, and,
because they loved money, scoffed at Jesus. He did not take kindly to that. “You
are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts;
for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God. The
Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of
the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.
But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter
of the law to fail. For example, this will never fail: Everyone who divorces his
wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is
divorced from a husband commits adultery.

“There was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen,
joyously living in splendor every day. A poor man named Lazarus was laid at
his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs, which were
falling from the rich man's table. Even the dogs were coming and licking his
sores.

“Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s
bosom, and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes,
being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. He
cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so he
may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony.’
But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember during your life you received your good
things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and
you are in agony. Besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm
fixed, so those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and none
may cross over from there to us.’ ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's
house, for I have five brothers. He may warn them, so they will not also come to
this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let
them hear them.’ ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the
dead, they will repent.’ But Abraham said, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the
prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.”

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Marlo stopped and looked across the arena. “I know none of us has risen from the dead, but we know
one who did. Please don’t ignore him!” She sat down. No one said a thing for several moments, until Dr.
Shalat rose and walked toward the Christians. “You are making a compelling case to me personally, I must
say. I’ve never heard such things in my whole life. I’m eager to hear more. Marlo, please.”

She deferred to Riley.

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The hearty group pushed southward well east of the Jordan River, staying
safely out of reach of those who would harm their leader. Nevertheless, a
messenger found them and delivered a troubling report. The young man handed
the message to Jesus and stood for his reply.

Master,
Behold,
He whom you love is sick.
Mary and Martha

Jesus' face told the disciples all they needed to know. Someone he loved was in grave need. He turned to them and said, "Lazarus is sick, but this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, so the Son of God may be glorified by it." He walked away with his arm around the young messenger's shoulder and out of earshot of the rest. "Tell them I will come. And tell them what I told the disciples."

"Yes, Master."

Jesus pointed him to the women and told him to get some food from them for his return journey, and then watched him move away quickly toward Jerusalem and Bethany.

The disciples were scared. The last place they wanted to go was to Jerusalem, although that was their destination in the first place. The longer they stayed away, the better they liked it.

After two days passed since the message came, they began to relax a little; but they should have known. Jesus announced after breakfast, "Let us go to Judea again."

"But Master, the Jews there were trying to stone you, and you are going there again?" Simon Peter reminded him.

"Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

The disciples tried again to understand whether he was talking in the physical realm or about the Spirit, and while they were sorting it out, he said plainly, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so I may awaken him out of sleep."

Nathaniel missed Jesus' point. "But Master, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

Jesus shook his head and looked at them with a frown. "Lazarus is dead. I am glad for your sakes I was not there to prevent it, so you may believe. Let's go to him."

Jesus walked on, leaving the disciples in their consternation. Thomas sighed and said to them, "Let's also go, so we may die with him." Reluctantly, they followed.

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The Mount of Olives loomed ahead. It had been four days since the messenger delivered the word. Many Jews on the road were heading to Bethany to console the two sisters, and discovered Jesus about two miles from town. They rushed on with word, and Martha responded in tears, running toward Jesus and leaving Mary in the house. She ran into his arms and hugged him tightly, sobbing and trying to talk at the same time.

"O my Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus held her head against his chest and waited for the sobs to subside. She gained enough composure to say, "Even now I know whatever you ask of
God, God will give you."

Jesus released her and he held her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Your brother will rise again."

She looked down sadly, then up again, fighting tears. "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus squeezed her shoulders, then released her and pointed his thumbs at his chest. "Martha! I am the resurrection and the life! He who believes in me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" he asked fervently.

Martha nodded, but understood nothing he had just said. Her concepts controlled her thinking. "Yes, Lord; I have believed you are the Christ, the Son of God; he who comes into the world."

Jesus did not express the dismay he felt in his heart for this very dear Jewish sister. "Go bring Mary."

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Martha hurried into the house to her grieving sister and whispered in her ear. "Jesus is coming and he wants to see you. He's on the east road."

She dried her eyes and rushed out of the house and down the road, her consolers following behind her.

Jesus saw her running toward him and when she arrived she reverently knelt at the feet she had anointed. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

The words cut like a knife. Mary, even you who anointed me for my burial do not know me! What more can I do? He looked around at the wailing Jews and at the one sister who had always chosen the better part whenever he had come to visit. O Father, open the eyes of your people!

"Where have you laid him?" he asked, lifting her to her feet. "Come and see."

As they moved toward the tomb, Jesus' eyes filled with tears and spilled over in the sight of many in the crowd. Not even those closest to me know who I am. How dreadfully sad. O Father, let them see.

He heard the whispers of the onlookers. "He weeps. How much he loved Lazarus!" "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man from dying?" Jesus groaned from his spirit. The blindness of the people was staggering.

The tomb was a cave with a large rock leaned up against the entrance. Jesus stood in front of it and commanded, "Remove the stone."

Martha turned to Jesus and shook her head. "Lord, by this time there will be a stench. He's been dead for four days."

Jesus looked down on her and said, "Did I not say to you if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" He looked back at the tomb and the men had rolled away the stone from the entrance. He lifted his eyes heavenward and prayed, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know you always hear me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so they may believe you sent me."

He peered into the darkness of the cave and shouted, "Lazarus, come forth!"
The man came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said with certainty and authority, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many believed in Jesus as Israel's Messiah, but others went and told the Pharisees what Jesus had done.

The news spread rapidly around Jerusalem and Judea. The Pharisees in their mounting alarm convened conferences to strategize how to apprehend and eliminate the growing problem. Jesus could no longer walk freely and publicly among the Jews, but instead went away back to the country, into the wilderness and into a city called Ephraim where he stayed with his disciples leading up to Passover. The Pharisees sent out word to the people to report any sightings of him. Jesus laid low until the time was come. Finally he could stay away no longer.

On the way to Jerusalem between Samaria and Galilee, the group headed toward a village to eat and rest. Some distance away from the village, ten men raised their voices to Jesus. "Master, have mercy on us!"

"Who are they?"

"Lepers," Jesus answered. He veered in their direction and the disciples looked on from the road.

"Go and show yourselves to the priests."

They obeyed immediately and headed around the village to the road to Jerusalem. Just out of sight they were all healed. One of the men, a Samaritan, became so excited at what had happened to him, he turned back to find Jesus, and when he found him, fell at his feet, glorified God and thanked him.

Jesus asked the man, "Were there not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this Samaritan?" Jesus bent down and lifted the grateful man to his feet. "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well."

As the entourage moved closer to Jerusalem, crowds of pilgrims increased and with them Pharisees, ever present with one question after another, thinking they could catch Jesus in an error.

"When will the kingdom of God come, Master?" one asked, more out of curiosity than trickery.

Jesus didn't mind the question. "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." He turned from the Pharisees to the disciples. "The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, 'Look here! Look here!' Do not go away, and do not run after them. For just like the lightning when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in his day."
“Will this happen soon, Master?” Philip asked.
Jesus shook his head. “First he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”
“So it will be some time in the future,” Philip surmised.
“Just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.”
Thaddeus puzzled over this answer. “But Master, it sounds as if the way of life is normal.”
“How so, brother?”
“Well, eating, drinking, marrying, all these are normal activities of our lives.”
“Then what made the flood come?” Jesus asked.
Thaddeus couldn’t answer. Jesus waited for anyone to comment. Nathaniel ventured a guess. “Were people swept up in these human things and letting the heavenly things slip away?”
“You’re close. What was Noah doing during this time?”
“Preaching righteousness.”
“So were the people preoccupied, would you say?”
“I would say so,” Nathaniel said.
“The problem was not in the human activities, but in the heart behind those things,” Jesus explained. “Noah warned them judgment was coming, but they ignored him, even mocked him. They saw the progress of the ark. They had every indication something was coming, and they had no reason to doubt Noah’s word as being the word of my Father. But they persisted in their disobedience up to the day when the rain started falling. It will be the same at my coming. Some will be taken and others left. The ones watching and waiting and ready for me will disappear into my presence. Others will be left to their human lives and to the impending judgment.”
“It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day Lot went out from Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day the Son of Man is revealed.”
Jesus continued to explain and the Pharisees inched closer to hear. “On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife. Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed, one will be taken and the other will be left. There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left.”
“Where will they be taken?”
“Where the corpses are, there will the vultures be gathered,” Jesus answered.
“Mr. Fritzen, can you explain the last sentence to us?” Dr. Shalat asked.

“Jesus is here warning about the day of his coming. He is speaking here of his second advent, and it will bring judgment on the unbelievers and the unfaithful. It will come like lightning – quick and furious – and will come like hungry vultures to a rotting corpse. Those days will see a lot of death,” he explained.

“Some interpret this to mean when Jesus comes, he will come leading his army of those who have paid the price of self-denial during their lives. Scriptures describe them as eagles who join with the Lord in executing judgment.”

“Your description of the days of Noah and the days of Lot seem to indicate normalcy, routine. Is that Jesus’ meaning?” the doctor asked.

“Yes. Routine will continue to the very end. Most people won’t have a clue of what’s going on,” Riley said.

“Very interesting.”

Riley sat down and Brent took over.

“Jesus could tell his disciples were deflated because of the word about the generational rejection, so he gathered them just off the road. Many onlookers joined them even though they weren’t invited. Jesus never turned anyone away.

“In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’”

Matthew asked, “What does this mean, Master?”

Jesus answered, “Will God not bring about justice for his elect who cry to him day and night, and will he delay long over them?” He waited for an answer.

“He will not delay,” John ventured.

“You’re correct, John. I tell you he will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

“Mr. Dawkins, we need clarification on this,” Dr. Shalat stated.

Brent shifted uneasily. He wasn’t sure. “Which part, sir?”

“I’m learning these parables mean more than the simple words. For example, I’m sure the judge represents God. Am I right?”

“You are.”

“Who is the widow?”

Brent looked over at the Jewish team, hoping his answer would not offend them. “She is Israel scattered throughout the world since the destruction of their city and temple. She is without her husband.”

Dalia walked to the podium and asked, “And yet she cried day and night, didn’t she?”

Brent nodded.

“I’ve read too much history of the Diaspora,” she added. “It is so agonizing to hear how my ancestors were treated everywhere they went, but they never stopped praying, never stopped hoping.”

“That’s why you’re here, Dalia. The judge heard all those countless cries and saw the injustice and the tears. You wore him out and he answered you. You have your land again,” Brent said with a smile. “You are the elect.”

Najeeb reacted after a long season of silence. “Nothing makes me more nauseous than to hear these lies. Your God did not give you Palestine. You stole it from the Palestinians!”

Brent refused to let the Arabian destroy the light shining at that moment. “Najeeb, you’re out of place. Leave the Jews alone. You’ll have your time at the podium.”
For whatever reason, Najeeb took the mild rebuke from the strapping black Christian with the deep voice, and sat down.

Dr. Shalat asked about the faith on the earth.

“At the end days the earth will be in chaos because of the rebellion of mankind against God. Jesus is wondering if there will be any faithful on the earth.”

“Will there be?”

“There is always a remnant of faithful in every age, including at the end,” Brent replied confidently.

“All right. That’s the last word. Let’s pick it up there tomorrow morning.” With a friendly wave, Dr. Shalat added, “Sleep well.”

JULY 23

They had walked about ten miles without stopping, so they were more than ready to plop down in a grove of unruly tamarisk trees. Most of them wanted a nap, but their irrepressible leader, still standing, began to speak. John and Matthew couldn’t believe the stamina of the man, and scrambled for their notes.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” As he usually did whenever his former profession came into play, Matthew looked up at Jesus with a knowing smile and received a nod in return. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank you I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” I tell you, this tax man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus turned around and saw a large caravan of young families taking refuge on the other side of the trees. He laughed. “So much for a nap, brothers,” he teased, and sat down on a large rock to enjoy the new company, perhaps even striking up a conversation.

A man and woman approached the edge of the group and asked, “Is that Jesus of Nazareth?” They pointed at him.

Thomas asked, “You know him?”

“Yes, of course. We’re from Hippos on the east side of the lake.”

The disciples were tired and not very friendly toward the interlopers, but that didn’t discourage the woman. She said, “Jesus healed my brother of an eye condition.”

Judas was particularly annoyed. “I suggest you leave us alone. We’re all tired.”

The man didn’t back off. “With all due respect, we came to see Jesus. Let him answer for himself.”

Judas bristled, “Move on!”

The man moved toward Jesus and asked another disciple lying in the shade, “Do you think we could talk to Jesus?”

Before the disciple could answer, Jesus looked over at the man. “What is it?”

Timidly, they said, “We are wondering if you would lay your hands upon the children and pray for them.”

“Of course. Bring them to me.”
The couple whirled around and ran back to their people and gathered up a large group of children and pushed them to Jesus. The disciples sat up and saw what was going on and were not happy. "Will they never leave you alone?" one disciple said loudly.

Jesus turned and glared at him, "They will soon enough leave me alone, and so will you. Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." For an hour Jesus laid his hands on each one and prayed for them. The disciples would find out in time the Father answered those prayers, and many of these would become part of many of the congregations springing up in the future. Even some would become martyrs for Israel's Messiah.

Further up the long incline at another rest stop, a young man, well dressed and leading an extraordinary group on well kept camels, stopped and dismounted and came to Jesus. "Teacher, I know you from the festivals," the man said, opening the conversation.

"Were you one of the leaders?" Jesus asked.
"No, no. I would hope I would never be so disrespectful."

Jesus smiled. "I understand. What can I do for you?" He noticed the crowd pushing in to hear, including the disciples.

"Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"
"Why are you asking me about what is good?"
"Because you are a good man."
"There is only one who is good," Jesus said, pointing to the sky; "but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."

"Which ones?"

Jesus replied, "You shall not commit murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor you father and mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The man answered confidently, "All these things I have kept from my youth; what am I still lacking?"

"If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

The young man's face fell and he looked down at the ground and slowly turned around and walked away from Jesus, never once making eye contact. Jesus knew the grief gripping his soul right then. As he watched the man depart, he said quietly to his disciples, "It is so true a rich man has a very hard time entering into the kingdom of heaven. In fact it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

The disciples were astonished at this encounter. A young man with wealth and his whole earthly life with its pleasure and position ahead of him, rejecting eternal life, rejecting the only one who could give real meaning to his existence. And yet, what would they have done if they possessed such means? Every disciple except one searched his soul. It took Simon Peter to ask what they all were thinking, "Then who can be saved?"
Jesus studied the dear faces waiting an answer. "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Matthew made a note next to this summation: It all comes down to the Spirit.

Peter said, "We have left everything and have followed you; what then will there be for us?"

Jesus nodded agreement. "Here's the truth: you who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne; you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for my name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last; and the last, first."

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Jericho came into view several miles east of the city. The disciples at last had a goal to strive for. Jesus, too, welcomed the sight, but with some anxiety, knowing Jerusalem was only a day’s journey from Jericho. Foremost on his mind was the impending separation from his Father when he would lay upon him, a mere man, all the sins of the world. That period of time when he would be alone is what he was beginning to grapple with. He veered off to the side of the road and huddled once again with his disciples. "We see the city up ahead. Let me tell you plainly one more time what is going to happen.

"The Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify him, and on the third day he will be raised up."

"Will you then establish the kingdom?" Simon Zelotes asked, nearly ignoring what Jesus had just said.

"I'll answer with a story.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. He went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing, and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' They said, 'Because no one hired us.' He said, 'You go into the vineyard too.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. When those hired first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' But he answered, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to
“do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’ So the last shall be first and the first last.”

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“Miss Fritzen, you have a lot of explaining to do,” Dr. Shalat said smiling.
“I’ll do my best,” she promised. “Sometimes interpretations fail because there is no end to the light coming from Scripture. So what I say is only the latest word, not the last.”
“Understood.”

Bailey hoped her explanation would suffice, especially for the Jewish team. “I think the vineyard represents the produce of the Lord’s work from the beginning of the nation of Israel to the end of the age, all of which is for the benefit of humanity. The first laborers are those Israelites born under God’s providence to bear the obligations of the Law of Moses in order to be the conduit for the Messiah. The third hour laborers could be the apostles of Jesus. The rest of the laborers could represent the Christians throughout history called at various times to work. I suppose you could say if our reading of prophecy is correct, then we here on this team could be among those eleventh hour workers called late in time.”
“That hardly seems fair,” Yosef said from the Jewish podium.

Bailey nodded. “I can’t disagree with you, Yosef, but the owner of the vineyard can do whatever he pleases. What seems fair to us may not be so with the rule maker.
“But remember your rejection of Jesus. When Yahweh put your nation aside for a time, he needed workers to work in the vineyard; that is, to distribute truth to the world. That’s why we Christians even exist. We’ve been answering the call to work the vineyard for two thousand years.” She knew the Jew was not satisfied.
“I think the point to take away from this is not to be upset at this parable, but to be grateful you have seen Jesus in an all new light this summer. Now you have the opportunity to become a laborer and get the same wage, the same blessing, the same reward as your ancient ancestors will receive.” Bailey sat down and Diego began.

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The disciples were dead on their feet as they approached the city. They were hoping they could get lodging and food without being detected by the sick and needy or the curious. They knew, of course, Jesus had no such attitude. He thrived on healing and teaching, so it was no surprise to them when they heard a loud voice ring out.

“Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”
Jesus looked over and saw two blind men together, and the crowd trying to quiet the man who yelled out all the more. How does he know I’m the son of David?

“Son of David, have mercy on me!”
Jesus stopped. “Philip and Judas, bring that man to me.”
The man leaned on the disciples and stood in front of Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked.

“Lord, I want to regain my sight!” he said excitedly.
“Receive your sight; your faith has made you well.”
The man saw and fell at Jesus’ feet and worshiped him and rose and faced him. “Lord, be it far from me to overextend, but I have…”
“Go and bring him here.”
The man rushed to his friend and lifted him to his feet and brought him to Jesus. This man was painfully shy, but asked Jesus if he too might gain his sight. Jesus obliged and the two men walked with Jesus and his group into Jericho.
Crowds along the way praised God for the great sign they had just witnessed and pressed in to see the two men walking beside their healer. Even the disciples were energized by it, so when they saw a man in a tree up ahead gazing down on the slow procession, they were not surprised.

Jesus stopped and looked up at the man and smiled. “Zaccheus, hurry and come down. I’m staying at your house tonight.”

He hustled down and came to Jesus. He was a short man and he looked up at him. “Lord, it would be my privilège. I will run ahead and prepare a meal for you and for all your people.” He looked up and recognized the men flanking Jesus. “Bartimeus, you and Ezra are welcome too. Congratulations on your new eyes!”

“Thank you, Jesus did it!” he replied enthusiastically.

Those from Jericho in the crowd began to murmur, some loud enough to hear. “He is going to be a guest of a man who is a sinner.” “Does he know who this man really is? Zaccheus is a cheat!”

Zaccheus hesitated, looked at his detractors, then up at the Galilean healer. “Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.”

Those who heard this were amazed at such a change in the man. It was almost as radical as the two blind men looking at the world. Jesus nodded when he heard Zaccheus’ proposal. He turned and addressed the grumblers. “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.

“A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then returned. He called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them...”

“Wait, Mr. Medina. Explain what a mina is,” Dr. Shalat insisted. Diego turned to C’Anna. Several Christians huddled and finally he turned back to the doctor. “A mina is about three months wages.”

“So if my math is correct, that was about two and half years worth of money.”


“...He called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them, ‘Do business with this until I come back.’ But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him and said, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us.’

“When the man returned after receiving the kingdom, he ordered these slaves be brought to him so he might know what business they had done. The first appeared and said, ‘Master, your mina has made ten minas more.’ The master said to him, ‘Well done, good slave! Because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.’ The second came and said, ‘Your mina has made five minas.’ The master said, ‘You are to be over five cities.’ Another came. ‘Master, here is your mina, which I kept in a handkerchief; for I
was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man. You take up what you did not lay down and reap what you did not sow.’ The master was irate. ‘By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow? Then why did you not put my money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?’ He turned to the bystanders and said, ‘Take the mina away from him and give it to the one who has the ten minas.’ They said, ‘Master, he has ten minas.’ He responded, ‘I tell you to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.”

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“Mr. Medina, explain this to us if you would,” Dr. Shalat said.
“This parable is based on an actual event. I suspect one on the Jewish team could tell us about it.” Shalev was caught off guard, but quickly recovered and turned to his history experts Naomi and Yaacov. They came forward, gathering their thoughts. Naomi began, “I think Diego is referring to the first part of the century when King Herod killed all the boy babies in Bethlehem.”
“I am.”
“When that evil, hated king died, his will said Archelaus should succeed him on his throne. But the Jews detested this man and did not want him ruling over them; so Archelaus gave investment money to his friends and went to Rome to confer with Augustus Caesar and to get his approval to rule over Judea. The Jews sent a protest party to appeal to the Caesar to disallow Archelaus. Augustus stood with Archelaus. When he returned to Jerusalem, he inquired about his investments and put to death many of the protestors who had traveled to Rome.”

“Thank you, Naomi,” Diego said. “Jesus used this incident to base his story on.”
“So how does it relate to us?” Dr. Shalat asked.
Diego quickly answered. “Jesus went away to a distant country, which is the throne of his Father to receive a kingdom for himself. He will return. He has distributed to his servants money, which means gifts – gifts of natural abilities and gifts of divine attributes. We are responsible for how we use what he has given us, for how we invest the treasure he put within us.”
“When do we receive these gifts?” Yaacov asked.
“At the moment we have human life, we have certain characteristics that are uniquely ours. Innately we have a soul capable of doing certain things. Our Creator gives us these traits,” Diego explained.
“Furthermore, at the moment we are born anew by the Spirit, he gives us a new life – Christ living in us. He is full of all the divine attributes and they are ours to live by and utilize in our lives.”
“And he will judge us by what we do with these gifts?”
“Yes.”
“What about those who don’t want him to reign over them?” Naomi asked.
“The parable is pretty clear about their end. I hope they don’t persist in their rejection. There’s still time,” Diego said, and sat down. Claire came next.

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“Six more days, brothers. Not much time,” Jesus stated at a rest stop not far from Bethany. The disciples did not want to hear the details again of his suffering. They would rather he talk of the kingdom and their place in it.
“It will be good to see Lazarus again,” Matthew said.
“I’m sure people are still dumbfounded by his being raised,” Nathaniel commented.
“They are, believe me,” Jesus said, standing up and preparing to hike the last
"We should get there by the middle of the afternoon."

The teacher pushed his students, setting a fast pace up the long incline. He recalled the day when he healed Simon the leper outside of Bethany, and what profound gratitude his three children had shown him from that time forth. Though their father died two years after his healing, those two years were the best of his life, because the whole family had come to realize Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. Many times the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus showed their love for him by opening their home, by fixing meals, by listening to what he had to say. It was Jesus' favorite retreat.

He first saw Martha in the shade outside the house slaving over food. He chuckled. "I see you're in your element," Jesus teased, surprising the little lady surrounded by mounds of vegetables.

"Jesus!" She rushed into the strong arms of her friend. "I knew you'd get here about now."

"I smelled the food."
"You men are all the same." She pushed away. "It's so good to see you again."
"It's good to be back, believe me. How are your siblings?"
Martha shook her head and grinned. "Since you raised Lazarus, this village is turned upside down. He is your greatest proponent. We're so thankful, Master."
"What do the Pharisees think of it?"
"We've heard of threats on his life because so many people believe in you."
"By whom?"
"The chief priests."
Jesus shook his head. "How shameful.
"I'll go in and surprise them."
"I think you'll find them expecting you."
"I'll try anyway."

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Capable hands prepared the meal with love and with plenty left over. Jesus and his twelve disciples reclined at several tables, Lazarus next to Jesus in intimate fellowship. Mary gathered up the dishes and took them away. She returned with a small box and knelt down at the feet of the one she deeply loved, the one she firmly believed was the Messiah of Israel. Every eye was upon her as she opened the expensive box and slowly poured the costly ointment, first on his head, and then on his feet. It was a touching scene to all watching on, and when the smell of the spikenard filled the house, they all realized the extent of Mary's love. She had poured out the best she had, way more than she could afford, but to her it was not nearly enough.

The reaction was swift. Indignant Judas, the group's money box pifferer, said, "Why this waste? Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" Jesus turned to Judas and glared at him before saying, "Why do you bother the woman? She has done a good deed to me. You always have the poor with you; but you do not always have me. When she poured this
perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial." Jesus hoped everyone would understand what he had just said – "for burial." I'm going to die!" I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." Such was the love of Mary of Bethany and such was the appreciation of the recipient. Now Jesus was ready for his final visit to Jerusalem.

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All four stood above the Eastern Gate watching the procession and not believing what they were seeing. They had heard he was going to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, but they were not expecting him to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, as Prisca had overheard. He was at the bottom of the valley ready to ascend through the Eastern Gate.

"This is absolutely amazing!" Silas exclaimed. "The old man was right!"
"I knew I heard him correctly," Prisca said.
"Look at all the people on both sides of the path," Leah pointed out.

The roar of their 'Hosannas' thundered through the Kidron Valley. Many threw palm branches in front of the donkey. Everyone was ecstatic, and the atmosphere snapped with excitement and anticipation. The people were convinced the kingdom had finally come to Israel! The Prophets were right after all! The great day had arrived and the Romans would be routed and the King would be enthroned and the world would be his footstool! It was a day beyond comprehension!

Stephen was overwhelmed with emotion. He had spent a lot of time in Galilee, more than his father had allotted, even becoming one of the seventy disciples. Now to witness the fulfillment of prophecy was more than he had ever imagined. But his emotion was tempered because he also knew the prophecies of the suffering Messiah, and had heard the teacher himself plainly delineate what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem at the hands of the chief priests and elders. Jesus had made it clear that lambs were for sacrifice and he was the lamb of his Father.

The four hurried down to get a closer view. Jesus waved to the crowd, and nodded at Stephen and Silas. The sisters noticed the acknowledgment.

"He acted like he knew you two," Leah said.
Stephen smiled. "He does."
Silas confirmed. "I told you, Leah. You wouldn't believe me."

Stephen wanted to position himself and his friends as close to Jesus as they could wherever he might go. "Come on. Let's go!" For the rest of the day, the four young people shadowed Jesus and his disciples, occasionally talking to some of them who remembered them as part of the seventy sent out to the towns around Galilee. Before the sun set, the band of brothers left the city for the friendly atmosphere of Jesus' favorite place – the house of the three siblings in Bethany.

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It was just after sunrise when the thirteen men left Bethany to go up to
Jerusalem again. Seeing a large fig tree up ahead, Jesus said, “A fig would taste good right now.” When they arrived at the tree, there was not a fruit in sight. “There’s nothing but leaves on this tree,” Jesus exclaimed. “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”

The disciples heard, but did not understand, and the group moved on toward an uncertain future. “Are you sure you want to go up there?” John asked, knowing Jesus’ goal was the temple. “I can’t imagine a more dangerous place for you right now.”

Jesus turned to his beloved disciple and said, “It must be so. My time is coming, but is not yet. Don’t worry.”

The disciples didn’t quite know how to process that word, so they said nothing and followed on. Had they considered the requirements for sacrificial lambs, they would have known. They entered the temple area and right away Jesus saw the same situation he had destroyed early in his ministry - moneychangers selling very profitably the sacrificial animals to the poor of Israel. They hadn’t learned a thing, or the Temple priests and their Roman overseers who allowed it were complicit and squeezing the life out of Jewish peasants. It angered Jesus because they were taking advantage of the people right in his Father’s house. As he had done before, he went on a rampage, overthrowing the tables and the coins, scattering the animals, releasing the doves, and generally shocking his audience.

He shouted at them as they departed the area, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of thieves! Get out! All of you!”

When the mayhem died down and the people recognized Jesus and the authority he exercised, they crowded around him, bringing to him the blind and the lame. He healed everyone, and an atmosphere of peace and calm settled over the area. Even some of the children began to shout over and over what they had heard the day before, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

The chief priests and scribes stood off to the side, indignant the maverick Galilean dared invade their territory again and overturn their carefully crafted and fraudulent way of life. They couldn’t bear to hear what the children were chanting, so they approached Jesus. “Do you hear what these children are saying?”

“Yes. Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have perfected praise?’” He left them speechless, and with his disciples left the mount and returned to the narrow streets and alleys below.

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The next morning on their way back to Jerusalem from Bethany, the group came to the fig tree and noticed it withered. Peter, remembering the curse, said, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree which you cursed has withered.”

Jesus stopped and gathered his men around him. “Let me teach you something here.

“You marvel that this fig tree has withered. Do as I do – have faith in God. I tell you the truth, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the
sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe you have received them, and they will be granted you.”

“Master, what do you mean by mountain? It is not literal, is it? Can you give us an example?” Peter asked.

Jesus was pleased with the question. “Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive them, so your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.”

The disciples understood, because, being together every day, irritations popped up all the time. Unforgiveness sometimes, more often than not, became a large mountain that needed casting into the sea. They moved on contemplating these timely words.

“Mr. Schenck, what do you have to say?” Dr. Shalat asked.

“I want to let C’Anna and the professors know of several of us who are familiar with Christian eschatology.”

“Explain that word, please,” Najeeb asked.

“It’s the study of the end times,” Chaim explained.

“Go ahead,” the doctor said.

“As Jews, we have borne the libel of being ‘Christ killers.’ Laboring under that stigma for so many centuries makes us a little sensitive. Although the Christians haven’t talked a whole lot about them so far, we know they have views that put Jews in a very precarious position at the end of this part of history. They have the idea Jews are going to suffer terribly before the Messiah returns to save them. I would like the Christians to tell us what they believe about the end of time things,” Chaim said.

C’Anna stood and asked, “Chaim, would you be so kind to bring to the podium those who are well-informed about these things, and maybe ask us questions. That may help us answer better.”

Chaim turned to Shalev and he pointed to six others to join their teammate at the podium – Gavriella, Nadav, Yitzhak, Orli, Naomi, and Raviv. Gavriella asked the first question. “Chaim is correct in saying we are familiar with the life of Jesus and his teachings on the end of this part of history. We have studied these things for years because many of our friends are believers in the Messiah, who they say is your Jesus; so we want to make sure we know what they are talking about. My question concerns the fig tree Jesus cursed and was included as one of his parables. Do you think he is speaking in a metaphor about the nation of Israel?”

Tyler took the question. “That’s a good question, Gavriella. I think most of us here believe the metaphor speaks of the nation of Israel.”

“So when Jesus cursed the fig tree, he cursed the nation?” she asked.

“Yes, but let me explain what . . .”

Yitzhak interrupted. “Explain what? You just said it!” He was angry, and Tyler was caught off guard, but quickly regrouped.

“Yitzhak, calm down,” she said quietly. “You’ll have to listen if you want to learn what we believe.”

The rebuke stung the Jew, and he wanted to retaliate, but backed off.

“When Jesus found no fruit on that tree, he likened it to what he had found in the nation of Israel, and that is, nothing but a show of religion without any practical result.”

“That’s not fair,” Nadav protested.

“Isn’t it? For three years Jesus went about the country doing good and teaching truth, but what did the national leaders do? They resisted him every step of the way, calling into question his pedigree, accusing him of doing the signs by the power of Beelzebul, and challenging his contention that he was the fulfillment of the pictures and prophecies of the Tanakh.” Tyler paused. “So when Jesus discovered the fruitless fig tree, he immediately connected it with the fruitless nation.”

“What do you mean?”

“The nation’s final rejection of Jesus occurred in the middle to late 60s. After that, the Romans came in and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and dispersed the nation throughout the known world. As a nation, Israel was cursed.” Tyler stated emphatically. “I don’t think you can argue with that.”
“Cursed forever?”

Tyler gave the podium to Dusty. “No! Absolutely not! That’s where the parable comes in. Jesus said . . . Here, let me read it.” He turned to the passage. “Jesus said about the fig tree, ‘when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know summer is near.’”

“I’m glad you said that,” Orli said. “Many Christians think we’re a cursed people.”

“You were cursed for a time,” Dusty agreed; “and for a long time; but when your nation achieved statehood in 1948, the branch became tender and put forth leaves.”

“You really believe that?” Chaim asked.

“Don’t you?” Dusty returned the question.

“I don’t necessarily believe the prophecy.”

“So what? The fact is what Jesus said came true. You’re living in the land right now because the fig tree became tender. You’re living proof of the veracity of what Jesus said.”

Chaim struggled. “So what are the figs then? Are they to come?”

Dusty was quick. “Yes. They are to come. When the nation repents of her rejection of the Messiah and embraces him, the figs will be there.”

“When will that happen?”

“You tell me. We’re all eagerly awaiting that day,” Dusty challenged, and relinquished the podium to Natalie.

“Do you think it’s going to take more trials for us?” Raviv asked.

“Yes. According to the prophecies, the nation will go through tribulation like never before.”

“More than the Holocaust?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Why?”

Natalie thought about softening the blow, but did not. “Because of your stubbornness. Even Elijah and Enoch preach to you to repent in the middle of Jerusalem, but only a fraction of you do.”

“You need to explain,” Raviv said.

“Will you listen?” Natalie challenged.

“Yes. We promise.”

“All right.”

“May we ask questions along the way?”

“Yes.” Natalie breathed out her anxiety and began her explanation.

“This has been a good exchange. Let’s continue in the morning,” Dr. Shalat said, dismissing the teams.

JULY 24

Jesus stepped into the temple and right away a crowd gathered around him. Passover week brought Jews from everywhere and many recognized him. Rather than just being a curiosity, Jesus took advantage of the situation and began to teach, but not for long. He was on enemy territory and the chief priests and elders came over and stopped him.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” the spokesman asked indignantly, but with great anticipation. Here was the national culprit in the temple with a crowd of witnesses about to watch him cave under their interrogation.

Jesus eyed the leaders of the people and said, “I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.”

They nodded, confident in their ability to answer any question by an uneducated carpenter.

“The Baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?”

They huddled together, because it was not the question they were expecting.

“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’
But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet."

They broke their huddle and said, "We do not know."

Jesus shook his head at the craven hypocrites. "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. But before you leave, let me tell you a parable, and you can tell me what you think.

"A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, "I will, sir; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

One of the chief priests said, "The first."

Jesus nodded and said, "The truth is the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him."

The crowd enlarged, including the temple priests and elders. Jesus was relaxed, though the environment favored his opponents.

"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. When the harvest time was near, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his portion of the crop. But the tenants seized his slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and get his inheritance!' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

They said to him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons."

It was the exact answer he expected them to give. "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

He waited for some response, but the leaders balked. Jesus took advantage of their silence. "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."

They didn't have to ask clarification this time. They heard it plainly the kingdom of God would go to another people. They knew Jesus likened himself to the stone that would pulverize them. We have to seize this man before it's too late! He will destroy us if we don't destroy him first! But what of the people? They consider him a prophet.

Jesus knew the secret deliberations in their minds, and He knew he was a marked man, but he wasn't about to lose this opportunity while he had this audience. He peered into the hardened eyes of his detractors. "Let me tell you
another parable.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, 'Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.'" But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them.

"But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast. Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.

"But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Jesus ended the parable with a chilling pronouncement. "For many are called, but few are chosen."

The priests and elders were in disarray. Jesus' parable was a thinly veiled allegation against the nation as represented by her leaders standing in front of the accuser. As they huddled to formulate a response, Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians joined them in their opposition to the former carpenter. Normally not compatible with each other, the leaders of the Jewish sects combined forces in their fight against Jesus.

Spokesmen of the Pharisees and Herodians stepped forward to question Jesus. "Teacher, we know you are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for you are not partial to any. Tell us then, what do you think? Is it lawful to give a poll tax to Caesar or not?"

Jesus saw right through their malicious pandering. "Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the poll tax."

They produced a denarius.

"Whose likeness and inscription is this?" he asked, holding up the coin.

"Caesar's."

"Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."

Disarmed and defeated, they moved to the back, and the Sadducees stepped forward. "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother as next of kin shall marry his wife, and raise up children for his brother.'

"Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother; so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be?"

Jesus was not impressed by their story. "You are mistaken, not
understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they
neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But
regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to
you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of
Jacob?' He is not the God of the dead but of the living."

The argument resonated with the crowd, especially the proof about the three
patriarchs being alive. They buzzed loudly as the Sadducees slunk away to the
rear of the opposition.

The Pharisees saw the dejection of the Sadducees, but that did not deter
them from charging into the fray with the unscathed Galilean. "Teacher, which is
the great commandment in the Law?"

Jesus immediately replied, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your
heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and
foremost commandment. The second is like it. 'You shall love your neighbor as
yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Jesus waited for them to rebut him, but no rebuttal came, so he asked them,
"What do you think about the Christ, whose son is he?"

"The son of David."

Jesus sprang the trap. "Then how does David in the Spirit call him 'Lord,'
saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies
beneath your feet.'"? If David then calls him 'Lord,' how is he his son?"

The crowd whispered about the wisdom of the answer, and watched the
Pharisees melt back into the defeated group of leaders who had nothing more to
say to the uneducated tradesman.

Jesus did not abate his allegations or calm his passion. He turned his back to
his antagonists and faced the crowd, his disciples off to the side, and said, "The
scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore
all they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they
say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's
shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move t

"But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they modify their
garments to be ostentatious. They love the place of honor at banquets and the
chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and
being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for one is your teacher
and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for one is your
father, he who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for one is your leader –
Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself
shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

Jesus then turned and faced the leaders of the people whom he had
humiliated into silence. He noticed one particular Pharisee, a young man, who
joined the group and was standing in the front with his arms folded. Jesus took
aim at him. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off
the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do
you allow those who are entering to go in.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because for a pretense you
make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.
“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

“Woe to you blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisees, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so the outside of it may become clean also.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs that on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Jesus shook his head at them and raised his voice. ‘You testify against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up the measure of your fathers! You serpents, you generation of vipers! How will you escape the sentence of Gehenna?’

Jesus paused to drink some water and paced between the two groups. No one said a word. He kept eye contact with the leaders and continued on. ‘Therefore, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so upon you may fall all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. All these things will come upon this generation."

Jesus caught his breath and closed his eyes briefly, contemplating the next grievous subject on his heart. He looked at no one in particular, raised his hands to the city, and said somberly and loudly, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to you!”

Some of the disciples took note of the tears welling up in their teacher’s eyes. “How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not!” With another sweep of his arm taking in the magnificent temple, he added, “Behold, your house is left to you desolate!” Turning to the chief priests and Pharisees and the rest, he said, “For I say to you, from now on you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

With that, Jesus stepped away from the crowd and left the area with his disciples, passing to the treasury on his way off the plateau.

He sat off to the side so he could unobtrusively observe how the people were putting money into the treasury. Many rich Jews were piling in large sums, one after another. Then through the entrance came an obviously poor woman.

“She's a widow,” Jesus whispered, and every eye went to her.

She dropped in two small copper coins amounting to a cent. Jesus led his disciples outside and huddled with them. "Brothers, I'm telling you the truth, that poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury."

The disciples' faces expressed unbelief, so Jesus explained. "The rich Jews put
in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, everything she had to live on.”

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“When does that happen?” Raviv asked Emily.
“When does what happen?”
“When does Israel say ‘Blessed is he?’”
“That happens at the end of the age when Israel’s Messiah returns to save the nation from destruction.”
“Really?” Raviv asked with much interest.
“Yes! Your own book describes it,” Emily stated clearly. “It’s what your prophets wrote about thousands of years ago. Please, Raviv, believe your book.” She turned around to her teammates and spread out her arm to them. “We do.”
Raviv didn’t know how to respond.
Emily continued. “You Israelis will have to start believing in your Messiah sooner or later. Better sooner.”
Chaim challenged Emily, “You’re so certain your Jesus is our Messiah, but with all your talk about him, we’re still not convinced. It’ll take a lot more.”
“All right, Chaim, you’ll get a lot more,” Emily promised. “Jesus had a lot to say about the end of this age, and that should persuade you. We’ll tell you, but you have to listen and try to understand.”

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The disciples crowded around Jesus when they left the temple plateau. As they passed along the structure, Judas Iscariot expressed the anxiety rising up in him after Jesus’ lecture to the priests and Pharisees. He had the sinking feeling they were going to do something to Jesus before he could establish himself as the king of the kingdom. Maybe he will respond to the temple. It’s not political. It’s the symbol of our national unity. “Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” Judas was genuinely hopeful Jesus would respond to his positive assertion.
Jesus looked back at the great house of the Lord, the only one like it in the world. With much gravitas, He shook his head. “Do you see these great buildings?”
The disciples nodded approvingly, unprepared for what was to follow. “Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down.”
The disciples were troubled by that word, but didn’t say anything until they were alone in the garden on the side of the Mount of Olives. The question gnawed at them, until Nathaniel broached the subject. “Master, tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?”
Jesus did not hesitate. “See to it no one misleads you. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and mislead many. You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not the end.”

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“Mr. Schenck, do you have a question for Miss Thomas?”
Chaim looked over at the Christian. “Who was Jesus talking to, Emily?”
“Refresh my memory.”
“He was talking about wars and rumors of wars and false Messiahs.”
“Okay, I remember. He’s talking to the disciples.”
“And this is to take place at the end of the age?”
“No. This is during their lifetimes.”
“But what about the stones of the temple being thrown down?”
“That happened in 70 with the Romans.”
“So you’re talking about the time between Jesus and the siege of Jerusalem?” Chaim queried.
“Yes. Listen to what Jesus said. He’s not only the Messiah of Israel, but a prophet as well,” Emily argued.

Jesus knew his time was short, as was the information among his disciples. This was a critical moment because he had their attention. “Before the temple is destroyed, here’s what will happen.

“They will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name’s sake. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. But even your parents and brothers and relatives and friends will betray you, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all because of my name. Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance and patience, you will possess your souls.”

The disciples were shaken by this word. Betrayal. Persecution. Hatred. Death. These were sobering promises, but they kept clinging to the one doing the promising. They could never forsake him, not after all they had gone through with him, all they had heard from his lips, and all the deep affection they had for him. He was their Messiah, after all.

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize her desolation is near; then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city; because these are the days of vengeance, so all things which are written will be fulfilled.

“Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and wrath to this people; and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led away captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

The seven Jews stood together at the podium listening eagerly to the account. Emily took her place on the bench along with Tyler, Dusty, and Natalie. The rest of the team lined up to give account and to answer questions.

“What Emily just described, is it for the nation?” Nadav asked.

“Indirectly. He’s speaking to the disciples and warning them of what is to come if the nation persists in their rejection of the Messiah,” Gabe answered.
“But it’s describing what is happening with the nation, right?”
“Yes. Emily described the time between Jesus’ departure to heaven and the destruction of the city and temple.”
“So Jesus knew?”
Gabe tried not to snicker. “Of course he knew. He’s the Son of Yahweh. And he was right.”
“What do you mean?”
“Your history of the last two thousand years proves everything he said. The nation was led away into all nations of the world. Millions of Jews died by persecution. The Gentiles trampled Jerusalem underfoot the whole time, up until 1967. Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about.”
The Jews wanted to protest, but wisely refrained and moved on. “So what about the end of the age and the times of the Gentiles?” Orli asked. “Tell us about that.”
Gabe obliged.

Jesus settled in for a long discussion, stretching his legs and taking a drink of water. “Brothers, listen to me. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are the beginning of birth pangs...”

“So this is a different time?” Gavriella asked.
“Yes. This is at the end,” Gabe explained. “This is the seventieth seven of your prophet Daniel. This is the long awaited final seven years of Israel’s history.”
“What are the birth pangs?” Naomi wanted to know.
“John, the youngest disciple, lived into his nineties and was exiled on an island where the Lord gave him visions of this time in history. In his book of Revelation he describes four horsemen set loose on the earth – one of judgment, one of war, one of famine, and one of death. These horsemen and the effect they have on the earth set in motion the labor pains, the birth pangs.”
“Who is born?” Naomi asked.
“The Messiah will return at the end of the labor.”
Esther was next.

“At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another,” Jesus continued. “Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.”
“Master, who will preach this gospel?” Philip asked.
“My two witnesses, Elijah and Enoch, and any who will believe in their message.”
“What will they preach about?”
“About my imminent return.”
“So this is after the destruction of the city and temple?” Peter asked.
“Yes. Long after.”
“So what is our job after you’re gone?”
Jesus loved Peter’s inquiry. It showed he was thinking well. “You will preach to the nation to repent and to receive me as the Messiah.”
“And yet you’re talking about a long time from now,” John wondered.

Jesus replied, “Yes, that’s true, but only if the nation rejects me. She has the opportunity to repent and receive me. If that happens, the kingdom will come to Israel. But if not, then what I have prophesied will come to pass.”

“So it’s up to the nation.”

“Yes, and up to your preaching to the nation.”

“What happens to those who do receive you?” Thaddeus asked.

“You will gather them and instruct them in the way of the Spirit,” Jesus answered.

“What about the Gentiles?” James the first asked.

“They are included. The Spirit is for every person.”

“Master, let’s say the nation rejects you and we come down to the end of the age, what can we look for?” Simon Zelotes asked.

“When you see the Abomination of Desolation which was spoken by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.”

“This sounds like the previous warning, Master,” Nathaniel interjected.

“Both apply, because Jerusalem comes under attack again. But this final time is much worse. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.”

Yitzhak interrupted the Christian. “Hold on, Esther. We need to talk here.”

“Go ahead.”

“This tribulation at the end.”

“Yes.”

“You said it would be the worst ever.”

“No. Jesus did.”

“Okay. Jesus did. Did he know about the Holocaust?”

“Oh, yes. If you read the final book of the Bible, you’ll discover that only one third of the nation of Israel will remain at the end of this age and will be saved by the Messiah,” Esther explained. “Now I don’t know how many Jews will be in the land by that time, but I suspect there will be a lot more than now.”

“Why?”

“Because the world doesn’t like the Jews,” she answered candidly. “I’m a black and I should know about that. But I like the Jews, and all of us here do, and most Christians do, but the world in general hates you, and that hatred is going to get worse and worse and I predict it will drive many millions of Jews back to the land. That’s just what I think. So there could be many millions who are slaughtered before the end, so yes, it will be worse than the Holocaust.”

The Jews were shaken by this word and had a hard time responding. Finally, Gavriella spoke up. “My friend Esther, I hope you are wrong.”

“I hope I am too. But for your sake, Gaviella, I hope you and your teammates see Jesus really is your Messiah and grip him with all your heart. This is your great hope.” Esther’s big heart was on display.

Gaviella couldn’t resist asking, “Do you think that’s why the nation will have to go through this?”

Esther nodded. “I do. The nation as a whole will need travail to recognize their Messiah, but you as individuals don’t have to go through that if you will recognize him now.” With that word, Esther let Riley follow. C’Anna was surprised to see such interest in these end time prophecies by the Jews. They hardly allowed time for Jesus to speak.
Jesus furthered his explanation of the end of the age. "Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short."

"Wait, Riley, let me ask you something right here," Yitzhak interrupted. "Sorry."
"No. It’s all right."
"Who are the elect here?"
"You are."
"I am?"
"The nation of Israel."
"Are you sure?"
"Yes. You are the chosen people of God. And Jesus goes on to warn the nation at the end, during the terrible trials, to not run after false Christs who can display all kinds of supernatural signs. Remember how often the Jews demanded a sign of Jesus. It’s a pattern. You won’t believe unless you see a miracle. Jesus warns the nation not to do this."
"Will there be nothing to signal the Messiah, then?" he asked.
Riley explained, "Yes. There will be his coming like lightning out of the east flashing to the west. You’ll definitely see it.
"You will also see plainly the angels of vengeance swooping down on the world for its final judgment. Jesus says it will be like vultures descending on a corpse. Yitzhak, there will be plenty to see. But I encourage you not to wait to see with your physical eyes. Exercise your inner eyes to see the Messiah and receive him."
"When can we do that?" he asked.
"Right now, if you wanted. You’ve heard us tell of the Spirit day after day describing Jesus’ ministry, so he’s available."
Alexis followed.

Jesus said, "But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. He will send forth his angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other."

"Alex, are you talking about the very end?" Orli asked.
"Yes. This will be it."
"How can you be so sure?"
Alex reached over and grabbed her Bible. "Let me read you something from your own prophet Zechariah. If you want to follow me, it’s the fourteenth chapter.
"‘Behold, a day is coming for the Lord when the spoil taken from you will be divided among you, for I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished and half of the people will not be cut off from the city.’"
“What does that mean?”

Alexis, quick on her feet, replied, “It means half the people of Jerusalem will be trapped. Let me keep reading.

“Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem. And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people: all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people of the earth be gathered together against it. In that day, saith the Lord, I will smite every horse with astonishment, and his rider with madness: and I will open mine eyes upon the house of Judah, and will smite every horse of the people with blindness.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Naomi asked, encouraged.

“It’s good because it signals the end of Israel’s suffering and the return of the Messiah,” Alexis agreed. “But the Jewish loss of life at this time will be appalling. Let me keep going, skipping ahead a bit.

“The Lord also shall save the tents of Judah first, that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem do not magnify against Jerusalem.”

“What does that mean?” Chaim asked.

“I don’t know for sure,” Alexis confessed. “Your team should know more about this than we do. These are your prophets. I’m almost certain Isaiah and some of the other prophets have a lot to say about the details of this time.”

“You’re right. I agree, we should know these things,” he acknowledged. “It’s just that we’ve never believed Jesus to be our Messiah.”

“Chaim, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to defer to my friend Grace Ann. I’ve talked quite a bit.” She sat down and Grace Ann continued seamlessly.

“Chaim, it doesn’t matter whether you believe Jesus is your Messiah, or not.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. The Messiah is the Messiah. You don’t believe he’s Jesus; we do. The fact is your Messiah is going to come. You think he is coming; we think he is returning. The point is he will be here soon and his coming is all about your nation.”

Gavriella agreed. “That makes sense.”

Grace Ann smiled at her counterpart. “With that, let me pick up where Alex left off.

“In that day shall the Lord defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and he that is feeble among them at that day shall be as David; and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the Lord before them. And it shall come to pass in that day, I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn. In that day shall there be a great mourning in Jerusalem...And the land shall mourn.”

Grace Ann looked up from her reading. “This is why we think Jesus is your Messiah.”

“Why?” Orli asked.

“Because it says, ‘They shall look upon me whom they have pierced.’ He would have had to be among you at some time in the past in order for you to pierce him.”

Orli asked. “So you think this was the crucifixion, then?”

“I do. We all do. I think you do. The prophet even refers to it. The thirteenth chapter.

“In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.”

“Is this what you Christians say is the sacrifice of Jesus?” Nadav asked.

“Yes! This is the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Jesus was the Father’s sacrifice.”

“But we don’t believe that,” he protested.

“I know. You rejected him and left the door open for us poor Gentiles to receive him,” she explained.

“Had you received him back in the first century, the kingdom would have come to Israel.”

“But we didn’t.”

“No. But we Gentiles did. It’s a bittersweet blessing.”

Holden stepped forward and Grace Ann retreated to join the previous speakers. “So here’s what happened because of your rejection.

“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, says the Lord of hosts. Smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered; and I will bring back my hand upon the little ones.” Holden let this verse hit its mark before continuing.
“The little ones here could mean the followers of Jesus who went on to establish the Christian
congregations. But after the smiting, the sheep were scattered. Who can deny the nation was scattered after
the smiting of the shepherd. It wasn’t until 1948 that the scattering ended, so the rest of these verses refer to
Israel’s judgment at the last days.

“And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, says the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and
die; but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as
silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried; they shall call on my name, and I will hear them. I will
say, They are my people, and they shall say, The Lord is my God.”

Holden looked up from his reading to find seven downcast faces. He waited for some response, but it
took a while. Finally, Gavriella spoke for the seven and for her team. “Holden, if you’re right, then we have
little hope that I can see.”

Holden frowned, and tried to figure out what she meant. “I don’t understand. Think about this. At
last, your nation will recognize her Messiah, the one they put to death. Why is that not positive?”

“Because look how many die in the process. Two thirds!” she shouted.

“But it won’t be until the very last days of this age. You have time to clasp the Messiah with your
heart and mind,” Holden explained gently, hoping his Jewish friends would begin to see what he was telling
them. “Let me read a little more. Maybe this will encourage you. It regards those trapped in Jerusalem.

“Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as
when he fights on a day of battle. In
that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount
of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so half of the mountain will
move toward the north and the other half toward the south.’ Now here’s where it gets good, and I’ll shorten
it some. ‘You will flee by the valley of my mountains. . .you will flee just as you fled from before the
earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord, my God, will come, and all the holy ones
with him!’”

Holden paused and looked at the two teams. The Muslims were listening, but not understanding. The
Jews were listening intently, especially the seven standing at the podium staring at the tall Christian. He
continued. “I want to remind you these words are not written by Christians. They’re not in the so-called
New Testament. I’m reading them straight out of your Scriptures. Again, it’s from Zechariah.

“But it shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord. . .And the Lord shall be king over all the
earth, in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one. . .And men shall dwell in it, and there shall be
no more utter destruction, but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited.

“That’s enough. There’s a lot more, but that will do for now.”

The seven Jews stood deflated at the podium. They were convinced the end of the age had everything
do to with them, and that was frightening in itself. Nadav broke the silence. “Is there a silver lining in this
dark cloud?”

Holden frowned. “Dark cloud? How can you say such a thing, Nadav? Your nation will have your
Messiah!”

“But like Gavriella said, at what cost?”

“At a very high cost, I have to admit, but that’s not the point.”

“What is the point?”

“You have your Messiah!”

“But what about the slaughter? Haven’t we been through enough already?” Orli asked.

Holden didn’t want to discourage them more, but he had to be truthful. “Apparently not. But you
don’t have to face that if you’ll do what you should have done two thousand years ago.”

Raviv sighed. “Receive Jesus as our Messiah. I know what you’re going to say.”

“Is it not clear to you?” Holden asked, somewhat bewildered. He waited for an answer. “I don’t know
what else we can say. One third of the nation is saved from destruction. Even among that third there is a
special part that you can be a part of if you want.”

“What part?” Naomi asked.

“There are the firstfruits of Israel, the ones who ripen earliest in the heat of tribulation. They will be
spared this judgment. There are 144,000 of them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. But my proof is from the last book of the New Testament and I know you don’t accept that,”
Holden said sadly. “Anyway, my time is up.”

The seven Jews scrambled for some kind of equilibrium as Holden sat down. They really had no
refutation for the compelling argument the Christians had just put forth. They just weren’t sure about Jesus.
Jesus sauntered through the garden, admiring the ancient olive trees and their determination to survive in the harsh climate. He sat down in a small sitting area and his disciples clustered around him.

“I know these are important things to know, and you do well to ask me while I’m still here. Now learn a parable of the fig tree. When its branch is yet tender, and puts forth leaves, you know summer is near. So likewise you, when you shall see all these things, know it is near, even at the doors. I’m telling you, this generation shall not pass, until all these things be fulfilled.”

Jesus sought to dispel any doubt about what he was saying when he said emphatically, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

As he wrote, Matthew considered the apparent disconnect between the parable and Jesus’ words. There was none. The word about the fig tree was the eternal word of Jesus. He did catch the implication that summer follows a time of dryness and cold, something he suspected would happen to the nation; and summer was a time of new life. Beyond that, he wasn’t sure and would bring it up in fellowship.

“But of that day and hour no man knows, and not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only.”

“Are there no clues?” Thaddeus asked.

“There are, and I’ll repeat myself so you won’t forget,” Jesus replied. “I told you before not long ago, as the days of Noah were so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered into the ark. And they did not understand until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be. Then shall two be in the field, the one shall be taken and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken and the other left.

“Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord will come.”

“How do we watch?” Thomas asked.

Jesus answered promptly. “Know this, if the good man of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ready, for in such an hour as you don’t expect, the Son of Man will come.”

“So are we the good men of the house of Israel?”

“Of course you are. You have to watch and warn and exhort the people concerning my coming and me.

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant whom his lord has made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?”

“That should be us, Master,” Peter answered.

“Yes, that’s right. Blessed is that servant, whom his lord shall find doing when he comes. Truthfully I tell you, he shall make him ruler over all his goods.”

Jesus stiffened and narrowed his eyes. “But if that evil servant shall say in
his heart, ‘My lord delays his coming,’ and shall begin to strike his fellow servants and to eat and drink with the drunken; the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he is not looking for him, and in an hour when he is unaware, and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The disciples heard the warning loud and clear, and fear of disobedience filled their souls.

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Nate sat down and Marty moved to the front of the line. Chaim deepened the discussion. “I guess what we’re having a hard time grasping is what you Christians have characterized as Israel’s rejection of Jesus as Messiah. Your arguments have been compelling, and I’m inclined to believe you’re correct; so for the sake of debate, let’s agree you are.” Chaim stopped and turned to his team and then back to the Christians. “We are all in our twenties and I’d say, for our age, are fairly accomplished already. We’re educated and motivated. Assuming you are correct, what would you recommend we do in light of what you have told us about the end of these times we live in?”

Marty was shocked that Chaim would concede so much. His tone was not argumentative. He seemed to genuinely want to hear Marty’s answer. The importance of the moment seized the young believer from Brooklyn. Lord, please be in my words.

“Chaim, I will try to answer you as sincerely as your question demands.

“When Jesus walked the earth, his one burden was the repentance of your nation. It didn’t happen, but his burden hasn’t changed. Your Diaspora opened the door for us Gentiles, and for that we’re grateful more than you can ever know; but your Messiah has never changed his mind about you. Once he obtains what he wants from us Christians, his attention will return to you. Even I would say that it already has. You have statehood, a major accomplishment, and you’ve made the desert bloom. All that remains is for you to recognize and embrace Jesus as your Messiah. On the one hand, that’s what I encourage you to do,” Marty said with his heart; “but on the other hand, I wish you could know him, not just as Messiah, but as Savior.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your Messiah, my Jesus, had to suffer as Yahweh’s sacrifice in order to save us from our sins. He was our substitute so we could have right standing with Yahweh. But beyond that, he wants to indwell you as the Spirit so he can live his life through you. This is the highest calling of all on a person’s life.”

Chaim pondered briefly what he had just heard, and had nothing to say. He sat down with his teammates, who seemed rather pensive as Marty resumed the history.

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Jesus stood and stretched and looked out on the city to his west where his future rested.

“Father, I know your plans for your stubborn people, but I nevertheless pray for their repentance. Turn their hearts around. He sat down on the stone bench and rested his forearms on his knees. “Men, listen carefully to me. I’m going to tell you a couple more stories.

“The kingdom of heaven is like ten virgins who represent the nation. They took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were wise and five were foolish. The foolish took their lamps, but no oil with them. The wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

“Explain the details to me so far,” Jesus urged.

“The kingdom of heaven is of the Spirit,” Matthew stated.

“All right. What else?”

“You are the bridegroom,” Thomas answered.
"Good. Keep going."
"The nation is the bride."
"What part of the nation?" Jesus asked.
That halted the discussion. No one knew what the question meant.
"I agree the nation is the bride, but, as always, a remnant of the nation
represents the whole nation. There are those at the end of days who will
recognize me and receive me and hold to me even though I haven’t yet appeared.
They are the first fruits among the Jews who are prepared and ready for my
return."

Then who are the ten virgins?" James the second asked.
"The rest of the nation awaiting my return.
"Now let me ask you, what are the lamps?"
"Proverbs said they are the spirits of men," Philip answered.
"And the oil?"
"The Spirit?" Nathaniel asked.
"Why answer with a question, Nathaniel? Aren’t you sure?"
"No. But it seems like the oil anointing the temple could be a picture of the
Spirit."
"You’re a smart man. The oil is the Spirit.
"So what does it mean they slumbered and slept?" Jesus asked.
John thought back to the little girl Jesus said was only sleeping when she
was dead. "They were dead."
"Yes.
"All right. Let’s move on with the story. I’ll add commentary as I go.
"At midnight (the end of the age) there was a cry made. ’Behold, the
bridegroom comes with his bride. Go out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins arose
(resurrection) and trimmed their lamps (readied their spirits). And the foolish
said unto the wise, ’Give us of your oil (Spirit), for our lamps are going out.’ But
the wise answered, ’No, lest there be not enough for us and you; but go rather to
them that sell (my Father) and buy (deny yourselves in the experiences of life) for
yourselves.’ While they went to buy, the bridegroom came. They that were ready
went in with him to the marriage and the door was shut (time ran out).
Afterward the other virgins came and said, ’Lord, Lord, open to us.’ But he said,
’Truly, I tell you, I know you not.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day
nor the hour wherein the Son of Man comes."

Jesus witnessed soul searching among his disciples, precisely what he wanted
to see. They were well prepared for the next story.
"The kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called
his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. Any guesses so far?"
Simon Zelotes said, "You are that man."
"All right, that was easy. What else? Where’s the far country?"
They didn’t know. Jesus explained, "The far country is my Father’s throne.
I’ll go there after I leave here. What are my goods?"
Peter replied, "Your teachings?"
"More than that, Peter."
"Your presence?"
"Yes. As the Spirit I possess all my Father’s virtues. Those are the goods I
leave with you.

"Unto one of the servants he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his own ability; and he took his journey. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made five talents more. And likewise he with two gained another two. But he that had received one went and dug in the earth, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and reckoned with them.

"He who had received five talents came and brought another five talents, saying, Lord, you have delivered unto me five talents, and I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said, Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.

"He who had received two talents came and said, Lord, you delivered unto me two talents. Look, I have gained two talents beside them. His lord said, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.

"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not planted. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the earth. Here, you have what is yours.

"His lord said, "You wicked and slothful servant, you knew I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I have not planted. You ought, therefore, to have put my money to the exchangers, and at my coming I should have received my own with interest. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For unto every one who has shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that has not shall be taken away even what he has. Cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

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"Does this help you, Chaim?" Marty asked.

Chaim nodded slightly. "Assuming Jesus is our Messiah, and I say that with a big disclaimer, I hear you telling us to be ready and watching."

"That’s exactly right! Even if you’re not sure Jesus is your Messiah, it’s a fact according to your own prophets that your Messiah is coming. Both of these stories you just heard emphasize the need to be ready and watching when he returns," Marty explained, and left the podium to Lauren.

Naomi stepped up. "Lauren, my teammate asks an important question. Marty says we need to be ready, but I ask you, how do we get ready? What do we do as young Jews?"

Lauren felt the pressure bearing down on her. Thirty Jewish friends are depending on me to help them! Lord Jesus, please help me lead them.

"Ask Yahweh to give you light concerning the coming Messiah. If our experience as followers of Jesus is any help to you, we’ve found praying together, studying the Scriptures together, and talking
endlessly produces light and truth. The God who gave us the Scriptures as his word, speaks loud and clear through them if we’ll apply ourselves to study them and to listen to each other. There is so much in your prophets about the Messiah and both of his advents. I know you can find the truth if you’re diligent. And if you want, anyone of us will be glad to teach you what little we know.” Lauren stopped to gauge the reaction of the Jews. They were pensive and calm. She took that as a good thing and gave the podium up to Amelia.

Finally, Najeeb stood up. Dr. Metzger swung around and smiled. He liked the gangly Arab, even though the feeling was not mutual. “Welcome back, Mr. Khalili! Did you have a nice rest?” he teased.

Najeeb managed a weak smile, though some of his teammates snickered. “Yes, we are well rested.”

“What is on your mind?”

“I would like to ask the Christian a question.”

“Good.”

Najeeb turned to Amelia. “Day after day we’ve heard about the Jews and their part in the end of time. What about the rest of the world? Don’t we count in any of this?”

Amelia shifted nervously. “I’m sorry, Najeeb. It wasn’t an oversight because Jesus didn’t talk much about the rest of the world.”

“Did he say anything?”

“A little, and even that involved the nation of Israel. Here’s what he said.

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Jesus sensed the time passing by, an interesting phenomenon since he created it and yet it was moving him along whether he wanted it to or not. His final Passover, like a mighty mountain, stood above all other concerns. "Brothers, I need to tell you one more thing before we go. Listen carefully.

"When the Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory. Before him shall be gathered all nations, and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. He shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King shall say unto them on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in. Naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came unto me.

"Then the righteous answered him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and fed you? Or thirsty, and gave you drink? When did we see you a stranger, and took you in? Or naked, and clothed you? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and came unto you?

"And the King shall answer, Truly, inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.

"Then he shall say unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you took me not in; naked, and you clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and you visited me not.

"Then shall they also answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto you?

"He shall answer them, Inasmuch as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.

"And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous
“into life eternal.”

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Amelia looked across the arena at Najeeb. “Do you understand?”
“No.”
“Jesus gathers the nations, and nations in the Scriptures mean Gentiles, those who are not the Lord’s people,” she explained. “You understand the separation?”
“Yes. Sheep and goats.”
“Left hand, right hand.”
“Yes, but what does it mean?” Najeeb demanded.
Amelia was calm. “You wanted to know what part, if any, the rest of the world would play in the last day. Here it is.

“Jesus takes the Gentile nations – not Israel and not Christians – and judges them according to how they treated his brethren. He is a Jew; his brethren are Jews. Now we know how Jews throughout their history have suffered at the hands of the Gentiles, but there are among the Gentiles those who have cared for them in many ways.” Amelia turned to the seven. “You have even recognized these people. What do you call them, Chaim?”
“The Righteous Among the Nations.”
Amelia turned back to Najeeb. “We all know how you Muslims feel about the Jews. It’s obvious, but you should be very concerned with this word from Jesus. If you don’t take care of them in their trials, it will not end well with you.”
Najeeb was furious. “You read stories out of your corrupted book and then judge us! You can believe whatever you want about the monkey Jews, but they will die at the hand of Allah’s warriors! You infidels are cursed and will feel the fires of hell sooner than you ever expected!”
“I’m sorry for you, Najeeb, and for your teammates. I’m afraid you will learn too late the truth of Jesus’ prediction,” Amelia said with feeling, and sat down.

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Leah smiled before she spoke. “All right, then. Let’s meet in the market after supper and see if we can locate him. We can sneak out, I’m sure, unless my brother chickens out.”
“In your dreams, Sis!” Silas countered. “What about you guys? Can you get away from your parents?”
“With as many siblings as we have, they’ll never know we’re gone,” Stephen replied. “We’ll be there.”

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Four hours after sunset the four teens met in the empty marketplace.
“How are we ever going to find him?” Prisca asked. “The city is empty.”
No sooner had she said this than a young man went by carrying a large pitcher. The teens thought nothing of it and watched the man walk away. Suddenly out of the shadows, two men approached the man and they chatted for a while. The young man pointed to a house and led them in.
“Let’s go see if anything is going on there,” Leah suggested.
They went down the street and stood in front of the door wondering if they should inquire about Jesus. After a few minutes the two men came out, casting glances at the teens, then headed up the street.
“We know them!” Silas exclaimed. “They were with the man in Galilee!
They're part of the twelve!"
"Are you sure?" Prisca asked.
"Yes. Silas is right. I recognized both of them," Stephen confirmed.
"Should we follow them, then?"
"Yes! Let's go. They might be going back to Jesus."

The four teens stayed their distance behind the two men because the street was empty and dark. Passover was too sacred for the Jews to be out and about. They nestled into an alcove between two buildings across the narrow street in front of the building the two men entered. It was a double storey structure and they could see the brightly lit upper room, and an occasional shadow on the ceiling.
"He must be up there," Stephen said.
"So what do we do?" Leah asked.
"We just have to wait. He has to come out sometime, doesn't he?" asked Prisca.

The four sat down and waited, and used their time wisely. Prisca and Leah grilled their brothers about their experiences in Galilee with the carpenter. What they heard enthralled them.

The disciples filed into the upper room and found it well prepared – the comfortable cushions surrounding the low table bearing the ample provisions, the dishware and pitcher and bowls and basin and towels sitting on the side table against the nearby wall, the lamps burning brightly on the corners of the room. Jesus stopped briefly to thank the owner, a believing former Pharisee, for making it all possible, and for doing more than he needed to.

The disciples took their usual positions around the table, something they had done for three plus years, except this time Judas decided to force the issue of position, and reclined where Peter normally rested at Jesus' left.
"What are you doing, Judas? That's not your place," Peter confronted the rebellious disciple.
"Is it written in stone that you always recline here?" he responded.
James answered, "We all know Peter is the greatest among us and John is his beloved. Move away!"
"We don't know that!" Judas challenged. "Has Jesus ever said anything?"
"He doesn't need to," Matthew retorted. "It's the natural order. You didn't walk on water, did you?"
"And you're not the Master's confidante," Simon Zelotes added angrily, glaring at Judas. "If you don't move over here, I'll move you myself!"
"No! The hour has come for the Teacher to declare himself king over Israel. We will see whom he selects for the high positions," Judas returned defiantly.
"You're a fool, Judas! This is no time for these antics!" Nathaniel exclaimed. When he stood to his feet, Simon Zelotes followed. They would forcibly remove the
provoke colleague and put him in his place.

Jesus entered the room and saw the disturbance and the three disciples standing and heard Nathaniel's strong words directed at Judas. He knew the dispute was over the position of greatness in his kingdom. He was disgusted. When will they learn, Father?

Judas quickly gave up the fight and moved to his regular place.

Jesus reclined at the table, prayed to His Father. "Father, I know my hour has come to depart out of this world and to come home to you. I have loved these dear men around me and I will always love them. Bless our meal together."

He began eating the Passover meal, knowing its reality would end with him in the morning. He would replace the tradition by fulfilling it. No one said anything. They knew the ritual of the meal, but they couldn't help remembering the many references they had heard in the last three years concerning the Lamb of God. As practicing Jews, they knew lambs died as sacrifices, just as they had in Egypt before the Passover and Exodus. Was Jesus really God's lamb sent into the world to die? Did he mean what he said about becoming the Spirit? They had the sinking feeling everything was true and it would come to pass soon. Would this be the night? All these thoughts silenced the disciples.

Jesus forced himself to confront the evil in the room. Scanning each face briefly, he lowered his eyes and sighed deeply. He was well aware what Satan had put in the heart of the betraying disciple. But before he exposed the evil, he got up, shed his cloak, walked over to the table against the sidewall, and returned with a pitcher of water and a basin and a towel over his shoulder. He began washing the feet of the youngest disciple.

Peter was next, but he recoiled. "Lord, do you wash my feet?"

"What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand in time," Jesus explained gently.

Peter reacted. "Never shall you wash my feet!"

Jesus frowned. "Peter, if I do not wash you, you have no part with me."

Peter retreated rapidly. "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head."

Jesus inwardly smiled at his rugged, lovable friend. "The new birth has made you clean already. You need only wash off the pollution of the dust of this world. You need only your feet washed, because all of you, except one, are clean."

Jesus made the round and washed every foot, including the feet of the defiant one. When he finished, he reclined again and asked, "Do you know what I have done to you?" No response.

"You call me Teacher and Lord, and so I am. If I then, the Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I've given you an example for you to do as I have done. I tell you the truth, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Jesus sighed, glanced at the men around him, and said with heaviness and a hint of sadness, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." He reclined at the table and began the meal, taken mostly in silence. No one felt like saying much.
When the meal was over, Jesus took the cup of wine and thanked his Father for his disciples and prayed for their strengthening and for his own, and said, "Take this and share it among you; for I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes."

The solemnity of the occasion slowly sank into the disciples' consciousness. The atmosphere was ominous, like a funeral.

The disciples pushed the leftovers and utensils into the center of the table and left a cup of wine and a simple loaf of bread sitting before Jesus as he requested. The disciples wondered what was going on.

He took the bread and prayed a short prayer and tore it in half, then tore off a piece for himself and passed each half around. The disciples took his cue. When all had a piece, he said, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Then he ate the piece, and the disciples followed.

Jesus took up the cup of wine and said, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." And he drank a sip and passed it around.

Jesus waited some moments after the taking of the bread and the cup, and the disciples waited.

"Concerning who is greatest among you, shame on you, brothers! The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you! Let me repeat: It is not this way with you! The one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. Who is greater, the one who reclines or the one who serves?" He waited. Nothing came.

"What have I done among you for the last three years?"

Only John had the boldness to answer, and that timidly. "Served?"

"Yes! I served! I have not reclined and let you serve me. I came to serve! If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

"Brothers, brothers, brothers. How many times have I told you my kingdom is not of this world? We don't emulate the world system. My kingdom is totally different. You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and just as my Father has granted me a kingdom, I grant you a seat at my table to eat and drink in my kingdom. You will all sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Jesus paused briefly and said something that threw a panic into their souls. "One of you will betray me," he said sadly.

The disciples stiffened and looked around in shock. "Who, Lord?"

"One who is eating with me."

The groans of grief came from every disciple except one. Peter, no stranger to impetuosity and even though marked for denial, spoke first. " Surely not I, Lord?"

"Lord, is it I?" Thaddeus asked anxiously.

Jesus remained silent.

"Please, Lord! Is it I?" Simon Zelotes begged for an answer.

After several painful inquiries, Jesus said, "It is one of you who dips with me in the bowl. For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born."
The silence gripped the room and deep grief pressed in upon the disciples. They all had dipped bread with him in the bowl. They dared not speak, for fear of being exposed as the betrayer. Their hearts beat hard in their chests because of the prospect of giving up their Lord to his enemies. Could they be guilty of such a heinous act? After three years of solid fellowship and training and correction, could it really be true one of them could betray the Master? The mere thought was inconceivable and reprehensible. Every soul but one examined itself to see if there could be such egregious considerations lurking in its shadows.

Though his tortured soul tried to recover, his emotions proved too strong. Judas asked, “Is it I, Rabbi?”

Without answering, Jesus reached over and took a piece of bread and dipped it in the bowl and gave it to Judas with a stern look in his eyes. “You have said it yourself: What you do, do quickly.”

Judas immediately got up and left the room.

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“Shhh. Look,” Leah whispered.

A man emerged from the door in a hurry. He looked up and down the dimly lighted street as if he didn’t know where he was going, but in an obvious state of agitation. He rushed to the right, up the hill toward the temple.

“Should we follow him?”

They thought about it.

“I’ll go,” Silas volunteered. “Something’s up. Did you see the look on his face? He looked like the devil.”

“Where will we meet up?” Prisca asked.

“Just follow Jesus. I have a hunch this will be a bad night,” Silas explained. “There are a lot of conspiracies to kill him. Now that he drove out the moneychangers again, they may really go after him this time.”

Prisca wasn’t satisfied. “You didn’t tell us where to meet up with you, Silas.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll find you.”

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The disciples watched Judas leave but didn’t think much of it. Since he took care of the moneybag, they figured he was off buying something or offering something to the poor.

Jesus felt the relief of the oppression when Judas left, and he settled into his final instructions. It was his last opportunity. He glanced at John and Matthew. They were ready with their writing tools.

“Now is the Son of Man glorified, and Yahweh is glorified in him. If Yahweh is glorified in him, he will also glorify him immediately.” Jesus saw the consternation on their faces and felt sympathy for them. They were so far from where they would come, he felt the liberty to let them know in a gentle way, not only how he felt about them, but also where they were in their understanding and experience.

“Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek me, and as
I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' A new commandment I give you that you love one another. By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Peter heard of the admonition to love, but got stuck on his master's departure. "Lord, where are you going?"

He replied, "Where I go, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow later."

Peter refused the word. "Lord, why can I not follow you right now? I will lay down my life for you."

The disciples saw the determination on Peter's face like they had never seen before. As the leader he was, he inspired them to the same height of loyalty to their master and teacher. Then the hammer fell on them all.

"You will all fall away because of me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.'"

Peter would have none of it, and reacted. "Even though all may fall away because of you, I will never fall away!"

Jesus weighed the remark and judged how Peter had just slighted his brethren. He knew they weren't happy that Peter implied he wasn't like them, that he was somehow above them. He said, "Simon Peter, listen to me carefully. Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. When once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

Peter remembered when Jesus addressed him as "Satan," and that rebuke had never left him. He wanted more than anything to distance himself from it, and now was the opportunity to show Jesus he could count on him to the end. "Lord, I am ready to go to prison and to death with you!"

Jesus turned to his well-meaning friend and shook his head. "Will you lay down your life for me, Peter? The rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know me."

Peter's stomach surged, and he felt the same icy coldness course through his soul. "I will never let that happen! Never! "Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you."

The disciples echoed the same attitude.

Jesus ended the wishful pronouncements by saying, "You heard me. I'll say no more. The truth is yet to come."

The impact on the disciples was immediate and crushing. They were incredulous that their zealous leader would ever deny his Lord. It was inconceivable to them, but coming from Jesus, they had no choice but to consider it. It depressed them, and Jesus knew it, but he had to strip them of any natural, human strength they thought was useful to his kingdom. How many times he had told them his kingdom was of the Spirit, not of the earth. No one was stronger on earth than Peter, the muscular fisherman, leader of men. This only added to the disciples' angst. All their expectations of the immediate kingdom had been shattered. Their king was about to suffer. One of them would betray him. Satan
had demanded them all so he could sift them as wheat, and it had been granted. 
And now the prophecy of Peter’s triple denial wormed its way into their souls. 
But worst of all was Jesus announcement that he was going away and they could not come with him. Who would be their comfort and encouragement and joy? 
Who would make their hearts burn with his words of life? Who would set them on a transcendent trajectory when all around them was falling apart? Who would be their guide, their help, their mentor and defender? Who would calm the sea and rescue them from sure destruction? Who would rebuke the demons and heal the diseases and draw the eager to the truth? Who would call the Lazaruses from among the dead? Who would speak the truth and lacerate the malicious Pharisees? Who would be there to love them, to be their dearest friend, to be closer to them than a brother? Jesus was going away, and the thought threw them into despair. 

These strange and terrible things depressed them, and sent their attitudes spiraling and their dreams vanishing into a damp mist swallowed up by darkness. This was the condition of his disciples when Jesus opened up his bountiful heart and shared words of eternal life.

"Brothers, do not let your heart be troubled; believe in Yahweh, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many abiding places. If it were not so, I would have told you."

"Do you mean the temple?" Thomas asked.
"No. No. Thomas, after these years of emphasizing the Spirit and the heavenly kingdom, do you think the Father’s house would be earthly?"
Thomas was embarrassed. "No. I’m sorry."
"Don’t be. You were honest, but you need to be more thoughtful," Jesus admonished his quiet disciple gently.
"I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also."

Thomas thought a place was a place, but now he was not so sure. It can’t be a place on the earth, because he always refers to the Spirit. But yet we are on the earth. Are we the abiding places? Are we the Father’s house instead of the temple? But he’s going away to build it. How does the Spirit fit into all of this? Thomas had so many questions and wanted desperately to grasp the truth of it all.

Jesus continued by looking around the table, and nodded. "You know the way where I am going."

Thomas spoke for them all when he said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How do we know the way?"

Jesus smiled. He had finally maneuvered the disciples outside their comfortable Jewish box and into the realm of the Spirit. They would not understand where he was going and the Father’s house and his building work and the way to all these things unless they understood his explanation. As he frequently did, Jesus jammed both his thumbs into his chest and said emphatically, "Thomas, I am the way and the truth and the life! No one comes to the Father but through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also."

Philip was a window into the thought process of the disciples. He said,
"Master, show us the Father, and it is enough for us."

Jesus sighed. He knew there was plenty of ground yet to cover. "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know me, Philip?"

"Are you the Father?" Thaddeus asked.

"Am I?" Jesus returned.

Thaddeus felt small, but considered carefully before speaking. "I think you are."

"Thaddeus, do you know how revolutionary that is?"

"It could get me killed, couldn't it?"

Jesus nodded. "Indeed it could.

"Let me tell you something further. "We don't have a lot of time together left, but from now on you know the Father, and have seen him." Jesus pointed to his chest a second time.

The disciples scrambled to throw off their concepts. Was Jesus actually the Yahweh of Judah sitting in the room with them? Had Yahweh really come to earth in the form of a man eating the Passover with them? Was it too audacious, and not only audacious, but also dangerous?

Jesus gravely commanded the full attention of those reclining around the table. He spoke slowly and deliberately and definitively. "He who has seen me has seen the Father." He glanced at Philip. "How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"

Philip shifted uneasily under the scrutiny, but he knew he was sitting in the presence of the most profound truth in the universe.

"Do you not believe I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own initiative, but the Father abiding in me does his works." Jesus waited for this truth to dawn on his disciples, because it was critical for them to understand and grasp and practice this deep concept.

"Brothers, this is what incarnation is all about. The Father in heaven is abiding in his son on earth. In turn, when I become the Spirit, I will abide in you, and you will learn to live according to my life. Philip, you must see this. This is the way to my kingdom - the only way. This is why I'm the way to the Father."

"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. If you can apprehend this, then know that he who believes in me, the works I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to the Father."

The disciples thought back on all the signs they had witnessed - the feedings, the healings, Lazarus, the storms - and had a hard time believing Jesus' words. How could they possibly be capable of performing more than the Son of God had done? Except for the Spirit. What did the Spirit mean? Was this the way Jesus would abide in them? That's what he had been saying for over three years.

"Whatever you ask in my name, that will I do, so the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."

Matthew dutifully recorded every word, but was puzzled by what Jesus was saying. "Master, I really want to understand this. Help me."

"Ask me questions, Matthew," he encouraged. "I'll do what I can to clarify."

"We all believe you're the Son of God, and we've seen everything you've done for a long time now. You credit your Father abiding in you. So when you say we'll do greater things than you have done, it is because you will abide in us."
"So far so good, Matthew."
"I'm trying to figure out where we fit in to this."
"Tell me what you're thinking."
"Are we supposed to regard you as you do your Father?"
"What do you mean?"
"You abide in your Father and he abides in you."
"Correct."
"Then we are to abide in you as you abide in us."
"Correct."
"Would you explain again how this will work out?" Matthew asked.
"Two words: the Spirit. Remember Nicodemus. I told him his human spirit must be born of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, I will return to you as the Spirit to abide in your spirit. You will practice living from your spirit and as a result you will abide in me," Jesus explained. "It all comes down to the Spirit."
Matthew understood and went back to his note taking. Jesus moved on to another subject.

JULY 29

The sun was pushing away the night as only light can do when the Christians got out of bed and showered for the day. Soon they were scattered about for their private prayer and Bible reading before their corporate prayer under the gazebo. The gravity of their situation cast a seriousness upon them. Prayer came easily this morning, not only for themselves but also for their fellow travelers, the Israelis, and for their philosophical enemies, the Muslims. The prayer went quickly around the circle, each Christian mentioning to the Lord the name of one of their competitors. It wasn't easy, but they did, praying their lives would be an expression of Jesus to everyone in camp. They scattered after the prayer to get ready for breakfast and for their last trip into town.

C'Anna sensed something wrong when the teams gathered to head for town, but she didn't know if it was her imagination, the Lord's prompting in her, the fluttering of the unseen powers of the air – she wasn't sure, so she really couldn't say anything, not even to those closest to her.

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The town people greeted their young friends warmly according to their custom. They were adjusting nicely to their visits, and even prepared special treats and crafts for them, putting them under an unwritten obligation to buy something. They weren't disappointed. The doctors gave each team a sizeable stipend to spend on food and gifts for home and personal items. "Spend every bit of it or face our wrath!" they told them.

This fourth trip to town was uneventful except for the clash of wits over a chess board that Marty and Kael and Barak studied, each oblivious to the bustle around them. The open market teemed with locals, government soldiers, and an upsurge of tourists as the summer deepened. The old bearded Bulgarian sitting across from them had just moved his queen in a bold move that threw the three younger men off their game. They stood up and consulted in whispers at what they were to do next. The old man sat with his arms folded across his chest, a false impression of boredom meant to mess with the young minds, when, in actuality, he was enjoying himself immensely. He had easily sized up his young opponents after a few moves, and struck at their weakness. To him it wasn't so much where their pieces were sitting on the board, but what was the state of their mental maturity. Experience and savvy versus over-confidence and youthful exuberance. It wouldn't take long to dispatch the three of them and present them with some valuable tools to take back with them to camp. He didn't speak English, so it was up to the three men to round up an interpreter in order to pick his brain and to glean some chess wisdom they desperately needed. They did and they learned and they returned to camp humbled, if not humiliated. They had left far too many pieces
After another nice day of shopping and eating and the usual pickup game of soccer with the local kids and chess with the old men, they said their goodbyes and headed back, more exhausted than usual. The increasing tension of the debates seemed to be wearing down the souls of the contestants, and it was expressing itself in their diminished energy and stamina. None of them looked forward to the five-mile hike up the hill, but there was only two more sessions before the three-day weekend. And that was a good thing.

JULY 30

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, that he may be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it does not see him or know him, but you know him because he abides with you and will be in you." Thomas asked, "So this is the sum of everything you've been telling us, isn't it?"

"It is, Thomas. This is the key. The Father will send the Spirit of truth to abide with you and in you, and yet I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you."

"As the Spirit," James said.

"Yes. As the Spirit. Right now, because I'm restricted to this body, I can only be with you; but when I return as the Spirit, I will abide in you."

"After a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will disclose myself to him."

Peter questioned, "Master, I'm starting to grasp the Spirit and the need to live by the Spirit, but I don't understand your commandments. What are they?"

"Peter, that's a good question. It seems like the Spirit and commandments are antithetical, but what have I tried to convey to you from the beginning when you first met me?"

"The Spirit."

"Yes. My commandments are simple - learn to live by the Spirit, and then everything I am I can live out through you. I don't do anything except what the Father does in me. The same with you. I command you to let me live through you."

"Pretty simple," Nathaniel said.

"Simple, but not necessarily easy," Jesus warned. "It will take a lot of practice because you men are too used to living according to your culture and your religion. But it will come."

"Any other questions?"

Judas asked, "Lord, what then has happened that you are going to disclose yourself to us and not to the world?"

"That's a fair question, Judas. I intended to disclose myself to the world, and
I did for some time, as you know; but you know my message from the beginning has been about the Spirit. My message now is the Spirit will abide, not only with you, but in you. That is what has changed.

"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him."

Judas nodded. "So the inward abiding of the Spirit is what has changed?"

"Yes. That is the major change, and it is the basis of my kingdom. That has been my word from the time I was baptized.

"So if anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me. These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you, but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all I said to you."

"Because you are the Helper?" Thomas asked.

"Because I am the Helper. You got it, Thomas," Jesus replied, and stood and stretched and walked to the side wall and poured himself a cup of water.

Jesus was satisfied with the reception to his word on the Holy Spirit. It seemed to him the disciples were finally grasping the concept of the inward nature of his kingdom. He felt liberty to move on in his final word to his followers.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives, but only as I can give. So do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. You heard me say to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I."

"But we do love you, Master," James protested mildly. "It's just hard for us to see you go."

"I know you do, James. But I'm not leaving you. I am returning as the Spirit and will live in you. I will be much more intimate with you than I am now, because the Spirit has no limitation like I do in this body," he explained patiently.

"Now I have told you before it happens, so when it happens, you may believe. I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in me. But so the world may know I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded me."

Jesus sat up from the table and studied the faces of his beloved brothers. He felt a twinge of sadness that this phase of his mission was about to wrap up. He had thoroughly enjoyed the rough and tumble life he had passed through with these wonderful men. "Well, brothers, it's time to get up and head out. We'll talk on the way. Let's sing a psalm first. Philip, lead us in Psalm 24?"

The most musical of the disciples nodded and filled his usual position and led the singing of the popular psalm.
It was a long wait for the three teenagers, but finally they heard a familiar psalm coming through the upper window. They could see several heads, so apparently they were standing.

"Maybe they're ready to leave," Stephen said, hoping.

Twelve men filed out of the house and spilled into the quiet street. They kept their voices down because of the lateness of the hour. Slowly they moved up the street.

"What if they catch us?" Prisca asked.

"We can't let them see us," Stephen instructed firmly. "We need to keep our distance, but not lose track of Jesus."

The small group moved slowly toward the Eastern Gate and out of the city, but not out of sight of the three youths. The darkness hid them well from the unsuspecting men crowding around their leader to hear every word he had to say.

Stephen stood at the entrance and huddled with Prisca and Leah to strategize, when Silas joined them out of breath. They waited until he could speak without gasping.

"So what happened?" Leah asked her brother.

"It was weird. The guy went straight to the temple. I think it was the snarky one, Judas Iscariot."

"The one we didn't like," Stephen added.

"Yeah. The quiet one who handled the money box."

"Okay, what did he do?"

"I followed him from a distance and sneaked past a few priests and hid behind the curtains near the entrance."

"Were the priests there this late?"

"Yes. Including your father," he said, nodding at his two friends. "They even called in Caiaphas."

"Wow! It had to be important," Stephen said.

"So what did the man have to say?"

Silas paused before answering. "The priests paid him to lead them to Jesus. As far as I can tell, he's going to betray Jesus at Gethsemane."

"So where shall we go?"

"They're headed for the garden, so let's circle away from them and hide somewhere near the entrance and wait for them. If I heard the man correctly, he's going to lead an arresting party."

"We need to hurry."

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The disciples jockeyed for position around Jesus as they headed toward the Eastern Gate. The streets were deserted for the most part, making it much easier to move about. Matthew and John taking the premier positions because of their scribe work. Peter was close by. Jesus set the pace, knowing what he had to say and how long it would take to say it. He wasted no time, but before he could say a word, a normally quiet disciple would not be denied. It was as if the light had finally dawned on him as to the extremity of the situation. Jesus was going forth
to die!

"Master, I must ask you for something."

"What is it?"

"Please explain abiding again. I must know before you're gone."

"That's the best thing you could have wanted to know, Nathaniel. I commend you.

"Let me give you an analogy. I am the vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me not bearing fruit, he takes away; and every branch bearing fruit, he prunes it so it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

"These things I have spoken to you so my joy may be in you, and your joy may be made full. This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

"No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he may give to you.

"This I command you, that you love one another," Jesus explained.

"Does this help, Nathaniel?"

"It does. Thank you."

Jesus wasn't so sure. "Then tell me, why do I emphasize love?"

Nathaniel thought through his answer. "Does loving one another prove we are abiding?"

"Exactly, my friend! That's precisely what love proves! If you find yourself not loving the brethren, then you can know for sure you're not abiding in the vine. Love is the fruit of the vine in this illustration. And you all know love is not something you can generate from your human nature."

"Master, what about our religion?" Simon Zelotes asked.

"What about it, Simon?"

"It seems hateful all the time toward you."

"It is. It's part of the system of this world. If the world hates you, you know it has hated me before you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you're not of the world - remember, I chose you out of it - the world hates you.
"Recall when I told you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for my name's sake, because they do not know the one who sent me."

Andrew protested. "Master, how can this be? Everything you have ever said has been the truth. Your words are righteous. How can they hate you for it?"

"They feel threatened, Andrew. If I had not come and spoken to them, their sins would never have been exposed, but now they have no excuse for their sin."

"But everything you've said has been right," Thaddeus said.

"It doesn't matter. They don't want to hear it. They respond with hate because they have no other response. And to make it worse, they don't realize if they hate me, they hate the Father."

"And yet they hold to Yahweh. How ironic," Andrew observed.

Jesus agreed. "It is a bitter irony. If I had not come and spoken to them, their sins would never have been exposed, but now they have both seen and hated me and my Father as well."

"So both your words and your works condemn them," Matthew added.

"You're right," Jesus confirmed. "They're totally without excuse."

"Why are they like this, Lord?" John asked.

Jesus didn't hesitate. "It's the fulfillment of their own law. You may recall the psalm that says, 'They hated me without cause.' But even so, when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father - the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father - he will testify about me despite the hatred. And you will testify as well, because you have been with me from the beginning. You know the truth about me because you've seen it firsthand."

Philip maneuvered himself into position to ask, "Master, it seems we are headed into troubled waters, kind of like that night you walked on the lake. I wish I had the confidence I'm ready. Some of the others may be prepared, but I feel somewhat overwhelmed."

"You're probably speaking for all the others, Philip, and it's understandable. But let me tell you, I have spoken these things to you so you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, and an hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God."

Philip frowned and asked, "How can they be so blind?"

"These things they will do because they have not known the Father or me. You know me, so they hate you. These things I have spoken to you, so when their hour comes, you may remember what I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning because I was with you. Since I'm at the end of my journey, I'm letting you know what to expect."

All the disciples had the realization that the short hike across the ravine would be their last with each other and with their Messiah. Their hearts were sorrowful and Jesus knew it.

"Now I'm going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'"

Matthew spoke up. "Master, we are all happy for you that you will return to your Father. That's not what's bothering us."

"What is it then?"
"All the hatred and persecution awaiting us without you. We're just starting to grasp what you've been trying to tell us for so long."

"I can understand. But I tell you the truth, it's to your advantage I go away; for if I don't go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I'll send him to you. And he, when he comes will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."

"Isn't that what you have done, Master?"

"It is. And as the Spirit abiding in you and poured out on all flesh, I will continue my work through you. As for you I will live inside of you, literally; and as for the world, I will convict through your preaching the unbelievers of their sin of not believing in me. This is the underlying sin of all sin."

"What about righteousness?" James the second asked.

"The Jewish and Gentile worlds regard me as a fraud, an imposter, a seducer, a destroyer of Moses, even a demon. The fact I will die and resurrect and ascend to my Father will prove to them I am everything contrary to their concepts. Through the conviction of the Spirit, they will know I'm righteous and innocent and true; because the Father will never accept anyone unrighteous to share his throne.

"Not only so, the Spirit will convict the world that their ruler Satan will be judged and they will too if they persist in their unbelief. When he is judged - and think of it, brothers! - when his head is bruised by my heel, the power of the great adversary will be destroyed. The Spirit will convince those followers of the adversary that their end will be the same as his if they continue in their unbelief.

"This, my friends, is the wonderful message you will spread throughout the earth when the Spirit comes!" Jesus explained emphatically.

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The men of Jesus slowly and thoughtfully passed over the Kidron brook and climbed up the Mount of Olives toward their favorite place of respite. A sense of urgency infused Jesus' words, and he spoke more quickly.

"Brothers, I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

"Master, you must speak them!" Matthew urged. "How will we ever know them if you don't tell us now?"

"When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own initiative, but whatever he hears, he will speak; and he will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify me, for he will take of mine and will disclose it to you."

Matthew relaxed, and was relieved to be reminded again of the Spirit's coming. He could not hear enough of this marvelous event to come.

"All things the Father has are mine, therefore I said the Spirit takes of mine and will disclose it to you. Let me make it simple for you.

"All the Father is he has given to me. All I have I give to the Spirit. All the Spirit has he will give to you. Grasp this, my brothers!" he commanded his tight circle. "You must grasp this!" The disciples wished they could shed their confusion and blindness and enter into Jesus' clarity, but they weren't there yet.
Nevertheless, Jesus pressed forward.

"A little while, and you will no longer see me; and again a little while, and you will see me." The disciples contemplated this word and were further confused. Some behind him whispered among themselves. "What is this thing he is telling us? A little while and we will not see him, and a little while we will? What does he mean, a little while? I don't get it."

Jesus knew the consternation and addressed it. "Are you deliberating together about this? I'll go further.

"You will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy.

"Whenever a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you. In that day you will not question me about anything, because, truly, if you ask the Father for anything in my name, he will give it to you.

"I have spoken to you in metaphors to explain these truths, but an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you like this, but will tell you plainly of the Father. In that day you will ask in my name, and the Father will give you directly because you love me and have believed I came forth from him. You know well I came forth from the Father into the world, and I'm leaving the world to go back to him."

"Now you speak plainly," Peter said. "You came from Yahweh and are returning to him. We don't have any more questions because we now believe."

Jesus sighed to himself. "Peter, do you now believe?"

"Yes."

"Do all of you?"

A low rumble of affirmation rose up.

"Let me tell you, brothers, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave me alone. You will all fall away because of me this night. Let me remind you again what the prophet wrote: 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.' But I am not alone, because the Father is with me. After I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."

"This is troublesome to us," John admitted. "How can this be? How can we forsake you?"

Jesus knew the angst in his youngest disciple. "These things I have spoken to you, so in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

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The ascent up the mountain ended at the entrance to Gethsemane, the quiet garden where Jesus retired many times to pray to his Father.

"Brothers, let me pray before I go in."

Jesus took the shoulders of two brothers next to him and they followed suit.
and formed a tight circle of arms over shoulders, heads together. Jesus lifted up his eyes into the dark sky to his Father. "Father, the hour has come; glorify your son, that the son may glorify you. Even as you gave him authority over all flesh, that to all whom you have given him, he may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

"I glorified you on the earth, having accomplished the work which you have given me to do. Now, Father, glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was. I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; they were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they have come to know everything you have given me is from you. For the words which you gave me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from you, and they believed you sent me.

"I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom you have given me; for they are yours. All things that are mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. I am no longer in the world, and yet they themselves are in the world; and I come to you.

"Holy Father, keep them in your name, the name which you have given me, that they may be one even as we are. While I was with them, I was keeping them in your name which you have given me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so the Scripture would be fulfilled. But now I come to you; and these things I speak in the world so they may have my joy made full in themselves. I have given them your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me through their word; that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so the world may believe you sent me.

"The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may be perfected in one, so the world may know you sent me, and loved them, even as you have loved me.

"Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, be with me where I am, so they may see my glory which you have given me, for you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, although the world has not known you, yet I have known you, and these have known you sent me; and I have made your name known to them, and will make it known, so the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus relaxed and released the shoulders of the brothers on each side. "Sit here while I go over there and pray. Peter, James, John, you come with me."

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The intrepid teenagers hid among the gnarly oaks near the entrance to the garden, hoping they weren’t too close to be discovered. They watched breathlessly as four of the twelve men disappeared into the garden.

“Shall we follow?” Silas asked quietly.

“We better not. If we get caught, who knows what will happen to us,” Stephen cautioned.

“I won’t go in that far,” Silas promised, and the curious teenager rose and rushed off.

Stephen and Prisca were aghast and turned to Leah.

“That’s Silas. He’s so restless. Always on the move.”

“What about reckless?” Stephen asked.

“No. He’s smart.”

Silas backtracked and made a wide circle above the garden and came down into the eastern side of the garden where he picked up the light from the torches of the eight men remaining at the north entrance. He found the other three sitting against one of the many oak trees dominating the garden. They were sitting in the direction Jesus went when he left them. Silas got as close as he dared and hid himself, waiting for events to unfold.

Although Silas didn’t like the tedium of sitting and waiting for something to happen, he remained stationary, watching the three men topple over in sleep. He felt like doing the same thing when he saw Jesus emerge from the depths of the garden and stand in front of the sleeping men. He stooped down and tugged at their robes. They jerked awake and sat up quickly. Silas leaned forward to hear what Jesus would say.

“My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with me.”

Though only a young man, Silas knew people well, having dealt with customers and vendors for several years already; so when he heard the scolding tone of Jesus’ voice, he wondered if Jesus had said the same thing before. It was a cry for support from three very tired friends. The plea shook Silas who had the inescapable feeling something dreadful was about to happen. He couldn’t know that Jesus was wrestling with fear, fear that being the Lamb of God meant exactly that: he was going to be sacrificed, but not before a thorough examination to ascertain his perfection, for every sacrificial lamb had to be unblemished. Though Silas didn’t know, the praying man he was watching was pleading with his Father for any other way than the one he was facing – death by hanging on a pole as a mere man. Silas didn’t know that Jesus wasn’t at all sure if he could make it, because at some point his Father would have to forsake him when he placed upon him all the sin of the world and all the evil of the universe. Could he do it? Could he do it as a forsaken man, though perfect in all his ways? He didn’t know. He had never been without the presence of his Father, so what would he do when that happened? He didn’t know, and the fear of the unknown seized his soul in a death grip.

Jesus returned to the center of the garden. Silas could see by his body language that he was deeply troubled. The bright moon illuminated him well, so Silas kept his distance for fear of being found. But when he saw Jesus fall prostrate on the grass between the olive trees, resting his head on his folded arms,
he moved closer, using the old trees to shield himself from view. He looked upon Jesus, hoping he wouldn't get up and walk around and discover him. He felt his heart beating hard in his chest, so he tried to calm himself. Jesus raised his head and looked up toward the heavens. Then he brought his knees up and remained in a kneeling posture for quite a while. The nervous teenager thought he saw red on his forehead and face, but couldn't be sure in the moonlight. What he was sure of was what Jesus spoke out in agonized intonations. He would never forget it.

Jesus stretched his hands upward to the night sky and said, "O my Father, if you be willing, remove this cup from me." He paused and dropped his arms and let his chin rest on his chest. Then looking up again, he quietly said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done."

Silas watched Jesus, who remained kneeling for some time, finally get up. He wiped his forehead with his inner garment and returned to the three disciples. They were fast asleep again. Jesus approached them and woke them as he did before.

"So you men could not keep watch with me one hour?"
"Too ashamed, they hung their heads and didn't answer."
"Keep watching and praying so you may not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Silas watched him carefully as he returned again to the garden center. As before his body language screamed weariness, maybe some fear. He must be so tired. What is he going through? Is he afraid? Silas felt a genuine sympathy for the good man, and wished he could do something to help him. Jesus fell on his knees and repeated the same prayer as before, pausing for an answer. When it didn't come, he said, "If this cup may not pass away from me except I drink it, your will be done." Jesus rose, went back, and woke his disciples once again.

"Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays me is at hand."

When he saw the four head back to the entrance, Silas retraced his steps quickly.

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Jesus and the three joined the eight at the entrance. Stephen, Leah, and Prisca watched carefully from the shadows as a large contingent with scores of lanterns and torches made their way up the narrow path.

"What is this?" Leah asked nervously.
"I don't know." Stephen asked. "There must be 500 men!"
As the group came nearer, Prisca exclaimed in a loud whisper, "Those are Roman soldiers!"
"Where's Silas?" Leah asked no one, wishing he were there with them.
"I can't believe Roman soldiers are here. They're decked out for war. Who do they think Jesus is?" Prisca asked incredulously. "He's a good man, not a criminal!"

Jesus stood with his eleven friends at the entrance to the garden, waiting for the military to reach him. As they drew near and halted, waiting for the
command of their leaders, Jesus stepped forward.

“Whom do you seek?” he asked without emotion.

“Jesus the Nazarene,” the leader replied.

Without hesitation, without fear, and with a deep aspect of regality, Jesus said, “I AM;” proclaiming in the name of Yahweh that he was the Son of God.

The answer perplexed the soldiers and stunned the Jews sent from the high priest to guide the soldiers to their victim. The soldiers drew back quickly, some stumbling to the ground. The Jews fell to the ground, trembling and silent.

“Why did they do that?” Leah asked from the shadows.

“Didn’t you hear what he said?” Stephen answered with a question. “He said he was ‘I AM!’ He declared his deity and his accusers understood it! That’s why they’re on the ground. I would be too.”

“Wow! That’s unbelievable!” Prisca exclaimed.

As soon as the men righted themselves, Jesus asked again, “Whom do you seek?”

Much more cautious, they answered, “Jesus the Nazarene.”

“I told you I AM,” Jesus announced a second time. Judas bolted from the crowd and approached Jesus. He grabbed him by both arms and said “Hail, Rabbi” He kissed him on the cheek.

Jesus didn’t resist. “Judas, are you betraying me with a kiss?”

Jesus awaited a response that never came. “Friend, do what you have come for.”

Judas turned to the temple officials and gestured that the man whom he had kissed was the man they were seeking. He then slinked back into the darkness, satisfied he had fulfilled his part of the bargain with the priests.

Then the chief priests and officers of the temple stepped into the light and confronted Jesus.

“That’s Father!” Prisca exclaimed. “Oh no!”

Stephen felt his stomach sink. “I can’t believe this!” Seeing his father among the detractors deflated him. He had reported to his father everything he had seen in Galilee among the seventy regarding Jesus – his manner of life, his teachings, his care for the needy – and he thought his father had been receptive, though he hadn’t said much. To see him among the arresting party was a blow to the young man. He felt sick.

Jesus saw the men whom he recognized from the temple. “Have you come out with swords and clubs as you would against a robber? While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on me; but this hour and the power of darkness are yours.”

The Jewish officials did not answer, but gave a signal. The soldiers and some from the temple guard seized Jesus and went after the other eleven.

Jesus protested loudly, “If you seek me, let these go their way!” He heard the skirmish to his side and turned and saw Peter take his sword and slash at a young temple servant, slicing off his ear.

Jesus reacted to Peter and said, “Stop! No more of this! Put the sword into the sheath! For all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword! The cup which the Father has given me, shall I not drink it?”

They watched as the young man from the temple held the right side of his
head and moaned in pain as blood coursed through his fingers onto his robe.

Jesus spoke quietly to the soldiers on each side of him and they released him. He reached into the dirt for the ear and held it out for his friends to pour water over it to clean it. He looked straight into Peter’s eyes and asked, “Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?”

Peter didn’t answer. He couldn’t.

Jesus softened his tone. “How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen this way?”

Peter’s body language told the onlookers everything they suspected. He was devastated, and he with the others, except for one who remained with Jesus, stepped back behind Jesus and circled away from the crowd, making their way quickly down the mountain and away from danger.

Jesus turned to the young man and asked him his name.

“Malchus.”

Jesus instructed one with water to clean the wound, and once it was ready, he reattached the ear. The arresting party watched in stunned silence, especially the soldiers. The temple officials weren’t pleased they had even less reason to apprehend a man who had just healed one of their own. But he had to be stopped or the people would flock to him as they had for the last three years.

The three young people watched in awe at the healing of the ear, but held their peace, struggling to put the evening into some kind of perspective.

Once Jesus finished with Malchus, he embraced him and submitted to the arrest. The leading temple officer instructed the soldiers to take him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of the high priest Caiphas.

Silas finally joined the three after retracing his steps. “What did I miss? What’s with the big crowd?”

“If we tell you, you’re going to hate yourself,” his sister chided him. “You should have stayed with us.” She filled him in on all the details.

He frowned. “You’re right. I didn’t see much compared to you. But I won’t miss anything else. Where are they taking him?”

Stephen said, “To Annas’s house. I know where that is.”

“Then let’s go,” Silas urged.

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The four young people watched the soldiers deliver Jesus into the custody of the religious leaders who met them outside the gate. Though it was late, there were a lot of people interested in the fate of the man, and when they heard and saw the 500 soldiers marching through the dark streets of Jerusalem to the house of the high priest’s relative, they collected at the scene hoping to be admitted into the courtyard.

“I’m going in,” Leah announced.

“How?”

“I’m going to volunteer to serve however I can. They’ll let me. I have friends in the temple.” She went up to the sentry at the gate and convinced him to let her in. He did.
“What are we going to do?” Silas asked.
“Our father’s name will get us into the courtyard, I’m sure,” Stephen said.
“All right, let’s do it,” Silas urged.
“What if Father sees us?” Prisca wondered.
“We’ll have to stay hidden,” Stephen answered. “I hope he goes home to bed. But if he’s here, he’ll be too distracted to notice us.”
“All right, then. Let’s talk to the sentry.”

They pushed through the crowd toward the heavily guarded gate to the courtyard and were about to talk to the leading sentry when the gate opened behind him. A young man walked through the gate and looked out into the crowd. He whispered to the sentry while pointing at someone in the crowd. He gestured for that man to come in. The man slipped past the three youths into the courtyard. Stephen recognized him. It was Peter! The young man at the gate, he was sure, was Jesus’ youngest disciple.

Stephen turned to his companions, “We’ve got to get in there! Come on.”

Stephen introduced himself to the sentry. After recognizing Stephen and Prisca as children of one of the leading temple priests, he let them in. Silas slipped in with them after he covertly put a denarius into the same guard’s hand.

JULY 31

The courtyard was crowded. Only temple officers had access to the fire in the middle of the courtyard. Behind them were all the servants who shivered in the cold of the deep night. Dawn was only a couple hours away.

Leah was in charge of the door to the central chamber, admitting only those with authority. She made eye contact with the other three standing against the courtyard wall next to a lantern.

“Leah’s in a perfect position to see everything,” Stephen noted.
“Don’t make me jealous,” Silas said teasingly.
“You’re missing the action tonight.” Prisca goaded her friend.

Silas smirked and shook his head. "I don’t think this thing is over by a long shot."

Stephen agreed. “I think you’re right.”

Leah opened to the knock and saw two men, one younger than the other. The younger man had spoken to her previously about allowing his friend to come into the chamber. Now he had returned bringing the bigger man with him. She looked at him and was sure she had seen him earlier at the garden. But she didn’t say anything because there was a lot of coming and going at the time. She kept her eye on the large man, trying to make sure he was indeed the man she had seen previously.

Peter stood against the wall directly behind Jesus and the officers behind him, and listened to the false testimonies being leveled at Jesus. He was restless and uncomfortable. What if he is found guilty? What does that mean to me? He
watched John take his place alongside the accused, perhaps trying to deflect some of the pressure brought upon his dear friend, the Nazarene. Peter knew he should be standing there with John and Jesus, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Something deep in his tormented soul prevented it. He made for the door and Leah moved to open it. She was sure now. She had seen him in the garden.

“You too were with this Jesus. You’re one of his disciples,” Leah said to him, holding open the door.

Peter reacted sharply. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

She followed him out, intending to argue, but being only a young servant girl, she didn’t have the status to confront him. She noticed his robe. There was fresh blood splattered on the bottom half, presumably from the severed ear. And the sheath was there. I’ll bet that sword is covered in blood. The man is a liar! And his friend has only one other standing with him!

She wanted to scream at him to help his friend inside, but she watched him take his place near the fire. She returned to her post, deeply troubled by the denial, but that made her listen more intently at the interrogation.

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An hour passed, but no one in the courtyard knew what was happening in the house. Leah took a break from her duty and came out of the house and made her way to her friends. They huddled in a corner of the courtyard and talked together in low tones.

“What’s happening in there?” Stephen asked.

“It’s not good,” Leah replied.

“Why?” Silas asked.

“Jesus doesn’t say enough to satisfy the priests and elders. He’s not defending himself.”

“What do you mean?”

“They bring in one witness after another to testify against him, but their testimonies get confused and they look silly. Annas is getting very frustrated, because he issued the order to seize Jesus. It’s not going well for them, and if it continues, they’re going to look bad in the eyes of the Romans. I don’t think they have a thing against Jesus.”

“Do you think they’ll let him go?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “If they do, they’ll look foolish.”

“That’s the last thing they want,” Stephen said, knowing his father. “I’ll get back and see what happens.”

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Leah went back into the house and relieved her substitute at the door. The servant staff stood at the doorways and watched the proceedings.

“What’s the status?” she asked the servant girl.

“They just brought in a couple more witnesses. One of them is about to speak.”

Leah inspected the room. It was a high-ceilinged chamber with a few ornate
designs up in the corners. The lanterns hanging on the walls gave off an ominous, rather somber, smoky light in keeping with the proceedings.

Annas was an old man, but vigorous in defense of his faith. He sat in the prominent chair overseeing the interrogation, surrounded by his officers.

“What is it you heard?” he demanded of the witness.

“This man said ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.’”

Annas turned to Jesus and waited for his rebuttal, but it never came.

The silence enraged him. He stood up and shouted, “Do you not answer? What is it these men are testifying against you?”

Jesus kept his silence, spurring Annas to get right in his face.

“I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God!”

Jesus finally assented. “You have said it! I am; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Caiphas reacted violently and tore his robes. “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? You have now heard the blasphemy.” He stepped up in front of his elevated chair and addressed the room. “What do you think?” he asked, making a sweeping gesture with his hand.

“He deserves death!” someone shouted. Another repeated the same, and soon all were in agreement.

Leah was appalled that the most educated men in Israel were taking part in this vilification of a righteous man, calling for his death, of all things. She watched in shock when some temple officers walked up to Jesus, blindfolded him, and slapped him hard in the face, while others beat him with their fists, knocking his head from side to side, and still others spat upon him. All the while they mocked him: “Prophecy who it was who hit you!”

Leah had enough. “I can’t take this.” She signaled for her substitute and rushed into the courtyard looking for her brother when her eye landed on the man sitting next to the fire. She was angry he would let his friend suffer. They made eye contact and he got up and walked toward the gate, but before he got there, a temple officer coming into the courtyard recognized him, and before the observing crowd, stated emphatically: “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

Peter shook his head and resisted the urge to grab the man and hurt him, “Damn you, man! I don’t know him!” The officer backed away, seeing the anger well up in the denier. Peter took a place at the back of the crowd against the courtyard wall, and tried to make himself anonymous. He wanted to flee the place but something compelled him to stay until the decision about Jesus came down.

Leah stood with her brother and two friends, looking across the courtyard at the man she had accused. “I know he’s the one who cut off the ear. I swear to it.”

“Don’t back him into a corner,” Stephen warned. “He’s carrying a sword.”

Peter couldn’t hide, and could feel the eyes of the bystanders staring at him. It irritated him and no one would leave him alone.

After about an hour of interminable waiting, Peter grew restless and walked toward the gate again, this time intending to leave the gathering. But as
he pushed his way through the crowd, several turned to him and identified him.

“Surely you too are one of them.”

“Get out of my way!” he snarled.

“Even the way you talk gives you away,” they continued tauntingly.

“Curse you all! I do not know the man!” Peter shouted at the accusers.

The noise of the crowd subsided instantly, captured by the sudden appearance of Jesus on the porch overlooking the courtyard. His face was swelling badly from the pummeling. Spit dripped off his beard and hair onto his soiled robe. He was in obvious pain, but no fear showed in his eyes. When he heard a distant rooster announcing the soon coming of the morning sun he turned to Peter near the gate and looked into his eyes. Peter remembered what Jesus had told him about the crowing rooster and fled the courtyard, crushed by his treachery.

The four young people watched the whole episode in shock. Jesus was being bloodied, and his leading disciple had just denied knowing him. Leah, especially, took it hard. “I can’t believe what they did to him,” she said in a whisper, and began to weep softly. Prisca took the smaller girl in her arms and let her sob.

Silas and Stephen tried hard to assess the event unfolding before them, but couldn’t claim a great deal of success. “I don’t understand what they find so bad in this man,” Stephen mused.

“I tell you, Stephen, he constitutes a threat to their system,” Silas explained again. “The priests are worried about the people. What if they forsake the temple to run after this man? That will completely nullify their reason for being. It will give the Romans an excuse to come in and subjugate the nation. My father explained all this to me. He lives in the middle of this nerve center, and sees the day-to-day politics play out.”

“So are they going to use Jesus as an object lesson?” Stephen asked.

Silas was quick. “Of course! Guilt is meaningless. We’ve seen him do wonders among the people. He’s a good man. He has done nothing wrong. But don’t forget, he prophesied this about himself.”

“I know. I have a hard time with that,” Stephen admitted sadly. “He is the lamb of sacrifice, and I guess this is how it’s supposed to happen.”

Prisca asked, “But at the garden, he made himself out to be God. Isn’t that blasphemy?”

Silas was quick to respond while keeping an eye on the victim standing before them. “Stephen, we’ve studied the Torah for years and years. Isn’t the Messiah the Son of God? Isn’t it possible?”

Stephen thought about it. “Our teachers always taught us our God is one. They were always so adamant about that.”

“And he is! But how did they explain the conversation in Genesis when the Lord talked with himself?”

Stephen thought back. “They didn’t.”

“Exactly. Did our teachers ever tell us what it meant when David said, ‘The Lord said unto my Lord. . . ’ Remember that?”

Stephen nodded. “You’re right. And from what we saw him do in Galilee, he has to be the Son of God.”

“Exactly!”
“Then why is he getting beat up?” Prisca asked.
Silas shook his head. “I can’t answer that. He doesn’t deserve this.”

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The dawn was only the continuation of a dreadful night for the innocent man. He found himself early in the morning standing in front of the ruling council of the Jews. Stephen used his father’s status to gain entrance to the proceedings and stood off to the side, trying to avoid his father’s eyes. He was sure his father wouldn’t approve of him being there, and if he saw him, would probably have him removed.

Caiphas, the high priest and ruler of the council, presided over the proceedings. The officials who had brought Jesus over from Annas had briefed him. He looked down at Jesus and spoke condescendingly to him, asking about his disciples and learning they were common, nondescript men, and Jesus was a lowly carpenter. He was not impressed.

“What is it that you teach?” he asked.
Jesus replied, “I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in the synagogue, and in the temple where the Jews always gather. I never teach in secret.

“Why do you ask me? Ask them that have heard me what it is I taught them. They know what I said.”
An officer took offense at the answer and slapped Jesus with the palm of his hand across his face. “Is that the way you answer the high priest?”
A council member named Joseph stood in protest. “What is this, my brothers? Shall we as assault a man for speaking the truth? I say we stand down and let the man have a fair hearing. Are we animals to treat this man so? Look at his face. He’s already been beaten! God forbid! What kind of people have we become? Are we worthy of the kingdom of God? My God, save us!”

Jesus appreciated the support and turned to his assailant and asked quietly, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if I spoke well, why do you strike me?”

Caiphas reluctantly waved off the officer and went on with his questioning. "If you are the Christ, tell us!"
"If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I ask a question, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."
Several elders spoke at once. "Are you the Son of God, then?"
Undaunted, Jesus answered firmly: "Yes, I am."
The reaction was immediate and raucous. The shouts of rage stunned Stephen. To see his father outraged was something he had never really experienced before. His eyes darted from his father to the man who had protested then to Jesus and then to the high priest. The high priest stood and calmed the room.

“What further need do we have of testimony? For we have heard it ourselves from his own mouth.”
As they led Jesus out of the chamber, a commotion at the door distracted everyone in the room except Jesus. He remained focused. Stephen recognized the
man who had burst into the room by overcoming the two sentries guarding the entrance as the one who had struck a deal with the temple priests to betray his now condemned friend. This man Judas brought the procession to a dead stop. "You're condemning an innocent man!" he screamed through his tears of torment at the priests and elders. "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood!"

"What is that to us? It was your choice!" Caiphas countered disdainfully. The answer drew a primal scream of agony, and Judas threw the thirty pieces of silver all over the temple sanctuary. He ran out of the chamber in erratic fashion.

Stephen couldn't believe what had just happened. It was shocking to him, but the reaction of the high priest of God was even more mystifying. He thought to himself, how could he have such a lack of feeling for a repentant man?

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Stephen related everything to his three partners as they followed the company to the Praetorium.

"So why are they taking him to Pilate?" Prisca asked.

"Because he's the governor of the territory. They can't do anything without the permission of Rome," Silas explained.

"If Jesus is the Messiah, will he become king?" Leah asked.

"I hope so. That's the promise of the prophets."

"So I don't understand. If he's the Messiah, why does he let them push him around and beat up on him?" Leah asked.

Silas was stumped again. He just shook his head. "I don't know. It seems like everything is in place for the Messiah. The temple is here, the people are here. I don't why he couldn't be king now. He rode in to the city the other day as the king. I don't know what's going on. Maybe this will tell us more."

"But, Silas, in the short time we were with him in Galilee, we heard him predict this many times. It's just that none of us heard a word he was saying," Stephen reminded his friend.

"You're right. This must be part of the process."

"So what if Pilate takes him into the palace to judge him?" Stephen asked, watching the movement of the soldiers.

"We'll go in. What's the problem?" Silas asked. "The judgment hall is public."

Stephen was stunned. "You're kidding. We'll be unclean for the Passover this evening."

Silas was defiant. He wasn't nearly as tied to tradition as Stephen was. "Then I'll go in and not take Passover. God will have to forgive me." With that word, he disappeared into the judgment hall.

Stephen was torn. On one hand he feared for his friend and his uncleanness and what it might mean to him, but on the other, he was envious of the eyewitness account Silas would bring.

It wasn't long before the stocky governor came out on the porch to greet his subjects. It was all the leading Jews could do to deal with a pagan on the day of Passover, but they were so desperate to rid themselves of the false prophet standing there, they couldn't wait another hour.
Pilate knew the importance of the situation when he looked down on the crowd and saw the chief priests and the rulers of the people standing there in front of him. He looked over at the bound and beaten man standing between the two soldiers who escorted him. “What accusation do you bring against this man?” he asked, repelled by the troublesome Jews.

The spokesman for the leadership replied, “If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered him to you.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” he bellowed, clearly frustrated by his experiences with this people over the years. He didn’t want to waste a lot of time on this case.

“We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding people to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying he himself is Christ, a king,” the spokesman lied, thinking a political answer would convince the governor.

“Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law,” Pilate said. “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”

This answer repulsed the governor. He often wondered how it was he was appointed governor over these intransigent Jews. In all the places in the Roman Empire, he ended up here. Reluctantly, he turned to the accused. Nothing is easy in this place.

Pilate studied Jesus for some time and was surprised that the Jew, unlike his countrymen, maintained constant eye contact. Pilate signaled for his soldiers to bring Jesus into the hall. Several Roman citizens followed, including a centurion whose daughter Jesus had healed some time ago. Silas and the young disciple who had not left Jesus’ side throughout the ordeal joined them and not a few Jews standing outside were aghast at their insolence in entering Pilate’s judgment hall, a place of impurity.

Pilate mounted his judgment chair and had Jesus brought up to the front and wasted no time. “Are you the king of the Jews?” he asked in a tone demanding no prevaricating.

Jesus wasn’t buying the brutish attitude. “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about me?”

Pilate returned sarcastically, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered you to me; what have you done?”

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would be fighting so I would not be handed over to the Jews.”

Pilate frowned and raised his eyebrows. “So you are a king?”

Jesus nodded. “You say I am a king. For this I have been born. For this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.”

The earthy, pagan Roman, given over to the pursuit of power and pleasure, sneered at the answer. “What is truth?”

Just then a young courier rushed into the judgment hall carrying a small scroll. Pilate unfurled it. It was a note from his wife. In a mocking way to assert his authority over her, he chose to read it out loud. Looking at Jesus, he commented wryly, “You might be interested in this note from my wife.

“Have nothing to do with that righteous man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of him.” Pilate shook his head, not grasping the
importance of the moment.

He rose up and quickly returned to the porch overlooking the courtyard and glared down at the Jewish leaders. "I find no fault in him."

The retort was vehement. "He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting in Galilee even as far as this place!"

"Galilee?" Pilate asked.

"Yes."

"He's from Galilee?"

"Yes. He's from Nazareth," they answered.

Pilate quickly returned to the hall and asked Jesus, "Are you from Galilee?"

Jesus said nothing. This offended Pilate.

"You do not speak to me? Do you not know I have authority to release you, and I have authority to crucify you," he threatened.

Jesus didn't flinch. "You would have no authority over me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered me to you has the greater sin."

Pilate saw the wisdom and truth in Jesus' reply, so he rushed back to the porch, angry that the priests and elders couldn't lay aside their religious conventions for something as important as this, and their refusal to stand in the Praetorium until the decision was final added to his impertinence. "I tell you again, the man has done nothing wrong. I will release him."

"If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar."

Pilate hated the logic, but they were right. The shrewd Jews knew how the system worked, and had just worked it to their advantage. He knew they would surely inform Caesar some way or another if he let Jesus go.

Pilate refused to take responsibility, hoping someone else would. "Then he will see Herod, who is in Jerusalem today. Galilee is his jurisdiction."

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Jesus stood before Herod as a sheep before slaughter. He had nothing to say to him and didn't, even though the chief priests and elders accused him vociferously. All Herod wanted from Jesus was a miracle to satisfy his curiosity, and became angry when he would do nothing of the sort.

Herod became irritated with the reticence of the prisoner and turned his soldiers loose to treat him with contempt and to mock him. Finally he ordered his people to clothe Jesus in an expensive, purple robe to humiliate him and to scorn his purported nobility, and then sent him back to Pilate. The purple color, representing regality, was not lost upon the temple priests standing by, for the veil dividing the inner chamber from the rest of the temple was the same color. It galled them that this false Messiah could be associated with anything of their temple, even the color of a curtain.

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Pilate received the news that Jesus had been sent back. He slammed his fist
on the table, cursed, rose to his feet and returned to the hall where Jesus stood waiting, but before questioning him further, he went to the porch where the leaders of the Jews waited.

“You brought this man to me as one who incites your people to rebellion, and having examined him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against him, nor has Herod. That’s why he sent him back to us. He has done nothing deserving of death! Therefore, I will punish him and release him.”

He turned to go back into the hall, when the ruckus started. The leaders screamed, “Away with this man!” The crowd followed with the same chant.

Stephen and Prisca and Leah were astonished at the irrationality of the crowd. They looked around and saw many of the same people who just a few days ago were laying palm branches before the king riding through the Eastern Gate. Now they were calling for his demise.

Pilate turned back to the crowd and held up his fist. “According to your own custom, I will release someone for you at the Passover. Do you wish then I release for you the king of the Jews?”

The leaders cried out at the suggestion. “No! Not this man, but Barabbas!”

This startled the governor. “Barabbas?”

“Yes! Barabbas!”

“He’s a murdering rebel! Are you mad?”

“Crucify Jesus!”

Pilate was bewildered at the frenzy. “The man is innocent! Think about it!”

But nothing he could say alleviated the pandemonium. The chant continued:

“Crucify him! Crucify him!”

He stood before them and again raised his fist to quiet them. “You have not told me what evil this man has done. If you don’t, I will punish him and release him.”

The reaction from the crowd grew more raucous. Pilate could not believe the people could be so deluded as to cry out for the death of a righteous man, but he was not a Jew and would never be able to figure them out. Never an easy people to govern, they had always tempered their stubbornness with rationality. Not this morning.

“Crucify him! Crucify him!” Their voices echoed through the palace and surrounding buildings, and drew an even larger crowd and threatened a riot.

The governor went back into the hall and ordered the soldiers, “Strip him of his robe and put Herod’s robe on him. And crown him! I’m sick of this whole thing!”

Silas watched a couple strong soldiers wearing thick leather gloves twist a thick, sinewy branch full of long thorns into a ring. They shoved the makeshift crown down on Jesus’ head, puncturing his scalp as the thorns sheared through his skin to the bone of his skull. Blood saturated his hair and flowed down his face and neck and shoulders. His battered and swollen face was soon a ghastly mess of red rivulets. But what bothered Silas more than the physical violation was the demeaning attitude of the soldiers. They forced a staff into his right hand and filed by the pathetic man and bowed mockingly, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and then either slapped him hard on the face or spit upon it; or took the staff and
beat him on the head, forcing the thorns to rip more flesh under his hair; or
grabbed his beard and yanked it out of his face. Over and over, one after
another, until involuntary tears flowed from Jesus’ eyes. The young man had to
look away from the malicious disfigurement taking place only a few feet away
from him. For as long as he lived, he would never forget this. The scene would
govern the rest of his life.

Pilate brought forth Jesus to the palace porch in full view of the Jews.
Leah gasped when she saw him. “Oh no!” she said under her breath. “What
have they done to him?”
Prisca shook her head and looked down. “They’ve tortured him. O God of
Moses! Why?”
Stephen looked at the other two. “What have we become? We’ll pay for this,
you watch,” he prophesied. “Our father is part of this.”
Pilate took Jesus by the arm and announced to the crowd with an extended
hand, “Behold the man!”
This gesture only incited the crowd. “Away with him! Crucify him! Crucify
him!”
Pilate went back into the hall. He was clearly confounded. He detested the
unruliness of the Jews, and he felt his antipathy toward them, especially the
leaders, rise up and find focus in an innocent man. “Put his own robe back on
and take him to the platform, strip him again, and flog him. Bring Herod’s robe.
Don’t let any Jew out there leave the courtyard. They want blood, they’ll get it!”
Pilate’s soldiers knew exactly what the governor meant. They ascended the
stairs of the large, stone platform dominating the courtyard in front of the
palace. Pilate followed and climbed the steps to the judgment chair at one end of
the platform. Jesus stood there, meek, quiet, steadfast, undaunted, bound, and
surrounded by soldiers. Pilate gestured for them to begin.
Two slaves removed Jesus’ own robe and moved off to one side, leaving him
naked again. The pagan warriors, like a pack of feral dogs, familiar with the
ways of the Jews and all the trouble they continually caused as rebel subjects of
Caesar, found in Jesus’ naked body, a means of taking out their frustrations with
impunity. The same soldiers, who hours earlier had fallen backwards at Jesus’
words “I AM,” were now given the license to reduce the so-called Son of God to a
mere mortal. They converged on him from both sides and whipped him with
flesh-lacerating leather straps embedded with bone and metal chips. The pain
cast all the strength from his body and drove him to his knees, his hands still
secured behind him.
The crowd watched the blood flow down his naked body. The four youths
could not apprehend what was happening to a man unjustly accused through
trumped up allegations. They were sick to their stomachs and wanted to cry out
to stop the insanity. Leah buried her head on Silas’s chest and wept. Prisca sobbed
to herself. Stephen watched in stunned disbelief. He wanted to rush the platform
and do something to stop the attack, but, of course, could not. He could only stand
there and watch, captured especially by Jesus’ demeanor between blows. Never
once did Jesus’ eyes exude hatred. If anything, they expressed sympathy for his
enemies who didn’t know what they were doing.
Pilate mercifully stopped the beating and signaled for Herod’s purple robe
to be placed upon the bloodied man. The soldiers yanked him to his feet, but for lack of strength he stumbled and had to be pulled up again. His knees quivered under his weight and barely held him up. Pilate came over to Jesus and then looked down upon the chief priests and elders of the people.

“Is that enough for you?” he bellowed at them cynically. “Behold your King!” Pilate forced the crowd, and especially their leaders to look long and hard at the beaten and bloodied man. “Away with him! Crucify him!” they returned in unison.

“Shall I crucify your King?” Pilate taunted the crowd. “Shall I crucify your King?”

The priests answered loudly with words that would indict the nation for centuries to come, “We have no king but Caesar!” Pilate heard the words but laughed cynically. That’s the first time they have ever uttered those words. They’re all liars! They hate Caesar! He slowly shook his head. He gave up trying to save the Jew.

He summoned his servants and whispered something to them. Quickly they brought forth a basin of water. “Take note of this, O Jews! I hereby wash my hands as proof I am innocent of this man’s blood! You can have Barabbas and you can do what you will with Jesus!”

“His blood shall be on us and on our children!” the leaders screamed. Nothing they could have shouted could have hurt Jesus more. He shuddered at what these words would bring.

The feeble governor plunged his hands into the water and washed them and dried them before the people. He took one last look at them and disappeared into his palace.

The soldiers took Jesus back to the Praetorium where they exchanged robes, but left the viciously painful crown in place. They took him to be crucified while Pilate ate his breakfast.

The four teens stood outside the Praetorium courtyard at the back of the crowd waiting for the soldiers’ escort of the condemned man.

“I don’t know how he’s going to be able to walk,” Silas said, shaking his head.

“I hate the priests!” Prisca said passionately, then caught herself. “I’m sorry, but they’re destroying a good man, and for what? Because he healed people, and fed the poor, and made the blind see?”

Stephen thought of his father doing his priestly duties in the temple, preparing for the most solemn and holy meal of the year. No doubt he was examining the many lambs that would be slaughtered as sacrifices. They had to be perfect in every respect to meet all the requirements of the Law, and yet this man and his colleagues could treat an innocent man with inhuman disregard for his life. It made him furious. “No, because he exposed the stupid traditions that mean nothing anymore,” he answered bitterly. “They would rather have their rituals instead of their Messiah.”

Prisca looked at her brother with astonishment. “Stephen, what are you saying?”

“What I feel in me right now! You’ve seen the same thing I’ve seen.”

Silas and Leah remained silent, although they were surprised Stephen had come to that conclusion. In ten years he would be one of the priests serving the
Prisca was worried about her brother and couldn't let the issue rest. 
“Stephen, you’ve studied so long for the priesthood, and you’ll soon be ready. Will you throw it all away?”

Stephen shook his head as they walked into the narrow streets. “What is it worth if it results in the death of the Messiah? This is not the religion of Moses!”

Prisca couldn't argue. She was sad all this big mess had to happen, but she trusted in her brother. He had always been the best student and the most eager to follow the path of Yahweh. She knew he would do the right thing. She laid her head on his shoulder. “I trust you, Stephen.”

He grabbed her hand and squeezed it tightly.

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The large crowd made room as the soldiers pushed their way into the street. Jesus was in the middle of their sizeable group, bearing the newly cut pole over his shoulder. Soldiers brought in two other criminals from the holding quarters inside the judgment hall who had been condemned the day before. They walked just ahead of Jesus.

Silas shook his head. “He’ll never make it. It’s too heavy and he’s lost too much blood.” Silas was right. No sooner had the killing crowd turned the first corner of the narrow street then Jesus sank under the load.

“Get up, Jew!” the soldier screamed as they pulled him up to his feet.

Jesus walked another thirty paces and collapsed again. This time the heavy pole lay across his back and pinned him to the stone pathway.

The exasperated soldier wanted to reach down and grab the victim and was about to when his centurion reached over and seized his forearm. “Stop! Can’t you see, he’s too weak? Get somebody to carry it for him.”

The soldier looked around and pointed at a large man. “You. Come.”

“What are you?” the soldier demanded.

“Simon.”

“Where are you from?”

“Cyrene.”

“Very well. You carry this pole for him.”

He reached down and, with the help of the young disciple who had stayed as close to Jesus as he dared through the ordeal, lifted the beam off the body of the weary man, and maneuvered it onto the man’s shoulder, allowing Jesus to get up.

Jesus looked back at the black man. "Thank you, my friend. I’m just too weak." The young disciple poured water into Jesus’ mouth until the soldiers shoved him aside.

The procession passed to the outside of the city where the crowd spread out along the road. The soldiers moved ahead to make a way to the hill of execution. The four young people found themselves surrounded by a large group of distraught women, many of whom Stephen recognized as being the wives and daughters of priests and scribes. Silas saw women he knew, related to merchants and tradesmen with whom he had business dealings.

Jesus turned and saw the contingent, and said to them, “Daughters of
Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children, for the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Leah nudged Prisca, "What did he mean?"

"I have no idea," Prisca admitted. She asked Stephen, but he didn’t know for sure.

"I do know there is great trouble ahead of us."
"For whom?"
"For the nation."
"There's something in Hosea about the people crying out for the mountains to cover them. That's all I know."

Then he added, "I'm telling you, there's something about this man. I think the nation has not heard the last of him."

"What do you mean?" Leah asked.

"I'm not sure. Something in my gut tells me."

Silas agreed. "We both believe he is the Messiah."

"Move it along!" the soldier demanded of the crowd. "Keep moving!"

As the three roughhewn poles came in to view, the crowd on the killing hill seemed less enthusiastic about the decision, but that is why calloused soldiers were in charge of executions. Being so familiar with war and death and the insignificance of human life, they had no problem carrying out the instructions of their superiors. The time had come.

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"Mr. Khalili, are you ready to proceed?" Dr. Metzger asked the Arab leader.

"We are."

"Allow me to caution you about your attitude. I appreciate your passion, and will not throttle it at any time, but when passion acquiesces to a nasty attitude toward your colleagues on each side of this arena, then you’re hurting your cause and undercutting your chances of winning the contest. Do you understand me?"

"I do. I appreciate your concern and we’ll try to check ourselves," Najeeb promised.

"Very well. Carry on," the doctor said.

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Muawiyah looked at the edict several times and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. As governor of Syria, he wasn’t about to give up his post without a fight, and fight he would if he had to. Uthman had been his relative, and he had been assassinated as caliph. That event never set well with him, and he always wondered if Ali had been behind it somehow. For sure he had done nothing to bring justice down on the assassins. Maybe this edict was all the proof he needed to accuse Ali of complicity, and if not proof, then certainly the motivation to avenge the death of his relative Uthman.

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"He wants war and he’s going to get it," Muawiyah told the five men sitting around his table.

"Why do you think he wants to remove you?" a general asked.
"I know exactly why," Muawiyah said. "He's going to try to rid Islam leadership of those of us who think the caliph should be selected from the best man available, like Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman. Ali has that weird idea only those from the house of the Prophet should lead the people. And the Prophet wanted that on the day he died. He would have appointed Ali to lead prayers and not Abu Bakr. He has no case."

Everyone agreed with the governor.

"So what do we do?"

"Prepare for war. He will come once he receives my rejection of his edict."

"Shall we fight fellow Muslims?"

"He gives us no choice. We have to prepare."

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Ali read the reply from Muawiyah with consternation. For the first time in the twenty-five years since the death of the Prophet, Muslim would be fighting Muslim because of a leader's evil ambition for control over Islam. The house of the Prophet against the savage lust for power. He wondered if the coming war would set a precedent for war between brothers, or if it would bring an end to internecine fighting once and for all. He had a deep sense that to lead an army against Muawiyah would open a door no Muslim would ever be able to shut. But what was he to do in the face of outright insubordination? He had to fight or lose all respect and his caliphate. He wished the governor of Syria had not called his bluff and defied him.

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"They come, my lord! Justice is served! The oath is about to be fulfilled!" Muawiyah's closest advisor announced as he looked south down the river at the advancing army. The forces of Muawiyah had taken an oath they would not wash or sleep at home until the murderers of Uthman were brought to justice. "I must say it is rather strange to be facing our brothers."

"Yes, it is," Muawiyah admitted. "We have been forced into it. This blood is not on our hands."

He hurriedly looked around at his generals. "It's time. Go and lead your men. Tell them they will have riches and women when the battle is won."

"Amr, you have 10,000 men on the river. Keep Ali from it. Let thirst be our ally."

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Ali examined the situation and saw the danger he was in. Astride his tall black horse, he was unafraid to lead his troops into battle, having done it countless times in the last quarter century. He knew any true caliph would have done it, and he was convinced of the veracity of his caliphate. All true caliphs must spring from the house of the Prophet.

"Malik, they have blocked our access to water. We have to break through," he told his leading general.

Ali watched his elite forces clash headlong with the entrenched enemy, and he knew this war would be a long and bitter struggle. Amr's troops waged a strong defense, but at last they were dislodged.

Malik's courier rushed to the caliph on the stallion. "What is your desire, my lord? Malik sends news of the breakthrough. We have the river!"

Ali contemplated the situation. He could charge now and end the war quickly and oversee a
vast slaughter of fellow Muslims, or he could give Muawiyah another chance to submit to his authority and save many lives. ‘Tell the general to remain in place.’

The courier looked puzzled, but turned and rushed back to the front to deliver the caliph’s order, an order that would bring hostilities to a halt for 110 days.

AUGUST 1

Ali came with four of his advisors. Muawiyah appeared with four of his trusted friends and took their places at the table in a mosque in Damascus. The initial greetings were expectedly cool, but as the day progressed, the two leaders relaxed somewhat and talked freely with one another.

‘I suppose we see the world in slightly different ways,’ Ali suggested, ‘but I think this difference could tear apart the empire.’


‘We both have a common ancestor.’

‘Yes, I know. Abd Manaf ibn Qusai.’

Ali was mildly surprised his antagonist knew this. ‘Then you know the Prophet came from his son Hashim?’

‘Yes. And I came from his other son Abd-Shams who had my ancestor Yumayya,’ Muawiyah explained. ‘Our differences are ever so slight.’

‘And yet they are great at the same time. Our clans are enemies,’ Ali said.

‘As they should be. You Hashimites killed three of our top leaders in a battle.’

‘True, but the battle was not one of treachery. It was a three-on-three match,’ Ali clarified.

‘Yes, I agree, but it doesn’t help the rivalry, does it?’

‘You would think the religion of the Prophet would heal these wounds.’

‘They would if you, Ali, wouldn’t insist on the caliphate remaining in the lineage of the Prophet,’ Muawiyah challenged. ‘I think you would agree my father Abu Sufyan, of the Qurainish tribe, from which you and I and the Prophet sprang, was a gallant warrior for the Prophet, losing both eyes in his service to Islam.’

‘Allah bless his soul,’ Ali confirmed.

‘Surely you can see how worthy he was of the caliphate.’ Muawiyah urged.

‘But he resisted the Prophet fiercely. I remember.’

‘That was before his conversion. He is the one who exercised great wisdom when the Prophet came to lay siege to Mecca. He saw the hopelessness of resisting and adopted Islam.’

Muawiyah explained. ‘In fact the name of our religion means ‘to submit.’ My father submitted to the Prophet and Islam benefitted greatly as a result. Not only did the Meccans convert to Islam, but they also became champions of the new creed, all under the leadership of my father.’

Ali couldn’t argue the facts because he had been there as the first convert, watching everything from the beginning. ‘I sense you’re making a case for Abu Sufyan’s vicarious caliphate through you?’

Muawiyah wouldn’t deny it. ‘Yes, I am.’

Ali was not surprised at the answer. ‘I cannot agree. I must maintain that in order to secure unity among Muslims, the line from the house of the Prophet must remain in control of the empire. Otherwise we’ll have countless struggles like the one we’re having right now.’

Muawiyah shrugged. ‘It’s not fair that the best Muslims then are not given the opportunity to rule. A poor leader from the house of the Prophet is no guarantee of unity in the empire. A good leader from the vast wealth of Muslim men will do much more to maintain unity. It’s all in
the character of the man, not in the family into which he was born."

"Then we cannot agree," Ali stated angrily, and he left the meeting.

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Ali spent the day in mute frustration. He sat alone in his tent contemplating his future and the future of the empire. The more he thought of Muawiyah's insubordination, the angrier he got. It's the Quraish! It's Abu Sufyan's revenge! He was never a true convert. He detested the Prophet. I know he did. And now his son. What is the difference? Toward evening he summoned his closest advisor.

"Bring me a slave girl," he demanded.

The advisor knew better than to violate the caliph's wishes. He'd seen the result of that sort of thing too many times, and because he preferred his head attached to his body, he went into the evening shadows and approached the enemy camp to obtain one of their female servants. He passed to the three guards a small bag of gold, a necessary bribe, to get what he wanted. Through this allowance by Allah, Ali kept his mind focused on the governing of the empire, on the struggle with Muawiyah, and on the necessity of daily prayers.

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For almost four months in the spring and early summer of 657 the negotiations went on, but Muawiyah would not budge on his demand that the murderers of his relative Uthman be executed. Ali would not agree and demanded his rival's subordination. Finally, the stalemate broke in full force.

The battle seesawed back and forth, with no clear advantage to either side. At the end of the third day, with no arrows left in their quivers, the battle disintegrated into fierce hand-to-hand combat with massive casualties on both side. Neither Ali nor Muawiyah could stand the carnage, but both pressed on.

Muawiyah welcomed his leading general Amr to his tent. "Speak to me, Amr. It looks hopeless."

"Not hopeless, my lord. A stalemate, perhaps, but not hopeless," Amr lied.

"What do you suggest?"

"I suggest single combat between you and Ali."

Muawiyah considered the suggestion only briefly. "I would have no chance against Ali. He is much more vigorous than I."

"Then I have another idea."

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Ali pressed forward with the attack, but the combat was wearing out his troops. It was madness and he knew it, but without a clear alternative, he kept on. He knew they were gaining ground bit by bit, but not enough to inspire much motivation in his soldiers.

Suddenly, the fighting ceased and Ali heard a chant. He rode forward into the fray to hear more clearly and was shocked.

"The law of Allah! That shall decide between us!" came the shout from the other side of the battle line. "The law of Allah! That shall decide between us!"

As Ali approached, he heard his own troops defiantly return the chant as if they, and not Muawiyah's warriors, owned it. "The law of Allah! That shall decide between us!" Then he saw
that Muawiyah’s troops had fastened pages of the Quran to their lances and had held them high for Ali’s army to see.

“What is this trick?” Ali demanded loudly. He turned to his troops and demanded they continue to press the fight to the enemy. “Do not be deceived! This is a trap!”

Ali and his general spent a long time arguing for the attack, but to no avail. The men refused, and through a commander, told Ali they would deliver him into the hands of Muawiyah if he persisted in fighting rather than negotiating. Ali shook his head, and gathered his generals to his side. “Friends, we have no choice. We have to settle for arbitration. Muawiyah has escaped through deception. I will go and talk with him.”

“A large number of your troops will not agree with that,” another general warned. “They are outnumbered by those who have taken up the chant, but they told me Allah’s will can only come through war, not through human negotiations.”

Ali dismissed the idea. “It’s easy to second guess when you don’t have responsibility. They can think what they want. And they can leave as well!”

Though both agreed to arbitration, which occurred early the following year, nothing was decisive. Muawiyah continued to rule Syria and eventually drove Ali out of Egypt, leaving Ali to rule the rest of the Muslim territories, all under an uneasy truce that split the empire in its first civil war.

Unfortunately for Ali, the split in the empire gave rise to a radical strain of Islam that rejected all Muslims that didn’t follow their interpretation of the religion. They despised the arbitration and those who had agreed to it after the battle between Ali and Muawiyah. Although Ali heavily damaged their resistance to his leadership through a crushing defeat in war, one of them managed to strike him with a poisoned sword in the back of the head while he was praying at the mosque in Kufa, ending the life of the fourth caliph, cousin of the Prophet, in the year 661.

Muawiyah assumed the leadership in Jerusalem in 661 of the vast and growing empire as the first caliph of Umayyad Caliphate, hearkening back to his great grandfather, Umayya ibn Abd Shams.

The reception on the plateau overlooking the city was a festive affair. Muawiyah never failed to provide the finest food for his guests, nor did he ever do much to put a bridle on his desire to indulge. He filled out his robe nicely.

“Can you imagine how much the empire has grown since the time of the Prophet?” the new caliph asked his guests. “We have conquered vast stretches of land in just thirty years. I predict we will have twice as much in another thirty years. The whole south shore of the Mediterranean will be ours. Then the north shore as well. Europe will fall to us and we will rid the earth of Christianity once and for all.”

“Now that the civil war is over, we can turn our attention to the rest of the world,” an advisor pointed out.

“Indeed!” Muawiyah agreed, holding up his golden chalice. “To Allah and his Messenger! The world will be ours!”

C’Anna did not like the last statement. Did her young counterparts sitting across the small arena really believe “the world will be ours,” and were they dedicated enough to this cause to make it happen? Or was it bluster designed to intimidate? Are they trying to frighten the Jews and the Christians, and, more importantly, the doctors? Will they be able to judge the contest if they become afraid of the Muslims?
Najeeb seems to be defying them to rule against Islam. Will this drumbeat of Islamic threats make us Christians afraid to express ourselves for fear of reprisal? Dr. Metzger had expressed his concern that the Muslim attitude, emanating from Najeeb in particular, was counterproductive and condescending and it would hurt the team’s effort to secure the prize. Najeeb had promised to address his concerns, but that was the furthest thing from his mind while relating the history of the caliphates. What is it in Najeeb that makes him defy logic, common sense, and the feelings of his audience? Does he simply want to offend us and laugh at our discomfort? Everything he and his team have presented so far is evil to the core and yet they ramble on and on without an ounce of compunction. Is this his way of daring us to speak out? Will all this history of brutality make us afraid to express ourselves? I will not stand idly by. I must speak out and try to neutralize this hideous propaganda.

She took her place in front of the podium and looked across the arena at her counterpart, Shalev, and made eye contact. She had the sense that he, too, was feeling what she was. Najeeb had to be stopped! He had to consider how uncivilized was the faith he was articulating and neither Jew nor Christian was going to sit for it. She felt good when Shalev rose and took his place at his podium. Maybe together they could blurt Najeeb’s thrust.

Dr. Metzger saw the two captains take their places, and realized something was important to move them to speak up. They had been quiet for a while, so he wanted to hear what they had to say.

“Miss Lundberg, it’s your turn,” Dr. Metzger said.

“Thank you. Najeeb, before you began to speak last, I heard you tell Dr. Metzger you would address his concern about your attitude toward us. I’ve listened carefully and if I feel something, I feel like you’ve doubled down on your efforts to offend us.”

Najeeb replied quickly. “I’ll say it again, we Muslims have nothing to prove or to apologize for.”

Dr. Metzger saw the frustration in the Christian captain, unusual for C’Anna. He read her correctly. C’Anna drilled her counterpart on the lack of humanity in the Muslim religion. “The point of this camp is to prove the validity of your religion. You’re not proving a thing except how depraved it is! Do you call what you’ve related civilized? After what you’ve shared, is this your definition of civilization?”

Lauren Thomas moved alongside her cousin at the podium. C’Anna clasped her hand briefly to welcome her into the fight.

Najeeb saw the pressure mounting before his eyes. Hodiya Jager joined her captain at the Jewish side of the arena. He ignored the Jews for now and turned to C’Anna, whose hard questions somewhat surprised him. “Let me explain one more time. Islam is the true religion.”

“It is not!” C’Anna nearly shouted. “I’m sick of you saying that! Repeating a lie does not make it true! You have no basis to say it! It’s scurrilous!”

“Scurrilous or not, the basis of my statement is strength,” Najeeb retorted. “Muslims have more strength than either Jews or Christians. It’s easy to see from the beginning how fast we grew. We were stronger than any other people. We conquered. We subjugated. We made others submit to us. This is how we will conquer the world. I don’t know how I can make it much more concise. You tell me how anyone on this earth can resist the strength of Islam! And because we are so strong, we can dictate our ways upon you, and there’s not a thing you can do about it.”

C’Anna bristled. “That is coarse, indecent, and odious! From the beginning, starting with Muhammad and his phony encounters with Gabriel, this whole thing is purely abominable! How can you say the bloodbath called the Arabian Peninsula is anything but?”

Lauren jumped in. “Muhammad is nothing but a product of Arabian paganism and tribal warfare. He didn’t bring forth anything different. There were blood feuds, war spoils, beheadings, rapes, enslavement, and revenge before he ever came and there was an abundance of the same things after he left, only they were incorporated into your salacious and vicious religion. All he did was deceive people into following him in the beginning, but after he gained his power and wealth by attacking caravans and weaker tribes, he forced people into Islam. Did you hear me, Muslim team, and especially you, Najeeb? He coerced people into Islam at the point of a sword! It’s absolutely deplorable!”

C’Anna continued: “And how did he do that? By being crafty like the devil, that’s how. He utilized... No. I’ll let a man explain. It would be more appropriate.

“Shalev, explain what Muhammad did to gain his power.”

Shalev responded as if he had expected C’Anna to call on him. The passion of the two Christians had swept him up. “I think Muhammad used the twin passions of men – wealth and pleasure - to drive his agenda. When he promised his male warriors victory on the battlefield, he meant they could pillage their
We think these few verses are going to terrify us into silence, you are more a fool than I thought you were.

Najeeb closed his book.

Jews are irredeemable because they reject Islam, but to you Allah may extend his hand. But be aware. Idolaters abhor it.

It is happening! That’s the truth you’re missing, “Najeeb retorted. “Look around the world. What religion is gobbling up country after country? Certainly not Judaism. Certainly not Christianity. Islam is on the march and is prevailing. Your two religions claim to have the truth, but truth is in strength and numbers. Islam has both. The dominating religion is the true religion.”

C’Anna was clearly stupefied by this foreign attitude. Najeeb’s argument was foolproof. If he could deflect any attack on the heinous activities of Islam and then justify them by Islam’s strength in numbers and by Islam’s vision of world dominance, as if numbers and vision had anything at all to do with righteousness or civilization, then there was no attack possible. “In other words you have no answer, do you?” C’Anna challenged. “Is barbarism exonerated because it is able to beat down civilization? You can’t explain the murders, the assaults upon women, the oppression of Muhammad, so you hide behind the theory that because your cult dominates in the world, it is therefore true and right. You should be utterly ashamed of yourself, Najeeb!”

Najeeb smugly smiled. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I am not ashamed. The better word is proud - proud to be a follower of the Apostle of Allah; proud to be a devoted member of the true religion in the world today; proud to know someday there will be no Judaism and no Christianity to confuse the people of the world, then there will be peace.

“Allah’s Prophet said, ‘The only true faith in Allah’s sight is Islam.’ He also said we Muslims are the noblest community ever raised up for mankind. He also said, ‘This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed my favor to you. I have chosen Islam to be your faith.’ The Prophet said, ‘It is He who has sent forth His apostle with guidance and the True Faith to exalt it above all religions, though the idolaters abhor it.’”

Najeeb paused and looked around at the Christians. “I should give you a warning, Christians. The Jews are irredeemable because they reject Islam, but to you Allah may extend his hand. But be aware.” He turned in his well-worn Quran and read, “Those that make war against Allah and His apostle and spread disorder in the land shall be slain or crucified or have their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, or be banished from the land. They shall be held up to shame in this world and sternly punished in the hereafter.” Najeeb closed his book. “Those who reject Islam are making war against Allah. Be careful what you say.”

C’Anna bristled with anger. “I suppose the preferred method of slaying is what we’ve heard over and over again. Beheading!”

“Oh, shut up, Najeeb!” shouted Shalev. “C’Anna is no more intimidated by you than I am! If you think these few verses are going to terrify us into silence, you are more a fool than I thought you were! We’re not interested in your fabricated book or your bloodthirsty killer leader. Islam is a plague on the
earth and it needs to be eradicated before it engulfs every country on the earth in blood letting! You speak sordid, irrational nonsense!"

“You will see someday, Jew! Someday you filthy apes will drown in the Mediterranean!” Najeeb shouted back at his hated enemy. “We will finish the job Hitler failed to complete! Be assured!”

C’Anna was shocked at the confrontation and could feel her teammates ready to charge into battle, literally. “Please! Be quiet! Both of you!”

Shocking to everyone, especially Dr. Metzger, they obeyed the Christian. She glanced at her opponent and offered some well-timed advice. “Shalev, take the high road. I can defend myself.”

Shame took the rebuke and nodded. “I know you can. My fault.”

She turned to the Muslim. “The more I listen to your explanations of Islam’s beginning, I’m coming to the conclusion that what existed in the Arabian peninsula before Muhammad has never changed, even to this day. I can’t see where Muhammad did anything to change the people and the culture, but he and the first four caliphs took the Bedouin mentality and temperament and utilized it for their own purposes through deceit. Then they used brute force to extend the reach of Islam throughout the Middle East. I don’t think any of us here doubt Ishmael was the father of the Arabs, so my theory is this camp is a microcosm of an ancient battle between two brothers, Isaac and Ishmael.

“You team, Najeeb, is of Ishmael. Shalev’s is of Isaac, and we are of Jesus who was of Isaac. I can see no way there is or can be any resolution to our differences. You see the world from an entirely different perspective than we do, and these two worldviews are incompatible,” C’Anna explained, and pressed the matter. “I think it should be noted Christians are not emigrating to Muslim countries, but Muslims are emigrating to the Christian West in ever increasing numbers. I personally think the reason for this is the spread of Islam in its quest to control the world.”

“Reaction, Mr. Khalili?” Dr. Metzger gave the opening to the Muslim.
Najeeb didn’t hesitate. “She’s right.”

“Is there any other reason?”

“No. There is nothing in the West a Muslim would desire except Allah’s will.”

“Allah’s will is to subjugate. Isn’t that the meaning of Islam, after all?” C’Anna grilled him. “It’s plain to me.”

She waited for a response, but none came; so she continued. “When Muslims emigrate to foreign countries, they do not assimilate with the native culture. Why is that, Najeeb?”

“We have no reason to assimilate because of the superiority of our culture.”

C’Anna almost reacted, but decided to remain true to her line of reasoning. “All right. I expected that answer, because you regard us as the Great Satan, so I want you and your team to give us a litany of offenses by Christians and Jews that you know about, maybe firsthand, or secondhand.”

Najeeb turned around and faced his team and they huddled to consider the proposal. The other two teams got up and stretched their legs. Dr. Metzger approached C’Anna.

“What do you have in mind, Miss Lundberg?”

“Nothing more than what I asked for. I want to make it absolutely clear we are involved in a clash of two civilizations, if we can call Islam a civilization,” she added sardonically.

Dr. Metzger didn’t smile. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far. They have contributed to the world some important things.”

C’Anna nodded reluctantly, but said, “Whatever they stole from the Jews and Christians, I suppose.”

Dr. Metzger didn’t respond. He placed his hand on her shoulder. “Don’t let Najeeb get to you. Stay above the fray.”

C’Anna pondered the advice as the good doctor walked away. He was right.

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Najeeb led off for his team so they could draw on his example. “I must first say I hope C’Anna’s request is not a trap.”

C’Anna stood up and replied. “No, it is not a trap. The point is to show the disparity between our ways of looking at the world and how we process it. I want you to describe your grievances and the basis for them. When your team finishes, then I’ll present my theory, unless I have nothing to say when you’re finished.”

Najeeb nodded. “All right. I would like to start right here with some of the offensive things you’ve
“You’ve disparaged the Prophet for consummating his marriage to Aisha when she was nine years old. The Prophet is Allah’s messenger and what he did is in accordance with Allah’s will.” Najeeb sat down and Abdulaziz took the podium.

“Along this same line, the girl Christian was very hateful when she talked about Muhammad’s wives. Allah does not like anyone discussing his Messenger’s private life. It is a violation of Islam.

“It’s the same with all the caliphs. Their private affairs are not open for criticism. Allah allows it and that is enough. To criticize is to dishonor Allah, a sin he won’t forgive. Even when you impugn unlimited sex with slaves, you are impugning the Qu’ran, Allah’s infallible book to mankind. The Qu’ran should not be discussed in this way. I have heard infidels disparage Islam for not being friendly to Jews and Christians according to the Qu’ran. That is an offense because what the Qu’ran decrees, we must not discuss.”

C’Anna slowly shook her head. It was impossible for her to understand these men, try as she might. She could only imagine what Shalev was thinking. What are these men doing in a contest like this?

Abdullah stepped up and said, “I have read the Kafirs, instead of being . . .”

“Not Arabic, Mr. Kassab,” Dr. Metzger scolded. “This camp is English only. What do you mean ‘kafirs’?”

Abdullah was reluctant to translate, but relented and rephrased his thought. “In the lands of the infidels, they refuse to adopt Islamic values and instead urge Muslims to adopt tolerance for every culture. This is an affront. We are of the true faith and we are commanded not to change. One of the greatest offenses to Muslims is an infidel who does not submit to Allah despite all the warnings. He is the one true God and will judge harshly those who reject Islam. When infidel governments pass anti-terror laws, they are striking at the heart of the Qu’ran, our holy book, which commands us to put terror in the hearts of the unbelievers in order to warn them.”

Dr. Metzger stood up when he saw the restlessness of the Jewish team and moved over to them as a calming influence. It was late and nerves were frayed all around. He knew airing these offenses was not sitting well with the Israelis. “Let’s stop here for lunch. See you this evening.”

Dr. Metzger gestured to Najeeb to continue where they left off in the morning session. He appointed Majid. When Majid began talking, it was apparent the night of sleep failed to cool down emotions. He said this: “When you two teams try to accuse Muhammad or his companions of murder, that is highly offensive to us. Whenever Muhammad killed someone, it was according to the will of Allah. You must not accuse him of wrongdoing. Murder implies wrongdoing.”

Dr. Metzger heard the murmuring behind him and gestured to let it go, and the buzz subsided. Majid sensed an opening to pour out grievances, and he took advantage. “When infidel governments refuse to allow Shariah law to be enforced for the Muslims, that is offensive. Allah’s laws are above infidel laws. Infidel laws are abhorrent to Allah and to Muslims. In America the authorities require all visitors to be fingerprinted, photographed, and biometrically registered. This is highly offensive because it makes us seem like terrorists. The desire of every Muslim is to live in peace. We are sick to death of the way the infidels peddle their immorality and decadence to the rest of the world. Muslims, the most noble of all peoples, sometimes see the depravity with their open eyes. Islam came to purify the world, but the infidels continue their decadence. The infidel women wear hardly any clothes to swim on beaches. Some infidel women who give birth out of wedlock, receive help from the government. Shariah demands the woman be stoned to death for immoral behavior. It shows how infidels hold Islam in contempt. Infidel women drink alcohol in public drinking houses. Shariah demands they be lashed forty times. Infidel men and women eat and drink in public during Ramadan where fasting Muslims can see them. This shows how insensitive infidels are to the only true religion.”

Dr. Metzger stood and addressed the Jewish and Christian teams. “For those of you who don’t know what Ramadan is, I’ll have Mr. Khalili explain.”

“Ramadan is the ninth month of Islam’s calendar, in which Muslims are required to refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sex during the daylight hours. It is designed to teach Muslims about spirituality and submissiveness to Allah and humility and patience and prayer.”

“Thank you.”

Jibran followed Majid. “Infidel women go out of their houses without covering themselves with even
a scarf. The Qu’ran says women are to stay at home at all times and serve their husbands. If she has to go out, it must be with permission from her husband, and she must be covered completely. Infidel women carry on relationships with men outside of marriage, but infidel authorities insist on keeping their evil laws of personal freedom for everyone, no matter how much we protest. Not only that, infidel courts incarcerate Muslim offenders even though Shariah gives Muslim men the inalienable right to copulate whenever he feels like it with infidel women who are Islamic captives.”

The murmur coursed through the audience like thunder. Dr. Metzger could sense the anger at Jibran’s so-called offense. He knew it could be challenged, so he addressed the two teams.

“What I think Mr. Fakhoury is referring to is the right of warriors to have the captive women of the defeated army. I suppose the question to ask him is whether he regards infidel women in an infidel country not yet conquered for Islam as captives. Elaborate.”

“They are de facto captives. It is only a matter of time,” he answered.

“You are sick!” several Jews yelled out. “Islam breeds miscreants!”

The Christians let the Jews express what they were feeling, but kept still. What he said was certainly salient because of a few incidents they knew about in the U. S. regarding these very things.

Dr. Metzger calmed down the Jewish team and returned the floor to the Muslims.

Jibran reported, “I have seen billboards in America near mosques displaying women in underwear and lingerie and swimsuits, provoking Muslim men to passion. I have received letters from friends in America, and they have told me fitness centers are patronized by men and women in sportswear showing off their sweaty bodies. They have asked local officials to make them wear trousers or to cover their doors and windows with coverings, but they have refused. The same is true for public swimming pools where men and women swim together. When Muslims ask for separate swimming pools exclusively for Muslim women, the authorities turn them down. My friends have told me this.”

C’Anna moved to the podium. “Jibran, what is wrong with the passion of Muslim men? You’ve said it is entirely excusable under Sharia law for a Muslim man to take pleasure from an infidel woman. What does it matter what she is wearing?”

The question hit like a rock. Jibran was speechless, and turned meekly to Najeeb for help, but couldn’t make eye contact, so he sat down without addressing the Christian.

Kaleem stood and made a further point along this line, as if C’Anna didn’t exist, or wasn’t standing to the side asking a question they couldn’t answer, and, in general, opposing everything they stood for. “A good example of Muslim affront is the Olympic Games, because mixed crowds watch the events and see much female flesh in action. This is erotic and anti-Islamic. Though we protest to the Olympic Committee, they ignore us and allow it to continue.”

C’Anna glanced at Shalev and they both had to cover their mouths so they wouldn’t burst out laughing. It didn’t prevent them from giggling.

“Infidel officials expel our imams for teaching the goodness of beating our wives in order to make them obey, and for preaching, what they call, hatred toward the adopted country. Some are kicked out of those countries. They tell Muslim men they cannot acquire four wives at one time because it is against the infidel laws, even though this practice is clearly sanctioned in the Qu’ran. Infidel countries hatefully condemn stoning in Muslim countries, but they don’t care that our system of jurisprudence is written by Allah and his Messenger.”

Najeeb followed and said, “One of the greatest offenses to Islam is the failure of the infidel countries to pay the jizyah.”

“Explain it, Mr. Khalili,” Dr. Metzger demanded, frustrated by the use of Arabic words in an English-only camp.

“It was in our history.”

“I know, but repetition doesn’t hurt a soul.”

Najeeb nodded. “Jizyah is the tax imposed on non-Muslims to prove their acceptance of submission to Islamic states. It grants protection from outside aggression, and allows them to practice their religion.”

Dr. Metzger stood and addressed the Jews and the Christians. “Do you all understand this explanation?”

“It came out in the history. We remember,” Shalev assured the doctor.

“Okay, Najeeb, why is the tax an issue?”

“Out of deference to Muslims in their countries, infidels should willingly pay the jizyah. They will have to pay it sooner or later, but if they would pay now, it would go a long way toward keeping the peace.”
The two captains glanced at each other and could only shake their hands at the incredulity of Najeeb’s statement, but they also knew he believed every word he said, and nothing they could say would change that.

Fatima spoke next. "When Muslim emigrate to infidel countries, the people refuse to learn Arabic, and, instead, urge us to learn the language of their country in order to be assimilated. Muslims don’t assimilate into other cultures. That is what other cultures must do, not us."

Dr. Metzger stood to defuse any reaction. He looked over at C’Anna and asked her to stand up. "Miss Lundberg, I will let you wrap up your comments for the day. After you’re finished, I’ll let Mr. Sharon articulate his final arguments for his team.” He turned to Najeeb. "Mr. Khalili, after these two captains are through, you’ll wrap up your arguments for Islam."

C’Anna stood up and walked to the podium. She sighed and paused for a moment to clear her mind. “Najeeb, thank you and your team for cooperating with my request and for being candid with us all. There is nothing to hide, and you hid nothing. That is commendable.

“What is not commendable is what you did not hide. Your long list confirms what I said earlier. You have made it crystal clear there is no compatibility between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The God we Christians worship is the same God Jews worship. The difference between the Jews and the Christians is not in our conception of the one true God. He is the same to both of us. We part ways because we Christians believe God is triune and the Son of God became a man in the person of Jesus. But the Father is the Father to both of our faiths.

“The same is not true with your faith, Najeeb. You Muslims believe in a God foreign to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Allah is not the God of the Jews and the Christians. Your Qu’ran is not even close to our Scriptures. It contains a lot of references to things taken from the Old and New Testaments, and those things make up the infrastructure of the Qu’ran, but that is the only similarity.”

C’Anna took a drink of water. “As you well know, you have found us Christians and Jews big doubters on everything you have presented to us, and we haven’t been afraid to say so. But you have taken an unassailable path. You have said directly and without proof Islam is the only true religion, Allah is the only true God, Muhammad is the final true messenger, the Qu’ran is the only true word of Allah, and Islam is destined to conquer the whole world by whatever means at its disposal. You have not deviated from this from the beginning of your argument. You may think this was a noble decision, and, in the opinion of your teammates, it may have been; but concerning us two teams, it was a serious miscalculation. I say that because we have not been able to engage in any meaningful exchange of ideas. You have come across as strident and sometimes vicious, in keeping with the character of your founder and his immediate companions. From the perspective of Christians from America, what you have uncovered of your faith is bewildering to us. From the conversations my team has had, I can say truthfully we fear you, not because of your ideas, but from the very real possibility that given the opportunity, you would kill us all, and you would do it without remorse.

"As leader of the Christian team, I would appeal to the good doctors, in determining what faith and what team deserves to win this contest, to look at the Muslim team, not from some nuanced perspective, but as they have presented themselves. Their warriors are driven by the accumulation of plunder and by sexual desire with the intention of annihilating any and all opposition standing in their way of world domination, most notably the Jews and the Christians wherever they find them. I cannot in the name of logic see how you can view them in any other light."

C’Anna took her place and gave way to Shalev.

Shalev was tense and angry and ready to plunge the dagger into the breast of Islam. "It’s hard to follow my Christian friend, whose superb elocution will probably put mine to shame, and I would probably let hers be the last word if my teammates and I had not lived our whole lives in a country directly in the crosshairs of the exact hatred Najeeb and his team vividly demonstrate and articulate day in and day out.

"The land of Israel prior to the late 1800s had been the scene of desolation since the Jews were driven out in the first century. When our forefathers began to return and to turn the desert into a garden through their sweat and blood, so also did the opposition from the Arabs return to frustrate us every step of the way. Through two world wars and the Holocaust, the world’s conscience turned in favor of the Jews for a fleeting moment and afforded us a country of our own. This, of course, was unacceptable to Muslims because in the sea of Islam surrounding Israel, here was yet another piece of the earth they had lost to superior forces. It was contrary to their doctrine of dominating the world. Retreat was repugnant and still is to Islam. But had the world never risen up to oppose this plague on the earth, Western Civilization and
Christianity would have been an intriguing artifact in the rubble of history.” Shalev looked over at C’Anna. “Because of the nature of this history and how central it is to Christians, I defer to C’Anna.”

C’Anna was a bit surprised by this sudden new assignment, but she had made sure her team was well-founded in Jewish and Muslim history, using an hour each day after supper to delegate areas of history to each of her teammates. She got the idea from Shalev who told her what the Jews were doing. Fearing the Israelis would get a leg up on her team, C’Anna implemented the study hour. Everyone participated and the hour went quickly. Now it was a matter of who would volunteer for Shalev’s surprise. Before she turned around, at least half her team stood behind her waiting. She smiled and, in a change of routine, randomly picked four – Alexis Hargrove, Tabi Schilt, Kael Lundberg, and Holden Thomas.

“Let’s take a short break and let the Christians formulate their thoughts,” Dr. Shalat suggested.

The four Christians gathered to discuss strategy as the teams seated themselves. Holden started off by saying, “The inexorable spread of Islam continued under the Umayyad Dynasty that Muawiyah’s caliphate began. The Muslim navy held Cyprus, Rhodes, and several Aegean islands that served as platforms to attack Constantinople in the late 670s. Though repulsed by the Greeks, halting their spread for the first time, the Arabs turned west to North Africa and conquered the stubborn nomadic people who finally converted to Islam. This advance put Spain in view, and after seven years of fighting the Visigoths in Spain, the Visigoths crumbled. The Muslims rushed in and occupied the Iberian Peninsula and moved north into a strong position in southwest France. Eastward they advanced into Central Asia as far as the Indus valley.

“The Muslim empire destroyed and completely absorbed the Sassanid Empire, a Persian-based government ruling from Ctesophon on the east bank of the Tigris near modern day Baghdad. It controlled land including all of today’s Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, and parts of Central Asia, Turkey, and Arabia; that is, the greater part of the Byzantine Empire.”

“Holden, give us a brief history of the Byzantine Empire so we can track with you,” Dr. Shalat said. Holden agreed. “It’s another name for the Roman Empire and it took its name from the city of Byzantium where Constantine set up the new capital of the empire. This city fell to the marauding Muslims and set the stage for the northward thrust of Islam into Europe.” The young Christian paused to let everyone focus on what he was saying, and then recounted some of the outstanding features of the Byzantines, chief among them was a critical battle for the continent. That would continue on Monday.

AUGUST 5

Charles Martel looked at the map and couldn’t believe his eyes. ‘Are you sure this map is correct?’ he demanded of his officials. He was visibly shaken by what they were showing him.

‘We have no reason to believe anything you are looking at is incorrect, my lord,’ the head mapmaker replied.

Charles backed away from the table and circled it, looking down and thinking seriously about the dismal future facing him square on. He returned to the table. ‘Men, we knew this day would come. Now is our grand opportunity to stop these oppressors. They are very beatable, but we have to be smart. They are seasoned fighters, as we know well. We don’t want to consider the ramifications if we don’t succeed,’ he said somberly, but with a hint of eagerness, not dread.

No one dared to consider the consequences of failure. In the head of every man lurked the stories that had trickled in over the years of Muslim conquests, but they refused to give them credence. They were too dismal to dwell on.

Charles saw that no one wanted to speak out on the inevitable. ‘Let me tell you exactly what this fight is about.’

‘Our faith is in jeopardy. The cause of Christ and his Catholic Church is coming under siege.’ Pointing to his religious advisor, Pietre, Charles said. ‘Pietre, I know you violently disagree with what has developed from the story you told me several days ago. I want you to tell it
Pietre agreed to share the story, trusting Charles’ wisdom. “Most recently, we have managed to apprehend a member of a group of Christians whom we call ‘Paulicians.’ Through interrogation, we discovered the origin of this group and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the Church. And for this we incarcerated the man and demanded of him the whereabouts of his group. So would not comply.”

“Who did you do with him, Pietre?” a military general asked.

“We burned him alive.”

No one said anything because live burnings were so regular an ending for non-conformists that to state otherwise would have caused a reaction.

“The only thing we were able to get from him was the story of this group’s beginning.

Apparently an Armenian deacon was escaping Syria ahead of the rampaging Muslims when he took lodging of one Constantine of Mananalis near Samasota. So enthralled was he of this breadth of kindness he gave this Constantine a rare manuscript of the four Gospels and the fourteen Epistles of St. Paul.”

Another general laughed. “You must be troubled by another story of a rogue manuscript. I wonder if it is still circulating among the unwashed. Pietre.”

Pietre didn’t respond to so obvious a tease, for everyone of the twenty in the room knew very well the trouble literacy, and especially literacy in the outlawed Scriptures, had caused and was causing to the Church. “This manuscript apparently changed Constantine from a Gnostic to a rabid adherent of St. Paul, and from there this group of ‘Paulicians’ sprang forth and persists to this day in opposition to Rome.”

“Good enough, Pietre,” Charles said. “I wanted Pietre to tell this story for one reason: If we fail to halt the spread of Islam, there will be a continent of Armenian deacons pushed out of their homes, villages, and countries into Europe. There will not be enough Constantines to give them shelter. This could spell disaster for the Church. These rogue Christians will bring manuscripts with them that could turn the common people away from Rome. We can’t have it. Outlaw Christians not attached to the Church are at least as much a threat as the Muslims are to our way of life. We must stop them!”

Pietre wasn’t buying the hyperbole, but he wouldn’t speak out because he wanted to see the army motivated to fight the Muslims. Though he feared literacy among the common people like Charles did, he knew history and he knew Muslims would obliterate the culture after dividing the spoils of war. In a few years there would be no Christian Europe.

“Look at where we are,” Charles continued emphatically. “The Umayyad Caliphate has captured all of the Iberian Peninsula. All of it! The Visigoths had no chance, and in twenty years they’re approaching Vienna. That’s staggering! Who’s the general?”

One of the cabinet members stood up and stretched out the large map on the table. “All right. Most of this will make sense when we see it here.

‘The Muslim conquest of the peninsula started in 711 and here we are in 732 looking at the literal conquest of the whole continent.’ He pointed at the map and showed where Islam was at its present expansion.
Charles beat his fist against the table. "This is what I’ve been saying all along! Every
measly duke and prince has to have his own little kingdom, and so he becomes so weak he can’t raise
a decent army. All they do is fight among themselves. So what happens? Arabs and North
Africans, of all people, blow in from the desert and conquer us! It makes me sick that little men
like Odo have to hang on to their own tiny duchies, instead of joining forces for a united Europe.
He lost Pamplona because he wouldn’t call for help for fear of giving up some of his power.

"I do commend Odo for winning at Toulouse. That was a huge victory and it killed. . ."

"Al-Samh ibn Malik."

Charles nodded. "We need to drive them out so we won’t have to pronounce their names," he
said half teasing. "I hope this coming battle is what we’ve been waiting for."

"But even though Odo won that battle, he couldn’t prevent the horde from advancing all the
way up here to Autun. Why did he wait so long to appeal to us?"

The cabinet knew the answer. He didn’t want to have to turn over sovereignty to the dreaded
Franks. "He’s afraid of you taking over the continent. Charles. After all, you gave him a sound
thrashing last year."

"That was probably a mistake. I could have forced him to capitulate without war instead of
leaving him weakened. Now we have this fine mess and not enough backing. The Muslims are
halfway through France. He has them to contend with on the south and us on the north. You’d
think he would have sided with us years ago to butt this Arab thrust. Instead he allied with
some African emir. what was his name. as if it matters."

"Uthman."

Charles smirked. "I’m glad some of you are keeping these names straight.

"So instead of coming to us for the only real help he has at his disposal, he turned to a
Muslim. Here we are, Christians like him, and what does he do? Turns to a Muslim! What is
that?"

Another advisor interjected. "I don’t know if you know this, but we found out Odo even
gave his daughter to that African to seal the alliance."

Charles was shocked. "That can’t be true! Are you certain?"

"That’s the news we received about a year ago."

"So Odo sacrificed his Christian daughter to an African Muslim!" Charles screamed. "I
can’t believe it! All because he thinks he can defeat this fighting machine on his own! That’s why
he got his tail kicked at the river. He’s too weak. So what happened to that alliance between Odo
and the African?" Charles had never been too interested in these details until now. He knew he was
in a showdown with Abdul Rahman. So he wanted to find out everything he could about the man.

A general spoke next. "It failed, of course. The African rebelled against the governor of al-
Andalus and got a real butt-kicking. Then he turned against Odo."

"All right. continue. Bring us up to date," Charles commanded.

"Abdul blew through Odo at Bordeaux."

Charles shook his head. "Let me guess. The Muslims plundered the city, took its wealth,
slaughtered the men, sexually assaulted the women."

The general nodded. "It was bad. apparently. That’s what the refugees said."

"Is this making an impression on us here? These are European Christians we’re talking
about!" Charles shouted again to bowed heads. Then he softened. "Listen, my friends. I’m not
blaming you. We are all that stands between this plague and Christian Europe. I’m just voicing
my frustrations with the whole situation. So, Odo got his next chance to meet Abdul at the
Garonne River. Explain."

"It was a slaughter. Most of his troops were wiped out."

"What happened to the monasteries in the region?" Charles asked.
"They looted them, of course."
"And this happened this year?"
"Yes."

Charles held up the small scroll with a ribbon around it. "So finally Odo gives us the sovereignty when he's beaten to a pulp and has allowed the implacable enemy to advance a quarter of the way into the continent. How noble can you get?"

The forty-six year old leader, tall, stately, charismatic, and confident circled the table once more, tapping the scroll on his leg, thinking. "So I guess we can say Abdul has the momentum." Charles observed, not expecting any confirmation to something so obvious. "Well, men, it's all up to us. All I can say is it's a good thing Constantinople didn't fall, or we'd have this pestilence crawling up our eastern flank."

Constantinople had endured two serious sieges from the expansionist Arab Muslims. The one in 674 lasted four years and resulted in a devastating defeat stunting the Muslim spread northward into Eastern Europe. Heroes of that Byzantine victory were the massive walls surrounding the city, and a vicious incendiary weapon called 'Greek fire' that could burn on water, wiping out hundreds of Muslim ships.

A second siege, more important now to Charles Martel, was in 717, of short duration. The same Greek fire came into play, as did the counterattacking Bulgarian army, along with another ally, the 'cruellest winter that anyone could remember.' Disease and starvation ravaged the Arab army encamped outside the walls of the city. They were forced to eat their camels, horses, donkeys, and, eventually, the bodies of their dead.

Charles studied the men sitting before him. "I called this meeting to make decisions. Now's the time. We have to decide what we're going to do and how we're going to do it."

"What have our scouts discovered about Abdul's army? Where are they?"
"They're heading toward Tours ahead of their supply lines," a general replied.

The religious advisor turned quickly to the general. "Are you sure?"
"Pretty sure. Why?"

"They're heading for the abbey then," he responded in dismay.

Everyone knew why the Roman Catholic was distressed. The Abbey of Saint Martin of Tours was the most important and the holiest shrine in Western Europe.

"They will desecrate it," the advisor lamented.

Charles began to formulate a response in his mind to this foreign incursion into Christian territory. "Here's what we will do..."

The following day the prematurely graying charismatic leader sat tall on his stallion, his favorite dais from which to address his troops, and explained to his men what the plan was. After explaining, he added, "Two things are critical for us. Surprise and bait. We have to present a surprise -- a surprise as to time and place. The bait is the wealth of Europe, already in place. We'll provide the surprise.

"Do I need to remind you this is the 100th anniversary of the death of Muhammad? A good date to put an end to his belligerence!"

The Frankish army marched steadily south, well prepared and well nourished and well supplied. They stayed off the beaten paths of the old Roman roads to move into place undetected, and chose a forest on high ground in which to assemble. No one had any idea, especially Abdul Rahman and his marauding Muslims that the Franks were in the trees overlooking their approach to Tours. This was a gross failure of Abdul Rahman, normally a good general. Perhaps the lure
of the plunder awaiting them in Tours proved too enticing to bother with trifles, like reconnaissance. Charles arranged his well-disciplined, battle-hardened troops in a phalanx formation—side by side in tight proximity to one another in a large rectangle—among the trees. There they waited and watched the road below them.

The Umayyads arrived at the scene of battle, and found Charles' surprise when they looked up the incline at a forest bristling with well-armed and armored soldiers defending their own turf. They didn't know what to expect because they had not scouted Charles' army. Fighting uphill was bad enough, but through trees was treacherous. Nevertheless, Abdul Rahman had tasted too much plunder in his life of warfare to turn back from Tours, the seductive 'Siren' of Europe. After all, how much better could this army be than the armies of Odo in Aquitaine?

For seven days Abdul Rahman studied the situation, never sure how good was the army in front of him, and waited for more of his troops to arrive. And every day Charles worried Abdul would decide against engaging the Franks, and yet he tempered that worry with the reality of possible failure. There was no tomorrow for the kingdom, because there was no other force able to repel the Arab armies. He hoped the lure of the plunder of Tours, the pride in Abdul Rahman's heart, and the fast approach of winter would conspire to trigger the attack. He also knew each day brought more troops from the kingdom.

At last Charles' bait proved too tasty for the proud Muslim. Charles had been waiting and preparing for this day since Odo had defeated them at Toulouse and killed their general. Charles had studied that battle in depth and knew the strengths and weakness of his enemy. Now it was his turn. He watched the Muslim general amass his cavalry and infantry for an assault, and up the hill they came, galloping and screaming and brandishing their swords and long lances. The moment of truth had arrived.

Charles surveyed the advance and knew he had done the only thing he could have done in stationing his men on a high and forested plateau, because infantry could not have survived in the open against cavalry. He was thankful his soldiers believed in him implicitly and trusted in his battle plan. They had fought with him for over a decade and had learned from him every step of the way. Unaware of history, their finest hour was upon them.

The Muslim cavalry crashed through the trees and came to a dead stop, horses piling up on each other. The Franks pounced like hungry lions on their prey, hacking the Muslims to death with their battleaxes, severing limbs, heads, horses' legs, anything the massive blades could contact. Blood spurted in all directions stifling the gurgling screams pushing out of dying lungs. The Franks let go their hatred of these dark skinned, bearded barbarians who dared to violate their continent by killing their men, violating their women, enslaving their children, and plundering their wealth.

The damaged horsemen retreated and gave way to the next charge, and the next, and the next, all with limited degree of penetration into the Frankish phalanx. Abdul Rahman screamed at his cavalrymen for their incapacity to breach the defense. 'In the name of Allah and his Messenger, break through!' Finally, at his desperate ravings, the cavalry broke through the trees into the interior of the phalanx, impaling many Frank defenders, but they were swarmed under and butchered by the disciplined defenders who stood like an immovable sea frozen in place. The men of the north
wielded their axes and plunged their swords into the enemy intruders. Charles moved about the phalanx on his capable steed. He needed the voice of experience whispering in his ear. He called his courier to his side.

"What have you heard from Odo?"

"He is on his way. In fact he may be in the area by now."

"Go around the back way and try to find him. If you do, bring him to me promptly."

Odo and his small army approached the region of Tours, and he sent out scouts to assess the situation, but within the hour, one scout returned with Martel’s courier. After the exchange of a few words, both men were galloping northward.

"Odo, welcome, my friend," Charles greeted his former opponent.

"It’s good to see you, Charles," Odo returned genuinely. "I must say it’s better to be with you than against you."

Charles smiled through the din of battle. "I agree.

"Odo, you’ve fought these brutes many times. Do you have any suggestions for me?"

Odo was taken aback by Charles’ humility, and felt buoyed by the confidence Charles bestowed upon him. He rode around the phalanx assessing the defense, and returned to the commander.

"Charles, here’s what I think. If we..."

Charles watched the Muslim cavalry irrepressibly crash through the trees, trying desperately to wield their weapons as they snagged tree branches and were ripped from their grip. The Frank defenders swung their axes at the horses’ legs, frequently severing them and bringing down their riders to an awaiting death. Charles wondered how long his men could withstand the constant barrage, the sure indication Abdul Rahman cared little to nothing for human life, including his own men. He pulled aside one of his captains and told him his plan. The captain went immediately to the front and spread the news.

Into the middle of the phalanx came a hard charging horseman taking direct aim at Charles, but his formidable and prepared men tripped the horse with ropes and toppled the rider to the ground. Within seconds he was subdued.

Looking up at five swords aimed at his neck and midsection eager to see his blood flow, the Muslim dropped his sword. The captain stooped down and pulled out of the Muslim’s pocket a gold chain holding a gold medallion and looked down the hill toward the encampment. The Muslim realized the Frank had figured out what could be stashed at the encampment down the hill. His face expressed more shock at the possibility of losing the loot from their latest plundering than he did of the spears staring down at him. The Franks lifted the man onto his horse and led him through the line where he galloped away, flush with news of the enemy rifling through their camp and stealing their plunder.
Muslim fears were not displaced. News spread rapidly and when many of the cavalry broke off from the fighting against the orders of Abdul Rahman, they returned to their camp only to find Odo and his men waiting in ambush. When they passed by into extreme vulnerability, Odo gave the command to charge the Muslims.

Abdul Rahman watched many of his horsemen and infantry turn from the fight and head back to camp. "Halt! Miserable cowards! Allah will consign you to hellfire!"

Abdul turned his back to the Franks to wail at his confused troops. Seeing the opportunity and the reticence of the Muslims to charge up the hill to the Franks instead of charging down the hill to their loot, the Franks charged the unsuspecting Arab general and slaughtered him on the spot. That did it. The whole army retreated to their camp and when Odo saw the superiority of the enemy coming his way, he and his troops rushed back into the forest and made their way to Charles, carrying with them some treasures plundered from Bordeaux.

Charles welcomed the evening shadows, and after conducting Christian burials for the fallen, he had his troops settle down around campfires and prepare for the decisive day to come.

Day broke upon the battlefield, but there was no sign of the enemy. The Frank army of Charles Martel, the strongest in Europe, the last barrier between civilization and barbarism, looked around in fear.

'They are about to ambush,' some said of the eerie silence. That prospect struck fear into the hearts of the seasoned fighters who quickly prepared for an attack.

Charles entered the center of the phalanx and addressed his men. 'I don't need to tell you under no circumstances are you to break formation or go out into the open. We cannot resist their cavalry. Men are no match for horses and men. Do everything as we did yesterday.'

As he finished up his rally, a courier rode up and told him the news.

'What?' Charles asked incredulously.

'They are gone. My lord. They left their tents and are gone.'

Charles lowered his head and closed his eyes. 'Thank God. Thank God!' He looked up and raised his fists into the air. His troops knew what that sign meant. They had won!

Pandemonium broke loose in the phalanx as the soldiers laughed and clapped and sang and danced. By noon they collapsed in the warm October sun and slept. And their sleep was sweet. They had saved Western Civilization from the foreign element that could have and probably would have eradicated the faith in the lowly Jesus.

Dr. Metzger approached the four Christians and nodded his head as he came. "Very well presented. I must ask you if this was the last time Europe was threatened by the expansion of Islam."

"Far from it," Kael replied. "There was another pivotal battle Christian Europe had to fight to protect itself from a Muslim takeover. Once again Western Civilization hung in the balance.

"But before I begin, I must say a further word about something we have talked about and have not identified. If Dr. Metzger will indulge me, I will use the Arabic word we all know so well."
Kael glanced at the doctor, who smiled briefly. “Just this once,” he teased. “The word is ‘jihad.’ I’m sure if I stray, a certain team will get me back on course,” Kael said wryly. “Islam’s 14th century historian Ibn Khaldun spoke brutally honest words, and in these words I hear Najeeb’s direction to tell us the raw truth, when he said, ‘In the Muslim community, the jihad is a religious duty because of the Islamic mission and the obligation’ to convert ‘everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force.’

“So what is this ‘jihad’ we hear so much about?” Kael asked. “In the Dictionary of Islam it is defined.” He held up a paper and read, “A religious war with those who are unbelievers in the mission of Muhammad. . .enjoined especially for the purpose of advancing Islam and repelling evil from Muslims.” Kael looked at the Muslim team. “I don’t see a lot of evil being repelled from Muslims, but I do see a lot of jihadis advancing Islam through force and murder and slavery. I contend we must see jihad in a military context. Every Muslim is a jihadi, whether a soldier on the battlefield, a governor in a palace, or a suicide bomber. Muslims live every day under the command to take out the infidel by whatever means necessary. All Muslims are in a war and that makes them jihadis. Now I’m sure our Muslim counterparts will argue jihad is an internal spiritual struggle for excellence, but I don’t buy it for a minute. I say it is the relentless, continual warfare against us infidels until we either convert, or get taxed to death, or get murdered. Great choices! It is an ideology of violence and warfare, and it comes straight out of the so-called Holy Book. And time has done nothing to diminish it. Whenever the Muslims conquered a society, they sucked the life out of it, like an insidious parasite gutting the intellectual and economic resources of that society. Whatever Muslims are purported to have contributed to civilization, they stole from the infidel societies they conquered. Even the base of their faith, the Qu’ran, is a good example. It is a twisted piece of theft from the Bible extolling fatalism and blind faith. Intellectualism is degraded in the Qu’ran, but slavery and abuse of conquered infidel women is encouraged. In fact jihadis regard women taken in war as war booty. They can be violated, enslaved, placed in harems, sold. They are nothing but conquered property and worth only what Muslim men say they are. And all this is justified by the cruel ideology of Islam, and very little a Muslim does to an infidel woman is a crime. Muslims regard women in the West with disgust. They are cheap and dispensable. It’s curious to me that creatures so objectionable to a Muslim are still subject to vile abuse. Maybe my Muslim colleagues could inform us how they could derive pleasure from vermin.”

Najeeb sprang to his feet. “You vilify my faith at your own peril!” he screamed at Kael.

Kael was undaunted. “Inasmuch as you are Muslims and your founder did such things and you’re commissioned to do whatever he did, I’m not vilifying anyone or anything. Before you jump down my throat, make sure you’re taking a defensible position, because everything you and your team has said of your history, and everything I have read, screams to me I am telling the truth.

“One of the great engines of Muslim conquest is this constant warfare syndrome they bring to other countries and empires. Wars weaken societies and cultures, and as long as Muslims pose a threat and even attack, those on the defensive grow weary and weak, leaving them vulnerable for Muslim penetration, either by military attack or immigration and fertility. The means don’t matter.”

Kael took a sip of water, eyeing his audience over the rim of his cup. The more he talked, the angrier he got. He noticed Najeeb’s smile. Smile all you want. The truth, the real truth, will destroy you! “I have one last point to make, and then I’ll turn it over to my teammates.

“Your Hadiths say the highest kind of jihad is the person who is killed while spilling the last drop of his blood. I find it interesting your old men, your imams, your teachers are quick to strap vests on the chests of the young and foolish, but never upon themselves. This craven display of hypocrisy is no longer secret. We all know it’s the truth.” Kael stopped and waited for a Muslim response, particularly from Najeeb, but nothing came. He wasn’t surprised because what he was saying Najeeb could not refute.

Kael felt good there had been no confrontation, proving to him his points were reasonable and outside the realm of Muslim criticism.

Alexis, the third Christian to speak, stepped up to the podium. She was anxious she wouldn’t be clear enough to reach her audience. But she forged ahead nevertheless.

“There is a final battle we have to consider that is every bit as important as the Battle of Tours. This battle took place in the fall of 1683, roughly a hundred fifty years after Luther began his outrage against the Church. It’s hard to think that with the upheaval brought on by the Reformation, there was a Muslim threat to Europe, but never forget the Ottoman Empire is on a mission.

“So who were the Ottomans? Briefly, without getting into a boring recitation of dates, places, and players, they came out of Osman, a lord of some small territory in modern day Turkey, not far from here.
That region was a mishmash of lordships, shuffled together partly as the result of the disruptive Mongol invasion of Genghis Khan and his boys. As is the case in most of world history, and especially in Muslim history, expansion is always on the mind of the leaders seeking power and control over others. They are in constant attack mode against neighboring infidel states. Kael was correct in saying that keeping societies in a state of war weakens them and allows Islam to fill the vacuum made through weariness. When Muslims conquer and rule infidel countries, their repressive governance saps the energy and destroys any desire to invent or innovate. This is by design, because Muslims want a seventh century world ruled by force and violence. They depend heavily on enslaving the conquered, effectively eliminating any motivation of the enslaved. Slavery breeds lethargy. No one likes to be forced to do anything.

“So Osman, whose followers came to be known as the Ottomans, conquered the tribes all around Turkey and assumed control of the entire empire including the northern shore of the Mediterranean, three sides of the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, Turkey and the countries to the west and north of the Black Sea, Greece and most of the Balkans. This, of course, took centuries to develop.

“Islam had tried at its onset to conquer Europe going through Spain and the Iberian Peninsula. They were first repelled by Charles Martel, and were eventually driven from Spain after almost seven centuries of conflict. The Ottoman Muslims next tried the eastern gate to Europe and went so far as Vienna in Austria, setting the stage for another critical battle in world history. That’s the next thing on our agenda.”

“Good job, my young friends. A lot of information filled the air this morning.” Dr. Shalat commended. “We’re running late for lunch. We’ll pick this up here after dinner.”

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The evening session promised to be another tense confrontation if the cafeteria held any indication of the attitude of the competitors. As expected, the Muslims congregated, and the Jews and Christians mingled. When the teams took their benches at the amphitheater, the Christians took center stage to launch another attack on the Muslim view of the world.

“Anna, are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.” She looked to Natalie to start things off.

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Jan Sobieski, along with his cabinet and military advisors, sat around the large round table in the palace in anticipation of the unveiling of the two letters from Leopold of the Holy Roman Empire.

“So what does the mighty emperor of the unholy, non-Roman, loose configuration of northern European territories want of us?” the Polish king teased. Everyone in the room laughed heartily.

“I’ll bet he wants our help for something,” a general predicted.

“I hope it’s not to fight the Lutherans,” one said.

“Or the Calvinists.”

“It’s a little late for that, anyway.”

“Maybe Louis is getting out of hand. I wouldn’t mind fighting him again,” another said, referring to France’s Louis XIV.

“You wouldn’t mind fighting anyone, Lech.” Sobieski chided. He took one of the letters and opened it. He read it out loud.

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Jan, King of Poland. Here in Europe we are accustomed to fighting amongst ourselves for various advantages of territory and power. However, it is time for us to coalesce for the sake of our continued existence under the religion of our Lord. The Muhammadan threat to Vienna must be met. If we fail there, they will overrun us all. I’m trying to put together a coalition of European armies to stand together against the Arab horde. I want you to be the commander of all the troops
I can muster. I make you this promise. If the Muhammadans attack Krakow, we will join you to repel them. Please consider taking command for us all. - Leopold

Sobieski laid the letter on the table and took up the next and read it. "These are excerpts from the letter Mehmed wrote to Leopold in August of last year.

"Primarily we order you to await us in your residence city of Vienna so we can decapitate you. . . We will exterminate you and all your followers. . . Children and grown-ups will be exposed to the most atrocious tortures before we put them to an end in the most ignominious way imaginable.

"Well, if we had any doubts about that enemy, we shouldn't anymore. Leopold makes a strong argument. I don't know if we have an option. These guys have to be stopped."

Everyone in the room agreed. One advisor confirmed the decision. "This letter confirms what we know about these barbarians. Leopold is correct. If we don't stop them there, we'll have nothing to fight over."

"Do you think Leopold is being honest about Krakow?"

"Why do you ask?" Sobieski wanted to know.

"The whole mess in the German kingdom. They fight with Louis. they fight with Protestants. they fight against the Reformation. How could he ever commit to helping us if it ever came to that?"

Sobieski nodded. "I know what you mean, but I don't think Leopold would reach out like this if he didn't think the Muhammadans were the ultimate threat. I'm sure he got clearance with the Pope to approach us."

One general asked the burning question. "What about Thokoly? Can we trust him? He's half Muslim as it is."

Sobieski knew he would have to deal with the Hungarian king sooner or later. In Thokoly's ongoing fight with Leopold, he had turned to the Muslim Sultan Mehmed the Fourth for support. He sighed. If he led his army to Vienna, then that would leave Poland virtually undefended. "I will threaten him with annihilation if he takes advantage of the situation. That's all I can do right now. We have a more pressing need on our hands."

"Do any of you have anything more to add to this discussion?" He waited for a few moments, but no one responded.

"All right. men. Let's make preparations."

"They will not capitulate, my lord," the general said to the roomful of high leaders, hastily assembled to brainstorm.

The Muslim leader cursed. "How many people are left in the city?"

"As close as we can tell, there are very few, maybe 5,000 or so."

"That's all? That means 75,000 are gone!" Pasha exclaimed. "Where did they go?"

"To Linz mostly."

"How many troops?" Kara Mustafa Pasha, the Turkish military leader and grand vizier, asked in frustration.

"We've estimated around 10,000. Maybe 11,000."

"Who's leading them?"

"Graf von Starhemberg."

"How many cannons does he have?"

"Nearly 400, we think."

Pasha shook his head. "I got up and paced back and forth, trying to come up with some kind
Vienna was key to his plan of overtaking the European continent. It stood in the way of vital trade routes from the Eastern Mediterranean to Germany and from the Black Sea to Western Europe. He had aspired this conquest for many years because of its strategic importance, to say nothing of the prospect of eradicating the religion of the infidel.

"How can this be a problem to us? Why won't they surrender and be done with it? They know it's only a matter of time!"

"No one had an answer. None of them could figure out the fighting Christians of Europe."

"We really don't know, my lord," a general answered. "We have lent our support to the Hungarian Christians to fight against European Christians influenced by the Pope of Rome."

"Another added. "We even promised the Hungarians they could have the kingdom of Vienna if we capture it. But we're still not sure if they'll come to our aid to take the city."

"Pasha asked. "Do any of you see any other way than through Vienna?"

"No, my lord. It is too strategic. We have to take it."

"Pasha sighed. "All right. Then, we can't attack now because it's too late in the year. We would get caught in the grip of winter. We'll have to wait until next spring."

"They know we've been mobilized since January," Pasha continued, mostly thinking out loud as was his pattern. "Here it is late summer. They've strengthened the city defenses. Let them! Next spring we will bring in more troops and start the invasion."

Ernst Rudiger Graf von Starhemberg was disgusted at the news, brought to his attention by the exhausted courier who had escaped from Perchtoldsdorf. He sent for his subordinates to hear the news. He waited until all were seated in the room, and then turned to the escapee. "Tell us what happened."

"The man nervously looked at his audience. "The Ottomans killed all the defenders and most of the men in the city. They took the children away."

"Why?"

"To turn them into slaves."

"What else?"

"The man dropped his head and sat down, shaken and trembling. "They assaulted the women in front of the onlookers. They were demons from hell." The man sobbed quietly, trying hard to suppress his weeping in front of the important men in the room.

"Von Starhemberg was livid. "We are facing barbarians. We will never surrender!" He turned to the distraught man. "Did your city surrender?"

"Yes. We thought they would treat us humanely if we surrendered," he stammered.

"Disgusting! We can't trust these vicious murderers!"

"The city leader walked back and forth in front of his men. "We have to take radical measures to protect ourselves. The city is about as well fortified as we can be, but let's make sure just in case."

Scouting reports sent chills coursing up and down the spines of those in charge of the defense of the city. The Turkish army was on the march. It was the middle of July. Von Starhemberg was in a way relieved the battle would finally begin. Waiting was the surest way to dull the knife-edge of an army's readiness. He hoped by demolishing the houses around the city wall and by removing the rubble, the army would be able to see the enemy and defend more capably. Time would
He gathered his generals to tell them of the scouting report. "They're on the move. I hope Leopold's armies show up in time. Here we are at the beginning of July and no help has come yet. Leopold said Sobieski was coming."

"I sure hope so," a general said. "That king is one master fighter."

Von Starhemberg nodded. "True, but we shouldn't expect anyone, and fight as if we're not going to get any help. The reports say we're going to be outnumbered twenty to one."

"What if they lay siege to the city?"

"I worry about that a lot. We won't last long if they do, but I think they'll attack because they'll want to get at the plunder. That drives them like the predators they are. That's their pattern. If we can last until winter sets in, their siege won't be effective."

"I don't think we have enough supplies for that long," a city official said. "In fact we may only have about two months' worth."

Pasha put out the decree that there would be no assault on the city. When his subordinates questioned him, he answered, "I don't want to destroy the city. There are too many valuables in there liable to damage."

"Are you sure, my lord?" a general asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. We'll starve them out in a couple months. Cut all their supply routes. We'll see how long they can last."

Summer was not kind to the defenders. The rationing of food under the stern command of von Starhemberg took a bitter toll on the defenders. They were weary and hungry and demoralized. On top of that von Starhemberg issued an order that any soldier falling asleep at his post would be shot. The leader huddled with his commanders. "It looks bleak for us, men. We're almost out of food and here we are in September. They're strangling us. Where's Leopold? It's going to be winter before he gets here."

No one knew. They also didn't know Sobieski and the Poles were only a day away from Vienna and were uniting with troops from Saxony, Bavaria, Baden, Franconia, and Swabia into what they would call the Holy League, which, fittingly, was being supported by Pope Innocent.

"If he doesn't get... What was that?" von Starhemberg asked springing to his feet and rushing toward the wall of the city where the dust cloud drifted in the wind.

The leaders of the city looked down on the damage and were aghast.

"Pasha is exploding the wall!"

The low rumbling alerted the city that something was definitely wrong. Von Starhemberg shook his head at the untenable position his city was in. Not only had the siege taken its toll, but now the wall was about to be breached.

"Keep blowing up the wall!" Pasha demanded of his 5,000 sappers. "Don't quit until we can walk into the city!" The explosive experts felt the pressure mounting against them by their impatient commander who didn't have a firm grasp on what they did or the danger they had to work under. Sandling explosives was not for the faint of heart.
Pasha was getting increasingly frustrated. Though he had conscripted the Tatars, the Moldovans, and the Wallachians, he could not trust them. Added to that uncertainty, he was afraid he had waited too long to attack. The siege was working, and was slowly strangling the city, but at what cost? Did the stubborn Viennese allow for reinforcements to mobilize? The Tatars, Moldovans, and the Wallachians, along with the Romanians, hated the Ottomans because of their excessive taxation on their people. Many complained the Ottomans were bleeding them dry. They detested being forced into warfare by their conquerors to fight in wars they had no interest in.