

ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number Nine:

BETRAYAL



ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

*Simon Peter was one of Jesus' closest followers.
He promised Jesus that he would never deny or
reject him.*

BETRAYAL

You condemn me, do you? Do you not think I don't condemn myself even more? But you weren't there, were you? You don't know what it was like. I'm not offering excuses—there are no excuses—but an explanation might help a bit.

You can have no idea of the sheer intensity of it all, of that night. I hardly recall all the details myself. So much of it remains a blur. So where to start? OK, after supper...

After supper we left the room in high spirits; at least that's how it seemed on the surface. Supper with Jesus was always wonderful, Passover even more so. But this had been a strange one: the foot washing (how I struggled with that) and those words over the bread and the cup—strange, beautiful and menacing words—what were we to make of them? So, yes, it was a joyous crowd that tumbled out of that upper room but there was an undercurrent of anxiety and unease as well.

It was a clear night, the moon big and low in the sky, blood-red. The air was calm and still and we could hear the murmur of voices from the houses around as they continued their celebrations. "I'm going up to the Garden," said Jesus, "I need to pray." Some left then, to go back to homes or families or masters and the rest of us followed Jesus up to Gethsemane.

It was one of his favourite places when he was in Jerusalem and so it was one of our favourites too. We'd go there for peace, for refreshment; a little bit of nature just across the valley from the city walls. Someone said, "Where's Judas?" He'd been behaving strangely all day and I thought he was probably ill and had gone back to our lodgings in Bethany.

We cross the Kidron valley and climb up to the Garden. The moon is higher now, the birds have almost stopped singing and there is an eerie stillness in the half-light as we follow one another up the path, the shadows from our torches flickering here and there as we walk.

We get to the flat grassy knoll and pause for breath. I am suddenly very tired as the events of the day catch up with me. "Wait here for me," says Jesus. "No, you three," and he gestures at James and John and me,

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

“you three, come and pray with me.” And so we set off, the three of us—the Thunder Brothers and Rocky—following behind as Jesus leads us on. We don’t go much further, just into a glade where, nearby, glistening in the moonlight, is a rock; appearing in this half-light like an altar.

“Stay here,” says Jesus, “and watch with me. Pray for me.” Then he walks over to that rock no more than five yards from us and lays himself down in front of it. We can hear his words, especially as he starts his prayer, drifting over the still night air. I look over at James and John. They are squatting under the trees, obviously as drained and exhausted as I am.

“Father, if it is your will, take this cup from me...” My own thoughts start to kick in. What ‘cup’ is he talking about? What is it that he wants taken away? It must be pretty bad because I’ve never known Jesus turn down a challenge before.

Suddenly, with a sickening, constricting, breath-stealing and growing sense of horror I know what it is he wants taken away. He’s talking about his death. He’s done that before; I’m still smarting from the time I confronted him about it, but this is different. This time it’s real; this time it’s imminent. Jesus is going to die, soon, in the next few days, unless God releases him from his mission, unless he leaves Jerusalem right now.

I am ashamed to admit that my next thought is for myself, even though it’s quite natural I suppose. What will I do if Jesus dies? First, but least in some ways, will I be in danger too? I suppose I might. If they—and we all know who ‘they’ are—if they kill him, they might go after us too. Or they might think that we’re just not worth the effort. Hard to tell and not really so much worth worrying about at the moment because something much worse is seeping through all these thoughts and now it overwhelms them.

If Jesus is dead, what am I? What is my life? What will I do? For the last three years he has been my reason for living: my inspiration; my sun, moon and stars; my love; my Lord; my life. If he is dead, I might as well be dead too. Yes, I could go back to fishing again, maybe start that family we talked about before he came along. But I don’t know if I could face it. Everything would be drained of colour, nothing would ever taste good again, every laugh would be hollow. Without Jesus in

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

my life, the world would collapse into nothingness. I cannot bear that, and...

The next thing I know, Jesus is shaking me and the brothers awake. With an anguished smile on his lips he says, "Couldn't you even watch with me just one hour?" His voice is gentle, his tone is sorrow not anger, and it hurts more than if he'd screamed and beaten us with sticks. What poor friends we have proved to be. And yet...

Jesus leaves us then and goes back to the rock. Some clouds have started to form and they are now scudding across the moon. A breeze has arisen, with a cold bite in its midst, and I suddenly find myself shivering—or is it shuddering?

All three of us resolve, I know, that we will do better this time. "Father," he almost shrieks, "take this cup from me—unless it can only be taken away if I drink it..." There is a sudden break in the clouds and I see his face bright in the moonlight yearning up to heaven with a look of pure anguish and pain in his features. It seems, in the half light, as if he is sweating great drops of blood. Then his voice drops, his head bows and his shoulders shake and I could swear that he is weeping tears of such deep distress that I can bear to look no longer.

My own thoughts turn again to the consequences of his death. No longer, this time, just about its impact on me; but the effect on the work, our gospel work. With him gone, is it all a failure? Sure, people have been healed, people have been given hope, people have been given glimpses of a new way of living and of God's true kingdom. But is that enough? Is that all he has come to do? I had always thought there was more; that we were on the verge of some great breakthrough—and now this! Even if he survives this, the whole project is surely compromised, dead in the water. Everything's come to nothing...

And for the second time he is shaking me awake. I can see that he is still disappointed in us but there's a change in his face and voice. There's still that deep, deep sorrow but underneath is steel: a sense of resolution and purpose.

Suddenly we hear shouts and the cracking of twigs, the clinking of metal on metal and there's no time to think any more. The flicker of torches and lanterns, voices shouting, the sound of feet—many feet—can all mean only one thing: they are coming to get us. They are

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

coming to get *him*; the rest of us are just bit players. As the voices drew nearer I wonder what has happened to the others. I guess they just melted away into the shadows as they heard the crowd coming. I certainly would have done. But we can't. We can't leave Jesus and he isn't going to run; I just know it. So we stand there, the four of us, waiting.

As they come close enough for us to make them out, I notice glints of reflection from the burnished metal on their uniforms. Temple Guard, then, not the Romans—and a glimmer of hope rushes up through my mind. Maybe this isn't so bad? Maybe, even, this is a routine patrol just going about their business?

But no, there are lots of people, too many people, behind them and I know that this is no coincidence. No sooner has this realisation crushed the little burst of hope than I see who is leading the guards. It is Judas! What is he doing here? Does that mean it is going to be alright after all? Has he been arrested? I can't make any sense of what is happening.

They walk right up to us, with Judas at their head, and stop. I'm still trying to make sense of it all when suddenly everything clicks into place. Judas has brought them here! That's why he'd been acting funny all day, that's why he hadn't come with us. He'd slipped away to bring the guards, to betray us, to hand us over.

Then he steps forward. "Teacher," he says and he kisses Jesus in greeting. A kiss! "You bastard! You fucking bastard!" I yell, "I hope you rot in hell for this. How could you do this to us?"

The boys grab me and hold me back—but only just, for my rage is so huge. The guards draw their swords; Judas draws back; and the whole scene is confusion and tumult. Except for Jesus. He stands there, in the midst of it all, as calm as a rock. "Do you come for me by night with swords and clubs to arrest me? Why not in the Temple in the daylight? I would not have resisted you."

But of course, they wouldn't have dared to do that, the cowards. Those who have come with the soldiers are getting bolder now, coming up to Jesus and talking at him. One in particular, a temple servant I think, really gets to me. "Because, Galilean," (and he makes it sound like an insult) "you won't be able to stir up the rabble here and because we didn't want to profane the Holy Temple."

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

Didn't want to profane what was holy? Doesn't he know true holiness when he sees it? That, and his sneering tone, is suddenly too much for me. I pull free of James and John, draw my dagger, and rush at him. It's pathetic! I half stumble, fall towards him and nick his ear with the knife as I pass him. He howls like a stuck pig (which was some comfort to me) and in the resulting clamour I find myself falling headlong into the midst of a thorn bush. In the heat of everything happening I feel no pain—though it hurt like hell afterwards—but my fall means that I disappear from sight. I can hear them all crashing about trying to find me and suddenly I am very sober and very scared.

But the captain calls them back. "Never mind him. It's the organ grinder we've come for, not the monkeys." And with that they take Jesus and lead him away. I stay in the bushes, the thorns now beginning to prick and scratch and hurt as sensation returns and as the lights and the voices gradually fade away.

I stay in the thorn bush, painful though it is, until I can no longer hear voices over the sound of my pounding heart. Then suddenly, splitting the silence, a half shout, half whisper. "Peter! Simon! Where are you?" It is John. Slowly, carefully, I extricate myself from the bush. "Over here, John. I'm in this bush."

As I get out, I see John standing alone looking anxiously around. "Where's James?" I ask. "Gone to Bethany to tell the others what's happened. But I'm going back to the city to find out what's going on." First thought: 'Absolutely. I've got to be there for Jesus.' Second thought: 'No way! I want to be as far away from there as I possibly can. There's still the chance they'll come for us as well.'

But John is already striding back down the hill and it seems I have no choice: his words were more instruction than invitation. John worries that we'll lose them. I worry that they'll find us. In fact, there is no cause for concern either way as the lights and chatter are easy to pick out in the distance and as we get closer it becomes clear that no-one is looking out for us.

So we follow at a safe distance along the valley and over the Kidron and wind our way back up to the city. As we enter the gate I suddenly worry that we will be challenged, arrested, taken away and beaten but the guards must have been asleep or playing dice or wenching because we walk through without a sound.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

We are in the city streets now, walking more slowly and dodging into the shadows lest anyone turn back and see us. My determination, such as it was, is ebbing away again. "They're going to the High Priest's house," whispered John. "That's good. I know people there." "Look, John," I say, "I think we should go now. We've found out all we can for now, there's nothing we can do for Jesus and we need to get back to the others." ('And I'm so scared I can hardly stand up'—but I don't say that bit.)

"No, no," says John, "it'll be fine." So we walk on towards the High Priest's house. "Wait here a moment and I'll sort it." Suddenly he is gone into the shadows and I am left alone with my fears. I shiver with the cold and pull my coat tight around me. Hunched into a doorway I watch and wait. I still can't believe it or make sense of it but the growing threat of dread and doom is beginning to overwhelm me. I just want to curl up in a ball and go to sleep. I want it to be over. I want Jesus.

Oh, Jesus, where are you when I'm in such distress? Come and comfort me. Work one of your miracles again; show us God's power and come and heal me. Lift me up and support me as you always do. Why won't you come?

But I know he won't; can't. There'll be no miracle this night. The age of miracles has passed and the age of death is rushing in.

Suddenly John is beside me. "It's OK," he says, really excited, hyper. "Come on. Come on. They'll let us in and there'll be no trouble." He tugs at my sleeve and sets off. I follow numbly, with no will of my own left and so we enter the gates and pass through into the High Priest's courtyard.

The courtyard seems vast and menacingly open after the narrow streets and doorway hiding places. In the far right-hand corner is a brazier with half a dozen people huddled round it. The chill of the night has really set in now and I envy them. "Wait here," whispers John. "I'll see what I can find out." And he's gone again, leaving me just inside the gate alone with the girl who had let us in. I feel very awkward and alone.

The girl smiles. 'Pretty,' I think as I look at her in the half light. "You're a friend of John's?" "Yes."

"So are you with that Jesus, the one they've taken inside?"

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

"No, no, not me." The words slip out like a wriggling fish from the hand. I just couldn't stop them.

The girl gives me a funny look. The smile disappears. "Oh. I thought you were."

I just shake my head miserably. This is getting worse and worse.

"Well, if you say so," she responds, suspicion and doubt deep in her voice. "Anyway, you must be cold. Come and warm yourself by the fire."

I am torn between a desire to be alone and a need for warmth and humanity. Not that it matters; I'd long ago ceased to have any free will of my own. I follow her meekly over to the fire and the small group of people. They shuffle apart a little to let me into the circle.

"This is a friend of John's," says the girl, "What did you say your name was? "I didn't," I reply, "but people call me Peter."

"I recognise that accent," says one of the officials round the fire. "You're from up north—Galilee. Say, were you with that Galilean they've just brought in?"

I am trapped. My earlier slippery lie is already catching up with me. I want to say, 'Yes, I know him. He's called Jesus. We've been close friends for years. He is the most marvellous man you will ever meet. He brings the love of God right here into the midst of our world and there is no reason on earth why he should be under arrest.'

But if I say that, or anything like that, the girl will ask why I lied to her and they'll all get suspicious and maybe call the guard and then they'll arrest me too and I can't bear the thought of that. So one lie forces out another: "No, I don't know him," I say. "Surely you must. Everybody's been talking about Jesus of Nazareth."

"Oh, that one!" I say. "Yes, of course I've heard of him. Who hasn't? But Galilee's a big place you know. Our paths have never crossed." ("Oh Jesus! What am I saying? How did it get to this?") For a moment they seemed to be satisfied. But then the clouds clear from the moon and we are all bathed in light.

"You were with him!" says a voice from across the circle. "I saw you. I'm sure I did. You were the one who went for my cousin with a knife."

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

"I don't know what you're talking about! I don't have a knife! This man Jesus is nothing to do with me."

The clouds cover the moon again and a cold bitter wind gusts around, causing the fire to flare up and the shadows to dance. The group falls into a rather embarrassed silence. In the distance a cock crows. "Oh, is that the time?" I say. "It will soon be day break. I must get home." I rush out of the courtyard into the street and sink to the ground in a doorway.

'Before the cock crows you will deny me three times... Before the cock crows you will deny me three times... Before the cock crows...' How did he know? What have I become? And I had the nerve to be angry at Judas! Two betrayers in one evening. What a pack of cowards and scoundrels we turned out to be. But me—I've denied my best friend. I've betrayed the best thing in all the world. When it came to the mark, I just wasn't up to it.

I want to pray. But I can't—not like Jesus taught us anyway. How can I say, 'Dada, I'm sorry. I've just denied your only son. I hope you don't mind too much.' Why doesn't a bolt of fire come down from heaven and burn me up? Because that's not God's way, that's why. Didn't I learn anything from Jesus?

So I do pray: not many words, really; just a turmoil of thoughts and feelings. 'Oh Dada, please forgive me. I'm so scared, so tired, so hurt, so sorry. Help me to trust you, help me to trust Jesus. Deep down I long to know that even now you are in charge. Just put your arms around me LORD and love me and hold me tight.'

And with that, I fall into a deep sleep right there in that doorway.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: BETRAYAL

NOTES

The account of Jesus' arrest is found in all four gospels. I have drawn most particularly on Matthew 26:36-46 and John 18:1-27.

This account is narrated by Simon, also known as Peter. When he talks about the *Thunder Brothers & Rocky* he is making reference to the nicknames that Jesus had given them. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Jesus called 'Boanerges', meaning 'sons of thunder' (Mark 3:17). Simon, son of Jonah, he called Peter, meaning 'the rock' (Matthew 16:18).

In an incident recorded in all the gospels but not included in this story, Peter says that he will never let Jesus down. Jesus responds by predicting that before the night is out ('before the cock crows') Peter will have denied him three times (see, for instance, Mark 14:29-30).

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