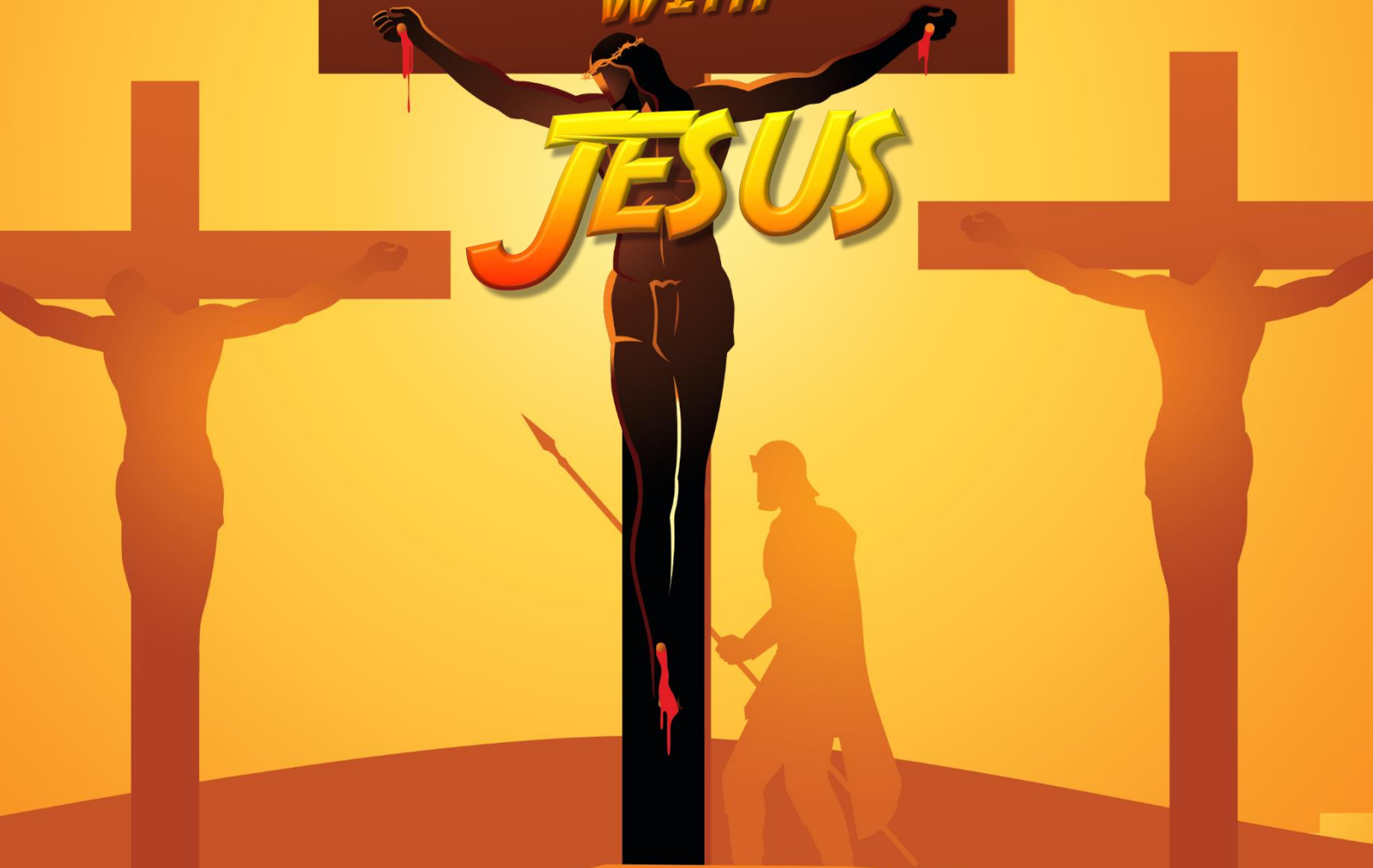


ENCOUNTERS

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WITH

JESUS



Number Ten:

PASSING BY

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Jesus was very popular with the common people. But there were those who saw him as both a religious and political threat to the Jewish nation

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Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by?

It's funny, I just can't get that quote out of my head. The prophet Jeremiah wrote it many years ago as he wept over the ruins of Jerusalem. What can it mean for me today? 'Nothing,' I answer, as I pass by his cross on the hilltop, 'it is *nothing* to me!' He is nothing to me and I am glad—I think—to see him there. But even so...

We of the high priest's household had heard of this man from Galilee for some time but no-one took him seriously. After all, there were many others like him with their few followers wandering around criticising the Romans, criticising the party of the Sadducees, for that matter. But Caiaphas is a practical man—hard but fair and he certainly wasn't going to get rattled by a peasant from Nazareth!

As for me, well I have no love of priests or Sadducees but they pay my wages and individually, most of them are pretty decent chaps doing their best for the nation in difficult times. After all, they've negotiated some concessions for us that very few other provinces have. We can even have our own coins for use in the Temple.

Anyway, as I say, no-one was worried about this Jesus of Nazareth until he started playing politics. He arrived at Jerusalem a few days before Passover and rode in, still with his supporters, on a donkey! That caused consternation in the household I can tell you. "He's proclaiming himself king!" "He's trying to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah!" "If the Romans find out there'll be trouble..."

I must admit that, at first, I wasn't quite sure what they were talking about. My friend Zebedee had been there when this Jesus arrived. He said it wasn't more than about 50 people—mostly kids—and there was a party atmosphere. He joined himself, just for the fun of it. There was nothing about being a king! But then one of the scribes reminded me that the prophet Zechariah had written, 'Rejoice, daughter of Jerusalem, see your king comes to save you, gentle and riding on a donkey.' He said this Jesus was deliberately implying that he is our new king—and that the Romans won't stand for that.

It sounded like a lot of fuss about nothing as far as I could tell. Lots of strange things happen around Passover time and it wasn't as if he had

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an army or anything. I thought they were all just a bit edgy because Pontius Pilate was due back any day and they didn't want trouble.

But then there was the business in the Temple. It was his performance in the Temple courts which convinced me he was up to no good—that he was dangerous, in fact. I wasn't there but I heard all about it. The priests were furious, and who could blame them? What happened was this: Jesus went to the Temple with his followers and he threw out the money changers, overturned their tables, scared away the animal sellers and generally created havoc in that holy place.

He quoted the prophet Jeremiah, asking if the house of God had become a den of robbers! The man is mad! And he is ignorant. He quotes the prophets but ignores the law. Surely he must know that Moses commanded unblemished sacrifice, surely he knows that Moses commanded the half-shekel to be paid. Does he not realise what a great achievement it was to get the Romans to allow us to have our own coins for Temple use? Does this man want to overthrow all that Moses taught?

Yet he has roused the crowds so that even the Temple guard dare not take action against him. Ignorant people are already saying that he is the anointed one, that he is the Messiah because only the Messiah would have the authority to supersede the priesthood.

But that is just plain wrong. The scribes tell us that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem, David's town, not Nazareth. That the Messiah will bring the reign of God's kingdom, will sit upon the throne of David, will bring all nations to grateful submission to the rule of the LORD. He will be of the line of David, beautiful, noble, a mighty warrior, a great and gracious priest. He will not be a dirty ragged northern peasant, a self-deluded demagogue!

As the days drew on, things get no better. Scribes, priests, even Pharisees—all tried to bring him down in the eyes of the crowd but his clever rabble-rousing answers just make things worse. The Pharisees thought they'd get him over taxes but he slipped out of that and left them looking stupid—and he didn't really answer their question.

My masters have decided to confront him over his authority. They argue that if they can get him to claim that his authority comes from God they will be able to force him to commit himself to something obviously blasphemous. Then, surely, the crowd will turn against him.

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So a group of them went down into the Temple precincts to confront him and I tagged along.

It was quite crowded in the outer courts—the great festival was approaching and the city was filling up with pilgrims. Jesus wasn't hard to find, though. Sitting with a crowd of about fifty around him, men, women and children.

We stopped and listened for a bit. He must have seen us but he gave no sign, just carried on as if we weren't there. I must admit he isn't quite what I'd expected. I thought he'd be shouting, full of passion and anger, a great orator working the crowd and getting them aroused. But he's almost the opposite. He sits very still and calm; his voice gentle—sweet in a way, with something of a lilt to it—and he speaks of the need to repent; to live differently so that God's kingdom can be realised.

He speaks quietly. I have to strain a little to hear him and I find myself being drawn in, sucked in, caught in his net. He speaks with humour, poking fun at our everyday failings. Even when he has a go at the pretentiousness of some of the priests I have to laugh, he is so right! I wonder who he's been talking to—I could have told him a few stories myself.

Then suddenly I see the danger. There is steel beneath the silk. The man I thought I'd come to see has been sitting right in front of me all along. The passion is there alright but it is like a deep bass note which permeates everything he says. He *is* a great orator, he *is* working the crowd, but not in the way I expected. His little jokes and stories drew me in and invited me to join him, to see the world from where he sat and to agree with him in his own special view of things. He is the most magnetic and attractive man I've ever come across. In just those few brief minutes I find myself longing to hear more, to stay longer, to find out everything I can about him.

Suddenly I flip back to my senses. This is actually the most dangerous man I have ever seen. I had expected a frontal assault on the hierarchy and the Imperial occupation. What I witnessed was more like a woodworm, a boring beetle undermining the foundations of all that the Temple is here to do. He is indeed a blasphemer, setting himself against the priesthood and the law. But oh, so subtle, oh so sly; no

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wonder the people are taken in. I nearly was too and I've worked in the high priest's service for many years.

The priests have obviously heard enough. One of them steps forward; "Rabbi, Teacher," he says, and I'm sure Jesus hears the sarcasm in his voice, "Rabbi, what you say is very interesting. But we were wondering: who gave you the authority to speak in this way?" The crowds hush. They can sense that something significant is happening. People start to drift closer, aware that a showdown is imminent. Soon there must have been a hundred or so, all listening and waiting. The Temple guards stand a little more upright, hands just inches from their swords. The tension is palpable. Jesus stands up, looks directly at the priests, but says nothing. Until...

"Let me ask *you* a question," he says, his voice stronger and more powerful now, cutting into the silence like a well-honed blade, "John the Baptist? Was his baptism from heaven or from men?" Oh clever! Clever! He's turned the tables on them with one simple question. This man truly is dangerous. (Though part of me can't help but admire him for his wit, his courage and his calm self-assurance.)

I look at the priests and the teachers of the law but even I can see that they can't win this one. At the mention of John the Baptist even more people are joining the crowd. There is now a real sense of menace in the situation.

If they say John's baptism was from heaven, he will ask why they didn't follow John, why they didn't support him when he was arrested, why they didn't protest when he was executed. The crowd could turn against them. So they don't want to pursue that line. But the other is even worse. To deny that John was sent by God would enrage the common people, most of whom revere John as a true prophet. So they answer, "We cannot answer your question." I can almost feel a collective letting out of breath. The tension dissipates and some in the crowd start to drift away.

"In that case," says Jesus, "I won't answer your question either." He turns his head away from them back to the group of people he'd been teaching, sits down, and starts talking softly to them. On the surface it seems like a draw, that the status quo has been maintained. Each has asked a question; neither has answered. But the priests know, even I know, that Jesus has won again. They've ended up looking stupid; he

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has kept the moral high ground—and by doing so he has written his own death warrant.

I don't know exactly what it took to do the deal. A number of things came together, I guess: as the support of the crowds grew ever more raucous, so men of discretion became more concerned and more determined to do something about him. Indeed, even his own people were getting worried. The rumour in the Temple was that one of his closest followers had turned against him and was now prepared to work with us. And finally, and this was key I think, Pontius Pilate began to get worried. He could smell trouble and he wanted to put a stop to it.

So that was the agreement: we would try him for blasphemy, they would try him for treason. The hope was that the crowds would be confused and doubtful enough not to rise up in support of him. And it worked.

I agreed wholeheartedly, of course. The whole situation in Judea was fragile enough without anyone coming to make it worse. Yes, I wanted the kingdom of God to come as much as the next man but you've got to be realistic. We have to live in the here and now, not spend our time in holy daydreams. This Jesus was clearly not God's anointed one and no closer to the kingdom of God than you or me. He had to be neutralised for the sake of the nation.

So, they arrest him and bring him to Caiaphas' house for the preliminary hearing. It was a bit of a shambles, actually. Everything has been done in such a hurry that the witnesses haven't got their stories straight and they're not the most believable characters anyway. They claim he'd said he would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, but they can't agree on the details and everything is just getting silly.

While all this is going on, Jesus just stands there, silent but completely in command of himself. The guards have roughed him up a bit and he must be in pain but he never shows it. He seems like the one still centre of calm in the midst of the chaos and mess of the hearing. I must admit I am impressed, despite my own feelings. Whatever else he is, he does have something about him.

I can see that Caiaphas is getting more and more frustrated. Finally, he raises his hands for silence and speaks directly to Jesus: "Are you the

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Messiah, the Son of the living God?" Well, that really hushes the room. There is a long silence and I think to myself that Jesus will no more answer this question than any of the others—he clearly isn't stupid and he's hardly going to say yes, is he? It seems to be a serious miscalculation by Caiaphas and I can see the whole thing unravelling.

"Yes, I am." You can feel the gasp more than hear it. It is as if, for a moment, the air has been sucked out of the room and we all hold our breath. He's said it! Condemned himself out of his own mouth! It doesn't make sense. Why would he do such a thing? But he hasn't finished: "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of heaven."

He really *is* claiming to be the anointed one. This Northern peasant, with no lineage or position, really thinks that he is David's successor, the one to free the people and usher in God's kingly rule. He must be mad. He must be stopped. He will be stopped. Caiaphas has all he needs now—and more. They bundle him off to Herod and then afterwards to Pilate.

His fate is sealed, had been sealed a long time ago I guess, and I should have been pleased. I mean, I am pleased but there was something about it all which leaves a rather nasty taste in my mouth. Somehow things don't feel quite right but I can't tell you why. It is only later that I begin to understand.

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Now I stand here on Skull Rock with those words of Jeremiah whirling in my head: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?" and I want to say, 'No, it's nothing to me. You brought this on yourself, Galilean. You were the one who tried to undermine the Temple and destabilise a really delicate political situation. You knew the risks and now you're paying the price.' And it's all true. I know it is. That's why we're here, to see justice done. A whole gaggle of us have come up to see him hanging here. (A 'gaggle'? Is that what we are? An unruly flock of noisy geese?)

The priests and teachers of the law are in their element, shouting abuse at him, mocking him, berating him. But I am getting more and more detached from them. Not physically—although there is a bit of a gap between me and them, now I come to notice it—but emotionally. They are enjoying their triumph; I just can't seem to share

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in their joy. I look around. The sky is clear overhead, the sun high above us. From the city below the shouts of the street traders and shoppers come wafting up. It's still festival time and the city is alive with people. I can even hear the clink, clink of the Roman patrols as they keep their watchful processions around the city.

But up here it is very still and quiet. No, that's not right—it's really noisy, with the jeers of the passers-by and the groans and cries of the men on the crosses. But there is a kind of stillness here, a tense sense of expectation; the calm before the storm, as they say. And actually, yes, on the horizon the clouds are building up. There's going to be some serious weather here in a couple of hours.

So, in this noisy stillness, I am looking again at Jesus. It's such a cruel death, crucifixion, and he's half dead already from the beatings they gave him. They've nailed them all, too. So when he tries to push himself up to breathe it hurts even more. And for what? The other two were violent men, criminals, not nice people at all. But he wasn't violent, except for the Temple tables, and no-one was hurt; everybody knew he was just making a point. No, he had a gentleness about him. Even if he was completely wrong about Israel and our leaders, did he deserve this? And suddenly it *is* something to me. I do care about what is happening to him and it seems wrong.

I move closer to his cross and look up at him. He looks awful, the blood congealed around his wrists and feet, the marks of the beatings vivid on his skin. He smells awful too: blood, piss and sweat mingling in a really pungent way. I am repelled and take a step back; I've never been this close to a dying man before. As I do, he lifts his head and looks down at me, directly at me and he gives a faint smile.

It is a smile with the eyes mainly. I guess his lips are too dry and cracked to do much smiling any more. But his eyes—they are still bright, intelligent, caring. They look down at me with tenderness and pity, as if our places were reversed and I were the one on the cross and he were standing here, pain-free, scot-free. I feel his gentle benediction overwhelming me, releasing tensions I never knew I had. How can he be blessing me?

I stand there, breathing it in. My attention is focused only on him now. It is as if everything else fades from sight and sound: just him and me in the whole universe. We are in a bubble of pure reality in the midst

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of a world of illusion. I have never connected with anyone like this before and I don't want it to end, ever. I say his name: 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus' and I remember that it means 'saviour' and I am sad to my core. That's what he wanted to do—to save us, not from the Romans or from the priests, but from ourselves. And of course, we couldn't let him do that!

I don't know how long I stood there, transfixed. It was probably only a few moments, though it seemed like an age. Then he dropped his head. The pain was too much, even for him. I could see it in his eyes. And I knew that it wouldn't be long before the end came—and I was glad for him. A few more hours and his sufferings would be over.

I was glad for him but desolate for myself. I didn't want another pointless death, especially his. He had something no-one else has ever had and now it's gone. I can't stand it any more and so I turn to leave. But I find it hard to turn away, hard to turn my back on him—as if he were some kind of king! And so I find myself walking backwards away from him, my eyes still fixed on him, until I bump into someone and with a muttered apology, turn and hurry away.

He has changed me, this peasant agitator, this broken king. ('King of the Jews', Pilate called him; that really upset my masters!) I have encountered something, someone, who has touched my heart of stone and I am melting. It is so good, it is so scary, and I do not know what the future will bring. But I do know that the future will be very different because of those few timeless moments on a dusty hillside. And I am thankful.

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NOTES

Each of the gospels gives an account of the last days of Jesus. Naturally, each of them tells it from the perspective of Jesus' followers and supporters. But there is clearly another perspective: that of Jesus' opponents, especially those in the establishment who saw him as a threat to the peace and security of the state and a threat to their ideas of true religion. In this story I have tried to engage with the events of Jesus' trial and execution from their point of view; to see Jesus as a threat to the status quo and the fragile accommodation which had been reached with the occupying Roman powers.

The Sadducees were a powerful group in first century Judea. Members tended to be drawn from high status wealthy families as well as many priests (though not all priests were Sadducees). They had some distinctive beliefs and differed from the party of the Pharisees in a number of ways. Perhaps the most significant was that the Sadducees did not accept the 'oral law' put forward by the Pharisees. They maintained that only what was written in the *Torah* (the first five books of the Bible) should be considered binding on Jews.

The Sadducees also denied that there would be a resurrection of the dead at the end of time, unlike the Pharisees (and Jesus).

The supreme court of Judea, the Sanhedrin, had members from all parties but perhaps the Sadducees held the balance of power at the time of Jesus' trial.

Caiaphas, the high priest at the time of Jesus' trial, was the son-in-law of Annas. Annas (also known as Ananus or Ananias) had been appointed as high priest in 6 AD by Quirinius, legate of Syria and Judea but was deposed in 15 AD by the procurator Valerius Gratus, who was Pontius Pilate's predecessor.

Although deposed, Annas continued to have great influence: all of his five sons and his son-in-law, Caiaphas also became high priest, Caiaphas ruling from 18 AD to 36 AD.

Jesus' quotation from the prophet Jeremiah when he was clearing the animal sellers and money changers comes from Jeremiah chapter five, verses nine to eleven:

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Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.

In the books of Exodus and Leviticus, two of the books of the Torah (traditionally believed to have been written by Moses), there are numerous references to the need for sacrificial animals to be without blemish. Since it was almost impossible to bring an animal from, say, Galilee without it getting marked on the journey the practice grew up of providing suitable animals for sale in the Temple precincts. However, Roman coins were forbidden in the Temple and so they had to be changed into Temple money before any transactions could be done or before the Temple tax (Exodus 30:13) could be given.

Jesus must have known this and some have wondered if what he did was a deliberate political act, proclaiming himself as equal to, or greater than, the law of Moses.

The question of payment of taxes is reported in Matthew 22:15-22. The dispute with the priests and elders over authority is recounted in Matthew 21: 23-27.

The words of Jesus about, 'the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of heaven' is a reference to a prophecy in the book of Daniel (chapter seven, verse thirteen).

It seems likely that some people associated the phrase 'son of man' (which was normally just a synonym for 'human being') with Daniel's vision with the Messiah, God's anointed one.

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