



## ONE | THE FINAL MEAL

All my life I've been involved in helping groups of people celebrate Passover. It's such a privilege to be able to set everything up and serve. It makes me feel, I think, somehow like I'm serving God by serving them – I don't want anything to get in the way of them remembering how God rescued us all from the Egyptians – the plagues, the night when the Angel of death passed over us all, the escape, the parting of the red sea ... I love it. It never seems to get old for me, because each time it honestly feels like we're still going through it – especially at the moment.

Years of rule from the Romans feels so much like we're back in that same position. This is our land! The land God gave to us as a sign he is with us, we're his chosen people, and we're meant to keep it holy, but as we walk around Jerusalem there are things everywhere that we can do nothing about! Foreigners everywhere doing their own thing. Temples set up to worship other gods. Coins with their 'divine' emperor on. Tax stations where we are forced to pay money to keep Rome fat. Women, men and boys selling themselves for worship. We've been praying and praying – the time promised that God would bring us our Saving One – our Liberator – another King David ... and it has felt like Jesus from Nazareth could be the one ... so when I heard that it would be our room that he and his disciples would hire to celebrate Passover – I had to be there.

And it was ... [pause] ... I just don't know how to tell you about it.

In the middle of everything, as I was right there, refreshing everyone's drinks, Jesus said to them all, "One of you here is going to betray me". The whole atmosphere became charged with anticipation, and with horror, and with uncertainty. I watched the disciples all start to look at each other, asking who it could be, even asking if it was going to be them,

themselves! The one they called Judas was sitting right next to Jesus, and he asked the same question – “Is it me?” and Jesus leaned in to him in the dim candlelight and said yes.

None of the others heard it, but I heard it, and I watched him squirm in his seat.

Everyone was still looking about with disbelief when Jesus took the bread. He thanked God for it, broke it and gave it to all of his disciples, including Judas, and he said to them “Take it, eat it ... because this bread is a sign of what will happen to my body. It’s going to be broken for you.” They went quiet, and ate it, and then the meal kind of carried on ... as much as it could do.

Just as we thought the meal was then over, and still the atmosphere in the room was hugely uncomfortable, Jesus took the cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. That was when he said the strangest thing of all. I mean, we’re all part of God’s covenant people – people marked by God’s everlasting promise to us that he would be our God and we would be his people – it’s what defines us, what binds us all together ... but Jesus took this cup of wine and said, “Drink this, all of you ... this cup is the cup of a brand new covenant between God and his people – a covenant that will be drawn up in my blood. A covenant formed by my sacrifice which will forgive the sins of many people.”

As they passed it around, and drank from it ... I went back into the kitchen area and told them exactly what had happened. Some of them in the kitchen with me were furious, their breathing changed and became bull-like. Some were ecstatic, two even hugged each other and said, “I told you he was the one” and others were just confused ... but since that night, having watched the events of that week closely, we have now seen and heard the events that happened after, and now we understand. This man has given us a new way to be alive – a way to be free from everything we were captive to ... freedom to serve him without fear all the days of our lives. In our land that was living in darkness, a new light has dawned.



## TWO | THE BETRAYAL

I can't quite remember all the details, but I remember that something had been building, there had been more and more of the religious leaders coming backward and forward from the High Priest's house, where I work, all clucking and brooding and whining about this rebellious blasphemer from Galilee that they wanted out of the way. Well it was literally in the middle of the night, and I got a loud knock on my bedroom door to come and serve, because all the leading priests, and the entire high council of leaders were all gathering for a trial! In the middle of the night! So we lit the fire in the courtyard outside the house, and kept the temple guards and other servants well stocked with food and drink as the night dragged on.

As the shadows from the fire played on the walls, and the smoke filled the air around us, people from all over Jerusalem slowly started to come to have a look at what was going on, and just as I'd suspected, it was the preacher from Galilee who they had finally arrested and put on trial.

I felt it though – we all did. Something wasn't right with the whole thing. A trial at night? What was the hurry? None of his family or followers there? And the way they treated him – this was the people that I'd looked up to my whole life! I'd worked hard to become a servant for the High Priest and these men were meant to represent not just our faith, but God himself – and as I watched through the open window I saw them trying to desperately find people to testify against him – anyone would do. The next time I looked in, I felt my heart sink. They were spitting in his face, some of them were hitting him, some of them slapping him and saying, “go on then, prophesy to us ‘Messiah’ – who hit you that time?”

I walked away from the window, still holding my tray of drinks, but wanting to get away from it all – I felt betrayed, I felt lost, I felt afraid.

That was when I saw him – of all the people gathered outside, this man looked like he really didn't fit. His clothes were rough, his hands were the hands of someone who worked outside, and his accent from the north – those were the initial signs, but more than that, it was the way he was watching. Every time Jesus was spat on, or punched, or slapped, this man flinched too, like it was happening to him. If anyone was going to understand my unease with what was happening, it was going to be him, so I went over to him and asked him, "Are you one of this man's disciples?"

"I don't know what you're talking about" he said, and he moved from the warmth and light of the fire, closer to the gate. But his accent and his actions gave him away. A cockerel cried for the first time that morning.

I'd started a chain of events that couldn't stop – and my heart began to beat even faster. Now I was watching both the Galilean preacher inside, and this man who claimed not to be a follower. One of my friends was by the gate, and she recognised him. "This is definitely one of the ones who was with Jesus" she shouted to us all, and suddenly every eye was on him. "I swear to you, I don't even know this man" he said to both her and the rest of us.

I took my tray to the kitchen and stopped in there for a few breaths, to calm myself down, but something was wrong – spiritually and morally something heavy hung in the air. Yes, I felt betrayed by those religious leaders, but I'd also betrayed God myself – things I shouldn't have done, and others that I should. Ways I'd not been like the person I knew was also meant to be reflecting God to others ... brokenness inside us all ... I felt compelled to get back out into the courtyard. As I moved out, a man was confronting Jesus' follower, saying, "Come on – your accent gives you away, you've got to be one of his followers." Hands started to reach out for him, all eyes locked on him, as he swore, "Curse me if this is a lie – I've never even met the man" he shouted.

Immediately, the morning cockerel cried for the second time, and the man's face transformed. He had held his face with anger, and fear, his eyebrows furrowed, his lips pursed ... but on hearing the cockerel, it was as if something broke inside him – a memory perhaps. His eyes widened, his mouth opened, his tense body weakened, his face became like a child! And he turned and he ran past me to the outside, with tears streaming down his face.

Things got worse that night, and the next day, but there are rumours floating around that I need to hear – there is a deeply unsettled part of me that says this man from Galilee I now know who was Peter, and this preacher they called Jesus ... they hold the key to unlocking this brokenness I feel inside myself. A key to our freedom. A key to our forgiveness.



### THREE | THE EXECUTION

They came, the Romans, and they took my brother from our house. We had begged him time and time again to clean up his life, to stop his stealing and live a good, quiet life, but the more we begged, the more it seemed like we drove him deeper into his ways. Eventually he had turned up at our house, asking us to hide him because of what he had done. But they had come. They had come with their swords and spears, and we had children, so we gave him away.

That day there were three executions. My brother, another, and the man they called Jesus, the holy man from Galilee. We stood on the hill – skull hill, and we watched, helpless as the man we loved were laid on the floor, on a beam, and those nails were driven through their hands and feet. I can still hear now the metal on metal, the agonising cries for mercy, and the loudest sound of all – my own faltering breaths as I struggled to choke back the tears.

But this was no ordinary day – and he was executed with no ordinary man.

Three hours they hung there. Three hot, long hours, with almost not a breath of wind. There were just a small crowd of us – mainly women, there for those sentenced to death, except that the religious leaders, and the usual disgusting crowds of gore-spotters were there in greater numbers, and they were there to mock the preacher. They hurled abuse at him – something about being able to rebuild the temple in three days. They shook their heads, they taunted him. It made me ashamed to have aligned myself with their rabbis. My grief and anguish mixed with anger. I wanted to shout at them to leave them all alone – and I prayed, “God ... God if you can hear me ... help my brother.”

At noon, when the sun was at its hottest, suddenly the whole sky went dark, and a cold wind picked up. I watched the Roman soldiers who had been gambling for the preacher’s clothes –

I could see by their faces that they were unsettled. Some were looking about nervously as the sky stayed black for three hours. Towards three in the afternoon, things had become quiet. The execution tourists had trailed off, and all who remained there were the small crowd of us and the soldiers. Women wept, watching and waiting, and then suddenly, as if without warning, the other man being executed shouted to the holy man, "If you're really our Messiah like you claim, prove it by saving yourself, and while you're at it, save us too!". It was as if he had a whole conversation that had been playing out in his head. He was angry.

The answer came from my brother! The first words my brother had spoken. I felt my whole spirit lift, and I moved closer as he said, "What is wrong with you? Don't you fear God even now, hanging on a cross?" He turned his pained eyes to me, locking his gaze to mine as he continued, "You and me," he said, "We deserve to die ... we chose a life of evil despite what others may have said, but this man here – he's done nothing." Without realising what I was doing, I reached out toward him – even though I was behind the line set up by the soldiers. I saw his aching face turn to the Galilean, and he asked him, "Jesus ... remember me, when you come into your kingdom?"

Jesus – his name was Jesus, of course it was – and my brother knew it! Had they met? Had they talked? Had he been following Jesus? Why had he never mentioned him? Why was he reaching out to him? What could Jesus do now – and what was this talk about a kingdom? Surely Israel is God's Kingdom ... isn't it? Jesus turned to him and replied, "Truly let me tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." And through his torment, I know I saw peace. I saw peace.

And I ran. I ran home. It was all too much – too much for me. I felt like I had lost my brother and found him all at the same time. Like I had known him and not known him, and I knew that the words of Jesus to him ... they had healed his pain. I knew Jesus had taken his guilt and promised him a new, eternal life ... what did that mean?

I fumblingly shared what had happened with my family, and they too cried with me. Jesus – the holy man from Galilee had been able to speak peace, to give forgiveness, to welcome him into eternity ... he spoke as if he was the gatekeeper to life itself, and he said it all as he was breathing his last, painful breaths. Could it be that this holy man really was our Liberator?



#### FOUR | THE SIGN OF JONAH

They had been really tough days. Dark days, and it had felt as if our world had crumbled around us.

I had joined the growing group of Jesus' followers when I had seen him heal my uncle who had been blind for his whole life. We'd heard that there was a miracle man, and the reports were so consistent and so filled with hope that we had taken him to see what it was all about. What could we lose? Right there before our eyes other people were able to hear, or walk, or run, or speak – evil spirits were driven out, and people were taught the most amazing, easy to understand, freeing truths we had ever heard. So we took my Uncle Reuben and led him to Jesus, and in a moment, he could see – for the first time.

We had been convinced that Jesus was the one we had all been praying for, come to overthrow the Romans, bring back God's reign to Israel, and more. But then he had been betrayed by one of our group, taken, beaten, tried and killed. Killed! The Messiah was not meant to die – “The Holy One will not see decay” is what was promised in the Psalms. We felt public shame and humiliation. We felt betrayed by God himself, let down yet again – we felt anger, we felt remorse ... but most of all ... grief. Jesus was more than just a teacher, healer, leader ... he had genuinely loved us. We had laughed with him, wept with him.

It was the morning of the third day. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, along with some other woman and myself gathered our spices together so that we could go and anoint his body. It had been a painfully long wait, but because Jesus had died on the night before the Sabbath, we could not anoint him until this moment. As we walked, we talked, comforted each other, and cried with each other. Once or twice we laughed, remembering how full of light and laughter our days with him had been. We did not walk fast, but we arrived just as the sun was rising.



As we entered the memorial garden with the tombs, we saw that the giant stone that was sealing the tomb had already been moved – someone had beaten us to it! I hung back, stood still in the garden holding my jar of oil. There were others closer to Jesus who should see him first, but from inside the tomb, we heard a cry, “He has been taken”

Some of us dropped our spices, and we ran. The cold stone did not move as I pushed past it to get into the tomb, and sure enough the space was empty ... but it wasn't a cold emptiness, not the cold, melancholy emptiness of an abandoned house, it was more like the emptiness of a stage just as the curtain lifts, before anyone begins the drama, but with the audience waiting, watching ... maybe it was the whole of heaven watching this moment and we were the first actors on the scene ... maybe we were the audience. But it was definitely a beginning, not an ending.

Suddenly in the tomb with us were two men – their clothes lit the space! We covered our eyes to start with, and we drew back. Joanna put her arm out to protect me, but the men said, “Don't be frightened ... don't be frightened. Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He has burst from death and is alive!”

It was everything we had wanted to hear and nothing like what we expected. It felt too good to be the truth. We live our whole lives putting up walls – walls to protect ourselves when the good we want to happen always falls short. People let us down and betray us. Systems fail us. We even fail to keep our own standards of goodness – but Jesus had never been like that, and now these angelic men were assuring us that Jesus had ripped open the curse of death itself and exploded back to life. If I could explain that moment to you ... if I could stay in that moment for the rest of my life ... it was like seeing a loved one return from war, or a loved one asking for your hand. I was like rain after a drought for the soul, or like ... like coming home again as a small child. And I knew. I knew as they said it, that it was true. As they said it, we remembered that Jesus had said he would rise on the third day – the sign of Jonah! Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, Jesus would be in the belly of the earth for three days.

Our mourning had turned into dancing, and we ran – we ran back to the others to tell the incredible news that Jesus was alive! He was alive! He is alive! And he is still alive today.