

### ***The Teacher of Israel***

We were stumped. We didn't know *what* to make of him. Well, a few of us didn't, anyway. To be perfectly honest most of our party had already written him off. They determined very early that since he openly criticized some of our most cherished traditions and our – yes, I'll say it – our thoroughly well-grounded and scholarly understanding of the Law of Moses, that he had to be some kind of fake – or lunatic, perhaps. For most of us that was enough to shut down any discussion or consideration of the evidence. But despite what you may have heard about us, not all of us Pharisees were so narrow-minded. Sure, we had our right-wing fanatics just like you; people who are all knee-jerk reaction and no thought or reason. Maybe we even had more than our share—okay, a lot more; but you may be surprised to learn that a few of us could actually think for ourselves.

And for those of us who could, Jesus was an enigma. He appeared out of nowhere. Before he suddenly exploded on the scene up in Galilee and became an overnight sensation, no one had ever heard of him. Why would we? His family was poor, peasant stock. He hadn't studied under any of the great Rabbis here in Jerusalem – or, near as we could tell, any of the well known but lesser lights in the provinces. He was a common carpenter, for goodness sake. But all at once we were getting reports in Jerusalem about this wonderful new Rabbi who was teaching in all the synagogues of Galilee. It was said that he taught from Scripture wisely and well, speaking on his own authority, without referring to the legal opinions of the most revered experts recorded in the Mishnahs and Talmud. It was said instead that he confirmed his authority with a steady stream of miraculous signs and healings of every kind imaginable.

Naturally we sent some of our people to investigate. I myself interviewed a number of people who claimed to have been afflicted with a wide range of ailments: blindness, deafness, paralyzed limbs, leprosy, even a few who said they had been inhabited by demons. They all said they'd gone to Jesus because they heard that he could heal them; and he did. I was skeptical, of course. For most people who think they've been miraculously cured of something, it's all in their head. That or they weren't really sick to begin with. But everything about their stories checked out. Witnesses and family members verified every detail. I could find no holes or contradictions. Pretty much the same thing came back in the reports of the people we sent north. The miracles he did seemed genuine enough. And there were so many of them. Someone might be able to deceive the crowds with few phony healing tricks, but this Jesus was performing them consistently on any and all who came to him.

All of this was in addition to the even more incredible accounts of him that were circulating throughout the city. Fantastic stories: a huge crowd fed to satisfaction with a little boy's lunch, the stilling of a violent storm, even raising a dead child back to life. If a fraction of the tales were only partially true, this Jesus would be the most amazing man who ever lived. I determined that I would go to Galilee to see him for myself. I was preparing to do just that; but then I heard I didn't have to: he was coming to Jerusalem.

I caught my first glimpse of him during that ruckus on the outer court of the Temple. Jesus arrived there and saw all the business going on: the sellers of sacrificial animals and the money changers and so on. He was instantly filled with righteous fury. He began overturning tables and driving them out. They all fled in fear before him, livestock, merchants, customers together as if they were one big terrified herd. Not one remained. And I saw him standing there

in the middle of the wreckage they left behind wondering how he did it. He was not a big man or powerfully built. He was instead the most ordinary and unpretentious looking fellow I'd ever laid eyes on. And yet he did in less than five minutes what we Pharisees had wanted to do for years, ever since that whole wretched nonsense started; but we lacked the authority, and yes, the courage to do it.

You see, our religious and political opponents, the Sadducees (you'd call them the theological liberals), were in the majority. They controlled just about everything, including the high priesthood and the temple grounds. When they first allowed a couple merchants to set up shop in the temple a few years ago, they said it was for the benefit of the pilgrims who came to worship. It was for their convenience, and how could we be so heartless as to not want to make their lives easier? Besides, the businesses were set up only on the little used court of the Gentiles, so it wasn't like anyone important would be put out. We objected on the very principle of the thing. The Temple of God is not a marketplace. But what could we do? We didn't have the power to stop it. But we soon discovered what it was really about. These privileged merchants paid a high premium to the chief priests and their cronies for their choice locations. Before long there were many more of them filling the outer court; and the bribes, kickbacks, and other dirty dealings made our opponents rich with filthy lucre. We hated it; but couldn't stop it. After a while I guess we got used to it. And then this Jesus appears and in an instant sets things straight. By the sheer force of his moral authority alone he cleansed the temple of that ongoing offense.

I was impressed. And so several times in the days that followed I stood in the shadows and listened to him teach on the temple courts. I suppose I expected him to continue to rail against our religious adversaries, both for their corrupt, indulgent lifestyles and their weak and bending interpretation of the Law of Moses—which he did to some degree. He was obviously no Sadducee. But it was even more obvious that he didn't share the views of us Pharisees either. To be sure, he made us the target of his sharpest verbal arrows. I found his criticism offensive. He called us hypocrites. He said that we only appeared good with all our efforts to be faithful sons of the Law. He called us whitewashed tombs: clean and bright on the outside but filled within with death and decay. But despite the disparaging way he spoke of us, I found myself swept up in his words. He had a compelling presence and an interesting way of spinning things in a radical new light that was totally foreign to our way of thinking; and yet it was strangely hard to dispute. And, I confess it now, I knew there was some truth to what he said about our hypocrisy ... about *my* hypocrisy in particular.

But what other way was there? I mean the Word of God is pretty clear, isn't it? There's a right way to live and there's a wrong way – probably many wrong ways. But God in his grace made known to Moses his will for us his chosen people. He gave us his commandments to obey. And it's only by keeping them whole and undefiled that anyone can ever hope to enjoy the blessings of God in this life and entry in that glorious life to come. And we of the Pharisees had made this our goal: to make our stand on the Law of God, to strive to live in perfect obedience to his commandments, to live in the righteousness that the Lord demands, and to earn for ourselves the everlasting kingdom. This wasn't just for ourselves, either. We had an obligation to the rest of people – to model for them the right way to live, to be the guardians, the moral authorities, the teachers of Israel that could guide them out of their lives of sin to the better way, the perfect way. This was our holy calling. The logic was flawless. But as I considered it, I had to ask why it fell to Jesus to clean up that mess in the Temple. Why hadn't we done that? It was clearly the right thing to do. And if we were supposed to be doing what's right and setting the example, how is it that one man could do what all of us together could not? What stopped us? Fear, certainly, and a spirit of concession, of moral laxity. And if we'd

compromised ourselves in this matter, it made me wonder in what other areas we were guilty of the same thing. I had to talk with this man Jesus.

Thus it happened that I, Nicodemus Ben Gurion, made arrangements to meet with him one night privately (I should say *secretly*—I didn't want my many offended colleagues to know that I held a grudging respect for him). And to be truthful, I thought at the time that I was doing Jesus something an honor. I wasn't just some nobody, you know; I was of noble birth – from one of the oldest and most distinguished families in the city. And if what they say is true, one of the three wealthiest families in the city. I had the best education that money could buy. I went to what you would call an Ivy League school, and did very well there. I was considered to be one of the leading living experts of the Law. To cap it off, I was a member of the Sanhedrin, the seventy member ruling council of the Jews. That's like being a senator. And here I was calling upon an admittedly popular, but poor, unschooled, itinerant upstart from the backwoods of Galilee. I thought that Jesus should be pleased that he managed to capture the attention of someone as high up the social order as myself.

And so, in an effort to make him feel a bit more at ease being with a person as important as me, I began by paying him what I intended as a very high compliment. I called him "Rabbi" – it means "great one" – and I said, "We know that you are a teacher come from God. The miracles we've seen confirm it." He didn't acknowledge the compliment. Nor did he seem at all uncomfortable in my presence. He just looked at me with earnest sincerity and what I can only call genuine compassion, and he essentially told me that I didn't know a thing – that with respect to the things of God and his kingdom I was like a blind man. To be able to see anything at all, he said, I would have to be born again from above.

It was the most startling thing I'd ever heard. If I'd been puzzled about him before, now I was way past any semblance of comprehension. You might think that I'd have felt insulted, this uneducated man telling me that I – I of all people – was spiritually blind. And I would have been; but he said it without the slightest hint of malice. He really wanted to help me. It was more like he was extending his hand to lead me to the truth. So I asked him, "What are you talking about? Born again? From above? How can anyone be born a second time when they're old? I know you do miracles, Jesus, but I just can't imagine anyone crawling back into their mother's womb and emerging again. Is that what you mean?"

In retrospect, I can only admire how patient and gentle he was with me. My questions were absurd, revealing the very blindness he accused me of. But I was at the time trapped in a very literal and wooden way of thinking. All of us Pharisees were. As it turns out, he was indeed speaking of a miraculous rebirth: the one that takes place by water and the Spirit in Baptism. You may recall that we Pharisees had rejected the Baptism of John. He had been calling sinners to repentance – a good thing, to be sure; but we didn't see how it applied to us. We weren't sinners – or so we had convinced ourselves. So we certainly didn't see the need to be baptized like the rest of them.

That evening Jesus helped me see the truth – or more of it anyway. I'll admit that I didn't get it all at once. But he helped me to see that I didn't understand nearly as much as I thought I did, and that a lot of what I thought I knew was wrong. He showed me that our way, the way of the Pharisees, was a dead end; that no person living could attain the level of righteousness required to achieve eternal life. It takes absolute perfection. And that accusing feeling I had about my own hypocrisy only proved that I'd fallen short. All men are rightfully under God's condemnation. I could see that now. I was a temple that needed cleansing. And I couldn't clean it myself.

But then he said something even more startling: that God had sent his Son into the world not to condemn it; but to save it. And that anyone who believed in him would have eternal life. He spoke of a righteousness that comes by faith and not by the works of the law. Faith in the Son of God can attain the righteousness that the law cannot deliver. You heard about that in your reading from Paul's letter to the Romans today. But mind you, it was all new to me at the time. And when he spoke of the Son of Man being lifted up like the snake in the wilderness – that cursed creature raised up to give life to those who were dying if only they'd look – well, I had no idea what he was talking about, nor would I for the next two years.

I left Jesus that evening after several very productive hours. My grudging respect for him had turned to admiration. I had become one of his disciples – though secretly, my damnable fear getting the best of me for those two years. You know the rest of the story. How I with several others objected to his arrest and hasty trial before the Sanhedrin – and how we were shouted down, threatened, and then forced out of the chambers. We were crushed to hear that he'd been condemned, and completely lost once again when we heard that he'd been sentenced to die by crucifixion. It was then, seeing him on the cross that I remembered what he said about being lifted up like the snake in the wilderness, and I wondered if he had known then that this would happen. At the time I dismissed it. I was overcome with sadness that this good man – this great teacher of Israel, *my* teacher – was being rejected and put to death like so many of true prophets before him.

And that's when I decided to come out of hiding. I had been afraid to openly confess him in his life. It only seemed right to confess my devotion to him in his death. I no longer cared what others would think. I helped Joseph of Arimathea (who was another secret disciple) take his body down from the cross. We were both beside ourselves with sorrow and once again, completely at a loss to explain how and why it had all happened the way it did. And what we couldn't understand most was that Jesus went into it all without offering any kind of defense – no attempt whatsoever to save himself as he could have several times. We went about our sad task in stunned silence. First washing his body and then wrapping it with the spices Joseph had brought. Then we placed the body in Joseph's recently completed tomb. And when we sealed it shut, we were certain that we'd heard the last of Jesus. Little did we know, our teacher had saved the best lesson for last. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***