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John's shocking discovery

It was not supposed to end like this. I couldn't believe how badly we'd misread it. How could he be there hanging on a cross after all that He'd accomplished? I looked at my mother. She was shocked at where we stood and what we'd witnessed. Then from the cross, Jesus looked at his mother. It was an especially painful moment. She had been through so much with him. And to have it all end like this.

He struggled to speak – "Woman, behold your son!" I wondered if he was speaking about himself at first. But then I noticed him looking at me. Why was he looking at me? What would I have to do with Jesus' mother? Then while still looking at me he said "Behold, your mother." Then his gaze turned back to Mary. Jesus gave me, John, the responsibility of caring for his mother. (John 19:25-27)

Well that was understandable in the circumstances. Jesus was the oldest son and with his father now dead, He was responsible for his mother. But his brothers thought he was crazy. Maybe he thought they would turn away from their mother in the aftermath of his death.

Of course I would look after his mother the best I could. But I didn't know how many days I even had to live. I couldn't believe they finally got him. And if they could bring down Jesus, they could sure bring down his disciples.

I remember that day he called James and me to follow him. That was a pretty significant day. (Matthew 4:21-22) You see, we were kind of set up for life. Our father Zebedee had a fishing boat and had done well. We didn't lack much. And we had this amazing mother, Salome. She always looked out for us. She ensured that we got plenty of opportunity in life. We even got to travel in some of the highest social circles of the nation. The High Priest's family knew us (John 18:15) and we were honored to have been guests in his house on occasion. Our mother built into us a great amount of self-confidence. She would often say "God helps those who help themselves." And "you can't wait for life to come to you. You've got to go out and grab it."

When we first met Jesus we wondered about him. He was not a successful businessman. He did not come from an influential family or have a network of powerful connections. But he had this amazing authority about him. Whenever He spoke, He had people in the palm of his hand. And it wasn't because of his witty sayings. His words were so deep, penetrating and true. The more we learned of Jesus, the more we were intrigued by him. And then He started

doing miracles. We were at this wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). There was no good wine left for the guests. Jesus' mother asked him to do something. So he changed the water in some jugs to the best flavored wine we had ever tasted. And we'd tasted some good wine.

We began to see some possibility in this Jesus. We thought there might be more to him than meets the eye. So when he called us to be disciples, we thought it looked like a pretty good career move. After all, James and I would be together. And mother approved of Jesus. So what could it hurt to learn from this teacher to pad our resumes. Besides, we could always go back to fishing and help Dad until it was our turn to take over the business. What did we have to lose?

Well, it was quite amazing listening to and walking with Jesus. He did some great ministry and gave great messages. He drew massive crowds. We had latched onto a real winner with this guy. Then one day, he sat us down. He told us he was going to send us out to do ministry. We were supposed to travel the countryside proclaiming "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Then he said we were to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons" (Matthew 10:5-8). Was he serious? We went out and did something we didn't think possible. We anointed the sick with oil and healed people. We cast out demons. We had received some special power to do these amazing works. We really began to wonder if this guy was the Messiah the Rabbis always talked about. After all, our Scriptures looked forward to a deliverer who would one day free us from oppression. Many of our people really suffered under the Romans and Herod. Could Jesus be the one? We couldn't think of anyone better.

So we began to dream about positions in Jesus' upcoming government. Jesus would be the king. But he would certainly need some help to carry out the various jobs in running a government. And some jobs are more important than others. Jesus would need people with connections to the higher classes and the high priest's family. Who better than James and myself?

But some of the other disciples also seemed to want those positions. Now don't get me wrong. I liked most of the other disciples. We knew Peter and Andrew from our region. And the other guys sure proved to be an interesting cross section of our nation. But let's be serious – our family was by far the most powerful in that group. We remembered what Mom said to us – "you can't just wait for life to come to you. You've got to go grab it." So we talked to her for advice. How can we ask for the best positions? But she had a better idea.

She would go talk to Jesus on our behalf. Then it wouldn't look like we were really behind the idea. But we'd be ready to take up positions. So we waited until we were alone with Jesus and mother went up to him (Matthew 20:20-28). She went before Jesus and kneeled. (That must have been hard for her!). Jesus said "What do you want?" She said to him "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." Whoa Mom. I don't think even we would have gone that far. But okay. We might as well be clear. You've got to go grab life. But Jesus wasn't smiling. He didn't seem to think it was funny. "You do not know what you are asking," he said to our mother. Then looking at us he said "are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" What cup could he be talking about except the cup of power? We could definitely enjoy some time drinking from that cup. So we responded in unison "we are able."

Jesus then said "You will drink my cup." Yes, we are in! I smiled at James. But then Jesus said "But to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." What? Jesus was going to give the place of prominence to someone else. I knew we should have talked to him sooner. It's probably Peter and Andrew. Just then the other 10 disciples showed up. They asked what was going on. When they heard what happened, they were steamed at us! Then Jesus went on to talk about "if you want to be great you've got to be a servant." The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.

But Jesus would not let up. He kept on talking about his kingdom and power. But he also kept talking about serving and suffering. He tried to avoid the crowds and the popularity. He did everything wrong if he was going to be this triumphant national leader. We began to wonder what was going on.

Then there was that one day when our hopes were raised up so high and then smashed on the rocks in a matter of minutes (Luke 9:18-27). Jesus asked "who do the crowds say I am?" We answered "some say Elijah and others John the Baptist." Then he asked, "but who do you say I am?" Peter answered him, "you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus answered, "blessed are you Peter, for you had this revealed to you from God." So Jesus finally admitted that he was the Messiah. Man, I wish I would have come up with that before Peter did.

But then Jesus strictly charged us not to tell anyone. And he started talking about going to Jerusalem. And that he must be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised." Well James and I knew some of those priestly families. We could put in a good word for Jesus with them. There was no need for Jesus to die.

But Jesus went on. "IF anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

Wait a minute Jesus. First of all, let's deal with this "deny oneself" business. We didn't sign up to be disciples so we could deny ourselves. We were in it to make our good name better. We wanted to do great things. We had already done great things and we wanted to do more. Yes, Jesus you can be king but we want to be princes or cabinet ministers with our hands on the power. And why are you talking about taking up a cross? The only people who took up crosses were the worst criminals. The Romans forced them to carry the cross beam to the execution site. Whenever we saw a man carrying a cross surrounded by a bunch of Roman soldiers, we knew he was on a one way journey to death.

The person carrying their cross had lost their right to a self will. They had to go wherever the Roman soldiers said he had to go. They had to take up the cross beam no matter how heavy or how difficult. There was no choice in the matter. And they had to follow whoever led them. They didn't get to choose their own path. The Romans were in charge.

So what's Jesus talking about here? If anyone wants to follow him, they have deny themselves, their own will and way of doing things. They have to take up their cross – like accepting someone else's orders and follow him. Could I do that? I might lose my reputation. We might lose the family business. What about our appreciated status with the high priest's family? What about the cabinet position? Jesus could give us some direction. But I certainly wanted to do things my own way.

And yet now we'd witnessed Jesus do exactly this same thing. We hadn't been able to get the high priest's family to stop this madness. The temple guards beat Jesus and he didn't stop them even though we'd seen the wind and waves obey him. The Romans then took Jesus and flogged him. Despite the glorious majesty we'd seen when he was transfigured before us, he now was beaten to a bloody pulp. He was barely recognizable. And then they made him carry his cross. "Why did you let them do this Jesus? We saw you raise Lazarus from the dead. If you can defeat death, you could surely defeat some soldiers."

Yet on he struggled denying his self will to break free. He followed exactly where they wanted him to go. He gave Himself up for them to crucify him. Now he hung there like the worst criminal in our society for every passerby to see. How had it all come to this?

The agony continued until he breathed his last. The sky grew dark. The earth seemed to shake. It was like the whole world was shaken with his death. They took his body down and carried it to a tomb. I took Jesus' mother along with my mother. And we sat, shattered, in our home, Jerusalem, with the doors locked. We were sure it wouldn't be long before the door knocked and the temple guards would come to take James and I away.

But it was Passover. They must have been busy. We made it to the third day when news began to spread that someone saw Jesus alive. Until I went to the tomb myself and saw it empty with his grave clothes still there. We decided to meet that evening to talk about these rumors. And then he was there standing among us and offering us peace.

As the days unfolded he visited us often, teaching and explaining many things. He was not going to establish an earthly kingdom at this time. He'd died to pay for our sins-my sin. He'd risen to conquer death. But he did commission us to continue to spread the good news of his coming and death and resurrection for our sins. He ascended to heaven and we began this ministry.

We never did get back to fishing. We never did get back in with the High Priest's family. Sadly, Herod had my brother James killed just to please the religious leadership a few years later. I had to live on the run some of the time. I lost that life that I thought I would live. But in the end I gained the life Jesus had for me. And I didn't forfeit my soul on some pursuit that would ultimately draw me away from following Jesus. I didn't live out my dreams. But the life lived for &with Jesus was more than I could ever dream.

It wasn't easy. It required that daily decision of denying my self will and agreeing to follow Jesus will. It meant I had to embrace whatever Jesus commanded like taking up a cross when the Romans commanded. And no matter where that required me to go, I had to follow. But it was worth it.

I don't know what you think you're life is all about today or what you have planned. But if you're a Christian, Jesus calls you to put aside your self- will and submit to His will. Take up whatever cross He has for you and to go where He wants you to go. You may lose the life you were planning to live. But you will gain the eternal life He planned to give. I pray you will heed His call.

Closing Poem

“Forgive them, O my Father,
They know not what they do.”
The Savior spoke in anguish,
As sharp iron nails went through.
No word of anger spoke He
To them that shed His blood,
But prayer and tender pity
Large as the love of God.

For me was that compassion,
For me that tender care;
I need His wide forgiveness
As much as any there.
It was my pride and hardness
That hung Him on the tree;
Those cruel nails, O Savior,
Were driven in by me.

And often I have slighted
Your gentle voice that said:
Forgive me too, Lord Jesus,
I knew not what I did.
O depth of sweet compassion!
O love divine and true!
Save the souls that slight You,
And know not what they do.

Cecil F. Alexander