

The Rock that Rocked

I thought that night was the beginning of the end, but it turned out it was the end of the beginning. We didn't understand then. I know I certainly didn't. It was a cold night. I remember standing warming myself at the fire and thinking everything was falling apart.

I remembered all the optimism of the early days when we first heard that things were happening again, after hundreds of years of silence from heaven. A prophet had appeared again. And what a prophet! A wild man who lived in the desert, close to nature. Such was the power of his preaching that he didn't come to the towns and cities; the towns and cities went out to him! Down to the River Jordan. Even the religious leaders and priests went down from Jerusalem.

And we went too—even although we were only fishermen—my brother Andrew and myself, and my friend John and his brother James. Exciting times! The prophet spoke of a coming kingdom. He had come to prepare the way. There was a lot of talk in those days about a new king—the one promised by the prophets long ago. The Prophet said he was among us. We heard he had called him the Son of God.

We certainly needed a new kingdom. We were just one of the many nations conquered by the Romans,

who let puppet kings like Herod rule over us. We were ground down under heavy taxation. Somebody had to pay for all those armies and all that luxury! And our own leaders were no better—the priests in Jerusalem in league with the Romans, indulging in luxurious Greek lifestyles and running rackets to exploit the people, even in the very Temple precincts. No wonder there was talk of rebellion. There was revolution in the air. There had been various attempts, but they had all been crushed ruthlessly by the Romans. But now there was talk of the great anointed King, the descendant of David.

And then I met him. My brother Andrew and John were real followers of the Prophet and one day he pointed out this person to them and said, “Look, that’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” None of us really understood what that meant, but Andrew and John were gob-smacked, because the person he was pointing to was none other than John’s cousin, Jesus, from Nazareth!

When I saw Andrew later that day he was utterly convinced. He said, “We have found the Anointed King!” And he wasn’t satisfied until he took me to see him. Quite frankly I wasn’t sure, and it was some time after that before I too was convinced and became a follower. But Jesus said a strange thing when he met me

that day that really stuck in my mind. He said, “You are Simon son of John. But you will be called The Rock.” I wasn’t sure what he meant, and I was too embarrassed to ask. But it sounded good. It made me feel special. I wanted to be solid as a rock, dependable, sure and steadfast. And I did try.

They were exciting days. Water into wine! Walking on water! Feeding the 5000! Healing the sick! Raising the dead! (Yes, all that really did happen.) So many were convinced he was the one—the promised King. In fact on one occasion they came to make him king by force. He would have none of it.

I thought of all that as I stood warming myself at the fire. It was a cold night.

But that’s not what really stood out in my memory. It was the more personal things that stood out—the day he asked for a loan of my boat to use to preach to the people gathered round on the shore. When he’d finished teaching, he told me to launch the boat out into the deep water and let down the nets. Well, we’d been out all night and caught nothing. And what did this Carpenter know about fishing? You caught fish in the shallows, not in the deep. But I did as he said. He had that effect on you. And it was amazing. It was the biggest catch we ever had. I had to ask James and John to help to bring in the fish with their boat too. I realised

then this was no ordinary man. And I felt so rotten for having doubted him—and him so generous. I told him he should have nothing to do with a miserable sinner like me. He just said, “Don’t worry. Come with me and it’ll not be fish you’ll be catching, but people!”

That was the start of it really. From then on we were inseparable. Where he went I followed. Even when it was impossible—like the stormy night when I saw him standing on the surface of the Sea of Galilee! This was my world—the world of wind and waves—but he was more at home in it than I had ever been. He was walking on the waves as if they were a carpet! I wanted to go to him. So he told me to get out of the boat and come to him. I did the craziest thing I’ve ever done. I got out of the boat! As I did so, I kept looking at Jesus, and I’ll never forget the sensation of not sinking. I took a few steps towards him. It was impossible, but I did it. But then it hit me how impossible it was, and I took my eyes off Jesus and looked at the wind driving the waves, and I began to sink. As I felt myself go down, I shouted, “Lord, save me!” And he did. He reached out his hand and caught me and led me back to the boat, and it was perfectly calm. From that time on I was in no doubt who he was. He was the Son of God.

But there were other memories too as I stood by the fire. Not such good memories—times when he had

to tell me off. Like the time when he started speaking about going up to Jerusalem and being rejected by the religious leaders and being killed. I took him aside and said this was crazy talk. I knew that since he had stopped them making him king by force, a lot of people had stopped following him, but once the people of Jerusalem realised who he was, they would accept him.

He was very severe. "Out of my sight, Satan!" he said. "You're looking at it from a human point of view, not God's."

It was the same that night, only a few hours before I stood by that fire. He seemed so pessimistic. He was talking about going away, about going where we couldn't follow. He said we'd all fall away. He said one of us would betray him. I said even if everyone else left him, I never would. I would die for him. He shook his head, "You die for me!?" he said, "The truth is that before the cock crows in the morning, you will disown me three times." I was gutted.

As I stood by the fire, I didn't feel very much like a rock. I was afraid. Everything else he had said was coming true. Surely not that too!

The authorities had come for him. We had come up to Jerusalem, although a lot of us had thought it was madness, such was the hatred of the leaders against him. Why did they hate him? Oh, because he exposed

their wickedness—their heartless exploitation, their hypocrisy, their closing of the door of God’s kingdom. And they hated the way people loved him. People may have feared them, but they never loved them. You see, when he exposes your sin and guilt, there are only two things you can do. You either hate it and resent it, or you come to him for help. They resented it.

We knew they were out to get him, so we were prepared to defend him. We had a couple of swords. I had one. I had it close by my side earlier that night when we left the upstairs room where we’d gathered. It was very late when we went out through the city gate, down into the Kidron Valley and up the other side on the Mount of Olives to the olive grove of Gethsemane. Jesus was in a desperate state. I’d never seen him so low. He was wrestling in prayer, looking for another way. But we all fell asleep. We awoke to a loud knocking and shouting at the gate. Jesus now was completely calm. He went out and opened the gate. We were all behind him and we could see this crowd. There were soldiers and officials as well as some of the priests’ hired thugs. And Judas, who was one of us, was there with them! The world was going mad! He came up as bold as brass and greeted Jesus. It was some sort of signal, because then they laid hands on Jesus.

That's when I saw red. I pushed past Jesus, drew my sword and swung at the first person I saw. It happened to be a man called Malchus, a servant of the High Priest, and if he hadn't managed to twist to the side, I'd have had his head off. As it was it was only his ear. But Jesus told me to sheath my sword, and that his kingdom was not of this world and the Scriptures had to be fulfilled. Then he healed the man's ear. In spite of that, they dragged him off.

That was the time for all our oaths to be fulfilled — our promises of loyalty. That was the time to stand like a rock, steadfast, immovable. But this rock rocked! Rocked back on his heels. And then he meekly rolled away. I ran for it. We all did — not that that excuses it.

I found myself with John, and after we'd got over the wall and had time to calm down, we could see the torches of the arrest party going down the valley. We couldn't just leave him! We had to do something. Maybe we could rescue him! We followed at a safe distance. Right in through the city gate. Right up to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest. And because John had contacts there, we were able to get in, at least to the courtyard where there was a fire going. I wish now we hadn't. I wish with all my heart. It was dreadful. Right off, one of the servant girls recognised me. She must have seen me with Jesus in the city. She said, "You're

one of Jesus' disciples!" That was the time to have stood firm like a rock. But again I was rocked. I saw all the guards standing round the fire. What good would it be if I was arrested too? So I meekly rolled over. "I don't know what you're talking about!" I said.

But she wouldn't let it lie. I went out to the gate, thinking about getting out of there, but she'd told the people at the gate and they challenged me. Again the Rock did not stand firm. I denied that I was one of his disciples and I even swore. After that they left me alone for about an hour. It was the longest hour of my life. I had to get out of there, but I couldn't. I was going over everything that had happened. What was happening to Jesus all this time? John had managed to get right inside and he told us later about all that had happened. The complete injustice of it—a court meeting at night, false witnesses who couldn't even get their stories right, getting the prisoner to incriminate himself, even using physical violence against him.

But all this time I was alone in the courtyard. I had tried to keep quiet and keep my head down, but there was a commotion and I was rather jumpy. I said, "What's happening now? Is the trial finished?" Right away the man next to me said, "You're definitely one of Jesus' lot. Your accent gives you away. You're a Galilean!" The rock finally crumbled altogether. I

cursed and swore and said I never knew the man! How could I have said that?! That I didn't even know him! Jesus, who had called me The Rock. Jesus, who had filled my boat with fish, and my heart with happiness. Jesus, who had rescued me when I was sinking. But I had no time to rake over all these coals. Two things happened at once. Somewhere in the city a cock crew, heralding the coming of the dawn. And just at that moment Jesus was being led out and he looked straight at me. He knew. He knew. It wasn't an angry look, or an "I told you so" look. It was as if he said, "Peter! The Rock. The Rock." It was a look that broke my heart.

I went out blinded with tears. I'm not ashamed to say I cried my heart out. Tears of grief. Tears of bitterness. Tears of shame. Why was I so weak? Why was the world such a horrible place? Why was God allowing all this to happen?

They say the darkest hour is right before the dawn, but that day got darker every hour, with every piece of news that came. At six Jesus was tried before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. At seven he sent him to King Herod who sent him back. By eight Pilate had Jesus flogged and gave the crowd the choice of who should be set free, Jesus or Barabbas, the rebel. Stirred up by those in the pay of the religious leaders, the crowd chose Barabbas. By nine they had taken Jesus

outside the city and nailed him to a cross. And every hour it got darker, until at twelve noon, with the sun at its zenith, an unearthly physical darkness came over the land and it lasted until three in the afternoon when Jesus died.

These were the darkest hours of my life. All our hopes and dreams were gone. All that was best had vanished out of the world. I remembered the words of Jesus when they had come to arrest him: “This is your hour and the power of darkness.” I knew the power of that darkness then.

But on the third day the world was turned upside down. I stood in the tomb where they had laid him—and it was empty, apart from the grave clothes that Jesus had been wrapped in. And here’s a strange thing. The grave clothes were still there, not all in a tangle as if they’d been just ripped off, but just as they had been around his body—only there was no body there!

And that evening when we were all together—going over everything that had happened and trying to remember all he had said, with the doors locked because we were scared—he suddenly stood among us—Jesus himself. There could be no doubt. No one could ever forget him. He was the same as ever, only ... well, only more so. Except his hands and feet. There were scars there. I’ll never forget those scars. Oh, and

he had always used doors before. Now it seemed he didn't need them!

I was as amazed and overjoyed as the rest of them of course. But there was still something troubling me. How could I be forgiven for what I'd done? And would I ever be what he said I would be—the Rock? It wasn't until a couple of weeks later when we had gone back to Galilee that he made any reference to it. Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John and me and a couple of others went out fishing. We caught nothing that night. As we came towards the shore in the early morning, we saw someone standing on the beach who asked us if we had caught anything. Then he told us to cast our net on the right side of the boat. Something made me do it. And there was this huge shoal of fish. We counted them afterwards. There were 153. John said, "It's the Lord." As soon as I heard that, I jumped in the water and swam ashore. And sure enough, it was. He had a fire going and was cooking breakfast.

As we sat round the fire, he asked me if I loved him more than the others. I said he knew that I was his friend. He said, "Feed my lambs." He asked me if I loved him. And I said he knew that I was his friend. He said, "Shepherd my sheep." Finally he asked me, "Are you my friend?" It really hurt that he asked me that. But then I looked at the fire and I remembered another

fire, when all around was darkness, and I knew why he asked me three times. I said he knew I was his friend. And he said, “Feed my sheep.”

I have not always been strong and steadfast, as my friend Paul could tell you, but from that day I began to grow stronger. I began to grow into the name he had given me—Peter, the Rock.

John 1:19-42

Luke 5:1-11

Matthew 14:22-36

John 18:1-27

John 20:1 - 21:25