

From Top to Bottom

Sometimes your life goes along much the same from day to day, from week to week and from year to year. Then there comes a day that changes everything: when what you thought would always be shut was opened; when what you thought would always be empty was filled; when what you thought would last forever was utterly destroyed. That day was a day like that.

I went to work that day just like any other day. I worked at the very heart of our nation's life, in our capital city. My workplace was the most special place in that special city. It was on the highest point of the highest hill. It was a landmark for miles around because it was built of white stone finished with pure gold. It gleamed and glistened in the sun.

It was ancient; but it was also modern. In its original form it had been created hundreds of years ago, but the building I worked in had only been started 50 years before the day I want to tell you about, and it still wasn't finished. The main structure was done in the first ten years, but building work went on all the time I worked there. In fact it is only in recent years that the whole thing was finished—just in time for its end.

But there was something in that building that was at the very centre of what happened that day. It was a

barrier. It was a barrier that had existed for those fifteen hundred years. No one could pass that barrier except one man, and he could do that on only one day, once a year.

You see, the place I worked was the great Temple in Jerusalem—the House of God, and you will only understand what happened there that day if I explain something of its history and geography and its purpose. I worked there because I was a priest. I was a young man then. I had only recently reached the age of twenty when I could start work. It was a work I had been born for, because only those who belonged to priestly families, those descended from Aaron, could be priests. Aaron was the brother of Moses, whom God use to liberate our people from slavery in Egypt fifteen centuries ago. It was to Moses that God revealed the plan for the first House of God, only it was called the Tabernacle, or the Tent of Meeting, in those days, because this was at Mount Sinai and the people were on the move, travelling from Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land.

God said he would live with his people, and the Tabernacle was constructed to show how he would do that. The problem is: how can God, who is perfectly holy and pure and who hates evil, live with sinful human beings who are guilty of all kinds of evil? The

Tabernacle showed how. It was a tent set in a courtyard. In the courtyard stood a bronze altar on which the carcasses of sacrificial animals were burned. The tent was divided into in two parts. The inner part was separated from the outer part by a great curtain. In the outer part was an altar for the burning of incense, a table for bread and a seven-branched lampstand which was lit continuously.

But it was the inner part that was most holy because it was there God promised to be with his people. There was only one thing in this inner part. It was called the Ark of the Covenant. It was a wooden box measuring nearly four feet long and over two feet high and wide. It was covered in pure gold, and it contained the stone tablets on which God had written the Law—the Ten Commandments—what he required of his people. You know: I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt—You shall have no other gods before me; You shall not worship idols; You shall not take my name in vain; Remember every seventh day (the Sabbath) to keep it holy; Honour your father and mother; You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not give false testimony; You shall not envy.

And right there is the problem. Who can keep that Law of God perfectly? No one. So how then can God

who is holy meet with and accept people who are law-breakers? That's where the lid of the box came in. It was made of solid gold and it incorporated the Kheroubim—two huge golden creatures whose wings overshadowed the lid, which was called the Kapporeth, or the atonement cover, or mercy seat. The winged creatures symbolised God's throne. It was here God dwelt with his people. But it was the cover that showed how that was possible.

There was only one man who could enter that most holy place—the High Priest (originally Moses' brother Aaron, and then those who were descended from Aaron's son Eleazar)—and he could only do so on one day in the year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This was one of the three great religious Festivals of our people. On that day several sacrifices were made, but there was one that was for the sins of the people. It was unlike any other sacrifice. It involved the sacrifice of two goats. The High Priest took the blood of one of the goats through the great curtain into the most holy place and sprinkled it on the mercy seat to atone for the sins of the people.

Then he laid his hands on the head of the live goat and confessed over it all the sins of the people. This goat was then taken alive by a man out into the desert and released there. The goat was known as Azazel, the

goat that departs, or the Scapegoat. In more recent times the goat was taken to a rocky ravine and thrown over the cliff, but I always thought that what God commanded Moses was somehow more significant. The sin-bearer must go out alone into the wilderness, a land of separation and desolation.

This ritual was kept down through the centuries, through all the different forms that the House of God took—in Solomon’s great temple built according to the plan that King David received from the Lord, in the Second Temple built when the people returned from a seventy year exile in Babylon, and in the Temple I worked in, the magnificent Temple built on the orders of King Herod the Great.

This Temple was laid out in roughly the same plan as the Tabernacle, only on a much grander scale. The Courtyard was immense—it measured a rectangle nearly 500 by 300 metres. Herod filled in valleys and levelled hills to create it. This area contained several courtyards, one inside the other, each progressively smaller, with the Temple proper, the Sanctuary with the Most Holy Place in the centre.

The outer courtyard was called the Court of the Nations, because anyone, whether they belonged to our people or not, could come there. It was there that strange things began to happen in the days leading up

to the day I want to tell you about. It all happened when this preacher from Galilee came up to Jerusalem. Now, the Temple authorities did not approve of him. They viewed him as a troublemaker. He had been to the Temple several times before and seemingly had always created trouble. I was seldom there on these occasions, as we only served in the Temple for one week at a time, twice a year. But other priests I knew told me of these events. There was the time he was there for the Festival of Tents and on the last day of that Festival there was a ceremony when one of the priests poured out water from a golden vessel reminding the people of the water God provided for them in the desert when he led them out of Egypt, and of the blessings of the new Kingdom that God would set up. It was at that precise moment that the preacher shouted, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." The authorities had sent Temple guards to arrest him because they said he had broken the Sabbath Commandment by healing a disabled man on the Sabbath, and he had claimed equality with God by calling God his own Father. (On another occasion I definitely heard him say the same kind of thing: "I and the Father are one!") But the guards came back empty-handed saying, "No one ever spoke like this man!"

However, because of what he was doing and saying, some people were saying he was the long awaited King that God had promised—the Christ—a great descendent of King David. Others disagreed and the authorities were afraid there would be trouble and the Romans would come down hard and take away all our privileges. But I remembered that one of the oldest priests had told me of strange events that had happened over thirty years before, when an old priest called Zechariah had told of a child that had been born in the royal line of David who would bring redemption, and when another old man called Simeon had spoken of this same child in the Temple courts, saying to his mother, “This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.” The old priest said he was convinced this child was none other than the preacher.

Be that as it may, it was, as I say, just a few days earlier that the preacher came up to Jerusalem. This time he didn’t come quietly. He rode into the city on a donkey. You may think there’s nothing strange about that. Only it was foretold by the Prophet Zechariah that the great king would come to Jerusalem gently riding on a donkey. Many of the crowds who were coming to

the city for the Festival started spreading their cloaks or palm branches on the road in front of him, and shouting, "God save the Son of David! Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" Everyone in the city was asking, "Who is this?" And the crowds were answering, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

I knew then there was going to be trouble. And I didn't have to wait long. The very next day he came straight up to the Temple into the Court of the Gentiles, where the Temple authorities had set up businesses to help pilgrims coming up to the Festivals by selling animals for sacrifices and changing foreign money into local currency so people could pay the Temple tax. I was never very sure if this was a proper use for an area of the Temple, particularly as rather large profits were made! Jesus obviously did not approve. He overturned the tables of the money-changers, scattering the coins, and drove them all out. He said, "It is written in the book of Isaiah: My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den of thieves!"

Next thing, blind and crippled people were coming to him and he was healing them. Then the children started shouting, "God save the Son of David!" I thought it lovely to hear the childish voices sounding in

the solemn Temple courts, but this was too much for the Temple authorities. They indignantly told Jesus to rebuke them. But Jesus said, "Have you never read in the Psalms that God has ordained praise from the mouths of children and infants?"

The next day Jesus was back, teaching in the Temple courts, and the Temple authorities challenged him about his authority for teaching. He told them stories (as he often did). One was about a man who had two sons. He told the first one to work in his vineyard, and he said he wouldn't, but later he changed his mind and went. He asked the other son to go, and he said he would, but he didn't. Jesus said the first son was like the tax collectors and prostitutes, because they repented and so entered the Kingdom of God. But the religious leaders (who despised the tax-collectors and prostitutes) were like the other son because they didn't repent. To cap it all, he told a story about another owner of a vineyard who sent his son to collect his share of the fruit from the tenants, but they killed the son and took the vineyard for their own. And he quoted the words of a Psalm of David: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing and wonderful in our eyes."

This confirmed the authorities' view that they had to get rid of Jesus. They knew he was claiming the

unique authority of the Messiah, the Son of David and he would completely change things if he came into power. For one thing, they would lose their power! So they started plotting how they would arrest him, which was no easy thing, because of the huge crowds, many of whom held he was a prophet.

But it all came to a head on the day I am talking about. I went to work as usual early that morning. As I passed up the great stairway I noticed there was a great deal of activity around the Council Chamber, and someone told me that they had arrested Jesus during the night and he was on trial for his life and was soon to be taken to the Roman Governor Pilate for sentencing. I passed through the Double Gate underneath the Royal Colonnade and out into the Court of the Gentiles, and I thought about some of the things that had happened there and wondered if they were right to arrest Jesus. I passed the notice excluding those of other nationalities on pain of death as I went up into the Court of Women, and I remembered it was there that the authorities had once dragged before Jesus a poor woman who had been caught in the very act of adultery. They said the Law said she should be stoned to death. What did he say? He said nothing, he spent a long time writing on the ground with his finger. Then he stood up and said, "Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone." No

one said a word. They all moved away, one by one, until only Jesus and the woman were left. Jesus told her he didn't condemn her and told her to sin no more.

I wondered if forgiveness was really as easy as that. Didn't we need all the sacrifices we offered in the Temple, and didn't someone have to live a worthy life to benefit from these sacrifices? With these thoughts going through my head I passed through the Court of Israel, from which women and children were excluded, and gazed at the magnificent sanctuary towering above me. It was 20 metres high and made of solid marble overlaid in solid gold. I shone in the early morning sun.

I was very soon caught up in my work. It was to be a very busy day. Not only were there the usual daily sacrifices and rituals, particularly the morning and evening sacrifice of a lamb at 3 hours before noon and 3 hours after noon, but because this was the Festival of Passover, there was to be the slaughter of lambs for that ritual. This was the commemoration of the night when God set our people free from slavery in Egypt. That night the angel of the Lord passed through the land of Egypt and killed every firstborn, but everyone who obeyed God and sprinkled the blood of a lamb on their doorposts would be safe. That day thousands of lambs would be sacrificed and the Temple Courts would run

red with their blood. But would even all that blood atone for all our sins?

Throughout the day we kept hearing news of what was happening to Jesus. The authorities had persuaded Pilate to sentence him to death. He was dragged out to the Hill of the Skull outside the city and there he was crucified. Then at noon, with the sun at its zenith, suddenly there was darkness. It was as if the sun had been swallowed up and it was pitch dark. We had to light all the lamps in the Temple. We were told that during that darkness Jesus had cried out, "My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?" For some reason a shiver ran up my spine, when I heard that, and somehow the picture of the scapegoat alone in the wilderness came into my mind.

But I soon had other things to think about. I had been chosen to offer the sacrifice of the evening incense. For that I had to enter the sanctuary to the altar of incense, where none were allowed except priests. As I stood there I looked at the great curtain twenty metres high that separated off the most holy place where only the High Priest could go once a year with the blood of atonement. That curtain stood as the last great barrier. It was immense. It was made in several layers so that it was thicker than a man's hand and it was embroidered with Kheroubim, winged angelic creatures which

reminded me at that moment of the Kheroubim which excluded Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life after they had disobeyed God.

Was our religion all about exclusion? How could I come into the presence of a holy God? Would the blood of bulls and goats really cleanse me from sin? My gloomy thoughts were exacerbated by the knowledge that now on the other side of that grand curtain there was no Ark of the Covenant, no throne of God and no Mercy Seat. King Nebuchadnezzar had removed them from the Temple over 600 years ago and they had never returned. Now on every day of Atonement, the High Priest had to sprinkle the blood of atonement on the floor. The most holy place was absolutely empty.

Suddenly, all of that was forgotten in a moment of sheer terror. The earth beneath my feet rocked. I was thrown down on the stone floor. There was a terrific rending noise and before my very eyes, the great curtain of the Temple was torn from top to bottom! It was said of that curtain that it could not have been torn apart by two horses pulling in opposite directions. But that day it was ripped like a child ripping old papyrus.

The way to the most holy place was open! The way to God was open! What did it mean? Everyone could plainly see that the room was empty. What did it mean?

When I stepped outside again, I realised that the darkness had gone. The sun was shining. Seemingly this had happened just before the earthquake—an earthquake, incidentally, that had left all the buildings intact, but had torn the curtain from top to bottom! Not long afterwards word came that Jesus had died. Someone casually asked when that had happened. The man said the darkness had lifted and Jesus had shouted, “It is finished!” and then he had died. The room I was in seemed to spin. I felt faint. I realised that was the exact moment I had witnessed the curtain tearing from top to bottom. Surely this was no coincidence! There was a lot of excited conversation about it all, but every one was afraid to voice their thoughts too much.

The authorities tried to hush everything up. Indeed even when the amazing story started circulating that Jesus’ tomb was empty and that he had risen from the dead, they tried to hush that up with an invented story that Jesus’ body had been stolen by his followers. It just didn’t figure. They had been too frightened to stand by him at his trial and death. They were hardly likely to overpower the Temple guards who had been set to watch the tomb!

Seven weeks after all this, there was another Festival, Pentecost, and it was then that a remarkable

change came over Jesus' followers. One of them, the fisherman Peter, started preaching boldly at the Temple, and after him a man called Stephen. It was through their preaching that I came to see the truth—that Jesus was the fulfilment of all the Temple had stood for. He was the one who really made atonement for our sins, and not only ours but the sins of the world, when he died on the cross. The way to God is indeed open. It was God himself that had torn that curtain. There was no power on earth that could have done it, and certainly not at that precise moment. All we have to do is repent of our sins and trust in Jesus as the only way to be saved.

These events are over forty years ago now. And I thank God that I know these things. Because now, of course the Temple is no more. The Romans at last lost patience with the nationalist rebels (they had nothing to do with Jesus—they were trying to build a different kind of kingdom). The Roman General Titus smashed Jerusalem and he smashed the Temple. All those beautiful stones and gold. All burnt. All rubble now.

But there is no need for a Temple anymore, no need for blood anymore. The Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world. The curtain is torn. The way to God is open, and open for all.

Matthew 27:32-56

Acts 6:1-7