

LOOKED AT WITH LOVE

My father was a vineyard owner.

Whether it was because his soil was of such high quality or the Lord had simply blessed us, everyone considered his grapes to be the finest in all of Galilee.

Merchants came to him from all over the region to buy them because the best grapes produced the best wine.

And, praise be to God, this high demand made my father quite wealthy.

I was the oldest son, so when my father died I inherited all his land and property, and his wealth became mine.

My good fortune allowed me to hire laborers to work in the vineyards, and I spent much of my time studying the Torah. Because, although I considered myself a faithful Jew who made every effort to keep the commandments, I still feared that I wasn't living a good enough life to inherit eternal life.

I went to the Temple often and approached many rabbis, requesting their wisdom and guidance. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I asked.

I received as many different answers as there were rabbis to ask.

"Give more money to the Temple," one said, "and God will be so pleased with you that He will let you live."

"Be mindful of keeping all the rituals and celebrating all the festivals of our faith," said another. "The Lord would never condemn a devoted, faithful Jew to eternal darkness."

Every answer I received made sense in my mind, but felt less than adequate in my heart.

Then I heard of another rabbi, by the name of Jesus. It was difficult to track him down because he never stayed in the same place for very long. Jesus and his followers were always traveling around the countryside, teaching and preaching to the large crowds who gathered to hear him.

One day the news quickly spread that Jesus would be passing through the area. I wasted no time going out to look for him. I eventually spotted him and his disciples, just outside my village, and I immediately ran up to him and fell on my knees before him.

“Good teacher,” I asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus looked at me with an inquisitive expression and asked, “Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.”

In truth, I don’t really know why I called him “good teacher.” I was taught as a boy that only God is truly good. But the words just came out of my mouth. Maybe because it almost felt like, in speaking with Jesus, I was speaking directly to God Himself.

Jesus’ answer to my question about inheriting eternal life was to keep the last six Commandments of Moses—the ones that teach how people must treat one another with respect, honesty and integrity. If that was what I needed to do, I would indeed live forever because I had kept them my entire life. But I felt that wasn’t enough. There must be something more I was supposed to do.

“Teacher,” I said, “I have kept those laws since I was a boy.”

For some reason, what I said moved him. He turned and looked at me—or should I say, through me—with an intensity I had never experienced before. At that moment it was as though he and I were the only people in the entire world.

I will never forget his eyes, and how he looked at me with a love I had never felt before. It was more love than my heart could contain, even spilling over because it could not hold any more.

“I see that there’s one thing you are missing,” Jesus said. “Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

“Does he know what he is asking of me?” I thought to myself; but from the tone of his voice I realized that, yes, he knew exactly what he was asking of me. My fortune, the one thing I was most attached to, and the one thing he somehow discerned I did not want to give up, was the one thing he said I must give up.

When I heard Jesus words to sell everything I had and give it away, my heart sank. The flame of hope in me was snuffed out in an instant. He was waiting for my response, although I’m certain he already knew what it would be.

I looked at him and shook my head slowly. The love that had radiated from Jesus’ eyes was still there, even after I rejected his offer to be one of his disciples. He didn’t appear surprised by my response, but he did seem saddened.

With a heavy heart I turned and walked away.

It has been three years since I last saw Jesus, but I remember our encounter as though it happened yesterday. How could I forget it? That was the day I chose wealth over discipleship, my treasure over my Lord.

Yesterday, I stood on the side of a dusty road outside the gates of Jerusalem for hours, waiting for a group of condemned men to pass by. I had never before witnessed the death march of those who were about to be crucified by the Romans. It was my first time seeing such a spectacle, and it will be my last.

The only reason was there was because Jesus was one of the men the Romans were going to execute. Why he was condemned isn’t clear. The only thing I know is that Jesus had greatly upset some very powerful religious leaders, and they felt so threatened by him that they sought a permanent solution to their problem.

The Romans were more than happy help them with that.

I only saw him for a few moments as he stumbled past me. I was among dozens of onlookers who lined the road to watch. Many in the crowd shouted, jeered and spit at the condemned as they struggled to drag their crosses up a hill called Golgotha—*The Place of a Skull*—where a torturous death awaited them.

I didn’t call out his name. I was too ashamed to do that—I who had turned down his invitation to join him in spreading the news of God’s coming Kingdom.

It looked as though he turned and looked at me when he passed by, but his face was a bloody mask so I can’t say for sure that he did.

I followed the morbid procession all the way to the area on Golgotha where the crosses would be planted and the condemned would hang on them and live out their last hours in agony. I turned away as the spikes were pounded through his wrists and feet and the crucifix raised up.

I gasped when, after an hour or so Jesus cried out loudly to God, quoting the psalmist: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

I was enraged as the soldiers knelt at the foot of his cross and gambled for his only possessions—his tunic and cloak.

I would have given them my entire fortune in return for them taking Jesus down from there. Jesus down from there.

Some people stayed to wait for the inevitable to happen. The smell of death and the sounds of moaning and screaming almost drove me away, but my determination to be with Jesus at that time caused me to remain. I did not want turn and walk away from him again.

I drew closer to his cross, hoping he would see me and remember our encounter three years ago. I wanted him to know that although I didn’t go with him back then. I was here with him now.

If only I had said yes to him when he had invited me to follow him.

If only I had said yes.

I stepped back to look up at Jesus’ face, and I saw him stir. It looked as though he was awakening from death. He slowly raised his head toward the heavens and blinked to try to clear his eyes of the blood that had streaked down into them.

“It is finished,” he said.

Then, right before he died, he looked down.

At me.

Our eyes met.

I will never forget his eyes, and how he looked at me with the same kind of love I had felt only once before, when I rejected his invitation.

It was more love than my heart could contain, even spilling over because it could not hold any more. Amen.