
PURE IN HEART

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You are redeemed, the voice sounded in my head above the jeering throng. The look below the bloodied brow assured me it was not just my imagination. The burden of a lifetime in my heart and soul seemed to lighten, even as the weight on my shoulder mounted and the wood ripped my flesh.

Fair-skinned he was, of those northern tribes, himself. Perhaps thirty, maybe forty. Even now, I am uncertain, as his ordeal stole time from him. He wore but a loincloth, though it was hard to tell. Dust and blood covered him, as did human and animal excrement, enrichments of the raving and violent mob. Even through the crusting filth, I saw the sea of torn flesh on his back and limbs, angry ridges everywhere. His matted hair beneath the rude crown of thorned branches was long and layered in slick blood and slime, which trickled down his face and neck in lines of human suffering and violation.

At the remembrance of his face, my pen falters, for I do not trust my memory. It was such a long time ago.

Agonized, his flesh cried for release in every line and pore. Begged for mercy.

Just a Jew, my mind wept its sorrow and disappointment then. **Just like me, after all.** I nearly fell myself in that instant of despair. **Not Him, at all.** The weight of darkness crushed me.

You see, despite what some have written, it was much more than coincidence that I was there that day. I was not just passing by. This is my testament.

I turned eighty-one last month, and will not see another winter. For thirty-five years these words, these truths, have been sealed in me. I am compelled, now, to step forward, not for myself, for I am still as naught, but for His glory, everlasting.

Simon of Cyrene, then, let me be called, as they would have me be. One name is as good as another. And I once did live there. And these current cave walls and stone floor care not, and do not remember me, though I have lived here over twenty years.

By my early forties, I had grown great in the eyes of men, with land, livestock and slaves. Many wives and children. I lived in the law and prospered by His grace. My life would have passed easily thus, in peaceful reverence to God, but for a hair's breadth incident that so often turns our lives against their tides.

I passed the kitchen doorway one winter morning, and heard the fervour in my servants' voices as they spoke of the latest prophet to arise in Galilee. I tarried but briefly, and dismissed their idle talk, like dust from my sandals. Yet, something in that story, in their voices, kept coming back to me. I could not leave it alone. It came to obsess me. It haunted my dreams and waking hours.

In time, leaving Alexander and Rufus, the two eldest, in charge of my estates, I traveled north and east. Even now, I cannot say exactly why I left everything I knew to hazard months on the road among strangers, to find a ghost in the desert.

Even before reaching Idumea, the stories of his miracles were repeated everywhere we went. Many believed, and many did not. My servants, of which I still had a dozen with me, no longer wished to return home, but wanted to go on their own pilgrimages to find this Messiah. Within a few weeks, I would release them all from their bonds of service to find their own paths.

Thus it was when I met the desert lion at the River Jordan I was alone. I heard his crying in the wilderness. So fiercely did he proclaim repentance and baptism that, trembling, I fell to the ground on the shore in supplication of His mercy. In a few rags of camel skin, this gaunt pillar of flesh flashed like a single taper in the night, burned fiercely to those of us who awaited and hoped for the dawn.

"Arise," the hoarse command, not unkindly, spoke to the group of latest arrivals, kneeling like myself. "Arise, children of God." His hands rose high toward the sky, as if he could draw us all up like puppets. "Forsake the past. Live in Him." He motioned them forward into the water, coaxing like a parent to hesitant children. "Come to me. And I will baptize you in His name, and His blessed mark shall be upon you all the days of your life." His long hair swung a gentle arc flashing light, like a rainbow, as he turned back to the river.

I heard the others rise and follow him, but I could not. Such a weight held me down. Instead of rising, I was pressed closer to the earth. On my knees, face hard to the ground, I began to count the grains of sand in my view.

These are the sins of my life, I thought. **In action. In inaction. In thought.** I was thought tzaddik or righteous in my clan, even within the city. But I, just like us all,

was plagued by thoughts not divine, by evil inclinations or yetzer hara. Peace in my heart would not abide, and I could not find His dwelling place.

I counted the grains slowly, and recited the ignominies of my weak soul and flesh. Hours I may have been entranced, sand clinging to my whispering lips and face.

“Arise, my brother,” the voice sounded just above a whisper across the water where he stood knee-deep, alone and pensive, flashing in the moonlit water, “Come here.”

At his command, I rose, let slip my robe, and walked into the river. I remember not its touch then.

I fell to my knees again in the water at his feet, looking upward into the star-smattered sky, my upturned face blank with sorrow and shame.

“Unworthy am I . . .” I mumbled.

But he set a finger to my lips. He paused. His gaze suddenly lit with a smile at the touch, as if he suddenly saw me, or as if he felt something pass between us. He stared a moment at my face, as if he saw something written there.

“Blessed art thou,” John the Baptist intoned as he raised a handful of water to my face, and gently let it wash the grains of sand from me. He brushed a few lingering particles, gently, as a mother would a child. I was cleansed and lightened by those cool waters and soft touch.

“You are the Christ,” I whispered, less a question, than a hope.

“No,” he answered slowly, “I am not whom you seek.” The smile still clung to the haggard, bearded face. “*He* is the light. I, like you, Simon, bear witness to that light. With grace and truth shall he gift us.” He paused, as if in reverie.

“I baptize with water alone.” His hand reached downward and trailed the surface of the river. “But he shall mark us all with the Holy Spirit.” His arms reached skyward once again. “He is the light of the World, though in *this* world, he shall dwell for a little time only.”

A flash of sadness overtook the prophet then, not for his own death at Herod’s hands that he foresaw, but for the crimes at Golgotha that would weep stones and cry men forever after.

“Darkness rises in this world,” John offered. His hand rested on my forehead, and his fingers spread through my hair as if in blessing, as if in prayer, as if trying to impart some of his will and strength to me. “And its weight crushes us all.” A briefest pause suggested his own mortality flashing before him again. “Remember, my brother, when that weight threatens you, remember these cool waters and strong words to fortify

and underpin that moment.” His eyes glistened, for joy or sorrow, I am not sure. “Your burden will be great.”

He released me, as if from a spell, and walked away, barely a splash or ripple in his wake. As I remember yesterday, he could foresee all future days, not just for himself, but for the Christ, and me, and all the world. I do not know where his vision stopped. A year out? Ten? One hundred? A millennium? In the motion and silence of his parting, I sensed he saw too much, and wished unmade the future’s mold, or to be given some understanding of the days to come.

In that growing dark, as in many times since, I heard the echo of the prophet’s unspoken prophesy: “We are all sinners Words break The world cracks.”

I would not see him again.

I left my robe in the sand, as well as everything else I still carried with me, except a loincloth, as if the weight of all else could not be endured.

I ranged the desert, lost and burned by the prophet’s touch, eating and drinking what I could find, which was not enough. Some weeks later, at least a full moon, I emerged from the desert like a lost prophet myself, ready to seek the Messiah. I’d like to say I had such profound thoughts and insights in that time among the unwatered stones, but it passed like a dream, forgotten in the instant. I’d like to say the experience made me wise, but I think I was out of my mind most of that time from hunger and thirst.

I feared less, then, not finding Jesus, for I knew, somehow, our paths would cross: that knowledge at least endured in me from the days of wandering.

I did find him eventually in Galilee, preaching from a mountainside to a great multitude. It would come to be called the Sermon on the Mount, when the great Beatitudes were professed.

By one line, in particular, was I haunted and riven. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” By these words, I felt condemned to an eternity of exile from Him, for I knew my own failings, perhaps most of all.

He seemed so ordinary then, less mekubal than John the Baptist, almost normal. But his voice caught you like a net. It was only later when I got close enough that I would witness and feel the power of his gaze. He seemed to look right into you in a flash. A kindness rose in him, like a balm for each and all, as if he understood each one’s secret anguish, as if he could take into himself that brokenness and leave only wholeness in return.

I was not pure in heart. I did not see him clearly then. I held to the fringes of his camp. I listened to him speak and, like the rest, often struggled with his parables.

I was not pure in heart. Even now, so many years later, I cannot understand the miracles he performed, from casting out demons, to curing illnesses and deformities, to raising the dead. I heard these rumors then, but I had no direct experience. I was not witness to them.

I wonder still, sometimes, where the reason lies, but always come to rue my own blindness and close-mindedness of that time. Of a thousand miracles, I saw not one. I wanted to, but perhaps too much. Others were blessed with easy proof of the Messiah, and grew stronger in their faith day by day. Mine own soul's calibration worked in reverse: from the absolute certainty of the day in the River Jordan, each day that passed thereafter, I lost a little of my belief. The more I wanted it, the less it stayed with me. I wanted to believe more, better.

I finally decided to go home. Disillusioned, I would forsake my dream. I would wait for Passover to finish, then I would wend a poor man's long road back to my estates in Africa.

His entry into Jerusalem on an ass to the accompanying and waiting throngs harbingered the crisis to come. Of what kingdom was he king? His popularity and following threatened his earthly counterparts to dire and decisive actions, once started in motion, virtually impossible to stop or deflect.

I could still not get close, as the crowds had only grown larger. A part of me, as I have come to realize in subsequent years, kept myself away from him - - afraid of the truth, fearing that he was not the Messiah, or maybe that he was.

It is hard for me to bear witness against myself, even these many years later.

I lost myself in the city, then. Hope had eluded me. I despaired. I stole a purse for drink, passing out in the gutter, a pattern repeated for three days and nights. I was befouled within and without.

To my eternal shame, I was in the mob before Pilate when they determined the fate of Jesus. I had been asleep at the back of the square, when the shouts awakened me from a Lethean wash of dreams, soul-wrenched.

When I stumbled upright and finally focused, I saw the silent figure of blame beside Pilate. **Bastard of my pain**, my mind decried. **I wanted to believe!** I did not see - - and fresh tears wash these pages - - the suffering, broken flesh of a man, and the rising spirit of our Savior. My hatred was blind. I hear forever in my mind, whether waking or dreaming, echoing condemnation on me and all my children and their generations of children yet to come, my sentence upon the Christ - - "Crucify him. Crucify him!"

I weep.

Perhaps I shouted longer, perhaps louder. Perhaps it was something in my voice. Regardless, the sad visage of Jesus turned upon me. Never will I forget the flash of power and certainty and sorrow in those eyes. They carried a world of pain, but also a knowledge superior to it all. I felt like a child who disappoints a parent. Why could I not have been better?

Open your eyes, the voice sounded in my mind, like strange and subtle music, reaching every last dark corner of my heart. At his command, like a miracle, I was suddenly transformed. I was blasted clean of all the accretive waste and hate and despair within me. I wept then. Tears ran tracks through the filth on my face. The words died on my lips as he was taken away to be crucified. Condemned by me, yet still forgiving me.

I stood as stone for a long time in that square, long after the crowd had left to line the route to Golgotha. I had left home to find the dwelling place of God, and I had found it, but managed to defile it utterly - - shitting and pissing in every corner.

Crucify me! I shouted in my mind at the absent host.

I fainted suddenly, as if struck down.

When I awoke, face in the dirt, the dust burned me like fire all over my body. I smelled and understood the worst of all the world: the unkindness, violence, hate, and despair, like vile puss and gore it streams endlessly from our ulcerative hearts. Sodom and Gomorrah arisen, unioned and multiplied.

My God, what have we done? We have forsaken you.

For this, He would ransom himself? For us? The questions sprang in my mind, wholly incredulous. I wanted to tell him He was wrong, for He *was* wrong.

Destroy us! Fire and flood destroy us!

He would hang upon the cross that day, and through all future generations, ever mocked, reviled, ignored, and forgotten. And all the violence and blood, murder and destruction, hetacomb and holocaust, would only increase in time. Maybe that is what the Baptist saw.

He could unmake that chain of events, but I knew He would not, for He believed in us, even if we did not in Him. My heart broke at that moment: His enduring love against our unchanging hate and indifference.

I wept again. For Him. For all of us.

A moment passed before I rose, as if suddenly restored to life, not knowing what I could do, just certain that He need not be alone.

I ran toward the great din of shouts and laughter. It had already started. The victim was to carry his own cross up the long road to Golgotha. The crowd was nightmarish, as if there was not a single human soul among them, only the demonic, as if all the spirits He had cast out were allowed their return in victory upon Him. They reveled in His pain, darkly laughing at the humorless spectacle.

Shame and sorrow rose in me. I brushed my cheeks, for I wept still.

I stationed myself ahead of Him on the Via Delarosa. The roaring mounted deafeningly as He neared. He advanced so slowly, with such pain, I imagined Him taking a lifetime to reach the end. I saw in Him then more than just the tortured flesh of His body, as I felt and perceived the light emanating from Him still.

“Don’t you see it?” I wanted to shout. “He is the Son of God.” But no one would hear me.

As He drew near, the din was truly inconceivable, as everyone shouted as if possessed, such profanities and curses unheard before or since, such was the stream of hate poured upon Him. And the trash and excrement were appalling. And surreptitious stones and bricks struck Him occasionally, death to the caster if caught, for the right to kill the accused was reserved for the state.

As He was about to pass by me, not four feet away, His ever downward gaze turned slightly toward me. And there is no doubt in my mind that it was for me that He turned, and gave to me the blessings of that day.

He locked my eyes. The pain of His flesh threatened Him, but He surged in that moment. I felt Him shudder.

A stone flew past my right ear. I cried out in warning, already too late. I stepped instinctively forward. The rock struck Jesus on His brow between His eyes, and He stumbled almost flat to the stones. The cross shuddered one end to the pavement, swinging slowly flat at my feet with a clatter unheard above the frenzied crowd.

Let it be said, as it has been recorded, that the Romans conscripted me to carry that cross. Let it be said, as many thought, that I hurled the stone that brought Him down. For *He* knows the truth. It was Him, not the Romans, who invited me to rise above myself. It was Him, not myself, who forgave me. I did not throw *that* stone, but had ever barraged Him and others with enough stones of the heart to bring Him low.

I leapt over the vile wood to reach His side, but spears and drawn swords greeted me. None could touch the prisoner. They drove me back a little. Two Romans whipped the fallen figure mercilessly, desperately. They had to move the procession forward or risk a riot. The whips cut Him fiercely. He rose slowly, as if from a grave,

Himself a Lazarus. They prodded Him forward. He was no longer burdened with the cross, as they knew He could no longer bear it.

I do not remember picking up those befouled timbers, slippery with human waste, weighted with viciousness and hate. It burned to the touch as if covered in acid. It weighed more than I could ever have imagined.

Within two steps, however, I was at His side. It was then I heard those blessed words, "You are redeemed." It was then also that I saw His ravaged face, holding no longer anything of the divine, and doubted again that He was the Messiah at all.

Despair and darkness ambushed me momentarily. I faltered with the cross, as if I needed His stature of Messiah to warrant my attention, to justify my actions.

A childhood memory rose in me. I was lost in the woods and fell into a ravine. Wolves and the dark threatened me. Fearful and hurt, I whimpered my pain and anguish. But, suddenly, my father was there, and took me in his arms.

And in that instant the message from His teachings and parables came home to me, as they never had before. As if I had been given a key to another language or realm, I was changed, forever.

No longer the Messiah, he was just a man and, as just a man, he had my love and devotion, and my sacrifice. I would carry his cross for him without regret or worry, the peril to my health and life were as naught. In fact, the impulse rose in me to take this man's place, accept his punishment as my own.

The ground shuddered, probably just from the thousands of stamping and milling feet.

But, when I looked into His face, He was Himself transformed, a light seemed present again.

Redeemed. The word resonated in me and beyond. And I saw once again, and ever more, my Redeemer.

Although I was soon as befouled as Him, the Waters of Life, like the River Jordan with the Baptist, washed over us, and we were made clean in spirit. The road grew steeper and my strength waned. My spirit, despite His presence, faltered.

And then His right hand rested on my shoulder. To all the world it looked like *He* needed *my* support, but I will tell you that it was His hand that lightened my burden and spirit, and lifted me.

Forgotten was everything around us, immediate and far. Time collapsed, or seemed on hold. In that touch He harbored me. Gone were the viscious faces and

cluttered streets. Gone was the cross. On solitary strands and verdant fields, we laughed lifetimes.

No longer cries demonic and depraved, but angelic refrains surrounded us. No longer did the fetor and decay assault us. I remember still the sweet smell that rose then, the redolence of baking when I was six or seven coming home from lessons to my mother dancing bread in the oven.

In that march, His eyes flashed the fires of heaven, like a burning sun. He slid his right hand up once to the side of my face. With his thumb, with the swiftness of a spirit, he made a sign upon my flesh, a mark to set me apart for all time.

He always ever knew me, but with that touch he gave *me* knowledge. In that instant I understood. He granted me such insight of the world, through all of time, though when the journey was done, it would be sealed within me, as if hidden to protect me, and all of us.

In my dreams still, I remember His toddler's fascination with the curls of wood from the planes, as they sang from the boards in His father's shop, arching like sudden angel wings, curling into secret scrolls of knowledge, that He kept protected as treasures for years to come. I feel still His own carpenter's hands upon His own special selections of wood, and the silent thunderous communion with the unsmoothed grain.

In these years, since that time, have I spent in solitude, trying to find again more of those lost moments of forever, and with but the smallest recovered pieces, I have found such reward.

At my return home, I told my story to my family and all who would listen. I gave my wealth away, and exiled myself to caves such as this one. My family became followers of the new Christian order, with Alexander and Rufus gaining some recognition for their ministries in Rome.

I am now ready, after all these years, to go home again, and see His face anew.

These words may not survive as I have written them, but they will be heard again.

They wrenched the cross and Him from me at the top of the hill. Such was the pain of loss, I cried out, as if a limb or vital organ had been removed. I stood to the rear of the crowd, numb and dumbstruck.

I could not take His place, though some would say I did. This testament should put those doubts to rest. I was overcome by horror and helplessness as they nailed Him to the cross, and thrust it skyward to mock the heavens.

The crowd thinned as time passed, but I did not move. Indeed, in later years, I would strike by accident the physical pose of that day, and my body would cry in memory.

Toward the end, He looked at me less (as He looked at all things of this world less). I watched Him through my tears. But He would not release me until His final breath. In the darkness that had befallen that Place of Skulls, I could still see Him clearly, as if He were illumined. Every breath of His was my own.

I want to say I shared His pain, but I did not. That was His alone. He spared me that, and all of us.

Yet, I remember, always, the rood's innocent hardness on His flesh. The plaintive song from that still pulsing wood rocked and cradled Him. Pledged with commingled sap and blood, they were bound like brothers.

As one voice they cried forgiveness to us all: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

Before He addressed His Father at the end, He looked one last time upon me. He may have tried to smile. I am not sure, the world was so sideways in my tears, helpless as God died.

Blessed are the pure in heart, His voice resounded in my mind, resonating for all my life, His departing words to me, **For they shall see God**.

Hosana.

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