

# “The Night the World Fell In” <sup>1</sup>

Hi, there. I’m John, Zebedee’s boy. You know, one of that motley group of guys that you folks today call “the Apostles.” I understand that you’re going to observe the Lord’s Supper tonight, and I thought you might be interested in how things were on that night when it all began – the night before Jesus died – the night before He was murdered. I was there, and I remember it well. I can still see it, feel it, taste it, as though it were this very night.

*So much* had happened since that August afternoon three years ago. It had seemed to be a day like all days – James and Dad and I were sitting in our fishing boat along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, mending the rips in our nets from the morning’s haul, and up came this stranger, bold as could be.

We’d heard of Him. Everyone was talking about what He had done at that wedding in nearby Cana. He just walked up, looked at James and me, and said, “Fellows, come with me, and I will make you fishers of men.” It was crazy. I looked at James, and he looked at me. We looked at Dad, and then we just got up and went with Him. I can still hardly believe that we did it, but there was just something about Jesus that inspired confidence, that made you want to be near Him.

I suppose that if all the things that happened after that were to be written down, the whole world could not contain the books. Now, nearly three years had passed, and it was April of the year 33, the week of the annual Passover festival, the great feast that celebrated God’s deliverance of our people from Egypt more than a thousand years before.

On the Friday a week before Passover, we – the Twelve and Jesus – arrived at Bethany in the afternoon. Bethany is a little village a couple of miles from Jerusalem, the place where Mary and Martha and Lazarus lived – in fact, we went to their house. Those three had always been very close to Jesus, but they had been especially close since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Oh, my! You should have seen that! But that’s a story for another day.

When the word got around that Jesus was in town, the whole village flocked to see Him. Most people really loved Jesus – common folks like me, especially. The next day, Saturday, was quiet – it was the Sabbath, of course. And then on Sunday morning, Jesus said we were going to Jerusalem – even though He knew the priests had a warrant out for His arrest. It never ceased to amaze me how bold Jesus was, and how calm and confident.

In an unusual move, Jesus sent for a donkey’s colt and rode into the city on it. Usually, we just walked in, but when Jesus did this, we all knew what He was doing, and we were thrilled to see it. To enter Jerusalem in this way was a clear claim to be a king, and not just any king, but Messiah himself. This was an intentional fulfillment of the words of the prophet:

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout in triumph, Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you; he is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).*

We thought Jesus was finally entering the city to claim the throne of David, which we had long believed was His, and His alone. And we weren’t alone in understanding what Jesus was doing in this way. A large crowd gathered, spreading their cloaks on the ground as a “red carpet treatment,” while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And everyone

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 29, 2018. Maundy Thursday.

was shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” It was really something.<sup>2</sup>

Every now and then, you could see little clumps of priests or scribes or Pharisees, muttering to themselves and looking fit to be tied. We stayed in the city all day, and then we went back to Lazarus’ house to spend the night. That evening, back at Lazarus’ house, Jesus told us,

*23 “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself. But if it dies, it produces much fruit. 25 The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves me, he must follow me. Where I am, there my servant also will be. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.*

***27 “Now my soul is troubled. What should I say—Father, save me from this hour? But that is why I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name”*** (John 12:23-28).

We had no idea what Jesus was telling us. Such melancholy seemed very out of character with what we thought had happened that day.

On Monday, it was back to Jerusalem, and the surprises were far from over.<sup>3</sup> Jesus went straight to the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple and He threw out all those who were buying and selling there. In those days, the Court of the Gentiles had the atmosphere of a busy market, with worshipers coming there to change their money into Temple coin and to purchase animals approved for sacrifice. Those were useful services, but having them in the Court of the Gentiles rather than outside the Temple precincts meant that Gentiles really had no place to worship any more.

Jesus launched into the crowd and started overturning the tables of the money changers and the pens of those selling animals, and He shouted above all the uproar, “*It is written, ‘my house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a den of thieves!*” (Matthew 21:13).

After the Court of the Gentiles had been cleared out—and oh, what a row that was!—people who were blind and lame came to Jesus, and He healed them all, while the children danced and sang, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” We didn’t know what to make of all that . . . but watching the fury of the Chief Priests and Scribes in the shadows, we could see that a storm was coming. It didn’t take a genius to expect that.

On Tuesday, we went to Jerusalem again, wondering why the priests had not made good their threat to arrest Jesus, especially after all that had happened during the past two days.<sup>4</sup> The big shots were even more visible on Tuesday, approaching Jesus again and again to try to trap Him with clever and contrived questions.

Jesus silenced them time after time, and the crowds roared. Finally, He really let the scribes and Pharisees have it in a heated and lengthy denunciation of their hypocrisy as religious leaders. I cringed inside, hardly daring to guess what form their revenge might take. I didn’t have to wait long for the answer.

That afternoon, Jesus took us to the Mount of Olives, a favorite place of His. He talked for a long time about things that didn’t seem very relevant – things about the end of the world and

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:12-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-22.

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 21:18-26:5; Mark 11:20-13:37; Luke 20:1-21:38; John 12:20-50.

the return of the Son of Man (that's how Jesus usually referred to Himself). He indicated that many terrible things would happen before that time, and that we should be ready and be watching, because His return would be as sudden and as brilliant as a lightning bolt splitting the sky. We wondered what in the world He was talking about. Sometimes, Jesus just seemed to be off in a world of His own.

On Wednesday, we didn't do much, because it was officially a day of rest before the feast.<sup>5</sup> There was one weird thing that happened at dinner, though. We were back in Bethany, having dinner at Simon's house, when a woman from the village entered the room, broke open a *very* expensive jar of perfume, and poured it on Jesus' head—I know that seems weird to you, but pouring oil on the head was an important symbol in our day. It represented setting someone apart for something very special, sort of like what you mean when you “ordain” someone.

This jar of perfume was worth nearly a year's wages, and some began to scold the woman for being so wasteful. They said the money should have been used for the poor. But Jesus said, *“Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a noble thing for me. You always have the poor with you, and you can do good for them whenever you want, but you do not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body in advance for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her”* (Mark 14:6-9).

As the woman left the room, Judas followed her out. “What in the world was all that about?” we wondered. We would know soon enough.

On Thursday afternoon, Jesus sent some of us into Jerusalem to make preparations for the Passover meal He would eat with us that evening.<sup>6</sup> As we gathered for the meal, things got off to a great start with an argument about which of us was the greatest and should therefore sit next to Jesus. He said we were foolish, and that worrying about such honors was the world's way to be important. Real importance comes from being a servant, He said.

When the dust had settled, Jesus invited Judas and me to sit next to Him. Judas was on His left and I was on His right. The seats were arranged in a horseshoe, which put me at the end, in the place of honor. Peter sat opposite me on the other end, having taken the “lowest” place on purpose.

After everyone was seated, Jesus got up, took off His outer cloak, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash our feet, a task that was always relegated to a very junior servant.

Jesus went to Peter first, but he protested. Jesus told him, *“If I don't wash you, you have no part with me”* (John 13:8). Jesus was doing the servant's task Himself as a rebuke to our prior argument about greatness . . . but looking back, I can see that He was saying a great deal more than that. Jesus was telling us that, in God's eyes, we can never be clean and acceptable unless we come to God through Him. Only Jesus can wash our sins away.

After Peter's protest, Jesus' solemn object lesson of foot washing continued in awed silence. As He finished, Jesus told us, *“Do you know what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are speaking rightly, since that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you”* (John 13:12-15).

<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 26:6-16; Mark 14:1-11; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 26:17-75; Mark 14:12-72; Luke 22:1-71; John 13:1-18:27.

That was strange enough, but as the meal continued, Jesus dropped another bombshell. Usually jovial, He became silent for a while, and then He said, *“I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me.”* Well, you could’ve heard a pin drop after that. After a while, one by one, came the questions: “Is it I, Lord?” “Is it I?”

Peter motioned to me across the table to ask Jesus who He was talking about. When I asked Him, Jesus said softly, *“It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.”* No one besides myself heard Him. Then, dipping the piece of bread, Jesus gave it to Judas, who was, as you may remember, also sitting next to Jesus, on His left.

*“What you are doing, do quickly,”* Jesus told Judas. We had no idea what Jesus meant at the time. Since Judas was our treasurer, we thought he was going to pay for our meal, perhaps. When Judas was gone, Jesus told us plainly that He was about to die; and as He said those words, it was as though the whole world collapsed into despair and darkness. We, who had left everything for Him, were about to lose Him as well. Hope seemed dead, and the future, empty.

It was in the depths of that despair that we shared with Jesus the bread and the cup of what you know as the first Lord’s Supper. We did not understand it then. We couldn’t hear anything beyond the fact that Jesus was really about to die. His conflict with the powers of church and state was about to come to a dreadful, horrible end.

None of us had any appetite at that point, but Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to us, and said, “Take it and eat it; this is my body.”

*Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He gave it to [us] and said, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. But I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom”* (Matthew 26:26-30).

Jesus talked to us for a long time after that. He told us some of the things that you hold dear, such as *“Don’t let your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if not, I would have told you. I am going away to prepare a place for you. If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also. He told us that I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:1-3, 6). And there was much more.

It was late in the evening when Jesus finally said, *“Get up, we must go”* (John 14:31). And I think you know what happened after that. *No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends* (John 15:13).

And we went out into the Night . . . .