

## CHAPTER 7

### A VOICE IN A SYNAGOGUE

THE SABBATH had come. I accompanied James and John to the synagogue. The little building was packed. People were standing all around the sides. There was hardly room for us to squeeze in and we stood just inside the door.

The ruler of the synagogue rose and faced the throng. A long beard hung dark against his white mantle. Above the beard loomed a hair of deep, unhappy eyes. He raised his hand for silence.

When his prayer was finished he handed the roll to Jesus and sat down. And now Jesus was standing up and facing us. In his hand he held a long scroll of scriptures. He unrolled several feet of the papyrus and then began to read:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; for He has consecrated me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to proclaim release for captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour."

When he had finished reading he rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant and sat down.

"Isn't he going to speak?" I whispered to James beside me.

"Oh, yes. They always sit down to speak in the synagogue."

"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," began Jesus. Then after a short pause he continued, "The Father is closer to you than any of you understands. The Kingdom of heaven is not something far away, only to find after death, but it abides in you right here and now, if you only knew how to turn and find it. You will never find it by looking for it in outward things, pointing to some new riches, saying, 'Lo, here' or to some new honor and saying, 'Lo, there.' The Kingdom of heaven is within you—in the peace and patience, the love and joy, the humility and faith, the temperance, gentleness and goodness that fill your inner soul. The Kingdom can come to you today and cast out demons and sickness; yes, it can even bring you bread for your needs and clothes to cover your nakedness, but only as it first brings you to the Father to control and direct your very life."

Again he relapsed into silence. I like this custom of silent places in the synagogue.

Someone beside me said, "Weren't those beautiful and gracious words! Isn't he a wonderful speaker!"

"Where did he get such ability?" asked another. "Isn't he Joseph's son?"

"Yes, and Joseph was of all men the poorest of speakers."

"Now perhaps he will cure somebody."

"Do some of your mighty works," called a man from the rear.

"Do what you did in Capernaum," said another. "Heal blind Jonah," demanded another.

"Yes, yes!" others shouted. "Heal someone!"

"I want to tell you something," said Jesus quietly. "I can sense in an interior way when the right condition for healing is in our midst, and dear friends, it is not here today. There are doubters here, and some have come to scoff. I feel it as clearly as the boat feels the tug of the anchor which the mariner has neglected to pull up. The winds of heaven cannot move the boat over the beautiful surface of the sea so long as the anchor holds fast to the mud at the bottom.

"But, my beloved friends and neighbors, I blame no one. I utter a universal law of which you are merely the unwilling victims. No true prophet was ever without honor except in his own country and amid his own neighbors and his own kin. This law held just as fast in the days of the prophets of old as it does now. In Israel there were many widows during the days of Elijah, when the sky was closed for three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land; yet Elijah was not sent to any of these, but only to a foreigner—a widow woman at Sarepta in Sidon. And in Israel there were many lepers in the time of the prophet Elisha, yet none of these was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

As people filed out of the synagogue a group of excited citizens tarried at the side of the road.

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"Did you ever hear anything so egotistical! He claims to have power to heal and then doesn't give us a chance to prove that he can't. If he had just attempted to heal lame Jonah we could have humbled his proud spirit. Jonah agreed to pretend he believed—merely to show him up."

"But he says that faith is needed and without it all will fail."

"Shut your mouth! By what right does this carpenter pretend to greater power than the rest of us?"

"And what piled mountains upon mountains was the complaisant way he dismissed all our attempts to make him even try to heal anyone!"

"And his effrontery to compare himself with the greatest of prophets, Elijah and Elisha! Even they couldn't do any more than he! Of all things!"

"That is what I call a sacrilege."

"The next thing he will be making himself equal to Moses."

"Or putting himself before Abraham."

"After that he will be saying he is the Messiah! Blasphemy!"

"It will bring disgrace upon Nazareth."

"Already people say, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?' If we let him go around the land speaking in this way he will bring ignominy upon us."

"There is one way we can save our town from disgrace and ourselves from continued insults."

"And what is that?"

"Let us take this infamous man to the brow of yonder hill."

There was an angry chorus. "That is good. We Jews cannot shed blood, but instead of casting stones upon him let him fall on the stones."

"But how get him to go with us?" asked one.

"He can be handled as easily as a lamb. Remember he told us once, 'If a man forces you to go with him one mile, go with him twain.' Let us invite him to go with us for a walk."

When I saw them taking him up the hill I followed close after. At the edge of the precipice Jesus looked down, and then he turned around and faced the crowd.

"The heavy weight of your unbelief that I felt upon my shoulders in the synagogue I carried with me up this hill. But I carried something much more powerful on my other shoulder. Murder was stalking up the hill on my left hand but Love was on my right. Love is so much more powerful than murder that I smiled as I came. You do not know how weak you are.

"Dear, misguided ones, how my heart went out to lame Jonah, sitting there in the synagogue, to blind Jacob and to dying Rachel whom you all love. Why could you not have lifted the anchor of unbelief for one minute at least and let the healing winds of God blow through that synagogue? I entered the temple to save life—you ascended this hill to destroy life."

Incensed voices in the back of the crowd broke in shouting, "Yes, and we'll do it now!" Blind rage flared and all became confusion. My blood froze as I feared for his life; and then what I witnessed melted it and caused it to sing as it flowed freely again. It was as if Love opened a pathway through the mob and I saw him pass through unharmed and untouched. Moments later I caught a glimpse of him strolling down the hill. John and James and I hurried after him. We felt so heavy that not one of the three of us could speak. In Jesus' eyes was a look I never saw before, a light of purpose and resolution.

As we drew near the city, he turned and spoke to James and John.

"Satan has been attacking from all sides. The Baptizer will never preach again. His disciples are dispersed. The time has come for me to gather some disciples around me. Yesterday I asked your cousins, Andrew and Simon Barjona, to leave their nets and I would make them fishers of men. I would say the same to you. Will you follow me?"

"We will follow you," said John. "We will follow you," said James.

"We will follow you. We will follow you. We will follow you." A thousand times my voice was saying that. I was saying it for countless thousands of people of my day. Even as we walked into Nazareth I could hear the footsteps of a multitude behind us!

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## CHAPTER 8

### A SERMON ON A MOUNTAIN

CROWDS WERE gathering on the outskirts of Capernaum now that Jesus had come back. As I mingled with them I found they did not call him Jesus of Nazareth, but they used the term given only to teachers of high degree—Master. In the group were many sick. Some lay on pallets by the side of the road. Many were blind or partly blind, a disease much more common than I had realized. There were no lepers in the group; they were evidently not allowed to travel that far from the outskirts of the cities where they were segregated.

Presently Jesus came down the road, accompanied by the sons of Zebedee and of Jonas—many fisherfolk following. Seeing the sick, Jesus turned aside from the path and went from one to the other, touching them, especially the eyes of those who were blind. Had I ever doubted the healing power of Jesus before, I never can doubt it now. But it came to me almost as a shock to see him giving so much attention to the healing ministry. What if he were only a healer—a professional healer of bodies—could the world have given its worship to him as it does now?

But suddenly he was finished. All who had faith were healed, and it seemed that most of those who came from a distance had that faith. Some of his old neighbors from Nazareth and a few of the new neighbors of Capernaum looked on with skeptical eyes, but not the family of Iscariot. All—Judas especially—seemed to revel in this power exercised by the Master of Nazareth.

"We are going to the mountain," said Peter to the crowd, and all immediately joined the procession.

The crowd by now was ranging itself all about him along the sloping hillside. There was a slight dip in the terrain at this point, making a natural amphitheater. But Jesus was standing somewhat above us, so that we had to lift our eyes to see him.

Finally, with the twelve close about him—the faces of Judas, John and James being especially conspicuous in the group—he seated himself upon a slight mound and looked quietly at the crowd before him. Then, when he was set, he opened his lips and spoke, saying,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn..."

As the voice continued, at times rising to powerful emphasis, I noted the startling iteration and reiteration of things that the people about me must find astounding and amazing. All the lowly, humble virtues were being extolled; all the powerful ones were being brought low.

Opposite me sat a Pharisee staring incredulously at Jesus. But now his face was changing. Exasperation showed in the lines about his mouth, and then actual beads of perspiration appeared upon his frowning forehead. I suddenly realized what I was hearing:

"One jot or one tittle of the law shall in no wise pass away until all these things shall be fulfilled. But unless your righteousness shall *exceed* the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in *no wise* enter into the Kingdom of heaven."

The excited stir about me made me realize that I had seated myself in the center of a group of Pharisees. I was encompassed by angry whispers and glowering faces.

"And when ye pray, be not as the scribes, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men."

I never realized how personal and severe this address was, and how it singled out certain groups for special warning.

A soldier sitting nearby now looked startled. "But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you . . ."

"Those who hear my words and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended and the floods came and winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock. And everyone that heareth these words of mine and doeth

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them not shall be likened unto a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain descended and the floods came and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell; and great was the fall thereof."

Jesus had finished the parable, but in the silence that followed no one moved. It was as if they all hoped he might speak again.

"He has given us enough to last a lifetime!" exclaimed a Pharisee sitting right beside me. "If—if we only put it into practice."

"You speak aright, Nicodemus," said Zebedee, who was sitting on my other side. "That sermon will not die. It will live and propagate itself."

"Such power breathed through him as he spoke," I said with a sigh.

"Did you see the light in his eyes?"

"I am not referring to the power in his voice or the light in his eyes," replied Zebedee. "I refer to the words in his mouth. They are living words, I tell you. Cut into them and they would bleed."

Now the people were rising from the ground and were starting down the hill, talking earnestly and gesticulating as they went.

"He speaks differently from the Scribes and the Pharisees," I heard one of them exclaiming. "He doesn't speak as one who had gathered these ideas from books, but as one who had already experienced them in his life."

Nicodemus, Zebedee and I stayed where we were, still pondering the words we had just heard. I noticed that the little circle of twelve men Jesus had gathered around him remained intact. One of them, tall and raw-boned, had risen and was asking Jesus questions.

"I, too, should like to ask him some questions," said Nicodemus, "but if my fellow Pharisees saw me it would not go well with me, for he said some very hard things about us. I shall have to seek him out under cover of darkness sometime."

Zebedee smiled. "So you are immediately putting into practice Jesus' words, 'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing!' " and he laughed gently as Nicodemus, silent and meditative, started on down the hill.

"Let us press forward," I whispered to Zebedee. "I want to hear what that athletic-looking fellow is saying." "That is Simon, a true son of Gideon. He is a member of the Zealot party that is plotting the overthrow of the Roman Empire." And he led me to them.

As we sat down behind James and John we heard clearly the words of the Zealot:

"Master, did you mean our Roman oppressors when you said, 'Forgive your enemies?'"

"Why shouldn't we? They despise us as an inferior race just as our people despise others as of an inferior race."

"Whom do we despise?" interrupted the Zealot.

"The Samaritans, the Ethiopians—but why limit enemies to race or nation? The real enemies are within."

"What do you mean?"

"I can answer that," replied Jesus, "by a parable. There is a Roman captain in Jerusalem who places guards every night at the gates of the city. He considers every Jew he meets a son of Belial, not capable of a single thought beyond his greedy gains. In contrast to him, there is another Roman captain in charge of the sentries that guard Capernaum. He believes that every Jew represents a blessed heritage born and reared in the ethical teachings of Moses and the prophets. He has built with his own money yonder synagogue as his contribution to a faith that he admires. Which of these two Roman captains is our enemy, would you say?"

"I should say," and Simon's strong jaws emphasized every word, "that the one who despised us and saw only the lower self of each is our real enemy."

"You say aright," responded Jesus. "Our only enemies —and they can be among our own household as well as among invading hosts—are those who see in us only the lower self and ascribe all our actions and motives to that lower self. As long as they do that sincerely and honestly, however, they can be forgiven, for they know not what they do. But when they have clear proof that what we say and do is prompted not by a self-centered motive, but is inspired by the Holy Spirit speaking and acting through us—and they still insist that what we do is done by the power of Beelzebub, then every slander they utter must be paid for to the last farthing. Verily, verily I say unto you, men may blaspheme the son of man and they may still be forgiven, and forgiven up to seventy times seven, but when they blaspheme the Holy Spirit, then they are committing the one and only unforgivable sin. Every curse they send out shall fall back upon *them*. Verily, verily I say unto you, they shall be required to pay to the last farthing."

"But is that consistent with the character of a loving Father as you have described Him to us?" It was John's voice speaking.

"After the last farthing is paid," said Jesus, "the healing may come. The Father never hates. He may punish but always to redeem. But take care that *you* don't do the punishing; don't you assume the office of God. Whenever man lets his emotions of hate and anger take over, they destroy not the one they are directed against but the one who entertains them. Anger is merely the punishment that one inflicts upon himself because of the wrong doing of another. Heed the words of the prophet, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.' And remember, when a nation roots out the enemies within its own soul it will cease to have enemies without."

## CHAPTER 9

### CLEOPAS APPEARS

"TOMORROW we are going up to Jerusalem," said Nathanael to me one night. And so I was going to see Jerusalem at last! As I thought about it, the wonder of it and glory of it so invaded my mind that for hours I could not sleep. Ultimately I fell into such deep slumber that all the sounds of crowing cocks and barking dogs could not have roused me.

When finally I did awake I could find no trace of the disciples anywhere. John was gone—Nathanael was gone—all the Twelve were gone—Jesus was gone. A great vacancy came upon me, a sense of incompleteness, an unquenchable yearning to be close to Jesus. And it was while I was in this state that I met Cleopas.

Cleopas was a quiet, slender man, with light beard, blue eyes and a gentle, dreamy way that reminded me of Zebedee. When I told him that, he exclaimed, "I married the youngest sister of Salome, Zebedee's wife." At once I felt drawn to him as though he were one of my own family.

"I came to see Jesus," he said. "Ever since I saw him baptized at the River Jordan I have yearned to follow him. And now that I come to Capernaum, I find that he is gone!"

"He and the Twelve are on their way to Jerusalem," I replied. "I, too, would follow him."

"Then come with me," he said. "I know the road to Jerusalem. Let us go together."

And there began one of the most satisfying friendships of all my sojourn in Palestine. He was a sweet soul, was Cleopas, and he loved to talk of the ancient prophecies about the coming Messiah.

To my amazement he did not consider Jesus to be the Messiah. "Jesus is the Forerunner," he stated. Before I had time to remonstrate he went on, "Isaiah explains all about it. Elijah will come first to clear the way, the Messiah himself will not come as a human being, but out of the sky. He will judge the world and then heaven will come to earth. Jesus of Nazareth is that Forerunner spoken of by the prophets."

"No!" I protested. "Jesus himself is the Messiah. John was the Forerunner."

Turning to me as a patient teacher would instruct a little child he replied, "John was not the Forerunner. Some tried to put that title upon him but he repudiated it when the priest and Levites came to question him. He confessed that he was not the Christ, neither was he Elijah nor the prophet. He said he was just a voice crying in the wilderness. 'I am not worthy,' he insisted. 'Here is the one who deserves that honor. I am not worthy to tie the latches of his sandals.' And that is the way he introduced Jesus to us by the River Jordan. No, my friend, any man of human flesh born of man and woman who dared to claim the Messiahship would be guilty of blasphemy and would be put to death at once by our religious leaders."

I dropped the argument for I saw that his love for Jesus and his unqualified devotion would reveal to him sooner or later Jesus' deep claims to Messiahship.

Toward nightfall we began inquiring of people coming down the road if they had met thirteen men travelling up toward Jerusalem. Several of them had. "I can never forget them," said one. "The leader seemed to have a radiance about him."

"We are on the right trail," nodded Cleopas.

It was at the bend of the dusty road, where the bare fields stretched off to the north, and the hills ahead of us looked like sloping backs of swine, that we caught up with those we were seeking. They were resting by the roadside. Jesus was talking to them of the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven. He was telling them how God is everywhere, and the Kingdom of heaven itself is pushing up all around us, in every blade of grass and in every star in the sky.

"The most beautiful thing in the world is the sky," said Philip.

"The most beautiful things are the hills," amended Peter.

"The most beautiful thing is the lake," offered Andrew.

"The most beautiful things are the birds that fly through the sky and dip down toward the lake," insisted John.

"THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING IS GOD," said Jesus. And then all became still.

"But whoever saw God?" Thomas asked after a pause.

"HE IS SPEAKING THROUGH EVERY WIND THAT BLOWS," Jesus replied. "HE IS SHOWING HIS GARMENT IN EVERY CLOUD, AND HIS GLORY IN ALL THE SKIES, AND IN THE FACE OF ALL MANKIND. WHENEVER YOU ARE POOR IN SPIRIT AND LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR SOUL GOD WILL SHOW THROUGH YOU AND THOSE WHO SEE YOU WILL SEE GOD. It is not the stars and the lake and the birds that are beautiful. It is God shining through these that is beautiful. He who looks only at the outside of form will not see God, for God is within. He who looks at the outside of men will not see God, for God is within their hearts. But if you see God in all things and in all men, God will come forth from all. If you go to meet God, He will come to meet you. You will make others sons of God when you have the eyes of a son of God. Therefore make your eye single—to see only God. If it is double and sees mammon, one eye pulls the other eye out of line; then you see nothing clearly. If the mammon eye crowds out the God eye, you will be exchanging light for darkness and then great will be darkness."

"This is a complete turning about for most of us," said Philip. "How can we make the start of seeing God in all things?"

"You can start best not with nature but with human nature, and the human nature closest to you is the nature within yourself. Become quiet and listen for the still small Voice within you. That is the Father speaking. He is not in the earthquake, the wind or the fire, but in the sound of gentle stillness within your own soul. Cast out all hate of men, all doubt of God, and listen to the Voice within. God will speak to you. When you look within and hear only God and look forth and see only God, then will you truly become a son of God. But arise, We must go forth to Jerusalem, for there are many who are hungry in heart and soul, and we must not tarry here."

So they all arose and went on their journey. And because no one said us nay, Cleopas and I took up our staffs and followed along.

And one walking near the rear (I think it was Philip) turned to another and said in a low voice, "This Jesus, son of Joseph, sees only God in men, therefore I see only God in Him. He is truly a son of God!"