

Anyone?

“ That's right. The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant even though I did my part as their Master." God's Decree.

33-34" This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They'll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I'll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I'll forget they ever sinned!" God's Decree.” **Jer 31:31-34.** (Message)

In this bold declaration is the watershed of human history. The Law, which was and is and shall forevermore be, the standard by which all humanity is judged, and which Israel's history surely proved could never ever be kept by any amount of fleshly effort, would one day be superseded. One day there would be the inauguration of a *New Covenant*, and it would not be like the old. The Law would no longer be understood as words written with ink on a parchment scroll. It would be a living principle within, something created within the each human heart by the very presence of God himself. For the ancient Jews, *this* prophetic promise held out the most amazing prospect: one day, *anyone* would be able to have personal relationship with God.

Anyone

To gauge the impact of this prophetic promise, we must realize that in Israel, as in all ancient societies, the *written word* – reading and writing – was out of reach of most people. It was high-technology and the exclusive territory of professional scribes and to be used for the sole benefit of the ruling class. In the ancient world, any document, any law, and especially *religious* writings, were not seen as serving the interests of the common folk. Imagine no public libraries. Imagine no freedom of the press. No *mass media*. *Writing* was originally invented to tally up debts, keep track of royal stockpiles in warehouses, calculate tax assessments, and to *lay down the law*. To enslave *most* people to a small but powerful ruling class.

This was the world in Jesus lived in. The Word of God was not available to just *anyone*. Those who taught the Law of Moses were the privileged, priestly class, who lived comfortably off the labours of the common folk who had no personal access to the Scriptures. Furthermore, the Torah, and the Prophets, and the Writings, this literature we now call the Old Testament, was all that they had with which to try and understand their god. Because the days of Israel's great prophet's had long ago ceased. Back in the days of Jeremiah, the exile had begun, and the Jews believed that at that point, long ago their had gone silent. For traditional Jews of Jesus' day, until God chose to speak to them again, all they could do now was search the Scriptures over and over again in the hope that one *day* Israel's god would begin live communication with his people once more.

It had been a long wait, since Jeremiah's day. But there were still those who kept the faith that there *would* come a day when they *would* no longer need *anyone to teach them*, and say to them “know the LORD,” for they would *all* know the LORD, from the greatest to the least.” *And what a day that would be* for the common folk. But what of the scribes and ruling elite?

Because for the priestly class, known as the *Sadducees*, whose wealth and power depended weaseling out continual compromises with the Romans, *continued control* over Jewish religious life was of paramount importance. Any uprising, any new prophetic movement that promised that *anyone* at could hear from God was simply terrifying to the Jewish rulers. And now, this new prophetic movement had arisen, *outside* of the control of the Temple and rule of official religion. Starting with John the Baptist, it seemed that what was promised to Jeremiah so long ago was finding fulfilment in . . .

Jesus of Nazareth

The excited crowd that cheered him as he rode into the city were pilgrims. They came every year. But this year, in their hearts rose an sudden anticipation of the *nearness* of this long awaited *day* of covenant renewal. Surely the *day* had finally come! Sparked by Jesus' dramatic raising of Lazarus, a man *four days dead* in his grave, Messianic expectation in Jerusalem had risen to a fever pitch. And so rattled are the Jerusalem leaders by this, they're now plotting to kill *Lazarus* for the pilgrim crowds are suddenly leaving the traditional, priest-led worship services in the Temple and flocking to Jesus. It was a phenomena we might call. . .

Messiahmania

The account of Jesus' triumphal entry into the city can seem a bit contrived. Like: where did these crowds suddenly come up with all these palm branches right in the middle of a city? Well, the simple answer is that Jesus entered the city during the run up to the Passover.

In the first century, a lamb was chosen by the high priest outside of Jerusalem on the tenth of Nisan. Then the priest would lead this lamb into the city while crowds of worshippers lined the streets waving palm branches and singing Psalm 118, "Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus entered Jerusalem this same day, probably right behind the High Priest's procession. The crowds that had just heralded the entrance of the sacrificial lamb heralded the entrance of the Lamb of God. Accordingly, Jesus identified himself with the Passover sacrifice (John 12:9-19). The next day, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, His entry fulfilled prophecy.

So *that* particular day, when they heard *Jesus* was coming into town, they *already had* the palm branches in their hands. So they literally left off following the ruling High Priest who was leading them to the traditional worship in the Temple and stayed in the streets shouting *hosanna to Jesus*. Messiahmania had struck Jerusalem.

The donkey's colt, his riding through the gates, it was all so obvious a fulfilment of the prophet: "look your *king* is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt. . . " But they didn't understand that until later (*after* his death and resurrection). Their king had come to bring peace and salvation precisely through dying and rising. In and through Jesus, Israel's god had come to his Temple. The excitement was palpable.

But in an exasperated cry filled with *pure irony* the Pharisees throw up their hands and say, "*Look*, the whole *world* has gone after him!" How literally true that was. For who now do we see going after him?

Greeks

"Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus."

This was *indeed* an ironic fulfilment of the Pharisees' exasperated cry. The *world*, the *nations* were now going after him! Now, these Greeks were not pagans. They were converts to Judaism. But even so, they represented the *first-fruits* of the Gospel in the Gentile world.

Their interest in Jesus had been aroused when he took action in the Temple, driving out the moneychangers from the *court of the Gentiles*. This was the one area in the whole Temple complex where these Greek converts could come to pray, and Jesus had disrupted, at least for one moment that clattering commerce. He obviously cared for these Greeks. He *desired* for them to *know* his Father. Yet their indirect approach, second-party through the disciples, reveals there's still a lingering uncertainty. Was it really true? Could *anyone* at all find acceptance with Jesus? And Philip's careful consultation with Andrew shows that even the disciples were unsure whether Jesus would actually receive *Gentiles* as his followers. But Jesus interprets their coming as . . .

The whole point

"Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

Jesus sees in the coming of these Greeks that now the stage is set. These Gentile forerunners signal the climax of his ministry. The hour has come when, at the cross, he would bring the whole *world* under the saving sovereignty of God. In this, he would be *glorified*. This word, "glorified" is short-hand for his *death, resurrection, exaltation to heaven and the coming of his Spirit to bring all nations into one body, the church*. All this is concentrated into a single word describing the redemptive action of God in the world. *Glorified*. But a rather abstract idea, so Jesus describes it to them more concretely as . . .

A seed which must die

"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces *many* seeds. Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me."

In the *image* of a seed, Jesus gives himself in death to produce eternal life in us. There are parallels to this saying in the other Gospels where Jesus says similar things. But when he *does*, there is always the thought that *his* cross calls for radical obedience from *anyone who would be his follower*. You and I, he says, must, "*hate our lives in this world*."

It's a troubling expression until we realize that in Aramaic, Jesus' native tongue, to *hate* something does not mean to revile and despise it, but to simply love it *somewhat less* than something else. We must never despise our lives. Life is a gift from God. It has ultimate value. God never wants anyone to intentionally abuse or neglect neither their body nor their mind. Extreme fanaticism is never a mark of authentic Christian faith. Jesus himself loved life: the embrace of a friend, a taste of good meal, the beauty of a sunset. . . . But there was always something *more important* to him than his own enjoyment of the good gifts of the creation: that others would come to know the *love* his Father had for him. And for *that* he would give his life. But looking in on the unique relationship Jesus had with the Father it's easy to forget that . . .

He was a human being

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, *save* me from this hour!' (?)"

Probably all our Bibles put a question mark here after the word *hour*. We make it a

rhetorical question. By this we seek to portray Jesus as brave and unflinching embrace of the cross. But the fact is, punctuation marks are totally absent in the original manuscripts of the New Testament. So let me invite you, at least mentally for this moment, to remove that question mark from the page of your Bible. I suggest to you that Jesus was pleading, 'Father, *save me* from this hour!'

This is the desperate cry of the human nature. He is at wit's end. He's in big trouble. He doesn't know what to say. So he prays that his Father *would* save him from this hour. This reveals the genuine horror and revulsion with which Jesus faced the fearful experience before him. But even in his agonized human nature he is still able to acknowledge the mission. And out of this act of selfless surrender . . .

Israel's god breaks his silence

"Then a voice came from heaven . . . "

Now, let's stop right here and let those words sink in. We don't usually hear voices speaking from heaven. Neither did the people who were with Jesus that day. Quite the contrary. Their god was just not speaking to them. Hadn't for a long, long time. So why does Israel's god choose this particular moment to break a centuries-long silence? Well, it's because finally, on earth, the Father's name has been truly glorified in Jesus. The Law of God was fully written on human flesh for all to read. Through Jesus God is revealed. And now that revelation is coming to it's ultimate climax in the cross.

But there's a confused response to this voice from the crowd. Some say thundered; others say an angel had spoken to him. But *Jesus* said, "This voice was for *your* benefit, not mine."

How so? Well, for Jews who believed that their god had silent, this was very much what they would have expected if and when *their* god chose to speak. It was exactly what the psalmist described in Ps18. When Israel's god speaks, the earth reels and rocks, there's a lot of smoke and clouds and lightening and thunder. What else would you *expect* if God were to speak? But then in Psalm 18:16, the psalmist says, "He reached down from on high, he took me; he *drew me out* of mighty waters."

You see, Israel's god never speaks without taking action. From the day he said "let there be light," his words *carry out* powerful actions. The voice from heaven is drawing up the one he loves to himself. And yet Jesus says it is *not* for *his* benefit, but for the benefit of, who? Anyone? Anyone at all? It remains an open question because as Jesus is drawn up into heaven . . .

A judgment is being handed down

"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself."

The "lifting up" of the Son of Man, takes us back to Jesus' words to Nicodemus in 3:14. Like the bronze serpent in the wilderness, when Jesus was lifted up on the cross he would draw out of us and onto himself the deadly venom of sin. He would take the full force of God's judgement on the sins of the world. The cross is, on one hand, God's deciding moment regarding rebellious humanity in it's readiness to follow "the ruler of this world," and specifically, God's judgement against the rejection of his Son and the decision to put him to death. The Son of Man was *sent* by God, so rejection of *him* is, in fact, rejection of *God himself*.

But, on the other hand, this event we call "the cross" is also God *giving us* his Son. This act exposed sin for what it is. But the sentence carried out against the sins of the world

was endured by one whose heart of flesh would stop beating in death, but whose heart in the Spirit would *never for a heartbeat stop loving* those who put him there. It was *God's love* that turned the awful news of judgement into the Good News of deliverance for the world. For, Jesus says, "the prince of this world will be driven out . . ." These words relate to . . .

A Cosmic Battle.

There was a widespread story in the ancient middle-east of the birth of one destined to slay a dragon that symbolized the evil system that enslaves all humanity. In this story there is a cosmic battle in which the slain dragon is cast down from the sky. It was the same story that Jesus referred to when he said he saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky. (Luke 10:18)

This same story was used by the writer of Revelation chapter 12 to show the victory of the Messiah. Revelation 12 says the followers of "the Lamb" overcome the dragon "by the *blood* of the Lamb." The *dragon* is the symbol of all the *power* behind all the complex infiltrations of evil into the structures of human life, and was *overthrown* at the cross and resurrection and exaltation of the Christ to the throne of God.

So when Jesus says "the prince of this world will be driven out" he is employing this well-understood picture of the slaying of the dragon to describe the dramatic change in the situation of the world that would come when he was "lifted up" to heaven via the cross. At the cross, the Satan was dethroned as "ruler of the world" and the Son of Man *enthroned* over the world for which he had died. Which brings us back to that one-word open question where we began. . . .

Anyone?

-Anyone here feeling enslaved by high-technologies of our day that seem to serve a global elite but leave most of us on the outside with an economic Armageddon looming on the horizon in which electronic transactions in distant markets can, with lightening speed, eat up savings, erase jobs?

-Anyone here living through a long silence with God in which nothing you do brings a sense that God is speaking? Speaking to you?

-Anyone here longing to have that true spiritual law written with their heart?

-Anyone here tired of the drudgery of "worship as usual", going through the motions?

-Anyone ready to make the break, go into the streets and shout hosanna to Jesus?

-Anyone here, feeling like those Greeks, feeling a lingering uncertainty that you are really accepted with Jesus, but still determined to say "we want to see Jesus?"

-Anyone here, like those nervous disciples, wondering just exactly how to introduce others to Christ?

-Anyone here ready to leave behind a self-satisfied existence in which we may enjoy many of the good gifts of creation but it's all tasteless and meaningless unless we embrace Christ mission on earth?

-Anyone here ready to embrace a lifestyle radical obedience, to go without some of those extras so that others may have a bit more, to face a bit of ridicule once in a while so that others may hear of salvation?

-Anyone ready to take Jesus at his word when he says, "My Father will honour the one who serves me."

Does any one of these "anyones" happen to be you? Is there anyone here who is NOT at least one of these anyone?

There is no limit to Jesus saving power except the resistance of unbelief. It is the witness of the ancient church that faith is

“The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” (Hebrews 1:3)

And he can be known, by faith, by *anyone*.