

RESURRECTION LETTERS

MEDITATIONS ON THE CRUCIFIXION

AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

BY ANDREW PETERSON

I. THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

Lord, forgive us.

We welcome you in because we think you'll give us what we want. We act as if our true motives are hidden from you—you who made the world with a word. We spread our coats and wave our hands and cry "Save us!" and you ride with your back straight and your face drawn, accepting our hosannas because you know that even if the heart is false the words are true, and for now, that is enough.

You come in the name of the Lord. Son of David, you come to save us. You come to save a fickle people, who one minute cry for help and the next cry for blood, and it is both help and blood that you give us.

The sun shines hot on the city gate, and you feel the air move with the palm branches. You hear the hearts pumping in their chests. Their mouths cry "save us" while their hearts cry "give us what we want." But because you are God you hear even deeper in the spirits of men and women and even children the silence of our profound loneliness. You hear the trickle of need we scarcely know ourselves.

You come to us though you know we're praying to you for the wrong reasons, singing to you without the faintest notion of how powerful and just and holy you really are.

We don't even realize the danger we're in, crying for salvation from Caesar when the Devil himself is battering the door—crying like a baby for its bottle when a wolf is loose in the nursery.

And yet, you come.

You set your iron gaze on Jerusalem, and because the Father wants you to, you come.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

II. THE SHEPHERD KING

You steer the donkey through the gates of Jerusalem. Centuries before, in this same city, King David wrote his songs and sang your praises. You think of the timbre of his voice, the earnest heart, the long nights on the roof of the palace when the great king remembered how to be a shepherd boy again, alone in the dark pasture but for the sheep in his keeping and the quiet stars.

In your mind you can see him:

King David, barefoot on the airy roof, sitting on the edge of a kingly chair, his harp like a woman in his arms, his mind bending heavenward as he prays with that boyish frankness you delighted in.

Would even David have known what you came to do? If David had been alive on the day of your coming, would he have known the kingdom you were bringing would be of a holy matter, stronger than stone and sharper than steel?

Even David would have been wrong. No man can fathom your ways. No mind could've alone foreseen the Kingdom as you would make it.

III. THE FIG TREE

You woke in the morning and walked along with your friends. Peter saw the fig tree you had cursed the day before, now withered and dead. While you slept, the life hissed out of the leaves, the branches clenched like knuckles, the roots curled up like the legs of a dead spider. The tree bore no fruit because it wasn't the season for fruit, and yet you cursed it.

Sometimes I'm afraid that I'm that fig tree and you'll approach me when I'm faithless and wayward and you'll banish the life from me. Or maybe you were just cross that the world you made didn't recognize you, even down to the trees themselves. Satan had so twisted the good world you made that the tree that might've blossomed at its maker's approach merely languished in the heat, as dead and unresponsive to your presence as I so often am.

Whatever the tree's significance, your power was plain to the disciples that morning, as it is to me now. You drew their eyes away from the fig tree to remind them about faith and forgiveness, and if they were better able to hear you by the death of the tree, then that too is fruit.

And maybe the story of the withered tree is not to make me afraid, but to show me you were hungry, and you were *human*. If you weren't human, then all that follows is farce.

IV. REMEMBRANCE

Remember, you told them.

With a loaf of tough bread and a cup of grape wine, you gave us all the gift of remembrance. You know how fallible our memories are, how prone we are to rationalize the spectacular and to sensationalize the mundane, and so you set in motion a ritual that would tether our fancies to earth and history and truth.

You broke the bread, and you thanked the Father for it, the one whose word lit the galaxies gave thanks for *bread*. You called it your body, and the apostles stared at you dumbfounded for a moment before they ate of it.

You took the cup and offered it to them, and you told them it was the blood of a new covenant, poured out for many. With the bits of bread still in their teeth and crumbs in their beards they looked at one another with questions on their faces.

Around went the cup and the apostles drank.

You told them it was for remembering, but what they were to remember hadn't yet happened and so it would be at least another week before they began to understand what you were telling them. I'm sure they wanted to know what you were talking about, but something in the look on your face stayed their tongues.

It's been two thousand years now, more or less. We kneel with contrite hearts and accept the gift of remembrance. We call it communion.

We accept the gift of your flesh and blood, and we offer you only our helplessness. We bask in mercy and rise from the table blessed, full of joy, because we have remembered.

Because we have *been* remembered.

V. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Judas.

Doomed to be the one who would betray the son of God, misguided, obsessed with money, wracked with a destructive, cowardly shame that left him swinging from a rope with his neck stretched and his head cocked. You knew it would be him. The night you broke the bread, your eyes met his, and he knew that you knew. Judas went and betrayed his rabbi. It would've been a dastardly thing had you been an ordinary man, and you were anything but ordinary.

Judas saw the wonders you did, the authority with which you taught, and heard you declare yourself the son of God more than once. He had no excuse. It was clear to those in your company that you were made of a goodness that rendered betrayal unthinkable.

But Judas, whatever his reasons, did the unthinkable.

And he did it with such irony. With a kiss. You had washed his feet only hours ago. I wonder what went through his mind as he sat there uncomfortable and appalled at your outrageous demonstration of love and service?

You knew he would betray you. You knew he was the guilty one, and still you took his filthy feet in your hands and washed them in the basin. You patted them dry with the towel around your waist.

Love your enemies, you had told them. And, kneeling before the betrayer, you showed them how.

VI. FRIENDS OF GOD

There in the torchlight, beads of blood-like sweat still on your brow, you answer Judas's greeting by calling him "friend."

"Friend, do what you came for."

Let's dispose of the charade, you said. And you remind us gently that though his would become perhaps the most dishonored name in history, he was your friend. You still called him friend. And perhaps his hearing that one word was the worst punishment of all for Judas, who considered friendship with you worth nothing more than a bag of change.

No one took your life from you—not Judas, not the Sanhedrin, not Pilate, and not the Jews. Not even me. You laid it down of your own accord. You had the authority to lay it down, and the authority to take it up again.

Let us remember, Lord Jesus, that what you did that Friday was a declaration of your friendship with us, who so often betray you with kisses of our own. Our sin can shock even ourselves, and we buckle beneath the weight of our shame. But you sit us on the chair, wrap a towel around your waist, and kneel before us. We protest, but you hush us and clean our gnarled feet. You bear the whip and the thorns and the naked humiliation of the cross to reconcile us to yourself, to end the enmity between God and man, so that we betrayers might be declared friends of God—yes, even *children* of God.

There is no greater love.

VII. THE HUNGRY TOMB

I want to turn away from this part of the story.

I want to close my eyes on it, partly because my love for you makes it difficult to bear, and partly because I am ashamed of myself. I'm afraid that I'll see my own face in the mob, among the teachers of the law, in Pilate, in the men who beat you. You are despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces.

But I watch. I watch as you are whipped, mocked, nailed to the cross, and lifted up.

I force myself to watch.

"It is finished," you say, and then the life and light of men dies.

The mob clears beneath a black, churning sky, as black as the sorrow or terror they feel in their chests. The Sabbath is coming, and Joseph of Arimathea of all people knows that no man's body is to hang overnight, especially during Passover. Pilate gives his permission and Joseph comes trembling to the foot of the cross. There stands the Jewish leader, his robe whipping in the angry wind, his back bent before your wrecked body, crooked on the crossbeams. Joseph lays the linen-shrouded flesh and bones of the son of God in his own tomb just as evening descends and brings with it God's holy day of rest.

We all have tombs that await us, open-mouthed and hungry for our bones, but the author of life lies there in our stead. You died so that we who come sorry and helpless to the foot of your cross may rest on the Sabbath knowing that it is not ourselves in our graves, but *you*.

That atonement was made would have been enough. But in the riches of your grace and great power, we rest on the Sabbath knowing that the tomb is not the final word. Great God, we are overcome with joy and thanksgiving and all manner of gladness that the tomb is not the end of the story.

Just wait, you say. You will see my wonders.

VIII. THE BEGINNING

The blue-green earth turns on its axis, rolling Jerusalem into the light of the sun. It turns like a door swinging open, pouring light into a dark room.

Jesus inhales.

His flesh and blood lungs expand, retract; the pupils of his eyes adjust to the buttery light pouring in through the crack in the door. The muscles in his shoulders flex, his fingers open and fan once, curl into a fist, then relax. His heart pumps steady and strong in his chest, and the stuff of miracles crackles in the air about him.

His glorified body passes through the grave clothes, and Jesus grins in anticipation of the looks on his friends' faces when he materializes in the room without bothering to use the door. He swings his feet to the floor, seeing the scars in his flesh and smiling again at the beauty of it all, if he does say so himself. Freedom for the captives. Hope for the weary. The bright unraveling of the curse that man brought upon himself. The valley of the shadow of death now glows with the light of the noonday sun and becomes lush and verdant and green as jade.

He trails his fingers on the damp stone walls, then steps into the light of the new day. He is pleased with the story he's telling. He is satisfied with the price he paid, with the cup he drank, bitter as it was, and most of all he is satisfied that he can now love his weak and wayward children with all of himself. The holy part of his nature that could bear no iniquity from man has been satisfied. There could be goodwill henceforth, from God to man. At last.

The sun warms his face. He closes his eyes and feels in a flash the hearts of all men and women from the beginning of things to the end, from Adam to Abraham to you and I in this room on this night, and with each thump of the holy heart in the frame of his ribcage he loves enough to overwhelm us all. Love set loose on the world. Love like a roaring lion, like a thunderclap of deep laughter.

From the moons of Jupiter to the center of our boiling sun, out past numberless stars to the walls of the universe, that laughter resounds and makes its way back to the ears of the figure standing at the mouth of the tomb.

"It is finished!" Jesus cried in his agony on the cross. Now he thinks of the Kingdom he is making, of the world he is redeeming, of the living hope he has unleashed. He smiles to himself and agrees with the Father.

"It has only just begun."