

The Forty and the Three

By Brett Roe



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There came a morning when he realized that he'd lost count of the days of his fast. He was watching the sun just brimming over the horizon, envisioning it as the tilting of a cup with a golden rim, when he found that he could no longer recall just how many solitary dawns he'd witnessed since first coming to this place. He wasn't sure if that mattered or not. When he'd begun this trial, it had been with only a vague sense of its terms – its duration, the extent of its hardships, even its exact purpose. He only knew that he must endure whatever came to pass and remain faithful to the source and significance of his being.

As the sun rose before him and its light adorned the sky, he started to number all the solitary dawns he could remember. But then his attention drifted off to other concerns and envisionings. His prolonged fast had brought him to a state in which his mind would often wander. It now required a sustained vigilance to keep his thoughts from shifting as randomly as the gusting winds that lashed across the desert. What he found most troubling about this infirmity was that it made it difficult for him to pray. The deep utterances of his soul now often became entangled in confused memories and worrisome speculations, until his prayers would lapse into rambling and repetition. In response to this, he made his prayers simpler and more concise.

His famished, sun-scourged body was another source of distraction. With its multitude of physical complaints, it clamored incessantly for his attention like a desperate mob pleading for deliverance – a deliverance he could not provide.

By faith, he endured it, but even his faith had changed. It no longer filled him as before like a boundless expanse; rather, it had pulled inward and become as hard and contained as the husk of a seed. In this harsh, barren place, so vastly indifferent to him, the divine realm he'd perceived at times to be all around him seemed far removed, as if it were only a recurring dream he remembered from his youth. His past and his present were now in conflict, each claiming the greater validity.

So he prayed as best he could through the hot dusty days and the bone-chilling nights, even though he had no sense of being heard, and he felt no response. There was only the desert, his afflictions, and his faith. With them, he was alone in a way he'd never been before. *Separation from God*. It held a desolate awareness. He found that it was not an idea or a feeling, but a part of being human. Like ignorance and mortality, it ran through his humanity like the grain in a beam of wood. It was an experience that pierced him deeply. Sometimes, he wept over it.

Around this time, a clever serpent had begun to visit him. It would come late in the day when the heat had passed from a relentless assault to a lingering oppression, and the sun sat low in the sky like a sated conqueror draped in colorful robes. The snake was timid at first and would only wiggle its tongue at him from the sparse concealment of some nearby shrub. But each day it grew bolder, until finally it was displaying itself openly atop the altar-sized outcropping he used for shade. Its body was a pale mosaic of orange and yellow, while its head and tail were solid black, as if it wore an iron helmet and carried a tarnished sword. The snake's unblinking eyes were as dark and lifeless as drops of ink, but when the light caught them, they would gleam like rubies.

And then it began to speak to him. Looking down from its perch, it would lecture him on various arcane topics, and then challenge him with pointed questions. In his depleted state, he wasn't sure if he was imagining it or not, but in either case, he chose to ignore it.

On the second day of its mocking discourses, the snake was attended by a host of scorpions. As it spoke, they gathered before it like a congregation, waving their claws in apparent adulation.

“Son of man, are you listening?”

He was gazing off at the sunset, nearly in a trance, when the serpent's words intruded on his reverie. They seemed to flick against his mind like the quivering of its tongue.

“How sad,” continued the snake. “I just told you a great secret of the desert, one that would have made your stay here much more bearable. Ah, well. I can see that you're the type who has to do things the hard way. So be it. But now, son of man, it is time for you to face the truth about yourself. Behold!”

Behind the snake, like two streams of oil poured from a lamp and set on fire, a pair of blazing paths flared out across the desert, running off in different directions.

The serpent nodded to each of them in turn. “This is the path of false prophets: those who proclaim in the name of some god what really comes from themselves. And this other is the path of failed prophets: those who receive a divine calling, but then find they are unable to fulfill their mission. Tell me, son of man, which of these is your path?”

He remained silent. He felt the snake's gaze on his face like a cold itch.

“Ah, so you choose to remain here, in the land of lost prophets.”

For a moment, he found himself seeing through the serpent's eyes. He beheld a thin, withered-looking man in a loin-cloth and a faded tunic, sitting alone in the middle of the desert. The figure appeared very small in the midst of such a wilderness – frail and insignificant. *Pathetic and ridiculous.*

“You do realize that's where you are,” hissed the snake. “Surely, by now, you've felt it in your heart – that you were led here by falsehoods. Either your faith is a lie or your god has abandoned you. And you're by no means the first. This desert is full of the bones of would-be messiahs who mistook their own delusions for a sacred destiny. Like them, you've grossly overestimated yourself. And in this place, son of man, only carcasses remain 'puffed up.'”

The snake waved its tongue at him tauntingly, and then wriggled down the side of the outcropping. It slithered off into the desert between the two smoldering paths with its scuttling entourage hurrying after it.

He watched the sun slide down out of the sky and felt the first cool breeze begin to blow across his shoulders. The deepening darkness began to fill with stars, like clusters of glistening thorns. He considered the inhuman beauty of it all, and tried to ignore the venomous thoughts the serpent had left in his mind.

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The serpent probably wasn't real, he reasoned later that night. Afflictions of the body often confused the senses, and trials of the spirit gave rise to troubling fancies. By such frailties the children of men were frequently misled.

A gust of the night wind made him shiver, so he pulled his fraying cloak tighter around him.

But I must not be, he thought.

Somewhere nearby, a jackal cried out deliriously, sounding like both cruel laughter and a wail of grief. He felt something inside him return the cry with a voice of doubt and despair. He reprimanded it sternly, and then abandoned himself to an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

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In the morning, he noticed a change in his newly hatched doubts. They were now yearning for the serpent's next visit like a chorus waiting for the music to begin. While he was willing to endure their discord, he wasn't about to empower it, so he decided to move on. Perhaps the snake, real or imagined, wouldn't find him in a different location.

He walked for much of the day, trudging on weakened legs, praying as often as his wavering attention would allow. By mid-afternoon, his body felt like a sack of stones he had to heave forward with every step, and the pains in his joints bit like the stings of a lash. His thoughts turned as bleak and shimmering as the sun-struck land around him, until he no longer knew which sights were of his eyes and which of his bewildered mind. When the very shadows began to beckon to him from every direction, he stopped in a stupor, able only to stare at their conflicting motions. It appeared to him that two of the shadows then rose up and moved toward him. As they came close, they converged, blotting out the confusion he was trying to make sense of. Then, they engulfed him.

From blackness, he drifted to a gray awareness of being carried. He felt as if he were a child again, overcome by drowsiness as his parents' quiet voices stretched an evening into night, being borne with a tenderness he'd always savored to his bed. He heard rhythmical steps shuffling over rocks and gravel, and sensed a steady, upward progression, as on a rising slope. Then, another darkness spread over him and the air's heat fell away from his skin. He surmised that he'd been brought within some form of shelter. He was lowered onto a soft patch of ground and comfortably stretched out. His sandals were removed and he felt rough, careful hands brush the sand from his face and his limbs. He slept for a time.

When he awoke, he found himself in a cramped space. It was a limestone cave, no bigger than a half-dug tomb, filled with the glow of evening light. He heard the voices of two men, ancient and authoritative, conversing nearby. Turning his head slightly, he saw their dark shapes just outside the cave. They were seated close together, silhouetted against a lavender sky. He lay motionless on his cot and listened.

"...held the wisdom of God in my hands. Flat, smooth stones, blue as sapphires. The words on them looked like they'd been carved in the sky." The voice was soft and beseeching, its speech slightly slurred as if the tongue were coated in wax. "Such joy I felt then! I was sure the people would embrace what the Lord was giving them, and it would make of them a holy race. I thought my task would at last be easy – just follow God and point out the way. That was the happiest moment of my life."

"Would that your joy had lasted," said the other man in a deep, rustling voice. "All of us who came after you have grieved that it did not. The breaking of those stones must have been terrible for you."

“Yes. It was terrible. So drunk was I on God's wisdom, I forgot man's foolishness. Before my eyes, the Lord's countenance changed, and all my joy turned to panic. I remember rushing down that steep mountain, my old legs bounding like frightened goats. Below me, I could hear the people chanting – chanting and singing and shouting. But it was the sound of madness. When I saw the people, my people, dancing with their false god, delirious with their own corruption, my heart filled with such rage and despair I wanted to pluck it from my chest and hurl it at them! Instead, I threw down the stones. I threw them so hard, they shattered at my feet.”

The old man sighed. There was a silence of empty hands and staring eyes. It lingered for a moment like a fading echo.

As the light dimmed outside the cave, the forms of the two men became a single black shape. From its obscurity, the rumbling voice of the second man said, “And yet, you held your ground between the people and the Lord's anger. I often thought of that when I was hiding in holes and seeking refuge with foreigners... fleeing from the very people God had sent me to save. I thought of how the Lord was ready to release you from your burden, to cast off that whole rebellious multitude and start over. But you interceded for them. You bound your fate to theirs. Despite all they were guilty of, you chose to save them.”

“I didn't save them all,” said the first man, softly. “But I couldn't bear to lose all of them. They were my people. Their past was my past. They were all I'd ever known of God's love in the world. And besides, I knew I was no better than they were. My sins were no less than theirs. Just before I smashed those stones, I thought I saw myself, the man I used to be, dancing and shouting with all the rest of them, praising that worthless god they'd made. That weak, selfish man the Lord nearly slew once for his foolishness. But instead he spared me, and with strong hands he forged me into his instrument. It seemed to me my people were no less deserving of mercy than I was.”

“I scarcely remember the man I was before the Lord put his spirit upon me,” said the second man. “My life before that seems just a tattered garment that I cast off. After I became the Lord's prophet, his power often filled me with awe and terror. But when he came to me as just a still, small voice, it was then that I realized the depths of his mercy. That touched me more deeply than awe and terror ever could. But my countrymen had hardened their hearts to both the Lord's power and his mercy. Nothing that I said or did ever made them change their ways. They continued in their selfish paths, or followed other gods – gods invented by men, with natures no better than their own.”

“It was that way from the beginning,” said the first man. “I'd hoped that stubborn, sinful pride would die in the desert with that first unruly generation. But when I came to the end of my journey, and I looked into the eyes of their sons and daughters, I realized that it would continue on, and with a terrible cost. I saw that the people I'd led through all those years of trials and wandering had taken not the law, but the wilderness into their hearts: a place of doubting God, and of endless contention. And I knew that no matter what home the Lord provided for them, such people would, in their hearts, always return to that wilderness.”

“And so it's been in that wilderness that all of God's messengers have had to wander,” said the second man. “And many have perished there. Each generation has rejected their teachings. The Lord has punished them for it, but never abandoned them. God always forgives and restores. But how long can it go on? After every fleeting repentance, the people always turn away again, and fall into even worse corruption. Does

it not make a mockery of the law? A law cannot merely promise, it must finally deliver. It cannot merely threaten, it must at last condemn. Otherwise, it ceases to be a living law.”

Now, he could only see darkness outside the cave, and as though the two men were moving away from him, their voices began to fade.

“Then for the sake of God's law,” said the first man, “Humanity must stand accursed. Or, the Lord must remove his law from the world of men – but then they are still accursed, for without the law of God, they will lose all that is holy. Only if their sins are atoned for, and the law lives in their hearts, can they finally be reconciled with the will of their creator.”

“But unless the Lord replaces this race of men with another, how can that ever be?”

“God knows. But the Lord will stay true to his word. And he will never forsake what he loves.”

The voices had now grown distant, and it was all he could do to hear them. He tried to call out to them, but all he could utter was a hoarse whisper.

The second man was saying something he could not make out, and then the voice was swallowed by silence. The effort to see and hear the men had drained his strength again, and with the question he'd wanted to ask them still in his thoughts, he plunged back into sleep.

* * *

He was awakened by the rain. It was the middle of the night and runoff down the hillside was flowing into the cave, turning it into a cistern. Although he awoke soaked and shivering, his overwhelming sensation was one of intense relief: the water was trickling into his parched mouth and down his throat. He opened his eyes gulping like a fish.

He was fully alert in an instant. Feeling about in the darkness, he carefully pushed himself up to sitting, his head kept bowed by the cave's low ceiling. When he placed his hand flat on the ground, he felt the puddle up to his wrist. It was obvious that he couldn't remain where he was, so he decided to climb up the hill to escape the rising water.

He crawled out from the dark interior of the cave into the equally dark tumult just outside it. Moving about as a blind man, he made a hard, slippery ascent through what felt like the heart of the storm. Slashing gusts of wind buffeted and clawed at him the whole way. Frigid streams of runoff flowed over his hands and feet, numbing them as he clambered over uncertain, shifting stones. Each *ex nihilo* burst of lightning stunned his eyes, leaving behind a dizzying bewilderment of colors.

And yet, he felt elated. Amidst all the extreme, clashing sensations, his spirit rejoiced in the perfect intensity of the ordeal.

When he at last reached the top, he found a niche between some boulders that shielded him from the worst of the wind and rain. He huddled there feeling more clear-headed and invigorated than he had in many days.

In each lightning flash he could now glimpse the desolate beauty of the storm-swept land around him, vanishing the next instant when the darkness struck its hands back together. As he exulted in the careless upheaval of the elements, he recalled a song he'd heard fishermen sing when they were setting out on rough seas, a tune as rollicking as the waves that confronted them. He sang it to himself for a time, joyously and with exaggerated crescendos, his voice contending with the storm.

After that, he was content just to listen to the ardent howls and hisses of the wind, and the rain clattering intently on the stones all around him. When the force of the storm finally began to wane, he felt a heavy drowsiness settle over him. He leaned his head against one of the boulders and closed his eyes. As he drifted off to sleep, he was filled with a growing conviction that his time in the desert was coming to an end.

* * *

By daybreak, all that remained of the storm was a fitful breeze and a few distant clouds in the brightening sky. He awoke with his hunger pangs intact and his muscles sorely knotted by the previous night's exertion. But his mind was much clearer after the quenching of his thirst.

When he tried to change his position, he found it hard to move against the painful stiffness that now gripped him. With considerable effort, he pushed himself up to sitting and then sought to stretch out his back and legs as best he could. Even as he was coping with this new infirmity, the sense came over him that it was time to return to the world of men. His spirit stirred inside him, declaring insistently, *I must be about my father's business*. Nevertheless, he felt obliged to wait. Having begun this trial in faith, he believed he should end it in the same way, leaving it up to God to choose the moment and the means. So he closed his eyes, bowed his head, and prayed for guidance.

Before long, a bright light fell upon his eyelids and the warmth of its source streamed down over his head and chest. The space around him seemed to hum with a sound his ears could not quite capture, and he felt an unmistakable presence. When he looked up, he had to blink several times before he could bear to keep his eyes open against the brilliance that had engulfed the hillside. He crawled out from the rocky niche and stood unsteadily before his visitor. He and the angel regarded one another. When it spoke, its voice was like the tolling of ancient bells.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken yourself? Look how defiled you are!”

“I am as the Lord made me,” said Jesus. “Nothing is defiled if it is as the Lord intended it.”

“Such heavenly words from a mouth formed from dust! But the other sons of men don't speak that way. And their hearts hold very different thoughts.”

“They've been led astray.”

“Then let them bear the curses of the law. Is it not God's will that those who transgress the law shall be punished?”

“It is God's will,” said Jesus, “to be merciful.”

The angel's light flared like the flames of an opened furnace and its words rang out as if struck from an anvil.

“There is no mercy where I AM! And I AM in this world! And I AM in the hearts of all its people! They hear *my* word, and in their inmost members they embrace *my* cause: that free will should truly be free!”

He felt his legs beginning to cramp beneath him and it was all he could do to stay standing. But he kept his voice steady. “Only the truth can make one free.”

“So say those who claim they own it,” said the angel, its voice now lowered to the rumbling of distant thunder, and its light dimmed to a smoldering glow. “But if you'll pardon my saying so, Jesus, at the moment, it looks as if your truth can barely stand. Please, sit down before you collapse. I promise I won't take it for obeisance.”

He acknowledged the angel's courtesy with a nod, and then sank down stiffly on the rocky ground. His legs felt as if they were full of needles and he wasn't sure they would support him again if he tried to stand.

"You look hungry, Jesus. Tell me, what do you make of hunger?"

"It is the body crying out for what it needs. Whatever isn't sufficient in itself craves for what sustains and completes it. The flesh craves the things of the world; the soul craves the things of the spirit."

"And do you see evil in that?"

"No. It's in every creature's nature to desire what it needs to be fulfilled. Only when a desire separates one from God does it become a sin."

"Then why don't you break your fast? What purpose is there in continuing it? If you really are the son of the Most High, then with just a word you could turn the morning dew into manna, or command the stones to become fresh-baked loaves of bread."

At the angel's words, the air became filled with the smell of warm bread that had just been set down to cool. The scent enveloped Jesus like a shroud.

"I'm waiting for the word of the Lord."

"You look like you've been waiting for a long time. What good does it do to keep prolonging your deprivation? Surely, it's no sin to feed yourself."

He shook his head and murmured, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by the sustenance of God's word."

"You're denying the nature of your flesh," insisted the angel. "Platitudes of the spirit don't ease the starvation of the body. Here, see for yourself."

Then it seemed to Jesus that a wave rose up beneath him and he was pitched forward into darkness. He had the sense of being high up, and far below him he could see things bright and writhing. A moment later, he was moving towards them at a great speed, sliding through distance like a shooting star. As he plunged downward, he perceived that the things he beheld were really his own hunger pangs wailing and gnashing within him. But even as he realized this, they changed. They became countless human beings, and the earth appeared beneath them. His descent suddenly stopped, but its force somehow continued on, coming down upon the people and scattering them across the world. By some enhancement of his perceptions, he was able to discern all of them, everywhere, all at the same time. And he could feel the severity of each one's hunger. He beheld skeletal beggars with limp, outstretched hands; and lost pilgrims trapped in barren wastes; and provisionless sailors gone adrift too far from any shore. There were prisoners left to starve in filth and darkness; abandoned children grown too weak even to cry; and men and women so ravaged by illness they could no longer feed themselves, but were shunned by others out of fear of their disease. And there were many, many more. The yearning to comfort all those he beheld swept over him, and his spirit cried out in grief.

The angel spoke from close beside him.

"If you truly are the son of God, then you can help all these people. By your will, you can feed and heal as many of them as you wish. Right now. And if you don't, it can only be because you don't really have the power to do so, or because you don't care enough about any of them to use it."

He looked upon the helpless, suffering people before him and felt as if all their desperate hands were clawing at his soul. But he kept his thoughts, and the hot tears in his eyes, to himself. He shook his head and replied quietly, "I am sent to do the will of

the one who sent me. What God will allow, I must allow. I will not do more than what my father bids me to do.”

The lamentations of the starving grew to a clamor in his mind, and the angel’s voice hissed in his ear. “Then, as far as these poor, miserable wretches are concerned, *oh merciful Christ*, you are either not enough divine, or not enough human.”

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With what seemed a contemptuous abruptness, the vision vanished, swept away by a great wave of shadows. As if he’d been pushed through a door, his surroundings completely changed. He now looked down upon a large city with clusters of stone buildings and streets full of people and animals. It was just after dawn, but already a haze of dust and noise was rising into the morning sky. He immediately recognized the city as Jerusalem, and realized that he was sitting atop the temple itself. Shimmering in the air next to him was the angel.

“Son of Mary, I set you a riddle: What is it that can make a towering cedar pare itself down to a thistle? Or cause a lion, the lord of its pride, to seek to become one of its fleas? Is not this the riddle of your nature? Or of what you believe about it? Why would a divine being ever choose to *be* what is so far *beneath* it?”

Jesus gazed down at the people moving below him. “You see the answer before you. There are so many who are lost. So many who need to be saved.”

“But why save them as one of them? Why be just as limited as they are? Whatever your nature may be, it’s now constrained by all the fleshly enfeeblements of the body and the mind. Even among your fellow creatures, you’re just a lowly member of a conquered race. If you really are what you believe, then it would seem that we’re both fallen. But of the two of us, you are by far the more diminished.”

“I am human. And to be human is to be greatly loved by God. Can you not appreciate them? How unique each of them is? All they can experience and become?”

“I see them as they see themselves,” said the angel. “And in time, perhaps, so will you. But if your purpose is to save them all, isn’t it unwise to be so much weaker than the forces that oppose you? All the powers of this world stand against you now. How can one poor Jew hope to overcome all of them?”

“By myself, I can do nothing. But if I do the will of the one who sent me, he will support me.” Jesus lifted his eyes to the angel. “And if God is for me, who can stand against me?”

The angel’s light bristled with shifting hues. “Ah yes, unquestioning faith. In this world, fools hoard it like misers, and fanatics guzzle it like cheap wine. You must realize, Jesus, that faith isn’t the same for creatures of flesh as it is for higher beings. In humans, it’s quite malleable. Their fears and desires shape it into many forms. In their minds, it’s not a window to the truth, but a mirror that reflects their conceits. Just look at all these ‘faithful’ people around you.”

He felt the angel touch its hand gently against the back of his head, and then his sight and hearing stretched forth. Throughout Jerusalem, he saw more than a dozen prophets and prophetesses proclaiming their conflicting visions to the passing throngs, some shouting and rending their garments with the frenzy of their convictions. He heard impassioned zealots whispering in doorways about competing messiahs, debating which of them they should shed blood and face death for. He observed gaping crowds awestruck

by magicians and healers who performed street corner miracles. And he followed a single, shabby man, about the same age as himself, as he wandered through a maze of alleyways, muttering an ecstatic conversation with whatever possessed his mind.

“Behold the faith of men,” declared the angel. “Is it not a currency that buys everything and nothing? How would you prove the true worth of yours?”

He had to hold his head in his hands for a moment to clear his senses. Then he replied, “My faith is like a tree at harvest time: it will be proved by the fruit it bears. If it produces a bounty of good fruit, then the truth is surely with me, and I am doing the will of God.”

“That’s an untimely proof, Jesus. You won’t know whether you’re right or wrong until after the fact. But as soon as you begin, you’ll be risking everything and asking others to do the same. For all you know, you could have made a mistake along the way, gone down the wrong path. Maybe you misunderstood what the Lord Almighty intended for you from the very beginning. How can you be sure? Or does your human self claim to be infallible?”

Jesus shook his head. “It is not given to any man or woman in this world to be infallible. One can only seek the truth and have faith.”

“Then before you ask others to follow you, and lead them into conflict with all the customs and authorities you’re about to confront, don’t you think you should find out if God is still with you? There’s a simple test, you know. Just cast yourself down from this roof to the street. If you truly are the savior of the world, then surely God and his angels will protect you, and you won’t even stub your toe. But if you’re mistaken, wouldn’t it be better to find out now before you lead so many people astray? You can reveal the truth this instant, Jesus. All it requires is a leap of faith.”

He leaned forward and looked down over the edge of the roof. A rising breeze brushed across his face, and below him, he saw the early worshipers entering the temple. From where he was perched, they looked very small. He felt the ache of the empty space before him and knew that with just a slight effort he could topple forward and launch himself into the air. The decisiveness of the idea felt both tantalizing and comforting in his mind.

Jesus smiled as he pulled back and turned to the angel.

“Once, when I was a child, and I was going to Jerusalem with my family, I played a trick on my father, Joseph. When he wasn’t looking, I climbed up on the very top of our wagon, and when he turned and saw me, I jumped off. I had no doubt that he’d catch me, and I thought it would be fun to make him have to lunge for me. As I was falling, the startled look on his face made me laugh. But after he caught me, and I saw the distress in his eyes, I felt ashamed of what I’d done. I realized I’d turned his desire to protect me into a foolish game. And worse than that, I’d used my father’s love for me as I’d use reins to lead a donkey. I never treated my parents that way ever again. And now, I will not tempt the Lord my God.”

“And what of your followers if you’re wrong?”

“They’re as much in God’s hands as I am. Those who follow me will just have to risk believing.”

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After that, the angel took him to a high mountain that seemed to tower over the breadth of the world. Its summit glistened with snow and ice, and a shrill wind swept around them. Only the angel's radiance kept him from freezing in his thin cloak. Again, the angel directed his sight, and he found himself looking down on all the kingdoms of men, and on all the kingdoms hidden from men.

"I show you now the things not made by God," declared the angel, "The works of men's hands, and the works of mine."

The angel's voice pierced the wind like the ringing of iron chimes, but Jesus could barely hear the words that left his own lips. "The power to create comes from the Lord."

"But it is a gift we have shaped to ourselves – and shaped ourselves with," said the angel. "Look upon the cultures and nations devised by the children of Adam. Has humanity not recreated itself – no longer in God's image, but in that of its own pride and shame? Humans are now at home in their exile. They do not seek to return to the Lord, but rather to build a world out of their own ideas. Since their first crises of free will, I've supported all their efforts to shape themselves. And so, generation by generation, I've gathered them to myself. They are much closer to me now than to God."

"No matter how much you've seduced them," said Jesus, "They remain the children of God."

"I've done more than seduce them. I've become part of them. Look within yourself, Jesus – would you deny that there's some of me even in your humanity?"

A hard blast of wind struck his face as he started to answer. As soon as it passed, he proclaimed, "I know how entangled you are in the hearts and minds of men. But thorns can be plucked from the flesh, and weeds can be pulled from a garden."

The angel's voice turned as low and somber as the echoes of a thunderclap.

"Perhaps. But since the Lord insists on redeeming through choice rather than force, that will take a great deal of time, as humans reckon it, and the cost will be very high. All of their sufferings will continue, and the cruelties they visit on each other will only get worse. Injustice and despair will consume them like plagues, and many more lives will be ruined. As one who feels compassion for them, would you not deliver them from such horrors if you could? If an easy path were offered you to do so, wouldn't you take it? Listen to me, Jesus: What if I were to simply give them all into your hand right now? What if I agreed to abandon this world to you, and remove all of my influence from the children of men?"

He looked into the face of the angel, considered its words, and replied, "The Lord would account it to you as a righteous act."

The angel responded with a hiss. "I do not seek the approval of the one who condemned me. No, I offer this to you, Christ, and to you alone. In exchange, I ask only for – a gesture."

"Whatever you ask of me, I will only do the will of the Lord."

"Consider for a moment my will and the wills of those you came to save. If I choose, I can go on opposing you in this world for as long as the Lord restrains its end. Humanity will endure much on account of our struggle. Whatever you teach, I'll distort. Whatever you gather, I'll divide. Whatever you build up, I'll corrupt. And as every soul is left to decide for itself, so many of those you long to redeem will be lost to you. But you and I can choose to end this now, without any more conflicts or sacrifices. You can save the world as soon as you want, in whatever way you want, with no opposition from me."

“And what do you ask in return?”

The angel did not reply at once. Instead, it rose up into the sky in front of Jesus, and its appearance became like that of a giant crystal beset with a multitude of facets. In those countless surfaces, all that lay below them was reflected and made clear. The largest facets showed the kingdoms of the world, those of the children of men, and those of the hidden powers. As he watched, they flourished and fell, empowered and enslaved, created and destroyed. In the smaller facets, he saw all the sons and daughters of men who dwelt upon the earth. He saw even into the depths of their lives and their souls. He saw their frailty and their potential, their tragedies, and their worth.

Then the angel cried out, its voice filled with a longing that seemed to hold all the pain in the world: “All these will I give you if, *for a single moment*, you will worship *me!*”

* * *

When he opened his eyes, it was midmorning and he was lying in the sand under the shade of a small tree. A snake was tickling his lips and, for some reason, his mouth was full of honey.

At first, his body felt too heavy to move, and he could do little more than look at the oddly formed serpent in front of his face. He saw that it wasn't a real snake, but just the semblance of one fashioned out of some sticks and vines. It was in the hand of a little girl who kept poking it against his mouth. When this caused him to part his lips, she pulled a small wafer from a cloth bag on her lap and pushed it past his teeth. The wafer tasted of sesame and honey, and from the residue left on his tongue, he gathered that she'd been playing the game for some time. The girl appeared to be about three years old. She had dark almond eyes, a heart-shaped face, and a small, round mouth that looked like the bud of a flower.

When he turned his head and looked up at her, she gave a start, but then smiled at him mischievously. She struck him on his head with her toy snake and giggled. He swallowed what was in his mouth, gave a nod of gratitude, and thanked her for feeding him. The little girl made a face as if he'd said something silly.

Then they both heard a woman's voice calling insistently.

“Manna! Manna, where are you? Manishe, come this instant!”

Manishe looked at Jesus as if both of them were now guilty of irritating her mother. She quickly stood up, brushed some of the sand off her legs, and ran off waving her snake. She left the bag of wafers behind.

Before long, he felt strong enough to sit up and get his bearings. As he looked around, he recognized the area, and was surprised to find himself so close to the Jordan. He thought he could reach Cana before nightfall if he kept a good pace. Off in the distance, he saw a group of pilgrims headed in that direction. He wondered if they were on their way to be baptized by John.

When he rose to his feet, he was pleased to feel a renewed strength in his legs. He took another wafer from the small bag he had tucked in his belt, considered it for a moment, and then smiled at the joke. In response, like the face of a loved one, he saw the kingdom of God.

End.

