

# One Greater than the Temple is Here

## Matthew 28:11

**Series:** Hidden Gems in Matthew

**Preaching Date:** April 20, 2014

**Worship:** All Things New

**Key Sentence:** Nothing but the victory of Jesus is worthy of our devotion

Six Layers of Story:

Storyline: A soldier whose loyalty to the temple leads him to hate Jesus learns to see God's real work in the resurrection.

Three Act Structure:

Act 1: Mattaniah grows up as the son of the Captain of Herod's Temple Guard. His harsh loyalty to the temple leads Mattaniah to vow to get the one who claims he will destroy it.

Act 2: throughout Easter week Mattaniah is thwarted in his attempts to get Jesus

Act 3: when he finally has the opportunity to get at Jesus through the disciples, he can't – because he has come to believe!

Character Values:

Mattaniah is loyal to the temple because of his family's history of temple service and because the Temple is the presence of God for his people

Mattaniah longs for God to show himself in power

Mattaniah hates the cynicism and skepticism that led his father to be disloyal to the purity of the temple.

Mattaniah is easily capable of violence if he thinks he's protecting the temple

Other Characters: Guards as a whole (another loyalty) Malchus? Peter? Jesus!

Sub plot – Malchus' conversion leads to Mattaniah's conversion

Scene List:

Act 1

1. Biography (I remember) (loyalty, love hate for his father)
2. Captain of the Temple Guard
3. The Reports about Jesus

Act 2

4. Triumphal Entry and Temple Cleansing
5. Arrest and Trial (false witnesses, tear down the temple)
6. Roman Trial and Sentencing
7. The Temple Curtain Torn
8. The Guard at the Tomb and Their Report

## Act 3

9. Peter and John at the Gate Beautiful

10. Peter and John before the Council

11. The Attempt to Kill Peter and John

12. Peter and John and My Turnaround

**Matthew 26:47** While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

**Matthew 27:62-66** The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate <sup>63</sup>and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’

<sup>64</sup>Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” <sup>65</sup>Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” <sup>66</sup>So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

**Matthew 28:11-15** While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. <sup>12</sup>And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers <sup>13</sup>and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ <sup>14</sup>And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” <sup>15</sup>So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

# One Greater than the Temple is Here

## Matthew 28:11

### Scene 1: Biography

Good morning. Thank you for including me in your very early celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. And I thank you for inviting me, because I know I'm not one of the key figures in the story of the resurrection like Peter and John and others who have spoken to you. Like you, I'm really the fruit of their resurrection witness, but I'm still able to share the truth of the resurrection.

Let me begin by telling you a little bit about my family. I come from a long line of Levites who have served in Jerusalem since at least David's time. Our family were gatekeepers at David's tabernacle in Jerusalem, and later we guarded the storehouses of Solomon's temple. After the exile Ezra and Nehemiah re-created these offices, and the man I am named after, Mattaniah, was in charge of the temple guard. When Herod rebuilt the temple our numbers were augmented, and during his reign we became more of a small army carrying out his whims than protectors of God's sanctuary.

My father Shallum was a member of the temple guard under King Herod, and I inherited his immense pride in the temple Herod had rebuilt. I well remember walking through the Temple grounds with my father in the early mornings as he pointed out the beautiful details that were being added on every side. In those early years he and my mother loved to tell me story after story about how God had shown his power in the past, protecting our temple and our city, sometimes through miracles as in the victory of Jehoshaphat, and sometimes through men, as in the glorious revolution of the Maccabees. I became convinced that in the purity of the Temple God was present with his people.

But when my father became Captain of the Temple Guard toward the end of Herod's life, those early days faded like a sunrise in a dust storm. My father grew bitter and cynical. I remember being awakened by my father's harsh voice as he and mother fought in the outer room. She said 'well then you must refuse; you cannot do these things.' He shouted 'and what will happen to me if I say no. I mean nothing to Herod. He would kill me as easily as any other. And you and our boys. Do you want them to suffer the fate of the boys of Bethlehem? I'm already a murderer many times over; I can't change that.'" After that my father seemed to give up and become the ruthless man Herod wanted him to be.

My estrangement from him became absolute the year he willingly and cruelly executed the young men who had cleansed the temple of Herod's golden eagle. My father was the one who captured them in this righteous act, and the one who lit their funeral pyres. I swore at that moment that I would defend the temple, and hate only those who sought to defile or destroy it.

## Scene 2: Captain of the Temple Guard

Then Herod died. Judea was not given to any of his sons, but to a Roman governor. The Temple Guard was reduced mostly to its original functions of guarding the Temple and its grounds. The High Priests, though politically appointed by Rome, were given free reign over Temple worship, as long as they kept the population from revolts or disturbances. But there were many seeds of such disturbances, and the Guard was often used to snuff these out.

Not many years later my father sickened and died. I mourned him, but not overmuch because I knew he had been a willing participant in Herod's evil. Yet those were the years when I myself joined the Temple Guard and began to rise through the ranks. Because of my father's sordid reputation I was trusted by the Romans and Herodians and even the Priests. Not that I had that much respect for the High Priestly families. At best they were only ignorant of the Temple ritual and careless about Temple purity, but at worst they were hypocritical and power hungry. But their concern for power and my defense of God's dwelling place often overlapped, and I was more than happy to do their bidding when it came to quietly eliminating rebels who were a constant threat to the temple. If a revolt took hold Rome could destroy the center of our worship without a second thought. But what I really wanted was for God to act in power and free the Temple and the nation to worship him without threat.

And so, after many years, I became Captain of the Temple Guard. This was shortly before Pontius Pilate became prefect of Judea, during the High Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. When Pilate came these two old connivers got on his good side, and wangled from him an increase in the size of our Guard and expansion of our powers to include more police activities, with his permission, beyond the temple grounds.

As Captain of the Temple I worked closely with a priest named Malchus, chief servant of Caiaphas. Caiaphas often gave me direct orders, but my day-to-day interaction was with Malchus. He took care of the ritual side of Temple worship and I took care of the physical purity of the temple, and we often debated whether the presence of God sanctified the sacrifices or the sacrifices invoked the presence of God. But we shared a desire to uphold the honor of the Temple, and we became good friends.

### Scene 3: The Threat of Jesus

One of my duties, of course, was to sniff out any plots against the temple, the priests and the Sanhedrin. So naturally I was among the first to take seriously the rumors of a new teacher in Galilee some held to be the Messiah. I was told that this Jesus was gathering huge crowds, and those who followed said he healed the sick and drove out demons and did other miracles while teaching with great authority. One day shortly after the threat of John the Baptist had been dealt with I pulled together a few of these Jesus rumors and took them to Malchus. He brought back word that Caiaphas wanted a close watch kept on this Jesus, and to know immediately if he came into Judea.

In seeking this information I discovered he had already been in Judea, at least twice. The first was while John was still baptizing in the Jordan River, rousing the rabble. During that time this Jesus had come to be baptized, and some said a thundering miracle of some sort had accompanied his baptism. The second time was later that year, when he came up for the feast of Passover and appeared in the temple. I remembered a report of the incident, but my men minimized it, probably because they had inexplicably, done nothing.

I now learned that this Jesus had not only cried out against the buying and selling in the court of the Gentiles, but had actually overturned tables and stamped the animals. I could understand someone being upset about the chaos all these traders introduced into God's place. But apparently he also claimed that he was going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Destroy the temple! What could make a man a greater enemy of God?

Immediately Jesus became my enemy. I tell you the truth, this temple was my heart and my life. Every day I woke to see the temple precipice standing golden in the sunlight. Every night I went to sleep under the moon shadow of its wings. Destroy it? Unthinkable. Try to destroy it? Worthy of death! I wanted to get my hands on this traitor, this rebel Galilean scum.

Needless to say I pursued information about him and sifted every rumor and was soon told of a conversation he'd had with some Pharisees in Galilee in which he said he was greater than the temple. Unthinkable. I swore at that moment I would get this Jesus. I even hoped to kill him with my own sword if the opportunity came. He thought he was greater than the temple, did he?

### (Act 2) Scene 4 – Triumphal Entry and Temple Cleansing

In the spring of the following year we began to hear rumors that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem followed by a small but vocal mob.

It didn't seem to me he could be any military threat. Even my small bands of temple guards could take out ragtag like that without breaking a sweat. But if the rumors of his miraculous powers had any truth, I had reason to be cautious.

He was coming for Passover, of course. More than a week before the feast I received word that he had arrived in Bethany and, according to the rumors, done some great miracle of healing, or even, some reports said, of resurrection. It was also said he was aware of the opposition to him in Jerusalem, and had seemed to be staying out of the region, but the sickness of his friend brought him. I wondered if he would dare to challenge the city again.

On the day after Sabbath, I stationed myself at the main gate of the city, above the Kidron valley, to watch the crowd of arriving pilgrims. I saw for myself what seemed to be a clump in the line coming down the Mount of Olives. As this larger crowd approached many rushed out to it from the city, and I could hear people crying 'Hosanna' and 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' I motioned my squad at the gate to full alert, and soldiers poured out of the Roman guardhouse as well. As the crowd pushed up the hill I saw a man seated on a donkey's colt, the center of the acclamation, accompanied by many who waved fronds and branches. This had to be the famous Jesus: there was no other person unknown to me who could command such allegiance.

I gathered up a half a dozen Guards by eye and walked into the crowd, which parted around us. Soon I could see the rugged features of the man. He seemed to regard the city with sadness, but then he turned and smiled at someone in the crowd and I could see joy on his face. This shocked me – I expected to see the wary face of a terrorist or the cruel face of a rebel, worthy of my hatred and my steel. I guess I was so taken back by this incongruity that I did nothing to stop the shouting or the entry of the crowd into the city proper.

The crowd dispersed slightly inside the city, but most continued through the streets to the base of the Temple. My suspicion immediately reasserted itself. I wasn't sure why I hadn't arrested him at the city gate, but I would get him at the Temple. Hurrying by back ways, I arrived slightly ahead of the pretender and his followers. I alerted the guard to keep their eyes open for any disruption.

And disruption happened. I was standing right there. This man and his followers walked into the court of the Gentiles. He looked around scowling, a look that should have jolted me into action. Then he took a whip off a post by the animals and began, again, to drive out the merchants and overturn the tables, saying in a quiet voice all could hear "My father's house is supposed to be a house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves."

And what did I do? Nothing! I recognize now that God put his hand on me and my soldiers to immobilize us. Someone shook me and begged me to arrest him but I did nothing, just watched as Jesus had a brief conversation with some of the priests and left the Temple grounds. Not until he was gone did my rage assert itself and I ran with my squad out the gates – but we never caught him.

I should have known that God was at work but I didn't. I shook with rage and I was fearful for the Temple. A man who could stop me without even looking at me was not to be trifled with. Yet when I consulted with Malchus and Caiaphas they told me they were glad I hadn't arrested or harmed him. They were afraid such action might have sparked a revolt. "Leave him alone, Caiaphas said. "We are working a plan to arrest him quietly." I disagreed. "He's a threat. He should be arrested, or killed, right now." "No." Caiaphas said.

#### Scene 5: Jesus' Arrest and Tried

So I tolerated him and his followers at my temple all week. At one point I even saw them gesturing at the buildings; making plans for destruction I thought sure. But I didn't do a thing. Finally just before Passover was to be celebrated the high priest called me in and told me the plan was ready, one of the followers of Jesus had betrayed him. He had me gather a crowd to augment my guards. Some of the Temple servants joined us, and Malchus appeared with the betrayer, Judas. Malchus said we would arrest Jesus but were not to harm him.

As we walked we could hear groups still celebrating Passover. But outside the city it was dark and quiet. The betrayer led us across the Kidron Valley and up the mountain to an isolated olive grove. There, he said, he would show us the man by kissing him on both cheeks. As we got closer we could see a small group of men standing up, some rubbing sleep out of their eyes. Judas embraced the one at the center. Then the man looked at me. "Whom do you seek?" I replied, "Jesus of Nazareth." He said "I am he." As soon as he spoke it was like a great force struck me in the chest and knocked me to the ground. As we scrambled to our feet he asked again "Whom do you seek?" Trembling I said "Jesus of Nazareth." "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go."

He stepped forward, but as we put our hands on him one of his followers leapt forward with a short sword and swung at Malchus, connecting on the side of his head. My sword was in my hand and I would have slain them all, but Jesus said "Enough" and reached out to touch Malchus' ear. Malchus put his own hand to his ear and looked up in astonishment. "He healed me." Jesus had meanwhile turned to speak to his followers, and they dispersed into the dark garden. I knew then they were cowards and would give us no further trouble. But we had who we wanted. We bundled Jesus off to the priests.

I myself guarded him during his trial before the Sanhedrin. Most of the witnesses were pretty miserable – obviously paid to testify, and even then they couldn't agree. But at the end the two who had told me of Jesus' plan to destroy the temple were brought in. Caiaphas must have sought them out. As they repeated his words, my anger boiled inside me, and when Jesus next spoke I used it as an excuse to strike him hard across the face. In the end Caiaphas accused Jesus not of plotting to destroy the temple, but of blasphemy, claiming to be the Son of God. The enraged council said he deserved death, and as I held him by his bound arms they gathered to spit in his face and strike him. Some slapped him, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

After this rage played itself out, Malchus told me we must take Jesus to Pilate. If Malchus had not come Jesus would have died trying to escape. As it was, we turned him over to Pilate's soldiers. They took him inside, but before long Pilate came out and asked the huge crowd that had gathered if they would rather he release Jesus or Barabbas, a rebel we'd arrested for leading a deadly riot. Coached, as I knew, by the temple servants, they chose Barabbas. Pilate washing his hands of responsibility, ordered Jesus flogged and crucified.

#### Scene 6: The Curtain Torn

Even in my exultation, I cringed. I was used to violence, and had done much myself, but I never could match the Roman taste for torture. After they nearly killed him by their cruelty, they dragged him out to Golgotha, and hung him on the cross. I never left the city; I was ordered to strengthen the guard posts in case of a riot. But about noon a darkness came over the land that put fear into all my men. About the ninth hour we heard a cry seeming to fill the sky. Then we heard a commotion from the temple. The priests who had been completing the afternoon sacrifice in the Holy Place had suddenly run out reporting that the curtain separating them from the Most Holy Place had torn in two.

I stood in shocked disbelief. What had this man been, that his suffering should bring such calamity? I remembered his power in the Garden, my immobilization in the temple courtyard, his miracles. Now the Most Holy Place stood revealed, but the presence of God was nowhere to be found. I had known that the Most Holy Place was only an empty room with blood stains on the floor. But wasn't it God's place? Wouldn't he return in power someday? Even in death this Jesus had tried to destroy that hope. He must be of the demons, a devil of hell. Thank God we had stopped him before he could do real harm to the temple.

#### Scene 7: The Guard at the Tomb



The next day was a busy Sabbath. My temple guards, like the priests, had special dispensation to do what we needed even on the Sabbath. Before mid-morning Caiaphas called me into his chambers. “The Blasphemer’s body has been placed in a tomb near Golgatha. We have gone to Pilate and gotten permission to guard that tomb. The witnesses told us when he predicted the destruction of our Temple he predicted he would rebuild it in three days. Judas said he thought Jesus was speaking of the temple symbolically; he told his followers he would rise from the dead in three days. We can’t allow this lie to spread among the people, so go, seal the tomb and guard it well.

I hurried to obey. This man’s followers were cowards, but I would give them no chance to continue his destructive plans. Malchus led us to the tomb, still lost in wonder over the wounding and healing of his ear. My men stood watch all day and into the evening, but when none of Jesus’ followers were spotted I went to a fitful sleep in my quarters. I was up early, consulting with Caiaphas, when my guard leader burst in with an astonishing story. “Before dawn we heard women’s voices, approaching the tomb. Before they came in sight, there was another great earthquake. A terrifying man descended from the sky. He was like lightning; his clothing white as snow. Fear overwhelmed us all and we fell like dead men. We were out a long time - the sun was already risen, the stone of the tomb was rolled away and the body of Jesus was gone.

Caiaphas left to consult with the chief priests. After a short time they called me in. “Mattaniah,” Caiaphas said, “These men are clearly under great stress.” He held out his hand to Malchus and was given a heavy bag of coins. “Divide these among them and tell them to say the disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.” I was appalled. My men wouldn’t sleep on duty. If word got out we’d all be dismissed by Pilate. “Don’t worry, Caiaphas said, “if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will keep you out of trouble.”

And there never was any trouble. The story that the disciples had stolen the body was widely spread. As for me, I couldn’t explain what had happened; it was a miracle, though of God or some demon I could not tell. And despite the cover story, persistent rumors of his resurrection continued to circulate. I found myself pursuing each rumor. I talked to a few said they’d seen him. Had this man somehow escaped me even in death? Was he still a threat? I didn’t know.

#### Scene 8: Peter and John at the Beautiful Gate

But it was quiet after the feast and for a number of weeks thereafter. Jesus’ followers were reported to have gone back to Galilee. Only as the next festival, the feast of Weeks approached did we hear rumors that some of his disciples had drifted back and were once again staying in an upper room in the city. Then, at the

end of the feast, I was told a commotion had broken out near that particular house. The report said that Peter had told a huge crowd that despite what the authorities had done to him, Jesus was alive. Many of those present had believed and joined a renewed movement of this man's followers.

When I informed Malchus and Caiaphas of this, Malchus seemed entirely distracted, reaching up over and over to touch his ear. He said nothing, but Caiaphas understood the threat immediately, and ordered me to keep a close eye on these men. My personal fear, of course, was for the temple. Any serious incident could lead Pilate to call in the legions and destroy our place.

Not many days later I was personally leading the guards one afternoon at the temple gate called Beautiful when I saw Peter and one other, John, approaching. Just across from me was a man begging for alms, a man I knew to be completely crippled. As Peter and John passed he called to them, and they stopped and responded. I didn't hear their words, but it was not long before Peter reached out and said more loudly "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk! And the lame man did. They went past me into the portico with the man walking, leaping and praising God. I was stunned. Here again was a miracle. All my life I longed to see God come in power to his temple, but every time he did it was associated with this man Jesus. What was going on here?"

As a crowd gathered, Peter and John stopped in Solomon's portico and spoke. "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this?" He told them the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had glorified himself in Jesus. We had betrayed him and killed the Author of Life, but God raised him from the dead on the third day, just as Jesus had prophesied "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up on the third day." And by faith in his name, Peter said, this man stands before you in perfect health. "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

He said many more things, but I did not stay to hear. I found Caiaphas and some of the Sadducees and brought them out to where Peter and John were still talking about Jesus. Near the center of the crowd was the man who had been crippled. Finally Caiaphas turned to me and said "this is intolerable. They are followers of the Blasphemer. They will destroy us and our place. Arrest them." I had my hand on the hilt of my sword as I walked up for I recognized Peter as the one who had cut off Malchus' ear, but the two offered no resistance. As I was leaving the temple prison, I encountered Malchus heading in. When I asked him what he was doing he refused to meet my eye; "I'm going to get their testimony for the trial in the morning." I knew Malchus well enough to know that was a lie, but I could think of no reason to challenge him.

## Scene 9: Peter and John at the Sanhedrin

Through the night I wrestled with my thoughts. Who were these men, and why did they seem to have access to the power I had always longed to see at work in the temple? Was the temple Jesus has spoken really his body, and had God raised him up? And if so, did that mean the end of the physical temple my family had served so long? Did it? I flushed with anger on my bed. Not that! That was intolerable. It must not be threatened. It must remain.

Early the next day my men brought Peter and John to the council for judgment. They asked “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Peter replied “by the name of Jesus the Messiah whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Peter and John spoke with amazing boldness and power. They seemed utterly convinced of this Resurrection. These men were not the cowards I had seen in the Garden that night. What else but a resurrection could give them this boldness?

The council was dumfounded by the fact that the man they had healed was standing right there. They conferred with one another, and concluded that the only thing they could get away with was a warning. So they called them in and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter and John answered “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” Nonetheless, and to my horror, the council released them.

## Scene 10: Peter, John and Malchus

A few weeks went by, and the reports of the Blasphemer’s followers continued to increase. There were gathering daily in the temple courts. Signs and wonders were being done among them. I suspected they were gathering a following to stage the revolt Jesus had never led. Then one day the Sanhedrin received a report of these things, not through me. For whatever reason they were enraged to jealousy, and they once again ordered me to arrest these men. They were not hard to find. I placed them in the same cell they had been in weeks before.

That evening I wrestled again with my thoughts. I knew these men were a danger. Rome would not tolerate these crowds, even if peaceful. And their teaching of forgiveness through Jesus rather than through Temple sacrifice undermined the very existence of the Temple. They continued to at least imply that Jesus was greater than the temple, that his body was the temple destroyed and rebuilt in three days. As I stewed over all this my resolve deepened. The council might not be willing to deal with these men. I would have to do it.

When the city quieted I got up, bound my sword to my side, and went to the Temple prison. I was surprised when the guard told me Malchus had entered ahead of me. When I reached the cell where Peter and John were chained, I found him sitting, deep in conversation. All three startled when I put my key in the door. “Mattaniah,” Malchus said in a voice that trembled. “Why are you here?” “I might ask the same of you? Have you become a counselor to prisoners?”

Malchus looked to Peter and then to John, hoping, it seemed that they would speak. “No, Malchus,” Peter said quietly, “If you know this man, then you must tell him the good news.” Malchus nodded and turn toward me, his eyes still downcast. “I have become a follower of Jesus, a follower of the way.” “What? What does that mean?” “When he healed me, Mattaniah, I knew it was with God’s power. After the crucifixion I was overwhelmed with guilt that my sins, my silence, my cooperation had sent him to the grave. No amount of Temple sacrifice could touch my guilt. When I heard that he was being preached as alive, and as a Savior from sin I sought these men out. A few weeks ago when they were here I repented and received forgiveness. Now Jesus himself is at work in my heart through the promised Holy Spirit. I came tonight to pray with Peter and John because no other could visit them here. And now I beg you, Mattaniah, to turn from your ignorance and sin and receive the Lord Jesus, God’s Messiah and King, the new and living way into God’s presence.”

I stared at him in deep confusion. Was this the answer? Was the temple a relic and Jesus the new way to God? Immediately my defenses rose up. No. I could not give up this place, this beauty, this eternal hope of God’s power. “Malchus,” I said, loosening my sword, “leave us.” He looked to the two men, who nodded. I listened to his steps recede down the hall, his words with the guard, the opening and locking of the gate. Then I drew my sword and advanced on the two chained men. “I don’t know how you have swayed so many from loyalty to God’s place, but you will not sway me.” I lifted my hand.

As I did so I looked up at my sword. I remembered the deeds it had done, some fair, many foul. I remembered the deeds my father’s sword had done for Herod, from Bethlehem to the Temple courts to the Royal Palace. All of a sudden I realized that I did not have to be the one who killed these men. The council could act if it was needed. Pilate could do it if they were a threat. And for whatever reason I had the power not to do it.

“Leave my friend alone,” I said. Then I carefully locked the doors. As I left I heard the two men raise their voices in tones of prayer.

## Scene: Peter and John before the Council

The next day the council met. They had me send a full squad to the prison for Peter and John. But only the optio returned and with a flushed face and downcast eyes reported that the prison was securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but there were no prisoners. My heart leapt within me – the power of God at work, I thought, then quashed the thought. Just at that moment another soldier entered and said the two men were at the Temple, teaching.

Caiaphas told me with no little exasperation to see if I could bring these prisoners. I took only two of my officers. All things considered I didn't think force was going to be of much use. When I walked up to Peter and John they sighed, greeted me warmly and came with me willingly. Once again as we walked I reflected on the peaceful courage of these men. What could make them so confident?

The council reminded them that they had been ordered not to speak in that name. Why did they continue to blame their leaders for this man's death? When they answered, it seemed I heard the answer for the first time "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things."

The council was enraged, and a long discussion followed, but I heard none of it. Finally I understood. My loyalty to a stone building was foolishness, even more foolish than Malchus' loyalty to animal sacrifice. The presence of God was not bound in stone, and forgiveness of sins was not found in the blood of bulls and goats. The presence of God was found only in Jesus, whom he had attested to me with the power I longed to see. And forgiveness was found only in Jesus, who died as a sacrifice and who rose in victory exalted as King and Savior. In that moment I believed, and my allegiance simple and irreversibly changed. Now I belonged to Jesus and as I felt his power in my life. I lay down my sword on the floor of the chamber, and walked out to find my friend.