

Easter 2009

### Nathanael\*

Drop, drop, slow tears. Nathanael wept slow, silent tears. Kneeling as he was, with his face bowed to the ground, his tears dropped straight to the dirt and disappeared, as if they had never been. An observer would have seen only a young man kneeling with his face flat against the ground, unmoving, except for the slight shaking of grief-stricken shoulders. God saw a broken-hearted man near collapse.

They had taken away his Lord and tortured him to death on a cross. It was the last thing Nathanael had expected. When Jesus had called him from behind the plow and waited patiently for him to say good-bye to his aunt and uncle, Nathanael didn't know what was to come, but he could sense it was wonderful and powerful. And as the days passed, the strength of this Nazareth Carpenter had grown and held Nathanael in a secure certainty that had slowly healed the shy, wounded soul within. How had Jesus known, that warm summer day on the Galilean hillside? In all their talk together, he had never said. But he had known the wounds, for in the nights he had listened to Nathanael, let him weep, and let the anger seep slowly out of the slight farmer, to be replaced by a calm that the gentle orphan had never thought he would have again. And now it had happened once more.

Nathanael thought of his own name bitterly: Nathanael, God has given. It seemed to the rough-handed farmer that God was always taking away. When he was ten, the Roman chariot had caromed though Cana, heedless of its course, not caring that it had struck and killed a man and woman walking along the road. Nathanael's parents were stricken from him in a second and though his aunt and uncle were kind and attentive, Nathanael blamed God for taking his parents away and for his loneliness. He used to sit under the fig tree in his uncle's yard and weep for his parents. One day, as he daydreamed there, he saw angels coming down from heaven and going up to heaven. They were carrying the souls of men and women and children. Nathanael was strangely comforted by this dream, though he never told anyone about it.

When he was twenty, he had gladly given his heart away to Hannah, his cousin, and her love had seemed to fill him to overflowing. But God had given them only three years and then taken Hannah and their still-born child. Nathanael bitterly cursed his name, God has given indeed, and hardly knew who or where he was for months on end. The years had passed.

And then two years ago there had been this Nazareth carpenter who had laid down his tools and taken up the word of God. Nathanael had known him as carpenter, had him repair the plow more than once. But after Jesus' visit to the wild man baptizing in the Jordan River, he had not been the same. He came back fifty days later and began to talk about God in a way no one had ever heard before. Some whispered that the prophets of old once more walked among their people. Nathanael had heard the rumors but paid no attention. Farming took all his attention and energy. Until that day.... Nathanael was resting in the shade of the fig tree, when Jesus had stopped.

They had talked for awhile, Nathanael glad of the respite from the glaring sun, and then Jesus had looked him straight in the eye, it seemed deep into his soul, and said, Follow me and I will show you how to grow faith and love and followers for God. It was the decision of a moment, though it seemed eternity balanced on his reply. He had run back home, said good-bye to his aunt and uncle, and caught Jesus up further down the road. Nathanael had become part of the band who followed the carpenter: fishermen, a tax collector, a divinity student, a rebel who railed against the Romans, a silver-worker, even women. In his simple straightforwardness, he had found a place to belong. For two years, Jesus and his followers had been Nathanael's family, given him all that he had missed throughout the years.

But now God had once again taken, not given. Jesus had not seemed at all surprised at the Roman guards and Temple police who had arrested him among the olive trees. But Nathanael and the rest of them were stunned. Nathanael had stood at the foot of the bloody cross that seemed to blot the sun from the sky and had wept with Jesus' mother and the other Mary. Nathanael had followed the men who took the body down and sealed it in this cold, forbidding tomb. Nathanael stood watch from a distance, not expecting anything, just unable to go away into a world that seemed no longer important. Two days and two nights he had watched and now he was bowed down before the mouth of the stone tomb, tears dropping into the heedless ground. It was time to go on with his life.

Nathanael was startled by a footfall, startled because he knew he was alone in the garden. He looked up and saw scarred feet standing before his nose. He crouched back and looked up into a familiar face, wreathed in a huge smile. It was Jesus his Lord, not dead, but alive with a vitality that coursed through his body, that seemed to come from beyond the morning stars growing pale in the rising sun. Jesus reached down a scarred hand and lifted Nathanael to his feet and held him fast in an embrace that seemed to shatter all the coldness and loneliness of the past three days.

Nathanael could hardly believe his eyes, his ears, his hands. This was indeed Jesus. The scars on face and hands and feet declared this body to be the same that hung upon the Roman cross. The voice and the eyes and the compassion proclaimed this man to be the same who walked Galilean hills with his disciples. As Nathanael stared at his beloved Master, he thought he saw angels all around Him, going up and coming down, just like on that long-ago day under the fig tree.

Nathanael could not understand, not at least, until he heard that familiar voice call his name, Nathanael, God has given. The simple farmer knew in a flash that this was what life and God and love were all about. God had given Jesus back to them. Deep inside himself, Nathanael knew that this was also about all the other things that had been taken away from him. The loss was not permanent, for finally Nathanael understood what this rabbi-carpenter had been talking about all these years. God truly did love His human children and in His mercy and love and compassion would give to them all that their hearts could desire. Resurrection is return, first of Jesus, and then of all that must pass through the gates of death. The gates of death are only a temporary passage; the fields of paradise are the eternal place of life and love.

So Nathanael lived a life he could never have conceived back home. He was called Bartholomew by those who followed Jesus. On that day, in the garden, eyes still wet with tears, he gave himself once again to Jesus. Jesus took him and gave the world back to him. Jesus took him and gave him back to the world.

God had given Nathanael everything that Nathanael had ever desired, and more. Resurrection was his forever.

Drop, drop, slow tears. But now they were tears of joy. Amen.

\*John 1.45-51; 21.2