

“RJ on Gethsemane”

Excerpt from Chapter 14 of Rock Johnson's
Let Me Tell Yuh: Stories of the Maine Messiah
by Pastor Steve Hammond on 1/12/2020
Text: Mark 14:32:42 at FBC of Newport, NH

When supper was over we sung a hymn, and set off together for Josh's favorite place in all a Bangor—Thomas Hill. More specifically, the standpipe on top of it. You know, that spot that's good for looking over the city and good for prayin'. It weren't far from where we was, so we started walking. Josh was in the lead.

Inevitably the subject of betrayal come up again soon after we started. Josh let it go on for a minute or so and then he turned around and spoke, which made us blunder into each other a bit.

“All a yuh are gonna stumble n' fall tonight on account a me,” he said. “It's written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I've risen, I'll go ahead of you n' meet yuh back at Bailey Island.” Then he resumed walking. And the others followed, except me.

“No Josh,” I said. “Even if everyone falls away—I will not.”

Josh stopped again with a scuff of his foot. “Simon,” he said. Then he turned so I could see his shadowy face dimly lit by a street light under the night sky behind him. “I'm tellin' yuh the truth heuh: today, even this night, before the dawn is broke with two cracks a the hammer, you will deny me three times.”

I could not believe what was comin' out a Josh's mouth n' hittin' me in the gut. I started to object.

“Simon!” Josh said ta stop what I was about ta say. “Simon, Satan wants to have *you* for his supper. But I've prayed for you, Rock, that your faith will not fail. And I'm confident you'll return strong for your brothers when this is behind you.”

“Josh, with all due respect, that *cannot* be true. Even if I have to *die* right along with you, I will never, ever disown you!”

Josh said nothing and resumed his course. Everyone else joined in agreement with me as we followed him up the street. I felt good about what I'd said, at least at the time. But it weren't so good as what I thought it was. And I weren't quite the man I proclaimed ta be. There was a seed a doubt I was covering up in that terrible quiet following my words.

In a few minutes, we come up the hill to that favorite place on top a Bangor, Josh's get-a-way from the world. That is until that night. The wide, round bulk of the standpipe dwarfed us as we approached it. We stood at the massive wooden door embedded in the stone foundation. Josh got out a key, opened it up and went inside. The rest of us followed him in and up the stairway to the right. We had flashlights but we didn't turn 'em on. It was a full moon coming through the windows. And besides, there weren't much need for advertising our presence. We could see just fine.

We expected Josh to go immediately to the roof and direct everyone else to the promenade as he usually would. But this time he motioned everyone onto the grand promenade and joined us there. He had another course from that supper to give us. So we all sat down below the railing wall and faced Josh.

There he prayed. It was a prayer a some length. It was actually rare to hear Josh pray for more n' half a minute. Most a his long times a prayer was strictly between him n' God. But this was a long one. N' we all was evidently welcome ta listen in. Basically, he prayed for himself, prayed for us, and he prayed for those who would believe n' follow him later. What struck me most was the way he put it all ... the power of his Spirit was in every word. And that made me wonder if he was gonna start glowin' again like he did at Halfway Rock.

But Josh did not glow. Even though he prayed a lot about bein' glorified, he didn't glow. In fact, he just got quiet at the end. Too quiet. Without so much as a "Amen," Josh got up, reached for a key and headed off the promenade by way of a door marked "Service Personnel ONLY." It led to the chamber just under the standpipe's roof. Then he looked back and invited Jimmy n' John n' me to stay by the entryway with the door open. His face was spooky serious in a kind a half moonlight, half darkness just inside the doorway. It took him a while ta speak.

"My soul ... is being crushed to death," Josh said.

While I was wondering if I could a heard him correctly, he continued, "Keep watch. Pray you don't fall into a black hole a trouble you can't escape." Then he disappeared int' the dark. The brothers n' I looked at each other. Then we sat by the door and made ourselves comfortable.

Pretty soon we realized Josh never made it to the roof. He stayed in that cavernous tomb underneath it. And with th' acoustics what they was, we could hear him as he started right in with his praying. Prayin' inside that vault with its starless, pitch black heavens oppressing the very air he breathed.

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup a poison away from me,” he said. “Yet, I’m not praying for my will to be done, but your will to be done.”

Josh surely prayed more, but I didn’t hear it. With all that food, n’ drink, n’ courses after courses a Josh’s teachin’, and now this. . . well, the night was gettin’ long, and I weren’t no night hawk.

So next thing I knew, I was bein’ woke up by Josh standing in the doorway saying, “Wake up! Simon, are you sleeping? Couldn’t you be on guard for even one hour? To protect yourself if nothing else. I know your spirit is willing, but your flesh is making you derelict a duty.”

I felt a bit picked on, as I saw Jimmy n’ John wiping the sleep from their eyes too. But I’m not sure any of us was all that awake even with our eyes open.

Then Josh turned back int’ the darkness, where the sound of his footsteps faded with him. Finally we heard his voice echoing back to us, like a sad song stripped of its usual accompaniment, yet still having a faithfulness, even a beauty, about it.

“Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet ... not my will, but your will be done.”

That was the last thing I heard. Jimmy n’ John fell asleep as well. Though John said he lasted long enough to notice there might a been someone else in there trying to help Josh, as he was really struggling. John thought it might a been a angel. I didn’t think one way or the other at the time. I was sleeping.

But then, there he was again, standing in the doorway. This time he looked terrible. He had sweat like drops a blood on his forehead, which brought back that perfume smell from Tuesday. As he stood there looking at us, I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing at all. Ends up, while Josh was suffering in his prayers for things beyond my comprehension, I was sleepin’ all comfortable n’ quiet.

This was repeated one more time. Same prayer from Josh. Same forsaken silence from the rest of us, sleeping as if all that mattered was the weight of our eyelids. We continued not praying n’ not saying anything at all. And so one a the most wicked things I ever done was that of my doin’ nothin’.

“E-nough,” Josh said to wake us again. He looked stronger than before. And determined as ever. “The hour has come, guys.” He pulled Jimmy up by the elbow like he was an old man. I noticed a blue flickering in the night air behind us.

“Look-it,” Josh said. “The Son a Maine is double-crossed into the hands a sinners. We’d best go and meet my betrayer.”

We followed Josh down the stairway with the blue light bouncing around us as we descended past the windows. It got brighter n’ brighter as we tried harder n’ harder not ta look at it. When we got below the windows in the foundation just inside the door, we got some relief in the darkness. That is, until Josh opened the door.

A flood a headlights, Maglites, and the flashing blue lights a the Bangor PD all come pouring in over Josh like he was the star a some show about ta go on stage.

But then a dark figure come into silhouette and approached Josh standin’ in the glow a th’ doorway. I could make out the voice—it was Judas—as he embraced Josh n’ kissed him on the cheek. Then he stepped aside and left Josh standing there for the world ta do with as it pleased.

That is, after I cut the ear off the first guy who tried ta lay a hand on Josh. There was no way I was lettin’ this go down easy, even if Josh himself seemed resigned to it. But then, he weren’t so resigned as I thought, at least as far as what I’d just done. He made me hand over my favorite knife and pick up the ear a that guy. Then he put the guy’s ear back on and made like nothing had like nothin’ had ever happened. I mean I cut that guy’s ear clean off, and now it’s back on n’ listening ta Josh say, “Anyone who lives by the sword will die by the sword.” Then he proceeded ta negotiate the release a everyone but himself.

That’s when the crew scattered like pigeons.

John n’ I, however, hung back to follow Josh from behind, in the shadows. We was watching the whole procession as they made their short way to the doors of the Penobscot County Courthouse, which should a been closed at that hour. But not only was it open for business, there was a surprising number a people there. Some just catchin’ up with what was going on. Like these two guys:

“You’ll never guess who they arrested up at the Standpipe,” one man said.

“That Josh guy who just come in on the Thankspassover Parade the other Sunday,” his friend replied.

“How’d you know that?” the man asked. “It only just happened.”

“Heard it on the scanner,” said his friend. “Thought I’d come see for myself.”

The two proceeded into the court house. N’ John n’ I followed.