

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland
"For the Offering"
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January 18, 2026

Simeon woke before the sun, though in truth, he had barely slept in a week. Newborns have a way of stretching the hours, and his tiny son was no exception. Despite the exhaustion tugging at his eyes, Simeon felt a surge of nervous energy. Today was the day he would take his wife and their firstborn to the Temple to perform the rites of purification and dedication. Living in a small village on the outskirts of Jerusalem, the trip was a significant undertaking, made even more daunting by the crush of the Passover crowds.

For months, Simeon had tucked away every spare copper, slowly amassing enough to afford a dove. It was the "offering of the poor," but to Simeon, it represented his best. He tucked his small hoard of Roman coins into a worn leather satchel, checked the ties on his sandals, and helped his wife settle the baby into her arms. Together, they set out on the treacherous, winding road to the Holy City.

Jerusalem was a sea of humanity. The air was thick with the smell of woodsmoke and the sound of a dozen different languages. Simeon felt a pang of anxiety as they pushed through the gates; he had never seen the city so tight with people. Protecting his wife and child with one arm, he navigated the surging tide of pilgrims toward the Outer Court.

He didn't want to look as desperate as he felt, but the sheer scale of the Temple—and the inflated prices he had overheard at the city gates—made his stomach churn. His eyes scanned the rows of merchants, searching for a face he could trust. Most were shouting, their eyes hard and calculating, but eventually, he spotted a man who seemed more settled than the rest. The merchant was middle-aged, his table neatly organized with scales and an abacus, and he spoke with a steady, practiced calm.

"Peace be with you," Simeon said, approaching the table, trying to steady his voice.

"A pair of doves, clean. For a purification."

The merchant, Ezra, didn't look up immediately; he was busy adjusting the sliding weights on his bronze scale. "Doves are in high demand today, friend. Passover prices. It's six drachmae for a pair of the best, pre-inspected."

Simeon felt the blood drain from his face. He had only four. "Six? Last year, my neighbour bought a pair for three. I've travelled from the hills—I have a newborn son and a wife who needs to complete her rites."

Ezra finally looked up, his eyes softening just a fraction, though his hands stayed busy. "Your neighbour didn't buy during Passover, and he didn't buy from a prime location near the gate. I pay for this spot, and I pay for the inspectors to certify these birds, so you don't get turned away at the inner court. You buy a 'cheap' bird out in the street, and the priests find a blemish on the wing? You'll be back here paying my price anyway, only you'll have wasted your morning, and your money."

Simeon looked back at his wife, who was swaying the sleeping infant in the shade of a nearby pillar.

He reached for his satchel, his fingers brushing the cool metal of the coins he had worked so hard to save. He emptied the coins onto the wooden table. A few Roman denarii and a handful of copper coins rolled toward Ezra.

"This is all I have," Simeon whispered. "Four denarii and some change. Please. I cannot go back to the village without the sacrifice. It would be a shame on my house."

Ezra sighed, looking at the small pile of money and then at the young family. He was a businessman, but he wasn't heartless. He reached into a cage and pulled out two birds, checking their feathers with a practiced thumb.

"The Roman coin is fine, but I have to charge you the exchange fee to turn it into Temple silver," Ezra muttered, pulling his abacus toward him. The wooden beads clicked rapidly under his fingers. "Tell you what... I'll take the four denarii. I'll waive the exchange fee because of the child. But you owe me a favour next time you're in the city. Deal?"

Simeon felt a weight lift off his chest. "Deal. May the Almighty bless your—"

The word "generosity" was cut short. A sudden, violent *thwack* echoed against the stone, followed by the sound of heavy furniture splintering. Before Simeon could even reach for his birds, the world turned upside down.

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Ezra was a fixture at the Temple, a man whose presence was as steady as the stone pillars surrounding him. Over the years, he had built a solid reputation; he was known for being fair—or at least, his exchange fees weren't much higher than the competition. He made a point to stock quality livestock: cattle, sheep, and doves that strictly met the requirements for sacrifice. Because he maintained good standing with the local priests and rabbis, they often directed pilgrims his way. Ezra understood the market; he knew that most travellers lacked the means to bring an animal from afar. It was simply more convenient for them to sell their stock at home and bring the silver to him to buy what they needed.

His day always began with a ritual of preparation. He arrived well before the crowds to settle the livestock, ensuring they were fed and watered. Then came the tools of his trade: the scales, the weights, and the abacus, all arranged precisely on his heavy wooden table. This particular morning felt especially promising. It was Passover, and Ezra had secured a prime location near the entrance of the Temple grounds. "It's going to be a busy and profitable day," he mused, watching the first wave of pilgrims arrive. He specialized in the anxious ones—those in a rush or a bit overwhelmed—who would pay for the convenience of his booth.

The disruption happened so fast that Ezra barely saw it start; he was deep in a negotiation over the price of a dove. The sharp crack of a whip snapped the air, startling the cattle into a panicked lowing. Ezra looked up to see a blur of motion. A lone man, fueled by a terrifying, focused fury, was moving through the market like a storm. With a roar of wood striking stone, the man began "flipping out"—literally. Tables were upended. Ezra watched in horror as his own table was tossed; coins that had been carefully counted, sorted, and stacked were sent flying into the dust. In a chaotic flurry of white feathers, the cages broke open, and his doves took to the sky.

Ezra wasn't just a bystander; he threw himself into the chaos with frantic desperation. His voice was hoarse as he tried to shout the man down, but his cries were drowned out by the lowing of panicked cattle and the rhythmic *thwack* of the whip. The "rabble-rouser" was a force of

nature, moving with a speed that made Ezra's efforts look like a child chasing the tide. When the man finally surged toward the next stall, the adrenaline faded, leaving Ezra breathless and shaking amidst the wreckage. He stood among the splintered wood and empty cages, realizing that in a long history of dark business days, this wasn't just a loss—it was a total wash.

The immediate aftermath was a desperate, undignified scramble. Ezra spent the next hour on his hands and knees in the dust, competing with street urchins and opportunistic onlookers to recover his coins. While the heavy silver shekels were easy enough to spot, the smaller copper coins had vanished into the crevices of the paving stones. Every time his fingers brushed the grit to find a coin, he felt a sharp sting of humiliation; a man of his standing should not have been grovelling in the dirt like a beggar. When he finally stood to assess the "inventory of ruin," the sight was devastating. His heavy table lay on its side with a splintered leg, his bronze scales were hopelessly bent, and the beads of his abacus were scattered—some crushed into fine dust under the heels of the mob.

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Andrew moved through the streets of Jerusalem with a quiet, persistent wonder. He had only been following the Nazarene for a short time, but his life already felt like a net cast into deep, unfamiliar waters. He had trusted John the Baptist's word—if the lion of the wilderness said this was the Lamb, Andrew believed him.

He had seen the private glory in Cana, where water had blushed into wine at a mere whisper. He had seen Jesus heal and teach in small circles, away from the prying eyes of the Pharisees. But as they approached the towering marble of the Temple, Andrew felt a shift. The private ministry was over.

"Why here, Master?" Andrew had wondered silently as they ascended the steps. "Why now?"

He stood at the edge of the Court of the Gentiles, his fisherman's hands tucked into his tunic. He watched as Jesus's eyes swept over the stalls, the exchange tables, and the lowing cattle. He saw a fire ignite in Jesus's gaze that he hadn't seen at the wedding feast. When Jesus began to braid the cords into a whip, Andrew felt a chill. This wasn't the quiet miracle-worker from Galilee; this was a reclaiming of a home.

As the tables began to fly and the silver clattered across the stone, Andrew didn't join the violence. Instead, he did what he had always done: he looked for the people Jesus was looking for. He saw the merchants' fury, but he also saw the collateral damage. He saw a young father looking at the ground with a face full of shattered hope. He saw a mother clutching a child, terrified by the noise.

Andrew realized then that Jesus wasn't just clearing the court of greed; he was clearing the way for everyone to come to God.

While the "crazy Galilean" moved toward the inner gates, Andrew moved toward the wreckage. He began to gather the stray doves that had fluttered into corners. He caught the eye of a few other disciples, nodding toward the pilgrims who were wandering aimlessly in the dust.

"The Master has cleared the path," Andrew whispered to himself, "now we must make sure they know they are welcome to walk it."

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Simeon's hand throbbed where it had been stepped on, and his satchel felt agonizingly light against his hip. He didn't look at his wife; he couldn't bear to see the disappointment in her eyes. They had travelled so far, and now they were leaving unpurified, their silver gone and their sacrifice lost to the sky. He felt as though the very heavens had turned a cold shoulder to his family.

As they reached the edge of the Temple Mount, trying to navigate through the retreating crowds, a man stepped out from the shadow of a pillar. He was a sturdy man with the calloused hands of a fisherman and eyes that seemed to have seen both great storms and great peace. It was Andrew, one of the companions of the man who had caused the upheaval.

He had been watching the family, noticing the way Simeon's wife clutched the infant and the hollow look on Simeon's face. Andrew stepped forward, his voice low and kind. "Peace be with you, brother."

Simeon flinched, still wary from the violence. "We are leaving," he muttered. "We have nothing left to trade."

"We aren't trading," Andrew said, reaching behind him to a small crate he had rescued from the wreckage. He pulled out two doves, their white feathers unruffled and their eyes bright. "The Master did not come to stop the prayers of the faithful. He came to clear the way for them."

He held the birds out toward Simeon. Simeon hesitated, his mind still stuck on the "six drachmae" Ezra had demanded. "I cannot pay for these. My coins are in the dirt back there."

Andrew placed the birds gently into Simeon's hands, closing the young father's fingers around them. "The Master says that God's house is a gift, not a marketplace. Take them. Go and present your son. Your sacrifice is already seen."

Simeon stood frozen, the warmth of the birds vibrating against his palms. He looked over Andrew's shoulder and saw the Galilean standing a short distance away, surrounded no longer by fury, but by those seeking healing. The man caught Simeon's eye and offered a short, solemn nod—a silent acknowledgement of a father's devotion.

"Go," Andrew urged with a small smile. "Before the line at the altar grows too long."

Simeon didn't have his silver, and his hand still ached, but as he turned back toward the inner courts, the bitterness had evaporated. He realized that while the tables of the merchants had been overturned, a different kind of table had been set—one where a poor father from the hills was invited to the front of the line without a price tag.

They performed the ritual as the sun began to dip low. Simeon watched the smoke of the offering rise, a thin, white ribbon drifting straight and true toward the darkening blue of the sky. For the first time since the child's birth, the heavy coil of anxiety in his chest unspooled. He wasn't leaving with less; he was leaving with everything.

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Across the city, the evening was settling differently. Bruised and indignant, Ezra had spent his final hours at the Temple seeking redress from the Guard, only to be met with cold indifference. The authorities, embarrassed by the breach of security, had no interest in compensating a merchant for a riot they couldn't control. By late afternoon, Ezra didn't have the heart to rebuild. While other merchants patched their booths together with twine and hope, he loaded his bent scales into a small cart and began the long, limping walk home.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the air grew thick with the scent of roasting lamb—a smell that usually signalled celebration, but today felt like a taunt. Every hearth fire in Jerusalem seemed to be burning through his profits.

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As the first stars began to pierce the velvet sky over the city, the two men sat in their respective homes. Ezra sat in a silent room, the scratching of his quill the only sound as he tallied his ruin. He saw a world that had descended into chaos, where the rules of commerce and preparation no longer offered protection. He looked at his empty pens and saw only a disaster.

But miles away, on the quiet road back to the hills, Simeon looked up at those same stars. He felt the steady breathing of his son against his chest and the weight of a grace he couldn't explain. He saw a world that had finally been made right.

The tables had been overturned, the silver was lost to the dust, and the "business" of the Temple had been broken—but for the first time in a generation, the path to the God was wide open, and the price of entry had already been paid.

Amen