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## **The Rejected Bread**

**Luke 20: 9-18**

A group of Russian prisoners, most of them convicted of sham political crimes against the state, stand in a train station, isolated from the general public in a feeble attempt to disprove that they exist. These prisoners have been rejected by their society. They are meant to be invisible. Yet several old ladies know of the prisoners' existence and know where they can be found. They arrive with bundles of clothing and food to give as gifts of mercy and sustenance. One elderly lady comes bearing freshly-baked bread, but the merciless guards will not let her near the hungry men. So, elderly though she is, she tries throwing the bread to the famished men. But she has no arm: plop, plop, plop, plop, plop, fall the loaves, out of the prisoners' reach. The transport train arrives. The prisoners board it, headed to a concentration camp. One prisoner looks back to observe tersely, "The holy bread was left to lie in the dust."

Now, my question to you is: who held the power in this scene?

The answer seems obvious. It is the guards!

They had the power by their cruelty to keep the prisoners hungry.

They had the power to reject the old woman's gift of bread. Or so it would seem.

But appearances can be deceiving.

For among those prisoners was a writer whose story ranks as among the most extraordinary of the twentieth century. His name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn. His life was one of stark contrasts. Raised by his mother within the Russian Orthodox Church, he had grown up as a Marxist mathematician. An artillery officer in the Russian military during World War II, twice decorated for bravery, he was nevertheless arrested for writing a few comments uncomplimentary of Stalin's conduct of the war. Rejected by his government, and sentenced to eight years in the Soviet gulag system, Solzhenitsyn nevertheless mirrored his government's commitment to atheism.

But by the time he had left prison he had realized that God was the ultimate reality whose Spirit had given him the strength to survive unspeakable horror.

Once released from prison, Solzhenitsyn began to write, and the secret police were so suspicious of his work that they actually confiscated some of his manuscripts. Even so, Solzhenitsyn persisted and went on to write a multi-volume chronicle of the Soviet prison system, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

This rejected prisoner had the power to remember the truth and tell it.

In time that prison system the guards were employed to defend, and indeed, the very political system that put that prison in place, crumbled in disrepute before the power of this rejected man's words.

And though that old woman's act of charity was frustrated by the guards' rejection of it, her kindness warmed the heart of that prisoner with a nourishment that no earthly bread could have bestowed.

Rejection is a part of life. It happens everyday. A guy asks a girl for a date and is turned down.

A student applies to a college and is refused. An applicant seeks a job and is told that none are available.

Happens all the time. Our Lord reminds us that rejection is even woven into the story of God.

Jesus referred to himself as the Bread of Life.

But he perceived that the spiritual nourishment he offered would engender resistance and rejection,

so he told the story of a vineyard owner who sent representative upon representative to the owner's own vineyard to remind the tenants to whom tribute was owed. Though the tenants owed their very livelihood to the owner's graciousness, they treated the owner's every emissary with disrespect, then rejected and put to death the owner's most cherished representative, the owner's beloved son. Why? The tenants thought they owned the vineyard when in fact it belonged to God. The tenants thought that in rejecting the owner's son that they could establish who had the power. They couldn't be more wrong. Jesus says with piercing clarity: "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner." Contrary to appearances, the true power resides with the rejected stone.

The Soviet authorities were so fearful of what Solzhenitsyn might write, that while he was briefly out of the country, the KGB grabbed one of his close friends, a peasant woman, and tortured her mercilessly until she revealed the whereabouts of the only typed manuscript of his book. They didn't need to kill her; she took her own life a few days later, no doubt in despair that her inability to withstand intolerable pain had resulted in the book's destruction. No doubt she and the Soviet authorities thought the matter was now ended. What neither she nor the KGB knew was that Solzhenitsyn had managed to smuggle another copy of the *Gulag Archipelago* through a friend to the YMCA in Paris, where it was published and won him the Nobel Prize for Literature. This rejected man had the power to remember the truth and to tell it, It changed the world. It changed *his* world.

As we come to our Lord's table we admit that the Supper is an acknowledgement of the world's rejection of the Bread of Life.

God sent his Bread into the world, and most of humanity pushed it away. If we would participate in the Supper and celebrate the depth of its truth, then we must accept the fact that rejection of the Good News is part of *our* spiritual journey, too. Not all of our invitations to come share our Lord's table will be accepted. Not all of our overtures to bring people into this community will find receptive hearts. Not all of our efforts to articulate God's grace in new and exciting forms will find a ready audience. Not all of our attempts to reconcile, to heal, to teach, and to redeem will be appreciated. Rejection is woven into the spiritual life.

The Supper reminds us that the Bread of Life was rejected by the world and thrust powerless upon a tree, nailed to a cross until his lifeless body was thrown into a tomb, where a stone as rolled across its entrance, the stone symbolic of the world's rejection of God's gambit. But the words of our Lord are true: the rejected stone was resurrected by our God to become the very cornerstone of the Kingdom of God.

God does not allow the rejected stone to lie forever in the dust. The rejected stone becomes the foundation upon which the peace and redemption of the world rests. Even when we encounter rejection, we are to live our Gospel with hope and enthusiasm because the Supper reminds us that the power of the rejected stone will ultimately prevail. It is our privilege to come to our Lord's table with undaunted courage, for even in the face of rejection, we claim in confidence that our Lord will triumph over all the world's rejections of God's love.

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