

Waiting for the Stranger

A rock that will cause many to fall and many to rise. A sign that will be opposed. A sword that will pierce a mother's soul. The secret thoughts of many hearts that will be revealed.

These were some of the words that tumbled from my lips as I stood in the Court of the Women in the golden Temple of Jerusalem and held a baby in my arms. Not the kind of words you would normally associate with a baby. Not the kind of words a mother would want to hear.

And yet they were words that had to be spoken, for they were words of truth.

But you want to know my story from the beginning? Ah, but where does my story begin? I am an old man now, but my story starts long before I was born, for it is the product of forces and powers at work long in this world, yes, and of a Power that is over all powers. I did not realise that when I was young. When you are young, you can only see the immediate, the forces at work in you and around you. This is one of the advantages of old age. When you are young, you cannot understand the old; but when you are old you can understand the young, for you have been there—if you allow yourself to remember.

But as I was saying, when you are young you live in the present. You have little thought for the past or the future. But when you are old, you reflect a great deal on the past, not only your own past, but the generations and ages long gone. And yes, the future too. For you know your own future in this world is short—and growing shorter by the day. You care about the future that your children and grandchildren are going to inherit.

It is many years now since I took up a study of these things. And there was much to study. I was not a priest, or a teacher or a lawyer. I was just a man—but a man with a question. Why was God silent? Or let me put it another way: there was a contradiction between past expectation and present reality. We were a people who were waiting—waiting for something to be revealed.

Let me explain. For the past 600 years our nation has been dominated by the great empires of the world—Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Greece and now Rome. We have been conquered and exiled, brought back and subjugated, and our land has been occupied and controlled. All except for one brief period of freedom.

And yet, the very books that tell us of the earliest of those times (and of glorious times before then) are

full of great assurances about the future. A glorious future is promised to our people.

Had God forgotten us? Why was there no word from the Lord—for 400 years? How long had we to wait? These were the questions I wrestled with. And so I started to study the ancient scrolls: the books of Moses, the great Prince of Egypt, whom God used to lead our people out of slavery; the books that told of the kingdom of David and Solomon that stretched from the Great River to Egypt and from the desert to the Great Sea; the books of Psalms and poems they had written; and the works of the Prophets. And there I made great discoveries. I discovered many things. Let me tell you of some of them. I discovered why we were waiting, and what we were waiting for. I even discovered how long we had to wait!

I discovered that there were indeed glorious promises in those ancient documents. The Lord promised salvation and redemption—and not to our people only, but to the whole world! These promises go back to ancient times. 2000 years ago, God promised Abraham that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him. King David prayed that God would bless and pity us and shine on us with his face, that the earth would know his ways, and all nations his salvation. And through the Prophet Isaiah God said, “All mankind will know that I, the Lord, am your Saviour,

your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob”, and that his house would be a house of prayer for all nations.

But you may be wondering, why all this need for salvation and redemption? Why do we need to be saved, to be redeemed? What do we need to be saved and redeemed from? This I also discovered in our ancient books—and it is not something unique to our people, but is common to the whole world. We all disobey God. Yes, it is as simple and as sickening as that—all the pain and all the hurt, all the guilt and all the shame, all the corruption, the violence and oppression. We’re out of line, we’re out of step, we’re in the dark. We need to be set free, not from Greece or Rome or any political power, but from a power far greater, a power of deceit and darkness and death. “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” That is what the Prophet Jeremiah asked. But even more, who can cure it? And how can it be cured?

The answer to these questions I also discovered. Of course, in one sense, every child of our people knows the answers to these questions. God alone can cure the human heart, and he does so by providing us with the law, and with priests and sacrifices to atone for breaking that law. These are the answers we have been taught from our mother’s knee and by our teachers and priests. But in the old books of God I discovered

something new—new to me, and I suspect, new to many. I discovered that while God himself had instituted the animal sacrifices, yet he also made clear that they were insufficient. For one thing they had to be repeated, day after day, year after year, high priest after high priest. There was not one sacrifice that atoned for all sin.

And there was this as well: King David said in his great penitential Psalm, after he had fallen into great sin, that God did not delight in sacrifice or take pleasure in burnt offerings. Instead God accepted the sacrifice of a broken and a contrite heart. And Isaiah went even further along the same lines, and then issued this invitation from the Lord: “Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” But how could this be, if there is no sacrifice? Who can read this riddle?

That is when I made my biggest discovery. I discovered that there were great purposes of God in salvation and redemption yet to be accomplished, and they were to be accomplished in a certain way: not through forces and movements and peoples, not through temples and priests and sacrifices, but through a man. A very special man, for whom we were to wait.

Now, I have not been alone in waiting for this man. Many are waiting for the Anointed King. For it is plain

to any who care to look that God has promised a King. But the question is: What kind of King? Many today expect a great king like David who will drive the Romans out and set up a new kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem. But in my studies, I discovered something startling.

Let me take you back to the beginning—right at the beginning, when the first ancestors of the human race, Adam and Eve, were driven out of the Garden of Eden because they had listened to the serpent Satan and had rebelled against the Lord who loved them. There were words of curse that God spoke upon Satan—words of curse for him, but words of hope for us. There would be a Seed of the Woman who would come. Satan would strike his heel. But the Seed would crush Satan’s head. There would be salvation, there would be freedom from evil, but it would be at great cost.

And so people waited, for generation after generation, through the mists of time they waited, till God called our forefather Abraham out of the dark idolatry of Ur of the Chaldees. And he gave him great promises. But above them all, there was this promise: that through Abraham’s seed, all nations on earth would be blessed.

And as Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, blessed his children, he spoke of the Lion of Judah, and that the

sceptre would not depart from Judah until he came to whom it belonged.

But after that the people endured long years of slavery in Egypt and still they waited through many lives of men. There was redemption from Egypt, but there was much disobedience and strife, until from the tribe of Judah, from the least of the towns of Judah, from the least of the families, there rose a king—only a shepherd boy, David—who yet broke the yoke of the oppressor and established a great kingdom. God promised that he would raise up David's Seed, a son who would be punished, but from whom the Lord would never take away his love. His kingdom would be an everlasting kingdom.

And yet in the time of David's grandson, that great kingdom was broken and divided. And still men waited—waiting for the fulfilment of the promises of God—waiting through the reigns of many kings and queens, some good and some evil. But in the times of those latter kings, God sent great prophets, and among the greatest of these was Isaiah. In the two scrolls of the Book of Isaiah, I made the greatest discoveries. In the first scroll, I discovered that the one we were waiting for was to be no ordinary man. By the Spirit of the Lord that was on him, he said:

"The virgin will conceive and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (God with us)... He will be a

stone that makes men stumble, a rock that makes them fall... he will honour Galilee of the nations, along the Jordan—The people walking in darkness will see a great light and a light will dawn on those living in the land of the shadow of death ... For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

There can be no higher titles! This one was to be none other than God himself, come to visit his people, come to work their salvation!

And yet when I came to the second scroll of Isaiah, I found he was to come as a servant, and would come to suffer:

“He was despised and rejected by the human race, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. We despised and rejected him, and we didn’t care. But he took up our weaknesses, and it was our sorrows that he carried. We thought he was being punished by God for his own sins, but he was pierced for our disobedience, crushed for our rebellion. He was punished so we could have peace, and his wounds bring us healing. All of us, like sheep, have wandered away from God’s paths to follow our own way. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all.”

Who could understand this? One who would be a man, yet God-with-us? One who would be the Great

King, but who would be a servant. One who would save and redeem, but by his own suffering?

And so we still waited for the revelation of this mystery. We still waited for light in our darkness. I discovered the grace of waiting—waiting on God. Many who had gone before me had waited, and waited without ever seeing what was promised. Why should I be any different?

But here is the really exciting bit: I discovered that the waiting was nearly over! In the Book of Daniel, one of those whom men call the lesser prophets, I discovered that the Lord had revealed the time of the fulfilment of all those prophecies. Daniel, who had been in exile in Babylon since Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Judah, remembered that the Prophet Jeremiah had predicted that the desolation of Jerusalem would last 70 years, and so he brought the situation before God in prayer. And God answered him far beyond his wildest dreams. He not only told him that Jerusalem would be rebuilt, but he also told him when God's Anointed King would come. A period of 69 sevens would elapse between the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the time when the Anointed one would be cut off. If those numbers referred to years and my calculations were correct, the Anointed King, the Lion of Judah, the Redeemer, Immanuel, might very well be born in my lifetime!

But still I waited, and I was not alone. There were others here and there who had not given up hope: those who were not cowed by the awesome might of Rome, or lulled to sleep by the smooth words of the priests and lawyers, or roused to acts of rash rebellion by the revolutionaries. We waited. There were those who had waited longer than me. There was an old widow woman called Anna, who stayed all day and every day in the Temple. She was 84, but she never ceased praying to God for the redemption of Jerusalem. "Simeon," she would say to me, "Simeon, there has been no word from the Lord, no revelation of prophecy these 400 years, but the day of redemption will surely come."

And then we started to hear tales of marvellous things beginning to happen in the hill country of Judea. We heard of an old priest and a young woman prophesying, and of angelic visitations. We were reminded of the words of the prophet Joel: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams." The old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were childless, but an angel met him in the Temple and revealed to him they would have a son called John who would prepare the way for the Lord. He was struck dumb until the child was borne, when he prophesied and

spoke of the Lord's coming redemption, of a King raised up in the House of David.

Not only that, but a kinswoman of Elizabeth's, a girl Mary to name, was also visited by an angel with even greater news. These things were spoken in great secrecy, for fear of what those in authority might do (a fear that was justified, as it turned out), but there was no doubt that this young woman was to be the mother of the Anointed King. The angel had said to her: "Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and he'll be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his forefather David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his kingdom will never end!" Mary was puzzled because she was a virgin. But the angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby will be holy and he'll be called the Son of God."

We heard eventually that Mary's child was born, and due to the arrangements of the great Emperor in Rome, he was born in David's town of Bethlehem. But born in obscurity, not in a palace, not even in a house, for there was no room for them in the inn. "And so it begins", I thought, "The world will have no room for the Saviour Jesus."

But some did visit him to welcome him. Not priests or kings—but shepherds! The outcasts, the outlaws! An angel of the Lord appeared to them as they were looking after their sheep out in the hills and told them, “Don’t be afraid. I bring you joyful good news for everyone. A Saviour has been born to you today in the town of David. He is Christ the Lord. This will be your sign: You will find a baby wrapped warmly but lying in a manger.”

I wondered if I would ever see him. His whereabouts were kept secret, known only to a few. But then as I was reading in the Book of Job, I read these words: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth... in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes.” I knew that the Holy Spirit was assuring me I would see him before I died.

And this is how it came about, how the long wait was ended. One day I felt a compulsion to go up to the Temple. There were many other things I could have been doing. More reading, more research. But that day the Spirit was compelling me to leave everything and go.

Up the long flights of steps I went slowly. I was not as young as I used to be, when I would run up those steps! I passed through the outer court of the nations and entered the Court of Women (which was as far as

women could go). There a man I knew and trusted whispered in my ear, "He's here! See that couple, and the baby they are holding? They have come up for the mother's purification and the boy's redemption, as he is their firstborn." Even in my excitement I couldn't help but smile that the Redeemer, to fulfil the law must first be redeemed!

My friend led me to them, and I asked Mary if I could hold him. Then I held in my arms the Seed of the Woman, the Seed of Abraham, the Lion of Judah, Immanuel, the Prince of Peace, the Redeemer who would be pierced for our transgressions, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon me, and all that I had discovered in the Scriptures came together and I praised God:

"Sovereign Lord," I said, "as you have promised, let your servant die in peace. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light of revelation for the nations and a glory for your people Israel."

I could see that Mary and Joseph were astonished by what I said. So I blessed them and said to Mary: "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall and many to rise. He is a sign from God who will be opposed. So the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul."

I could see my words roused fears in her heart, but I could also see strength and faith, and I was glad. Glad

I was able to give her words of warning from the Lord to prepare her for what was to come, but glad above all I had seen him with my own eyes and held him in my arms.

My eyes will not see the end of the story. My old eyes will be closed in death before that day dawns. Yet dawn it will. The day we long waited for will have come—the day when Mary’s soul will be pierced, for her son will be pierced. What will that day mean for you? What thoughts of your heart will be revealed? Will you fall or will you rise?

Luke 1 and 2

Isaiah 7:1-9:7 and 52:13-53:12