

God's Way Out

"For Us and For Our Little Ones"

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

Ezra 8:21.

Lesson 19. How the Deliverer Came

If in the happiness of some Christmas morning you have wished to see "peace on earth" remain forever, with "goodwill toward men," read in this chapter of the Prince of Peace, who will, ere long, deliver the world from war and strife.

YES, the Deliverer came! It was about the twenty-seventh year of the reign of Chief Tasciovanus, head of the tribes of south-eastern Britain, when Christ, the Messiah, the Deliverer, was born. London was a small village; Manchester was a little settlement on the Irwell; New York was undreamed of; Australia unknown.

The Great Tax Enrolment

In Rome, after years of strife had followed the death of Julius Caesar, Augustus came into power. It was about the thirtieth year of his reign that he sent forth the famous decree that all the world should be enrolled for taxation. But no tax was paid by Chief Tasciovanus. Nor by his tribesmen. No, Britain was still free from the Roman yoke. From the pebbled beach of Deal to the towering rocks of Land's End, Rome had as yet no power.

How Did It Affect the Jews?

But in Palestine it was different. From all parts of the land could be seen groups of men and women travelling to their native town or village to be enrolled for the taxation. The shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem, two thousand feet above the sea, watched them come. And when night fell, and the stars came out, they gathered in a group as usual and discussed these events. How much longer would they suffer this galling Roman yoke? For sixty years they had borne it, since warlike Pompey had taken their beloved Jerusalem, and had dared to enter into the holy apartments of the temple. [1] How sacrilegious!

Later, the Roman general Crassus had done worse. Not only had he profaned the temple by entering its holy rooms, but he had stolen the sacred treasure—two thousand talents of it. [2] Yes, while Caesar was plundering the Britons, Crassus plundered the Jews. Then this same Julius Caesar who had crossed the Thames in Britain—he crossed the Mediterranean and appointed Antipater to rule in Judea.

Herod, the son of Antipater, became governor of Galilee. Aye, what a plight the world was in! And Now Herod, the Idumean, Herod was king over Judea now. He had distinguished himself by honoring the Romans and toadying to them, and was now confirmed in his kingdom under Augustus Caesar, Emperor of Rome, chief ruler of the world. Herod had been a clever, unscrupulous, and energetic ruler. He had cleared the countryside of robbers, he had built temples and towns, cities and harbors. But how cruel he could be both to his subjects and his own relatives! His family affairs had gone from bad to worse. "He has nine wives," gossiped the country people. "Nine? No, only eight. He killed his favorite wife, Mariamne."

"Oh, yes! And he drowned her seventeen-year-old brother at night, poor lad!"

"Yes, and he executed her grandfather!"

"But worse than that! He has had her two sons strangled."

"And now Herod himself is in fear of all his kindred. They are all lying accusers, one of another! He fears the poison cup; he believes every false accusation; he tortures his servants and kindred to find out some real or fancied plot. He seems possessed of the devil." With sad hearts the shepherds, too, discussed the condition of their country. How mercenary were the priests now! How evil-minded the people! How had Israel fallen from God's ideal! How peaceful and full of promise now seemed the days of the past!

If Only King David Could Return!

"Twelve hundred years ago," they mused sadly, "in the cornfields over yon, beautiful Ruth gleaned after the reapers of Boaz. She lived in the village here. Here in Bethlehem, her maidens danced at her wedding. She married Boaz and became great grandmother of King David." [3]

"King David!" said one of the shepherds. "Aye me! Would God that David were here with his sling and his stone again. These be his native hills, and Bethlehem his home. There be the brooks with the smooth stones in their bed, such as he used against the giant Goliath."

"Yes, Nathan," answers his companion, "David would not fear Herod, nor Augustus."

There is a bright hope for us in spite of these things. Out of David's line shall come a Deliverer, the Messiah, [4] said one of the older men. "And the time is almost here."

"How knows thou, Zachary? Do the prophets tell the time of His appearing?"

"Yes, full well they do," replied Zachary. "Does not Daniel's book say: 'From the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and three score and two weeks'? [5] That is four hundred and eighty-three years. Four hundred and fifty-odd years have already passed; thirty years hence He shall begin His work. He may be a boy, or a babe, in one of these villages now!"

"Would to God He were here now!" responds another shepherd's voice in the darkness.

But What Rumors Are Afloat?

They talked on as they watched. Was it not true that in Jerusalem strange stories had been told in the past few months? Had not old Zacharias, while he burned incense, been visited by an angel of God some months before? Had it not been noised abroad throughout the rough hill country of Judea that the angel had declared to the venerable priest that his wife should bear a son in his old age? Moreover, this son had now been born according to the angel's word. He was to be called "John, the Prophet of the Highest," because he was destined to go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways.

Pleasant and heartening as the grapes of Sharon were the angel's words to the listening shepherds.

"And old Zacharias, impelled by the Holy Ghost, had raised his voice, thanking the Most High that through the tender mercy of our God the Day-Spring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace!" continues Zachary the shepherd.

"Yea, those be good words," assented one of his hearers. "For we all sit in the shadow of death, and the shadow is getting short for some of us older ones. And Herod shortens the shadow swiftly for many an innocent man."

"Said thou this son had now been born to Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth?" asked another. "They be both well stricken in years. In his younger days Zacharias must have seen Julius Caesar, and Pompey, too."

"Yes, they be old indeed," replied Zachary. "They are right happy with the child. And it hath been said they have been visited by the one who shall be the Messiah's mother."

"Comrades, why should not we pray God to send the Messiah?" proposed one of the men. Yes! The voice of fervent prayer arose on the hillside. But how little they dreamed that it was already answered! They resumed their seats.

Suddenly a brilliant, dazzling light shone round about them. A dog barked and howled in terror. The shepherds tumbled about in confusion and hid their faces from the overpowering brightness. "Fear not! Fear not!" said a gracious, commanding voice out of the radiant light. The shepherds raised their frightened faces as their eyes became accustomed to the strong light. "It is an angel of God," they said to themselves. "An angelic messenger. Perhaps Gabriel, the angel who told Daniel of the Messiah's coming."

"Fear not," again called out the angel, drawing closer: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." And joy and love filled his voice and thrilled their hearts as he spoke. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord," he announced.

"Christ the Lord! Christ the Lord!" How the hearts of the shepherds leaped as they heard his words. "Has He come to Bethlehem? How did we miss His glorious cortege yesterday?" But, no! There had been no glorious procession. Christ had laid His glory by. "This shall be a sign unto you," the angel directed: "You shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

"Here at Bethlehem?"

The shepherds could scarcely speak for joy. "The Messiah has come. The Messiah has come!" The news stirred their souls. Then suddenly the choirs of heaven broke into songs of gladness. The air above seemed filled with multitudes of the heavenly host, singing for very joy. The hills and valleys, each limestone outcrop and rough-built wall, the village above and the flocks below, all were flooded with the light and glory of heaven as the angel host raised their voices in melodious songs of rapture:

"Glory to God! Glory to God in the highest! And on earth peace; On earth peace; Goodwill toward men! Oh, glory to God in the highest!" That celestial music! It seemed as though heaven itself had come down to earth for a little while. Eden seemed very near again. "Ah! Leave us not, you messengers of peace and goodwill toward men." But slowly, slowly the light faded away. Then it was gone, and only the stars of old Orion twinkled down on the hillside. Yet a little of heaven was left in the hearts of the shepherds, and a little of heaven, thank God, a heavenly Babe was left in the manger.

Be of good cheer, you followers of Jesus! Before long the sky shall be radiant with light, and musical with angels' songs again. And the Babe of Bethlehem shall come as King of kings, and heaven shall come to your hearts forever. Even for ever and ever.

"We Must Go at Once!"

"Let us now go even unto Bethlehem," said the shepherds excitedly, "and see this thing which is come to pass, 'Which the Lord hath made known unto us.'" How they stumbled up the hillside and clattered along the village street! They heard a baby's cry--they entered a dimly lighted and lowly room, and found Joseph and Mary there, and the Babe lying in a manger.

Glad were their hearts. God from on high had heard the sighing of His creatures. With joyful voices and thankful hearts they worshipped, glorifying and praising God. Then they returned, and over all that region they made known the angel's message concerning the Child. "Good tidings of great joy to all people. Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Fleece-clad herdsmen, clay-besmeared potters, rough laborers, and chattering market-women passed on the good news: "On earth peace, goodwill toward men."

They understood not just how this golden age should come, but they reasoned that the Messiah would make that clear.

At Jerusalem

The story of the angels' visit to the shepherds and their wonderful news of the coming Messiah's birth, were heralded far and near. But the rabbis in Jerusalem, proud and ambitious religious teachers of that time, disdained to believe it. "Babble of ignorant countrymen," they sneered. And yet here in the temple itself the wrinkled old prophetess Anna was declaring that the heavenly Babe had been brought already to the temple. She had seen Him herself!

Old Simeon, too, the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he should not see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ. And, behold, a few days ago he had seen the Babe in the arms of His parents, he said. His soul was full of rejoicing, and he had given utterance to the words which have been sung and said in the Christian church for nineteen centuries. "Lord, now let Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou has prepared before the face of all people. A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel." [6]

But on top of all these stories Jerusalem was suddenly stirred by the news that a party of learned, influential men from the East had reached the city and were inquiring for "a new-born king." Their camels had come swinging down the slopes of Mount Olivet, up the steeps to the city, and here they were, asking the way.

"Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" they asked. "We have seen His star in the East, and are come to worship Him." Jerusalem's priests and people were troubled at the wise men's questions. What could all this mean? The worship of God had become to many a meaningless form. Most of the priests were seeking political or ecclesiastical advancement. The possibility that God's Christ had come, aroused no rejoicing in their hearts. Just as the signs of Christ's second coming are unwelcome to many worldly or misinformed hearts in these days.

But to Herod the king the news was most unwelcome. The Jews had taught that their coming King would crush all nations under His feet. The thought of such a rival for his kingly house filled him with a mad, jealous fear. He summoned the chief priests and the scribes. Hiding his feelings, he demanded: "Where shall the Christ be born?" They found the answer in the Scriptures: "In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor that shall rule My people Israel." [7] Herod still hid his evil thoughts, and called the wise men.

"The King of the Jews, whose star you have seen, is to be born in the village of Bethlehem, six miles along the road to the south," he said. "Go and search diligently for the young child, and when you have found Him bring me word again, that I may go and worship Him also."

The wise men departed, their camel bells tinkling tunefully. The night was falling, but behold, there was the star again! gleaming high above and before them, leading along the road to the south. They followed eagerly on. That star was not a planet; not Venus, nor Mercury. They knew the planets and stars too well to be mistaken. No! This star was a sign from God. It moved along the Bethlehem road and then remained still, shining out its message of hope and joy over the house where heaven's Babe--God's great gift to man--lay cradled. "This is the King!"

Complete and full rose the assurance in their hearts now as they entered the room and saw the Babe. With joy they knelt before Him and worshipped. Treasures of gold they laid at His feet, with costly frankincense and myrrh. These were their gifts of gratitude to Him who had left heaven for the love He bore to the children of men. "Our long journey--ah! What a happy ending it has had!

Tomorrow we shall return to Jerusalem and tell King Herod," they decided. "How glad he will be!"

"No--Not Back to Herod!"

"Return not to Herod," they were warned in a dream. "He purposes evil against the child." So they returned to their own country another way which by-passed the city where the scheming king waited and plotted. He heard the bells of their camels no more. Time passed; Herod in Jerusalem still watched for the wise men to return. When at last it seemed obvious they were not coming, he was furious. He peremptorily called an officer.

"Take soldiers to Bethlehem and slay all the infants up to two years of age," he ordered. "We will make sure this infant King shall not escape," determined the wicked ruler. But, swiftly as the soldiers moved, Heaven's messenger had moved swifter. In a dream the angel of God had commanded Joseph: "Arise, take the young Child and His mother and flee into Egypt, for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

So, while darkness hung over Bethlehem's streets, and night birds called to each other, they stole away. Away from the hills of Judea, across the desert land they traveled, until they reached Egypt, country of the Pharaohs. Here they were safe for a little while. The gifts of adoration, presented by the wise men, provided the money they needed for their sustenance, and they had no lack.

Retribution Ends Herod's Reign

But with that mad order to kill the children, Herod had filled up the cup of his iniquity. A strange sickness fell upon him. An intolerable itching seized him! A fever consumed his frame. Parts of his body rotted and bred worms. Pains tormented him, and at last his life ebbed away. [8] Joseph in Egypt heard the news of the tyrant's death, and was assured in a dream that he might now return. But when he heard that the wicked Archelaus now reigned in his father's stead, he dared not settle in quiet Bethlehem or turbulent Jerusalem. He took the road north and came back to his home among the hills in Nazareth.

It was well he did so. Three thousand Jews were slain by the sword by this very Archelaus as they offered their sacrifices in Jerusalem about this time. Little mercy would he have shown to any Babe said to be "King of the Jews." But the shepherds rejoiced, and the wise men cherished a joyful hope. Now Christ the Lord had come! He had left behind the power and might He had in heaven as the Leader of the angelic host, and had come to redeem His own. Heaven had clasped

earth to its breast in the embrace of love, and the Babe had been born who should bring heaven to earth and earth to heaven. Far-off Eden's gates seemed to be open wide again. Well might men and angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest."

"He came unto His own" the Holy City, its priests, king, and people, "but His own received Him not." How true Joseph and Mary felt this to be as they trod furtively along the road that led by Jerusalem up to the north!

"But as many as received Him" shepherds, wise men, and shall it be you and I? "to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name." Amid the clamor of war and the strife of men, still shines the light of Bethlehem's angels on God's way out of darkness into light. Every heart that opens to God and receives the spirit, of the Babe of Bethlehem shall find heaven within. And from such hearts the light will shine out, bringing peace on earth and goodwill toward men.

REFERENCES:

1. Josephus - Wars" (Every man Edition), Page 27.
2. Ibid., Page 31.
3. Ruth 4:13, 18-22.
4. Isaiah 11:1; Psalm 132: 11.
5. Daniel 9: 25.
6. Luke 2: 29-32.
7. Matthew 2: 5, 6; Micah 5:2.
8. Josephus' "Wars," Page 114.

