

Jesus is Coming for Me!

By

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Preface: This is a story of a man who was living in the city when Jesus was born, traveled the same countryside in Israel that John the Baptist and Jesus traveled, spent his life hating the Roman authorities, and allowed that hatred to blind himself to the Light to whom John was pointing and to the truth which that Light was bringing. Despite his blindness, the Light, who is Jesus, conquered his blindness and his hatred before death overtakes him.

As night was about to set in, Joshua and I took up our positions on opposite sides of the road to wait for the next weary traveler to pass by. We were robbers by profession. It was not the sort of life that I had planned for myself. A tragic event in my youth had directed me to this life of crime. At the age of twelve, Joshua and I were involved in a night of terror that put us into the position where we had to flee Romans and start out life of thievery.

As a youth, Joshua and I played in the streets of Bethlehem with great pleasure. Our life was a simple one then. Our families were close knit ones. We often observed the Holy Days together as brothers in one family. My father always observed each Holy Day with much ritual and prayer. I remember the Feast of the Passover the most. Father would retell the story every year of the way our God spared His people from death that night in Egypt. He would tell us how the angel of the Lord passed over Egypt taking the lives of the first born of every household whose doorpost was not marked with the blood of a lamb. The taste of my mother's unleavened bread and the special prayer of my father on that occasion will remain with me always. Those were pleasant memories. However, the memories of the Romans and King Herod from Bethlehem are not pleasant memories. The memories of Herod and the Romans are the ones that caused my whole life to change.

I was twelve at the time, and the town of Bethlehem was filled with strangers. These strangers were returning to Bethlehem to register for a new tax which the Romans had levied. Every room in town was either rented or given to a returning relative. My parents had given my room to relatives from Cana. People were everywhere. I remember a great disturbance one night during our relatives visit. Shepherds came to town looking for a child who was born in a barn. The shepherds claimed that an angel had appeared to them during the night, and the angel had told them that our long awaited Messiah was born that night. The angel further said that the child would be found in a barn behind a Bethlehem Inn. Can you imagine that? The long awaited Messiah being born in a barn? In Bethlehem? Such nonsense! My father felt that those shepherds had been out in the fields too long, and he did not believe their story. All of our friends laughed at their story.

Things in the town did not settle down after the shepherds left. Still more strangers came. Three wise men from the East were among the strangers. The wise men were also seeking a child born in a barn. They claimed to have followed a star to Bethlehem in search of the child born "King of the Jews." Everyone knew that Herod was king, and his son would not have been born in Bethlehem. The shepherds and the wise men caused my father and others to gather at the temple to discuss these events. Neither the Rabbi nor the wise men of the scrolls could find any written proof of a Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Why would our Messiah want to be born in Bethlehem anyway? Jerusalem, Yes! Bethlehem, No!

The talk of a Messiah only added to the confusion of the days with people coming and going due to the Roman tax. Roman soldiers patrolled the streets with regularity to keep things calm. All of these events helped to set the stage for my tragic day that December.

Our family was eating our Sabbath meal when Joshua came screaming into our home. He said that Roman soldiers were searching homes and killing every male baby they could find. Mother quickly got up from the table and ran for my baby brother, Caleb. She had planned to hide Caleb in a secret place behind her work table in the kitchen. Before she could get Caleb from the room, two soldiers entered our home and cut Caleb into pieces with their swords. As the soldiers were leaving, Joshua hit one soldier on the head rendering him unconscious. I tripped the other one with my foot and stabbed him to death with the bread knife from the table. By this time, my mother was screaming at the horror of the situation. My father stood stunned by the table. Things happened so fast. Joshua had interrupted our Sabbath meal. The Roman murdering my brother. My stabbing the killer of my brother. It was as though it were a nightmare, but it wasn't. In an instance I had turned my simple, happy life into complete unhappiness and possible death. Death was the punishment for killing a Roman soldier. Worse I had broken one of God's Commandments, "Thou Shalt not Kill!" Without hesitation, Joshua and I disposed of the dead Roman in the streets amidst all the confusion of babies being killed. Upon returning home, my father had recovered somewhat from the shock of the events. He gathered up some food and money and told us to leave town until he could straighten things out. I told him that we would be hiding in a cave outside town where our family used to spend a Sabbath in the summer to escape the heat of Bethlehem.

It was several days before my father was able to come to us in the cave. He told us the news from that terrible day. He said that King Herod had ordered the mass slaughter of every male child under the age of two years. Herod feared that the child, called the "King of the Jew," was here to replace him. The whole town of Bethlehem was in mourning. My father was still wearing the torn clothes in mourning my brother. Sobbing, he told us that a reward was offered for us for killing the Roman soldier. Someone had seen Joshua and me dragging the Roman soldier's body into the street that terrible night. The Rabbi had to intervene with the Roman authorities to save the lives of my family because of my deed. My family was permitted to live as the Romans feared the Rabbi would cause more unrest. Father said that Joshua and I could never return to Bethlehem again. He gave us more food and money before he left. He suggested that we go to stay with relative in Cana. We parted tearfully.

Joshua and I never made it to Cana. On the road, we met up with some zealots. The zealots hated the Romans as much as we did. They welcomed us as brother, and asked us to join them in fighting the Romans. After some thought, Joshua and I accepted their offer. We too became zealots! At age twelve, I was growing up in a hurry.

Life with the zealots was exciting at first. The zealots moved about the countryside to avoid the Romans. At first, Joshua and I stayed back at camp when the zealots went out on a raid. Within a year, we joined them on their raids.

Over the years, the Romans increased their efforts to capture our little band of zealots. They were unsuccessful. Occasionally, one or two of us did fall into Roman hands during our raids, but very few. These zealots had become family for Joshua and me. As the years passed our numbers grew smaller as members tired of the hide and seek life with the Romans. These zealot friends left us to return to their old lives with family members, but without success. The Romans captured most of them the minute they set foot in their home towns. Only Joshua and I are left from the former group of zealots. We have stayed friends and partners these many years. That is why we are crouched behind rocks tonight on opposite sides of the road. We are robbers awaiting our next victim who might pass by. This victim shall be just another one in a long line of people who have given us their wealth.

Joshua and I signaled each other as a stranger approached our hiding place. I could make out the physical build of the fellow. He looked to be a strong one, but we have met other strong people. On cue, Joshua and I pulled taut the rope we had stretched across the road. The stranger fell to the ground with a loud thud. We rushed at the stranger with a net to make him immobile. The stranger was too quick and got to his feet before we could reach him. A fierce fight occurred. Joshua was knocked into a large rock and broke his arm. In a short time, I too was subdued by the stranger. I cursed the Roman dog who had overcome us. He said that he was not a Roman, but a Jew. We too are Jews said Joshua. We meant to only take your money, not your life. With that the stranger got up from the ground and helped me to my feet. My life is not yours to take the stranger stated. I am chosen of God for a purpose which I am now fulfilling. No man can harm me until I have fulfilled the purpose given me by God. What purpose is that we asked? As I bound the broken arm of Joshua and put it into a sling, the stranger told us that he was sent to point the way for the coming of God's own son. I asked "How can it be? You are dressed in clothes of camel hair and a belt of leather. Prophets wear fine white clothes like the Rabbis at the temple." The stranger laughed. "I am not here to entertain the masses the way the rabbis do. I am here to call our people to repent and to be baptized with water as a true believer of God." "Stranger, what is your name? What is this baptism with water asked Joshua. "My name is John" the stranger said. He shared with us the purpose which God had sent him to minister to the Jews. Joshua asked when the Messiah would begin His ministry for which John was pointing the way. John felt that the Messiah would begin His message to the world very soon. The joy of the Messiah coming overjoyed both Joshua and me. We would finally rid ourselves of these hated Romans! God's kingdom would be re-established in Israel? I asked John where the Messiah was that I might join his army. John said that he did not know, but the Scriptures could tell us. "For true to the

Scriptures,” John said, “the Messiah was born in Bethlehem. He was in the lineage of David. He would redeem our sins so that we could spend eternity with God.” Joshua said that we were from Bethlehem, but we knew of no Messiah being born there. Joshua and I took turns relating the series of events that happened in Bethlehem at the time when we were forced to leave there. We told of the shepherds, the wise man, and the mass slaughter of the babies. John concluded from what he had said that we were there at the time of the birth of the Messiah. How could we have missed such a long awaited event? How? John comforted us. He said that having failed to recognize the Messiah’s birth was not the end of the world. We still had a chance for eternal life with Him. John told us to repent now and allow him to baptize us. He said that the life which we were living was no life at all. John said, “Repent now! and allow God to enter your lives.” We were to make ready to receive God’s blessings. Joshua’s heart was moved by those wonderful words of hope and promise. He asked John to baptize him with the water of life. I accompanied John and Joshua to a nearby stream where Joshua was baptized. When John asked me if I were ready to repent also, I backed away. I could not remove the terrible thoughts from my mind of the senseless slaughter of my brother by the Romans. John had only succeeded in remind me of my past hate of the Romans. I could not repent. Joshua pleaded with me to repent as he had done. I could not. The past hurts were too deep. Joshua said that he could not return to a life of thievery and violence. Instead, Joshua asked John if he could follow him in search of the Messiah. John embraced his new friend. The time had come for Joshua and me to part after a lifetime of friendship. We had been through so much together. Our bond was a bond of life itself. I could not repent and follow John. I couldn’t. With tears in my eyes, I embraced Joshua and left. They begged me to spend the night, but I wanted to bear the hurt of a lost friendship alone.

As I wandered the countryside the next few months, I became careless. I was captured by the dreaded Roman dogs. Without Joshua, I was alone and friendless. I was thrown into a dungeon to await trial and certain death. In the midst of my despair, I cried out to God for help. The answer to my cry came in a surprising manner. John, the man who baptized Joshua, was put into the cell next to mine. What a surprise! What a joy in this hole of darkness. I asked how he got there, and what news he had of Joshua. John said that he was arrested by orders from the king himself. John had publically accused the king and his wife, Herodias, of living in sin. The queen could no longer stand his mocking and accusations. She had the king order John’s arrest. As for Joshua, he was killed by the soldiers trying to protect me from harm. John told me he had given Joshua God’s blessing before he died. John said his final words were to ask you to repent and join him with God someday.

I was overcome with grief. Once again the hated Romans had murdered someone close to me. How could I repent and forgive the Romans? How could God allow our people to continue to suffer under the heel of Rome? When was the Messiah going to call our people to

arms to stop the Romans? When? In the name of Caleb and Joshua, I renewed by vow to rid Israel of all Romans. Repentance was not for me!

My immediate concern was for John. My cellmates told me that he was called "John the Baptist," a devout man of God. I soon began to fear that the Romans would work to kill my only remaining friend. John tried to reassure me that he would be in prison only a few days. John felt that his followers would force the king to release him by causing unrest among the people. I only wished that I could be as confident as John.

It was during one of our conversations, that John told me of his meeting the Messiah. John said that he was baptizing at the river when the Messiah suddenly appeared. John said that he recognized him instantly; his heart jumped with such joy. The Messiah had come to the river to be baptized with the water as John had baptized others. John said he told the Messiah that he was unfit to untie His shoes; that he was unworthy to baptize Him. However, Jesus, as John called Him, insisted that John must do so as it was written of old. John did as Jesus requested, and He was baptized. Following the baptism, John said that a dove from on high came and landed on the shoulder of Jesus. From Heaven was heard God's voice proclaiming that Jesus was His son in whom He was well pleased. My heart leaped for joy. Such good news! At last God was about to redeem His people from the Romans. At last I would be free. The Romans would be driven from Israel. I could return to Bethlehem. What joy!

The joy did not last long. John's stay in prison was longer than he had thought. I overheard him say to one of his followers how troubled and concerned he was. John told the follower that he had to know if Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Life in prison was beginning to show its affects on John. A day passed before John's follower returned. Jesus had instructed the follower to tell John a series of messages. "The blind are receiving their sight. The lame are walking. The lepers are being healed. The poor are hearing the Good News of the Gospel." With that, John had renewed life. John shared with me his joy. He said that the message from Jesus was a fulfillment of the Scriptures which the Son of God was to do. Jesus was the Messiah! John's mission was fulfilled! John suddenly stopped talking. He realized that he would never leave prison alive. He had told me upon our first meeting that no one could harm him until he had fulfilled God's mission. John realized his mission was over. That evening, John was taken from his cell and beheaded before my eyes. With the falling of the ax, the light that John had returned to my life was gone. His death allowed the darkness to close in around me. I was overcome with grief once again. Where was the justice in John's death? My last friend was gone. I was alone.

Shortly following the death of John, the guards came to my cell. I was told that I was the one chosen to bury the body of John. The grief of losing the light of hope which John had brought to me had barely set in when the burial duty was assigned to me. I could not eat or

sleep. The next afternoon, the guards came for me to bury John. Only one guard was assigned to watch this act. As dusk began to set in, I decided to look for an opportunity to escape. As I was putting the final shovel full of dirt on John's grave, a gust of wind came up. My opportunity had come. I threw the shovel full of dirt into the air, and it drifted into the eyes of the guard. As the guard grasped his eyes, I hit him over the head with the shovel and made my escape into the night.

The death of John the Baptist had given me new life, a life that I was determined to live by ridding Israel of the Romans. I searched the hills for a zealot named Barabbas. A fellow prisoner had told me of his hate for the Romans. I knew that he was a man I should seek out. I found Barabbas, and I joined his followers.

For the next few years, we harassed, burned out, killed and antagonized the Romans throughout Israel. Barabbas planned our attacks well. The Romans were now paying for the death of Caleb, Joshua, and John.

From time to time, we would hear news of Jesus, the One John had baptized. Jesus was carrying out his ministry of teaching and healing as He had told John. Jesus had not issued the call to arms yet. I was awaiting His call. I wanted to be among His followers who finally rid Israel of the Romans. However, my plan to join Jesus was suddenly changed. One of the zealot guards had sold out to the Romans, and all of us, including Barabbas, were captured. The guard had sold us out for his release and a few pieces of silver.

This time, my capture meant death as a certainty. We were given a swift hearing before the Roman Tribunal. We were all sentenced to death. Crucifixion was the means by which we were to die.

As we were awaiting death, Barabbas was taken from his cell by the order of Pilate, the Roman governor. I found out later, that Pilate was conforming to the custom of releasing a prisoner to the Jewish people during the Passover feast. This year, Barabbas was chosen for release. In place of Barabbas, a man named Jesus was to die. Could this be the same Jesus who John claimed was the Messiah? Surely now! What would a good person like Jesus have done to deserve to be crucified? This must be another Jesus. God would never permit His son to die like a common thief!

The news spread all over the prison that Jesus was the man I feared He was. He was the man baptized by John. Word spread around the prison that the high priests had plotted against Jesus to end His life. The high priests said that Jesus had committed blasphemy by claiming to be the Son of the Living God. Feeling threatened, the priests conspired to end His life. John had told me that Jesus was the Son of God. John said that Jesus had fulfilled the Scriptures of old, and John's mission was over. John had pointed the way to the Messiah, and he died as that

mission was accomplished. The high priests knew the Scriptures. How could they be so blind? Why was I so blind in recognizing Jesus?

As I sat there accusing others for having rejected Jesus, I suddenly realized that I had rejected Jesus from the beginning. I remembered that the Messiah was to have been born in the City of David, Bethlehem, according to Isaiah. I had lived in Bethlehem at the time in which He was born, yet I did not recognize Jesus. He must have escaped the Roman slaughter of the babies which Herod had carried out in Bethlehem. Judging from the age of Jesus, I would have been twelve years of age at that time. Had I joined Joshua and followed John the Baptist, I could have seen Jesus for myself to see who He was. I could have determined if He were indeed who John said He was. Now I was about to die, never having seen this Jesus for myself.

The morning of my death was at hand. Ruben, one of Barabbas's men was to be crucified with me. When Ruben and I reached the death site, I noticed there were three holes, but only two crosses. Why three holes? I looked around only to see a large crowd gathering to watch me die. Why a large crowd to see me? Then through the jeering crowd came a man wearing a crown of thorns and dragging a cross up the hill to the death site. I asked the guards who this third man was. One replied that He was "The King of the Jews!" Could this be Jesus, the man who I had failed to recognize and accept as the Messiah? The babe who I had missed in Bethlehem? The man who John had baptized? Was my life to end the same as His? As they pierced my wrists with nails, my eyes were on Jesus, and I somehow felt little pain. The nails were placed in my feet, and I was raised up to be crucified.

For the first hour, the pain was unbearable. I grew weaker, and the pain lessened. The crowd and the hated Romans mocked Jesus as He was hanging on the cross. Ruben joined in with those who were mocking Jesus. Ruben chided that if Jesus were the Son of God, then Jesus should come down from the cross and prove it. Jesus should save Himself and us also. I protested loudly to Ruben. "Ruben, do you not fear God?" I told him that we deserved to die for we had murdered and robbed. Jesus had done nothing to warrant His death. I could hold back the truth no longer. Jesus was the Messiah. I cried out, "Jesus, remember me when You enter Your Kingdom." Jesus replied, "Today you shall be with me in Paradise." This was His solemn promise to me, a sinner. I had spent my whole life running away from the truth and the light of the Messiah. Now at last I had found Him, and I was to be with Him in Paradise.

For the first time since I left home, I prayed to God. "Oh God of my forefather, Abraham, I give you thanks and praise for your Son, Jesus. I pray that even now as I hang on this cross next to Him that I can experience Your grace and love." Even to His own agony, He granted me peace and eternal life with Him in paradise." I continued to pray, "May others realize the truth, light, and life which your Son, Jesus, offers freely to all." I prayed that others will not

wait until their last breath as I did to accept God's Son. And, I prayed that the work of His ministry would be spread throughout the world for others to hear.

As I ended my short prayer, I heard Jesus say that it was finished. He was commending His spirit into His father's hands. His head then slumped forward in death. The Romans pierced His side to make sure He was indeed dead. The Romans then broke my legs as well as Rubin's legs to hasten our death.

Following the earthquake came the darkness. God was angry. I could feel none of it. I looked and smiled. Jesus is coming for me.

