

VOICES FROM HEAVEN AND HELL

by

J. MARCELLUS KIK

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CHAPTER TWO

"I Heard The Carol Of The Angels"

by A Judean Shepherd

"I was one of the shepherds keeping watch over the Temple flock near to Bethlehem. It still mystifies me that my fellow shepherds and I were chosen to hear the first announcement of the birth of the Messiah. We were poor and despised by many. Nevertheless we heard the carol of the angels. Let me tell you of our experience.

"The Temple in Jerusalem required many lambs and sheep for the sacrificial service. A number of flocks were maintained for the provision of these sacrifices. Ours was one of them. Along with two friends I took care of the flock that was near Bethlehem. My name is Reuben and the names of the other two shepherds are Thomas and Caleb. This particular night Thomas and I were sitting near a fire while Caleb was making the rounds. It was very cold that night and we enjoyed the warm fire.

"Thomas asked me if I did not think that Caleb was taking rather long in making the rounds. He was taking long and I was a little worried for fear that he was having trouble. This led us to talk about Caleb. Thomas felt that he was rather peculiar and that he had strange views of the Messiah. He told me that Caleb did not agree at all with the views of our Rabbi Annas of the synagogue we attended.

"Of course, Thomas did not know Caleb as well as I did. I knew his background. He had attended the school of the rabbis in Jerusalem. Something happened and he did not become a rabbi. He became a shepherd like his father. He continued to study the Law and the Prophets. This I related to Thomas. He, however, still mistrusted Caleb because he did not follow all the traditions of the elders.

"While we were discussing him we saw him coming in the distance. The stars were very bright that night. As he approached we saw that he was carrying one of the flock. It was a little lamb. Apparently it had been mauled by a wolf. He told us what happened and how he was able to save this lamb and scare away the wolves. We all hated these wolves. Talking about wolves led

Thomas to speak about his pet hate which was Herod whom he called a blood-thirsty wolf. And he surely is a wolf. He put to death his own wife and mother-in-law. His hands were dripping with the blood of those he murdered. Would that we could protect Israel from Herod as we protected the flock from marauding beasts. But, as Caleb mentioned, only GOD could be such a Shepherd. Some day the great Shepherd of the flock will avenge the ill-treatment of Israel.

"Talking about Herod caused us to talk about taxes. It was Herod's purpose to bleed us to death with taxes in order that he might send large sums to Rome. He wanted to stand in good favour with the Emperor. Just recently the Emperor had made a decree that all the world was to be taxed. And you can well believe that Herod would see that we paid our share. For this tax we had to enroll in the village or town of our family. That is why the town of Bethlehem was filled with strangers. It was a shame that all of the lineage of David had to travel from afar just for the privilege of enrolling for more taxes. Some had to come from as far as Nazareth. 'Tis said that the Inn was crowded and there was no more room. What some of the travelers will do is beyond me. And all because the Romans want to increase our taxes. Would that GOD would send the Messiah to deliver us from Herod and the Romans. Thomas asked me whether I thought the Messiah would appear in our day.

"It so happened that I heard Rabbi Annas teach on that subject on the previous Sabbath. I told the men what I heard. It seems according to the figures of some Rabbis that the Messiah should soon appear. It was the opinion of some that the Messiah would come 4,000 years after the creation. Others place the time 4,291 years after the creation. Some of the Rabbis maintained that the Messiah would come when the world is thoroughly wicked. I told the men that it was the personal opinion of Rabbi Annas that the Messiah would come when all within our nation are righteous. He seemed to think that such a day would soon arrive as he thought most Israelites were righteous except such shepherds as we because we did not have time to fulfill all the rituals of the law. Knowing that Caleb was learned in these things, I asked him what his opinion was.

"He replied: 'The Scriptures do not tell us the exact time, Reuben. GOD will send the Messiah in the fulness of time. As to waiting for Israel to become righteous it seems to me that Rabbi Annas is wrong. Israel is becoming very wicked. Jerusalem is a city of iniquity. I dare not tell you of the wickedness I observed while studying in the school of the rabbis. Even the priests are living immoral lives. Their greed is polluting the worship of the Temple. There was a time when I rejoiced to be a shepherd of the Temple flock. All these sheep before us and the lambs will be used to obtain the forgiveness of sins by offering them upon the altar. And to know that I have a part in taking care of the flock so that they will be without blemish used to thrill me. But the priests are using these sheep for their own profit and are selling them even within the Temple. Just the other day they even sold a pair of pigeons for a gold denar. And they had just paid a few pence for it. When the Temple is so desecrated Israel is not so righteous. I used to think that the Messiah would come when the children of Israel would repent. But they are far from repentance. Now I believe with all my heart that the Messiah will come when the mercy of GOD decrees it. His coming depends entirely upon GOD's will and mercy.'

"We discussed this point for a while and then we entered into a discussion as to what the Messiah would do when He came. Thomas and I felt that one of the first things He would do would be to establish the Kingdom and vanquish Herod and the Romans. Caleb quoted a passage from the prophet Jeremiah which stated: **'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will**

raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.' We were delighted to hear that quotation from the prophet. The Messiah would be a great King and execute judgment against the Romans. We hoped that He would tax them to death.

"Caleb halted us from such thoughts of revenge. He said that the Messiah would reign with love and righteousness. And if we were to reign with Him we would have to change. We could not be like the Romans. We could not be cruel and selfish like Herod. Well, that would mean that we would have to possess new hearts for I still could not see how it would be possible to have love towards the Romans. I hated them.

"Then Caleb expressed a thought about the Messiah which I never heard before. I am sure that Rabbi Annas never expressed it in my hearing. Caleb said that the greatest task of the Messiah would be to save His people from their sins. Thomas asked him how the Messiah could do that. Caleb said that he wasn't quite sure. But he had been studying the prophet Isaiah of late. The prophet indicated that GOD would lay on the Messiah the iniquity of His people. Caleb declared that Isaiah had also written that the Servant of the Lord would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. He said to Thomas that he would rather have his sins forgiven than to tax the Romans a thousand golden talents.

"Both Thomas and I felt a little guilty. I suppose we should not imitate the wicked Romans. I confessed that I, too, was concerned with my sins. I know that I am guilty before GOD. The Psalmists and the Prophets declare that GOD will punish sin. I said to Thomas: 'To have peace with GOD would give more joy than to tax the Romans and even Herod.' Thomas admitted that he was also concerned about his sins. He longed to be reconciled to GOD. But neither he nor I looked upon the Messiah in that light. We looked upon Him as a King who would deliver us from Herod and the Romans. It would indeed be wonderful if He would deliver us from sin. That would be a greater deliverance. We encouraged Caleb to tell us more of the teachings of the Scriptures.

"Caleb could not tell us much more. He pointed out that Moses had indicated that the Messiah would teach us as He would be a greater prophet than Moses. What a wonderful person the Messiah would be. He would not only be a greater prophet than Moses but He would be a greater king than David and a greater priest than Aaron. Glorious would be His coming. I suppose that if He came in our day we shepherds would not see Him. The Messiah would be surrounded by the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the rulers. However, that did not matter. The important thing was His coming. And I said to the others that if He came in our day I would leave the flock and travel to Jerusalem for just a glimpse of Him.

"Caleb then surprised us again with his knowledge of the Scriptures. He said that the prophet Micah had written that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. I could hardly believe that. There is no dwelling in Bethlehem that is fit for Him. The grandest place was the Inn. And surely that would not be good enough for the King to have as His birthplace. Yet that was the declaration of Micah.

"As we talked about Bethlehem we glanced in the direction of the city of David. We could see it so clearly. It seemed to lie so still and peaceful. Never has it been so light. The light seemed

almost supernatural.- It was supernatural! It was a heavenly light! Something mysterious was happening.

"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon us, and the glory of the Lord shone round about us: and we were sore afraid. And the angel said unto us: 'Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'"

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from us into Heaven, that we said one to another: **'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass which the Lord hath made known unto us.'** We actually ran to Bethlehem. The angel said that we would find the babe in a manger. We determined to go first to the stable of the Inn. It was hard to conceive that the Messiah would be born in a stable; nevertheless there is where we went.

"I shall never forget the startled look on the face of young Joseph and Mary his wife. They wondered who had informed us of the birth of the child and who had directed us to the stable. With great pride Mary showed us the little babe lying in the manger. It was wrapped in swaddling clothes. This was the sign of which the angel spake. We accepted the word of the angel that this babe was Messiah the Lord. In quiet reverence we worshipped Him. We related to Mary and Joseph the words of the angel and told them the carol of the angels.

"We then spread the news throughout Bethlehem. All wondered at the words of the angel and the carol of the heavenly host. After telling all our friends we returned to the flock. How we glorified and praised GOD! The day of deliverance was at hand. He is born that will redeem Israel. **'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, and good will among men.'** "

~ end of chapter 2 ~
