**LONGING FOR A MESSIAH**

**BY ANDY NASH**

In his book *Twelve Years a Slave* Solomon Northrup describes the living hell of separation between a parent and child as a Black mother watches her son being auctioned to a planter from Baton Rouge. She and her daughter are about to lose forever this boy they love so much.  
  
“All the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought herself and Emily. She promised . . . to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her. . . .   
  
“She kept on begging and beseeching [the man,] most piteously, not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy; . . . how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last moment of her life; if he would only buy them all together. But it was of no avail. . . . Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her—all the while her tears falling in the boy’s face like rain.”\*  
  
Several years ago I was sitting at an oil-change station with my three daughters. As we waited for our car, I noticed an older man watching my girls. He smiled and said, “I had three daughters like them.”  
  
“Are they grown up now?” I asked.  
  
“Well, two of them are,” he said. “We lost one.”  
  
He told me his story. He and his family had gone camping with friends in Arizona. They were from Connecticut, and it was the only vacation they ever took. A few days in, their teenage daughter took the car into town. She never returned. A frantic search revealed nothing.  
  
Fearing the worst (kidnapping or enslavement), the man quit his job and became a truck driver. He spent the rest of his career driving throughout the country in search of his daughter.  
  
The bond between those who love each other was never meant to be broken, not through slave auctions, not through abductions, not through divorce, not through death. None of these are natural; none are from God.  
  
Our Separation  
The separation between humans and God began with two people huddled in the Garden of Eden, naked and ashamed: “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ ” (Gen. 3:8, 9).  
  
This separation would continue to widen, even among the people God chose to bless the world. After leading the Israelites through the Red Sea in a supreme act of grace, God set up a tabernacle in the desert to illustrate just how far humanity had wandered from Him—in case anyone was ever inclined to think the separation was normal. With its many levels of access—the courtyard, the holy place, the Most Holy Place, the outside of the ark, the inside of the ark, the Shekinah glory—the tabernacle kept all but one person a year out of the immediate presence of God. But, the people were assured, this distance was only temporary. For those who entered God’s salvation rest, symbolized by a weekly Sabbath, they would commune with Him once more.  
  
But the people would not rest. Of the original 12 tribes of Israel that entered the Promised Land, only a few remained faithful, the most prominent being Judah. Most of the people were scattered throughout the world—the lost tribes of Israel. And even the people of Judah, now called Jews, began to exchange worshipping God for worshipping the work of their own hands.  
  
One of the things Jewish people were supposed to do was to let their land rest every seventh year. But the Jews hadn’t let the land rest for 490 years, meaning that the land was owed 70 years of rest. So God Himself gave the land its Sabbath rest—by delivering the Jewish people to Babylon.  
  
If there was any place on earth the Jews didn’t want to go, it was Babylon. Babylon, Babylonia—Babel!—was where the Hebrews had been called *out* of. Babel was the land of human effort, of worshipping the work of your hands. God had called Abraham *out of Babel* to a land of rest. Now they were right back where they had started: square one.  
  
But the darkness of Babylon would be pierced by streams of light. An upright Jewish man named Daniel was given messages from God through the angel Gabriel. In one of these messages he was told that there would be a new period of 490 years—literally “seventy sevens”—when Israel would get another shot to get things right. Seventy sevens were “decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy” (Dan. 9:24).  
  
Near the end of this period, Daniel was told, an Anointed One would come. The Hebrew word for anointed is *mashiah*—Messiah.  
  
Encouraged by Prophets  
Following their 70-year captivity, most of the Jews decided to stay and hang out in the world—now the Persian Empire—rather than return to Jerusalem. Those who did return and settle had mixed feelings. They were excited to be rebuilding their Temple, but as the foundation was laid, those who remembered Solomon’s magnificent Temple realized that this second Temple wasn’t going to be anywhere as grand.  
  
The people received some unexpected encouragement from two men: an old prophet named Haggai and a young prophet named Zechariah. Haggai reminded the people that the true glory of Solomon’s Temple didn’t come from what Solomon or anyone else brought to it. It wasn’t Solomon’s Temple; it was God’s Temple.  
  
Haggai said: “This is what the Lord Almighty says, ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty. ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Haggai 2:6-9).  
  
The glory of this second Temple would be even greater than the first? Things got even more hopeful when the prophet Zechariah spoke: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech. 9:9).  
  
These prophecies brought hope to people struggling just to hang on. The Jewish people at this time were led by two men: a priest named Joshua from the line of Levi and a kinglike leader named Zerubbabel from the royal line of David. Both the priest and the king were important to the Jews. In fact, many Jews believed that there would be not one but two messiahs who would save Israel: a priestly messiah from the tribe of Levi and a kingly messiah from the tribe of Judah. There was no comprehension that one person could be both a king and a priest at the same time.  
  
That’s why it was startling when Zechariah said: “Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch.”  “Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jozadak. Tell him this is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne” (Zech. 3:8; 6:11-13).  
“A priest on his throne”? How was this possible? A man named Joshua who’s the Branch—the Messiah? Who’s both priest and king?  
  
The name Joshua, more correctly Yoshua, or Yeshua, means “salvation” in Hebrew.  
  
After rebuilding the Temple, the Jews resumed the regular sacrifices. The lambs sacrificed were tended to by shepherds working in some fields about six miles south of Jerusalem, near the small village of Bethlehem, where King David himself had once been a shepherd.  
  
A curious prophecy about Bethlehem had come from the mouth of the prophet Micah: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. . . . He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace” (Micah 5:2-5).  
  
Political Pawns  
With the deaths of the Minor Prophets, Micah through Malachi, prophecy ceased and God seemed to go silent for 400 years. This seemed strange, because the Jews were getting closer and closer to that 490-year (70 sevens) mark prophesied by Daniel.  
  
But rather than things getting better, they got worse. The Jews went from being ruled by the relatively moderate power of Persia to being ruled by Greece and their young king Alexander the Great. Following Alexander’s death, future Greek rulers began persecuting devout Jews. At the height of this persecution, a pig was sacrificed in the Temple. In response, some heroic Jewish fighters, called the Maccabeans, retook Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple. The celebration of this event became the Jewish holiday Hanukkah, the Feast of Lights.  
  
In time Israel was conquered by the Roman Empire, which ruled with an iron fist and heavily taxed the Jewish people. The Jews were now spread out, living all over Israel. So it became a hassle when the Roman ruler Caesar Augustus ordered that all the people must return to the hometown of their original tribe so they could be counted and taxed.  
  
Among those who began making travel arrangements was a young engaged couple living in a small village near the Sea of Galilee. This couple, Yosef and Miriam, were descendants of the tribe of Judah, so they had to make the 80-mile trip south to Judah to be registered.  
  
Prior to their departure, Yosef and Miriam suddenly received news that would forever change their world, as well as the entire world. Out of nowhere, Gabriel, the same angel who had once visited Daniel, appeared to Miriam and said: “Do not be afraid, [Miriam]; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him [Yeshua]. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:30-33).  
  
In the Fullness of Time  
Meanwhile, back in Persia some men had been studying. These Wise Men lived in the same land as the Babylonian wise men. They were fascinated by the prophecies talking about the coming of the Jewish Messiah. Combining their study of the Hebrew Scriptures with their interest in astrology, these Magi set their eyes to the western night sky and began to plan a trip west toward Judea with a cavalry escort and some carefully selected gifts.  
  
Meanwhile, in the late fall, probably October, shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem were doing what they always did: tending sheep that would be used as sacrifices in Jerusalem. The flocks were out in the hills because it wasn’t the rainy season yet. When the rainy season came, the lambs would be born in caves around Bethlehem.  
  
But on this fall evening, as shepherds sat watching their sheep, their world, too, was suddenly changed—by a sky full of angels. One of the angels said: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10-12).  
  
After all this time—after so many years of separation—everything was suddenly changing. All types of people—poor and rich, Jews and Gentiles—were being drawn to a humble cave where a newborn named Yeshua laid his soft head.  
  
This same Yeshua had once roamed a garden paradise filled with animals, calling out to a young man and woman “Where are you?” Now He had come back, this time to a dark cave filled with animals, to be together again with a young man and woman. He had come to bridge the separation, to reunite with the human race, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to make all things new. Lamb, Priest, King, Yeshua, Messiah, Immanuel. Once more God was with us. 