

Chapter Four – A Joyful Surprise

Before our Lord came, the holiest place in the world was the Temple of Jerusalem. Only there would God allow sacrifice to be offered, and there twice a day it was offered—a little lamb was slain, and the smoke of sweet smelling incense rose from the golden altar in the Holy Place. At the hour of incense the people assembled in their part of the Temple, the open Courts, and prayed silently, in union with the priest who was within.

One day there was a great stir among them. A priest whose name was Zachary had been a long time in the Holy Place, and when he came out he was trembling and dumb. What had happened? They crowded round him to ask, but he made signs to show he could not speak. The news spread fast that Zachary had seen something wonderful, and that he looked as if he had heard good news. Good news! Indeed he had; he was dumb because he had thought it too good to be true. For many years he and his wife Elizabeth had longed to have a child, in the hope that the Messiah, now so near, might be of their family. But God had not seen good to hear their prayer, and when all expectation was gone, they had made His Will their own, and encouraged one another to bear their disappointment bravely.

Now, on this day, just as Zachary was going to pour the incense upon the flame, he saw a glorious vision an Angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar. And seeing him he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

But the Angel said to him: "Fear not, Zachary, for thy prayer is heard." Then he went on to tell him that Elizabeth should have a son who should bring gladness to many. Even as a little child he would be great before God, and when he was grown up he would convert many of his people and prepare them for the coming of the Messiah. Bewildered by such a joyful surprise, Zachary asked how he should know all this was true.

"I am Gabriel, who stand before God," was the answer, "and am sent to speak to thee, and to bring thee these good tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and shalt not be able to speak until the day wherein these things shall come to pass, because thou hast not believed my words which shall be fulfilled in their time." So Zachary had the sign he asked, though it was a punishment too because of his unbelief.

Good news, as well as bad, travels fast, and when a week later he returned to his home at Ain-Karim, in the hill country of Judea, he found that Elizabeth had heard all that people knew about the vision in the Temple. She came out to

meet him, anxious, yet, somehow, full of joyful expectation. He laid his finger on his lips, sent for his writing tablets, and, with a trembling hand, wrote down all that had passed. Then they rejoiced together, and thanked God for His goodness to them, and waited in quiet happiness for the fulfillment of His promise.

Weeks passed by, and months. Priest after priest went by turn into the Holy Place to offer incense, and Zachary's vision came to be forgotten. But not by all. Not by those who noted every sign of the Messiah being at hand. There was an old man in Jerusalem who had a promise from God that he should not die till he had seen the Christ of the Lord. There was an aged woman who departed not from the Temple, serving night and day lest she should miss the Lord at His Coming. Such as these did not forget. And all over the world, wherever Jews were to be found, were eager hearts praying Him to come quickly.

Where was the most eager ? Was it in Jerusalem among the doctors of the Law, whose life was spent in the study of the prophecies ? Was it the High Priest's, or that holy old man's, or the aged woman's, or Zachary's, or Elizabeth's? ~No, not in Jerusalem, nor among the learned, nor those who had grown old in the service of God. Where then?