

# Room in the Heart Vacancy

## Paradise

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:26a,27

At his creation, man began in fellowship with God. Through no mechanical process of their own, the first man and woman began their existence in harmony with their creator. It was not the result of a choice made; they had no part in the decision, but were simply made that way.

Man and woman were beautiful, inside and out. They remained naked, as they had been made, for there was nothing to hide. Their spirits were at one with God; it was His habit to come down to walk with them, to fellowship with them. They enjoyed His company, and He theirs.

From the beginning God had built into man a "God space"—a place in his heart perfectly shaped to hold the Spirit of his Maker. Here God would come in and make Himself at home, to commune and fellowship with His creation, to listen and whisper words of guiding wisdom. Man's God space identified his ownership; no other god would fit there. So man entertained no other spirit as a replacement.

## Paradise Lost

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

Genesis 3:6

Then the man and woman gave in to temptation and sinned. Though their world was perfect, needing nothing to be added or changed,

the serpent touched a nerve and tickled their vanity. He held out the honey of their becoming God-like, and the first couple believed the lie. They chose, not another god, but themselves and their own desires over fellowship with the one true God.

And suddenly their God space went empty. That place in their hearts fashioned and shaped to fit the Spirit of God remained, but now there would be no tenant. They did gain some new wisdom in the bargain, however: they now knew they were naked, and that they were ashamed. And alone.

Now all their children, from the world's second generation until world's end, would enter the world alone—separated from the God who had given them breath.

## Paradise Offered

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

Galatians 4:4-5

After many centuries of men and women being left on their own to struggle back up to fellowship with their Maker, after many centuries of empty discipline and vain imaginings meant to replace the sweet communion they had once enjoyed, God looked down upon His people and expressed hope in the form of a tiny child.

He sent down to them, not a new creation, but a very ancient part of Himself in the shape of man. He who dwells outside of time and space, He who holds eternity in His hand came down to dwell, for awhile, among those who carried around inside them an empty space into which His Spirit would fit.

And once again man could know fellowship with his Maker. He could walk with Him, listen to His quiet counsel, commune with Him. Once again man's God space could be filled with its intended occupant.

## Prophecies and Decrees

Bethlehem was a small, inconspicuous town lying just short of a day's journey south of the city of Jerusalem. It was a sleepy little village, tucked away and forgotten by most; nothing flashy, a bit disheveled. Few people ever visited by choice. Time and trends had passed it by, disregarded and even held in contempt by some—until one day the mighty despot called for a census to be taken of all the people in all his conquered lands.

In the village was a small inn, unimpressive and tattered, worn down by time, home for the village innkeeper and his wife and son. From the small room facing the street they conducted their business. This room more than any other was home for the innkeeper as he welcomed new guests and dispensed with the old.

The mighty despot was Caesar Augustus, and the village innkeeper was called Simon.

"Where *is* that boy? I sent him off more than an hour ago." Simon bustled into his establishment, carrying with him clouds of dust from the street outside. His nervous neck muscles twitched, jerking his head from side to side, scanning the room.

Joanna, his faithful if bedraggled wife, caught off guard by her husband's explosive entrance, felt his anxiety invading her like the damp of a cold morning. "Should I go look for him?"

"No time. No *time*," he sputtered. "Get back upstairs and see if anyone's ready to leave."

"But what difference does it make?" She said, halting her scrubbing of the table that was the centerpiece of their front room. "If the room's occupied, why look for another tenant?"

Simon scurried to her side. "*Sssbbh!* Lower your voice! Each time one leaves—I raise the rate." He grinned, his eyes twinkled with pecuniary lust. "We're making a *killing* off this census."

"But Simon," Joanna gasped, "that's dishonest!"

He turned on her, glaring angrily, as if she had just threatened his very sanity. "Listen, those filthy Romans have been bleeding us of every denarius. If they hand me a chance to make some of it back, well, I'm going to take it."

"But it's *our* people you're taking it from."

Now here was one of those moments Simon disliked intensely. It wasn't so much that his good wife had just scored a point against him. Healthy competition was good for the soul, after all. No, what really irritated was that she was *right*. He stared at her, blank-faced. "Where is that boy?" He said, quickly turning away.

Joanna rewarded herself with a quiet smile and returned to the job of cleaning the surface of her work table. "Oh, he may have stopped to see one of his friends. You've been working him awfully hard these last few days."

"Much to do," Simon muttered, staring out the latticed window that looked out onto the town's central street.

"You worry me, Simon. I've never seen you like this."



Wishing she would just leave him to his business, he snapped, "Must I do *everything* around here?"

Joanna threw down her rag with a wet slap. "Now you just sit down here and take a break. The rest of the world won't fly away if you rest for a moment."

Reluctantly Simon turned away from the window and dropped down into the chair. He wouldn't admit it, of course, but even at this early hour he was bone-tired. Yet he was convinced his actions were right. "Why do you fight me so? It's all for the family."

"But this isn't my husband," she said in her most soothing tone, "running around, squeezing every drop of profit from his neighbors—"

"They're *not* our neighbors," he slapped the table. "These people are coming all the way down from Galilee. *We* aren't the ones forcing them to stay in our town."

"But we don't have to cheat them."

"And where's the difference? When the harvest is poor, the price of wheat is high. When the harvest is good, the price is lower. Simple economics, Joanna. The law of the marketplace."

"So tell me, my husband the banker," she answered confidently, "why is it your harvest is good—but your prices remain high?"

Well now, there she had done it again—and twice in the same day. She had scored another point against him, and pretty soon there would be no living with her.

"Where is that boy?" Simon blustered, rising to leave while at least some of his manhood remained intact. He reached for the door, but before his hand could grasp the handle it swung in toward him. Nathanael, their young son, was carrying a basket heaped with fresh bread, and behind him came their neighbor, Eliezer.

"I simply *had* to return with Nathanael," the older man said, beaming, "to compliment his father on his son's bargaining skills. Quite amazing in one so young, I must say." He clutched the diminutive Simon by the shoulder, his eyes twinkling. "I wonder where he learned them."

Nathanael presented the basket of bread to his mother. Grinning proudly, he said to Simon, "I did good, Papa."

"And what did Eliezer's fine bread cost us today?"

"Only three cents."

"Three cents!" Simon exploded.

"Why, that's robbery! I would have paid no more than *two*." He rose on his toes to get his face as close to Eliezer's as he could. "Why such a high price to your neighbor?"

Eliezer's grizzled face took on a look of wounded innocence. "Many new customers in town," he explained. "My poor wife is kept busy with the orders."

"So with all the orders, you can afford to lower the price," Simon said, landing tiny drops of spittle onto Eliezer's white beard.

"This census won't last forever," he shrugged.

"No, but your *greed* probably will," Simon edged closer.

"Stop it you two!" Joanna cried, coming between them. "Simon," she said to her husband, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "what is one penny when the harvest is good? It's the law of the marketplace—simple economics."

As the confrontation between his elders escalated, Nathanael backed away from them, into a corner of the room. From there he said,

quietly pleading, "It's good bread, Papa."

Simon was as angry at himself as anyone else. He *was* proud of his son. He had brought him up to be careful with every coin that passed through his fingers, and the boy was learning the ways of commerce at an early age. And he had no quarrel with Eliezer. His neighbor was an honest man trying to make a living for his family—just like Simon. But the pressures of dealing with this recent influx of people in their small town had frayed his nerves, and lately he had found himself on edge with everyone.

Embarrassed, Simon knelt before his son. Expressing his awkward affection through his strong grip, he clutched Nathanael's narrow shoulders. "You made a good bargain, son. I couldn't have done better myself." He reassured the boy with a thin smile. "Now go help your mother put the bread away."

Nathanael smiled, knowing that his father would prefer that to any more demonstrative display of affection, then gathered the basket of bread in his arms. And the two men were left in the room.

"He's a good boy, Simon," Eliezer volunteered.

"The God of Abraham has been generous," Simon answered. But quickly his face darkened, and the edge crept back into his voice. "Now, if He would just see to those filthy Romans. They stain this land with the blood of our own people! They count our heads like sheep, so they can gouge us for more taxes."

"*And* make you rich in the bargain," Eliezer reminded him.

"If the Lord will turn His back on our sorrow, then we'll have to survive on our own."

"You have no patience, Simon."

"Patience will get us killed."

"No one is getting killed," the old man chided.

"Maybe not—but the Roman taxes bleed us dry."

"Messiah," Eliezer said, gazing out the window to the cloud-dappled sky. "Messiah will come."

Simon made a rude snorting sound. "Sure. Here we go with all the old prophecies. How many years, Eliezer? How long must we wait for Messiah?"

The old man turned to his neighbor and friend, alarmed. "There's no peace for one so

angry with God."

"The Romans are systematically taking everything from us—"

"Everything but our *faith*, Simon." Eliezer sighed heavily. "But I see, my friend, that they have taken even that away from you."

"What good is a prophet's story of a Savior," Simon persisted, "when people are in chains? What do we tell our children when they ask about Messiah? How do we explain the reality of today?"

"The Lord heard our fathers in Egypt," Eliezer insisted. "He hears us as well. Today's reality leads us *to* our God—not away from Him."

"The Romans have weakened you," Simon said with a measure of contempt.

"No," Eliezer said firmly, "they've *strengthened* my faith. The Lord will choose the day of Messiah. It won't be the Romans—and it won't be us who choose. Simon, it's *your* faith that has been weakened by a Caesar. Our God *is*



God! He's the God who led our fathers out of Egyptian slavery—and He's the God who will deliver us from *our* bondage."

## The Visitors

That night, after the light evening meal, two road-weary travelers knocked at the closed door of the Bethlehem inn. Joanna rose to answer, but Simon instructed her, "Tell them we're full up—and that they've got a lot of nerve even trying at this late hour."

"I'm sorry," she told the man and woman seeking lodging, "but we have no more room." Her heart went out to them, however, and she asked them to wait a moment. Joanna eased the door closed, and turned to her husband. "Simon, she's pregnant. We *must* find a room for them."

"There's not one left."

She opened the door again. "I'm very sorry. Maybe there'll be something tomor-

row." The man pleaded with Joanna while the woman with him sat silently atop their beast. She was quite young, Joanna noticed, and very close to her time. She could see that the baby could come at any moment. "Excuse me," she said, smiling through clenched teeth.

Closing the door again, she turned on Simon. "Where is your heart? Surely we have *something* for them."

"How else do you want me to say it? We have no *room!*" But then his eyes flickered nervously side to side. "That is, unless—"

Joanna's anger rose. "Unless they can pay extra, right?"

"I can be persuaded—"

"Listen," she moved toward him, struggling to control her disgust, "I can see that the people have no money—and the woman is near her time."

"Charity!" Simon shrieked. "Always charity. This is a business, Joanna, *not* a charity. People give us money and we give them a room for the night. Do you see how it works?"

"All I see is your cold, empty heart!" She grabbed the lamp and threw open the door. "Come with me," she said to the travelers. "I'll put you up in the stable tonight. At least you'll be warm."

Now there, that was better. Simon leaned back into his chair and smiled, satisfied with himself for finally scoring a point against his wife. When would she ever learn that—just like their neighbor's bread—they couldn't afford to be giving away the very thing that put food on the table. It wasn't personal; he felt no animosity toward the late visitors. It was business—just business. They had to know people wouldn't give them something for free.

Yes, his sound business sense had put this roof over their heads, had given them a comfortable life, a position of respect in their town. It was a good thing. Yes, a good thing. And if they hadn't many friends, well, that was just the price one paid sometimes for working hard. Someday his wife would understand that the sacrifice had been worth it.

Simon glanced around at the sparse furnishings, and the room suddenly seemed quite empty. It was too early for Nathanael to be in bed. Where could he be? Joanna should be back by now.

Where *was* everyone? dsj

(to be continued...)