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Teaching Letter

A Stormy Christmas in the Holy Land



Teaching Letter
By Derek Prince

For most people in America or Europe, the strongest associations of Christmas are those of home. They think of warmth, of comfort, of good food and good fellowship, and of family reunion. Perhaps their thoughts may also turn to the Holy Land and to the scenes of the first Christmas there more than two thousand years ago. Even so, they seldom realize how different in all its circumstances that first Christmas was from those we are accustomed to celebrate today. For Joseph and Mary then, home, with all its comforts and associations, was far away. At the command of an alien emperor, compelled by circumstances outside their own control, they had left their home in Nazareth and had made a long and weary journey to Bethlehem. On arrival, they had made their way to the public inn — feeling, no doubt, that it would be a poor substitute for their own home. But even there they had been told that there was no room for them. At last, in desperation, they had found shelter in a cattle stall. There, as they rested, weary, discouraged, unwanted by the world, the greatest miracle of the ages took place: "she brought forth her firstborn son." Surely, the glory of that first Christmas arose not from any material or external circumstances, but from one thing only — the revelation of God's mercy and love in the gift of a Savior.

December 1947

These reflections are made very vivid to me, as I go back in memory to 1947, the last Christmas that our family spent in the Holy Land, a few months before the State of Israel was reborn. For in the events of that Christmas, too, there was little of external comfort or glory, but there was a fresh and wonderful revelation of the love and care of our God and Savior.

At that time my wife, Lydia, and I were living with the children whom the Lord had given us, in a district of Jerusalem known as Upper Bakaa, on the very road that led due south to Bethlehem. Our children were all girls. They were not our own by natural birth, but God, who "setteth the solitary in families" (Ps. 68:6), had entrusted them to us. By natural birth, indeed, we were widely separated from each other: for Lydia was Danish, six of the girls were Jewish, one was Arab of Muslim parentage, and the youngest girl and I were British. Each of us had entered, by rebirth through God's Spirit, into Christ — "in whom there is neither

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Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). Through the same Spirit, God had united us as a single family, by bonds that were just as real as those that unite any natural family.

The actual story begins on December 12, 1947. A few weeks previously, the Assembly of the United Nations, at Lake Success in the United States, had decided upon partition as the solution of the "Palestine problem." (Palestine was at that time under British rule. In May 1948, as a result of partition, it was divided into the two independent states of Israel and Jordan.) As I look back, I cannot help wondering whether any of the statesmen responsible for that decision really understood what its effect would be on the lives of men and women thousands of miles away in Palestine, any more than the Emperor Augustus understood the effects of his decree "that all the world should be taxed" (Luke 2:1). In each case, the powers of this world were instruments to fulfill the purposes and the prophecies of God.

Partition in Palestine was not due to take place until six months after the decision of the United Nations, but in Jerusalem, at any rate, through the forces of fear and suspicion, a form of partition was brought about almost immediately. Jews and Arabs were no longer willing to live side by side. Each party was afraid that they might be attacked without warning by the other. In those areas of Jerusalem that were purely Jewish or purely Arab, no immediate change was necessary. But in the mixed areas where Jews and Arabs had been living side by side, a change quickly took place. In the areas where Jews were stronger, the Arabs hastily packed a few of their belongings and left to seek new homes. In the areas where the Arabs were stronger, the Jews left.

Upper Bakaa, where we were living, was one of these mixed areas, with Jews and Arabs living side by side. We occupied the second and third floors of a large stone house, with our own private entrance on one side. Our neighbors on the ground floor were Jewish, except for one Muslim Arab boy who acted as errand boy and caretaker for a Jewish contractor, sleeping at night in his office. After the announcement of partition, we soon realized that all our Jewish neighbors had left us. Quietly and inconspicuously they had departed, carrying only a suitcase or two with them, as anyone seen moving with large quantities of luggage or furniture was too tempting a target for Arab snipers. As our own household contained both Jews and Arabs, and as we were all Christians by faith, we did not feel that the new relationship between the Jews and the Arabs directly concerned us, or that either side would regard us as enemies. It was not long, however, before we learned our mistake.

"None Shall Be Lost"

The Scriptures warn us:

> "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth" (Proverbs 27:1)

Certainly, on the morning of December 12, no member of our household had any idea about what that day was to bring forth. But God knew, and He began to prepare us. Lydia and I began the day with prayer in our bedroom. As we were praying, God gave Lydia an utterance in an unknown tongue that sounded strangely urgent. Then He gave me the interpretation in English. The message concerned the family that He had entrusted to us. The last sentence, which made a deep impression on my mind, was this: "None shall be lost or scattered."

In the afternoon we had an unexpected visitor. A British policeman from the Palestine Police Force came to the door. He did not know us, but he asked us if we could tell him the address of an Australian lady connected with the Salvation Army who was a friend of ours and lived not far away. Instead of sending him on to the lady's house, we invited him in and sent one of the children to fetch the lady to our house. In all this we saw, at that time, no special purpose or design. But afterwards we understood that God had sent the policeman as His "angel" to us and had ordained that he should remain with us throughout that day.

When the Australian lady arrived, we had a time of prayer together with some of the children. The policeman, who had been a member of the Salvation Army but had backslidden, reconsecrated his life to the Lord. As we were praying, the Lord spoke again through the gifts of the Spirit. This time the sentence that remained in my mind was: "I have delivered thee from the snare of the fowler" — words based on Psalm 91:3.

As we got up from prayer, one of our older girls — a Jewess named Johanne — burst into the room. She was pale and trembling. Quickly, she told us her story. She had gone out, as her habit was, to have a music lesson with an Armenian lady who lived a few doors down the road. At the end of the lesson she had been delayed; by the time she left, it was already getting dark. As she walked back in the shadow of the houses, she saw a military truck, full of Arab Legion soldiers, standing before the front entrance of our house.

The Muslim boy, who was the only remaining occupant of the ground floor, was talking with the Arab Legionaries.

At this point it is necessary to explain that the Arab Legion was a force of Arabs, mainly from Jordan, trained and equipped by the British. They were a main part of the so-called '"security forces" that were supposed to be maintaining law and order in Jerusalem while partition was taking effect. In actual fact, they were entirely pro-Arab and violently anti-Jewish. For the Jews in Jerusalem they were not a source of protection, but rather their chief danger. Later, the Arab Legion proved to be the strongest and best equipped of the various Arab forces that attacked the newly formed State of Israel.

To Johanne, therefore, it immediately seemed strange and suspicious that an Arab Legion truck should be standing outside our house. Running around to the back of the house — out of sight of the Arab Legionaries — she entered by the side door that led to our part of the house and ran up the stairs to the second floor. On this floor, at the front of the house, there was a veranda, protected by a low stone wall, which jutted right out over the main ground floor entrance. Crawling on her hands and knees, Johanne made her way out to a position on the edge of this veranda from which she could hear what was being said below without being seen. She had a perfect knowledge of Arabic, so she could understand all that the Arabs were saying. The Arab Legionaries were asking the Muslim boy about the people who lived in the house; he, in reply, was giving them full details of us all, emphasizing especially that all our older girls were Jewesses. The soldiers then asked what would be the best time for them to come back. The boy replied that from midnight onwards there would be no other security forces on that road. Finally, the soldiers drove off after promising to come back again at midnight.

My wife and I both had close personal acquaintance with the Muslim Arabs, so, as soon as we heard Johanne's story, we knew that we were confronted by a very real threat to our home. The British policeman, who also had worked much amongst the Muslims, was of the same opinion. As we had no phone, he offered to go to the nearest police post for help. On his way to do this, he escorted the Australian lady back to her home, where she was comparatively safe, having the protection of Arab neighbors who were her friends.

When the policeman got back, his report was not encouraging. The sergeant in charge of the police post was willing enough to help, but the situation all over Jerusalem was so bad that it was not in his power to do much. It was possible that a police patrol might be in the neighborhood of our house about midnight, but he could not promise this. Even if the patrol should arrive, it would be no protection against a truckload of Arab Legion soldiers, fully armed with the latest automatic weapons. From all this, we saw plainly that we could not risk the children's lives by remaining in the home that night. We had no alternative but to leave as quickly as possible. We told the children each to prepare a little bundle of the most necessary things to carry with them. Even in such a moment as that, it was a joy to me to see that the first thing that almost every one of the children put into her bundle was her Bible. Meanwhile, my wife quickly prepared a meal since we did not know when we would eat again. However, we found that none of us had much appetite.

Out Into The Dark

It was about seven o'clock when Johanne overheard the Arabs' conversation. They had promised to return at midnight. At nine o'clock our whole family filed silently out into the dark and deserted streets of Jerusalem. Each member of the family was carrying a bundle. I came last, and my bundle was Elisabeth, the youngest child, whom I carried in my arms. The British policeman was still with us. There was not a living soul in sight — not even a cat or a dog. The doors of the houses were all fast closed, the windows shuttered. Every now and then the silence was broken by the distant crack of a rifle. There was no way of knowing whether anyone was watching us.

The only place that we could think of making for was an American mission situated in the center of Jerusalem, about two miles away. But this mission lay inside a special British security zone, which was encircled with a wall of barbed wire and to which no one was admitted without a special pass. Our family did not possess these passes. How then could we enter the zone?

God's answer to this problem was provided by the British policeman. When we reached the entrance to the zone, the policeman went in and asked to see the British commander. We were left outside. The sentry on duty took pity on us and allowed my wife and the two youngest children to sit down in his sentry box (which was made of sandbags). The rest of us remained standing. From the oldest to the youngest, we were all praying.

The suspense of waiting was hard to bear. My watch told me that forty minutes had passed — but it seemed twice as long. Then the policeman returned. He had obtained permission for all of us to enter the zone! He escorted us through the barbed wire barricade right to the door of the American mission. Only when he had seen us safely inside

did he take his leave of us. Just a few hours previous he had reconsecrated his life to God's service. In turn, God used him that very night to save our whole family.

We spent the night in the American mission — some of us on beds hastily made up, others on mattresses spread in the attic. But news travels fast in the Middle East, and we were not left in peace long. The American missionaries worked mainly among the Arabs and were thus in touch with a group of Christian Arabs.

Next morning, the leader of the Christian Arabs brought a message from the Muslims to say that if the Jewish children were allowed to remain in the mission, they would burn the whole house down. After consultation, the Americans told us that they would willingly keep my wife, me, and the non-Jewish children, but that we must find another place for the Jewish children. To this we replied that we were all one family and we could not be separated from any of the children. Wherever they went, we would go too.

A Christmas Battlefield

Two days later our whole family was again moving — in a small rented truck — through the streets of Jerusalem. At one point we had to pass a roadblock manned by Arabs. We told the girls to speak to each other loudly in Arabic — and we were allowed to pass. Our place of refuge this time was a British mission located on the edge of one of the completely Jewish areas of Jerusalem. Our situation here made us safe from direct attack by the Arabs, but on the other hand, just beyond the mission was a sort of no man's land — an area in which all the houses had been vacated and neither Jews nor Arabs were living any longer. Each night in this area, opposing bands of Jews and Arabs met and conducted intermittent battles as long as darkness lasted. Later, this area became well known on account of the Mandelbaum Gate, which was for about ten years the point of interchange between the Jewish and Arab sectors of Jerusalem. It was in this mission that we spent Christmas Day. As soon as darkness fell, the battles began just outside our walls; after that, it was no longer safe to remain in any of the rooms that had windows facing outward, as we never knew when a bullet might come through the window. We withdrew, therefore, into a hall in the center of the mission that had no outside walls. Here we sang hymns and prayed and sought to occupy the children's attention with some games. But through it all, we heard the intermittent chatter of rifle and machine gun fire; at intervals there was a bigger explosion, as one side or the other blew up some deserted house which they suspected of harboring snipers. These bigger explosions caused the whole mission building to vibrate and broke some of the windows. When we eventually went to bed, we were careful to arrange our beds below the level of the windows to avoid any stray bullets that might enter. But few of us enjoyed much sleep.

Early in the New Year of 1948 we moved again — back to the American mission in the central security zone. Meanwhile, the American missionaries had left for the United States, and the Muslims who had threatened to burn the house had been driven out of the zone by the Jews. A few days later, the British mission where we had spent Christmas became the scene of actual fighting, being captured first by one side, then by the other. Eventually it was abandoned by both sides, empty and gutted.

"God With Us"

Early in May 1948, our four oldest Jewish girls left us, being evacuated to Britain by the British forces as they withdrew from Palestine. Lydia and I remained with the four younger children in the American mission. Here, for two months, all six of us lived in a basement laundry room, sharing the fate of the Jewish community in Jerusalem — siege and starvation. During this period we were cut off from all communication with the outside world and had no way of knowing what had happened to the older girls.

Then, by a sudden miracle, God opened the way for the six of us to also leave Jerusalem. This time we walked out of the house at 5 AM, once again taking with us only as much as we could carry. As a nation, Israel was still under siege. There were no transportation services entering or leaving the country by land, sea, or air; but God provided an airplane that took us from Haifa to London. A week later, at a Pentecostal Church in a small English village, we were reunited with the four older girls who had gone ahead. Thus, God kept the promise He had given us on that fateful morning of December 12, 1947: "None shall be lost or scattered." Looking back over that stormy Christmas, I realize that it taught me the real message of Christmas. Stripped of all its externals and its non-essentials, that message is Emmanuel — "God with us." In all the tension and the turmoil, the abiding presence of God was more real and more precious just then than in any other Christmas I have celebrated — before or since.

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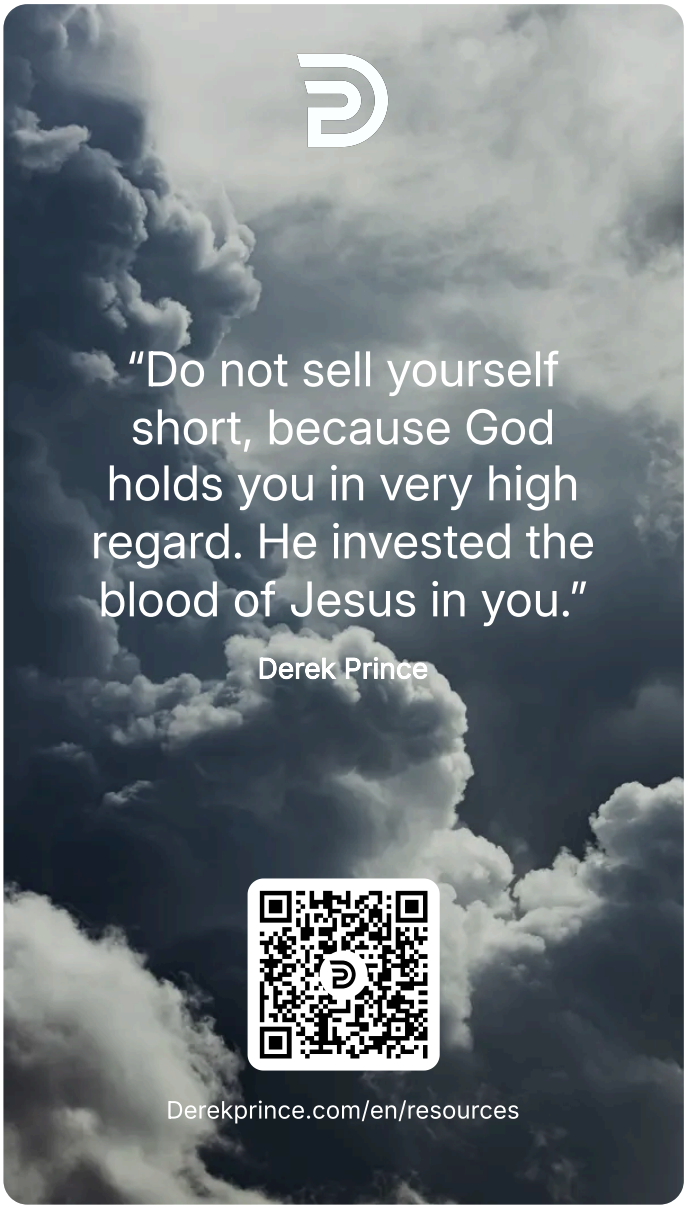

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