



THE
SHEPHERDS'
PRAYER

A Christmas Novel

RICHARD M. BARRY

THE
SHEPHERDS'
PRAYER

A Christmas Novel



RICHARD M. BARRY

RM BARRY
PUBLICATIONS

Copyright © 2006 by Richard M. Barry

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Published by RM Barry Publications, Englewood, Colorado

Some scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible. Public domain.

Some scripture quotations are taken from the American Standard Version of the Bible. Public domain.

Some scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.lockman.org)

Some scripture quotations are taken from the Amplified® Bible, Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.lockman.org)

Some scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, Copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

For information or bulk orders:

RM Barry Publications
P.O. Box 3528
Littleton, CO 80161-3528
888-209-0510
www.ShepherdsPrayer.com

Jacket Design by The DesignWorks Group, Sisters, Oregon.

ISBN: 0-9767290-5-9

Printed in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to the shepherds of
Bethlehem, who, I believe, may be some of
the greatest unsung heroes in the Bible.

THE
SHEPHERDS'
PRAYER





PROLOGUE

Lydia struggled to stay in the saddle as the frantic horse dodged briar-laden bushes and jumped over other obstacles in its path. She tried to see if the killers were chasing her, but turning her head to look almost made her lose her balance as the horse stumbled and lurched through the dark, inhospitable Judean wilderness. She tightened her grip on the baby in her arms.

Her mind reeled. The screams of horrified mothers and fathers still echoed in her ears, as did the snuffed-out cries of their slain children. The terrible scene flashed through her memory over and over. She struggled to comprehend what was happening back in the peaceful little village of Bethlehem where she lived.

Every motherly instinct she had told her that her only chance to escape with her son's life was to ride as fast and as far as she could. So she jabbed her heels into the horse's side, urging the poor animal to continue the frenzied pace, clinging with all her strength to her baby with one arm, and to the saddle with the other.

The horse panted heavily, steamy mist pouring from its flared nostrils. The desert brush tore at Lydia's nightclothes and cut into her skin as the horse raced over the unfamiliar terrain.

She had never ridden a horse before, only donkeys, and she made no attempt to guide it. The night was dark, so she couldn't see where she was going anyway. All she knew was that Bethlehem and the cries of her neighbors were behind her.

Eventually the exhausted horse slowed to an unsteady trot as it struggled in vain to catch its breath. Lydia was finally able to turn to see if she was being pursued, but it was too dark to see anything. Then the horse staggered sideways down a steep slope as Lydia struggled to hang on. The horse finally collapsed onto the rocky bottom of a dry creek bed. Lydia's body slammed to the ground, still gripping the saddle. A sharp pain shot up her leg, searing her mind with agony, and she immediately slipped out of consciousness.



When she woke again, Lydia thought for a moment she had been asleep in her bed, and it had all been a terrible dream. But as she slowly became aware of her surroundings, she realized this was no dream. Her skin was numb from the cold, and she couldn't feel her leg which was trapped under the fallen animal, now lifeless and still. She lay for a moment under the dark, moonless sky, gradually trying to make sense of her predicament, and she understood she was dying. In her condition, she would not survive the night.

“My baby!” She was suddenly stricken with panic as she remembered her infant son. She reached out blindly into the darkness for him. He was next to her, still wrapped tightly in the lambskin. Lydia pulled a corner of the blanket away from his face, and breathed a deep sigh of relief when she heard his cry. He seemed to be unharmed, and she murmured a prayer of thanks to God. Then she began to weep at the thought that he, too, might succumb to the elements before anyone would find them.

With her last bit of strength, Lydia pulled the infant close to her breast to shield him from the wind and the biting desert cold. Caressing him, she whispered, “My sweet baby.” Then she prayed through her tears, “Oh Lord, I give my child to you. Use him as you will, but please let him live. Please, Lord ... deliver my son to safety.”



1

CHAPTER



*A*nam sat at the family gathering wishing he could be more cheerful, but the occasion only served to remind him, once again, that he did not fit in. His father, Micah, sat at the head of the table. Anam noticed a gleam in his eye as Micah looked with pride upon his large family assembled there. They were a handsome lot. His sons had grown tall and strong. All but the youngest had taken wives, who were with them, along with his many grandchildren.

They were celebrating because Anam's younger brother, sixteen-year-old John, was now engaged to be married too. Micah had arranged the marriage with a business associate of his. The union of his son with the man's fourteen-year-old daughter would enlarge the profits of both merchants.

That left Anam as the only single man at the table, though he was nearly thirty, a realization that made him feel more out of place than usual. He was not related to the others by blood, but Micah's sons treated him like a brother. And Micah had always cared for him like one of his own. Yet this event reminded him once again of the sad fact that he did not really belong.

The eldest son, Aaron, turned to his white-bearded father. "Are you going to bestow a blessing upon the boy?" He winked at his youngest brother. "He is to be married soon, so he will need all the help he can get!"

The brothers roared with laughter. Their wives rolled their eyes and smiled demurely, the way women were expected to. The children giggled along with the adults, though they didn't understand the joke. Anam didn't think it was very funny, but he loved hearing the laughter of children. They always seemed to have such light hearts that laughter came naturally for them. In a way he was envious of them.

Micah stood from his position at the head of the table.

His beloved wife, Miriam, had died four years earlier, and he insisted that her seat next to his remain vacant as a permanent tribute and reminder of her life. His sons had urged him to remarry, but the old man had no interest in any other woman. The patriarch fixed his gaze upon his family, then raised his eyes toward heaven. "We beseech ye, oh Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth, to bestow thy blessings upon John. Bless the union he will enter into with the fruit of children and the goodness of heaven."

They all bowed their heads and recited a solemn "Amen" in perfect unison.

The women went to work at once, carrying heaping platters of food to the large wooden table. The scent of fresh-baked bread and roasted meats filled the air. Micah had ordered the fatted calf slaughtered, and they feasted on it along with lamb, cooked vegetables, bread, and wine.

Anam was pleased that his brother would now be married and start a family. He wished John nothing but happiness. But his mood was gloomy as he ate quietly and kept to himself, in stark contrast to the brothers, who were their usual boisterous selves. Jacob, the second-oldest brother, finished his third glass of wine and poured himself another. His wife whispered something to him. Jacob shook his head dismissively, then turned toward Anam. "You are the luckiest amongst us, my good man."

Confused, Anam quietly said, “How do you mean?”

“You have no wife nagging you about how much you drink!” He slapped Anam on the back as his brothers laughed.

“I’ll drink to that,” Aaron said.

From across the table, Anam caught the look on his compassionate father’s face, as Micah locked eyes with his adopted son. The old man’s deep wrinkles around his eyes spoke volumes. He obviously felt Anam’s pain, but would not embarrass him by addressing it here at the table. It helped Anam to get through the rest of the dinner without punching one of his brothers. They had no idea that their good-natured barbs were so hurtful.



After dinner, Anam slipped away from the family and wandered out into the fields. The sun was setting behind the hills in the distance. He pulled his cloak more tightly around his neck against the evening chill. “You are the living God,” he said aloud into the gathering darkness. “I need guidance. This cannot be my lot for the rest of my life. There must be more. Please show me.”

He listened to the wind as it softly fluttered among the trees. A faint whisper came to his ear. Whether or not it was audible, he could not tell. Yet it was a voice ... and it told him the time had come to go to Micah, his father, and pour out his heart.

2

CHAPTER



The night wore on and the festivities died down. The children fell asleep first, followed soon by their fathers (helped by too much wine), who were dutifully joined by their wives after they cleaned up following the meal.

Anam, however, had no intention of going to sleep yet. He felt the hand of God upon his shoulder, urging him to speak with his father openly—man to man. There was no turning back now. Anam gathered up his courage

and went back inside the house. The sweet aroma of the evening's feast still lingered in the air as he quietly made his way to his father's private quarters, careful not to wake any of the others.

A faint light flickered from beneath the closed door. *He must be up reading. Perhaps it is best not to disturb him,* Anam told himself. He turned to walk away, but something stopped him. *No! I must do this,* he resolved.

He knocked lightly on the door.

After a shuffling of footsteps, Micah appeared in the doorway. "Anam," he said, "I thought you were in bed like the others."

"I could not sleep, Father."

Micah ushered him inside and closed the door. "Now," he said, "tell me what is bothering you."

How does he know something is bothering me? It must show on my face. I swear that man can see right through me sometimes! Anam's eyes turned toward the large parchment scrolls carefully laid out on the table next to Micah's bed, illuminated by a dim lantern. "I see that you were reading from the sacred Scriptures, Father. I am sorry for disturbing you."

The old man smiled and rested his weary bones in a chair

next to his bed. "To tell you the truth, I needed the break. What I was reading was ... well, let's say, very disturbing."

Though he wanted to get right to his question, Anam found Micah's statement riveting. "Is it from the Pentateuch?" he asked, referring to the portion of Holy Writ he was most familiar with.

"No, it is from the inspired utterances of the prophet Isaiah."

Anam nodded when he heard the name. He was certainly familiar with the great prophet, but embarrassed to admit he did not know all of his writings. "He was a great man of God who lived hundreds of years ago, is that not correct?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, but his words seem to speak clearly to our own day. The passage I just read tells of a mysterious figure—a servant who will come and give his life to save his people."

Anam vaguely recalled hearing of this passage before, but he wanted to know more. "How can a servant save anyone?" he asked, perplexed.

"I do not know, my son. But Isaiah says that this servant will be despised by men, reviled. He will suffer much, but his suffering will not be in vain. In fact, through his suffering God will heal the nations, and this servant will be glorified."

“The prophet has indeed given us a strange story, Father. What does it mean?”

Micah sighed deeply. “I wish I had the answer. I do not fully understand it myself. But I think what he is trying to tell us is that we must look at suffering in a different way; we must see it from God’s perspective rather than just man’s. This was written in the distant past, but even now our people suffer greatly under the oppression of the Romans. That makes me wonder if Isaiah was speaking to us today.”

There was silence for a moment as Anam absorbed his father’s words.

Micah stood and carefully rolled up the parchment scrolls. After kissing them, he reverently placed them on the shelf in the corner of the room. Then he patted Anam on the shoulder, saying, “But I know you did not come here to discuss prophecy. So tell me, what is on your mind?”

Anam cleared his throat. “Please understand that I mean no disrespect by this question. You have been a kind and loving father to me all of my life, and I thank God every day for you. But ...”

Micah’s old eyes looked upon him with pity. “But you want to know about the circumstances of your birth. You want to know where you came from.”

Bowing his head, Anam whispered, “Yes.”

“I knew this day would come. In fact, it is to your credit that it took so many years before you finally came to me and asked. You have always been most respectful.” Micah sat again in the chair beside his bed. “Now I will tell you all that I know.”

Anam sat at his father’s feet and felt his throat tighten as he listened to the story he had always wanted to hear, but never dared ask about.

“It was many years ago ... it seems like yesterday, but it’s been almost thirty years now. I was traveling alone—not a wise thing for a merchant to do, but in my younger years I took chances. I was on my way home from a successful trading mission in Jerusalem. It was early in the morning, and my donkey was heavily laden with merchandise I had purchased in the great city. I was filled with happy thoughts of returning home, where I knew my beloved wife Miriam would be waiting for me. I also anticipated the money I could make with all the fine products I had shrewdly negotiated for.

“Then, before me on the road, I came across something that would change my life forever. From a dry creek bed off to the side of the road, I thought I heard something, a wailing sort of sound. I stopped dead in my tracks. My donkey

began braying and kicking. Something had frightened him. The first thought that crossed my mind was that there were thieves lying in wait. They would pounce upon me and steal my goods. In fear of my life, I unsheathed my dagger and moved cautiously toward the edge of the creek bed to take a closer look.

“I cannot tell you how astonished I was when, rather than bandits, I saw a Roman soldier’s horse toppled over on its side. It was dead, having apparently been ridden to exhaustion. Next to the animal, wrapped in a lambskin blanket, was an infant. The child was crying, and I picked him up to comfort him.”

Anam had been listening intently. He swallowed hard as the reality of Micah’s words sunk in. “The child was me?”

“Yes.”

“I was all alone?”

Micah stroked his long white beard, a gesture Anam knew he did when something was bothering him.

“There was a woman. She lay pinned beneath the dead horse. With all my strength I managed to pull her out from under the carcass. But I was too late. She also was dead. That woman, I can only presume, must have been your mother.”

A tear clouded Anam’s vision as he waited for the old man to continue.

“The scene was a mystery to me. I couldn’t understand why a woman would be riding a horse that—it was obvious from the saddle and other gear—belonged to a Roman soldier. The woman was wearing only a nightdress, her feet were bare, and it was very cold at night that time of year. She must have died from her injuries and from exposure to the cold. Fortunately for the baby ... I mean you ... you were tightly wrapped in the blanket and shielded from the cold and wind by the woman’s tight embrace.

“I laid her body across my donkey, leaving most of my merchandise by the side of the road, and took her back to our town for a proper burial. Of course, I took the baby with me too, carrying you in my arms the remainder of the trip.

“Ah, you were a fine-looking child, Anam, and when I held you, you stopped crying. I wanted to consider you as my own child from that very first day, as did Miriam when I showed you to her. However, when we took you to the elders at the synagogue, they noted that you had already been circumcised. According to the laws of our people, given to us by the Most High, that meant you were a Jew and had already been given a name on the day of your circumcision. It would dishonor your parents, alive or dead, to give you another name. That is why we deemed it necessary to call

you Anam, which literally means ‘no-name.’ It fulfilled the letter of the law.”

Anam sighed deeply. He knew all too well the meaning of his name. For him it had been an endless source of shame for as long as he could remember.

Micah paused and leaned forward from his chair, placing his hand on Anam’s shoulder with the same compassionate look in his eyes Anam had seen earlier at the dinner table. Then Micah sat back and continued his story. “The elders told me that it was my duty to try to find your family and return you to them. But the circumstances of your birth were shrouded in mystery. The only clue I had, in fact, was the lambskin blanket you were wrapped in when I found you.”

Anam cocked his head. “How could a blanket tell you anything about who I was?”

Micah nodded as if to confirm a long-held belief. “The time has come for you to see as well as to hear.”

The old man ambled over to an oblong wooden chest that lay at the foot of his bed. Ever since he was a child, Anam had wondered what was inside, but his father always kept it under lock and key. The aged hinges groaned in protest as Micah opened the lid. The musty smell of things stored away for many years permeated the room. Micah carefully

retrieved a lambskin blanket from deep within the chest and handed it to Anam.

“It is beautiful,” he said as his fingers caressed the soft, white wool.

“Go on,” said Micah. “Read the inscription.”

Embedded with ink into the tanned hide were these words, which Anam read aloud: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to men of good will, through Jesus Christ, who was born of Mary in a stable in Bethlehem and who, wrapped in swaddling clothes, was in a manger, he who is the Savior of the world.”

Micah smiled. “Yes, yes. I remember those words, each and every one of them, as if I had just read them yesterday. They have remained with me, close to my heart, all these many years, and I have often pondered their meaning.”

Anam stood, his heart pounding with excitement. “Father, I do not understand what these words mean. Who is this Jesus? And Mary? I do not know of these people. Are they my relatives?”

Micah shook his head. “I tried to find out the answers, but it has remained a mystery to this day. I want you to know, however, that this blanket is rightfully your property. I have faithfully preserved it for you, for this very day, and now I want you to keep it.”

Tears welled up in the young man's eyes as he hugged the blanket close to his body. It was a connection to his past, the only link in fact, and it stirred within him a passion to know more.

“You said this blanket was your only clue, Father. Did it lead you any closer to the truth?”

Micah sat in his chair again and sighed heavily, “The truth was indeed what I was seeking. With the blessing of our town's elders, I set out back up the road the same way I had come, in hopes of finding your family. When I came to Bethlehem, I heard of a terrible evil that had befallen that place. It seems that the king had received information that a child had been born who would someday present a challenge to his throne. So he ordered all the male infants in that town to be slaughtered. The killing was horrific; the grief it caused, indescribable.

“I surmised that your mother must have fled from the town to save you from a certain and cruel death. In her flight, she happened upon a horse that belonged to one of Herod's soldiers. She urged the horse on as fast and as far as it would go, until it finally collapsed in the creek bed where I found you.

“I hoped this great tragedy would lead me to your family. My heart rejoiced in thinking how happy they would be

to have you back. But it was not to be. The more I asked about this mystery child I had found, the more hostile the people became toward me. They were angry and suspicious of me. Before long, I was met with a wall of silence as one by one they refused to speak with me. Realizing the futility of my quest, I returned home. And from that day on, you became my son.”

Hearing this story now for the first time, nearly three decades after it had occurred, caused all sorts of emotions to flood Anam's being. Micah's incredible tale prompted more questions than answers. And who was this mysterious Jesus that the lambskin blanket spoke of? He was determined to find out.

“Father, I know what I must do. I shall travel to Bethlehem myself and seek out answers.” He then bowed his head in deference to the kindly old man who loved him so much. “That is, sir, with your blessing.”

“Come here,” Micah said, gesturing Anam to his side. He placed his hands on the young man's head and uttered a prayer over him. Anam closed his eyes as he listened intently to every word. Then Micah dismissed him and sent him on his way, saying, “May the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be with you, my son. And may the living God who alone guards all truth guide your every footstep.”

About THE SHEPHERDS' PRAYER

A young man orphaned as a baby sets off to discover the truth about the circumstances of his birth, the fate of his parents, and his heritage. Having been raised in a culture where bloodlines mean everything, he seems forever condemned to live as an outsider on the fringes of society until he discovers his true heritage.

His only clue is a cryptic message on a lambskin blanket about a child born in a stable in Bethlehem. Who is this mysterious child? And what could such a child have to do with his own birth and destiny?

The answers will change his life forever...and maybe yours.

"I really enjoyed the fact that the story line was so captivating to the many levels of readers and listeners in our family."

—MICHAELANN MARTIN, Author of *Woman of Grace* and *Family Matters: Bible Study on Marriage and Family* and co-founder of FOCUS Campus Ministries

"Your book was a wonderful Christmas surprise for me."

—JERRY WINTERROWD, retired Episcopal Bishop of Colorado

"I have never read anything like this. You have taken Biblical stories and prophecies and woven them into a most remarkable and fascinating book."

—PASTOR DAN J. DUNKEL

ISBN 0-9767290-5-9

