

PART I Chapter 1:

It had been a long, tiresome trip and a trying search. The city of Jerusalem was a teeming metropolis, alive with people from all walks of life. Surely here, he thought, he would find the type of man he was looking for. Surely, there was at least one man in Jerusalem with insight, drive, and motivation, who could be inspired and trained to lead a small insurrection.

First he tried the cloth shop owner, a short stocky old man with a withered look about him, whose name, according to the sign in the window, was Benjamin. He first tried to sell the owner some goods, as that was his main line of work. But the old miser had already stocked up for the next three or four months. So he made a note to check back. As he wrote, he began talking about the evils of the Romans, and their high taxation. Benjamin never flexed a muscle. "Doesn't bother me any," he said. "I'm rich enough to retire. I only keep this shop going for something to do."

He could see that he would get nowhere with this fellow. So he left politely and thought he would try the other end of the spectrum.

As his black and white chariot passed along the dusty streets of Jerusalem, he caught sight of a beggar, sitting by the side of the road. Perhaps this was his man. He stopped the chariot and spoke with the mendicant, who was obviously surprised to see a gentleman of his appearance stop and converse with the likes of himself. As he continued the conversation, he could see that the beggar, who was short of stature and somewhat elderly, was obviously both uninformed and apathetic about the political situation and how it affected his daily life. The beggar stared blankly at his visitor, obviously puzzled by the whole incident. He was also obviously offended when the man started to leave without giving him any money. The stranger apologized, and, reaching into his pocket, pulled out a handful of small change and dropped it into the beggar's cup.

So, the stranger thought to himself as he rode along in his unique looking chariot, it's not to be the rich shopkeeper, nor the poor beggar. Both were completely apathetic to the situation, the first due to his money, and the second because of his ignorance. No, the type of person he was looking for was obviously somewhere between the two. Perhaps, the brawny blacksmith, whose huge frame caught his eye as he rode slowly by the large shop window. The sign hanging in one corner of the window read: "BARABBAS' BLACKSMITH SHOP. FINE IRON WORK AS WELL AS HORSES SHOD." He could see right away that this was a hard-working man. Certainly he was not rich like Benjamin. Neither did he look to be as ignorant as the beggar was. Yes, this must be his man. He'd give it a try.

Beads of sweat poured from Barabbas' forehead, as the crackling sparks flew upward, some of them hitting and bouncing off of his rough, black leather apron like so many flitting fireflies. As he finished the horseshoe, he hung it up to cool. He wiped his face with his huge white handkerchief and sighed deeply. The day had been long, and he was hot and tired – tired of standing over the scorching fire all day, making wheel hoops and horseshoes. He'd had few calls that week for the fancy plates and shields he so liked to make. If only he were rich like that cloth shop owner who had stopped by a few days ago to get

his horses shod. When Barabbas asked him how his business was, he replied, "Not too good right now, but I don't care. I only keep my shop open for something to do." If he had this man's money, he thought, then, he could make what he wanted to, or not work at all if he didn't feel like it. Perhaps, he should try raising his prices and cutting corners. He did want his family to enjoy the best. But, it was the Romans who really bothered him. They'd take every shekel you made in taxes if they could. And what do they do with it all? Gorge themselves, that's what. The community could certainly stand some improvements. But no! They didn't care for the people. They'd kill you if they get a chance, just like they did his grandfather. After he'd given them his best efforts, they'd turned on him and crucified him, along with the rest of the Spartan captives. He would despise them forever for that. They're all tyrants, he thought, and murderers at heart! And the local rulers aren't much better! There's that putrid puppet, Pilate, always bowing and scraping to that Cyclops, Caesar, and his hired helper, Herod! It's a known fact that the old fox adds to the amount of the tax he's required by Rome to collect in order to fill his own coffers. Laws are passed for their political expediency rather than for the good they might do. And then there's those Roman soldiers, always parading up and down. They've even added a tax of their own, supposedly for their upkeep. Yes, things are truly in a terrible state!

All these thoughts were running wildly through his mind that afternoon, when the door opened and in walked one of them – a Roman soldier in the flesh. He cringed. The unwelcome visitor inquired about the sword hanging on the back wall, but when told the price, declined to buy it, saying, "I'll wait until the next increase in the soldier's tax. There is another half-shekel raise scheduled, you know." – as if it wasn't high enough already! The smith nodded patronizingly, though all the while something inside of him wanted to take the down sword and thrust it into the soldier's back as he turned to leave. But, he thought better of his compulsion and reached for another horseshoe instead. As he carried the horseshoe to the hearth, he made every effort to present a calm exterior.

In a moment, the soldier was gone. But, his exit was followed by the entrance of another figure who was very strange looking. He wore a pitch-black tunic with a wide white belt and a black hat with a white ribbon. His stern face sported a big black mustache, but no beard. The mustache curved down and then up on the sides like one of those fancy doorknockers Barabbas used to make. It connected nicely with his bushy black and white sideburns. He looked very strange indeed, and a bit frightening! He stood for a minute, looking the place over. Then, he smiled politely and motioned for the proprietor to come toward him.

"Yes, sir?" Barabbas said politely. "I'd have come quicker, only I was working with that horseshoe there, and was afraid to drop it. May I help you, sir?" He noticed that, despite the stranger's odd appearance, he still had the look of a Jew about him. The stranger's penetrating eyes wandered over the profusion of fancy cups, plates, knives, shields and other objects displayed for sale and rested upon the large sword hanging on the back wall.

"That sword there, of what does it consist?"

"Why, it's made of the finest iron available, sir. Nothing but the finest."

"Well, how sharp might its edges be?"

“Why, sharp enough, sir. Sharp enough to split a rock, or pierce a wall, or...or...or...”

“Or,” ventured the stranger, lowering his voice, “slit a Roman soldier’s throat?”

“Yes! Or slit a Roman soldier’s throat, confound ‘em! Now I’ve gone and said it, haven’t I? I’ve finally said what’s been brooding inside of me. I suppose you’re one of ‘em in disguise, or one o’ their spies. Well, arrest me, if you will, and have done with it. Our lives are without hope anyway under your wretched tyranny!”

The stranger smiled benignly. “Relax, my friend, relax. I’m Roman in citizenship only – by no means in sympathy. Despite my divergent appearance, do you not see the Jew in me? I was born a Jew, just like you. But, I was raised in a somewhat different environment. Having the chance, I determined to be my own man, to dress, talk, act and think as much as possible on my own, without the influence of any outside pressure.”

“Then, you are not a true Jew.” Barabbas was still on the defensive. “A Jew follows the precepts of the fathers: the Law, the Prophets and the Talmud.”

“I believe in the basic spiritual truth behind these teachings. But, every man must be free to find the meaning of this truth for himself, and to apply it to his own life as he sees fit. It is the spirit of these things that is important, not the letter. Look at you! Where has following the letter gotten you?”

Barabbas’ mind was racing and he started to speak. “Uh...”

But the stranger raised a finger, smiled and continued: “Ah, but it did my heart good to hear you speak those treacherous words a moment ago. For, I, myself, feel the same way. Those Romans are truly tyrants and must be stopped!”

“Ah-ha!” The smith’s face brightened. “So! You’re not one of them! Ah! I’m safe! And I have someone with which to share my rebellious attitudes!”

“Indeed you do!” exclaimed the stranger, who had been glancing toward the doorway every now and then to make sure no one entered. He now leaned over the counter and spoke more softly and yet more emphatically, so as to ensure his listener’s full attention. “...And I’m certain there must be more who feel the same way about things as we do!”

“Most likely. If only they would speak out!”

“And why do you think they do not?”

The smith’s brow wrinkled. “I never thought much about that, but the only reason I can think of is fear. We’re all afraid to say anything.”

“Exactly! If only we could all find each other, as you and I have, and all band together...” The stranger’s voice trailed off as he turned and glanced at the sundial outside the window. “I must be leaving now,”

he added, starting toward the door, "But, we shall meet again, my friend."

"What about the sword? Do you want to buy it?" "Not at this time. Perhaps later. Shalom." He raised his hand in a parting gesture. That was all. The stranger left as suddenly as he came.

Barabbas began to think. He thought as he closed up shop and got ready to go home. He thought all the way up the street to his ordinary looking home. He thought, perhaps it would be possible. "If only we could all band together..." That was what the stranger had said, wasn't it? But how? How could it happen? If only...

Should he tell his or wife, or not? She'd certainly be against the whole idea. She greatly resented the fact that her father had been brutally executed for plotting against the life of Herod, the great. She knows things are bad, but she'll just say, "We might as well grin 'n' bear it," or "We'll get along somehow." They had gotten along so far. But things are getting worse. Who knows if another insurrection might not succeed? If enough people could be gathered together to fight... But that was a big if. Well, too late now for any further mental deliberation. The 'little tigers' had spied him coming and were running out to meet him as usual. Big and boisterous, short and stocky, petite and ladylike, all three of them descended upon him at once, pulling and screaming.

"Shalom, Ababa!"

"Daddy, you're home!"

"Peace, Daddy!"

"Peace yourselves, you little bunches o' joy!" he said, reaching out his big brawny arms to enfold them.

"Did ju bring me anything t'day, Daddy?" asked the smallest of them. "Did ju?"

"No, sweetheart. Didn't get a chance."

As they approached the doorstep, she appeared, a tall, thin, golden haired vision of beauty. Her apron was still on, as she stepped decisively up to her huge husband, smiling radiantly.

"Barabbas! You're home late today!"

"But not by much, Deborah dear. An important customer came in just as I was closing."

"Well, come here you big brute and let me feast my eyes upon y'!" But it wasn't only their eyes that met. "Umm, ummmm!"

"Wow!" exclaimed a voice from the peanut gallery. "Mama's kissin' Daddy!"

"Ummmm!" As much as he enjoyed her kisses, his stomach told him it was time to think about supper.

"Alright, alright! Enough of this for now! I'm tired 'n' starved half to death!"

“Supper’ll be ready in just a minute, dear. Come on, sit down and wash your feet. Th’ water’s already poured.”

“Can I help y’, Daddy? Can I?”

“Ken I?”

They tugged and pulled at him from all sides.

“I want t’ help, Daddy.”

“Now, Caleb, you helped me yesterday. It’s Jason’s turn.”

“Alright. Then, I’ll get y’r slippers.”

“I wanna get Daddy’s slippers!”

“No! I asked first!”

“Now, you kids stop your bickerin’! I’ll get my own confounded slippers!”

I heard that, Barabbas! You know you shouldn’t talk like that, especially in front of th’ children!

“Now, Deborah! All I said was I’d get my own confoun...”

“But you didn’t have t’ say ‘confounded’!”

“Oh, alright, then! I’ll get my own slippers! Confound it!”

“Barabbas! When will you learn? Why, I’ll bet you don’t talk

like that to your customers. Just because you’re home, you think you can...”

“My foot, Deborah! You make such a fuss over one little word! Tend to th’ supper! I’m starved!”

The sound of Barabbas’ heavy tread upon the bare floor was heard as he walked deliberately to the bedroom. Then there was a bang, as he flung the door open. Entering, he grabbed a pair of rough leather slippers, roughly sewn together with the backs turned down.

Barabbas returned to his chair to sit for the washing of the feet. His eldest son, Jason held the towel with one hand while helping to splash the water around with the other. When the feet were washed and dried, Jason slipped the slippers on his father’s feet. Then he turned to go.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going? Aren’t you forgetting something? You know emptying th’ pan is part of the job.

“Sorry, Daddy, I forgot.” He picked up the pan and left.

Barabbas sat and waited. The joy of being home after a hard day’s work had taken his mind away from

the mysterious stranger and his exciting challenge. He was really hungry and the aroma of boiled mutton wafting through the room made it all the worse. What could be taking her so long in the kitchen? But just then, he heard again the patter of tiny feet.

“Daddy, supper’s ready.”

“Well, it’s about time! I’m half starved to death!”

“So am I, Daddy!”

“Now, what could you have done to get so starved?” he asked, putting his arm around his little daughter as they walked toward the kitchen table.

“I helped Mama clean th’ house.”

“Really?”

As they reached the kitchen, another voice chimed in: “And I pulled th’ weeds out o’ th’ yard.”

“Well, well! We’ll have to see what can be done about all this, we will.”

As they took their seats, he perused the feast before him. “Yes, sir, I’m starved. An’ ummmm, that beans ‘n’ mutton sure smells good.

Ummmm!”

It was one of the best meals he’d had in a long while. After supper and the reading of the torah, they got the children ready for bed.

Then, they got ready for bed themselves. Thus, the night went by without Barabbas telling his wife about the stranger’s strange visit. No need. He could discuss it with her tomorrow, if she was in a better mood, or maybe next week, or next month, or maybe never.

Sleep was long in coming that night. What was that the stranger said? “If only we could all band together...” But, no! It was utterly impossible. He glanced at his sweet wife, sleeping so peacefully at his side. What did she really know of all this anyway? It wasn’t her grandfather whom they crucified for no reason. She didn’t even keep up with all the raises in taxes. As long as they managed to get by she was happy. But, if things kept up, they might not be getting by for long. If only something could be done!

Then, his mind turned to the stories of the holy scripture: stories like that of Gideon, who defeated the whole Midianite army with only three hundred men; of Samson, who slew a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass; of Joshua and the walls of Jerico; and of Jehosaphat, who defeated the enemy through song. The next thing he knew, the golden rays of the morning sun came streaming through his window. He awakened with a curiously combined feeling of despair and hope.

[end of Chapter 1]

End of Chapter 5:

There must be some point, some purpose for existence, but where is it? Is there no answer? Is there no answer?

Chapter 6:

Manahem's question has echoed in the minds of many men.

Men search

For fame, for pleasure,

For contentment without measure,

For earth's vain illusive treasure,

Men search.

Barabbas was searching, though he might not have realized it, and it was his searching that made him take careful note of Manahem's words when the mysterious stranger visited his shop. The fact of Manahem's searching is evident from the last words of the preceding chapter. Pilate was searching, and also his wife with him. She, in fact, really thought, though mistakenly, that she had found the answer: more power and authority (take over Herod's territory!)

Let me introduce yet another in the list of searchers.... He was poor all his life, yet...he was spiritually poor as well.

What kind of man the mendicant

Who on the corner begs,

Who has no decent clothes to wear,

But sits in shreds and rags?...

What kind of man the mendicant?

Look inward you who ask.

For every man's a mendicant

Behind his haughty mask.