

THE PROMISE OF THE STAR

**THE
PROMISE
OF THE
STAR**

A NOVEL OF HEALING PRESENCE

STEPHEN PHIFER

KW
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Chapter One

Late in the afternoon, not long after he had seen the new star, Joseph slept in his shop, but he did not rest. In fact, several days had passed since Joseph had really slept. Mary's disturbing announcement had robbed him of all peace. Nothing had ever disturbed his sleep before. Long days of hard work in the carpenter's shop served only to make sleeping easy for him. He had no burden of guilt to wrestle through the night, no soreness or pain in his strong frame, and no answerless questions to trouble his mind. Now a pale version of sleep had captured his conscious mind while his hidden mind raced from fact to fear and back again.

With his long form stretched out on his cot, one could see that Joseph was a tall man, broad in the shoulders and with the powerful forearms of a man who did hard work with his hands. Those hands were strong and rough from handling wood and tools. He was always careful to be gentle, especially with children or with Mary. His dark hair was pulled back out of his face and eyes by a cloth band he wore around his head. He wore a brown tunic, tied at the waist, with short sleeves, all designed for comfort and safety in his work. His mouth, surrounded by a trim black beard, was on the delicate side, his lips quick to retreat from his white teeth in a laugh or a smile. His nose was not large but was sufficient to help him breathe deeply the joy of life as he worked. His eyes were large and brown with premature lines around them. The lines appeared when he squinted against the sun and when he laughed, which was often. He was known throughout

the village of Nazareth for his cheerful spirit and for the quality of his work. Most of the villagers had seen him grow from boy to man in a stream of years unbroken by bad behavior or rumors of hidden sins. Everyone knew that Joseph was what he appeared to be, a man among men, a craftsman with a cheerful delight in his work, and a devout worshiper of Jehovah. The village took great but unspoken joy, at least to Joseph or his family, in such a man as an example of their village life. No one in the village could imagine the agony of the choice before him.

Mary, his beloved, was with child. Some other man had touched her, known her. On many nights since their betrothal, he had welcomed sleep by dreaming of their wedding day and the night to follow. He loved her. There was no lust in his dream, only the natural use God intended—that two should become one. Now some other man...

And Mary had lied about it. Was she protecting someone? Was she forced? Was she in danger? The story she made-up to protect the guilty one was simply unbelievable and pitiful, really, so unlike the Mary he thought he knew. In his restless sleep he formed a fist and struck the air, startling himself awake. He stared at the ceiling of his shop. Sleep had overtaken him in the late afternoon. Now it was early evening. He was alone and he was confident no one would come to check on him. His father and mother and the rest of his family and friends were careful to leave him alone. They had observed a brittle temper in him none of them had seen before. Some deep claw had gripped the soul of their friend, brother, and son. He spoke to no one, and no one spoke to him. Throughout the town, voices of concern breathed prayer after prayer to heaven as evening candles and lamps were set ablaze.

A thin layer of clouds hid the emerging stars. The one brighter star in the east, seen and forgotten a few days before, looked down on the sleepy village of Nazareth. Seeing no stars and feeling no hope, Joseph took a dirty towel and wiped the sweat from his face, leaving streaks of dirt behind. Heavily he sat down on the cot again. As he began to weep, he called her name.

“Mary, Mary. O Jehovah help me. I want to believe her. But it is impossible. Her story, her explanation...” Pounding his right fist into his left palm, his anger burst out of his heart. “Who? That’s what I want to know!” Slowly, he relaxed his hands and let them cup his face. Tears and dirt smeared his already dirty face. “O, Lord, help me! Help me know what to do. Tomorrow, I must decide.” Lying back on the cot, covering his face with his forearms, he prayed in a voice that only heaven could hear. “Mary. O Lord, help me.”

Thin clouds parted in the eastern sky as the new star appeared. No one noticed.



Mary paced the limits of her room. Her family, too, was keeping a safe distance from this girl they all thought they knew. They had never seen her so distant, so reserved in her demeanor. They all knew something was wrong between Mary and Joseph, and none could imagine what the issue might be. Mary was troubled but there was something more. There was a new serenity about her. She seemed to possess strength deep within her that no one had seen before and a depth to her spirit those closest to her had never known was there. With her carefully planned life flying apart before her eyes, she somehow looked beyond mere vision to something beyond sight. The only thing to do was to leave her to her thoughts and hope that someday her reverie would be revealed.

Mary was neither tall nor short. She thought her height was just right when she stood next to Joseph. Her dark hair was always hidden by a headpiece but was rumored by the women and girls of Nazareth to be long and lustrous with thick waves. As a child she was the delight of the neighbors who watched her grow to be the most beautiful, in the view of many, young woman in the village. Her brown eyes were large and her rather thin face was unlined. Her olive skin seemed to glow in the sun and with its own luminescence at night. Her mouth was full and ready, it seemed, to smile for the slightest reason. Her virtue was never in question. Her modesty was

simply a fact of the town, adding to her allure in the eyes of the men of the village. Those who were able to see past her beauty and actually listen to her, found her to be highly intelligent and capable of astute observation and comment.

In the other rooms of the house, the day was coming to an end. The evening meal was almost finished, all without this girl who was usually at the heart of things. Occasionally someone would stop and listen at her door. All they ever heard her say was a one-word prayer. “Joseph.”



Every time Joseph slept, he had the same dream reliving in detail the story Mary had told him. In his shop, he slept again and dreamed again.

She was alone in her room, in the darkness of the early evening. The house was quiet as light suddenly poured into the room from all directions at once. There was no sound, no wind, only light and silence. A man who seemed to be dressed in light materialized before her. Her dark eyes widened but there was no need to protect them from the intense brightness. Her vision deepened somehow, and she saw more than light, this light that cast no shadows and stirred no fear. It was the angel of the Lord. From that light came a voice, quiet, deep and full of love. The sound of the voice was like the sound of many waters.

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” The angel stepped toward her and touched her right shoulder. His touch was cool and comforting. Gabriel stood taller than any man she had ever seen. His shoulders were broad and powerful. A gleaming sword hung from his golden belt. His face could barely be seen against the brightness of the light that accompanied him. She could see that he

was most handsome, with a kind expression. Such love and power she had only seen in one man, her Joseph.

“And behold you will conceive and bring forth a Son and shall call His name Jesus.”

At the mention of the name of Jesus, Gabriel lifted his hands to heaven and began to speak words Mary could not understand. Somehow, she knew that he loved this one called Jesus and could not speak His name without worshiping.

“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Highest,” Gabriel finally said, still lost in adoration, “and the Lord God will give unto Him the throne of His father David.” Gabriel’s eyes were closed, his face lifted toward heaven, standing in heavenly realms although standing on the earth. It was more than Mary could process. She thought of Joseph.

“Our son, our son.”

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she wondered if she had heard what she knew she had heard. She stared at the worshipping angel. Gabriel was oblivious to her, lost in his exaltation of Jesus. As if by an audible voice, but hearing no sound, the words of Scripture entered her mind. “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.”

“But how can this be, since I do not know a man?” The sound of her own voice startled her.

Gabriel lowered his gaze and looked upon Mary. His heart, so recently filled with the love of God, now flooded with compassion for Mary. He again placed his hand on her shoulder.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Highest will overshadow you.”

Gabriel lifted Mary’s face in his hands to look directly into her eyes. “Therefore also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.” He spread his hands to heaven again to exalt The-One-Who-Sits-Upon-the-Throne.

Mary followed his gaze and looked around her room, flooded with the cool light that cast no shadows. She saw

into her own heart and saw that there were no shadows there either. In this room she had prayed and memorized the scriptures. She had dreamed a child's dreams and those of a young woman. She had dreamed of husband and home and the children they would share.

"All I have ever wanted was to be the Lord's servant." Mary stated this fact simply, knowing its absolute truth. Old dreams were gone, and new dreams would soon replace them. What would they be? What was to become of her, of Joseph, of—the child?

"Let it be to me according to your word." Mary spoke with simple faith. "For with God nothing is impossible."

On those words, Gabriel detached part of his robe, a golden strand of fabric like none found on earth. He placed it on a table by Mary's bed. Mary did not see him do this. When she spoke from her heart these words, "Let it be to me according to your word," the fearless, shadow-less light enveloped her. Deep in her womb life stirred as fearless and shadow-less as the presence overshadowing her, and she knew that what the angel said was true. Without the touch of any man, a new life was in her, a life unlike any other, the promise was fulfilled. She closed her eyes and memorized the sensation of the Divine within the human. When she opened her eyes, Gabriel was gone. The golden strand he left on the table, emitted its own light. She slowly picked it up and felt in her hand what she had felt in her body—the presence, the promise.

Joseph woke from this dream with a start. He looked around the room and saw that he was alone. "Mary! O, it was another dream. Did she dream, too? She spoke as if it were no dream. Mary, how could you do this to me? I had a wonderful life planned for us and now it is gone, forever. I know what I should do. I will not put you on public display. I cannot take you as my wife, but I love you too much to see you

disgraced before the town. All right, it is decided. I know what is best for us. God give me rest, give me strength. Tomorrow, I will tell her.”



At that moment, Mary stood, left her room and joined her family just as dinner was almost finished. No one spoke to her as she gathered some food for herself and began to eat. She was hungry now, hungrier than she had ever been. Thoughts of Joseph only made her smile. Her family wondered at that smile, but no one asked her anything.



Later that night, along toward morning, the thin clouds were gone. The night was at its deepest and darkest. The new star stood out against the night sky, like a diamond against black velvet. Joseph, exhausted from a long night of shallow sleep devoid of rest, rehearsed again and again tomorrow’s task of sending Mary away. With his very soul drained of life, he slept and dreamed again.

He was in his shop working on the crib Josiah the baker had hired him to make. It was almost finished. As he worked, he thought of the crib he would make each child that he and Mary would bring into the world. Suddenly he was aware of another workman, beside him helping with the crib. Joseph sprang away from the bench ready to fight if need be. He looked at the new carpenter. Beneath his work clothes, he seemed to glow with white light, a cool light that did not hurt the eyes, did not strike fear, and cast no shadows. The light spilled out from the sleeves of his cloak, through the collar of his vest and from the hem of the garment and filled the

carpenter shop. From the light came a deep voice, firm but reassuring. With the voice came the face and form of Gabriel.

“Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary, your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”

Gabriel picked up a mallet from Joseph’s workbench and passed it from hand to hand, feeling its significance. He handed the mallet to Joseph. Joseph felt his heart jump and his mind begin to race. He would raise the child, teach him his trade and the ways of men, train him in the Scriptures and the ways of God.

Gabriel spoke again, “And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” At the name of Jesus, Gabriel worshiped with words Joseph had never heard. He studied the mallet the angel had given him as if he had never before seen it. As he did, Gabriel detached another golden strand from his robe and left it on the workbench as he faded from sight.

Outside the shop the last mists of darkness were surrendering to the encroaching sunrise. The new star in the east was the last to be seen. The sound of a street vendor awakened Joseph. He sat up with a start. For the first time since Mary had told him she was with child, he felt truly rested. He stood and began to pace with excitement. After a few passes by his work bench, he saw the golden strand. With awe he picked up the luminous cloth. He felt in it the touch of the mallet Gabriel had given him in the dream, the promise of the role he would play. He rushed to the door with only one word, “Mary!”

Mary was already awake in her room. There was no panic in her heart as she rehearsed what she would say to Joseph.

“O God, how can I make Joseph understand? I have been faithful to him and to You! God, if you do not intervene, Joseph will have me sent away. You have chosen me and You have chosen him, but he can’t see that. You will just have to show him somehow. This is

You know what people will think, what they will say. I hate to see you subjected to the gossip.”

“None of that will matter, Joseph. The promise is the thing that matters most. This child will have a work to do that no one else can do. He will be Messiah, the Bright and Morning Star.”

They remained in Mary’s room for almost two hours, talking quietly. No one dared to check on them. When they finally emerged both Mary and Joseph were smiling, as if there were some private joke between them. Joseph greeted everyone as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be there before breakfast. Mary saw him to the door and when he was gone, she turned back toward her parents with that secret smile almost visible.

Stars, of course, cannot be seen in daylight. But they are there nonetheless, loving, watching, guiding. Starr was concerned at the notice this joyful Joseph attracted as the morning crowd saw him leaving Mary’s home.



Anna in her chamber and Simeon in his, dreamed the same dreams several nights in a row but neither of them mentioned it. In fact, they tried to put it out of their minds everyday—it was too sweet to contemplate. What were the dreams? Each of them dreamed of powerful angels, speaking words their minds could not understand, but words that seemed to quicken each ancient heart. They flew in graceful arcs and swirls and sang the beautiful songs of the throne room of God. One song they did understand was, “Holy! Holy! Holy! The whole earth is full of His glory!” Simeon remembered this from Isaiah’s vision. The angel leader spoke of the Promise. Neither Simeon nor Anna could remember his exact words and they could never see the person to whom the angel was speaking. All they could remember was the angelic vision, the heavenly voices, the sense of the Promise and the way their old hearts raced.

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