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THE ANGELS SANG AND THE HEAVENS RANG
By Mrs. Paul E. King

A cold wind stole down from the hills and swept across the vale where Jabez sat guarding his family's sheep. It was peaceful and still; not a ripple of sound other than the quaking leaves broke into the tranquil stillness. Jabez loved the early twilight, and the still later night hours. His mind had time to reflect on the things he had read from Amaziah's scrolls and his heart had time to meditate upon them. What wonderful things were written upon those

beloved and sacred scrolls! He believed everything contained within them. Yes he did. Little matter that his cousin Joab called him odd and strange and a bit daffy. He called him even worse things than that: these other names stung him and put a slice of grief into his heart sometimes. Especially when and if the pain in his joints and legs was intense. Sometimes it had a way of being like that. If it wasn't for the faith he had in Jehovah God he was sure the pain that Joab inflicted would be completely unbearable during the times when the pain stole into his joints and crept up his legs like stinging, burning fire. Joab's razor-sharp tongue was worse even than the pain in his legs.

He looked heavenward and saw the faint twinkle of stars. It was thrilling and uplifting to watch as daylight was "put to bed" and God wrapped the night in its regal robe of deep purple. What a display of heavenly bodies was revealed as the "night robe" covered the sky! It was almost as if an explosion of glittering, glistening diamonds or jewels erupted before his eyes. The wonder and beauty of it all never ceased to amaze Jabez, though he had watched it night after night after night.

"How great Thou art!" he exclaimed reverently, his eyes never once leaving the vision of loveliness and awesomeness in the sky above him.

"Do you have company, my boy?" a voice asked softly from somewhere nearby. It was Amaziah.

"None, Amaziah. None. Why do you ask?"

Drawing near, the older man replied, "I heard you talking to someone."

"The stars, Amaziah: look at them. My comment was to the Creator of the stars and of the heavens and the earth. How great He is! Oh, how great He is, Amaziah! My heart worships Jehovah God. The more I read about Him so much more do I worship, adore and fear Him."

"I see the writings of the scrolls are finding lodgment in your young heart, Jabez. This makes my heart leap for joy. Not many men your age find the sacred writings of great interest," Amaziah remarked as he seated himself on the ground beside the young scholar.

Clearing his throat, he said, "I do wish your nurse had been more careful with you, Jabez. 'Tis such a pity, this lameness."

"She meant no harm, Amaziah. She was ever a gentle woman, and kind. She could not have known that the obstacle was in the path as she fled with me in her arms. She saved my life. This should be considered and remembered as something of merit. She risked her life to get Mother and our entire family away from the village when the messenger ran through the street and told us about the band of robbers that were coming. Huldah was a brave woman. We loved her like one of the family."

"But your legs were once so very strong, Jabez, and even though you were small and a mere child, you could run almost like a hart. I recall it as plainly as though it were yesterday. And now, well. . . ." The older man's voice trailed meaningfully. He sighed sadly.

"I can walk, Amaziah. I thank Jehovah God that I haven't lost the use of my limbs entirely. I'm slow, to be sure, and the pain is sometimes almost more than I can stand. But I am blessed, my kind friend: because of my condition you have taken pity upon me and brought the sacred writings to me to read. In search of our family's genealogy one day, I came across a verse that arrested my attention instantly and immediately. It stood out like a shining rainbow against a storm-darkened sky."

"What was the writing; can you remember it, my boy?"

"How could I ever forget it, Amaziah, and not remember it!" Jabez exclaimed joyously. "I was sure that my parents had chosen my name carefully and given it to me as a gift. A challenge, even, after I read the verse."

"Why do you say this?"

"Listen as I quote what I read; you will then understand why I said what I did. 'And Jabez was more honorable than his brethren. . . .

"'And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it might not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested' (I Chronicles 4:9-10).

"Oh, Amaziah, this is my almost constant prayer since I read that wonderful scripture. It is my heart's greatest and deepest desire. Oh that Jehovah God would bless me indeed and enlarge my coast! More than anything, I want His hand to be upon me and to be kept from evil: especially from wrong thoughts about some people."

"Has Joab been harassing you again?" the older man asked as he got to his feet and paced back and forth.

"Joab knows nothing much about Jehovah God, Amaziah. We must be patient with him."

"Patient, Jabez! Patient, you say! That young man is churlish and proud and vain; he has no interest whatever in Jehovah God. I wish he were my son for five minutes; I would teach him a thing or two. He makes sport of you because you are crippled in your legs and because you love and worship Jehovah God and are looking for the promised Messiah. He is one of the most disrespectful young men I have ever met. Where is the reverence for God that is required and demanded of all our children and our young people? Where, Jabez? That young man has a rebellious and stubborn heart."

"Might it not be because he is not a worshiper of God, the Almighty One?" Jabez asked.

"He is what I would call, a rebellious son."

"But there is still hope for such as he, Amaziah. Does not one of the writers -- the prophets -- say, 'The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.

"Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty. . . ."

"You are indeed a scholar of the Scroll, my boy!" Amaziah exclaimed with glad and joyful surprise. "It was the Lord Himself who proclaimed those words to Moses after descending in the cloud and standing with him there, renewing the tables (Exodus 34:6). And, yes, He's a merciful God. I need to remember this regarding your cousin, although he is much like some of the heathen round about us. In my way of thinking, I mean. Anyone who scoffs

and makes light of Messiah's coming is a heathen, me thinks. Isaiah's prophecy is true: He will come."

"Perhaps in our time, Amaziah? Do you think so?" Jabez looked toward the star-studded sky with longing and desire.

"In our time, yes, Jabez. All who worship Jehovah God and believe the law and the Prophets have looked for Messiah's coming."

"But He did not come. . . ."

"Little matter, my boy. Little matter. The brightness of the promise and the sure word of prophecy, as told by the Prophet, has been a beacon light of hope down through the centuries of time; from generation to generation. This could be the generation in which He will come; yours and my generation. My father has told me this since I was born. His father before him told it. On and on it goes and has been passed, until all have been instructed that Messiah will come. This is why it is so hard for me to have any leniency whatever for Joab, knowing that he has heard this truth over and over."

Sighing sadly, Jabez said, "The meek receive and believe the Word, though, Amaziah. Joab is a learned young man; a worldly-wise learned man. This much learning sometimes causes some to feel superior to those of lesser learning. They look down with disdain and, even, contempt, in some cases, upon their less educated peers. All of what they have been taught in boyhood regarding spiritual matters seems suddenly unnecessary and irrelevant with and to their present way of living. They push the things of true worth aside and cast them away as meaningless and worthless. But I know the Prophets have foretold the truth: Messiah will come. Perhaps, even now. I am looking for His coming, Amaziah. Longing for it, and praying for it."

"Ah, 'tis refreshing and uplifting indeed to know that not all young people are like your cousin Joab, and those like him, whose learning has puffed them up with pride and filled their heads with lightness and error and foolishness," Amaziah stated, sighing tiredly and sitting down once more on the ground.

"The sheep are resting nicely tonight," Jabez said softly. "Manassah said they were a bit trying today, and not satisfied with the grazing to which he had led them. I wish my legs were stronger and less painful; I would lead

them near the waters of Shiloh. Old Uncle Eban tells me the grazing is lush and plentiful there. I mentioned this to my brother, but he shrugs his shoulders and says he's not about to risk his life getting the sheep across those hills and through the pass into where the waters of Shiloh run softly and water the terrain thereabouts. Uncle Eban's too old to care for sheep anymore and, though the grazing land is lush and green, he refuses to allow just anyone in there to feed his sheep. Since we are relatives, and he has always been partial to our father, his youngest brother, he offered the land to us for grazing the sheep. Were Father still alive, he would see that Manassah grazed them over there in the warm months."

Amaziah muttered something about lazy young men; then he arose and bade Jabez good night and disappeared into the shadows and was gone.

Jabez gazed intently heavenward, praying all the while for Messiah to come. Amaziah's brief nocturnal visits and his words of encouragement made the young man's heart yearn all the more for the glorious event to transpire and take place in his time. The joyous note of expectancy and the knowledge that He would come, alleviated the pain in his legs to some degree and made his nightly vigil and care of the sheep a time of holy joy and delight. Always, his heart seemed to whisper the same message: He could come tonight. This may be the hour, the time.

He walked closer to the flock, limping painfully. How peaceful and quiet they were! It was as if the Almighty Himself had covered them with His hands and put them to sleep. He loved the sheep. They seemed calm and relaxed in his presence, sensing the kindness and love and tender care that flowed out from him to them. His ties with the sheep were closely knit and much akin to that which he felt toward Jehovah God: just as he trusted in and upon the Almighty, so the flock trusted him.

He listened for a while to the breathing of the flock, a sound he enjoyed hearing, then he sat down again and pillowed his head upon a rock and watched the twinkling, blinking stars so high above him.

"Perhaps tonight!" he whispered prayerfully and reverently. "Yes, perhaps tonight Messiah will come!" He closed his eyes while the blessed thought played across the strings of his mind. Perhaps tonight! Perhaps tonight!

So deep in meditative thought was he that the sound which erupted from above him startled him. Opening his eyes, he saw the sky was a glistening white; so bright that he shielded his eyes with his hands. Getting to his feet with eagerness and gazing intently upward, he heard the Angel's glorious pronouncement of the Christ-child's birth. Then, like a mighty chorus, there was with the Messenger Angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward all men."

Nearly beside himself with holy joy, Jabez leapt to his feet and started to run. In Bethlehem. Yes, Bethlehem, the angel had said. In a manger: a lowly manger. Messiah had come! He had! He had! His eyes would see Him. Yes, for himself, he would see the Promised One.

Leaping like a frolicking lamb and racing like an athlete striving for a prize, Jabez raced on, knowing that he was healed. Completely and totally healed.

What a night! What fulfillment of prophecy! The angels sang, and the heavens rang. His heart was nearly bursting with joy: Messiah had come! He -- Jabez -- was healed of his lameness and of his pain and he was on his way to witness the arrival of He who was born King of the Jews; King of kings and Lord of lords -- the Messiah! His Messiah!