

## *Chapter 8*

**N**ot wanting to miss the ceremony and thinking he may be of some service to the pastor, Philip emerges from his car after a conversation with Pamela and hurries down the driveway. He is approaching the limousine when he hears the voice of the driver quoting the prophet Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth;

Like a lamb brought to the slaughter or a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

In his humiliation he was denied justice—who can explain his generation? They took his life from the earth!

It was for the transgressions of my people that he was stricken.

Coming alongside the car, Philip sees the driver reading from a large Bible propped against the steering wheel. Philip stops. The driver stops reading and looks up, recognizing the one who was directing the parking.

“Do you understand what you’re reading?” Philip asks.

“How can I?—unless someone explains it to me. Please—would you mind? Can you tell me what this means?”

“I certainly will try,” says Philip.

“About whom is the prophet speaking? About himself or someone else?”

“He’s prophesying about Jesus Christ.”

“I thought so. That is amazing, is it not, sir? I know this is the Old Testament, which was written long before it happened.”

“Would you like me to tell you more?”

“Sir, if you would be so kind. We can sit in the back where it will be more comfortable. Here, let me get out. This Bible belongs to Ms. Newton. She left it and said I was welcome to read from it.”

“My name is Philip, by the way. I should have introduced myself earlier.”

“My name is Melech. Here, hold the Bible, and I will get in

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first; that will make it easier for you.”

The look, feel, and smell of the luxurious interior is a new experience for Philip, but it holds little interest for him compared to the priceless privilege of being the one to explain the Word of God to a hungry soul. Melech extends the desk and lays the Bible on it. Philip observes that the book is well used and that the particular page at which it is open bears copious underlining, including the portion Melech was reading.

“Isaiah knew that Messiah—that is, the Christ—was coming,” Philip begins, “—the one anointed by God to be King not only of Israel but every other nation as well. That much they got, but they didn’t quite understand how it had to happen. They didn’t realize that in order for this kingdom to come, there would have to be a big change in the hearts of men and women. The world has never seen a government that didn’t become corrupt—because the mind of man is desperately wicked. God’s remedy for that was so radical that nobody really understood it back then. Probably, nobody understood it until Jesus explained it. Even then it was like his words fell on deaf ears. It wasn’t until after he died and was resurrected that they understood. That’s when the Spirit of God opened their eyes, and *then* they saw that he had *already* revealed what he was going to do. It was right there in the Scriptures; it was in front of their eyes all along. This fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is one of those passages. Let’s look at it. Here, let’s start with verse five:

He was wounded for our transgressions.

“This means it was for *our* sin that Christ suffered. It wasn’t for any wrongdoing of his: it was for *our* disobedience—that is, for us who are sinful.”

“Why does it say ‘he was’—like it happened in the past—when Christ had not yet come into the world?”

“That’s the way the prophets spoke. It means it’s a sure thing, just as sure as if it already happened. In other words, it was already done in the mind of God. It’s the grammar of certainty. What comes next?

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It was a punishment that brought us peace.

“Everybody wants peace, but hardly anybody finds it, and nobody keeps it for long. There’s no lasting peace in this world. Now, the amazing thing is that here God is saying peace is possible, and it comes through the punishment of Christ.”

“How could that be? How could his punishment be of any help to me?”

“There is one answer to that. Here’s how I explain it: Peace must be made with God before it can happen anywhere else. There’s a score to be settled with God, and until it is, there can’t be any peace. This statement by the prophet reveals that God is willing to let the punishment of Christ settle the score. It’s as if *Christ* paid the price to get *us* off the hook with God.”

“That doesn’t seem fair. Christ himself was not the sinner. It makes God look unjust, but I know that cannot be.”

“Yes, it does look that way, but we aren’t left with a paradox. There’s one way it would not be unjust of God to settle the score between him and me without taking it out on me. And that would be for him to take it out on himself. In other words, he could write off my debt by paying the price himself. He isn’t penalizing anyone else: he’s paying it himself. Since it was owed *to* him and paid *by* him, the payment isn’t unjust to anyone else. And the law demanding punishment for sin gets satisfied.”

“But are you not confusing Christ with God? That would work only if they were one and the same.”

“They *are* one and the same. We say that Jesus Christ is a person of the Godhead. God is more complex than we are, as you would expect. He’s one being, yet he’s three as we perceive him. It’s like he has three distinct roles: Christ is God the Son. He spoke of his Father as God. And the Spirit of God is known to us as the third person.

“What’s next?”

By his stripes we are healed.

“He was wounded, and we are healed—another way to look at the exchange. It isn’t only that Christ settled the score on our

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behalf; he's also restoring us to a kind of health that we can scarcely imagine now. But he promised it. There are other places in the Bible where he speaks about that more fully. The summary of it is this: we'll not only be cured of our tendency to sin and be given peace, but we'll also be glorified in order to live and reign with Christ himself. We know this is true because Christ was raised from that awful suffering and restored to glory. He was buried, locked in a tomb, and soon after reappeared to many witnesses as a testimony to the power that God has to raise *us* to glory.

We all went astray like sheep, each going his own way, and the Lord laid our sin upon him.

"You see, we've all been disobedient: we've all been living for ourselves, oblivious to the claims our Maker has on us. The penalty is an extreme one because in the economy of heaven no disobedience can be left standing. It's a sentence that we can pay only by dying—unless we take the gift that we're being offered. The Lord laid our sin on him. We must quit thinking that we can somehow make ourselves righteous. We need to simply accept what he's done for us. He won't force the issue because that would destroy our ability to respond to him in true worship—which is essential to our fulfillment if we only knew it."

"Is that what it means to be Christian?—to accept this gift from God and worship him for it?"

"That's the start."

"What then?"

"Then we owe him everything. He owns us, actually. We become his slaves for a while, which is not bad at all. Let me tell you, it's delightful. There's nothing better than to be in the service of God."

"And if we don't accept?"

"The devil already owns you and has a plan for your life that's not as wonderful as you may desire."

"Is there any reason I cannot be baptized now?"

"As long as there's water in the lake, there's no reason I know

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of. Let's go see Pastor Murphy."

†

Alice sees them coming. "Here comes Philip ... with another man," she says.

"Melech wants to be baptized too," Philip announces.

"Adam is over there talking with Ruth," Alice informs him. "As soon as they're through, he will want to talk with you, Melech. I'll go see if I can talk Earl out of a pair of shorts you can wear into the water."

†

"I met Ms. Newton in Amman," Ruth was saying. "She did not have a permanent secretary at that time; she was using general staff personnel when she needed to have something done. I was employed at the US embassy and happened to be free during one of her visits. I worked for her for two weeks, and we got along so well that I asked her to hire me permanently. She hesitated because it would take me away from my country. I had no family ties that would keep me from traveling, and I wanted to see the world. That's what I told her anyway, and I think that's what I believed at the time. In reality, I had become attached to her as though she were my mother.

"Please do not urge me to leave you,' I told her. 'Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So help me God, nothing but death will part me from you.' When she saw that I was determined, she hired me.

"However, I didn't truly know her God. I thought I knew God through the religion of my country. I was a Sunni Muslim like nearly everyone else, and I thought that Allah was Jehovah and Jehovah was Allah by a different name. But it wasn't long before I knew without a doubt that the God of Ms. Newton was not Allah. So I began to study the Scriptures. As a Muslim, I had a certain reverence for Jesus, but I couldn't reconcile the statements in the New Testament that made him appear to be one with Jehovah. So

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I adopted Judaism as my religion, and I thought I had come to terms with my promise to Ms. Newton that her God would be my God.

“I went on that way for several years and brushed aside comments she made from time to time about Jesus being her Savior. It was not a concept I was familiar with. I knew about Messiah, but the concept of a personal Savior was incomprehensible because I thought in terms of obedience to the laws of religion.

“Then the shock came on Sunday when rumors of the Rapture dreams turned out to be true. Both Ms. Newton and I were driven to examine where we stood with God. It was then that she gave me the piece of the puzzle I had been missing. How I had missed it, I don’t know; it is the most obvious thing in the world. Almost everything I had learned about winning a place in the kingdom of God was a lie because I thought it was attainable through enough effort.”

“What did she tell you?” asks the pastor.

“She told me that my heart was deceitful and desperately sick, and I had no chance of improving it to please God in just one week.”

“Evelyn told you that? I can’t believe she would be so blunt.”

“I nearly died when she said it. It was as though she had thrust a dagger into my heart. I broke down. I couldn’t understand what had happened. It was awful.”

“Did she apologize?”

“No. She opened her Bible and showed me Jeremiah 17:9:

*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.*

*She was being gentler with me than the Scripture was.”*

“What else did she say?”

“She gave me her Bible and told me to read the Gospel of John. I hesitated because of my Judaism. She said it was an order, and she would fire me if I didn’t do it.”

“So you read it?”

“I did.”

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“And what did you find?”

“I found Jesus. I had never known him before.”

“Did you decide he is God?”

“He can be anyone he wants to be as far as I’m concerned. I found that he was speaking to me through the Scripture. The essential thing is, he loves me unconditionally. It doesn’t depend on me being perfect or even good. I took him at his word, and now I’m free for the first time in my life.

“It’s the most obvious thing in the world, isn’t it Pastor Murphy? I mean the fact that the hearts of men and women are sick beyond any healing. It takes a miracle of God, not human effort. God had this all worked out from the beginning, and I was kept from knowing it by my religions that were supposed to bring me peace. There is no peace apart from the saving grace of God.”

“I’m assuming you told Evelyn all that?”

“We talked about it a lot. She explained many things to me. We read Ephesians together. Isn’t chapter one glorious?—especially the first few verses?”

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” quotes the preacher.

“He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing,” responds Ruth with a smile.

“In the heavenly places!” he declares, completing the verse.

“He chose us in Christ even before the beginning of the world,” she quotes, raising her hands.

“In love, he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ,” he adds enthusiastically.

“According to the purpose of his will,” she responds, rising from her chair and reaching for his hand, inviting him to stand.

“To the praise of his glorious grace!” Halfway shouting, he stands with her.

“In Christ, we have redemption through his blood—the forgiveness of our trespasses!” she declares, turning around in the manner of a Mideast folk dance.

“Thus are we blameless before him,” he says, facing her and

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raising his hands together with hers.

“According to the riches of his grace,” she says slowly, making each word sound holy.

“I’m sure she was delighted with your response,” says Adam, ignoring the silent stares he feels. (Their brief rhapsody did not go unnoticed.)

They are standing at the water’s edge with their backs to the onlookers. Ruth continues:

“She said she had become desperate when she heard the news about the Rapture. Even though she wasn’t sure it was true at first—it was awfully hard to believe—she was worried not for herself but for me. She said she could not stand the thought of being separated from me; she had been praying for my salvation since we met. Finally, she felt that she must become stern with me though she did it with fear and trembling. It is what God used to break down the walls of the prison that held me.”

†

The FSA and hardware-store ex-employees are talking and laughing. Ruth goes to join Evelyn and Leila who are standing with Benayahu and Melech. Alice informs Adam about Melech wanting to receive baptism. The pastor takes him aside.

“So you were reading from Isaiah when Philip came by?”

“Yes, sir. Ms. Newton had lent me her Bible, and I was reading from the page where she had left the marker. There were some underlined verses, and those I was reading when he stopped and asked me if I understood it. I told him I needed someone to explain the meaning to me, and he said he would. He sat with me in the car and went through it verse by verse.”

“What impression do you have of Jesus Christ?”

“Well, it is truly amazing, sir. That prophet knew about him hundreds of years before he ever came and died on this earth. He knew that this man would die not for his own offenses but for those of others and that his death would bring healing. Now, that is *not* something which makes any sense for a man to do. Philip explained how it *does* make sense because he is God.”



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“So you believe that Jesus was God come in the flesh and that he died for the benefit of others?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was it only for his own people?”

“No. Philip showed me it was for sinners, and in case I thought I was no sinner, he showed me what God thinks about the human heart. I knew then that I needed this Savior just as much as anyone else, and I asked him if I could be baptized. He said we should talk to you about it.”

†

Alice is entering the house, looking for Earl. She passes through the kitchen, the dining room, and into the parlor where she finds Philip. It occurred to him that the warmth of a fire would be appreciated by some of the ladies after coming out of the water into the crisp autumn air. Being familiar with the arrangements in the house, he wasted no time locating wood and laying the fire, which is already producing lively flames.

“Have you seen Earl?” she asks Philip.

“No. I checked upstairs. He’s not there.”

†

No one other than Evelyn noticed when Earl went into his shop. It is as though he is a prisoner at his own house. True, he does not own the Beach House—indeed, it is regarded as a community treasure. Nevertheless, he is used to having it to himself.

Earl peers out of the shop window at the improbable multitude. He surmises that they are not merely spectators: apparently, the baptism roster inflated unexpectedly.

People are going in and coming out of his house, no doubt using all of the rooms for changing into their sundry and scanty attire for the sacred occasion. It all looks exceedingly profane to him.

†

Adam is searching for Clara. He does not know her and would not recognize her, but he recognizes Clarence from the store and

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makes the reasonable assumption that the woman hanging on his arm is his wife.

“Hello, Clarence. I don’t believe I’ve met your wife.”

“This is Clara.”

“I’m Adam Murphy. It’s wonderful to have both of you here. Are you both wanting to be baptized?”

“We’re ready,” declares Clarence.

“I was wondering if I could have a word with Clara in private before we start.”

“It’s fine with me,” he says.

Clara lets go of her husband’s arm and looks at the pastor rather sheepishly.

“Lets go over to those chairs on the beach and have a little talk,” he suggests.

“How long have you been a Christian, Clara?”

“Just since this afternoon.”

“Did your husband lead you to the Lord?”

“I don’t want to be left alone.”

“It’s a little scary, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever read the Bible?”

“No.”

“Would you like me to show you the plan that God has for you?”

“Okay.”

“I have some portions of the Bible here.”

He brings up Romans 3:23 on his phone.

“Would you like to read this?”

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

“Does that mean anything to you?”

“Does ‘all’ mean everyone?”

“It really does. I could show you the context, but if you’ll take my word for it, it does say that everyone falls short of what God expects.”

“That isn’t good, is it?”

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“You’re right. It’s telling us what we probably already knew.

“Here’s another one: Romans 6:23. Would you read it, please?”

The wages of sin is death. But the free gift of God is eternal life in  
Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Does that mean anything to you?”

“It means that—it means ... um. ... It means—there is a gift. Is it for anyone?”

“No. Only for sinners. That’s why it’s put like that. It’s assuming the readers know they’re sinners. As it said, all fall short of the glory of God. You see, in God’s book just falling short of perfection is as bad as any sin. It’s really a tough place for us to be. We wouldn’t have any hope if it weren’t for the gift.”

“Now, here’s another one: John 3:3. Would you like to read it?”

Jesus said to him, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the  
kingdom of God.”

“Do you think that could be the gift the other one was talking about?”

“Like being born?”

“Right. That’s a gift, isn’t it? Now we’ve found out that the gift for sinners is being born again.”

“Let’s look at another verse. This is John 14:6.”

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one  
comes to the Father except through me.”

“Do you see any connection with being born again?”

“I’m not sure.”

“First, Jesus said no one can see the kingdom of God except by being born again. Now he’s saying that he himself is the only way. So, receiving the gift is being born again, which means coming to God through Jesus.”

“How do we do that?”

“Let’s see what the Bible says. Here’s Romans 10:9-10.”

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in  
your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.  
For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the  
mouth one confesses and is saved.

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“What does it mean that God raised him from the dead?”

“Jesus was crucified.”

“I know that.”

“He was put to death. Do you know what for?”

“No.”

“The religious leaders of that day were a jealous bunch, just like we are today. Jesus came along saying that the only way to approach God was through him. That made it sound like he was claiming to be God himself, and they couldn’t or didn’t want to believe it. He seemed to be leaving them out of the process, making their professional services unnecessary. So they got the Romans to crucify him. But as it turned out, they were playing into God’s hand, and he raised Jesus from the dead.”

“But what does that have to do with us?”

“Jesus died not on account of his own sin; it was the sin of others that put him to death. It turned out that God used this in a big way. Because Jesus actually was God—that is, the Son of God—when he was put to death, it also put to death the sins of his creatures, for he is our Maker, and the offense of our sins was against him in the first place. He made a way for us to escape punishment by taking the punishment on himself! But that wasn’t the end of the story: Death could not hold him. He overcame death and escaped the grave, walking the earth again and finally rising to heaven where he sits at the right hand of God. And just as he took our sins with him to the grave, so he is taking us to heavenly glory with him—as a gift!”

“Doesn’t everyone have the gift?”

“No. Here’s another verse: Second Corinthians 5:15. Would you read it?”

And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who died for their sake and was raised to life.

“That’s the catch?”

“Right. Those who receive the gift no longer live for themselves but for Jesus.”

“I’m not sure I would know how to begin.”

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“Let me show you. Here, read this verse; it’s Revelation 3:20.”

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.”

“How do you hear his voice?”

“I think you already have heard it—because you’re reading this.”

“How do I open the door?”

“It means he is not going to force you to do anything against your will.”

“What does it mean to eat with him?”

“It’s a way of saying that he wants to be close to you, one on one. If you invite him into your life, you will get to know him. He has promised.”

“What is heaven like?”

“It is a safe place to be. The earth is becoming dangerous, and soon there will be dreadful disasters. You are fortunate to be chosen for heaven.”

“Is it because Clarence works for the Evanses?”

“I think it is just as likely that he saved the Evanses in order to reach you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. God has a different way of looking at people. His favorites are sometimes ones that would surprise us if we knew.”

“Does he know me?”

“Yes, I’m sure of that. He knows all about you, and he thinks you are a delightful person. He has called you to come to him; if it were not so, you wouldn’t be here. There are many people who will not listen to his voice. But you have, and he knew you would, and the angels in heaven are rejoicing right now because you have opened your heart to receive him.”

“Is he in heaven how?”

“Yes, and he will be coming tomorrow morning to take us to heaven to be with him.”

“Will Clarence live with me there?”

“It will be like one big happy family. Clarence will be there, but

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Clarence will no longer be your master. Only Jesus will be your Master, and you will love the way he treats you, and you will love serving him. In fact, he has a special place prepared for you to serve him that no one else in the world would be able to fulfill. Aren't you thankful that he has saved you?"

"When will I meet him?"

"In his Spirit he is here right now."

Clara straightens up, sitting tall in her chair. The timid look has left her, and a smile transforms her face. It appears that she is seeing something far out on the water or above it.

"He says he's coming for me," she says.

†

Earl peeks out and sees Adam sitting with yet another of the crazed company.

*Is he going to interview all of them? This will take the whole day!*