

Terror on Every Side

For I hear the whispering of many—
 terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
 as they plot to take my life.

A psalm of David: Psalm 31:13

For I hear many whispering.
 Terror is on every side!
“Denounce him! Let us denounce him!”
 say all my close friends,
 watching for my fall.
“Perhaps he will be deceived;
 then we can overcome him
and take our revenge on him.”

Jeremiah 20:10

Terror on Every Side!

The Life of Jeremiah

Volume 1

By

Mark T Morgan

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Chapter 1 – My Birthday

March, 585BC

It was on my 17th birthday that I first heard – or felt – God’s voice. In those days, we seemed to have a happy extended family in Anathoth and I was welcome in it. Times are different now: no happy family, all are dead except me – the one they all hated.

It is hard not to feel nostalgic about those times, times of innocence and ignorance. I guess that is the trigger for writing this diary. It is intensely private, not even to be shared with Baruch who has written all the messages God has given to the people through me. It may never be finished, but I had to start it because of what happened today. Again, it was my birthday and again God spoke to me. Funnily enough, even after all these years of hearing his voice, it still startles me and thrills me – I could never fake it or imagine it. The burning shock of the voice of God within me; scorching but uplifting, frightening but joyous; the feeling that brings me to instant wakefulness or stops me in my tracks as I walk. And when the voice fades, the effects remain – God’s demand for action continues to burn within me¹. Yet today, once again, I was told “The Lord did not send you”. It was Johanan the son of Kareah this time², along with the other leaders of the pathetic remnants of the once great army of Judah. If only they could experience the voice of God! Then they would know I could never make it up. But they don’t believe me. No-one ever has....

If only things could have turned out differently. King Josiah was the great comfort and hope of those of us who loved the Lord, Yahweh

¹ Jeremiah 20:9

² Jeremiah 43:2

our God. Josiah, the Boy King, was probably the reason I was willing to agree when God told me his plans for my life, plans that had started before I was born³. But Josiah died, and with him died all hope that Judah might turn back to God. Memories are all I have left now, memories of a city once full of people, now sitting lonely and forlorn; memories of a family of priests who served at a temple now ground into the dust.

March, 726BC - the 13th year of King Josiah

In Judah, we never made much of birthdays. If a young man ever suggested a celebration, the older priests would always remind him sternly of the only birthday feast mentioned in our Scriptures, where Pharaoh hanged his chief baker⁴! Nevertheless, as Levites, our birthdays *were* important to us, and particularly to those of us who were destined to be priests. God had given rules about when we could start our life's work, so the date was important, even if having a party was not. My birthday was a little more special than most, because I shared a birthday with the king⁵. Was that another part of the pre-planning of God in my life? It certainly made the king very important to me, particularly his well-known search for godliness. Every year my father would tell me "Jeremiah, you are still only a young lad, too young for the work of God." But I knew how old the king was, and would sometimes ask cheekily "Does not King Josiah do the work of God?" Josiah was just 4 years older than I: he had become king when he was only 8, yet no-one doubted that he was doing the work of God. "Ah, yes," my father would reply in his rich, deep voice, "but he is only a king, while you will be a priest, acting even between the king and our omnipotent God!" My father's voice was just right for a priest – when he spoke it made

³ Jeremiah 1:5

⁴ Genesis 40:20-22

⁵ There is no evidence for this at all.

you feel as if he had all the wisdom of the ages at his disposal, and you were enveloped in the certainty of an endlessly glorious kingdom of Judah with the temple in Jerusalem at its centre and the priesthood of Aaron as Judah's guiding light. Everyone loved my father, and they loved to listen to that delightful, caressing voice. However, even before I turned 17, I was beginning to wonder about some of the murkier depths behind it.

On my 17th birthday, during our evening meal, he had reminded me as usual that I was still too young. Then, as I lay on my bed that night thinking and praying, my life's work was shown to me. If God ever speaks to you, it may be different, but for me, the word of God came like the slow start of a fire, with light and heat and the knowledge that this was something very special. I don't think there was a light in the room, it was more as if the light was inside me and that I could feel it. After a few seconds of this growing feeling of a presence within me, the voice came. Expansive, vast, uncontained, it seemed to fill my being, threatening to burst me open. Yet it was also calm, tranquil almost, as my God revealed his long-held plans for me:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

I'm not really sure whether I responded out loud or whether I spoke in my mind. How do you speak to a presence that fills you with sound, yet doesn't seem to make a sound? I had no doubt whose the voice was: “Ah, Lord GOD! I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” My father's words came very easily to me despite my feeling of irritation earlier in the day when he had used them. Again the voice of God:

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’;
for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
declares the LORD.”

It didn't seem strange to have God announcing who he was at the end of this speech. Rather, it was comforting, despite the surge of light within me, the surge of a white-hot flame filled with power and infinite purity. It was an experience I was to become very familiar with. Whenever God announced his name – Yahweh – the light inside me burned hotter and brighter, and the power in the voice seemed to swell. This was the great creator, the living God, speaking to me – within me – how could it be possible? These things didn't happen in modern times, yet here I was experiencing the voice of God; hearing a challenging command that came with a reassurance of the presence of God in my life! Then suddenly everything changed. Instead of a voice inside me, there was now a vision clear as crystal in my eyes, as a hand which I somehow knew to be the hand of God, came shining from the darkness of the night and touched my mouth. Instantly I thought of Isaiah, the great prophet who, more than a century ago, had volunteered to be God's messenger⁶. His complaint of unclean lips had been swept away when they were touched by a burning coal taken from the very altar of God; even his sins had been taken away in that searing second. I had complained about being too young. Could the hand of God fix this also? But no, he declared that instead his words had been put within my mouth. The words of God – in *my* mouth? This was what I had often longed for – words of wisdom and certainty from God. It is strange to think back on this now, now that the

⁶ Isaiah 6

certainty of God's message has brought me such trouble and suffering over the years, but if I had to choose again, I would still want his words within me, leading me as he wills it.

The voice had not finished; the sting in the tail was yet to come. At the tender age of 17, I was told:

“See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

Humility was never my strong point, but even so, this left me utterly bewildered: how could I possibly be set over nations and kingdoms? How could I pluck up and break down? Even the great king Josiah was only set over one nation, one kingdom. I was a priest – or I would be once I grew up – not a prophet or a king. How could this ever be? And did I want it anyway? I remember clearly the jumble of my thoughts as the vision faded...

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