

Benjamin's Secret

The sun rose softly over the hilly horizon, casting its golden rays over the calm Sea of Galilee as it shimmered in the distance. Benjamin opened his eyes as a ray of sunlight slanted into his bedroom window. He threw off his blankets, headed toward the window, and blinked in the bright light.

He looked out at the village below. The flat roofs of the houses dotted the hillside all the way down to the main town road. A company of soldiers marched past the synagogue toward the main square. Today was market day. By noon, the main street would be crowded with people: merchants from faraway countries selling their goods, travelers on their way to Jerusalem telling tales of distant places they had been to, and local villagers selling their fruits and vegetables. And not far from there were the fishermen by the shore fixing their nets and telling tales of their fishing adventures.

“Are you ready yet?” called Keren, Benjamin’s mother, from the kitchen.

“Yes, Mother.”

The smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the small house, and Benjamin hurriedly threw on the rest of his clothes and sat down for breakfast.

Like most people in Capernaum, Benjamin and his family lived in a simple house. The main section consisted of upper and lower parts. In the lower part was a simple fire pit, which made up their kitchen. Here they did all their cooking. There were urns of oil, flour, and water, as well as smaller pots with dates, olives, and figs. There was a door, which led out the back of the house. Right outside this door was the staircase that led up to the flat roof.



Benjamin’s room was built next to the upper section of the house, which contained their main living and dining area. Here stood the family table, around which they would gather for meals and special occasions. His mother was just setting down the straw basket filled with hot bread when Benjamin came in.

“Your father should be here any minute now with the milk.”

Benjamin was ten years old and often helped his father, John, with the sheep and goats. John was a shepherd by trade, as was his brother, Benjamin’s uncle, Eli. Benjamin wanted to be a shepherd just like his father when he grew up.

After breakfast and a prayer of thankfulness to God for keeping their herds and providing their needs, Benjamin hurried to help clear the table. He was eager to go to the market with his mother, but first all the house chores had to be taken care of.

He wiped the crumbs off the table, and then swept the floor, brushing the crumbs down the four steps that led to the lower section of the house. The sheepdogs, which had come in with Benjamin's father and were lying on the floor near the fireplace, jumped up and started licking up the crumbs that Benjamin was sweeping down.

John was on his way out to tend the sheep. He whispered something in Keren's ear. She gave a nod.

“Benjamin, how would you like to join me tonight as I watch over the sheep? We can enjoy some bread with butter and cheese for dinner, build a fire, and you can help me keep an eye out for any jackals.”

“Oh really, Father? May I?”

“Yes, Mother said it was all right.”

“Oh, thank you, Mother!”

“Be sure to take a midday rest today,” Keren admonished him, “so that you'll be awake and alert when watching the sheep tonight.”

“Yes, Mother.”

This would be the first time for Benjamin to join the sheep-watch team at night. Most of the shepherds worked together, and they would all take turns watching the herds by night. Tonight was his father and Uncle Eli's turn.

“James will be coming along with Uncle Eli,” Benjamin's father said as he walked out the door.

“James is coming too? How fun!” James and Benjamin were cousins and best friends. Benjamin wished the day would pass quickly.



Soon he had finished all his chores and was on the way to the market with his mother. There were many people milling around at stands selling all manner of fruits, vegetables, dates, olives, figs, grapes, caskets of wine, fish, breads, wool, and furs.

But Benjamin's favorite part of the market was near the main square where all the traveling merchants stopped. Although his mother never bought anything in this part of the market, it was still fun to see the interesting things these merchants had loaded up on their camels, carts, and donkeys.

Sometimes there would be strange-looking or colorful animals, which Benjamin had never seen before. Other merchants sold magnificent robes, veils, and headdresses inlaid with colorful gems, or large buckles and girdles decorated with precious stones. Still others had small statues of Roman gods, goddesses, and emperors.

As Benjamin looked around, he noticed groups of Roman soldiers standing around making sure everything was in order. Benjamin had seen the centurion who was in charge of these soldiers a few times. He would come to the market every so often and was easy to recognize because of his elaborately plumed helmet. He seemed to be a kind man, and the Romans in this village were usually helpful to the people.

It hadn't always been that way, however, but that had changed after a man called Jesus came to town one day. People said he was a prophet, and that he had come from Nazareth. It was reported that he healed many sick people and performed all sorts of miracles.

There was also the story about the centurion who had gone to see Jesus, and how Jesus healed one of the centurion's sick servants. Ever since that time, this centurion had been a changed man. He had become kinder and was now more cheerful and helpful to the people, as were the soldiers who served under him.

As Benjamin and his mother walked past the tax office, they passed a group of Roman soldiers. Benjamin overheard the word "Jesus" in their conversation and wandered closer to hear what they were saying.

"Remember that look on Levi's face when this Jesus came up to the tax desk?"

"Yes, I remember. I just couldn't believe it. Here this perfect stranger walks up—who didn't even have enough money to buy some decent sandals—says, 'Follow Me!' and Levi just gets up and leaves with Him!"



"Ha. The poor fool. I wonder what he is doing these days. Do you suppose he still wanders around with that Jesus guy? They say Jesus has done all sorts of miracles. Remember, even the centurion said that He healed his servant!"

"He still shows up here every now and then."

"Yes, but there are usually so many people with Him that I've never gotten a close look at Him. ..."

"Oh. There you are." Benjamin spun around to see his mother. "I've gotten what we need, and it's time to return home."

When Benjamin arose from a midday rest, it was already late afternoon. He had surprised himself by falling asleep and dreaming of protecting his father's sheep.

With the bright sun still high in the sky, he went out to find his cousin, James. They often played together in the afternoon, running over the beautiful hills, walking along the village paths that wound through the houses dotting the serene landscape. Then they would stop to see the shepherds at the top of the hill, and watch the sheepdogs cleverly keeping the herds together. They would help feed the sheep grain, or milk the goats. It was fun to watch the little lambs playing with each other, running, jumping and climbing on top of the rocks that dotted the grassy hillsides, and sliding off again.

As they played with the lambs, Benjamin and James talked about keeping watch over the sheep with their fathers that night. They imagined themselves driving away the wild animals with flaming torches from their campfire.

"Watch out with those sticks," Uncle Eli called out. The boys had picked up some sticks which they imagined were torches, and were swinging them around wildly, pretending to drive away the jackals.

"We're scaring away the jackals!" they chimed.

"Well, that's good. Just keep those sticks away from the sheep, or you'll hurt them."

"Yes, sir!" the boys called out as they moved further on up the hill in "chase" of any dangerous predators.

Later that day, as the setting sun touched the horizon and the fishing boats on the lake returned to dock, Benjamin and his father and James and Uncle Eli sat down for dinner.

"We thank You, God," Benjamin's father prayed, "for how You have protected us this day. Thank You that no evil has come to our family and that You have provided all our needs once again. Bless this food we are about to eat, and sanctify it according to Your promises. Amen."

"Amen."

Uncle Eli and James had joined them for dinner too, since they all would be going up to the sheep together that evening. It was fun to have them over for dinner, as Uncle Eli and John would always tell of the adventures they had had together watching the sheep.

Soon it was time to leave. Benjamin and James diligently prepared for their task of watching the sheep that night. They dressed warmly, putting extra cloaks on over their robes, and fastening their best sticks to their belts. They brought along some rope too, to bundle firewood they would collect along the way.

The sheepdogs followed close behind Benjamin and James, snapping at the bundles of sticks that dangled behind them, which grew larger and larger as they walked up the hills. Having picked up every bit of wood they saw, the boys were huffing and puffing by the time they reached the herds. It was getting dark now, and the first stars appeared low in the sky.

Benjamin and James proudly dropped their bundles of firewood near the pile of rocks where the shepherds would build the fire.

“That should keep us plenty warm, and the jackals far away tonight,” Benjamin's father congratulated them.

Uncle Eli lit a small fire with the torch he had carried up the hill. The boys, together with their fathers, walked through the herd of sheep making sure none were missing, and then returned to the fire.

“Boys, we must be sure to stay awake and watchful. The sheepdogs are standing guard at the edge of the fold, making sure everything is safe and that the sheep stay together. We'll take turns throughout the night, so if you're tired you can rest for a bit.”

All the sheep were huddled together, starting to doze off for the night, secure between the vigilant



sheepdogs and watchful eyes of the shepherds. All was silent other than the sound of chirping crickets which filled the air and the rustling of tree branches from an occasional breeze.

Benjamin and James lay on their backs looking up at the stars, which had grown brighter now that darkness had settled.

“Father, please tell us the story about the star.”

“Yes, the story about that magic star,” James echoed.

“All right,” said John. He had told the boys this story many times before; it was one of their favorites.

“One night,” Benjamin's father began, “when Uncle Eli and I were as old as you two, at the time we were living near Bethlehem, we were watching the sheep with our fathers. It was a night as calm and still as this one.

“The sky was crystal clear, and the stars glistened like diamonds in the sky, but soon we noticed that the whole hillside had grown silent. None of the sheep stirred, and there was no wind. Not even the crickets were chirping. We wondered what was going on, and looked at where the shepherds were standing. They still stood calmly at the edge of the fold, but they were looking up into the sky.

“We looked up to see what it was they were looking at, and then we saw it too. It was a bright star. None of us had ever seen such a clear and beautiful star before. It was almost like ... well ... like a magical star! It was so bright. We both looked at it for the longest time. It was funny, but both Eli and I thought we could hear the star singing.”

The boys listened quietly. Even though they had heard the story many times, this night, as they lay under the stars, it seemed all the more real to them. Looking up at the stars, it was almost like they could see it happening. A shooting star suddenly lit up the sky and then disappeared. There were a few more barks, a few more stirring sheep, and then all was silent again.



John continued, “Not too long after, some very unusual travelers passed through Capernaum. There was a whole caravan of camels, carts, and people who had come from some faraway eastern country—a country we had never heard of before. There were some kings in this caravan. Well, actually, they said they weren't kings, rather that they were wise men from the East. They were dressed in rich robes.

“They camped here for a few days to stock up on supplies. Eli and I would often go down to their camp to see what was going on. These men talked a lot about the stars, and especially about this one bright star. They said something about it being a sign that a king had been born somewhere.”

Benjamin and James listened—spellbound—as they watched the glistening stars above. A few soft flames licked out of the pile of coals, which had burned down to only a soft glow. James threw a few more sticks on the fire to stoke it up, and then he lay back down on the soft grass.

“Once, Uncle Eli and I got to talk to one of these men. We told him how when we first saw the star, it sang to us. He listened intently and started telling us more about what this star meant. He said that it was a special star, and that it meant that a king had been born. He said that they had come to find this king, because that was where the star was leading them. Once they found this king, they would return and tell the people who he was. He also said that this king would be a very special king, whose kingdom would last forever, and that he would bring peace on the earth.

“Well, we were all very excited, of course. After these kings had left, for days everybody talked about who this special king might be. Some people thought that maybe this king would be the Messiah, who would set us free from the Romans.”

Benjamin’s father grew quiet. The boys knew the rest of the story. They had heard that Herod had all the baby boys killed in the whole region around

Bethlehem. These wise men also never came back. Soon afterwards, the star disappeared, and people stopped talking about this king.

As Benjamin drifted off to sleep, he wished they could find out who this mysterious king was. Maybe someday he would just show up out of nowhere and say, “I am the king that was born in Bethlehem!” and then everyone would know ...

When Benjamin woke up, it was early morning. The sun was already shining on the hills, and a little lamb played near some rocks right where Benjamin had been sleeping. *Morning already!* thought Benjamin as he squinted in the light of the rising sun.

“Well, well, son, how did you sleep?” called his father.

“I had such a beautiful dream,” said Benjamin. “It was all about that magical star. I dreamt I saw it, and could hear it singing, and then it even started dancing in the sky!”

His father chuckled. “I’m glad you’re rested up. Come, help me milk the goats. Then you can run some milk down to your mother.”

It wasn't long before Benjamin had filled up a pail with milk and was on his way back down the winding path to his home.

"I'm home!" Benjamin called out as he stepped inside the house with his bucket of milk.

"Thank you, dear." Keren took the heavy pail from him. Benjamin smiled, pleased with his labors, and took a hearty bite from a piece of fresh bread on the table.

"I'll pack some breakfast for your father. Then you can take it up to him."

"All right," said Benjamin, as he finished his piece of bread and drank a cup of milk.

"How was it last night?" Keren asked Benjamin.

"We had so much fun. James and I carried the firewood all the way up the hill, and then we made a big fire, and Father and Uncle Eli told us stories while we kept an eye on the sheep."

"And did the sheep stay safe all night?"

"Yes, we kept a good eye on them!"

"Good for you. I'm glad," said Keren as she put some slices of homemade cheese on the bread.

"Mother, do you think that maybe this prophet Jesus, who can do so many miracles, could be the king that was talked about by the visitors Father met when he was a boy?"

She paused for a moment. "He does seem to be a very special or unusual prophet."

She remembered the time she had gone to hear Him speak on one of the many hills around Capernaum. So many people were following after Him that she decided she would go see for herself what type of person Jesus was. When all the people had been seated, Jesus started to tell them stories and about the kingdom of heaven being near.

All the people had stayed till quite late, and when some of the crowd started home to get food, Jesus told everyone to sit back down. She never figured out what happened next, but all of a sudden people were passing around bread and fish. No one knew how all this food had gotten up there so quickly. She later heard that a boy had given Jesus five loaves and two fishes to eat, but that didn't explain where all this fish and bread for the whole crowd had come from. She couldn't stay much longer after that, and was soon on her way back home, still puzzled by all that had happened.

Maybe this is the Messiah, Keren remembered thinking.

Keren handed Benjamin the bundle of food she had made, and he ran out the door, eager to get back to the sheep and his father John.

“Here, Father. Mother has sent some bread and cheese for breakfast.”

“Oh, thank you, son. You’re just in time. One of the lambs seems to be missing, and I can’t leave our flocks right now. Could you help me look for it? You shouldn’t have to look too far. If you don’t find it, come on back and we can pen the sheep and then look further together.”

“Yes, sir,” Benjamin replied, excited that he had been asked to help find this lost lamb. He didn’t mind having to look. He enjoyed walking over these hills, with the trees casting their soft shades over patches of grass and shrubs. He loved feeling the warm sun on his face and watching its reflection in the distant waters of the Sea of Galilee, where tiny ships scuttled to and fro.

As Benjamin walked, he came upon a group of men sitting by some rocks on the side of the road.

“Lad!”

He looked around to see which one of them had called.

“Yes, you, lad!” the voice called again, as a man stood up and motioned Benjamin to come over.

The man had an air of authority about Him, but His eyes were the kindest eyes Benjamin had ever seen. Benjamin approached the man, and was soon standing in front of Him.

“What is your name?” the man asked.

“I am Benjamin, the son of John the shepherd.”

“And how old are you, Benjamin?”

“I’m ten.”

“Are you a shepherd too, like your father?”

“Yes, I am, and I’m looking for one of our little lambs who has wandered away from the fold.”

The man turned to His friends, who had been closely watching this exchange, and said, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.”¹

Benjamin looked at the man closely. *Could this be ...?*

“Would you like to hear a story?”

“Oh, yes, I love stories.”

1 Luke 9:48 NIV

The man motioned for Benjamin to draw near, and patted a comfortable place for him to sit. Then He told Benjamin of a stable, a star, and wise men that had come from far away to give Him gifts when He was two years old. He told of how He and His family had fled to Egypt, and later gone to Nazareth after Herod had died.

“A-are you the M-messiah? The one prophesied about?” whispered Benjamin, his eyes wide with wonder.

“My kingdom is not of this world.² My kingdom is in the hearts of special people like you.”

Benjamin didn't exactly understand what this meant. But that didn't matter. He had found the king; their Messiah had finally arrived!

“You had better go back to your father now,” Jesus said kindly. “The little lamb that was missing has already returned and is safely back with his mother.”

Benjamin wasn't sure how the man could know this, but somehow he felt it was true, and he knew that he wouldn't have to keep looking for the little lamb. He ran back over the hills to where his father was watching the sheep.



“Oh, there you are,” called his father. “It's okay, the little lamb came back on its own. You don't have to look anymore.”

“I know,” said Benjamin. “I know ...”