

## THE INNKEEPER'S STORY

My name is Bartimeus. It's a good name, an honest name; one that's been in my family for generations. I have come to tell you my story. It's not an important story in the great picture of things, but Yahweh uses even the simplest tools to create his works, as my father used to say.

My father was a great teller of stories and shared many wonderful sayings, he did. He had a story for every occasion and was as wise as the wisest rabbi in Jerusalem, he was. And he was an honest businessman, building up his trade and treating people fairly.

But I'm rattling on, as my Abital would say. She takes exception to my talking and sharing stories with our customers—says I talk too much and work too little. Of course, she is happiest when she is complaining or yelling at the help. And she is a happy woman!

I guess she's right, sometimes. When times are slow, and they often are when the trade routes are empty, I have time to stop and tell stories and to hear the news that comes from around the region. Sometimes it comes as far away as Joppa, Beersheba, or even Damascus!

But, when things are busy, I would most likely forget my name if the customers weren't yelling it at me day and night! One thing drives out another, as they say, and I'll forget what I'm doing and where I'm going. As

my father used to say, “Busy hands have not time for the work of mischief.”

So I guess I should consider myself a lucky man.

You see, I run a small business. It’s an inn, started by my father’s father and handed down to me. I’m an honest businessman. I give fair measure for a fair price. My food is simple, but wholesome, but wholesome and filling.

My cider and ale are mellow and served in clean ware. The rushes on the floor are changed regularly and even my smallest room is clean for the traveler who stays the night or the trader who stays the month.

Now, it’s not a fancy place, mind you. “Handsome is as handsome does,” as my father used to say. There are fancier places near the city’s heart and imposing buildings near the city’s gates, but we do all right, we do all right.

Then, of course, there are the Romans. I guess they aren’t too bad around us. Oh, some of them don’t like us. They see us as something less than people and treat us that way. And I have as little love for those who occupy our lands as anyone else. The common soldiers who desire drink and companionship usually go to other inns. We only host the occasional petty officer and his family, who are good enough.

But, here I go again—away from my story. “A Full cup holds no more but drains out a little,” as my father used to say. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, the inn—a good little inn, a place that I hope one day to pass to my son.

That night actually started out in Rome. I say that because that's where the Caesar fellow lives. He decided that he wanted to know how many people lived in the whole of his kingdom. I really think he planned on raising taxes. "You don't trust the fox to guard the henhouse," as my father used to say. Anyway, Caesar was determined to find out how many people lived where; so he sent everyone back to where their fathers' homes had been. Now you must understand that our town is but a small stop on the busy trade routes. But it is a part of David's house, and we're proud of that. You know David? The King? The REAL King? Not like this Caesar fellow! Oy vay, I could tell you stories about David!

What? OK, OK, I'll get back to my story. That was Abital, making herself happy... BY YELLING!

Anyway, the order goes out, but the local officials can't begin to handle the flood of people who come in. It should have taken a day, two at the most. But a day turned into a week and there was still no end in sight. Other inns raised their rates—two, three, five times higher than their normal prices. But I saw no reason to cheat other Jews who had no choice but to wait. So, as the week progressed, it became harder and harder to get decent food to prepare wholesome meals for my customers. Food that should have lasted until the next harvest started running low, and tempers began to flare. Every

night, the people would sit and shout at me, “Bartimeus, get me drink!”

“Bartimeus, get me food” “Bartimeus...Bartimeus...Bartimeus!” Little wonder I would lose myself in the blur of every evening!

Now, even though it’s been some time ago, I remember that one night as clearly as if it were yesterday!

The evening started like any other. People who were camping outside the city walls were looking for a meal; travelers who had been caught up in the madness of this event were looking for a place to spend the night; and beggars were looking for anything they could find. Oy vay, how many times would I receive a tongue-lashing from those I had to send away? But then, what was I to do? My rooms had been full for weeks. Even the benches in the common room were full each night with those who slept there because they had no other place to go.

And then there was a man at my door. I really didn’t pay him much mind—I was far too busy. But when I looked up, he was just standing there. You could read the familiar story on this face. Like everyone else, he was looking for a place to stay. He must have tried every other place in the city before he ended up here. And as he looked around the common room it was obvious, even to him, my humble inn was beyond full and was bursting at the seams.

But he came anyway. Asking for a place to stay, any place to stay. I could hardly hear his voice over the noise of the room, but I knew his story. I'd heard it a hundred times before. I was just about to turn him away when I saw his wife through the open door. The poor thing was no more than a child herself. She was riding a scruffy old donkey and was long overdue to bring a child into the world. Yet there was a wonderful kind of peace in her face; it was that special look that Yahweh gives to women in her condition. I knew I couldn't turn them away. But there was just no place for them! And even though I knew Abital would have my head if she found out, I offered them room in the stable. Their beast would have to stay in the courtyard, there was just nowhere else for it. But the other beasts in the stable would be quite warm enough to ease the chill of the night. Besides the sweet smell of the hay would help cover the smell of the slop in the back alleyways.

From the look on the young man's face, you would have thought I had given him an inheritance! He thanked me, and then thanked me again. I sent my youngest son to help move the animals and throw out some fresh straw. I really didn't have time to think of them again that evening. I had customers waiting.

It was later that night, quite a long time later. The fire in the main hearth had died down, and the last of my customers had drifted off to their rooms or had fallen asleep on the benches of the common room. I was cleaning up the last of the crockery and tapping a new hogshead for the morrow when I first saw it. I thought it was my imagination at first. There shouldn't have been a light like that in the sky unless half the town was on fire! I ran out into the lane and saw a glow off beyond the hills.

Now, I know that area. I ran in those hills like every boy in my youth; there's nothing out there for miles in any direction except empty hills and sheep. Yet there was a glow as if the hills themselves were on fire! I did nothing but stare for a while. But then I was deathly tired and know it was long past time to find my own bed. It was wonderment, but a wonderment that was beyond me.

I turned to go back inside, but as I did, I noticed a commotion at the stable. At first I thought it was thieves.. And if so, they would feel the sting of my stick on their backsides if I caught them.

Even in the midst of the hardships around us, I have no patience for thieves. I will help anyone willing to work, but I have no love for those that would steal from Jew or Gentile! Then I remembered the man and young girl with child. I'd forgotten them!

But now, it looked as though someone had set the stable on fire. If that couple had harmed my stable, I would turn them out, expecting or not! I burst in, either ready to provide a lashing to some thieves or to throw that couple out right then. But something stopped me. It was what wasn't, if you can tell what I'm saying.

But then you'll probably think me a madman. There was no fire, no commotion, no sound; it was as if the earth was holding its breath. Even the animals had become so quiet. And there they were – the man and his wife, and a little baby whose age could be counted in moments. Now I've seen babies. And I have as soft a heart for them as any other. But let me tell you, this one seemed...different. I could hardly help myself. I stood and stared like the fool that I felt I was. And the woman looked up—and she smiled at me. She smiled as though she knew secrets that I could never begin to fathom. And my old stable looked like a royal court, holding its queen. And then they came—down from the hills. At first by ones and twos, panting as if they had been running from a lion. Then more and more—shepherds! Some silent as the night, others crying and laughing! Some came to stare. Others came simply to kneel. But they came, crowding in to see this tiny baby! Some were talking of visions and voices; others spoke of angels. They were talking like the prophets of my great grandfather's time.

I don't know exactly what they were looking for. But I knew what I saw and felt. Yahweh himself was there! I don't know how I knew, but I knew. And I had given him a bed of straw!

Well, the night was wearing on, and the morning would come soon enough.

Even in the splendor, I knew I must sneak away and get myself abed. I thought to check on the young couple in the midday. But then I was busy.

By the time I did go to check on them, they were gone.

My young son told me that they had settled their accounts and had gone away. How I wish I had taken a moment to ask them who they were and from where they had come. How I wish I had taken time to ask them what it all meant. I hope they remember me kindly.

Ah, there's Abital again. She's come to scold me again about talking too much and working too little. I must be on about my chores. I never did find out any more about that young family, but somehow I have a feeling that Yahweh has great things planned for them, great things indeed!