

Chapter 1

Besieged

December, 598 BC - the 1st year of King Jeconiah

The biting cold - and the need to remain unseen - both kept me huddled behind a small tree. The lashing rain made me reflect wistfully on comfortable evenings spent around a warm fire.

Not far from me, a sizzling watch-fire flickered and sputtered as the gusts of wind and rain threatened to completely overwhelm the timid flames. Ample fuel lay within reach of the blaze, but the drenching rain was winning.

Reluctant guards tended the fire, paying little attention to any possible threat of danger. After all, who would be out on a night like this?

It was late on a winter's night and I was hiding near the top of the pass between the Mount of Olives and the Mount of Watchmen¹ - though little could be seen of any watchmen that night! A multitude of lights marked the locations of Chaldean camp fires around Jerusalem, but the lights often glimmered feebly or vanished completely behind the windblown rain that periodically reduced visibility to almost nothing.

Nebuchadnezzar's army surrounded Jerusalem, preventing any from coming or going, patiently and methodically strangling the life from a beleaguered city in which supplies, once used, could not be replaced.

¹ Har Hatsophim (הַר הַצֹּפִים), also called Mount Scopus, is to the north of, and slightly taller than, the Mount of Olives.

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On this particular winter's night, however, Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers were concentrating on themselves. For all they cared, an entire army could come or go as it pleased, as long as they did not have to expose themselves to the ferocious wind and periodic sleet. A winter storm was spending its fury on the city and its encircling enemies, and none would be so foolish as to brave the elements. None, I thought, except for me.

As I had travelled cautiously south from the Euphrates River, news had reached me about the Chaldean army's siege of Jerusalem. Rumours suggested that King Jehoiakim had been captured or injured, but no-one could confirm their truth.

God had given me a message for the king and his mother. At the time I did not understand why the message would be for Jehoiakim's mother, as she was not in favour with her wayward son. However, God's word must be delivered, so here I was, hidden high on an exposed hill seeking a way to enter a city under siege. If I was to succeed, this was just the weather I needed.

It was time to change the guards, and the fortunate guards whose watch was over retired into the relative comfort of their flapping tent. No doubt they would do their best to get warm, clapping and stamping, trying to restore feeling to their numbed fingers and toes. One unlucky guard remained outside on watch, single-handedly protecting this extremity of an army camped uncomfortably far from their homes.

Gingerly, I crept out from behind the tree, crouching low as I sneaked past the fire with its sole guard and continued the risky task of making my way towards the walls of Jerusalem. As I went and the weather continued to worsen, it became increasingly clear that the risk was not great. Very few people were moving along the road that led towards the Benjamin Gate. On an ordinary night, I'm sure that the guards stationed near the fires beside the track would have been accosting any traveller who dared to pass, but on this night, the guards remained huddled near fires that struggled even to stay alight, and any foolhardy soul who trod the road did so unquestioned.

One or two hardy travellers passed me in the windy darkness, their cloaks wrapped tightly around them to hide even their faces from any passing inspection. Could it be that they too did not want to be known? It occurred to me that I might not be the only one seeking entry to or egress from the city under the cover of a wild and frigid darkness. The thought filled me with hope. I hurried towards the gate, with one last camp fire to pass - a larger blaze, several

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hundred metres from the wall. More guards were huddled around it, too. As I approached, though, a particularly strong flurry of sleet and icy rain blew across the road, causing the guards to huddle even more closely behind their shields, their hooded cloaks wrapped tightly around them. I slipped past, unseen.

The road between there and the city wall was completely devoid of light, and I was glad that I was familiar with the terrain, although the unaccustomed heavy rainfall made the road slippery and difficult. There were also unexpected obstacles on the road, and I stumbled and almost fell a few times. Finally, it occurred to me that the Chaldeans might have deliberately placed barriers on the road to slow down any attacks that might come from the gate, and from then on I moved more cautiously. It was far too dark to see the things I had been tripping over, so all I could do was to hold my hands out in front of me and edge my way forward.

As I neared the brooding bulk of the stone archway of the Benjamin Gate, the city wall gradually began to offer a little protection from the elements. Eventually I reached the gatehouse with its vaulted roof and massive stone walls which created a protected area immediately in front of the large wooden gates. I stood for a moment enjoying the comparative warmth, but there was no time to waste. Somehow, I must get the attention of the men in the city without exciting any suspicion that I was an enemy.

Being out of the storm gave me the chance to notice how much I was shivering and just how cold the rain dripping from the end of my nose was. The night was still getting colder, and even under the shelter of the gate, my teeth were chattering so loudly that it seemed as though the Chaldean soldiers must surely be able to hear them!

I raised my fist and banged on the gate. Three, four, five times. Then I listened carefully. No response, so after a while, I banged again, for longer this time. Once again I waited, looking back anxiously towards the nearest campfire. Surely they must be able to hear all the noise I was making? But the howling wind was still whipping the sleet and rain across the road, and the closest Chaldean guard post was almost invisible.

Yet again, I struck the gate as firmly as I could, ten or twelve times, until finally I heard a faint voice from behind the gate, almost completely masked by the roar of the wind behind me. "Someone's knocking," said the muffled voice, and I heaved a sigh of relief. Step one had been completed. Now to see whether they would let me in.

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How could I convince them that I was a lone Hebrew and not leading an attacking force of Chaldean soldiers?

Suddenly a voice came from above my head. "Who are you?"

"I am Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah," I replied, looking up, but unable to see anything that showed where the voice was coming from.

"Move back a few steps from the gate," said the voice, and I obeyed.

A very small hatch in one of the massive wooden doors opened and a light was held up behind it. Some of the light shone through the hole and illuminated my face, and I pushed the hood back from my face so that it could be seen as clearly as possible in the dim and flickering light.

"Ah," said the voice from above, "you really could be Jeremiah, though you look more like a drowned rat at the moment!"

"Yes, I am Jeremiah and I want to come in," I said.

"Everyone else is trying to get out, why do you want to come in?" came the disembodied voice again, but by that time I had seen a small aperture in the vaulted roof above me. It had obviously been included at the time when the gate was built for just such a purpose as this, so that the guards could see what was happening outside the gate, without themselves being in danger, or being seen.

"I have a message from Yahweh for the king," I replied, deliberately avoiding naming the king until I could find out what the truth was.

"Does delivering your message include bringing Chaldean soldiers into the city?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Are you working for the king of Babylon as some people say?"

"I work for Yahweh the God of Israel, not for any king," I answered, suddenly feeling very tired and starting to worry that the Chaldeans might take an interest in the activity in the gateway. Would they be able to see the light that shone through the small hole in the gate? "There are no Chaldean soldiers with me or near me. Not yet. But if we keep talking for too long, that might change," I insisted, urgently. "Can you please hurry up and let me in?"

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A different voice answered me from above, saying, “You can come in, but be very careful. Don’t make any sudden movements or turn round at all, or make any signals. When the gate opens, just walk forward quickly and silently. Then we can find out whether you really are Jeremiah or not.”

“Alright,” I said, and waited.

A few moments later, I heard the sounds of heavy wooden bars being moved behind the gate. This seemed to last for an interminable time, but I obeyed the orders I had been given and continued to face directly towards the gate. It was a frightening wait, knowing that any manner of death could be approaching silently from behind and I would know nothing of it. Eventually, one of the gates swung open a short way and I walked smartly into Jerusalem. Immediately the gate was slammed behind me and men started lifting the heavy bars swiftly into place again. Four guards were standing just inside the gate with spears levelled at me, their sharp points unpleasantly close to my dripping cloak. Behind them, another four guards stood with their swords ready, just in case. The movement of heavy pieces of timber continued behind me, and I turned to see that there were many more bars across the gate than was normal. They must have been put in place to keep out the Chaldeans. It was clear that the city was taking the siege seriously.

My shivering was now completely uncontrollable, and I could hardly talk as relief overcame me. The chief of the night guard came down from the tower and began to question me. One of the guards put down his sword and began to search me thoroughly. I tried to explain my presence, while rainwater dripped from my clothes and hair, forming a spreading puddle around my feet.

This is end of the sample of Chapter 1 of *Terror on Every Side! Volume 4 – The Darkness Deepens*.

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