



## **Sarah of Jerusalem**

A Short Story by David Collins

Sarah lives in a small apartment in Jerusalem. The year is 68 AD. She is the oldest of three generations of her family crammed into the small space in the middle of this bustling city. Many baby girls of her generation bore the name, Sarah – a reflection of the love they all had for Abraham's wife from whom their beloved nation had been born a good 2000 years earlier.

Sarah was the mother of Tom, who also lived in the apartment with his wife Ruth and their twin daughters. Sarah's husband had not been seen for thirty years – it was assumed he had not survived after a gang of thugs had broken into their home all that time ago ... a proud Pharisee named Saul had led this unruly band – they especially relished breaking in as the believers – disciples of the Nazarene – sang their hymns together. Dragging Sarah's young husband away, along with other men-folk from the group ... Sarah could still remember Saul's mocking laughter, even though she had long ago forgiven these men and happily immersed herself in the life of the community of believers, and her little family.

For thirty years, Sarah had been rebuilding her life – but it had been far from easy. In the mayhem of those early years of faith, large numbers of her friends had fled Jerusalem for the towns and cities that surrounded the eastern Mediterranean. In those days the Christ community numbered close to 20,000 devotees, but was radically reduced to just a few thousand by the effect of Saul's persecution against them.

But making new friends was not hard for Sarah – they needed one another, they loved one another and through all the trials shared laughter, song and many a good meal together. They never ceased to wonder at how Jesus healed the sick among them – their fellowship was simple, yet full of the wonder of His presence. And then there was that report that Saul himself had met Jesus on the Damascus road – and had been baptised a believer, but had not been heard from since – a most curious business.

Despite the conversion of Saul, the persecution from the Temple rulers and their gangs of zealots continued. Many of Sarah's friends, along with many of the community leaders, found that they could lessen the threat to their lives and livelihoods by reintroducing some of the Temple practices into their lives – circumcision, observing the holy days of the Old Covenant and abstaining from certain foods. It wasn't long before some of their preachers were demanding this of them, and telling them that true salvation couldn't really be enjoyed without these observances.

This disturbed Sarah greatly, the message of the Christ had been so liberating for her – the rituals of the Temple had been just that – lifeless forms, but when she heard of the free grace of God and the love and freedom of which Jesus had spoken – and then the miracle of miracles of his resurrection and ascension to heaven ... well Sarah, Tom and Ruth held firm to the simple things that had brought them freedom and refused to bow to the pressure from the Temple and the compromise that had infiltrated the Jesus community.

If all that wasn't enough, everyone in the region were finding it hard to make ends meet. The farms surrounding Jerusalem were not doing well, it was dry and crops were failing – this had effected everyone's livelihoods, and those who started with little were now barely able to feed their families. Without a hubby, Sarah was struggling.

There would be three times in Sarah's life that a knock on her apartment door would change everything. The first was hardly a knock, more the brutish force of Saul and his gang bursting in on their worship. The second was completely different – this time it was in the midst of the famine, and the visitor had come from one of the servers in their faith community. She told Sarah how Saul, now named Paul, had turned up in Jerusalem bringing with him money and treasures from the northern gentile churches. This was a great relief to all in Jerusalem who were in hardship – but, Paul had also passed on a list of addresses where he asked that special favour be shown in supplying their needs. Sarah's little apartment was on the list, as were all the homes where 20 years earlier Paul had once entered with murderous intent.

The leaders in Jerusalem were full of gratitude and good news that they shared with Paul - thousands in Jerusalem have believed in the Lord, however, they are all zealous for the law of Moses. Paul was known to have stood firmly against these Jerusalem zealots who had insisted that old Jewish laws be adhered to by the Christ communities wherever they were – he was in hostile territory and a clash was looming.

Sarah, her family and a growing number of her friends were now Paul's strongest supporters – they were not about to surrender the unconditional love, the grace and freedom they had experienced. Some of Paul's writings had filtered into the city, and now there was a stark choice in Jerusalem: be part of a free, but persecuted, community of Christ; or join the drift back to the Temple for safety's sake.

During this time, bands of Jewish militants had launched random attacks on garrisons of the Roman occupation. The deranged Roman emperor, Nero, was looking for an excuse to move against everything that threatened his rule. In 64 AD a massive fire destroyed large parts of Rome and Nero, seizing the opportunity, unleashed a cruel and massive campaign against the communities of Christ all over his Empire – after all wasn't this

Jesus a Jew? They must be responsible for the fire. There was every reason why the believers started calling Caesar Nero, The Beast.

Three years later – well 67 AD seemed like the worst year of Sarah's life. Now 59 years of age, she is more grateful than ever for the loving support of Tom and Ruth and their girls, plus that of her believing friends in Jerusalem – but this was the year that Sarah learned that the Roman's had murdered the beloved Peter and her spiritual hero, Paul the apostle of grace. Both murders needing the help of the authorities in Jerusalem. On top of that John, whom they called the apostle of love, had been exiled to a prison island, and now 60,000 Roman troops are marching through Judea, killing as they go, headed for Jerusalem.

In the New Year there's a knock on the apartment door – this was number three. She opened the door to a true brother in Christ, one who was doing the rounds of the believer's homes in Jerusalem. He had with him three scrolls of parchment. Sarah was not alone that evening, some twenty of her believing neighbours would cram every corner of her house, often five times a week – they jokingly called it their “New Covenant love nest.”

The first parchment was read aloud in the room. It had come from the beloved John – a vastly ranging account of visions and picture scenes and images – the violence and turmoil portrayed looked a lot like the world they were living in, but by the time the visitor had read the final paragraphs, Sarah's apartment had filled with praise and shouts of victory at what was told. There was Jesus, there was His New Covenant Bride, there were the nations walking in the precious light of the Lamb of God.

The second parchment contained none of the mystery of the first. It was a letter to them, and to all the Jews who had put their trust in the Messiah and in Him alone. The letter had come from a friend, an apostle, they loved and respected greatly.

Don't throw away your confidence in Jesus, the letter urged, don't forsake gathering together as you do ... we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, run with endurance the race God has set before you ... keep your eyes on Jesus, who because of the joy awaiting him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up.

Soon there's a room full of people holding and hugging one another – speaking with true affection to one another – encouraging and praying over one another. There's tears aplenty, but all of them of pure beauty.

The third parchment was at least ten years old, and looked like a copy of a copy of a copy. It had originally been written by the old tax collector from Galilee who had become a disciple of Jesus. It was Matthew's whole story of Jesus' life and the things he'd heard Jesus say. Sarah's visitor went straight to the middle of the scroll, and when he finally locates the bit he wants to read them, begins:

Jesus, as a good farmer, has planted good seed in his field ... people who love the King and love his Kingdom. But an enemy has also been at work, sowing false seed, tares among the wheat, people working for another kingdom – one of bondage and wickedness. This enemy is the devil. But this mixture in the field is coming to an end; at harvest time there will be a furnace of fire into which these tares, these offenders will be burned. They will wail and gnash their teeth as they are thrown from God's field. Then those whose righteousness is by grace alone will shine forth ... they'll come out of the shadows and shine as bright as the sun in the Kingdom of their loving Father.

With that, the small crowd in Sarah's apartment grew silent as they pondered what lay ahead of them. The Roman troops were now spreading out around the city, the well tested strategy of conquer by siege was beginning to form.

An old man started to speak; as a Jew he'd been taught to memorise the Torah from a boy: *"They shall besiege you at all your gates until your high and fortified walls, in which you trust, come down throughout all your land; and they shall besiege you at all your gates throughout all your land which the Lord your God has given you."*

The mood in the room was becoming decidedly somber until Sarah's visitor, the bearer of the three parchment scrolls spoke up. Dear friends, I've come to show you that none of what has happened or is about to happen has escaped the understanding of our Lord, nor that of his servants who have written these things. Jesus has always known that your faith would be tested that the enemies of His grace would seek to trample it out. But as far as he is concerned, their opposition is soon coming to an end, as is the old law with which they have sought to bind you.

And then looking directly at Sarah, her two grand daughters in her lap, he says, it won't be long now, Sarah, and it's your time to shine without the shadow of the Judaizers, the Pharisees, the Temple rulers to hinder you. Somehow, dear ones, you'll escape all this and will then be free to live in the ever advancing Kingdom of the Son. Sarah, all of you, get ready to leave this city – God will make a way – and get ready to shine as the sun.

As they returned to their homes, there was hardly one of them that wasn't wondering how the rest of this would play out ... and they wondered what it was going to be like for people in every generation to come, all over the earth, to live fully new creation lives in the grace – and grace alone – of their loving God.



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