The Innkeeper

JOHN PIPER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN LAWRENCE
To Rollin
And All Who Ever Lost
A Child

A Word from
JOHN PIPER

So quickly do we pass over the Christmas words, “Herod . . .
slew all the male children . . . two years old and under.” But the
poet lingers, weeping, raging, looking at the dark spot, in hope
that any prick of light might become a portal for the sun. And
what he sees he strains with words to show—pressing us against
the perforation in the wall of pain.

Why this struggle? Why does the poet bind his heart with
such a severe discipline of form? Why strain to give shape to
suffering? Because Reality has contours. God is who He is, not
what we wish or try to make Him be. His Son, Jesus Christ, is
the great granite Fact. His hard sacrifice makes it evident that our
spontaneity needs Calvary-like discipline. Perhaps the
innkeeper paid dearly for housing the Son of God. Should it not
be costly to penetrate and portray this pain?

The Innkeeper seeks to reveal the Light that shines behind this
brutal moment in history and our own path of suffering.

Come and see!
Jake's wife would have been fifty-eight

The day that Jesus passed the gate

Of Bethlehem, and slowly walked

Toward Jacob's Inn. The people talked

With friends, and children played along

The paths, and Jesus hummed a song,

And smiled at every child he saw.
He paused with one small lass to draw
A camel in the dirt, then said,
“What’s this?” The girl bent down her head
To study what the Lord had made.
She smiled, “A camel, sir!” and laid
Her finger on the bulging back
Where merchants bind their leather pack.
“It’s got a hump.” “Indeed it does,
And who do you believe it was
Who made this camel with his hump?”

Without a thought that this would stump
The rabbi guild and be reviled.
She said, “God did.” And Jesus smiled.
“Good eyes, my child. And would that all
Jerusalem within that wall
Of yonder stone could see the signs
Of peace!” He left the lass with lines
Of simple wonder in her face
And slowly went to find the place
Where he was born.
Folks said the inn
Had never been a place for sin,
For Jacob was a holy man.
And he and Rachel had a plan
To marry, have a child or two,
And serve the folks who traveled through,
Especially the poor who brought
Their meal and turtledoves, and sought
A place to stay near Zion’s gate.
They'd rise up early, stay up late,
To help the pilgrims go and come,
And when the place was full, to some,
Especially the poorest, they would say,
“We’re sorry there’s no room, but stay
Now, if you like, out back. There’s lots
Of hay, and we have extra cots
That you can use. There’ll be no charge.
The stable isn’t very large,

But Noah keeps it safe.” He was
A wedding gift to Jake because
The shepherds knew he loved the dog.
“There’s nothing in the Decalogue,”
He used to joke, “that says a man
Can’t love a dog!”
The children ran

Ahead of Jesus as he strode

Toward Jacob’s inn. The stony road

That led up to the inn was deep

With centuries of wear, and steep

At one point just before the door.

The Lord knocked once, then twice, before

He heard an old man’s voice, “’Round back!”

It called. So Jesus took the track

That led around the inn.
The old Man leaned back in his chair and told The dog to never mind. “Ain’t had No one to tend the door, my lad, For thirty years. I’m sorry for The inconvenience to your sore Feet. The road to Jerusalem Is hard, ain’t it? Don’t mind old Shem. He’s harmless like his dad. Won’t bite A Roman soldier in the night.

Sit down.” And Jacob waved the stump Of his right arm. “We’re in a slump Right now. Got lots of time to think And talk. Come sit and have a drink. From Jacob’s well!” he laughed. “You own The inn?” the Lord inquired. “On loan, You’d better say. God owns the inn.”
At that the Lord knew they were kin,

And ventured on: “Do you recall

The tax when Caesar said to all

The world that each must be enrolled?”

Old Jacob winced, “Are north winds cold?

Are deserts dry? Do fishes swim

And ravens fly? I do. A grim

And awful year it was for me

When God ordained that strange decree.

How could I such a time forget?
Why do you ask?” “I have a debt to pay, and I must see how much.

Why do you say that it was such a grim and awful year?” He raised the stump of his right arm. “So dazed, young man, I didn’t know I’d lost my arm. Do you know what it cost for me to house the Son of God?”

The old man took his cedar rod and swept it ’round the place: “Empty. For thirty years alone, you see?

Old Jacob, poor old Jacob, runs it with one arm, a dog . . . no sons. But I had sons . . . once. Joseph was my firstborn. He was small because his mother was so sick. When he turned three, the Lord was good to me and Rachel, and our baby Ben was born, the very fortnight when the blessed family arrived.
And Rachel’s gracious heart contrived
A way for them to stay—there in
That very stall. The man was thin
And tired. You look a lot like him.”
But Jesus said, “Why was it grim?”
“We got a reputation here
That night. Nothing at all to fear
In that we thought. It was of God.
But in one year the slaughter squad

From Herod came. And where do you

Suppose they started? Not a clue!

We didn’t have a clue what they

Had come to do. No time to pray,

No time to run, no time to get

Poor Joseph off the street and let

Him say good-bye to Ben or me

Or Rachel. Only time to see
Alifted spear smash through his spine
And chest. He stumbled to the sign
That welcomed strangers to the place,
And looked with panic at my face,
As if to ask what he had done.
Young man, you ever lost a son?"
The tears streamed down the Savior's cheek,
He shook his head, but couldn't speak.
"Before I found the breath to scream
I heard the words, a horrid dream:

‘Kill every child who's two or less.
Spare not for aught, nor make excess.
Let this one be the oldest here,
And if you count your own life dear,
Let none escape.’ I had no sword,
No weapons in my house, but Lord,
I had my hands, and I would save
The son of my right hand. . . . So brave,
O Rachel was so brave! Her hands
Were like a thousand iron bands
Around the boy. She wouldn’t let
Him go, and so her own back met
With every thrust and blow. I lost
My arm, my wife, my sons—the cost
For housing the Messiah here.

Why would he simply disappear
And never come to help?” They sat
In silence. Jacob wondered at
The stranger’s tears.
"I am the boy
That Herod wanted to destroy.
You gave my parents room to give
Me life, and then God let me live,
And took your wife. Ask me not why
The one should live, another die.
God's ways are high, and you will know
In time. But I have come to show
You what the Lord prepared the night
you made a place for heaven's Light.

In two weeks they will crucify
My flesh. But mark this, Jacob, I
Will rise in three days from the dead,
And place my foot upon the head
Of him who has the power of death,
And I will raise with life and breath
Your wife and Ben and Joseph too,
And give them, Jacob, back to you
With everything the world can store,
And you will reign forever more.”