

PILLARS OF BARABBAS



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This is Book 2 of the *Barabbas* Series.

Book 1 – *I Was Called Barabbas*

Book 2 – *Pillars of Barabbas*

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PILLARS
OF
BARABBAS

A NOVEL

M.D.
HOUSE

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INTRODUCTION

My original plans for a series of historical fiction novels centered around the life of Barabbas have evolved in surprising ways. I've been led on a journey of discovering possibilities, seeing things I hadn't contemplated before. The dramatic events of 2020 were naturally a part of that. We've all been given opportunities to learn—through suffering, striving, and service—that we hadn't anticipated. It isn't over, of course, and perhaps won't be until the Savior's promised return.

As I study the history of the ancient Christian saints and try to place myself in the full milieu of their time period, I'm struck by how similar we are to them. We're no better than they were, in our basic makeup. The same kinds of temptations plague us, both individually and as societies. The same fiery darts of the adversary assault us. Technology is mainly fancy wrapping paper, though it can also act as an accelerant—for good or ill.

Most history, of course, is written by the victors. It is also often changed later by those in power who seek to cast a particular light on past events, groups of people, etc. in order to promote current political or social aims. With that in mind, I used what I consider the most reliable of the ancient sources—the New Testament—and built frameworks from there that made sense given some of the secular histories and our common human nature.

My wife and I also took a trip to Rome, and part of the reason was so that I could “feel the bones” of the Eternal City, particularly the ancient ruins. It was everything I had hoped for. When writing about Rome, where much of this book takes place, I can now say I’ve walked those streets and been able to imagine how Paul, Peter, and early church members felt as they navigated the same cobbled roads, humbly carrying the greatest message the world has ever known.

Ideas came, and the links in the chain formed. It was an incredible—and deeply fulfilling—process. The final product is astounding to me, and it’s not what I expected. Many people helped me along the way. They know who they are. Professional credit goes to Lance Buckley for another sensational cover and interior design, Christy Distler for her excellent editing expertise, and Nicole Ballengee for the wonderful PR and Marketing campaigns.

A final note: Some of the characters and major events in this story are real, of course—or perhaps I should say ‘known’—while some are fictional (and plausible, at least to me). I’ve tried hard to stay true in all respects to the spirit and purpose of the early Christian saints, and to honor their valiant efforts to spread the Word and follow the example and teachings of Christ. If many more of us could be so valiant, the world would be a far better place.

Now, enjoy Book 2: *Pillars of Barabbas*.

PROLOGUE

*Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day:
we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep,
as do others; but let us watch and be sober.*

I Thessalonians 5:5–6, KJV

My name is Publius. I am the grandson of Publius, who was the Chief Mayor of the island of Melita when Jesse, who was also called Barabbas, lived there. I am a historian of some renown in several parts of the Roman Empire, and I am a faithful Christian. I have traveled extensively, even beyond the empire's borders, studying manuscripts and interviewing people high and low, rich and poor.

It was Bishop Jesse who eventually tasked me with adding to his personal record, so that future generations could see the fuller picture of the great work of restoration and salvation that was happening in our time. As well, that whenever and wherever apostasy might come, the faithful would have a place of spiritual solace and refuge in the words of those who lived during a time of great faith and many mighty miracles.

To whomsoever might read these words, many of which are the voice of Barabbas himself, the remainder my abridgements of others' records, I wish the eternal blessings and perfect peace

of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ upon your immortal souls. May you seek and find him, in both your brightest hope and your darkest despair. He is with you throughout.

“Do you have it, Morech?”

Morech, his identity shrouded beneath his gray hooded cloak, had just entered the artificer’s shop. It was still an hour before dawn. He nodded in the flickering torchlight. “Ay, here it is.” He extended a gloved hand, the item resting elegantly in his palm. He was nervous, but he held his arm steady. Governor Venalian was known to be a cruel, capricious man, even to those who generally pleased him.

The governor, standing next to the artificer, was dressed in the finest of clothing, in dark colors, while the artificer still wore his threadbare sleeping gown, trying to stifle a yawn. The governor smiled. “Excellent. There were no troubles in obtaining it, I presume? And in ensuring secrecy?”

“None,” Morech replied. “The thief is crazy, and he is back in the caves.”

Anger flared on the governor’s face. “You were to kill him.”

Morech shrugged, now uncomfortable, and tried to defend himself. “He is no threat, and the legionnaires believed your ruse that he was removed temporarily for interrogation in Medina. They don’t suspect anything, so they won’t have anything to report to the centurion.”

The governor furrowed his brow, throwing daggers with his eyes. But then he snatched the item and looked at it closely. It was a small brass ball, finely worked with tiny lines and whorls that made it look like a map. After a moment he handed it to the artificer.

The artificer stepped closer to the torch and examined it, peering intently for several seconds. "This is exceptionally fine workmanship. I'm not sure I've ever seen anything to match it." He shook it. "There's something inside, though it moves only slightly. I cannot see how to open it. The metal doesn't seem to be thick, and overall it isn't very heavy."

"Test it," came the order.

"Yes, Governor." The artificer opened a door to another room, where a small furnace was already fired up, and the three men entered. The artificer carefully set the ball onto a small steel ring at the end of a rod, then inserted it into the furnace. He must have used some special fuel to bring it to full temperature so quickly. Morech could feel the heat pulsing from the small opening.

Seconds passed. The artificer peered into the furnace often.

The governor tapped a finger against his thigh impatiently. After several minutes, his patience ran out. "Enough. Take it out."

The artificer donned a thick glove and grasped the rod. When the ball emerged from the furnace, the ring that held it glowed red and had begun to sag, but the ball seemed unaffected. He looked at the governor, eyes wide, then back at the ball, bending to put his face close.

The governor stepped closer as well, squinting. "Well?"

"It looks like brass, but it definitely isn't brass. Brass melts before steel. It isn't gold, either. It could be a new alloy I've never encountered." With his other hand he reached into a small bucket sitting on a bench and splashed a palmful of water on the ball and ring.

The water sizzled on the ring but just slid off the ball.

He brushed a bare finger across it to test it further, then tipped the rod, dropping the ball into his bare hand. "It isn't hot, not even warm. *Remarkable.*" He continued to stare at it, clearly dumbfounded.

With a nod, the governor straightened. “Very good. Now we know it was a gift from the gods, stolen long ago, as my rhabdomancers have divined. We will return it to the emperor, who speaks for the gods, and he will greatly honor us.”

Morech was a practical man. He wanted nothing to do with emperors or gods. The excitement in the small room was palpable, though, and his thoughts quickly turned to the riches that would come with the emperor’s honor. Perhaps he would be able to leave the empire for good, become an honest man somewhere, and use his skills for something more ... worthwhile. If the governor didn’t betray or exclude him somehow. That possibility made him frown.

“What, Morech?” the governor asked with a laugh. “Are you afraid of appearing before the emperor?”

Morech’s heart froze. He would have to appear before the emperor? Why? Couldn’t the governor do it by himself? No, he reasoned, it would probably be better to be there so the chances of betrayal by the governor were lessened—although they could increase as well. What a mess he had gotten himself into. He was in his prime and coming into his own as an influencer, though attaching himself to this governor had been a mistake. What if the governor betrayed him *in front of* the emperor? That prompted another frown, and another laugh by the impish governor, who was nearly cackling.

The artificer joined in. “Morech, you look like you’ve eaten a barrel full of bad fish!” He tilted his head back and roared in laughter. It seemed fake, all a show for the governor. What a lickspittle.

Morech hastily decided against joining in the mirth. “My apologies, Governor,”—he bowed briefly—“but if it truly is a gift from the gods, who are constantly quarreling with each other, we may have pleased some of them but angered others. We should deliver

it to the emperor as quickly as possible, as he alone among us will be able to ... um, mollify them.”

The governor’s face became more serious, though he was still smiling. He nodded. “Yes, Morech, you may be right. And the sooner we deliver it, the sooner we will be rewarded.”

“However did you find this?” asked the artificer, his pretended mirth having subsided as well.

To please the governor—and ignoring the hypocrisy of that—Morech responded with a rough, dismissive tone. “One of that Christian zealot Jesse’s children showed it to a local youth, who told another youth. I heard about it through that child’s father. It sounded interesting given how little is known of Jesse’s past—and his association with Paul of Tarsus, whom many on this island consider to be a god himself, or at least sent by one of the gods—perhaps Mercury—to toy with us.”

The governor growled at that. Morech knew he hated Paul, who had made him feel threatened. The governor hadn’t been able to refute the stories of miracles, including Paul’s resistance to the venom of the deadliest of vipers and his raising of Publius’s wife from the dead. The centurion and his men who had traveled with Paul clearly worshiped him. Seeing the governor getting worked up about it was amusing.

“Paul is gone,” spat the governor, “and Jesse will be dealt with in due time. Find a ship. We leave as soon as possible, and I will take an entire century of legionnaires with me.”

Morech nodded. That wouldn’t be difficult to do. But the crazed thief from the mines had said something in one of his lucid moments—something about fairness in the realm of the gods—that intrigued him to the point of annoyance. He had made some discreet inquiries. It appeared the well-known thief had

been imprisoned unjustly for murder, and if Morech could survive his meeting with the emperor and return to Melita safely, he was certain he could solidify the proof and present it to the centurion. Having a skilled man in his employ who was deeply indebted to him, even if he was a little unstable, could make a difference in his ability to permanently escape the bloody Roman Empire.

He also felt a strange desire to get to know Jesse and his family better. Whether Paul of Tarsus was a god or not, he had chosen to stay with them. There was something special in Jesse's home, and the craving to know what it was grew by the day.

CHAPTER 1 (BARABBAS)

*Behold also the ships, which though they be so great,
and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about
with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.*

James 3:4

“Father, we got a letter!” Nineteen-year-old Matthew, soon to be twenty, hadn’t burst into the house like that since he was thirteen.

Chanah, carrying laundry up the stairs, nearly dropped her basket as she turned to look.

I was at our small table in the front room, reviewing a few notes I had scratched out on parchment for the short sermon I would give the next day. My sermons were always short, even on the Sabbath. I didn’t have the oratory skills of Paul or Peter—or Chanah. I had asked if she might speak this time, and she had patiently reminded me that it was my turn, then advised me not to try to pawn it off on Publius again, either.

I looked up at Matthew in bemusement, my sermon topic of understanding the Scriptures with the help of the Spirit mixing with his excited words in my head. I had blinked twice before Chanah was coming back down the stairs.

“Who is the letter from, Matthew?” she asked. “Do you know?”

Matthew turned to his mother. "It's from the church's headquarters in Jerusalem. It might be from one of the apostles!"

My eyebrows rose at that, my mind processing the news. We had received a brief letter from Paul notifying us of his arrival in the port of Puteoli near Rome, but nothing since. That had been almost four months ago. I didn't know what might be coming from Jerusalem, unless it were something for Paul, in which case we would forward it on. "Is it addressed to Paul?" I asked.

"No, Father." Matthew's enthusiasm surged again. "It's addressed to you, Bishop Jesse Barabbas of Melita. How did they even know Paul had made you the bishop?"

I looked at Chanah, who smiled knowingly. My wife's black hair framed her tanned face and green eyes so perfectly I still often wondered if she was an angel in disguise. Matthew shared her dark hair and many of her features, though he had my height and broad shoulders.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and set her basket on the floor, then walked over to Matthew. "May I see it, please?"

He handed it to her, urging her with his eyes to open it.

Her smile almost turned to an amused laugh. "Paul must have sent a letter notifying them of what he'd done here," she said. "The Lord's house is a house of order, so these things must be recorded and organized."

Matthew nodded without the least hint of embarrassment. Why was he so excited about a letter, even if it was from an apostle? Paul the apostle had *lived* with us for a time after his shipwreck, and nothing could ever top that.

The letter had come in a sealed wooden tube. Chanah broke the wax seal and opened the tube, then extracted the rolled sheets of parchment. It amounted to four full pages of tightly spaced script. She moved to the table and gently pressed out the

parchment, then stood beside me as we looked at the first page. Matthew took a step closer.

I cleared my throat, then read aloud.

“Peter, Chief Apostle of the Lord’s church on Earth, to Bishop Jesse and the faithful saints on Melita. The peace of the Master be upon you, and his grace and goodwill in abundance. We your brethren and sisters in Jerusalem bid you fond greeting, noting that you are in our prayers always. Our brother Paul has informed us of the miraculous work taking place in that part of the Lord’s vineyard, and we rejoice with you in the great uplifting of souls. We commend you, and we thank our Holy Father for your faithfulness and diligence, as well as that of our sister Chanah, whose wise counsel we sorely miss in Jerusalem.”

I looked at my wife. Her eyes were glistening with sudden tears. I felt the emotion of the moment, too. To receive a letter from the apostle Peter!

Matthew had taken another step closer, his eyes locked on the document, trying to read it upside down.

I looked back down and continued reading.

“Give heed to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit which is within you, which gift you received at the hands of the Lord’s authorized servants. The adversary has redoubled his efforts to deceive and distort that he might distract you and cloud your minds, drawing you subtly but surely away from the true path. Let no one lure you away from truth and righteousness with vain musings or false hopes, with anger or jealousy, malice or strife, vengeance or betrayal. Forgive one another. Forgive your enemies. Invite all, in patience, to come unto Christ, who is Lord of lords and King of kings, who has conquered death and offers eternal life to the faithful. Hold tight to the true vine, which is the perfect example of Christ Jesus, whose longsuffering love has given us the bright hope of redemption in the mansions of our Father.

“Give no heed to idolatrous fancies, nor to those who would entice you to unfetter your lusts or abandon your duties and covenants. You are

children of God, spirits from a premortal realm of great power, possessed now of mortal bodies that will test you and teach you. Gain the mastery over the flesh, with your faith firmly focused on the Messiah, who is Christ the Redeemer, and you shall have power to overcome all things in the due time of the Lord!

“Above all, turn your minds and hearts toward love and service to all, both within and without the church. Seek the welfare of others first, and you will find your own treasures—in peace, in understanding, in faith and firmness of mind. The most joyous and liberating feeling in all the world is to be an instrument in the Master’s hand, and few are the philosophers who have reasoned it out, great though many of them have been!”

“We leave our blessing upon you. May the Lord ever keep you healthy, happy, and whole. Amen.”

The first page ended there, and I set it aside to view the second. Matthew had made it around to my other shoulder without me noticing, and now all three of us scanned the parchment. I didn’t continue reading aloud.

The top of the second page contained instructions that I should read the letter to all the congregations of the saints on Melita, and that I should have copies made and distributed as far as I was able. It also asked that Chanah and I send a complete record to Jerusalem of the names of the saints, along with those who had been called and ordained as elders and deacons, and as teachers among both the men and the women. Included were instructions on how to properly administer the sacrament, which we were already following, and suggestions on how to organize teaching and ministering among the saints so all could work together in a fitly framed structure as a unified body of Christ.

The third and fourth pages of parchment contained a compilation of news from the widespread body of the church, and those pages were a thrill to examine. The work progressed so

rapidly! The Lord's arm was being made bare from one end of the empire to the other, and even beyond, filling the earth with the joyous news of Jesus's victory over death and hell, enlivening minds and hearts with the powerful peace of his teachings and example.

Chanah's hand squeezed my shoulder. "A temple in Carthage," she said. "We had a hard time believing that was possible."

I set my hand on hers and looked up at her. "*I* had a hard time believing it. You easily believed what Philip said."

She smiled, shrugging slightly. "It is a miracle regardless. And no, husband," she added with a slight tease in her voice, "I was not going to remind you of what you thought of Philip's prophecy concerning Carthage."

Matthew gave her a questioning look, and she reached across me to tousle his hair like he was a young boy again. Surprisingly, he didn't seem annoyed by it. "Look here," he said, pointing. "There are ten new congregations in Britannia, at least twenty in the Parthian empire, and many more in Egypt and Ethiopia. Missionaries are even being sent to India."

I looked back down at the page. The progress of the church was remarkable. It was not without its challenges, of course, even on Melita. And Peter had warned that the adversary would spare no effort to knock us off course.

"Ephesus, Corinth, and Philippi will also be getting temples," noted Chanah, marveling. "Added to Carthage, Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria, and Kainepolis, that will make eight. Eight temples, Jesse. We Israelites have always boasted about having *one*, and the Lord's church will soon have *eight*."

Amazing indeed. Chanah tended to be much better at seeing the broad scale of things, but I caught at least a glimpse of how significant this was.

“We are all still learning not to be surprised at what the Lord can do,” she added, “even when he has already told us he would do it.”

Matthew nodded as if understanding, and I pondered on the goodness of our eldest son. How grateful I was for him. It seemed like he would do great things, and that I needed to help him prepare better, though I wasn’t sure how.

Simon walked in from the back rooms of the house, followed by Marian and Sophia. Marian, at eleven, already looked like she would be the spitting image of her mother, while Sophia, two years younger, looked a lot like my sister Mara and me, with her unruly brown hair and glistening brown eyes. Simon, who we had almost lost not long before, was fifteen. A bright but sensitive young man, he was shorter than his brother and lighter of hair and complexion, making him seem like a native of Melita.

In that moment, the fact that we had three additional children that I couldn’t see hit me powerfully. They were cheering us on from the other side, and Chanah still occasionally prayed for them by name. All three had lived less than a week. Hannah and Joel had been born before Matthew, and after Joel’s birth the doctors had declared Chanah barren. After the miracle of Matthew proved them wrong, Miriam was born, staying with us just two days. We would have been happy if Matthew had been the only one given to us, but three more miracles occurred, and all of them were standing before me as I read an update on the Lord’s church that had come directly from the Chief Apostle. It was nearly impossible to comprehend.

“What’s the matter, Papa?” asked Sophia in concern.

It was then I felt the tears in my eyes. I smiled at her. She was the kindest and most angelic of our children. “Nothing, sweet angel. We’re just reading about how much the Lord is blessing people all over the world.”

“And that includes us,” added Chanah, putting her arm around my shoulders and reaching out for Sophia, who instantly moved to accept her embrace.

I recapped what we had read so far, re-reading in its entirety the opening message from Peter, which made Sophia smile as wide as she was able. Then we studied the other updates together.

A synopsis of news came from Jerusalem and its environs. Judea, one of the most chaotic provinces of the Roman Empire, continued to be both fruitful and challenging for the church, especially in the Holy City. I couldn’t imagine how Peter and the other church leaders navigated the treacherous politics of the proud and restless Jewish leaders. The Sanhedrin was unpredictable and often merciless, though their complex dance with the Romans sometimes kept them distracted from some of their more aggressive tendencies. My mind spun crazily every time I tried to think about it.

Peter had recently agreed that no Christians would enter a Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem for any purpose, and that teaching of non-Christians could only take place in the streets, where it could be observed and actively refuted by Jewish rabbis and priests. It seemed a bad accommodation, but Peter seemed perfectly happy with it, expressing his trust in the Lord to help them make it work. He noted one instance when it had worked to their advantage, as a large group of people had been able to witness a Spirit-filled refutation of one of the more vituperous of the Jewish priests. Most had decided that Christ was indeed the long-awaited Messiah, and several baptisms followed.

Another accommodation was that baptisms could no longer be held in the open, where ‘innocent’ passersby could observe. The church had therefore begun to construct fonts inside a few select homes and structures. Keeping the water clean was an issue, but

several novel ideas for straining and purifying the water without wasting it had already come forward from the saints, and Peter testified that the Spirit was assisting them in myriad ways. His optimism was infectious, and I wondered if this was the same Peter who others once said worried too much.

A third major accommodation was that most of the church's ministrations to the poor, at least in Jerusalem, had to be done through the Jewish priests. I could almost hear Peter chuckling as he wrote about the priests' clumsy attempt to increase their own favor and reduce that of the saints.

"Why would they do that?" asked Simon, looking puzzled. "Don't they know it doesn't matter if other people recognize their charity, just that God does?"

Chanah gave him a tender smile. "You're very perceptive, Simon. They are some of the smartest, most well-educated people in the world, but they allow stubbornness, pride, and greed to blind them to the ways of the Lord—and often to common sense."

Simon looked at me as I nodded.

"Without humility, all the learning in the world can become utter foolishness," I added. "I'm no great philosopher, like Aristotle or Isaiah, but great learning too often makes people feel superior, and they stop listening to sound, simple counsel. Remember what Isaiah said? 'Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge; and their honorable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst.'" I wasn't a great orator, but I wasn't bad at memorizing things. Well, short things.

Chanah took it up from there. "Learned people sometimes underestimate how smart other people are, even people with no formal education. These haughty priests believe people won't figure out what's really going on. And in trying to fool them, they miss the most important point, just as you said: that the Lord blesses

those who give—voluntarily, not by force—in perfect ways that cannot be turned aside by mere mortals. The Lord blesses us for our sincere efforts to help each other, and his work will continue to prosper as long as we keep doing that, no matter who tries to deflect or interfere.”

I thought of something Paul had once told me. It lit up my mind with beautiful clarity. “It’s like a ship. Even though the ship might be grand, and her hold filled with riches, she is guided by a small rudder that operates by simple principles and obeys perfectly.”

Chanah smiled at me, squeezing my shoulders. Tears were forming in her eyes again. She sat down next to me on the narrow bench, grasping my arm and leaning on my shoulder. She sighed contentedly after we finished the final few details from the letter. “What a blessing to receive word from the apostles.”

I basked in her presence a few moments before responding. “Yes, and now I don’t have to prepare a sermon.”

Matthew laughed, and I had just joined him when I spotted a figure standing in our doorway. Matthew had left the door open, which he often did—which we *all* often did, since we felt supremely safe on Melita. But something seemed ominous about this man. He hadn’t said a word, but his presence demanded attention.

I glanced at Chanah as I rose from the bench, gesturing to everyone to stay put as I walked toward the man. I noted his pale skin, disheveled gray hair, heavy linen robes, and somewhat wild-eyed expression. He looked like a scribe, straight out of Jerusalem, who spent all his time indoors poring over manuscripts—and not a high-ranking one based on the plainness of his vestments. I had never seen him before, and wondered why on earth he would be here.

Chanah had schooled her face to composure, though some apprehension pooled in her eyes.

“Who are you, stranger?” I asked.

The man cleared his throat and tried unsuccessfully to tame his hair with one hand. “I am Ahijah, of the second course of the third watch of the royal scribes of the House of David,” he began proudly in a voice less scratchy than I had expected. But then he mysteriously cast down his eyes and let his shoulders droop a little. His voice lowered. “I am come humbly and swiftly on the Lord’s errand, and no other.”

The royal scribes of the House of David? Did such a group still exist? I turned to see that Chanah’s eyes had widened a little. I didn’t know what to think, so I just listened as the man continued, his eyes still lowered.

“A holy man visited me at night last month, in my bedchamber, and he bade me follow him,” he began in a solemn tone without waiting for leave to speak further.

I was immediately, inexplicably entranced.

“We took a curious path, entering not into the temple, but descending to the Gihon Spring, then following for a time the tunnel of King Hezekiah that leads to the Pool of Siloam. He revealed a hidden side tunnel that drove deeper into Ophel, descending slowly until it made several turnings and opened up into a large, natural chamber, which, as near as I could tell, must be deep underneath the house of Caiaphas. I know not how we were able to see, for I had brought no light, and he carried none, yet we could see.”

He paused briefly to look up, first at me and then at Chanah. His voice became reverent. “I could tell that many thousands of records were stored in that sacred vault, which was perfect for the task as the air was exceptionally dry, and the holy man led me to one niche in particular, bidding me to thrust in my hand and remove the contents. I pulled out a small scroll tube, completely

sealed in wax, that had been resting on a bed of fine cloth that had also been dipped in wax.

“He bade me open the tube, which was ancient, and at first I hesitated, as such a thing was surely above my station. But he persisted, and when I had withdrawn the scroll, he bade me read it.” He paused, looking intently at the wall beyond my head while seeming to collect his thoughts.

I glanced again at Chanah, who now had no fear in her eyes at all, just reverence. I could feel something, too, but wasn’t sure yet what it was.

The man called Ahijah continued, “It has long been said, and taught, that David’s first wife, Michal, the beautiful second daughter of King Saul, later lost her love for David and even despised him. Saul had ripped them apart soon after they were wed; he had given her to another man while David was in hiding to save his own life from the treacheries of his jealous king going mad. It was more than fifteen years before David, soon to be the new king of all Israel, was able to reclaim Michal, having then already six other wives besides, all blessed by the priests and scribes, including Nathan.

“The scroll to which the holy man of God had led me proclaimed the truth. As David had kept Michal near in his heart for those many years of forced separation, so Michal had kept David near in hers, and loved him even more deeply. Far from being offended by him when he removed his kingly raiment to don the simple robes of the priesthood, she honored him for it. But that is not the most important part.”

He shifted his gaze again to Chanah, his eyes growing more intense. “It was also written, erroneously and on orders from King David himself, that Michal never bore David any children. That is not true. While it was difficult for her to bear children, she bore

him two after they had been reunited, a boy and a girl, but the families of his other wives became so jealous of these two blessed babes that David and Michal feared for their lives. So when they were still very young, she sent them with two of her handmaids to Jabesh-Gilead, there to be raised safely among those who had shown such fealty in the past to the Lord's anointed, both to David and Saul, whose body they had rescued from the Philistines at Beth-shan. Michal then started a rumor—which soon reached the status of accepted truth—that her two children had taken ill and died.

“But those children grew faithful and strong, away from the intrigues and betrayals of the king's court, with frequent extended visits from their supposedly brokenhearted mother and the close attention of the local priests. Since they saw their father only rarely, and in secret, and their names were eventually removed from the official genealogies of the king, they faded from memory. Neither of them begrudged the elimination of their claim to power in the kingdom, and both mourned greatly when their father succumbed to temptation and betrayed their mother with Bathsheba, which betrayal did indeed sever the ties of love between David and Michal, who then elected to move permanently to Jabesh-Gilead.

“The first sin of David was great indeed, but even more so given his once dutiful love for Michal. Pride entered his heart after his many victories as king of all Israel, and he began to forget the Lord and the covenants he had made, which covenants had enabled such miraculous events in the history of the Israelites. Perhaps King David also ordered the change in the date when Michal lost her love for him, whether to scorn her or to protect her, or perhaps the scribes wished to excuse to a degree David's great sin with Bathsheba—and the greater sin that followed—by creating a myth of pain and anguish at the loss of Michal's love.

This hidden scroll revealed much that has been hidden, as did some of the few words the holy man spoke before he disappeared after charging me to find *you*.”

Chanah blinked, implications clearly dawning on her. My mind still strained through thick mud. So, King David had more children than were listed in the genealogies. Why did that matter? What king or other ruler—like the Roman governors and prefects—didn’t have more children than were officially acknowledged?

“Which one is my ancestor?” she asked.

My mind jolted.

Ahijah finally smiled, apparently pleased she had made the connection. “Her name was Jehanah. Her brother was Zoram. They were eventually adopted into the tribe of Reuben. One faithful scribe of the tribe of Judah, who from the beginning was with David and his six hundred—the Mighty Ones, of whom the valiant Uriah the Hittite was a chief member—with his faithful generations after him, kept their genealogy for more than seven hundred years, after which it was kept by a selected line of scribes from the house of Reuben.

“You are a direct descendant of Jehanah the son of David and Michal through the maternal lines—*only* the maternal lines. As Jehanah and all her daughters were faithful to the Lord all their days, I sense you are faithful as well. The Lord favors you and has a great mission for you and your posterity.”

Chanah curtsied, obviously embarrassed. “I am a simple daughter of Israel, sir.” She shook her head, eyes fixed on his knees. “I am not worthy of such acclaim or stewardship.”

I swallowed hard, knowing there was nothing I could do or say in the moment.

Ahijah harrumphed suddenly, causing me to jump, then chided, “The daughters of Israel have often brought salvation to this

people, and to many others. Have you forgotten how Deborah called Barak to lead the army of Israel against King Jabin and inspired them to victory in that terrible battle, and how Jael, the wife of the traitor Heber, killed Sisera the enemy general with the spike of a tent? Have you forgotten the faithfulness of Ruth, who was the grandmother of David and provided such a powerful example of righteousness that the people of Judah and of Moab were both well inclined to accept David as their king? Have you forgotten the courage of Esther in the courts of Babylon, without whom all of Israel would have been destroyed?

“Too often the Lord’s covenant people have forgotten that the blessings of the priesthood of God come through both the men and the women of Israel on account of their obedience and faithfulness. The priests who are called upon to administer the ordinances are *not* the power—God is the power, and the faith and steadiness of his sons and daughters bring it to bear. It has always been so, and it will always be. I perceive in you, Chanah, daughter of Sariah daughter of Abigail, the faithfulness of Ruth, the wisdom of Naomi, the strength of Deborah, and the courage of Esther.”

Chanah nodded. “As the Lord wills, so will I do.”

My mind still struggled to comprehend everything.

Ahijah turned to me and cocked his head, like a bird of prey about to pluck out my eyes. “Do you recognize the gem you have found? Your marriage is an eternal pattern, and together you are called to build great things in the name of the Messiah.”

I nodded and didn’t state the obvious—that Chanah was far ahead of me, as the width of the Red Sea or the height of Mount Hermon above the city of Dan.

“He has come,” said Chanah in a tone both reverent and authoritative.

Ahijah stared into her eyes for a moment. “I know. Whether the holy man who visited me was him or one of his resurrected angels—he was no mortal!—I know not. But I asked if the Messiah had come, and my question was answered. Praises be to God for the salvation of Israel and the entire world. I hope to rest with the Lord in his kingdom as soon as I have completed my earthly duties. One of the last of those was visiting you today, here on a tiny island I had never seen before. It is a beautiful place.” His visage seemed to transform, and my eyes beheld a man who looked much younger than a wizened old scribe on his last legs. His eyes sparkled, his cheeks drew more color, and he stood straighter, firmer.

“The holy man told me you have borne three children who did not survive—Hannah, Joel, and Miriam. They are mighty warriors on the other side, striving to make you and their Savior proud, and I hope they deign to greet me when I pass.” His gaze was so intense, the aura emanating from him so powerful, that my knees nearly buckled.

Chanah began to weep openly as she fell to her knees. Matthew, Simon, Marian, and Sophia followed suit. I knelt beside my wife to offer some comfort, but she was shedding tears of joy and gratitude, thanking God and his priest he had sent to our home.

Ahijah seemed impressed. “You show great faith, Daughter of Israel, and because of that you and your family will be blessed. Rise, Barabbas, Jehoshua son of Abbas.”

With a start I realized that Chanah and the children had already risen. I alone knelt on the floor, my head down, eyes closed. I slowly rose, my gaze still on the floor.

“They will need you, Barabbas,” said Ahijah. “The Lord has called you this day to lead your family in righteousness, with a daughter of David at your side in all things. You have sinned greatly in your past, but I sense you have already been forgiven. Your

release by the Romans on that most eventful day in Earth's history was no fault of your own, but the design of our Great God, whose Son wrought the victory for us—over death, and over eternal pain and sorrow. Rejoice in his great and last sacrifice, and let no man cause you to deny his hope.”

My stomach was churning, my mind reeling, my skin flushed and moist with sweat, so at first I understood little of what this strange priest had just said. I barely remember him bidding each of us farewell and leaving a blessing on our home before he left. He didn't say if he was staying on the island for a time, returning straightaway to Jerusalem, or going somewhere else. But we never saw him again.

After a few minutes, Chanah and I dismissed our children. We stayed in the front room for many hours, discussing the importance of Ahijah's visit and what it meant for our future. It was hard to imagine those possibilities, but they felt good. And before we knew it, the Sabbath was upon us.

CHAPTER 2 (PUBLIUS)

*That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro,
and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men,
and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.*

Ephesians 4:14

“I hope these new accommodations will suffice, Master Paul.” Paul the Apostle had just stepped into the elegant private foyer, large enough for gatherings of at least two dozen people. Books, scrolls, and tablets lined one of the walls, tall windows another. Two rooms led off the foyer—a private bedroom with its own privy, and a small study, both with windows overlooking the Quirinal, one of Rome’s seven principal hills.

After taking it all in for a few moments, Paul turned to the stately man next to him, dressed in fine white robes and an orange sash of state. “Senator Aviola—Brother Manius—please don’t doubt my gratitude, but this all makes me feel uncomfortable. It is too much for a humble servant of the Lord.”

The senator grinned. “I knew you would say that. These rooms are not opulent, Master Paul, but they *are* designed to be highly functional, so that you can teach and administer the work from Rome in serenity and safety. And,” he added, raising a finger as if he sensed a coming objection, “we have taken all that was lavish

in these rooms and sold it to supply the bishop's reserve for the poor here in Rome."

Paul nodded. It was an ideal location, close enough to Nero's palace should he be summoned, and the study and foyer would prove useful in writing and holding council. He could tell that the senator was eager to prove his worth as a new Christian, and it was a powerful stroke of providence to have an influential senator among the saints. How could he deny such a sincere gift offered in the building of the kingdom of God? Part of him wanted to be suspicious, but he had too much work to do. He needed to get started, and the Lord was providing a way.

Paul smiled. "Thank you, Brother Manius. This is a worthy gift to the work. I will endeavor to use it to full effect."

The senator beamed, his shoulders relaxing. "You honor me and my house, Master Paul. We are your humble servants." He gave a bow, which caused the discomfort to return more strongly.

"Don't bow to me, brother. We are fellow servants. We kneel before the Lord and serve *him*, always. I am no better than you, whether the world deems us nobles or peasants. We are alike, sons of God, and he loves us equally."

The senator looked slightly abashed. "This is still a strange doctrine to me, and hard to understand sometimes. I have never viewed all men as equal, thinking some to have been better formed by the gods for their own mysterious purposes. And some *are* better formed, clearly."

"To our eyes it appears so sometimes, at least in this mortal realm."

"Yes, you have been teaching me to look beyond outward appearances, including the educational advantages of some over others. I am trying to see, Master Paul. I truly am." He started to bow again but stopped himself.

Paul chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder. "I am grateful for your efforts, Manius, and your faith, and indeed your friendship. The Lord bless you and your house! And now,"—he took a deep breath—"I must prepare to meet with the saints in just three hours. Is the place prepared?"

"Yes. The theater owner was hesitant at first, but we have been friends for a long time and he trusts me. I had to promise him a private audience with you, of course."

Paul nodded in only slight resignation. The theater owner had a strong reputation for debauchery, and he wasn't sure how some people would react to his meeting with such a man. But the Lord could do his own work, having done miracles with Paul himself, and Paul made sure he keenly remembered that, always.

The Laughing Caesar Theater wasn't the finest Rome had to offer. The façade needed refreshing, and the interior seemed dark and dank compared to larger, more popular venues, especially the Theater of Marcellus, with its majestic rows of arches and columns and its travertine cladding. Caesar Augustus had even had the temple of Apollo Sosianus moved to make room for that grand structure, which could hold more than twenty thousand people. Still, the fact that the smaller Laughing Caesar catered more particularly to the lower classes made Paul feel more at ease than if he were appearing in a more spacious and well-trimmed edifice.

Senator Aviola himself escorted Paul through a door in the back of the scaena, then through the small structure at the rear of the stage and onto the pulpitum. The loud murmur of voices from the gathering crowd hushed as Paul and the senator made their appearance. The senator didn't seem to mind that he would surely be seen entering one of the 'lower' theaters of the city. That

impressed Paul, though he knew social pressure from the nobility would continue to press upon Manius and his family. Rome was so powerful, so wealthy—and sadly, so often sordid, cruel, and corrupt.

Paul stopped near the front of the stage, looking upon the humble gathering of saints in the theater. More than a thousand of them, most already seated, filling only about half of the theater. How wonderful to see so many, though he wished more would have been able to come. He knew the Lord had a powerful message for him to deliver that day, though he didn't know all the details yet. He was well prepared, yes, but the Spirit would take him where it needed to, and he prayed he would listen closely to that direction.

He smiled at the crowd, then realized he felt awkward standing on the stage with just Manius and his ever-present centurion jailor, Julius Gustavus, standing a few paces behind him. He hopped down off the stage and began to mix with the crowd, eager to clasp hands, forearms, or shoulders with the faithful followers of Christ in Rome who had been providing such a powerful example to other saints across the empire for many years.

They were eager to greet him, beaming as he touched them, uttering words of gratitude and praise. He worried about his pride in such situations, painfully remembering the praise he used to receive from other multitudes—high and low—for his labors in persecuting the Christian saints many years ago. But he focused his thoughts on the Savior, on how Jesus would minister to them personally if he were there, on how each and every one of those present was a brother or sister from the heavenly courts, arrived on Earth in various circumstances to be tested and tried. He thanked their Heavenly Father that they were able to gather and help each other. That mutual assistance was critical, unity among the beautiful diversity of saints indispensable.

After at least twenty minutes, he returned to the stage feeling refreshed by the spirits of all he had greeted. He smiled broadly at the congregation, strongly feeling the Savior's approval that they were gathered in his name. He paused a few moments until the crowd quieted again—save for the occasional noise from a child or infant, which also caused Paul to smile—and then he began to speak, impressed as always by the acoustical qualities of the Greek and Roman theaters.

“My dear brothers and sisters, fellow covenant-makers with our Lord and Savior Jesus the very Christ, Creator and Redeemer of the entire world. By the grace of God embodied in his Son, I am pleased beyond words to be with you today, in person instead of by epistle, as before. My journey from Jerusalem as a prisoner of the empire has taken many strange and miraculous turns. Even the short trip from Puteoli through Three Taverns to Rome lasted longer than anticipated. But I can testify to you that the Lord's hand has been in every step, even in the midst of great distress.”

He felt the truth of those words. The intricate perfection of the Lord's plans continually amazed him, and if one was truly willing to trust him, persistently and patiently, there wasn't anything the Lord couldn't do through that person. Paul still had much to learn, more work to do to discipline his passions and overcome his doubts and fears, but the Lord was so very, very patient.

Tears formed as he continued, “Like you, I am imperfect and in need of God's grace. I seek peace and happiness, just as you do, and I find them daily in studying and obeying the teachings of Jesus, and in communing with our Heavenly Father. I find them in loving God and my fellowman. I find them by being with the saints, by being with you. Your faith is much remarked upon throughout the empire, including in Jerusalem. I bring greetings from the brethren and sisters there, including Peter and the Lord's own

mother, Mary, whose remaining days on this earth are short. Her love for you is strong and pure, just as she is.

“I have taken lodging under the kind hospitality of Senator Manius Acilius Aviola, who is present behind me. My first audience with Emperor Nero is being arranged and will come shortly. I rejoice that I will be able to witness of Christ before the emperor, even though he may scourge me in the flesh. I invite your prayers for me, as I pray for you and for the success of my mission in the Eternal City, the so-called ‘Caput Mundi.’ And while Rome is not in fact the capital of the world, it is powerful among men, and the Lord will do a great work through her ... through *you*.” He paused again, letting his last words settle in, feeling the Spirit reinforcing them with his audience.

“I come most recently from Melita, where I was shipwrecked. Some of you have heard fragments of that story, and of the miracles that attended our company. The centurion who guards me can well attest, though he has not chosen to become a Christian yet.” He turned to look at Julius, who varied neither his stance nor his expression, though Paul could see the slightest sign of discomfort slip through the mask.

He turned his face again to the congregation. “There is a man on Melita, a Jew from Jerusalem called Barabbas, who was with the Savior shortly before he was crucified. He is now the bishop of Melita, and his story is remarkable. He intimately knows, as I do, the depths from which the Lord can reach down his hand and grasp us and save us. He thought for many years that he could never be forgiven for his sins, but he didn’t understand the full power and majesty of what the Lord had wrought through his holy, unblemished sacrifice. Barabbas will come here one day, and you will meet him.”

He hadn’t intended to say that last part. It had just come out, and it felt right. He nodded to himself. Prophecy was hard to

predict. “Jesus Christ made a choice. He was literally the Son of God and lived a life free of sin. He was already God. He had nothing to achieve for himself here. But he had volunteered to come, to offer himself through supernal suffering to make it possible for us to be redeemed from our fallen state. It was harder than he expected, and he asked the Father in his most extreme pangs of agony if there was another way, but he drank the dregs of that bitter cup, his mind focused on the joy that the Father had set before him. That joy was not the adulation of the angels or a great throne in the heavens.”

He paused for dramatic effect. “That joy, brothers and sisters, was *us*. He is happy when we are happy. He is sad when we are sad. He shares in our sufferings, offering comfort through his Spirit, always honoring our precious freedom to choose and learn and grow.”

Paul took a deep breath, scanning the congregation. All the adults were intent upon him, and surprisingly most of the children as well. Some teachers didn’t like having young ones in the audience, and there were times when gatherings of just adults were more useful, but how could he have denied the children? Peter and the others often related how Jesus had loved to be around children, even seeking them out for special attention and blessing.

For the thousandth time, he wished he could have personally witnessed the Lord’s ministry. But it was unnecessary. Nobody in this Roman crowd had been there, either, nor had they ever seen him, as he had, so he was asking them to press forward in faith by accepting the testimony of Truth by the Spirit.

“All of you have heard my story, so I will not relate it in detail. But let it be a lesson to you to watch for overzealousness among you, to beware of your own selves and seek to humbly follow the Savior in meekness, showing strength in patience, having courage

in obeying his commandments, exercising faith in his Word and his promises. When I persecuted the Christians, I believed I wielded a mighty sword of heavenly fire in the name of Jehovah and his chosen people of Israel. I took pride in my great learning and in my determination to root out the cancer of the Heretic of Nazareth. I reveled in the praise heaped upon me by the Sanhedrin and other Jewish leaders. I thought I was a great man, even like unto the patriarchs, and pride filled my head until there was little room for any light to penetrate my thoughts.

“When the Lord appeared to me on that dusty road to Damascus, it was as if a dark veil was lifted from my mind, and the intensity of the light that shown from him nearly overwhelmed me entirely. I know I almost died that day. For many months afterward I wondered why he had spared me. Perhaps he saw a sliver of goodness in me, and he asked me to trust him and build upon that. I accepted his offer. I could have chosen not to. After I made that firm choice, my mind truly began to expand with knowledge I hadn’t even realized existed!”

He had raised his hands high in the air, his face lifted toward heaven, though he had hardly noticed doing so. He lowered his hands and refocused on the faces of the congregants. His voice became more somber. “I knew my choice would have consequences for my comfortable life, though it was worse than I expected. After I had been healed of my blindness and began teaching in Damascus, I sent a long epistle to my wife, Miriam. She was upset by my tidings, knowing I would lose my position. She worried most about our two young children. But she might have stayed with me if it weren’t for her father. He was a proud and ambitious man, and the blow to his reputation was too much for him to countenance. He renounced me publicly, claiming that I had used sorcery to

deceive his daughter. That was bad enough, but he went even further, and it still takes my breath away to think of it.

“Shortly afterward, and before I could journey to Jerusalem to speak with Miriam personally, my father-in-law gathered his entire family—including my wife and children—and departed Judea for another part of the empire. I know he conspired with the priests in this, so that they would help set him up in a place of prosperity in a new location. He apparently changed all their names as well, because so far I have been unable to find them.”

Paul didn’t tell this part of his story often, and it appeared most of the Roman saints had not yet heard it. Shock and sadness marred their expressions, along with many tears. A few of the children looked at their parents with concern. Yes, that part of his story was still difficult to tell, even after so many years. His children were long-since grown, living somewhere with scant knowledge of their father. What little they did know would be lies fed to them by his wife’s father—and perhaps by Miriam herself. He would find them someday, he was sure, but he knew it might only be in the next life.

“Don’t be too sad for me,” Paul said, though he felt tears beginning to run down his cheeks. “I trust that the Lord has provided for them, as he has provided for me. I will see them again one day, and we will rejoice. I am sure of it. You will all see your departed friends and family members as well, for we are all sons and daughters of God, and he will gather us all together before we are judged and receive the mansions of glory we have earned. Until then, the Comforter who was promised will be with us. We can choose to accept that comfort or reject it. We can choose anger, rage, and rebellion ... or we can choose kindness, charity, and peace. We must make that choice every day, in mighty prayer

that we may resist the temptations of the evil one who seeks to pull us down and make us his miserable servants.

“Now, I ask you to trust me, and most of you have just met me. But it really isn’t me I am asking you to trust, but him that sent me. If you will listen, with real intent and an open heart, you will hear his whisperings strengthening you, enlightening you, causing you to rejoice and have faith. Don’t forget those whisperings. It is so easy to forget. Our minds are so frail and imperfect, our physical needs so constant and consuming, that we can easily lose focus. The miracles of our past fade, the testimonies of the great prophets and prophetesses and their many mighty deeds become less believable in the face of our persistent challenges, and we falter in our hope and faith.

“It was by faith that Adam and Eve made sacrifices to God, that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, that Joseph rose to rule in Egypt and saved his family, that Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea upon dry land, that Elijah called down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice and raised the widow’s son, that Daniel played with the lions as with kittens. It was by faith that Peter and John healed the lame man at the gate of the temple in Jerusalem and escaped prison, that the fires of heaven were felt on the Day of Pentecost, that Mary Magdalene sought the Lord in the garden near his tomb, and that I washed ashore on Melita to minister there after fourteen days of one of the unrelenting storms called euroclydon.

“The Lord tests us, refines us, and puts us where we need to be. Each of you has access to the same Spirit, the same faith, that I do. Each of you has opportunities to serve and to strengthen others. You may think your station humble, but nothing on this earth is below the notice and care of the Father. By small means are great vessels maneuvered, and by the faith of one humble, penitent son or daughter of God can mountains be moved!”

The Spirit was coursing through him, and he felt compelled to shout for joy. He had never met with so many members of Christ's church at one time, and without any Jewish or secular leaders trying to harangue and refute him. What a blessed gathering, a towering opportunity to bask in the pure light of the Savior's love. He ended up speaking for more than two hours, and even then, he was not spent.

His feet felt light as he walked back to the house with Julius and Senator Aviola. His thoughts frequently turned to pure praise that he had been allowed to feel such joy so fully with the saints. Yes, the Spirit often brought him joy, even amid sharp travails, but there were few times it was so abidingly powerful.

He was deep in thought as they began to cross a busy road near the base of the Quirinal when he heard an angry shout. Startled, he looked up to see a small horse-drawn carriage moving swiftly his way. The shout had come from a cavalryman clearing the way ahead of the ornate carriage, which had its curtains drawn to hide the noble person within. Paul tried to react, while at the same time looking for Julius, who was usually there to warn him of such things when his mind was drifting. He was too slow.

The cavalryman angled his horse and forcefully moved Paul out of the way, knocking him to the ground. His hip and elbow hit hard, but fortunately he didn't feel anything break on the stones of the street. The small procession moved swiftly past as Paul picked himself up and looked at the back of the carriage.

He wasn't angry. He rarely was, though in his younger days he might have reacted differently. Who was inside? What had that person's life been like so far? They had probably been born into wealth and status, though it was possible they had earned it through some feat of military or civic benefit. Did they know their escort treated people on the street so harshly? Would they care if

they knew? Did they realize that upon their death, all their earthly wealth would disappear, that they would return to their Heavenly Father to give an account of their efforts to do good based on the knowledge and talents they had been given?

Did they even know they were a child of God? That was a painfully poignant question. And so important! He wished he could tell everyone in that teeming city, in an instant, that God loved them, that he had sent his Son to offer them salvation and true, eternal joy. He wished he could tell the person in the carriage right that moment. But they were gone.

Julius rushed up to him, grabbing his arm and looking him up and down to see if he was hurt. "Master Paul, I am sorry. I got distracted by a girl who was trying to sell us flowers. I don't know why. I usually don't, especially when I'm supposed to be protecting you."

Manius rushed up as well, having obviously stopped when Julius did.

Paul smiled, clapping Julius on the shoulder with his other hand. "Don't you mean you're supposed to be preventing my escape? You're my jailor, remember?" He laughed, though this wasn't the first time they'd shared that joke. "And don't worry so much about me. I'm fine. No harm was done, though I'll feel it for a few days." He smiled again, noting the uncomfortable look on Julius's face. The man was clearly disappointed in himself. "So, you bought a flower, I see." He noted how tightly Julius was gripping the stem of the purple-petaled flower. Julius blinked in momentary confusion.

"Oh, um, well, yes, I did." He looked even more uncomfortable, and his grip on the flower's stem loosened.

Paul laughed. "Wonderful! Where is this girl? Perhaps I shall buy a flower from her as well."

Julius relaxed a little, then turned and scanned the side of the street. He pointed. "There, in the light-blue dress. She looks to be about eight years old."

Paul spotted her. She was turned away from him, talking to another prospective customer, this one a woman who listened half-impatiently and then declined as she went on her way. As Paul started to move toward the girl, she turned. He stopped, his heart skipping a beat.

Was he seeing a vision? It couldn't be his daughter, from so many years ago, standing near the street, her eyes finally landing on him and twinkling as a smile lit up her face and sweet little dimples appeared. No, his daughter hadn't had dimples like that, and her hair had been slightly darker. Of course, she would be much older than eight now as well.

He recovered and stepped over to the girl, then stooped toward her. "I hear you are selling beautiful flowers, young one." He beamed at her. "I would like to buy one."

"Oh, yes." Her face brightened further, and she turned and took two steps to reach a small wooden bucket that held a few flowers of various colors. They looked like tulips, which were rare. She took her time studying her inventory, then plucked a bright yellow one out from the rest and turned to hold it out to Paul. "Is this one all right?"

Paul's heart swelled as he nodded. He could still picture his own daughter's cherubic face. "It's perfect."

She told him how much it was, and Manius insisted on paying, also telling the girl to come by his house and speak with his chief housekeeper the next morning. Then the three of them, with Paul gently holding both his flower and Julius's, crossed the street and found the narrower road that ascended the hill.

It was a warm day. By the time they reached Manius's house, well past the noon hour, Paul was feeling much older than his early fifties. It had already been a full day. They were sweaty and hungry, and one of Manius's stewards greeted them with concern as they stepped through the doorway, offering them refreshment and shouting for the cook to prepare a hasty meal. Then he mentioned that they had visitors, and that one of them was from Nero's household.

Paul took a moment to ponder that information. He didn't feel concerned by it, but he was curious. He hadn't yet appeared before Nero, though he was torn. Part of him wanted to see Nero right away, as the Lord had a definite purpose in sending him here. But part of him wanted more time to prepare. He needed to learn more about the young emperor who was rumored to be somewhat moody, and he wished to spend time with the saints in Rome, as much as possible, just in case Nero decided to change his current arrangement and restrict his freedom of movement.

Paul looked at Manius, whose expression was a mix of pensiveness and worry, and then at Julius, who was stoic. An experienced soldier, he approached most situations with calm.

Paul nodded at the steward. "It will be a pleasure to meet him. Or is it a woman?"

The steward looked confused. "Why would Nero send a woman?"

Paul nearly chuckled. If this man had only met Mary, and Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Priscilla, and so many others, he would not act surprised at such a question. "Lead on, good man," he said, letting the question lie.

"How long ago did he arrive?" asked Manius as they began walking toward the rear of the house and the large veranda that extended out over the hill.

“Just a few minutes ago, Master,” said the steward. “I’ve made sure he is comfortable, and he has company. It’s just one man, and he isn’t from Nero’s household.”

Joy filled Paul as he stepped out onto the veranda. “Luke, you have made it!”

His wiry, energetic companion of many journeys rose from a chair and walked briskly toward Paul’s oncoming embrace. The emperor’s steward, sitting in the chair next to him, rose and observed the reunion with a raised eyebrow.

Manius moved to him swiftly and gave a small bow. “Welcome, Your Eminence,” he said respectfully, almost as if he were addressing the emperor himself.

Paul released Luke, turning toward the man whom Manius had clearly recognized as a high-level personage in the palace. “My apologies,” he said. “I am Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” He reached out a hand, which the man took, looking at him as a robin might look at a strange-colored worm, but Paul didn’t break his smile. “Well met, good man.”

The man glanced at the flowers Paul was still holding, but didn’t comment on them. He finally nodded, seemingly unoffended. “Well met, Master Paul. We are happy you arrived safely, especially after such a harrowing experience on Melita.”

“God always keeps his promises.” Paul released the man’s hand. “How is the emperor this fine day?”

“He is well. I am Octellus, the emperor’s chief steward. The emperor felt strongly this morning that I should come personally to welcome you, and to invite you to his home.”

Paul looked at Manius, who kept a straight face. How remarkable was it that Nero would send his chief steward instead of a lesser steward? Had the Lord arranged this? Of course he had.

Octellus continued, “I have been enjoying a fascinating conversation with your colleague, Master Luke. Greek physicians are highly regarded in the empire, but rarely are they such great storytellers.”

Luke laughed, slapping Octellus on the back as if they were already fast friends. Paul could almost feel Manius and Julius flinch. That was almost like touching the emperor’s own person. “The benefit has been largely mine, Chief Steward. You have traveled far more places than I have, and you’ve met people more interesting than I could ever imagine.” The trademark twinkle of his obsidian eyes added emphasis to the compliment, and the chief steward inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Julius still portrayed calm, but Manius seemed flummoxed by what was happening. Paul knew proper introduction protocols weren’t being followed, but it didn’t seem to matter. “Let us all sit,” he proposed, “and hear the news from Emperor Nero’s court.”

The steward was allowed to sit first, as *was* proper, and then they waited for him to begin his message. Instead, he contemplated Paul for a moment, eyes intensifying. “I have spoken to a pair of Julius’s soldiers who were on that ill-fated ship. They confirmed that you told them they would all be safe from the storm that thrashed you onto Melita. You even convinced them all to eat, and to throw the remaining stores overboard. And then you were bitten by a poisonous viper and received no harm, as your companion Luke described.”

He glanced at Julius as if to get his confirmation, and the centurion nodded austere. “You don’t seem nervous in my presence, and I have received similar reports of your countenance from Festus and Agrippa. I must tell you that the emperor is intrigued by you, Master Paul. You claim to be a servant of the one true God—a strange concept to Romans and Greeks alike, as you discovered

on Mars Hill in Athens, which I know about as well—and yet you seem to be a god yourself.”

Paul stared back at the man intently for a few seconds, seeking what he needed to express. “I am a son of God, like you, battling the weakness of the flesh every day. I praise God that he has revealed to me many secrets of the gift of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, whose will, when I am willing, courses through me, giving me strength and utterance, and even protection. I will die one day, like you, but I now possess the glorious truth that death is just a passage to the next life, and that it cannot ultimately defeat us because of the victory Christ gained over it.”

Octellus sat back, bringing up a hand to rub his jaw. “So, you truly believe that Jesus, who was slain by Pontius Pilate, rose from the dead? Where did he go? Why did he not stay?” He leaned forward, but Paul sensed no trap. Even if it were a trap, he would testify the same thing.

Paul leaned forward, too. “He tarried for many days among his faithful disciples, teaching and preparing them to carry on his work of hope and salvation among all the peoples of the earth. And then he returned to heaven, charging his disciples to immerse themselves in his work and seek his guidance in all things. He won’t do everything for us, because he knows we can’t learn anything that way. And he won’t force us. Human dignity and happiness come from hard work and accomplishment that is recognized and fairly rewarded. He’ll help and encourage us, when appropriate in his infinite wisdom, but he won’t steal our opportunities. He wants us to reach our full potential, which is to be like him.”

Paul ended with one hand on his heart and another pointed heavenward, feeling the promise he had taught countless times. It was true. His confidence in it was complete, and that

confidence brought immense peace, even in the center of the most powerful city in the world and in the presence of an emissary of the emperor. He smiled as he lowered his hands, watching Octellus closely.

The chief steward steeped his hands as he pondered. Then he looked at Luke. “You believe this as well? You would give your life for it?”

A heartstring twinged in Paul’s chest, but Luke didn’t hesitate in answering, as Paul knew he wouldn’t. “Yes, Your Eminence, I would, and I would count it a blessing if it was asked of me.” He glanced at Paul, his eyes determined, then returned his gaze to Octellus. “I had to beg to accompany Master Paul on the ship after it set out from the Fair Havens against Paul’s own advice to the captain. He insisted there was work for me to do in Lasea and that region, and that I should then follow him to Rome. I prevailed upon him, however, and another of our companions was sent to Lasea instead. Following the winter after our miraculous deliverance on Melita, he insisted that I leave Melita ahead of him and check in on certain of our members in the south of Italy. He promised me he would arrive here safely, that the Spirit had assured him of it. I couldn’t doubt that—not after the euroclydon. Even if I hadn’t witnessed those miracles in person, I would not doubt him. He truly speaks with God.”

Octellus took that in, finally nodding slowly, and then his eyes snapped to Julius. “You were a witness also, as were your men. Do you believe Paul is a god, or is he just a man who is protected by the gods?”

Julius spread his hands before him. “I know I saw things that cannot naturally be explained, some of which Master Paul predicted. Many would have died had we not heeded his advice. But I’ve seen him as exhausted as a man can be. I’ve seen him bleed,

and I've seen him cry out in pain. I have never seen him complain, though. That is what I find most ... um, irregular."

"Do you believe he cannot be slain?"

Julius shook his head. "I do not know, but he probably can't if his god doesn't will it."

Octellus narrowed his eyes. "So, he has gained power over *you*, a decorated centurion, which means he may be dangerous. Would you strike him down with your sword if I commanded you to do so in the name of the emperor?"

Julius blinked a couple of times, twitching his head only slightly as if he wanted to look at Paul, but then he shook his head. "I believe I would die in the attempt, and I wouldn't try anyway, out of respect for Master Paul, even in the name of the emperor." He sighed resignedly, probably thinking he had at the very least lost his commission as a Roman officer. At worst, he would be cruelly executed for treason.

The man's courageous choice astounded Paul. He and Julius had developed a friendship, but not a close one, and Julius had never shown overt interest in his teachings. He was always there, though, and he was highly observant.

Octellus suddenly rose to his feet, drawing his own short sword in one smooth motion. He was not a young man, but he looked fit, and he clearly handled his sword with some skill. With a brief warning look at Julius, who registered only the second look of shock Paul had ever seen from him, he took two steps forward and raised his sword, bringing his off hand up to grip the end of the pommel for more force. He swung it down toward Paul's neck—and then stopped, the blade hovering a foot from its target.

Several seconds passed. Paul maintained eye contact with the man. He hadn't moved as Octellus was preparing to strike. His heart beat a bit faster, but he had felt calm and unworried,

knowing that if he died that day, he would be worthy to enter the Lord's kingdom with honor.

Octellus finally straightened, still shrewdly considering Paul. His face was stern but serene, and he took a long breath before re-sheathing his sword. He then looked at Julius, who blinked rapidly, showing his nervousness. "I don't think I could have slain him, either. I knew it, and it was unlike anything I've ever felt." He returned his attention to Paul. "Master Paul, I pray you forgive my demonstration, but I didn't believe you could be as strong and brave as the others told me. I needed to know."

Paul considered what to say. What an extraordinary scene. Octellus hadn't truly apologized, of course, so perhaps the test was continuing. "My life is not my own, Chief Steward. I have entrusted it to another, and I trust him completely. He is the Master Steward, and without him, my life—and my hope of eternal salvation and happiness—would have been lost long ago in the fires of my own pride and passion. If I am ever struck down to the earth, it will be to fulfill his holy purpose."

Octellus cocked his head slightly as he listened, then registered a hint of amazement. "My report to the emperor will be most interesting. I have never met anyone like you in all my travels, and I know the emperor will want to meet you as well. You have earned an invitation to his presence. I will arrange it and send word. You will bring your companions present here today with you, but no others."

Paul rose and gave a small bow, holding the purple and yellow flowers against his chest. "We are honored, Chief Steward. It will be as you say."