

the **man**
from **cyrene**

conversion
of a skeptic



a novel by A.D. Ray

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Author's Foreword

One day as I was reading about the temptation of Jesus it occurred to me that there was much more to the story than is printed on the page. There is no doubt that there was more dialogue between Jesus and Satan than we read in the Gospels. I imagine that Jesus was hungry, skinny, His ribs showing, His hair and beard straggly. He was sunburned, sore and exhausted. Satan appeared to Him and said something like, "Who are you? Surely you are not the Son of God, the Prince of Heaven! Where are your robes? Where is your crown of glory?"

And Jesus just looked at him and said, "What do you want?"

Satan probably said, "I want to take you away from all this." He waved his arm to indicate the scorching desert around them. "You look miserable. Are you hungry? If you are indeed the Son of God turn these stones into bread so you can eat."

You know how the story goes from there. But try for a moment to put yourself in the situation. See the setting. Hear the conversation.

When we are taught the Bible stories in Sunday School or Bible Study we are not encouraged to read between the lines. We are not taught to consider the back-story behind these events, to see the dialogue and the interactions that are not written on the page.

It is my aim, my desire, to flesh out events in the Bible, to draw the reader into the story, to show that these were real events that happened to real people and changed real lives. My hope and prayer is that as you read about these people's lives and how they were changed by meeting Jesus the Bible will come to life for you in a new way. I hope that you will see that these are not *just* Bible stories, but that they are things that really happened. I hope that it will bring you to a powerful realization that He can have the same effect on you that He did on the people in this story.

I have taken considerable creative license in drawing in some of the details of the people's lives and events surrounding them, but I have done so with great prayer and consideration and made every effort to remain true to the Bible. So please, read this as a novel, but remember that it is about true lives and true events.

Humbly Yours,

A.D. Ray

Prologue

My name is Simon bar Tolomeo. You may have heard my name. I am a person not without some degree of influence in the business world, especially in and around Cyrene and Alexandria, and, to a lesser extent, Jerusalem. Most of my business consists of rental houses and flats, but I do own a few shops of various types. I am a self-made businessman, and quite successful if I do say so myself. I have a reputation for being shrewd and ruthless in my business dealings, but at the same time in my personal life being kind and loving. In business I know what I want and I know how to get it most of the time. I run the business with a single-mindedness of purpose. It has always been my goal to never make a deal that did not favor me more than the person with whom I was dealing.

There is nothing in the world dearer to me than my family. I have five children, three strapping boys and two lovely girls, and a wife Miriam who is sweeter than sweet. She was in the flower of her youth when we married, fourteen, and the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, or have ever seen since. She was from an upscale Hebrew family; blue eyed and fair skinned, but her dark, straight, heavy hair and facial features left no doubts about her ancestry, with almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, and a high forehead. She was not tall, but even in her youth gave the impression of power and determination just in her movements and the way she spoke. She proudly traced her lineage all the way back to David.

Her father was a Pharisee, well placed in the Synagogue in Cyrene. He was a devout Jew and brought all his children up in strict observance of the Hebrew religion. He insisted that all his children memorize large chunks of scripture. Miriam's favorite was the Song of Solomon, and she knew it word for word, as well as most of the writings of David and Isaiah.

Miriam is a modest, pious Jewess, strongly devoted to the religion she was brought up in. She has always attended synagogue, even if I didn't go with her. She would often go with her sister Esther and Esther's family. She prayed regularly and she meditated on the Scriptures daily. I was not one to place much stock in religion, and

when I objected to her desire to take the children to synagogue she quietly acquiesced. She seemed somehow peaceful with it.

When we married I was slightly older than she at seventeen, and well established in my father's business. There was never any question that I could support and provide for a family at that age.

We had been married but a year and a half when she presented me with my firstborn, a red-skinned, black haired, wrinkly baby boy we named Alexander. Rufus followed a year and a half later, then five years after that our twin daughters Helen and Mary were born. Julian came along two years after the girls.

Right from the start Alexander was a bright, inquisitive, precocious boy, smart like a whip. He figured things out quickly and always seemed to be one leap ahead of me. He seemed to do things impulsively sometimes, though. Rufus was quiet; one would almost think him shy. He was always watchful, observing. You could see him taking it all in, as if storing it for some future day. He wasn't slow, by any means, just reserved you might say. He and his big brother were inseparable. You never saw one of them without the other.

The girls, now there are my little angels. Some among the Hebrew people say there are no angels, but I beg to differ. I don't remember ever once having to scold or punish either of them. When they were only four years old we betrothed them to sons of a good friend and business associate named Hiram. He was a half-Jew on his mother's side, his father being a big gruff Greek man. His wife was a sweet Hebrew girl ten years younger than he was. She was a good friend of Miriam and the two of them attended Synagogue together regularly. Hiram had been brought up in all the traditions and teaching of the Jewish religion, and he and Rachel raised their children the same way. His older son Mark was seven at the time and the younger, Adam, was five. Hiram was a shipper of goods and owned three good ships. His ships sailed regularly to Italy, Macedonia and Israel. He was a good businessman and ran quite a profitable enterprise. Before long he bought another ship and put it on a line to Asia. His boys were already showing signs of astuteness that would serve them well in the business world, and every day that they were not in school Hiram had them at the office learning the shipping trade.

We knew we couldn't go wrong choosing two such well-heeled boys to wed our daughters.

And then there was our youngest, Julian. He was a walking wave of destruction. Oh, he was a good kid, but he just was so full of energy that he couldn't be still. He was always into some kind of mischief or other, but you couldn't help but love him. And laugh, my goodness he seemed to think everything he did was funny.

I love them all and cherish them and always supported them in pretty fine style. If one should ask them they would say that they have never known want... of anything material or of my love and devotion.

What properties I own in Jerusalem I inherited from my father. He moved us away from there when I was a youngster, when the Romans began to really overrun the place. I try to stay away, but sometimes business demands that I make a visit.

Hebrew? Yes, I am a Hebrew. By birth. By choice, I am more Greek than anything else. Oh, my parents raised me as a good little Hebrew boy. They took me to synagogue every Sabbath. I learned the Law and the Prophets. I learned the history of my people. I learned how they continually rebelled against God. I learned how they could never get anything of their own. I learned how they licked the boots of every nation that enslaved them, how they tried to assimilate themselves into the lifestyle of their captors. I learned to despise the thought of being a Hebrew.

And so I became a Greek, living in Egypt, made a big success of myself and put all that as far behind me as I could. After my father died I cut my hair and shaved my beard, much to my mother's chagrin. To her further dismay I began pronouncing my name in the Hellenized manner as opposed the Hebrew style, Shimon (pronounced shee-mohn'). I even named my children Greek and Roman names. Somehow, though, even though I had learned Italian at a young age, and learned to speak fairly good Egyptian, I could never give up on my native language. Hebrew was spoken exclusively in our home, and among most of the people I called friend.

Now, as I am telling you about it, I realize... what have I done any differently from my ancestors?

Enough about me. I will get on with my story.

I

I was in Jerusalem on one of my business trips. I had been trying to sell off all my holdings there so I would never have to go back. A certain Nicodemus had made what I thought was an attractive offer on a couple of houses, and I had had to travel up there to complete the deal.

I had heard some stirrings of unrest, and decided just to keep to my business and get in and out as unobtrusively as I could. I had heard tales of a certain rebel, teacher, rabble-rouser, holy man, troublemaker, miracle worker, whatever the masses decided he was at the moment. Whoever or whatever he was, I certainly wanted to steer clear of him and his followers. Alexander was eighteen and Rufus had just turned sixteen and so I took them along on this trip. I was teaching them the business so that soon they could launch out on their own.

“Boys,” I told them, “whatever you do, do not get mixed up in any of the goings on here. There is a lot of political stuff happening, and I get the feeling it is not good. Just stick close to me and watch how I negotiate this deal. Let’s get our business done and get out as quietly as possible.”

Nicodemus and I had an appointment to meet at a certain tavern on the evening before Passover. It seems he was some kind of official in the Temple or something and was busy during the day, so we had to meet in the evening. It was in the spring, so the trip up there hadn’t been bad at all. We had opted to sail from Cyrene to Joppa and join a caravan from there to Jerusalem. The weather held out and there was no rain for the whole trip. We actually got ahead of our schedule and stopped at Lydda and Emmaus along the way to visit with some cousins I hadn’t seen in years, and I introduced my sons to some other important people along the way.

We arrived at the tavern a day early and checked into our room.

“Simon bar Tolomeo! You just got here in time,” the innkeeper said. “If you had arrived tomorrow there probably wouldn’t be a room to rent anywhere in the city.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “I try to stay away from here this time of year.”

“You’re not here for the Feast?” the innkeeper asked, incredulous.

“Hmmm,” I restrained a snicker. “You know I am not really what you would call a religious man.”

“Simon the skeptic, they call you,” he replied with a friendly chuckle. “After you get settled in your room, you can come down and have something to eat. The wife will be putting some lunch up in a little while.”

We had a delicious lunch of mutton and potatoes, took a little nap, and went out for some sightseeing. That afternoon passed uneventfully. We returned to the inn for a light supper and went to our room about sundown.

The next day we arose well rested and refreshed. We breakfasted and went out to start the day. My plan was to look in on some of my properties, and check the books of the managers overseeing them. About noontime we were walking along one of the narrow streets when we heard someone shouting in Aramaic, “He is coming, he is coming.”

To whom he was referring we had no idea, and so we continued on our way.

Sounds of some kind of commotion emanated from somewhere up the street behind us. Moments later a man bolted from a side street, grabbed me by the arm, and veritably shouted at me, “It’s the Messiah. He’s riding on a colt, just as the Prophet said he would.”

I looked at him, quite puzzled, and said, “What are you talking about?”

“The Messiah. Yeshua ben Yusef is the Savior. He is riding into the city on a colt. He has healed the sick, given sight to the blind. It’s all in the Scriptures. He even brought a dead man back to life. It has to be Him...” He looked at me pleadingly. After I stared blankly at him for a moment he released me roughly and ran on his way.

“What was he talking about?” Rufus asked.

“The Messiah,” Alexander replied. “The scriptures tell of a Savior who will free the Hebrews from oppression and captivity forever.” A lilt of excitement was in his voice. I tried to interrupt, but a lump was in my throat and I couldn’t speak. My mind swam. I wanted to run after the man. I wanted to run the other way. Suddenly I burned to see the Promised One. But he was just a myth, a fabric of all the old tales, hopes and dreams of a sad people.

Alexander continued, “I think one of the prophecies is that he will enter the city riding on the colt of a donkey.”

I found my voice and managed to say, “Nonsense.” I pulled myself together. “The Messiah is a fairy tale. The prophecies are all figurative, and besides, this Jesus, as the Greeks call him, is certainly no savior. If he was, don’t you think the priests would know it? He is a troublemaker and one to be avoided at all costs. Let’s get along before we get in trouble with the Romans for loitering.”

One certainly didn’t want to run afoul of the Romans. My appointment with Nicodemus was for before dinnertime so we had time to visit a couple more properties and then head back to the inn.

Having returned to the inn we sat in the garden enjoying the cool breeze of the late afternoon, when a messenger boy came in, obviously looking for someone. We paid him no mind and continued our conversation about the properties we had looked at and how the books were being kept. After a moment the innkeeper came over to where we were sitting and said, “This boy has a message for you.”

I looked at the boy and he spoke timidly.

“Are you Simon bar Tolomeo, from Cyrene?” he asked.

“I am,” I responded.

“Nicodemus sends his regrets and apologies, but he cannot meet with you today. He has some pressing business at the Temple and will be tied up all evening. He hopes to be able to meet with you tomorrow.”

I tossed the boy a coin and he left with a bow.

“This is just great,” I said, to no one in particular.

Alexander said, “That is rude. We travel all the way up here just to meet with him and he pulls this.”

“Alexander,” I said, more sternly than I intended, “you will mind your manners. Speak kindly or don’t speak at all. I am sure Nicodemus will manage to see us tomorrow. In business one must often have great patience with other peoples’ foibles.”

The boy shot me a rueful look then focused on his barley water.

With preparations for the Passover occupying everyone in the city there was no entertainment to be had that evening. We passed the time playing some games of chance and kicked a ball around for a while. After supper we retired once again to our room, feeling like the day had been wasted.

II

Next morning we awoke, washed up, dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. The innkeeper was nowhere to be found, nor was his wife. A couple of other guests were in the dining room with no food before them, looking somewhat puzzled themselves.

“Where is everyone?” I asked one of them.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “We’ve been down here for a few minutes but can’t find anyone.”

Just at that moment someone ran past the window that looked out onto the courtyard, panting some kind of gibberish to a fellow running right behind him. Alexander frowned and went to look out to see what the fuss was.

“Looks like there is going to be a riot out on the street,” he said, almost with glee. Almost anything that would break the boredom we had been experiencing would be a welcome change. But definitely not a riot. The Romans didn’t take kindly to the Hebrews misbehaving. Pilate would make sure some heads rolled if that were the case.

“I sure hope not,” I said. “If there is one thing we don’t need it’s another massacre.”

Alexander started out the door with Rufus right behind.

“Boys,” I said sternly, “stay in here...” Too late. Alexander always was too curious for his own good. And Rufus would follow him off a cliff.

“Damn,” I said, and started after them.

I caught up with them as Alexander was stopping a running man and asking him what was going on.

“They’ve arrested the Messiah!” the man exclaimed. “Sometime in the night. They’re taking him to be crucified!” He ran on without another word.

Alexander looked at me askance.

“I knew he would be trouble,” I said.

“Can we go see what is happening?” Rufus asked.

“No!” I said. “Definitely not! We don’t want to be anywhere around a mess like that.”

Once again, it was too late. Alexander was already loping away down the street, dust boiling from beneath his shoes.

“Alexander!” I shouted. He either couldn’t hear me above the hubbub, or didn’t pay my warning any attention. He could be like that sometimes. Exasperating kid!

“Rufus, I am going after him. You stay here! You hear me?”

He only nodded. I took off down the street, trying in vain to spot my oldest son in the growing crowd. I followed along with the throng a couple of blocks, growing angrier with each step at that wayward, headstrong, determined, aggravating son of mine. And at his little brother. The mindless herd of people rounded a corner then ground to a halt. I actually bumped into the two people in front of me before I could stop. But no one seemed to notice. And then I saw HIM.

At first I wasn’t sure what I was looking at. A squad of Roman soldiers was escorting a prisoner down the center of the thoroughfare on his way to be crucified, their weapons at the ready. I had seen victims of a Roman scourging before, but never had I seen anything like this. One couldn’t even be sure it was a man. I was revolted. I gagged, and had to hold back my vomit. I wanted to run away as fast as I could but my feet were glued to the paving stones. I was appalled, fascinated, horrified, all at the same time. I felt pity, revulsion, I wanted to help and I wanted to disappear... I had never felt such conflicting emotions in my life.

The horror I witnessed is nothing I can describe, nor would I try if I thought I could. As was the custom, he was dragging his own cross down the street, barely standing under the awful burden. He stumbled and almost fell beneath the terrible weight. *Then he looked at me.* His eyes met mine and I felt myself begin to melt. The pressing crowd around me seemed to vanish. The hubbub dwindled to nothing. It was only him and me, now. He looked right through me, straight into my soul. In His eyes I saw love, such love as I had never seen or felt come from another human being. Love, and pity for *me*. How could anyone in such a deplorable situation have pity for *anyone else*? I burned with an indescribable fire. The encounter lasted only a couple of seconds, but it seemed to span my entire lifetime. Then He looked away and I recovered enough of my strength to begin to melt back into the crowd.

Again He stumbled and this time the crossbar of the cross struck the paving stones with a bone-jarring thud. One of the guards must have noticed the momentary eye

contact between the two of us. He said, in a rough attempt at Aramaic, “You, give some help here!”

At first I wasn’t sure he was talking to me, but when he thrust his dreadful looking javelin my direction his intention was clear.

“Jump, you Hebrew swine. I said get over here and help.” Though his Aramaic was rough, the epithet he spat with practiced ease.

I moved timidly toward the awful scene. I hated myself for cowering before this Roman. I had never cowered before anyone in my life, but there was something so very intimidating in the whole mess. I sidled up to the cross and put my shoulder under it. I felt His breath on my cheek and heard Him sigh as the weight was transferred to my body. How He had managed to drag it this far in His condition was more than I could understand. I am not by any means a small or weak man, and the dreadful weight of the spiteful thing was difficult for me to manage. I moved forward, the cross dragging roughly over the stones. He tried to speak, but I couldn’t bear to hear His words and just shook my head. A croak issued from His parched lips, but nothing more.

I hadn’t taken more than a few steps when I glanced sideways toward the crowd and saw my two sons standing there, mouths agape. Just as I had expected, Rufus had not obeyed my order to remain at the inn. They obviously did not understand what they were seeing; their father beneath a cross, the most despised of all Roman inventions. They seemed confused, lost, on the verge of attacking the soldiers. I somehow was able to say quietly to them, “It’s okay. It will be okay.”

I didn’t know myself just what I meant by that, but it was what came out at the time.

The guards led us down the street and around a corner, up the El Wad Road. We went out of the city at the Fish Gate and turned up the hill toward The Skull. As we started up the hill He leaned on me for balance. When His hand touched my shoulder I felt a surge of renewed strength. I suddenly felt as though I could run up the hill, pulling that awful cross behind me. I breathed in deeply and trudged on.

III

As we plodded up the hill I deliberately forced out of my mind visions of what would happen when we got to the top. Already I could hear the pounding of hammers and the grunts and moans of some other poor soul, victim of the Roman sense of justice. We arrived at the top of the hill and I dropped my burden. It fell flat on the ground with a thud. Several of the Romans roughly pushed me aside and grabbed Him by the arms. If they expected a struggle, they were disappointed. I am not one to assign Scripture to situations, but I could not help thinking of the place where it says He was “led as a lamb to the slaughter.” They tried to be rough with Him, but He was so compliant that they couldn’t. He LAID DOWN on the cross and spread His arms, opened His hands for them to drive the spikes through. Which they did. I shan’t shock you with the horrifying details. If you have ever witnessed a crucifixion you don’t need them. If you haven’t, you don’t want them.

As it turned out, there were two others being executed that day. Roughly drawn placards were nailed to the top of each of their crosses, telling the world of their transgressions. On one was scrawled “THIEF”. On the other was “ROBBER”. On His had been written, in a somewhat neater, more elaborate hand, “KING OF THE JEWS”.

One at a time, the crosses thudded down into the holes that had been dug for them. When they struck bottom I was sure that the spikes holding the men’s bodies to the wood would tear through and they would fall to the ground. But the spikes held. I heard Him grunt when His cross was dropped into its hole. Again He looked at ME. With love and *pity* in His eyes. Then His gaze moved slowly around the jeering, chanting crowd. He spoke the first words I had heard Him say. The crowd hushed as He began to speak. Obviously everyone expected some sort of protest, or curse, or something. They certainly didn’t expect what they heard.

Between gasps, in a gruff whisper, barely audible, He said, “Father...forgive them. They do not know...what they are doing.”

My sons had followed the grizzly procession and now stood beside me, one on each side. They stood there, looking bewildered. Rufus sucked in his breath, started to say something, then either decided better of it or could not find words to say.

Some men and a few women gathered near the foot of the cross. The women were weeping bitterly and the men wore anguished expressions. One of the women reached to touch Him as He hung there, but a Roman soldier pushed her back with the butt of his spear. She wailed aloud.

Another of the soldiers rebuffed the first and said in their coarse Italian language, “*Non lo fermi. Non puo vedere come loro lo adorranno tanto?*” Which is to say, “Don’t stop her. Can’t you see how much they loved him?” He then motioned her forward. She fell on her knees and grasped His bleeding feet. One of the men who had been with the women went to her and placed a consoling hand on her shoulder.

Again He spoke, in a gravelly groan. “Son, behold your mother. Woman, behold your son.” I had no clue what He was talking about, but those whom I had decided must be some of His followers seemed to get some significance out of it.

Suddenly the earth shook with the most violent tremor I had felt in quite some time. A number of the people there actually fell to the ground. It was only by holding one another up that my sons and I remained erect. Clouds covered the sun and a frigid wind blew. It grew dark and silent for quite some time. I don’t know how long we stood there, but after a while the clouds slowly receded and the sun came out again. The wind abated and it grew warm once more.

He cried out loudly, in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I was so confused. Was this man the Messiah? I was beginning to think that maybe He was. But, then, if He was, why was He saying God had forsaken Him? Wasn’t He the prince of Heaven? Couldn’t He call down armies of angels to help Him?

My reverie was interrupted when in the quietest voice He said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Then after a moment more, “It is finished.” And He died.

The women began wailing again and rushed forward to touch Him. The Romans made half an effort to hold them back, then relented. I heard one of them say to another, again in Italian, in an awe-inspired whisper, “*Certamente, questo e il figlio di Dio.*” “Surely, this is the Son of God.”

“Simon?” I heard a familiar voice speak my name quietly. I felt as if I were in a dream. I turned slowly, dazedly, to see who was talking to me. At first I didn’t see anyone I recognized.

“Simon, it *is* you, my old friend.” My eyes focused on the familiar face, but my mind was reeling. It responded slowly as I recognized the speaker.

“Joseph,” I said slowly. He embraced me and we kissed each other on both cheeks. “How are you?” I asked, regaining some of my composure.

“I am well,” he replied, a grim expression on his face. He took me by the arm and led me a little distance away. “We have much to talk about,” he said, quietly, “but not here. I am so glad to see you. When did you get to Jerusalem?”

“A couple of days ago. I am selling some of my properties here.”

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

I told him the name of our inn, and he said he would meet me there after the Sabbath and we could have a good visit.

“I have something to take care of right now, but I will talk with you later,” he said, and turned back toward the group of people around the cross.

“Tomorrow is the Sabbath,” I heard him say, “and it is getting late. We must take Him down. Do you have a place to lay Him?”

One of the women spoke, her voice trembling. “We have no money to buy a tomb...” She broke down, sobbing bitterly, and fell to the ground.

The man to whom He had and said “Son, behold your mother” knelt beside her and put his arm around her. He looked up to Joseph and said, “I don’t know what we are going to do.”

Joseph said, “I have recently had a tomb cut for myself. We can lay Him there ‘til we decide something. I will ask permission to take Him down, if that is okay.”

The other man just nodded. The woman on the ground whispered, “Thank you.”

The boys and I started back to our inn. As we walked Alexander spoke in a reverential tone I had never heard from him before.

“Is He the Promised One?” he asked.

I could tell he felt trepidation at asking me the question that was on all our minds. He knew I didn’t have much patience with religious talk, especially of the Messiah and this Jesus character. I stopped walking. The boys’ momentum carried them on half a step, then they came back even with me. I looked at them both, put my arms around them, and said quietly, “I don’t know.”

As we walked along I kept my arms around them, pulled them even closer. They weren't accustomed to me being so close and were not quite sure exactly why I was suddenly showing this unexpected affection. To be completely honest, neither was I. Rufus made a false start at saying something. After a few moments walking in silence he finally said, "Papa, what about that guy you're supposed to meet with about the houses?"

That was the farthest thing from my mind at the moment. I shook my head to clear the fog.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Maybe he will come to see us today, before his Passover meal."

Visions of His blood flowing down upon the wood of the cross kept coming into my mind. There was some significance there, I felt sure, but I couldn't figure out what. The horror of the spikes through His hands and feet... The look of pain and pity on His face... His words of forgiveness... "A lamb to the slaughter..." I wanted to scream! As I have said, I have witnessed crucifixions before, but none of them ever affected me this way. Again the blood flowing down over the wood. And then we were at the inn. I shook my head once more as we turned in to the gate.

"Are you alright, Papa?" Alexander asked.

I looked at him and made myself smile. "Yes," I said, "I am okay."

As we entered the inn, the innkeeper raised his hand in greeting from across the room. "Nicodemus came by a little while ago to see you," he said, coming over. "He said he will be back in a few minutes. He seemed quite anxious to meet with you."

"Thank you," I replied. I wasn't quite sure I was up to meeting with him right now, but this would be the last chance for two days, until after the Sabbath. "We will be in our room."

We went up and washed up in silence. The boys knew something was weighing heavy on my mind, and didn't want to disturb me. After a few minutes the innkeeper knocked on our door and said, "Nicodemus is here now, if you could come down."

I opened the door and motioned for the boys to follow me.

Downstairs Nicodemus was waiting along with two other men I didn't recognize, looking rather grave. "I thought we should get our business dealt with this afternoon so

you can get started back home, or get on with whatever plans you might have,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to keep you waiting two more days.”

“Thank you,” I said, shaking his hand and motioning him toward the sitting area. I tried to smile. “These are my two sons Alexander and Rufus.”

He nodded a greeting toward them and we all sat down. “I took the liberty of bringing my accountant and attorney along with me,” he said. “Now, you have received my offer for the two properties?”

“Yes, I have,” I replied. I *really* didn’t feel up to this today.

“And do you find it acceptable?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any caveats or additions you wish to add to the agreement?” he asked. His face betrayed his puzzlement at the deal going so easily.

“No,” I said. “Let’s just get it done.”

“Very well,” he replied with a sigh and a lift of the eyebrows. One of the men, whom I took to be the attorney, brought out two copies of a contract, both of which Nicodemus and I signed, then the other of Nicodemus’ men, the accountant I guessed, signed as witness. The second man spoke. “The money will be transferred to your bank first business after the Sabbath,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said feebly, and stood. The others stood too, and we shook hands again. I turned and started back to our room, leaving them standing there looking at each other in bewilderment. The boys tagged along after me. Something was missing. I felt no thrill, no sense of accomplishment, that feeling of satisfaction that I usually had after completing a business deal.

After we got to the room Alexander spoke up.

“Papa, that didn’t seem to go the way you usually do business. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” I replied, rather brusquely. “I am fine.” Then I did something I thought I would never do. I sat them down and recited to them the Passover story.

“When the Hebrew people were slaves of the Pharaoh,” I said, “Yahweh decided to free them. The Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses and would not let them leave. As part of His punishment of the captors, Yahweh told Moses He was going to send an angel

to strike dead all the firstborn in the nation. The Hebrews were to slaughter a lamb and smear its blood over the doorposts of every house so the avenging angel would know it was a Hebrew home and not smite that house. Every year as a memorial of Yahweh's grace to His people we have a special Feast on the fourteenth day of Nisan, and offer as a sacrifice an unblemished lamb."

"But we have never done that," Rufus interjected.

I closed my eyes and recited from the Scriptures just as though I had the scroll before me. "And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead. And Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, 'Rise up and get you forth from among my people, both you and the children of Israel, and go serve the Lord, as you have said. Take your flocks and herds and be gone. And bless me also.' And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste."

"We have no lamb to sacrifice," I said, "and no food for the Passover meal. I didn't even bring any of the Scriptures to read from. I can't believe that I actually remember it that clearly, but somehow I felt it was important that I tell you about it."

"Papa," Alexander said, with something like enlightenment in his eyes, "*He* was the sacrifice."

"What?" I asked, looking at him slowly.

"Jesus. On the cross. His blood on the wood. The Scriptures say He would be the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. *He* was the Passover lamb." Tears welled up in his eyes. "We witnessed it today."

Rufus looked from one to the other of us. He expected me to deliver a sharp rebuke at being lectured about the Scriptures by Alexander. I found tears trickling down my own cheeks. Then I had to laugh. Poor Rufus looked so confused!

IV

Next morning I woke the boys earlier than usual. I had us all don our skullcaps and we went to Temple for the Sabbath. I hadn't been in worship services for so long that I couldn't remember the last time. It felt both strange and warmly familiar at the same time. The wizened old men at the front with their long beards and their hair pulled back behind their heads, the sounds of people shuffling in. The rigid formality of the ceremonies starting the day. The smell of the incense. I definitely felt out of place, with my Greek hairstyle and no beard. All the other men had beards and long hair with their fetlocks hanging from the sides of their heads.

My boys had never been exposed to all this. At times they both were wide-eyed, taking it all in. At other times they squirmed with the boredom of the rituals. When the Scriptures were read Alexander sat leaning forward, focusing, absorbing every word. I had never seen him so captivated by them.

I recognized Nicodemus on the platform at the front. He stood and picked a scroll from the rack. He read from the Psalms, "But you, O Lord, will endure for ever; all generations shall remember You. You shall arise and have mercy upon Zion, for the set time is come. For your servants take pleasure in her stones and favor her dust. So the heathen will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth Your glory. When the Lord shall build up Zion He shall appear in His glory."

He looked out over the congregation and paused as though he wanted to say more. He took a deep breath, then replaced the scroll and sat down.

After a little while the time was opened to the congregation for any of the learned men who wanted to read. My old friend Joseph went forward and looked the rack of scrolls over. After a moment he chose one and unfurled it. "He is despised and rejected of men," he read, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and we hid our faces from him. He was despised, and we did not value him. Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities. Yet he did not open his mouth. He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep is dumb before its shearers, so he opened not his mouth."

With this some of the elders there began to hiss and wave their hands at Joseph to leave the podium. He stared back at them defiantly until Nicodemus came forward and took him by the arm. He led Joseph away from the podium and back down to the pews. They whispered something to one another and then Joseph gathered up his cloak and left the Temple in a huff.

After the reading of Scripture there was a break in the ceremonies. The boys and I went outside and stretched our legs for a few minutes until I met an old friend of my father and we started talking. Alexander and Rufus found nothing of interest to them in our conversation and wandered off on their own. Ordinarily, the boys disappearing in this crowd of religious people would have annoyed me, but somehow today I didn't mind.

My father's old friend was named Jacob. Jewish law forbade us talking about business on the Sabbath, so our conversation stayed pretty innocuous for a while. Then in a conspiratorial tone Jacob said to me, "So, what do you think about this Jesus they crucified yesterday?"

"I don't know much about Him," I replied. "We don't get a lot of news from up this way in Cyrene. To be honest, I am somewhat confused. He claimed to be the Messiah, right?"

"Well, basically He let people pretty much form their own opinions. He did say that He was the Son of God, but then He said we are all sons of God. The Messiah is supposed to be our new King and free us from bondage and slavery. Jesus is dead, so I don't see how it could be Him."

I still wasn't sure about everything from the previous day and what my encounter with Him meant, and I certainly wasn't going to bring it up with someone I didn't know any better than an old friend of my father. I only hoped that he hadn't seen me with Jesus and wouldn't start asking me questions about all that. And I suddenly realized that this was the first time I had thought of Him by name.

"This bar Abbas fellow they released for the Passover is talking about starting up another rebellion," Jacob went on. "And some of Jesus' followers are saying the trial was illegal, being held at night and in secret. I hear they are even talking about rebelling against the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin has issued a decree against any of His disciples

meeting together. They have gone so far as to make an edict against anyone even talking about Him.”

I said, “We sure don’t want another rebellion. Pilate would love to have a reason for another Jewish massacre. It’s only been three years since he slaughtered all those Galileans right here in the Temple courtyard. Sounds to me like it’s about time for me and my boys to head back to Cyrene and get as far away from here as we can.”

Just then a priest announced resumption of the ceremonies. I bade Jacob farewell and returned to my seat. Alexander and Rufus were nowhere to be seen. The rest of the day was a blur of activity, barely catching my attention. I was lost in thought. I couldn’t get the visions from the previous day out of my head. Why would the religious hierarchy issue such an edict as not to even talk about Jesus? Wasn’t He just another troublemaker? Again I saw the blood flowing down on the wood.

Soon the Sabbath ceremonies came to an end and I began to search for my two wayward sons. After a while I spotted them in the Court of the Israelites seated on a bench with a couple of rough looking fellows. I could tell by their garb that they were Galileans. They were almost fat and had long straggly hair and unkempt beards. My two boys saw me at the same time that I saw them. Rufus looked down sheepishly, but Alexander waved at me grinning from ear to ear. I walked quickly over to them.

“Papa,” Alexander began, “this is...”

“Let’s get going, boys,” I interrupted, brusquely. “It’s time for us to head back home. We need to start back tomorrow. Let’s get back to the inn and start packing.”

“But...” Alexander started to say.

“No argument,” I said. “Your mother will be worrying about us soon. We were supposed to have left Jerusalem two days ago. We need to leave tomorrow.”

They both looked at me confused.

“Let’s go!” I said when they were slow getting up.

They both stood quickly and said farewell to their newfound friends. They all hugged each other warmly and we headed out of the courtyard at a brisk walk. The boys were both in a huff all the way back to the inn. Maybe I was a little rough on them in front of their friends, but I had no intention of staying in Jerusalem another day. Big trouble was brewing, and I just wanted to get out of there. Back to the sweet life.

Once we were back in our room I said, “Who were those two men you were talking with back there?”

Alexander said, “They were James and John, sons of Zebedee from Capernaum.”

“The fish merchant?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Rufus spoke for the first time, almost cheerfully. “Do you know him?”

“I know of him,” I replied. “He has quite a business in fish. He owns several boats and a couple of markets up in Capernaum.” I was glad for the opportunity to talk to them even a little bit about business. In my heart I actually hoped that had been the topic of their conversation with Zebedee’s boys. I knew his sons were very much involved in their business. They had the reputation, though, of being loud and rough characters, and I had heard that they had been in more than their share of fights.

“He even sells a lot of fish here in Jerusalem,” I went on. “I hear his sons can be trouble, though. Couple of real rabble rousers.”

Rufus laughed at that, for some reason, and looked at his brother as if they had some secret joke.

Then Alexander said, “I guess they’ve changed. They said Jesus had a nickname for them. He teased them and called them ‘sons of thunder’. They were two of His disciples.”

“Oh, great!” I exclaimed. “Just great. Do you know what you have gotten into? There is real trouble brewing here, and you have just stepped right into the middle of it. If you two had obeyed me when I told you not to go running off after that crowd yesterday we wouldn’t be in any of this mess. What am I going to do with you? Alexander, you especially. You are the oldest. You are supposed to set an example for Rufus. You know he would follow you anywhere.” Rufus squirmed under my onslaught. Alexander just looked hurt and confused.

“Now we are right in the middle of a real mess waiting to happen,” I ranted on. “We would have been gone yesterday if you had listened to me. Now, let’s get down to dinner and then we will start packing. I want to be gone right after breakfast in the morning.”

The two boys glanced at each other meaningfully then went to wash up.

V

We had our dinner in silence then went up to start packing. After a little while there was a knock at the door and the innkeeper said, "Excuse me for bothering you, but there is a man here who wishes to see you."

"Who is it?" I asked, in a not-too-friendly tone.

"He says his name is Joseph and that he is a friend of yours."

"We will be right down," I replied. I had forgotten all about Joseph saying he would come visit after the Sabbath. Even if I had thought about it I would have thought he meant tomorrow, not tonight.

When we got downstairs Joseph was there, but with none of the usual good humor I knew him to have. We greeted one another with a kiss on the cheek and he said hello to the boys, and then we all sat down. He looked at me warmly and managed a smile.

"It's been a long time, Simon. How have you been?"

"I am well, thank you," I answered. "Business is booming. The family is healthy. What more can a man ask for?"

"The boys have sure grown up," he said, stealing a glance at Alexander and Rufus. "How's your dear wife?"

"Miriam is wonderful, as always," I said. "She was sick some last year, but she seems to be doing much better."

"Oh, nothing serious I hope," Joseph said with genuine concern.

"No," I said, "just something with her stomach. But she got over it."

"Good, I'm glad she is doing well now," he said. "How about the other kids?"

"Joseph, you wouldn't recognize them. They grow so fast. You and Ruth really should come down and visit sometime. Miriam talks about Ruth often."

"Maybe we will soon. Simon," Joseph said, in a quieter tone of voice, and moving a little closer on the couch, "a lot has happened around here lately, and I don't know how much of it you know about."

"Not much," I interrupted. "We don't get much news from here, and honestly what we do get I don't pay much attention to."

"Have you heard much about Jesus?" he asked, glancing uncomfortably in the innkeeper's direction.

“Well, He sure seems to be the talk of the town. Frankly, I haven’t, and I am not sure I want to,” I said, with a sigh. But part of me wanted to in the worst way.

“Well,” Joseph said, steeling himself for some inner task, “you are going to anyway. Simon, I was a good friend of your father, and I like to think you and I are friends, too.”

“Of course we are!” I butted in again.

“I hope we can remain so,” he went on, undaunted. “There are things I want you to know about.” He seemed to be trying to figure out how to say whatever it was he wanted to get across. He leaned closer yet and spoke even more quietly. The boys leaned in to hear better. “Jesus was undeniably the Messiah.”

I started to interrupt again, but he held up a hand and said, “Please, just hear me out. I spent a lot of time with Him and His disciples. He wanted me to join them, but I just couldn’t leave my business and family. He said He understood and that there would be something else I could do for Him later that no one else would be able to do. When I asked what that was, He just said that I would see. Well, ultimately, I did see.” I thought for a moment that he was going to break down and cry. He regained his composure and went on. “I don’t understand how His death fits into the grand plan, but He just said to trust Him. He knew He was going to die, and when, and how. He talked about it several times, but when anyone would ask about it He would just say we would all understand when the time came.”

Joseph could see the look of doubt and consternation on my face. He glanced at the boys, as did I, and saw they were smiling from ear to ear and about to burst with excitement. I could tell Alexander wanted to say something, but he knew better than to interrupt adults talking. Seeing their apparent acceptance of his words, Joseph seemed to relax a little.

“All the prophecies of the Messiah fit,” he said. “There is a Samaritan woman who claims that He told her plainly that He was the Messiah. He worked miracles that no prophet or magician could ever do.” His voice shifted into an almost pleading tone, as if it was important that he convince me. “I saw you at Sabbath services. Did you hear the scripture that I read?” I nodded. “Right there it tells us that He would die without resistance or complaint. Simon, I certainly don’t understand it all, but I have no doubt

that we saw the arrival of the Messiah and then killed Him.” Tears began to flow down his cheeks. “But, somehow, it was all part of the Prophecy, part of the Plan.” He wiped his cheeks, sighed and sat back on the couch.

“I don’t know, Joseph,” I said after a moment of reflection. “There have been so many false prophets and false messiahs. Every year it seems that another one crops up. It hasn’t been three years since that one they called the Baptist. Everyone was sure he was The One. And look at what it got him. They beheaded him and now they have crucified this one. I just don’t know.” My demeanor changed. I grew more determined and certain. “What I do know is that this place is about to blow up, and I want to be gone before it happens. I just want to get my boys back to Cyrene where we won’t be affected by any of this.”

My voice said one thing, and yet my heart yearned for another. And I didn’t even know what it yearned for.

He stood, shrugged as if he had nothing more to say, or had more to say but didn’t know how to say it, and reached out a hand to me. I stood and took his hand in mine.

He looked into my eyes as if there was more, then said, “I wish you Godspeed, Simon. I hope your travels are safe and quick. Please tell Miriam hello for me.”

Then he hugged me and kissed me on both cheeks. Without another word he turned and left. I looked after him, but from the corner of my eye I saw the two boys hugging and grinning and practically jumping for joy. About what I didn’t know, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to ask.

VI

Next morning the boys and I went down to the bank to confirm Nicodemus' deposit. After that we headed to the tariff collector to see if he knew of a caravan headed toward Joppa or one of the other coastal cities where we could find a ship sailing to Cyrene. He told us there was one leaving later in the day for Appolonia. He told me where to meet them and I thanked him and left.

I wasn't real happy about going to Appolonia. I would have preferred Joppa because I knew a number of people there and could get passage to Cyrene more cheaply than at Appolonia. But I wanted to get us out of Jerusalem without another day's delay. So we hoisted our bags and went off to find the caravan.

We finally found them and arranged to join them. The caravan consisted of some dozen camels, laden with goods going to the coast, and about a hundred pilgrims heading back to their homes after spending the Passover in Jerusalem. We were told that they would be leaving in about an hour, so we just had time to go get some lunch. I had been so preoccupied throughout the morning that I really hadn't paid much mind to the boys' demeanor. Now, while we were eating and I had time to notice, it occurred to me that they hadn't said much to me all morning. They had talked some, quietly, among themselves, as if they had some grave secret. Part of me itched to know what it was. Part of me wanted desperately *not* to know.

We left Jerusalem via the Tower Gate near Herod's palace and set out on a four-day journey. The caravan was to stop at Amasa, Emmaus, and Adida along the way to pick up more goods headed for the coast. We could have made better time just the three of us, but it was much safer to travel these wilderness highways with a caravan. Four days felt like a long time to get to the sea where we could get passage home, but at least we would be getting away from Jerusalem and all that I was sure was going to happen there. As we left the towering walls of the Holy City behind us I was relieved, but at the same time I wanted to go running back as fast as I could.

We stopped at Amasa that afternoon and the caravan took on what cargo awaited it there. Then we went on. The road was straight as an arrow all the way to Emmaus, but we only made fifteen miles before sundown and stopped for the night. Camp was pitched and we settled down for the evening. I napped for a while and when I awoke the boys

were nowhere in sight. Part of the cost of passage with the caravan included meals, and just as I sat down to eat with a large group of other travelers Alexander and Rufus came into the camp.

“I knew you would show up when you smelled dinner,” I said, trying not to show my irritation at them disappearing like that. I wanted them to be independent, but at the same time I was nervous when they were out of my sight. Especially in unfamiliar countryside. They laughed and tried to show good humor. Something was definitely strained between us since their encounter with those boys of Zebedee. I didn’t like it, but maybe it was just part of them finding their own wings. This was, after all, the first time they had been away from home and their mother and all the other things of their youth. They were becoming men now, and I must get used to the idea. And so must they.

As dinner progressed and the evening went on things warmed a little between them and me.

“You know,” I finally said, when I felt I could do it calmly, “you really shouldn’t go off away from the caravan like that out here. There are all kinds of dangers. Snakes, bandits, you could get lost and not be able to find your way back.”

“Papa,” Alexander replied, “with this big bunch of people and all the animals and the fire, I doubt very much we would have a hard time finding it from fifty miles away.”

“No argument!” I said, more sternly. “I want you to stay close ‘til we get to Appolonia and board the ship.”

“Yes, Papa,” he said.

“You hear me, Rufus?” I asked.

“Yes, Papa,” he echoed.

I couldn’t help but smile. I think he really would follow his big brother off a cliff.

For the next three days the boys didn’t leave the camps or wander away from the caravan. I did notice, though, that they seemed to find other boys of various ages near their own to visit with as we traveled along. This, too, was different from when we had traveled to Jerusalem. On that portion of our sojourn they had stayed close to me and didn’t seem to have much interest in finding new friends. All the way to Appolonia they didn’t talk to me much, and I was not wont to pry. I thought, though, that I saw them off by themselves praying a couple of times. Finally we arrived at Appolonia.

VII

First thing I did was find an inn where we could have a bath and a bed to sleep in for at least one night before I set out to find a ship sailing to Cyrene. We had been away from home less than two weeks but it seemed a lifetime since I had kissed my dear Miriam goodbye. It was middle of the afternoon when we had arrived in the harbor town, and as soon as we had settled in at the inn I decided to have a talk with the boys.

“Alexander, Rufus,” I began, “ever since we left Jerusalem there has been something different with you. You don’t seem to be talking with me very much and you are acting like you have some kind of a secret. Is there something I should know about?”

Rufus looked at Alexander and Alexander looked squarely at me. I could tell there was something.

“Well?” I prodded. “You both know I love you more than anything in the world and that you can trust me. If you’ve done something you shouldn’t have tell me and we will deal with it.”

“Papa,” Alexander replied after looking into my eyes for just a moment, “you remember that we met James and John bar Zebedee.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Oh great,” I interrupted. I could feel my anger rising. “Is this about them and that revolt everyone was talking about?”

“Not about any revolt,” Alexander said, his voice rising with emotion. “It is about Jesus. Please, just listen before you get angry.”

I forced myself to calm down.

“Papa, they told us things that we found hard to believe at first. They said they had spent three years with Him, involved in His ministry and mission. At first they thought the Messiah would lead Israel in an uprising against Rome and throw off the yoke of bondage as the prophets said He would. After some time they, all the disciples, realized that He was always talking about spiritual warfare and about being ‘born again’.”

It was hard for me not to interrupt. I wanted my son to stop all this religious nonsense. And at the same time I wanted, craved, to hear more.

Alexander went on. “He told all of them that they would carry on His mission after He was gone. They all rebelled at the thought of Him dying, but He told them that His mission could not be completed unless He did. That even His death was prophesied.

We weren't sure about all they had told us. You have always taught us to carefully weigh anything we were told by other people and not believe just anything without careful consideration and slow judgement."

My chest swelled just a little at that.

"Then your friend Joseph from Arimathea came to visit the night before we left. All that he told you fit in so well with what they had told us. Papa, we are convinced," he stole a quick look at his brother, "that Jesus was, is, the Messiah." He could see me about to butt in. "Wait, please. While we were at Amasa with the caravan some relatives of some people in the caravan caught up to it and told them that Jesus was alive. Of course, we didn't believe them because we saw Him die. They said He had risen from the grave. It was about then that the caravan was ready to start moving, and we dismissed all they had said as rumors. Then while we were at Emmaus some more people came to us and told us the same thing. They said that when some of His disciples had gone to Joseph's grave to prepare the body and move it to a permanent grave He was gone. After that He was seen several places in and around Jerusalem by lots of people."

I didn't know what to believe. It was impossible. As Alexander had said, we watched Him die. People didn't just go walking around after they died. I was speechless, which I didn't like a bit. Finally I found my voice.

"This is nonsense," I said. But my heart disagreed. "This is nonsense," I repeated. "It is all just some kind of rumor those dissidents who want to start a revolution have cooked up to get people riled up. They want to start something they can not finish. The Romans have put an end to many such attempts, and never with results that were good for the Hebrew people. You would do well to forget all about it. Tomorrow we will be onboard a ship headed for Egypt where this can all be put behind us. When it all blows up here we will be safe and snug in our own little world far away from it all."

I hoped my speech sounded more convincing than I felt. I could see Alexander steeling himself for something more. I suddenly felt afraid to hear whatever it was.

"Papa," he took a deep breath. "Papa, I am going back."

I just looked at him dumbly. He went on.

"James and John told us that we can know the Father without having to have some priest intercede." He could see me about to lose control. "Please, Papa, just listen.

Rufus and I have been praying. A lot. I know I am meant to be part of Jesus' mission. Don't ask me how, I just know it. I am going back to Jerusalem and join His disciples."

That really threw me. Praying? Alexander and Rufus? I thought I had seen them a couple of times, but "a lot"? I felt as if I had been hit.

"You are not going back to Jerusalem," I shouted. Both the boys jumped. It was not like me to shout. "What nonsense are you talking about? No, don't even answer that! You are going to Cyrene with me and your brother." Rufus started to say something but I cut him off with a glare.

"What are you talking about?" I said again. I couldn't find words. I stammered, then came out with, "You would be walking into trouble like you have never known. You don't know what it will be like there when this thing blows up. The Romans will be killing Hebrews in the streets." Now I was pacing as I ranted. "That is the end of it, and I don't want to hear any more about Jesus or any of it."

"Papa," Alexander grew almost placid. "I love and respect you. You know that. I would never do anything against your wishes. But I am of legal age now, and technically I can do what I want. I am supposed to go to Jerusalem and join the disciples. That is what I am going to do. I would like to do it with your blessing."

He was right. He was of legal age. I had known it would come some day soon, but I certainly didn't expect it like this. I could see I was losing my sway over him. He was answering a higher call, responding to a higher authority.

I tried a different tack.

"What about your mother?" I said. "She's waiting for all of us to come back home. You will break her heart."

"Somehow, I don't think so," he replied calmly. "I think she will understand. I think Yahweh will help her. And you. It is what He wants me to do."

That rankled me. "You dare to tell me what you think Yahweh will do? Since when do you have His ear? Only the priests have a link to Him." What was I talking about? I had never talked to the kids about Yahweh. I wasn't even sure what I believed about Him and His almighty ways.

Through all of this Rufus sat and looked from one to the other of us. He was decidedly uncomfortable. This was the first real confrontation between me and either of

the boys. I could tell Rufus couldn't decide whose side he was on. But right now he was not my main focus.

"Papa," Alexander said calmly, "I am going back tomorrow. Please, send me with your blessing."

I looked at him for a moment. Then I said, "I can not, will not give my blessing to something so foolhardy, so dangerous as what you are talking about. You don't even *know* what you are talking about. No. That is the end of it."

"I wish it could be different from this," he said. He stood and walked toward the door. "I will be back later to get my things and say goodbye."

"Alexander," I said, sternly. He walked out the door. As it closed behind him I shouted, "Get back here! Get back here right now." The door closed gently.

I stood there stupefied. Rufus looked at me. I could see tears welling up in his eyes.

"It will be okay," I said, sitting beside him and putting my arm around his shoulders. "He will be back. He's becoming an adult and just stretching his wings."

"It's not that, Papa," Rufus said. I looked at him. "I want to go with him."

"No!" I jumped up. "Absolutely not! Alexander is of legal age, but you are not. Not yet. And until you are you will do as I tell you!"

"Papa, we both feel that Yahweh has spoken to us in the last couple of days. We think it was no coincidence us meeting James and John. Yahweh wants us to be part of Jesus' work."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I have to go back to your mother with one less son of hers than I left with," I retorted. "Her heart will be broken enough already. I will not go back and tell her that two of her boys have taken off on some fool's mission."

He looked hurt, but I could not lose both of them to this foolishness.

"Now, let's just calm down here a little bit," I said, "and try to relax. Alexander will realize his error and be back before dinnertime."

But he wasn't. Rufus and I had dinner in the inn in silence. After we had eaten I said to Rufus, "Let's go for a walk. The evening is cool and the breeze coming in off the sea will do us some good."

I wanted to patch things up with him, to make up for losing my temper earlier. As we walked I put my arm around him. I was astounded to realize that Rufus was nearly as tall as I was, broad shouldered and sturdy. He felt solid. He, too, was no longer a boy. We stood near one of the piers looking out over the water.

“Son,” I said, finally, “I hope you can understand. Your mother and I love you both so much. This is a dangerous time to be in Jerusalem, and being involved with any of Jesus’ followers is even more dangerous. If anything at all ever happened to any of you children your mother and I would both just be destroyed. I have done all I could to protect all of you from all this religious nonsense. Now, by bringing you to Jerusalem I have exposed you to real danger.”

“But, Papa,” Rufus interrupted, “you carried His cross. You were close to Him. You heard the things He said as he hung there. You even told us about the Passover and took us to the Temple for the Sabbath. Didn’t all that mean something special to you? Didn’t it mean that there is *something* to all this ‘religious nonsense’?”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt tears forming in my eyes. I tried to stop them but they flowed freely down my cheeks. I don’t think any of my children had ever seen me cry. Rufus looked confused.

I wiped inately at the tears and said, “Honestly, son, I don’t know. I don’t know what it all means. I don’t know why I was there that day. I don’t know why that Roman picked on me to carry that damnable cross. I just wish it had never happened. What I do know is that I am taking you back to your mother. Then if Yahweh has some great plan for you He will have to deal with her over it. And good luck to Him.” That made Rufus laugh.

When we got back to the inn Alexander was in our room waiting. I thought with joy for a moment that he had changed his mind, then I saw his bag setting beside the door.

“So you are actually going to go through with this,” I said, with a sigh.

“Yes, Papa,” Alexander replied. “I have to.”

I could see that he was torn, but resolute in his decision.

“In that case,” I said, looking deep into his eyes, “go with my blessing. And with my prayers for your safety. Please be so careful and stay away from the Romans and

away from the Temple.” I knew it was silly to say that because Alexander would go wherever and do whatever he felt the Lord was leading him to.

He smiled and said, “Thank you, Papa.”

“You will need money,” I said with a sigh. I took my moneybag, poured it out on the bed and sorted out half of what was there. I put half back in the bag and handed it to him. “If you need anything at all, please let us know.” He smiled again. He seemed so at peace.

He turned to Rufus and looked at him for a moment. “I will see you soon, brother,” he said. I wondered what he meant by that. I didn’t want to ask. He hugged Rufus and kissed him on both cheeks. That was the first time I had seen him do that. There was no denying it; my boy was now a man. Then he gave me a big hug and kissed me on both my cheeks.

“I have to go now,” he said. “I have some friends waiting for me. We are all going back together. Goodbye, Papa. Goodbye, Rufus.” He picked up his bag and walked out the door. Tears were now streaming down Rufus’ face. I felt tears on mine, too. We hugged each other and sat on the bed. I found myself actually envying Alexander. Suddenly I remembered the weight of that cross on my shoulder, Jesus’ breath on my cheek. I saw the blood flowing down on the wood. I wanted to go running after Alexander and join in Jesus’ mission, too. I put my head in my hands.

“You okay?” Rufus asked.

I shook my head to clear the visions.

“Yes,” I said. “It will all be okay.” Then I remembered saying those words to them on that day, and I remembered not knowing why I said them or what it meant. Now I think I knew. “Let’s get ready for bed. We have to get up early tomorrow to find a ship going to Cyrene.”

Next morning we went down to the docks and had no trouble finding a ship going our way. It would be departing at noon. We arranged our passage, left our bags to be stowed and went to do some shopping. We didn’t dare return home without trinkets for Miriam and toys for the other kids. Throughout all of it my heart was heavy for Alexander. I wondered how far he had traveled in the night, how he had slept, if he had eaten, what he was thinking about. And part of me still wanted to go running after him.