

# PAUL, APOSTLE OF CHRIST

THE NOVELIZATION  
OF THE MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

A Novel by  
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Based on the Screenplay by  
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Introduction to Luke's first book:

Now many have undertaken to organize an account of the events fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us from the start by the eyewitnesses and reporters of the word. Therefore it seemed best to me also, because I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, to write for you an orderly record, most excellent Theophilus, so you may know for sure the truth of the words you have been taught.

Luke 1:1–4

Introduction to Luke's second book:

I wrote the first volume, Theophilus, about all that *Yeshua* began to do and teach—up to the day He was taken up, after He had given orders by the *Ruach ha-Kodesh* to the emissaries He had chosen. To them He showed Himself to be alive after His suffering through many convincing proofs, appearing to them for forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Acts 1:1–3

CHAPTER  
ONE

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**The Seventh Day of Junius**

The hooded man darted into a niche in the dark alley, his heart pounding against his sternum. His ears, tuned to catch the slightest sound, warned him of approaching footsteps—*heavy* footsteps, accented by the metallic scrape of sword hilts against iron buckles.

The Greek pressed his spine into the recess in the aged wall, willing its shadows to cloak him. He could not be caught in this part of the city without a valid reason for venturing near Nero’s prison. Not even his medical bag would suffice as an explanation, since the only residences in this part of Rome were the former palaces of Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula.

He drew back, the wall biting into his shoulder blades, as two members of the Praetorian Guard moved through a nearby puddle of torchlight and continued on their way. “I still say it’s a nasty business,” one Praetorian remarked. “I have seen men die in all sorts of ways, but that has to be one of the worst.”

The other man replied, but the crunch of gravel beneath their sandals obscured the rest of their conversation.

When they had turned the corner, the Greek physician held his small bag next to his chest and changed his destination to a place that would be infinitely safer.



In the heart of Rome, directly across from a monument to Julius Caesar and the famous Roman Forum, another man sat in a cavern hewn out of stone. A single candle pushed at the darkness, scattering its light over a tattered blanket, an empty bowl, an overturned stone cup. The man's toes, riding above misshapen and callused feet, shone weakly in the gloom.

Paul, called Sha'ul by his people the Jews, closed his eyes at the all-too-familiar sight. Day after day, hour after hour, he leaned against the wall of his windowless prison and stared at his toes, which had long since ceased to fascinate him. Sometimes, especially if the guards did not remember to lower the daily allowance of water and food, those wizened appendages took on the appearance of men he had known: Demas, who loved the world more than Christ; Crescens, Titus, Alexander the coppersmith, Governor Felix.

He closed his eyes, slamming the door on the images of those who had deserted him. He would rather envision beloved friends: Timothy, so young and full of righteous zeal. Priscilla and Aquila, fellow tentmakers with whom he had shared laughter and many a meal. Barnabas, his constant encourager. Aya, his sister; Avniel, his nephew. And Luke. Beloved Luke.

Keeping his eyes closed, Paul crossed his arms and smiled as the iron bracelets clanked. As far as he knew, his friends were alive . . . and still free.

*Thank you, Yeshua.* May God be praised.



Making his way past the Temple of Jupiter, Luke felt the tension in his shoulders ease. The Tiber River lay just ahead, and beyond it stood the Roman market where people did business at all hours. During the day, merchants of trade goods occupied the dilapidated booths, while vendors of another sort plied their wares after sunset. A hooded figure would not appear out of place in the crowded market, though a well-known Christian would be at risk anywhere in the city—

He flinched when a bony hand grabbed his shoulder and forcibly swung him around. “Hello, there.” A thin-faced man gave him a wide, disturbing smile. “What’s your pleasure?” He stepped closer, his breath stinking of infection and rotting teeth. “Boys or girls?”

Luke shrugged off the man’s hand and staggered away, his heart twisting at the reminder that evil lurked around every corner in this city. Rome was reported to be the greatest city in the world, but Nero’s Rome had begun to smell of decay, a rot that came from within.

That realization never failed to trouble his spirit. Influenced by the world’s greatest thinkers, artists, scholars, rulers, and military men, Rome had been home to some of civilization’s most noble men, and home as well to the most dishonorable of people. In Nero’s Rome, on any street corner a man could find beauty and perversity, generosity and stinginess, abundance and scarcity.

In the area where he walked, the walls of the buildings functioned as signboards on which public opinion was clearly—and often rudely—expressed. He read as he walked:

*Alcmaeon, Orestes, and Nero are brothers.*

*Why? Because all of them murdered their mothers.*

*Count the numerical values of the letters in Nero's name,  
And in "murdered his own mother"  
You will find their sum is the same.*

*The Palace is spreading and swallowing Rome!  
Let us all flee to Veii and make it our home.  
Yet the Palace is growing so wickedly fast  
That it threatens to gobble up Veii at last.*

His friends would undoubtedly share the news about what was currently happening in Rome, but these buildings frequently offered better reporting because they did not attempt to soften the truth.

Still, he had not come back to report on Rome. He had come to see his friends . . . if he could find them.

He walked on, heading to the appointed spot—a statue of Nero near the Tiber—and kept his back to the river so that no one could creep up on him unobserved. The moon had barely risen, but the sliver of silver cast a white beam over the trash heaped along the river's edge. Though he would wait for as long as necessary, he hoped his escort would soon appear.

A flash of light caught his eye. To his left, on the walkway atop the Servian Wall, a Praetorian passed by with a torch in his hand. Two other guards and a prisoner followed him, and the moonlight revealed bloody stripes on the prisoner's back. What was this?

The Praetorians stopped, and one of the guards shoved the prisoner down. Faint cries reached Luke's ear, and he turned away, not needing to look in order to know what was taking place. Crucifixion had been a common form of execution even before Yeshua's death, and the sight was not unusual in the city of seven hills.

Luke's stomach roiled as the man released an agonized cry. Who was this condemned prisoner, and what had he done? A thief would have his hand chopped off; for treason or murder a Roman citizen might lose his head. But crucifixion was reserved for non-Romans who had committed truly heinous crimes.

Almost against his will, his gaze drifted back to the wall. The prisoner had been nailed to a post, his arms bent and fastened above his head, his feet nailed to the base. The two Praetorians who had positioned him moved back while the third lifted a bucket and sloshed some sort of dark liquid over the man's body. The man began to shriek, and the frantic note in the sound evoked an unnatural silence. Even the insects by the river stopped churring as the torchbearer stepped forward and touched the flame to the base of the support. The hungry flames rose up quickly to lick the wood and race over the prisoner as his frenzied cry became a plea for release at any cost. . . .

Then the man fell silent. The flames settled back to consume what remained, and the insects resumed their night music.

Horror snaked down Luke's spine and coiled in his gut. What sort of new torture was this? Luke looked to the right and saw more prisoners approaching under guard. Was Nero so demented that he considered human torches an economical way to light the city? The serpentine Servian Wall was long, encircling the old city and enclosing many important palaces and temples.

"Grace be unto you."

Startled, Luke turned and stared into the eyes of another hooded man, one whose cloak had opened enough to reveal a sword of the Praetorian Guard. But this man, he knew, was a brother in Christ.

"And also to you," Luke replied, his voice trembling.

A smile flashed within the hood. “Come. I will take you to your friends. But walk several steps behind me. For both our sakes, we should not be seen together.”

Luke swallowed hard when the hooded man turned and entered a patch of darkness. Not daring to take his eyes from the broad-shouldered figure, Luke followed.



“Prisoner!”

Paul clung to the soft darkness as closely as he could, burying his head in his folded arms. He did not want to wake, did not want to lie in the dark breathing fetid air when he could experience a small measure of freedom in his dreams.

A revolting liquid assaulted his face, cruelly waking him. He sat up, sputtering and wheezing, as laughter floated down from above.

“There.” A burly guard grinned down at Paul. “Rouse yourself when we call your name.”

“My name—” Paul spat, desperately ridding his mouth of the taste of foul water—“is not *prisoner*.”

“It is now.” Grinning like a well-fed house cat, the guard walked away, leaving Paul wide awake and choking on his own stench.

He wrapped his arms around his bent knees and lowered his head. He was no stranger to prisons, but this one was the vilest, probably in the entire civilized world. Located in the heart of Rome, the centuries-old prison was comprised of two chambers of hewn stone. The ground floor consisted of one large space, occupied by the Praetorians who guarded this place and the prefect, whenever he chanced to visit. Beneath the ground floor lay the second chamber, a dungeon accessible only by way of a round opening in the stone floor of the first space.

At the moment, Paul was the only prisoner in the pit, although thousands of others had left behind tattered clothing, worn-out sandals, gnawed rodent bones, and layers of sweat, blood, and human waste.

Paul had lost count of the days he'd spent underground. His time here began following the trial, held two years after the great fire destroyed more than half the city. From his exalted golden throne, Nero listened to testimony and wept elephant tears as false witnesses spoke of seeing Paul and his followers dance before the leaping flames.

The verdict, which came from the emperor's own lips, was swift and nonnegotiable: "Paul of Tarsus, I find you guilty of arson, conspiracy, treason, and murder. You will be sentenced to die upon a date I shall set at my leisure. Until then, you shall contemplate your crimes in my prison. That is all."

A squadron from the Praetorian Guard led Paul in chains from the Forum to the prison, which was but a stone's throw away. They marched him across the ground floor and led him to the opening in the stone. "You'll like it down there," one of the guards said, his mouth curving in a predatory smile as he picked up a thick, knotted rope. "Your comrade Peter was held here before we crucified him."

When another Praetorian nudged his back with his foot, Paul sat and held the rope. He managed the descent with some difficulty, then dropped onto the filthy floor below. With a sinking heart, he had watched the rope ascend until it disappeared from sight.

How long ago had he made that descent? At least seven hundred thirty days. And although the guards occasionally pulled him up to meet with the prefect, those occasions were rare.

Dreams were Paul's only escape. Even his memories could not

compare, for many of them were as horrific as his reality. But in dreams he could walk beneath a wide sky, inhale the fragrance of sea air and fine leather, and hear the haunting cry of a hawk in flight. Sometimes he dreamed of leaning against the rough bark of a tree and closing his eyes, relishing the music of a shepherd or the snoring of friends around a makeshift campfire.

The worst thing about his prison, he often thought, was the desperate, deprived condition of his senses. In the depths of the prison, his eyes saw little but shadows, his nose inhaled nothing but stench, and his tongue tasted only thin gruel and his own rotting teeth. His hands, which had grown soft without the joy of honest labor, often swelled in the humid space, and his skin was so covered in grime that he could barely feel the texture of the stone that surrounded him.

In his dreams, Paul found release—so long as the Praetorians allowed him to sleep. Unfortunately, some of them thought it great sport to wake him in cruel and unusual ways.

Yet the guards' cruelty and the horrendous conditions in which Paul found himself were not the worst aspects of Nero's prison. More torturous by far was the knowledge that he, an apostle who had traveled hundreds of miles and spoken to thousands of people, had apparently been set on a shelf. Cast aside like an old man—which he was—and forgotten.

His own words came back on a tide of memory. *“Every competitor exercises self-control in all respects. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we do it to receive an imperishable one.*

*“So I run in this way—not aimlessly. So I box in this way—not beating the air. Rather, I punish my body and bring it into submission, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.”*

Despair pooled in his heart. He had become what he feared—

an old, weak, broken man without an audience or a purpose. He had run the race to win, but . . .

“Please,” he whispered, shutting his eyes against the sight of his awful surroundings, “one thing I ask, Yeshua—help me finish well.”



The hooded Praetorian led Luke through winding streets bordered by tall wooden buildings that appeared to be in danger of toppling with the slightest breeze. The structures in this part of the crowded city bore little resemblance to the marble-columned palaces and public buildings where he had walked earlier. The ground-floor apartments in this area were dedicated to trade and occupied by butchers, ironsmiths, woodworkers, dentists, and sculptors of household gods, while the workers and their families inhabited the upper floors.

Through open shutters Luke glimpsed life in all its many forms—people sleeping, arguing, feeding their children, plucking chickens, kneeling before their idols. Sputtering oil lamps and torches lit these buildings, reminding Luke once again that a single wayward spark could threaten the two million people who lived in the crowded city.

His escort paused at a busy intersection, and Luke made his way to the guard’s side. “Do we part here?”

Without looking at Luke, the Praetorian shook his head, then turned and walked down the Way of Triumph, the paved street over which Julius Caesar, Augusta, and Cleopatra had once ridden. Finally the guard headed toward a group of pleasant-looking villas on a hillside. Luke followed the man up a set of stairs, then through a narrow space lit by a single torch. Luke could see nothing but cascading vines and a trickling fountain,

but then his escort lifted a tapestry and exposed a rough wooden door. Taking an iron key from his pocket, he fitted it into the lock and pushed on the door. He gestured for Luke to enter.

Was this the place? Or was he stepping into a trap?

He studied the Praetorian's eyes—they were wide and as guileless as a child's. Trusting the man was not a spy, Luke drew a deep breath and ducked beneath the small doorway.

He found himself inside a courtyard garden. An air of faded gentility marked the large fountain, the remnants of a formal garden, and an intricately worked iron gate, but the space was cluttered with hammocks, small tents, and iron pots set over smoldering fires. Around those fires, on cots and sleeping mats, he saw dozens of men, women, and children, all of them eyeing him with suspicion, speaking in whispers, and instinctively huddling together.

And their faces! The eyes that rose to meet Luke's were haunted and wary, as though they could not trust even a man as harmless as he.

*Lord, how could you have allowed the sort of evil that has driven your children into hiding like this?*

“Luke!”

A woman's voice, resonant with joy, snapped through the collective anxiety like a whip. Luke spun around and saw Priscilla standing on the torchlit balcony, her lovely face alight with relief and happiness. “Stay there, I'll come down.”

She moved down the stairs with the grace of a woman half her age and drew him into a tender embrace. “Praise God! We were beginning to worry about you.”

Luke smiled. “I had to wait longer than I anticipated, but here I am. I never would have found you if your friend hadn't found me.”

Priscilla turned to the Praetorian who had served as Luke's escort. "Thank you, Eubulus. Once again you have served us well."

Two red patches appeared on the man's cheeks. "It was nothing."

"It was a gift," Priscilla said, correcting him. "We know what risks you take every time you help us."

Luke watched in silent appreciation as the imposing soldier walked into the courtyard, stopping to speak to a man and woman near one of the fires.

"Priscilla," Luke said, turning back to her, "I didn't expect to find that you had so many guests. If my presence is an imposition—"

"You are always welcome in our home." She sighed. "We didn't expect to have so many guests. Many of these families lost their homes in the fire. Others have fled the threat of spying neighbors. Still others are known to be Christians, so they dare not be seen on the streets any longer. Since they have no place else to go, and we have room . . ."

"It's good you are here."

She inclined her head toward the villa. "Come, Luke. Aquila is inside—he will be thrilled to see you."

They went up the stairs and into the house. Priscilla took Luke's bag and cloak. The man near the fire turned at the sound of footsteps, and his face brightened when he saw Luke. "Brother, you are a delight to these weary eyes."

Luke stepped forward to meet his friend's embrace. "I'm glad to see you. Thank you for making the necessary arrangements. I wasn't sure I would be allowed back into the city."

"What did you say when they questioned you?"

"I said I was a physician."

“Did they ask you to offer incense to Vesta?”

Luke grimaced. “They did not.”

“They must have been in a hurry. Or God distracted them.” Aquila gestured to a bench by the fire, inviting Luke to sit. “We do not take many chances these days. These are dangerous times.”

Luke sat, then pulled a bag of coins from his tunic. “Your letters broke the Philippian community’s heart. We took up a collection for you.” He placed the bag in Aquila’s hand. “It’s not as much as we had hoped.”

Aquila smiled. “We are grateful for every coin. Supplies and food are running low, but still, the Lord provides. And now He has provided through the Philippians.” He turned to a young boy who sat near the fire. “Tarquin? Will you take this bag to Herodion and Rufus? Ask them to put it wherever it is most urgently needed.”

The boy, who appeared to be eleven or twelve, grinned before he took the bag and sped into the courtyard.

Luke watched him go. “He seems young to be entrusted with such a responsibility.”

Aquila chuckled. “He is loyal. A Roman boy. The community took him in after his parents died in the great fire. Thousands perished during that time.” He pointed to a young man standing beside the courtyard gate. “His cousin, Cassius. He came to us after he heard what the community had done for Tarquin. He was baptized a few days later.”

Luke rose and moved onto the balcony, where he studied the faces of those milling around in the courtyard garden. “A good thing you have a large house.”

Aquila grinned. “The house is not so large, but the garden has room for many. It is just what the Lord knew we needed.”

“Everyone here can be trusted?”

Aquila’s smile broadened. “We trust God. Come, sit, you must be starving. Tell me how the church at Philippi is doing.”

“They are doing well. And thank you—I am hungry.”

“Then come to the table, brother. Priscilla has done an amazing job of feeding so many. And after you eat, if you don’t mind, we have some who are sick. If you could—”

“I can.” Luke reached for his bag. “My belly can wait.”

“None are so sick that they cannot wait until after you eat something.” Aquila squeezed Luke’s shoulder. “Let us take care of you for once. Later we will have plenty of time for you to do what you do best.”

Reluctantly, Luke let himself be led to the table.



Luke was not surprised by the illnesses he discovered among the refugees. A few women exhibited festering burns—always a problem when people and their cooking fires were crowded together—and a few children were suffering the effects of malnutrition. Several people presented wounds for him to examine—cuts, as well as infected insect and rat bites. Two babies had fevers, so Luke instructed their mothers to give them lots of water and bathe them, if possible.

He treated the afflictions he could, gave advice to those who needed to adjust their daily habits, and comforted those who were sick with worry. “Did Christ not tell us to be anxious for nothing?” he reminded them. “We are to cast our cares on Him.”

When he had finished examining all who were ill, he looked up and saw Priscilla waiting at the edge of the courtyard. “Come,” she said, smiling serenely. “The hour is late and we have more food.”

He followed her into the house, into a lamp-lit room where a table had been laid with bowls of figs, a slab of cheese, and bread. Some sort of stew simmered in an iron pot, and the delicious aroma awakened his appetite.

“I knew that simple meal of bread and cheese wouldn’t be enough,” she said, gesturing for him to sit. “Not for a man who probably hasn’t eaten all day.”

“The food smells wonderful.” He slid onto a bench. “Thank you.”

Priscilla and Aquila sat across from him. After giving thanks to God, the three of them began to eat.

“I know I have only just returned,” Luke said, breaking off a piece of the fresh bread, “but things appear to be worse than they have ever been. Rome has long been a place of debauchery and bloodshed, but darkness hangs over this city now—a darkness that was not present when I was last in Rome.”

Aquila sipped his wine, eyeing Luke over the brim of his cup. “Nero’s cruelty has worsened. He now holds regular games at the Circus Maximus. He still loves chariot races, but on days when the horses are resting, his games feature men, women, and children being torn apart by wild beasts.”

“The crowd screams for more after each exhibition,” Priscilla added, shivering. “It is horrible.”

Luke shook his head. “Evil has overtaken his soul.”

“Perhaps,” Aquila said. “But Nero says those exhibitions are intended to remind the Roman people that followers of Christ burned more than half the city to the ground.”

Luke blinked. “Does he really expect them to believe that?”

“He would like them to believe anything,” Aquila answered, “rather than know the truth.”

“And that truth is—?”

“The fires were his deliberate act,” Priscilla said.

Luke glanced from wife to husband. “Truly?”

Aquila nodded. “One of Nero’s grand plans—one he actually presented to the Senate—involved tearing down a third of the city so that he could build an elaborate series of palaces he called Neropolis. The Senate rejected his proposal, and not long afterward, fire broke out among the shops lining the Circus Maximus.”

“Fires break out in Rome every day,” Luke interjected. “And the wooden buildings are deathtraps.”

“Agreed,” Aquila said. “And many of the slums *did* burn. But the stone homes of the senators also burned—homes in the part of the city Nero wanted to destroy.”

“Gangs—organized thugs—prevented people from fighting the fires,” Priscilla added. “They threatened to torture anyone who stopped the flames.”

“The Praetorians are supposed to fight fires when necessary,” Aquila said. “Instead they remained billeted in the Castra Praetoria while the city burned.”

“I have heard,” Luke said, watching Priscilla ladle stew into a bowl, “that Nero played his fiddle while the fire raged.”

“I heard that rumor, too,” Aquila replied. “But it’s not completely true. He was in Antium when the fire began. Convenient for him, really. No one could blame him for the blaze if he was away from the city.”

“But he came back,” Priscilla said. “When the fires neared his home. The fires could not be prevented from consuming his palace, yet Nero was able to open the Campus Martius and Agrippa’s public buildings to house the impoverished people. He distributed useful supplies from Ostia and other cities, and lowered the price of corn to three sesterces per peck. He did

these things to gain the public's favor—and the ploy worked, but only until the rumors spread.”

“What rumors?” Luke asked.

Aquila snorted. “They say that on one of the nights Rome burned, Nero stood on a household stage and sang about the fall of Troy, likening the fire to that catastrophe.”

“Everyone blames him anyway,” Priscilla said, passing the stew to Luke. “Because even before the fire, he behaved as though the run-down condition of old buildings and narrow streets offended him. He lit fire to the city so brazenly that a number of former consuls caught his associates with oakum and pine brands on their properties but did not arrest them. He also desired the property of several grain storehouses, so he demolished the walls with siege machines and set fire to the inside, though the outer walls were made of stone. That fire spread and burned for six days and seven nights, prompting many in the area to take refuge around monuments or in the tombs. Many destroyed homes were owned by well-known generals who had decorated their walls with spoils from their victories. Temples burned, even those that were consecrated during the wars against Carthage and Gaul. Nero observed the fire from the tower of Maecenas and said he was ‘engrossed in the beauty of the flames.’ Then he donned the clothing of an actor and sang ‘The Fall of Illium.’”

Aquila's mouth pursed and rolled like he wanted to spit. “Nero said he would pay for the removal of corpses and debris, but he forbade anyone from combing through the remains of his own estate, as he wished to gather the spoils for himself. Then he initiated a fund for the relief of damages from the fire and forced the people to contribute, until the private citizens had almost no money left.”

“But he got what he wanted,” Priscilla added, her features hardening in a look of disapproval. “Now no one can stop his grand plan for rebuilding Rome. He has already begun his *Domus Aurea*, the grand palace. I hear it will have a park, a lake, and several palaces—”

“The lake and park are to appease the people,” Aquila interjected, “while the palaces are to reflect Nero’s glory.”

“When people think of him in years to come”—Priscilla shook her head—“I do not think they will remember his palaces. They will remember his cruelty.”

“I saw an example of that cruelty tonight,” Luke said, setting his jaw. “The Praetorians crucified a prisoner on top of the Servian Wall, then set the man afire. It looked like they were preparing to execute others.”

“It happens every night.” Priscilla’s lower lip quivered. “And those prisoners were not criminals—they were Christians. Nero proclaimed that since Christians started the fires, they will serve as torches on the Wall.”

“Why doesn’t anyone stop him?” Luke asked. “The Praetorians have removed emperors before. They engineered the assassination of Caligula, didn’t they?”

Aquila let out a sigh. “The Praetorians have not removed Nero because many of them trust the emperor and his lies. Rumors have been spread throughout the city, and those who do not understand people of the Way have no trouble believing such stories.”

Curious, Luke asked, “What kind of stories?”

Aquila tugged on his beard. “Some say, brother, that an ancient Egyptian prophecy—supposedly well known to Christians—foretold the fall of ‘the evil city’ on the day Sirius rises. Sirius rose on the nineteenth, the day the great fire began. Those who

cling to this falsehood have no trouble believing that Christians fanned the flames of the fire, hoping for the complete destruction of Rome.”

Luke’s thoughts spun in bewilderment. “Since when have Christians *or* Jews placed any faith in ancient Egyptian prophecies?”

Grinning, Aquila tipped his finger toward Luke. “Exactly. Yet those who do not know us insist that Christians are not to be trusted. They cheer Nero on and applaud his plans for rebuilding Rome. Each time a Christian dies on the Wall or at the Circus, they yell for more.”

Luke pressed his hand over his lips and stared at the stew in his bowl. “I . . . I seem to have lost my appetite.”

“I am sorry,” Aquila said. “I should not have burdened you with so much news all at once. You have been away—”

“No, I needed to know what has happened, because now I understand why Nero ruled against Paul at his trial.” Luke pressed his hand to his chest. “Now I see why so many have crowded your courtyard. How much longer can you hide so many?”

Aquila looked at his wife. “We don’t know. We are at a cross-road and yet we see no sign of this darkness being lifted. We don’t know whether we should continue here or attempt to lead the community out of Rome.”

“Where is Linus?” Luke tilted his head, remembering the gentle Roman who was a leader of the church in Rome. “Surely this is a decision for him to make.”

Aquila lowered his gaze. “We lost contact with him weeks ago. I believe he’s gone into hiding with the rest of the larger community. Their location, or even if they are still in the city . . . we simply don’t know.”

Luke rested his elbows on the table and propped his chin in his hand. He had always considered problems from a logical perspective, and surely this problem could be methodically considered and resolved. “With the threat of such great persecution, why stay in Rome?”

Priscilla gave him a rueful smile. “We are the only light left in the city. If we go, the poor and needy will suffer even worse than they do now.”

Aquila lifted his hand. “But in remaining here, we risk everyone’s lives. We have families with women and children. If we are discovered, the emperor’s Praetorians will take everyone prisoner.”

Luke sighed. “I understand. It is not an easy decision.”

Priscilla leaned toward him. “Luke, when you speak with Paul, perhaps . . .”

“Yes.” Luke nodded slowly. “He will shed light on this. I will ask Paul for his counsel—he will know what to do.”

“We would be grateful for his insight on the matter.” Aquila pushed the bowl of figs toward Luke. “And you, my friend, should eat more. You are too thin.”

Priscilla smiled in agreement. “I know you are used to hardship, but when food is available, you should take advantage. Especially when it is offered with love.”

Luke felt his reserve thaw. He had become so accustomed to being cautious and on guard; perhaps Priscilla was right. He needed to put his wariness aside and rejoice in the blessings around him.

“Thank you,” he said, taking a fig from the bowl. “Thank you for reminding me that for everything, there is a season. A time to fast, and a time to eat.”