

Chapter 16

At dawn the next day we left Beneventum and headed west along the Appian Way toward Capua and ultimately Sinuessa, a resort on the seacoast known for its salubrious hot springs—although they had brought no health to the Emperor Claudius, who was murdered there ten years earlier. Claudius had married his scheming niece Agrippina, the grand-daughter of Augustus, and according to rumor she had Claudius poisoned in a plot to ensure that her son Nero would ascend the throne instead of Britannicus, Claudius' son from his prior marriage. Her own ambition to rule from behind the scenes eventually became too much for Nero, who had her killed as well.

As our cart rambled out along the road, Peter picked up the story of Jesus' ministry with a discussion of the folly of ambition for position and glory.

“Let me tell you, Mark, of the time Jesus overheard the twelve of us debating which of us was the most important. He had just been telling us of his own impending humiliation and vindication—that the Son of Man was soon to be delivered into the hands of men, who would kill him, only to have him rise again. As incomprehensible as his statement was to us, we didn't ask him what he meant; instead, we argued amongst ourselves over which of us was worthy of leading the group after he was gone. Here was a man about to sacrifice his life, and all *we* could talk about was glorifying our own lives!

“When he asked us what we were arguing about, we were too ashamed to speak. But he knew. He sat us down, and calmly told us

that whoever aspired to be first among us must make himself last, and the servant of all. 'Many who are first shall come last, and the last shall come first,' he said.

"I pointed out to him that we had put aside everything we held dear, family and property, in order to follow him. He assured us that all who did so would receive them back a hundredfold in the present age, and be rewarded with everlasting life in the age to come. But he also cautioned us not to adopt the attitude of one who sacrifices *because* of the hope of future reward. Selflessness, humility, even suffering; these are what make one great in God's eyes, which is reward enough.

"It is such a hard thing to grasp, Mark, this new way of thinking about greatness in terms of service and humility. And we did not grasp it at first; in our prideful need for recognition and status, Jesus' measure of greatness just fostered an argument over who among us had sacrificed the most and therefore was greatest as among ourselves.

"James and John—sons of thunder that they were!—had the audacity to request that they be allowed to sit next to Jesus, one at his left and the other at his right, when he came into his glory. So great was their ambition, they wanted to be like the two angelic figures that they had seen flanking Jesus on the mountain! He challenged them, 'Do you know what you are asking? Can you drink from the same cup that I am to drink, or be baptized in the same baptism of pain as I?' They were so bold as to reply that they could indeed do so. And fools that *we* were, the rest of us were indignant at their presumptuous play for superior rank! Again, he gently reminded us that a position of preeminence required service to the needs of all. He told us, 'Be not like the scribes, who parade around in their robes and seek out public respect, taking front seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. It must not be like that with you.'"

"I take it, then, he did not grant the brothers' request?" I asked.

"He said he had no authority to do so; it was for God alone to reserve such places of honor for those He chose. But he did tell James and John that they would indeed drink from the same cup and be immersed in the same baptism as he." Peter's voice had a hint of apprehension in it. We both knew of James' fate—beheading, at the

behest of Herod. What would happen to his brother John? Or, for that matter, to the rest of the twelve who were still alive?

“Did this answer stop the debate among you?” I inquired.

“As far as who among us was greatest, yes; but arrogance is a difficult thing to tame. Rather than lose our pride and self-importance, we simply shifted its focus toward our own group of twelve as being superior to others.”

“How so?”

“Do you remember the story of Eldad and Medad, who prophesied in the camp of the Israelites when Moses and the seventy elders were gathered at the tent outside the camp—how Joshua complained to Moses that they should be stopped, and Moses rebuked him? In like manner, John complained to Jesus of someone not of our party, who was casting out demons in his name. ‘We tried to stop him, Teacher,’ he said. But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one can do such things in my name and at the same time speak ill of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.’

“I myself have learned this lesson all too slowly,” Peter continued solemnly. “In fact, there was a time when I was jealous of Paul, of the great following he had developed among the Gentiles.”

I was completely taken aback by this admission; Peter, a rock of the faith, the acknowledged leader of the original disciples of the Lord, jealous of another’s success in winning souls! It seemed so incongruous to my image of the man. “You have no cause for jealousy, Peter,” I protested. “You are as great an apostle as any; I have seen with my own eyes that you are! Why, look at what you accomplished back in Tarentum just a few days ago—and many other times before then.”

“Yet I am the *least* of the Lord’s apostles, Mark.”

“You are wrong, Peter! Indeed, Paul claimed that title for himself when he wrote to the Corinthian church, because he once persecuted the followers of the Lord.”

“Ah, yes, I have read his letter. Paul’s self-effacement makes a pretense of humility, belied by his urging the Corinthians to be imitators of himself. In any event, what he did before his conversion, he did in ignorance of the truth. But I, I who learned at the Lord’s feet and purported to serve and follow him, have committed a greater sin than persecution. In his final hours, I deserted him.”

“What are you *talking* about?”

Peter’s eyes saddened. “We shall speak of this another time, Mark. For now, it is enough simply to say that we must be ever vigilant against pride and jealousy, for humility does not come naturally to us. The proof of this is that upon discovering humility to be a virtue greatly prized in the kingdom of heaven, we often seek the prize by declaring ourselves the most humble! That is itself a prideful declaration.”

“I appreciate the conundrum; but humility can be pressed too far, Peter. Audacity in service of the Lord, for example, I would count as a good thing. Paul has often said that one must be bold in preaching the Way and in decrying false teachings, even at the risk of appearing audacious, for boasting in the service of God gives offense only to the ungodly.”

“And Paul is the master of such boasting, Mark. He is fond of listing all of the sufferings, the imprisonments and beatings he has endured in that service. Such arrogance comes from having convinced himself that his teachings are beyond reproach, are presentations of absolute truth. He tolerates no disagreement on any issue of faith regardless of whether there is fair ground for disagreement, and regardless of whether there was any instruction on the matter by Jesus himself, in whose actual words Paul seems to take little interest, despite his recent request for the parchments. For my part, I find that I cannot be so presumptuous. There is much which remains uncertain, and while we remain on this earth the limitations of our knowledge ought to be admitted candidly, with a spirit of humility. It is that spirit which Jesus bade us to adopt, and as my years advance, I am finally beginning to heed that request.”

“But do you and Paul really disagree on very much?”

“Oh, I suppose we do on a number of things, some significant, some less so. But as to much of what he teaches, I am simply unsure. Paul seems to have worked out an extended theology of the cross and its implications, and while he may well be right as to most, even all, of his inferences, I am not prepared to say so. I just do not know. Is that disagreement? Call it such if you like. My concern is to be cautious in claiming too much as true, in clothing speculation as dogma

without a sufficient grounding either in the teachings of Jesus or the workings of the Spirit. Paul exhibits no such concern.”

“But how can you be sure that the Spirit is not working in Paul as well, when he preaches the gospel?”

“I can’t. As I said, I simply do not know. But this much is certain; Paul’s very boldness, his *lack* of humility, gives his message an advantage over any competing version whose proponents are restrained by *their* humility. As time goes on—if Jesus has not returned—it is *Paul’s* theology which will ultimately become orthodoxy, *Paul’s* teachings which will form and shape the beliefs of the church; not mine.”

“No, Peter. Let me be the instrument for recording and spreading *your* message, as *you* know it. I promise you, I will be true to it no matter what Paul or others may teach!”

Peter looked at me silently for a moment, as a parent looks sympathetically and patiently at a child who is without understanding. Then he said tenderly, “I think I *will* tell you now about my denial of Jesus.”

I sensed the importance of what was about to be revealed to me, and my pulse quickened. With a deep breath, Peter began:

“You know the story of Jesus’ betrayal, how at supper on the night before he was to be crucified, he told the twelve of us that one of our group who had been plotting against him would betray him and hand him over to the chief priests—a prediction fulfilled that very night by Judas. But what you do not know is that he made a second prediction that night, of a second betrayal.

“After supper, we walked out toward the Mount of Olives. Along the way, he turned to us and said that after he was handed over, the rest of us would scatter with our faith shaken. I was indignant at this, and immediately protested that no matter who else might be shaken in their faith, it would not be so with me. And Jesus replied, “I assure you, Simon, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ ‘Never!’ I replied. ‘Even if it means I must die with you, I will not deny you!’ We all said so.

“Then we came to the olive grove at the foot of the hillside at Gethsemani, not far from your mother’s house, where we had often retired to pray. He told us to sit and wait while he prayed, but then he asked James, John and me to go with him into the grove. We

could see what distress he was in; he knew his time was at hand, waiting for his betrayer to arrive. And he asked us to remain with him and stay awake. He went a little further and kneeled to pray. But the hour was late, and I and the brothers could not keep our eyes open. The next thing I knew, Jesus was standing over me, saying ‘Asleep, Simon? Could you not stay awake even for an hour? Be vigilant, and pray that you are not put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ Again he went to pray, and again we dozed off! He awakened us again, and in our embarrassment and exhaustion we did not know what to say to him. A *third* time he went off to pray, and a third time we fell asleep! ‘Still sleeping?’ he said this time. ‘Rouse yourselves; the hour of my betrayal is here, and the Son of Man must now be handed over to the clutches of evil men.’”

“And did the cock then crow?” I asked, thinking that these must have been the three denials Peter was speaking of.

“I wish with all my heart that it had! If failing to stay awake had been my only failure that evening, I might be at peace with it. I should have done as he bade; I should have prayed that I would not be put to the test. But God saw fit to humble me again.

“As we were leaving the garden and joining up with the rest of the disciples, an armed crowd sent by the chief priests arrived, with Judas in the forefront. Jesus did not resist or attempt to flee; he let Judas come up to him and kiss him—a signal to the mob, I suppose—and then they seized him. Jesus said to them, ‘You come to arrest me armed with swords and clubs as though I were a brigand; yet while I was within your reach daily, teaching in the temple precincts, you never saw fit to arrest me?’ Someone—not one of us, for we were unarmed—drew a sword and brandished it, and in the confusion accidentally hit the high priest’s slave, cutting his ear. On seeing this we panicked, and we all scattered, all of us who that very evening had pledged to die with him! We deserted him just as he had predicted.

“After they took him, I followed at a safe distance to see what would happen. They brought him to the high priest’s house, into one of the upper rooms. I was in the courtyard below, warming myself by the fire with the temple guards and trying to look inconspicuous even as I strained to hear. One of the high priest’s servant girls observed me, and said to me ‘You were with Jesus of Nazareth, too.’

'I don't know what you are talking about; what do you mean?' I responded, and quickly headed for the gateway. But she started to tell everyone in the courtyard, 'This man is one of them.' Again, I denied it. Then some of the bystanders picked up the theme, and accused me, saying 'You are certainly one of them; you're a Galilean, aren't you?' I swore to them, 'I do not even know the man you are talking about!' And at that moment," Peter said as his voice cracked and his eyes welled with tears, "I heard the cock crow."

I was stunned into silence by this confession. No word of encouragement could I mouth to offer any comfort here; that much was obvious. I waited for Peter to make some comment, *any* comment, on forgiveness, resolve, atonement—but he simply let the matter lie where it was. Suddenly my brash assurance that I would remain faithful to Peter's testimony no matter what may happen seemed petty and insignificant.

And in the somberness of the moment, I could not bring myself to tell Peter that I understood only too well—indeed, firsthand—the panic that he and the others felt at Jesus' arrest. I could not relate to him the truth that I had kept to myself and tried to repress since the age of twelve: that *I too had witnessed Jesus' arrest, that very night!*

The memories all came flooding back to me. I had been awakened from my sleep by the commotion in the garden below my bedroom window. Peering out, I saw a procession of several dozen torches heading back toward the city. I immediately went down to investigate without taking the time to dress, wrapping my linen sheet around me against the chilly night air. I quickly managed to outflank them, and from behind a tree I saw the man who was being led away with his hands tied behind him. In the glare of the full Passover moon and the flickering torchlight, I could discern no trace of emotion on his face—only those piercing eyes that somehow spotted me despite my perch in the shadows, and for a brief moment held me transfixed. Suddenly someone grabbed me from behind and began to shout to the others. Terrified, I broke free and ran off naked into the night, pursued only by the haunting image of what I had seen.

In one way or another, I have been running from that image ever since.