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Drink This Cup

THE
SON
OF
GOD

Series: Book 5



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To my husband,
Donald J. Lindsay Jr. 1947–2006
Jesus lived the sinless life
that neither of us could live.
He died the death we deserved.
He took the keys of death.
After three days, he left the tomb, alive;
and now, he sits at the right hand of God.
Jesus is coming as king of this Earth soon.
Because this is true, factual, not fiction,
I will one day enjoy your companionship
again. This time, for eternity.

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Introduction

Two thousand years ago, the blood of Jesus literally poured from his body. Today, we remember that event through the symbolism of a small sip of wine or grape juice when celebrating the Lord's Supper. That little taste of his sacrifice is so meaningful to most modern Christians, but few understand its history and significance.

That sip of wine comes from the Jewish observance of Passover, the meal they eat to commemorate the Exodus. It is the same meal that Jesus ate with his disciples just before he was arrested.

In the traditional Passover Seder, during the course of the meal, the participants drink four cups of wine. With each cup, there is a specific scripture and teaching. The first cup is about sanctification and identifying with the Kingdom of God. The second cup recalls the ten plagues of Egypt, the battle God waged. The third cup commemorates the blood of all the sacrificed lambs and deliverance by an "outstretched arm." Finally, the fourth cup is a drink that celebrates the joy of deliverance.

The disciples entered into the meal, drinking the four cups, remembering the exodus of their ancestors. But as the meal progressed, Jesus used the imagery of these four cups to demonstrate the deliverance that he was about to offer.

In the garden, he prayed specifically about the third cup, ultimately drinking it by going to the cross. When he drinks the fruit of the vine again, with us in heaven, it will be the fourth cup, the celebration of our deliverance.

Drink This Cup is the final book in the *Son of God Series*. It is about the events of Passover, the first one when God became the destroyer and a Passover two thousand years later when God went to the cross to become the deliverer.

Because the *Son of God Series* has imagined characters and subplots that have been added to the biblical account, it is classified as historical fiction. Nevertheless, there is much more truth than fiction. As a strong believer in every word of the Bible, I hope I have brought both life and insight to the familiar biblical narrative. An index of characters has been provided so you can distinguish between reality and imagination.

Prologue

THE FIRST PASSOVER

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.

—Exodus 6:1

The daughter of Putiel who had married Eleazar, one of the younger sons of Aaron, watched her own young son. The boy was excited, eagerly tying his meager belongings into a small bundle. With a heavy sigh, she folded both hands over her heart. The gesture was a futile attempt to control her fears. Her eight-year-old son was leaving his home in Goshen and going to live in the Pharaoh’s palace. How could she let him go? What would happen to her firstborn within the royal complex of palaces and temples? When would she see him again?

Keeping her distance in the small room that was their home, the Hebrew mother caressed her son with her eyes. Her tearful glances brushed the bronze smoothness of his skin. It was young flesh that had never felt the whip of their Egyptian masters. She could not bear to think of his beautiful back, ripped and bleeding.

“Phinehas?”

The boy looked up and flashed his mother a carefree smile.

“Son, be quick to please your young master. Don’t let any harm come to him. Always remember, he is the son of Pharaoh. He is a

few years younger than you, so you must watch over him and be a companion to him. But never forget you are his personal slave.”

The woman gulped. Fear was rising in her throat again. In her lifetime, she had seen so many tragedies. “Your well-being is in a boy’s hands. In a moment of childish temper, he can order—” The Hebrew mother stopped short. She could not say the words. “Just don’t displease him.”

Phinehas shrugged. His natural optimism did not know how to respond to his mother’s anxiety, so he grinned. “Working in the palace is better than making bricks. I’ll be all right.” Then the boy changed the subject. “I heard Grandfather Aaron has returned and his brother, Moses, is with him.”

“Yes.” The daughter-in-law of Aaron chose her words carefully. “Do not speak of this in the palace. No one must know you belong to the family of Aaron and Moses.”

Phinehas looked into his mother’s serious eyes. With a little impudence, he countered, “You worry too much.”

“Respect your mother and do as she says.” Eleazar stepped through the doorway.

Phinehas bowed his head in submission to his father’s authority.

Eleazar turned to his wife. In hushed, yet eager tones, he spoke over the boy’s head. “Early this morning, Moses and Aaron met with all the elders of Israel. Moses performed the signs God had given him, and the people believed.

“Has the God of Abraham really seen our misery?”

Tears flowed. Neither parent could contain their emotions.

Phinehas stared silently, watching his father and mother. The boy felt unsure and slightly confused by such an unusual display of emotion.

Reassuringly, Eleazar pulled his wife into his arms. “Moses says the Lord spoke to him. It was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He said, *‘I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving... I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with*

mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God."¹

"I can't imagine." The Hebrew woman shook her head as she tried to wrap her mind around the wonderful yet fear-invoking message. "How? How long?" Her eyes returned to Phinehas. "Our son can't go to the palace when we are so close to freedom!"

"We have no choice." Eleazar sighed. "For now, we are still slaves." Eleazar put his work-hardened hand on his son's shoulder. "My overseer gave me this afternoon to take Phinehas to the palace. We are fortunate to have a little favor. It's because you assisted his wife when she was in labor."

The daughter of Putiel nodded, grateful that kindness still had its own reward. She bent and kissed her son. Her fingertips brushed his warm skin. Then she turned away to struggle with her own anxious thoughts.



Two weeks passed. The sun was touching the tops of the palms that grew along the Nile as the crew of the royal barge guided their vessel to one of many docks where a ship could safely spend the night. Phinehas brought the little crown prince forward so the boy could stand by his father to wish the sun a speedy journey through the underworld of the night. Phinehas placed the boy between Pharaoh and Jambres, the oldest priest in Egypt. Then the slave boy stepped back, close to the rail, respectfully waiting.

When the royal barge was securely docked, Jambres began calling to the sun, their most important deity. "Do not leave us, O blessed sun. We cannot live without you."

Pharaoh then chanted the next lines of the evening prayer. "O wonderful sun, if you must make this journey into the world of darkness where the ancestors of all people dwell, return to us quickly. We are the living who will, one day, take this journey with you."

The sun seemed to pause, a huge orange disk resting on the banks of the Nile.

Jambres bent and spoke to the little prince. "See, the sun waits. It has heard the voice of your father, and now, it is considering whether or not to continue its journey. One day, the sun will pause to listen to what you have to say."

Phinehas looked away. He let his gaze travel up and down the river. A collective gasp brought his attention back to the evening service.

A boat was approaching the royal barge, a small skiff. It seemed to be coming directly out of the sun, like a messenger from the god of daylight. Two bearded men were standing in the boat. Phinehas immediately recognized that they were wearing the garments of the Hebrew patriarchs. A much younger man wearing only a loin cloth guided the vessel.

The skiff tied up beside the royal barge. Phinehas recognized his grandfather, Aaron. He assumed the other bearded man had to be his great uncle, Moses. Phinehas caught his breath. The man guiding the skiff was his own father, Eleazar. For a brief moment, the father and son locked eyes. A silent warning passed from the elders to the youngest grandson of Aaron. There was no other communication.

Grandfather Aaron addressed Pharaoh. "We have come from the God who created all life. He is the God of the Hebrews. Before our people came to live in your land, the father of our nation was the personal friend of God. Now our God is calling all the Hebrews to leave their homes and their responsibilities to come into the desert to worship him."

Moses spoke a few stuttering words in a language that Phinehas did not understand.

Aaron interpreted. "*This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.'*"²

Pharaoh looked at Jambres for direction.

The old priest scowled and shook his shaved head negatively.

Pharaoh's lips curled into a sneer. Then he turned back to the men in the skiff. *"Who is the LORD that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."*³

Aaron quickly responded with a warning, *"The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword."*⁴

Jambres laughed.

Pharaoh then added his own scoffing laughter.

The little prince did not understand, but his childish laughter mimicked that of his elders.

Phinehas felt very uncomfortable. His family had become the focus of Pharaoh's ridicule. The slave boy looked down at the deck of the barge, not lifting his eyes, only listening.

He recognized the voice of Jambres. "None of the gods have spoken to you. You are men. You are Hebrews. Tell us your names."

Phinehas cringed as he heard his grandfather's voice again. "I am Aaron from the family of Levi and this is my brother, Moses."

There was an uncertain pause. Phinehas snuck a peek at the old priest. Jambres was squinting into the setting sun, studying the two men. "Moses, I think I know you. You have said very little. Talk to me. Let me hear your voice."

Aaron responded, "My brother has been forbidden to speak directly to the court of Pharaoh. Our God speaks to him. He speaks to me in the language of our God. Then I relay the message to you."

"Humph!" Jambres grunted in disgust and turned away.

But Pharaoh did not turn away. He looked hard at both men and then in a menacingly soft voice, he said, *"Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!"*

"You are Hebrews, therefore you are slaves. And you have work to do!" Jambres reasserted himself.

Then Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working."⁵ Leave us and return to your responsibilities."

Phinehas looked up to see what would happen next. He watched as members of the royal guard moved swiftly to untie the skiff and push it into the current of the river. With his eyes, he cautiously followed his family downstream. Then he turned his attention back to the needs of the crown prince.

Later that day, Phinehas overheard Pharaoh give an order to the slave drivers and overseers in charge of the people: "You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies."⁶

Phinehas struggled with a turmoil of confusing thoughts. How could his family approach Pharaoh with such an outrageous proposal, and how could they bring such trouble upon the entire nation of Israel?

That night, after the little prince had fallen asleep, Phinehas lay on his back, looking up at the stars. He tried to remember the stories of his heritage, how God had spoken to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He knew about the fall of Adam and the promise of a Deliverer, but his mind was filled with doubts. And he wondered who was greater, the God of the Hebrews or Pharaoh.



One week later, Phinehas stood in the entrance to one of the inner rooms of the Temple of the Cult of the Bull. He knew better than to take another step. His back still stung from the day before when he had hurried into the sacred room to assist his young master. Jambres, the crotchety court magician, had used his scepter effectively, laying stroke after stroke across the slave's

bare back. "You must never under any circumstances enter the sacred chambers of this temple!"

Phinehas moved a little and felt the crust that had formed over the welts. It caught and pulled on the light linen fabric that covered his back.

From the safety of the outer court, Phinehas kept his eyes on the young prince. Both boys longed for the freedom of childhood. They would rather play a game of hide and chase through the columns of the outer court. Yet the boy who would become the next pharaoh sat miserably in his own royal enslavement.

"Repeat!" Jambres glared down at the boy as he smacked his jackal-headed scepter on the brick floor.

The young prince stared mutely at the confusing patterns of figures interspersed with symbols.

"Your father is going to hear about this!" Jambres shouted. "You are not the student he was!"

Phinehas felt a little sympathy for the boy. The prince was not the smartest child he had ever played with, but they had become friends. The Hebrew boy casually glanced at the symbolic figures painted on the wall. He understood everything the priest had said. There were eleven gates in the underworld. Each gate was guarded by two divine beings and a dangerous serpent. The dead must pass through each gate before they could enjoy the pleasures of the afterworld.

A gong sounded. Jambres bent and hissed at his young student. "Come again tomorrow. Plan to sit in front of this wall until you can name every god and explain every symbol."

The prince kept his eyes on the floor until Jambres strode away, his scepter tapping the floor with each step. Then the royal child stood. He bowed to the deities on the wall and remained in that bent-over position, backing out of the sacred room while sweeping his footsteps away with his hand.

As soon as the royal child stood up, Phinehas took his hand, and together, they ran to the main entrance where the sacred

bull was being led to the man-made lake where it bathed every day. Both boys watched as the lumbering animal with long sleek horns ambled down a series of ramps, finally entering the water.

A small crowd began to gather. It was believed that this animal could answer yes or no questions with a nod of its head and cure all illnesses with its breath. Everyone wanted to ask a question or just get close. The boys ignored the crowd. They began to run and chase each other up and down the ramps, never stopping until they heard a commotion near the lake.

The palace guard was dispersing the people. The bull was coming out of the water. Pharaoh with his advisors had arrived to make their own inquiry.

Phinehas placed a cautionary hand on the shoulder of the crown prince. He wanted the little boy to know that this was a time to show dignity and respect. The prince responded, calmly focusing his attention on his father.

To the right, Phinehas heard the steady tapping of wood hitting the brick paving stones. At first, he thought it was Jambres, walking with his scepter. But the old Egyptian priest was already listening to Pharaoh's question and positioning the bull so it could indicate a yes or no response.

Phinehas turned toward the tapping sound. His breath caught in his throat, and his heart began to pound like it was going to come out of his chest. Two bearded Hebrew men were approaching. Phinehas was certain of their identity!

The men did not look to the right or to the left. Their eyes were fixed on Pharaoh who was laying a garland of flowers over the neck of the sacred bull. Straightway, Moses and Aaron approached the royal party. At the top of the ramp that entered the water, they stopped. Grandfather Aaron spoke. "Why do you need an animal to nod its head and give you advice? The Creator God has sent us to speak directly to you."

"Remove these men!" Pharaoh ordered.

The palace guards took one step forward and then slumped to the ground, leaving Pharaoh and Jambres with only their attendants for protection.

Aaron and Moses stepped closer. “The God of the Hebrews has remembered the promises he made to our ancestors who rest in the dwelling place of the dead. Our God is calling all the Hebrews to come out into the desert to the sacred mountain of his presence.”

Again, Phinehas remembered that Adam had been promised a descendant who would defeat the Evil One and restore a perfect life to God’s people. Also, Abraham had been promised a fertile and wonderful land. Cautiously, the slave boy wondered, was the God of the Hebrews strong enough to change the course of history? Could he keep such promises?

Jambres whispered into Pharaoh’s ear. Then Pharaoh took a confident step toward Aaron and Moses. “If you come from the gods, then you can show us something amazing, something that only the gods can do!”

Moses nodded his head, and Aaron took the long wooden shepherd’s staff from his brother’s hand. He raised it over his head like he was about to strike the ruler of Egypt.

Pharaoh and Jambres jumped back.

Nearby, the bull pawed the ground and snorted, angrily shaking its head from side to side.

Protectively, Phinehas pulled the crown prince close. He did not know what was going to happen next.

Grandfather Aaron violently threw the stick to the ground. It hit the paving stones with a smack. Suddenly, it became a fast-moving cobra.

Pharaoh and Jambres jumped back again! And the bull broke loose from its handlers, snorting and running away.

Jambres regained his composure first. Frantically, he gestured for his assistants to come with their staffs. “You do not have power

that is beyond our power!” the old priest angrily announced as he and his assistants threw their scepters to the ground.

Phinehas heard a collective gasp. He watched all of Pharaoh’s attendants scramble to put distance between themselves and nine active serpents. Nine serpents now coiled, slithered, and darted near their feet.

In the midst of the nine serpents, one serpent raised its hooded head. It looked directly at Pharaoh. Then, slowly it began to turn from side to side. With forked tongue it tested the air. With black eyes, it briefly studied the other eight snakes. Then, faster than the gasps of the onlookers, it attacked and ate each serpent. When the last serpent had been swallowed, Aaron calmly bent over and picked the cobra up by its tail.

The cobra became a shepherd’s staff again, and Aaron returned the staff to Moses.

Phinehas held his breath. How would Pharaoh respond?

Pharaoh turned his head and seemed to notice his son for the first time. He then turned back to Moses and Aaron. “I am not going to let my entire labor force go. Should I bankrupt Egypt because you are clever magicians? I must turn over to my son an Egypt that is stronger and more prosperous than the Egypt I received.”

Aaron turned and looked at Moses. Moses nodded his head again. This time, Aaron put his hand and most of his arm deep into the folds of his garment. When he pulled it out, it was white with leprosy. Fearlessly, he extended the infected arm toward Pharaoh. “Look! Egypt will be as ruined as this arm if you do not listen and comply with the commands of the God of the Hebrews. He is a god who can destroy and who can heal. He is the most powerful god.” Aaron walked over to where the sacred bull waited in the shade of a nearby tree. He put his leprous arm close to the bull’s nostrils. He could feel the breath of the animal on his skin. Then he looked back at Pharaoh, waving his infected arm toward the monarch. “Your god cannot heal this disease.

None of your gods can save you from the wrath of the God of the Hebrews.” Aaron then put his hand back into the folds of his garment. He brought it out again, completely healthy. “See for yourself, O ruler of Egypt. See what the God of the Hebrews can do.”

Moses and Aaron turned abruptly. Without the permission of Pharaoh, they strode back the way they had come.

Phinehas continued to hold the royal heir close to his side. As his grandfather and great uncle passed, his eyes met the eyes of both men. The eyes of the elders asked a question, but the eyes of the youngster did not have an answer. It was a passing moment, an uncomfortable moment.

Pharaoh called his son to his side.

Both boys responded, hurrying to obey the monarch’s directive. Standing close to Pharaoh while watching his family’s patriarchs walk away, the Hebrew boy wondered where his allegiance belonged.



Early the next morning, in the predawn torchlight procession, Phinehas walked behind the little prince who walked behind his father. Every morning, the entire palace rose and dressed in darkness. Then they joined Pharaoh to call the sun back to their land. It was always a silent procession. This morning, Phinehas could not even hear the usual tapping of Jambres’s scepter on the brick pavement. He remembered that it had been swallowed by the hooded serpent.

Arriving at the pool of the Pharaoh on the banks of the Nile, the royal entourage waited in silence. From a nearby temple, a gong sounded. The torches were extinguished. Then Pharaoh raised his arms and called to the eastern sky, “O mighty sun, return to those who love you.”

Phinehas watched the eastern sky. It did seem that the sun responded to the voice of Pharaoh. Immediately, it popped above the horizon filling the sky with fiery gold and red.

With the help of his assistants, Pharaoh then removed all of his garments except his loin covering. He stepped down into the pool. Dramatically, he filled both palms with water from the Nile. He brought the water to his lips and kissed it. “Father of life, your children have come to greet you.”

Tap, tap, tap, tap. Phinehas knew that sound—a wooden staff was steadily hitting the brick pavement. Phinehas turned his head in the direction of the sound. This time, he was not surprised to see Grandfather Aaron with Moses. Both men walked to the edge of the pool and looked down at Pharaoh. Their faces were stern and uncompromising.

Phinehas knew that men did not approach Pharaoh with such boldness and live. The slave boy held his breath. He felt fear rising in the pit of his empty stomach. He did not want to see his grandfather killed on the banks of the Nile.

Moses lifted his staff, and then he rapped three times on the pavement, officially proclaiming that he had taken the stage. Moses then nodded to Grandfather Aaron who loudly spoke in the language of the Egyptian court. “Our God has sent us to say, ‘Let my people go into the wilderness to meet with me.’ If you do not do this, our God will strike the Nile, the lifeline of your nation. The water within its banks will turn to blood. The fish will die and the people of Egypt will thirst.”

Phinehas watched as Grandfather Aaron turned and took the staff from Moses’s hand. Deliberately, he held it over the water in the pool of the Pharaoh. Then he brought it down, striking the water. Immediately, in that place, dark red blood bubbled to the surface. It filled the pool and flowed out to mix with the current of the river. Pharaoh screamed in horror and quickly splashed out of the blood-filled pool.

His loin cloth dripped dark coagulating blood. Immediately, Pharaoh ripped the disgusting fabric from his body, accepting a clean linen cloak for a covering.

Jambres hurried forward to demonstrate that he could also turn water into blood, but Pharaoh was not attentive to the demonstration. Instead, he was looking beyond his personal pool to where the river was broad and turning blood red. Dead fish were beginning to float to the surface. A stench was enveloping the land.

Phinehas watched the ruler of Egypt. His body had become like the many statues of previous monarchs, rigid and royal. “Dig wells. We need water.”

After that order, Pharaoh strode back to the palace.

Phinehas looked around for Grandfather Aaron and Moses. There seemed to be no trace of the Hebrew patriarchs. How could they just come and go at will? Were they the embodiment of Egyptian gods? Phinehas thought about the paintings of the many Egyptian gods. He remembered two Egyptian deities with a large serpent for a staff. They guarded the gates of the underworld. Grandfather Aaron and Moses seemed to have the attributes of those gods.



After a week of confinement in his royal apartments, the crown prince was bored. Phinehas started another game of hide-and-seek. Instead of hiding, the little prince ran to an inset panel in the wall of his bedroom. He pushed with all his strength, and then he called, “Phinehas, come help me.”

Obediently, Phinehas pushed with the prince. To his surprise, the wall moved; and suddenly, instead of a wall, there was a passage.

With miniature royal authority, the prince announced, “This is a better place to play hide-and-seek.”

“What is this?” Phinehas asked.

“An escape,” the prince answered. “If I am in danger, I can go through this tunnel and get to the river. It comes out close to the royal barge.”

Suddenly, Phinehas was overcome with curiosity. “Can we explore it?”

“Yes!” The prince pointed to a burning lamp.

Phinehas grabbed it, and both boys entered the dark passage.

Together, they moved in silence, respecting the eerie dancing shadows and holding fear at bay with their boyish desire for adventure. Approaching the river, an unusual sound filled their ears, like the croaking of a frog. Gradually, the sound increased until it seemed that an army of frogs must have invaded the land. When the boys stepped out of the passage, they saw legions of frogs, leaping from the Nile in multiple waves.

For a moment, the crown prince and his slave stood, speechless. Then the prince turned on Phinehas. “Your people have caused this problem.”

“My people?” Phinehas responded with amazed anxiety. “How can people cause frogs to come out of the Nile?”

“Those two old Hebrew men!” the prince angrily answered. “My father told me that they threatened an invasion of frogs.”

“Maybe they aren’t men,” Phinehas replied.

The little prince became silent, considering the response of his slave. Moments later, the prince was climbing a pile of rocks, getting away from the frogs, calling Phinehas to climb with him.

From the height of several boulders, Phinehas observed that nearly every section of level land was covered with moving frogs, and he wondered, what role did Grandfather Aaron have in this plague of amphibians? How could frogs relate to the ancient promises?



A week passed. It was nearly noon when Phinehas led his young charge past the heaps of dying frogs that lined the road from the

palace to the temple complex. The stench almost overpowered both boys. Nevertheless, Jambres had demanded that both Pharaoh and his son were to be present today. They were to escort the sacred bull as it paraded along this route to purify the land and the air.

Phinehas could see the sleek animal standing at the top of the first ramp. It shook its magnificent horns as it looked out over the polluted landscape. Jambres stood on one side of the animal. Pharaoh stood on the other side. Phinehas nudged the crown prince to hurry, but before the boys arrived at the base of the final ramp, two old Hebrews seemed to appear out of nowhere. Both boys stopped, afraid to cross paths with the two men.

From the top of the ramp, Jambres called, "The frogs are dying. The land will be clean, again. We do not need your magic."

Pharaoh added, "Return to your people. Help them gather straw and make bricks. They need your magic."

Neither Moses nor Aaron spoke.

Phinehas watched as Grandfather Aaron turned to Moses and took the long wooden staff from his hand. The slave boy felt his insides quiver with fearful anticipation.

Again, Aaron lifted the staff. This time, he struck the ground. A black cloud of gnats rose from the dust.

Immediately, the air was thick with small flying insects. Phinehas could barely see the temple walls. He heard the sacred bull snorting and sensed that the attendants were struggling to return the animal to the inner rooms. He heard both Jambres and Pharaoh shouting to their gods, demanding that the insects vanish.

At first, the boys felt smothered by the cloud of bugs. The tiny insects were in their mouths, their eyes. They were working their way through their hair and crawling along the crisp pleats of their linen clothing.

Phinehas glanced down at the crown prince who was spitting and jumping and crying. The slave boy took the little boy's hand and led him running back to the palace. Phinehas took the prince

straight to the bathing chamber where he poured jar after jar of water over the screaming child until the boy felt some reprieve.

The crown prince fell asleep that night behind and beneath layers of linen gauze. Phinehas sat at the foot of the royal bed, swatting and shooing the annoying bugs. Such misery! It came from Grandfather Aaron and his brother.

Resentment smoldered in the heart of the slave boy.



While the plague of gnats lasted, Phinehas heard over and over the whispered refrain, "This is the hand of the God of the Hebrews."

Again, the crown prince was ordered to remain in his royal apartments. No one saw the face of Pharaoh, and the boy who was next in line for the throne became increasingly irritable and pouty. One day, he ordered that Phinehas receive ten lashes from the master of the household because he did not like the way Phinehas played with him.

That was the day the gnats went away, but soon, the flies came to torment the people of Egypt.

After the beating, Phinehas stayed in the slave quarters while his back healed. There, other Hebrews whispered amazing news. The flies were only in the homes of the Egyptians. There were no flies in Goshen where the Hebrews lived. Not one Hebrew had been bitten in all of Egypt!

On the day that Phinehas returned to his duties, he heard the crown prince screaming. The royal child was screaming in pain like the slave boy had screamed with each lash of the whip.

Phinehas opened the door. The little boy sat inside a tent of gauze. Servants stirred the air with palm branches to keep the flies from landing. Still, every once in a while, a fly would slip between the folds of fabric and bite the little boy viciously.

Phinehas wanted to feel sympathy for the child, but he was still hurting from his own torment. The slave boy turned away from the prince. He went out onto the balcony. The flies did not

bother him. From there, he looked out over the river. Immediately, his eyes were drawn to two old men standing beside the palace wall—Grandfather Aaron and great Uncle Moses.

Phinehas watched Moses raise his staff. He heard both men pray for Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. They prayed that the plague of flies would cease and the Hebrews would then be allowed to go into the desert to worship their God.

A small skiff came through the reeds in the river. A man jumped out and pulled the shallow boat up onto the riverbank.

Phinehas felt his heart jump. He knew that man. It was his father. Phinehas felt tears of homesickness well up in his eyes.

The slave boy watched as his father spoke to Aaron and Moses. Then all three men turned and looked up at the palace. The younger man waved, and Phinehas waved back. His father had seen him and that was a comfort.



A few weeks later, Phinehas stood in his usual place at the entrance to the sacred rooms in the Temple of the Cult of the Bull. The morning lessons for the little prince had abruptly ended. Up and down the corridors, everyone was running and screaming, “The sacred bull is dead!”

Only Jambres retained his composure. The old priest stood like one of the many columns that supported the temple. For a few uncomfortable moments, he turned his beady eyes on Phinehas.

It seemed to Phinehas that the old master of magic must somehow know he belonged to the family of Moses and Aaron; therefore, he must be responsible for the death of their god. Phinehas swallowed hard and then tried to appear relaxed.

The crown prince came over, and the slave boy was thankful for his presence. Both boys knew this was a time to be silent and respectful. They watched as the magnificent bull that had been the center of worship for this region was hoisted onto a wagon.

A funeral procession quickly formed. Without being told, the little prince stepped into his role as the representative of his father. He walked behind the wagon.

Phinehas followed from the side of the road. He knew they were going to the embalmers. This animal would be buried with all the trappings of a high official.

As the procession made its way past the homes of various palace officials, Phinehas could see that many people were disturbed today. They were in their fields running from animal to animal. And all the animals in the fields were dead!

The slave boy whispered to himself, "Are Grandfather Aaron and Great Uncle Moses somehow responsible?"



Four days later, on a glorious sunny morning, the little prince was very excited. He danced and wiggled, running back and forth through his royal chambers while Phinehas struggled to complete his morning routine. At noon, when the sun was directly overhead, the young prince was going to join his father at the royal foundry to greet a new golden bull.

When the child was finally properly dressed and fed, Phinehas hurried him away from the palace toward a place on the banks of the Nile where black smoke continually rose from the furnaces where gold was smelted and animal-shaped gods seemed to leap from the glowing liquid. Today, it would be a new calf for the Temple of the Cult of the Bull. This new god would live in the most holy chamber. He would protect the new sacred bull and all the priests of the temple.

As the boys approached, it was easy to see that only one furnace was fired up. The others stood like sooty sentinels for the royal gathering. A raised platform had been constructed. Pharaoh was already in the seat of honor, Jambres standing beside him. Quickly, the crown prince ran up the steps and sat at his father's

feet, while Phinehas stepped back into the obscurity of the other Hebrew attendants.

Curiously, Phinehas looked around, hoping to recognize someone from his family or their Hebrew community. Near the burning furnace, he saw his two uncles, Nadab and Abihu. They were sweaty and covered with black ash from shoveling fuel into the furnace. For a moment, the boy's eyes locked with theirs, but they did not show any indication that they recognized him. A moment later, the temple musicians took their places. Court attendants began placing garlands of flowers around the podium where the golden calf would be displayed.

From behind one of the furnaces, two old Hebrews joined the ceremony. Phinehas recognized them immediately. He could not believe that Aaron and Moses would come uninvited to such an auspicious event.

Moses rapped his staff on the side of the furnace three times, and every eye focused on the two men. Dramatically, Moses handed his staff to Aaron. Then he reached into the mouth of the cold furnace and filled his hand with soot.

Grandfather Aaron took a step forward. His two sons stopped shoveling fuel and stepped up to stand on either side of their father. Aaron made fearless eye contact with the ruler of Egypt. "You are waiting for a man-made god to come out of this furnace. We are waiting to go worship the God who made all men. He is a powerful God, who demands that you respect his request."

"Never!" Pharaoh responded.

Immediately, Moses tossed the soot into the air, and festering sores erupted on both people and animals. But the Hebrews remained untouched.

Jambres cursed. Pharaoh began calling for the physicians. The crown prince began to wail, and Phinehas hurried to the little boy. He took him by the hand and led him straight back to the palace. For the entire walk, Phinehas could not take his eyes off the boils. One after another, they broke through the little boy's skin. His arms, his shaved head, his bare shoulders, chest, and back were

covered with pussy lesions. Every time Phinehas looked, another seemed to have emerged. At the palace, the physicians were waiting to clean and scrape each lesion.

All night, the little prince wailed. Jambres paced the halls of the palace, chanting and cursing. And Pharaoh sat like a statue submitting to the painful remedies of the physicians. In his heart, he cursed the God of the Hebrews.

In response, the Spirit of God abandoned him to the demons of the underworld.



Two weeks passed. The crown prince had skin that was scarred but healed. In the early morning darkness, a gong sounded in the palace. Once again, Pharaoh was going to greet the morning sun and kiss the Nile. Everyone hurried to join the procession.

Silently, Phinehas guided the crown prince to his place behind his father. Then the slave boy stepped to the side, to walk with the other Hebrews who worked in the palace. They watched as Pharaoh and Jambres called to the sun and then smothered their gasps of horror and amazement as the golden rays revealed the ravaged faces and scarred flesh of all the Egyptians.

There was another smothered gasp. It came from the Egyptian attendants. Moses and Aaron stood in the blaze of the rising sun. Like two powerful messengers from a glorious being, they confronted Pharaoh and Jambres.

“This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you.⁷ At this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now. Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every person and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die.”⁸

Phinehas briefly studied Pharaoh. His scarred face was set like the Sphinx. Then Phinehas looked around to judge the reaction

of the other Egyptians in the morning procession. He could see that they took the words of his grandfather seriously. They were nervously edging away, ready to run to their homes to provide shelter for their slaves and their animals.

A little skiff slipped through the tall reeds that grew along the riverbank. It pulled up so Moses and Aaron could step in. Once more, Phinehas saw his father. The two looked at each other for a long moment. Phinehas saw his father mouth be safe. Before stepping into the little boat, Moses raised his hand toward heaven, and black clouds appeared on the far horizon. Distant thunder rumbled ominously, and lightning flashed from heaven to earth.

Aaron announced, "This time tomorrow!"

Phinehas watched the reeds close behind the little skiff that held his family. His heart went with them. They were his people headed for his home in Goshen. In his mind, he saw the face of his mother, and the slave boy discretely wiped a tear from his eye.



The early morning gong did not sound, or if it did, it could not be heard above the roaring thunder, the pelting hail, and the crashing lightning. Phinehas sat on the royal bed with the little prince in his arms. From this place, he could see hail as large as his fist bouncing on the balcony. The balls of ice rolled into the room. Tall trees beat against the building. Lightning danced along the ground. Both boys trembled.

In the audience hall of the Pharaoh, a giant palm crashed through the roof. Hail and rain poured into the room while lightning seemed to split the sky above the gaping hole.

In the midst of the chaos, Pharaoh shook his fist at the storm and screamed, "Enough! I command you to stop!"

The elements seemed to jeer at the monarch as they sent a greater downpour into his audience chamber.

Deflated, but still resolute, Pharaoh ordered, "Get me three strong Hebrew slaves. Send them out through this storm and tell

them to bring Moses and Aaron back to me. Do not return to me without those two old men!"



It was late afternoon, the storm still raged. Moses and Aaron with their escort of Hebrew slaves strode through the rain and hail, untouched.

Pharaoh met them at the entrance to his ravaged audience hall. Jambres was not with him. "I have sinned, and I have brought the wrath of your God on my people. Pray to your God. The thunder and the hail must cease, or we will all die."

Aaron responded, "Our God has made a demand of you." Lightning struck a nearby tree. Immediately, thunder shook the building.

"You may leave! You may leave!" Pharaoh screamed.

Moses replied through Aaron, "When I am out of the city, I will pray to my God. This storm will stop, and then you will know the power of my God." Moses turned to leave, then he stopped and addressed the Pharaoh once more. "Still, you do not fear the God of the Hebrews."

A short time later, the storm suddenly ended. The black clouds disappeared, and sunshine streamed through the gaping hole in Pharaoh's audience chamber. Then Pharaoh reversed his decision, and with his fist raised toward heaven, he announced, "The Hebrews will never leave this land!"



Together, Phinehas and the crown prince pushed against the recessed panel in the boy's royal sleeping chamber. The hidden door opened and both youngsters, with lamps in hand, escaped

the confines of the princely apartments. It was just two days after the violent storm.

Coming out near the place where the royal barge docked, they could see slave crews everywhere, moving debris and repairing structures. The boys climbed a large pile of boulders. From that vantage point, they spotted Pharaoh and Jambres inspecting the destroyed flax and barley fields. They also recognized the silhouettes of two old men, emerging from the reeds near the river and determinedly approaching the flattened fields. Without any pretense or protocol, the men confronted Pharaoh and Jambres.

The boys could not hear their verbal exchange, but the body language of the men told their story—another plague was about to be unleashed.

Phinehas turned completely around to scan the landscape for signs of the next onslaught. He spotted a strange black cloud hovering above the horizon just beyond the river. Tapping the young prince on the shoulder, Phinehas pointed to the approaching mystery.

For a moment, the son of Pharaoh looked puzzled. Then, the boy became angry. “Why is your God doing this to my people?”

“Our God is calling us to meet him in the wilderness. Your father refuses to let us leave Egypt,” Phinehas answered.

“Why?” the little boy selfishly ranted. “Why would you want to leave me? We have fun together. It is better to be a slave in Egypt than a freeman in any other part of the world.”

The Holy Spirit answered through the grandson of Aaron, “Jambres has told you many times that life is about responsibility. He has told you that first, you must do your duty to the gods. After that, everything will fall into place.”

The crown prince scowled. “I don’t like that answer!” He stomped his little royal foot.

A big brown locust landed on the rock by the boy’s foot. Then a whirring sound suddenly overtook both boys, and immediately after that, the air was filled with flying insects. Everywhere the

boys looked, the vegetation along the banks of the Nile was black with creeping, chomping, and buzzing insects.

Both boys were now brushing the bugs out of their hair, shaking them from their clothing and beating them away from their faces. Phinehas was the first to make a protective move. He grabbed the prince by the hand and led him down the boulders. Both boys dove into the secret passage. Raising their handheld lamps, they were amazed to see even the rock walls of the tunnel crawled with moving insects.

Once again, the little prince slept and lived within a tent of gauze. But the royal child could not escape the ravenous onslaught of locusts. They plastered their bodies against his fine linen curtains. They ate through the folds of sheer fabric and found numerous routes to resting places between the boy's bedtime covers.

The other Hebrew slaves in the palace whispered incredible news to Phinehas. There were no locusts in Goshen. There, the spring vegetation was lush and little Hebrew children were already gathering it to supplement their diet. Contemplating this latest news, Phinehas walked out onto the balcony. From that place, overlooking the river and the palace grounds, the slave boy could see. Not one green leaf had survived the invasion of locusts.

Soon, there was more news, passed discreetly from slave to slave throughout the palace complex. Moses and Aaron had been summoned to meet with Pharaoh and Jambres.

The palace slaves had secretly watched the event. Jambres had cursed under his breath and ground his teeth through the entire meeting. They had seen Pharaoh drop to his knees in front of the two Hebrews. They heard him say, "I have insulted and angered your God. Forgive me once more, and beg him to remove this deadly plague from our land."

The slaves reported that Moses then left Pharaoh. Outside the palace walls, both men lifted their hands and their voices, calling to the God whose name is I Am. Suddenly, a mighty wind blew

across the land, sweeping the locusts into black buzzing clouds that moved swiftly toward the Red Sea.

The next morning, Phinehas escorted the little prince into Pharaoh's audience chamber. Other slaves were busily sweeping dead locusts out of the corners, pushing them into nasty dark piles. The crown prince looked around the room, obviously still in a state of disarray with repairs in progress. Then he looked at his father. "Why have so many bad things happened? Have we displeased the gods?"

Phinehas watched Pharaoh clench his fists. Then the monarch replied in a measured, angry tone, "No, those old men have just taken advantage of some unusual natural occurrences. They want to trick me into believing it is the will of their God to allow the slaves to leave. But I am also a god. It is not my will to destroy Egypt. Now, I need those slaves more than ever! I will not release the slaves from their duties, even for one day! I am Pharaoh! I have spoken. My word is law in the land of the living and in the realms of the underworld."

The crown prince looked up at his father with admiration.

Phinehas observed the royal pair, and he instinctively knew. He had just heard the voice of the Evil One speaking through Pharaoh. The slave boy felt a cold shiver of apprehension.

A meal had been prepared. Phinehas led the little prince to his seat. He held the water bowl so the royal child could wash his hands. The boy smiled up at him, and Phinehas naturally smiled back. Then the boy reached across the table and took one of the sweet treats that had been specially prepared for the meal. He placed it in Phinehas's hand, and he grinned at his companion. "This is for you. I'll bring more back to our room."

Phinehas let out a small relieved sigh. The prince was still his friend.



A gong echoed through the dark halls of the palace. Both boys left their beds. Phinehas helped the little prince with clothes and a quick wash. Then he brought him to his place in the predawn procession to welcome the sun and bless the Nile.

Two slaves carrying torches led the way, while other slaves followed with more torches. Phinehas knew the path by heart. He knew the chants. Every morning, it was the same. The slave boy knew the motions so well that he just did them while his mind wandered to his family, to their morning routine.

Phinehas glanced at Pharaoh. By torchlight, he was a frightening and commanding figure.

The torches were extinguished. Then the chants began. Jambres and then Pharaoh said the prescribed words.

Darkness remained.

Phinehas saw the priest and the monarch exchange horrified glances.

The monarchy and the priesthood then called together, "O great sun, ruler of the heavens, return to us. We need your light and warmth. Return to us, your children."

The darkness only seemed to intensify.

First, there was horrifying silence. Then Phinehas heard frightened low murmurs spreading among the Egyptian attendants.

Suddenly, Pharaoh shouted, "I want to know. Does the sun shine in Goshen? Send trusted servants and bring back an answer." Grabbing a torch from a nearby slave, Pharaoh ordered that it quickly be lit. Then he led the procession back to the palace.

That day, the sun remained in the underworld. It remained in the underworld for an extended time. Only the Hebrews in Goshen could affirm that three days of darkness had passed for the citizens of Egypt.

Once again, the crown prince was confined to his royal apartments. Torches and lamps burned constantly, but their light seemed to be continually sucked into the blackness. Phinehas

stepped out onto the balcony. In the distance, he could see a faint glow, and he knew that was his home in the land of Goshen. Below, he could see several torches approaching the palace, and he wondered who would be about during such a fearful event.

Hearing footsteps in the hallway, Phinehas went to check. One of the Hebrew slaves was spreading the word. Aaron and Moses were coming to a private audience with Pharaoh. Other slaves were watching from hidden alcoves, and more reports could be expected.



A short time later, Phinehas heard the report.

It was a meeting like no other. Pharaoh had met with those men in private. This time, no Egyptian was allowed to see his humiliation.

Pharaoh had actually dropped to the floor facedown. He then said, *“Go, worship the LORD. Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind.”*

But Aaron, speaking for Moses said, *“You must allow us to have sacrifices and burnt offerings to present to the LORD our God. Our livestock too must go with us; not a hoof is to be left behind. We have to use some of them in worshiping the LORD our God, and until we get there we will not know what we are to use to worship the LORD.”*

At that point, the humiliation of Pharaoh ended and another spirit took over. Pharaoh suddenly clenched his fists and sprang to his feet like a man ready to fight. Enraged, he screamed at Aaron and Moses, *“I have made enough concessions! Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die.”*

Then for the first time, Moses spoke directly to Pharaoh. *“Just as you say,”* Moses replied, *“I will never appear before you again.”*¹⁰

Wide-eyed, Phinehas asked, “What will happen next?”

The Hebrew slave replied, “There is going to be a meeting. All the representatives of the twelve tribes will be gathering with

Moses and Aaron. They will tell us what to do. The plan will be passed from home to home.”

Phinehas nodded and quietly closed the door to the royal apartment. He checked; the prince was still sleeping.



The daughter of Putiel, who was married to Eleazar, sat quietly in a corner of the room. Her eyes moved from face to face. All the sons and grandsons of Aaron were present except for Phinehas. Her only son remained at Pharaoh’s palace. Anxiously, she waited for Moses or Aaron to speak.

Finally, Moses stood. “The Lord has said, ‘I will bring a final plague on Egypt. Then Pharaoh will order you to leave his land. Tell the people to go, right now, and ask their slave masters for payment—silver, gold, and other valuables.’”

Around her, there were murmurs of assent, but the daughter of Putiel did not really care about her back wages. She wanted her son, Phinehas, back in her home with the family. Once again, she focused on the instructions from Moses.

“On the tenth day of the month, take a male lamb into your home, a year-old, without blemish. Care for it until the fourteenth day. Then at sundown, all the lambs are to be slaughtered. Take some of the blood; put it on the sides and the tops of the doorways in the houses where you live. Roast the whole animal over a fire and then eat it with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. Stand at your tables, dressed for a journey. Eat quickly. While you are eating the meal, God will pass through the land of Egypt. Where he does not see the blood, he will stop and every firstborn male within that house will die, but where he sees the blood of the lamb on the wood of a doorway, he will pass over that house.”

The daughter of Putiel stopped listening to Moses. Her mind flew to her son, her firstborn. Somehow, they must get him out of the palace. Phinehas must be in this house, and the protective blood of the lamb must be on the doorposts, or...

The mother of the slave boy could not let her thoughts go any further. She looked across the room at Eleazar, her husband. Their eyes met, and she knew that he shared her concern.



Phinehas heard a light tapping at the door to the royal apartments. He stepped away from the game he was playing with the prince to see who was at the door. Phinehas opened the door slightly.

One of the Hebrew slaves from the palace staff whispered through the crack, “Ask the little prince for your wages and then meet us by the royal barge. We are all leaving the palace and returning to Goshen.”

“What?” Phinehas was shocked. He looked back, over his shoulder, at his playmate. “I can’t just leave. I have a responsibility to the prince.”

“Be there!” the other slave responded tersely. “If you don’t come, we will leave without you, and then you will be the only Hebrew in the palace.”

Before Phinehas could glean further details, he felt the prince behind him. Instantly, the Hebrew slave vanished down the long corridor. Phinehas turned to face the son of Pharaoh.

“Are you going to leave me?” the little boy asked.

Phinehas looked into the face of the child who had been his companion for nearly a year. They had bonded. In many ways, they now depended on each other. Phinehas shook his head negatively. Both boys returned to their game.



Eleazar pulled the lamb into the house. The animal did not like being separated from the rest of the flock, and it resisted entering a structure that was for people. Eleazar forced the animal through the doorway and tied it to a wooden beam in a corner.

His wife was packing all their belongings into tall reed baskets. She looked up. Her eyes asked, “Where is our son?”

Eleazar answered, "Phinehas did not return to Goshen with the rest of the palace slaves."

The Hebrew mother did not say a word she just looked at her husband. It was a look that demanded action.

Eleazar responded, "Phinehas will be here for the meal."

The daughter of Putiel returned to her packing. As she worked, every movement was part of her constant petition to the God of Abraham. "Bring my son home."



The sun was slipping down toward the western horizon. The last fingers of light stretched across the Nile. Phinehas stood in his place for the evening procession to the Pool of the Pharaoh. He looked around. All the other Hebrew slaves were missing. Only Egyptian attendants stood with Pharaoh and Jambres to bless the sun as it dipped into the underworld.

Suddenly, Phinehas felt so alone, so disconnected from his family and his people.

In Goshen, families were gathering. The head of each household had taken the lamb from their home and slit its throat. Now the blood was draining into basins and bowls.

The ceremony at the Nile was ending. Phinehas stepped forward to take the crown prince by the hand and lead him back to his royal apartments. Abruptly, an Egyptian officer stepped in front of him.

"You're a Hebrew, aren't you?"

Phinehas was startled and did not know how to reply.

The officer continued, "What are you doing here? All the other Hebrews have returned to their communities. Here"—the Egyptian took a heavy gold necklace from around his neck and put it over the head of the slave boy—"take this. It is my offering to your god. Leave this place."

Speechless, Phinehas looked around. The crown prince now stood beside him.

The royal child took Phinehas's hand and spoke to the officer. "Phinehas is my friend. That is why he remains in the palace. He is staying with me."

The officer glared down at the child. "If you are his friend, you will send him back to his people. If you want to grow up to be the next ruler of Egypt, you will respect the demands of the god of the Hebrews."

"You cannot speak to the royal child with such directness and disrespect!" Jambres inserted himself into the conversation.

Immediately, Phinehas guided the little prince away from the arguing adults.



The night was quiet, very quiet. Phinehas helped the little prince bathe and find a restful position under the linen covers. Since there were no other slaves in the palace, Phinehas picked up one of the long-handled fans and stirred the air so the little boy would be comfortable as he fell asleep.

Unexpectedly, the boys heard a scraping sound. The prince sat up in his bed. Both boys turned toward the secret panel and watched in amazement as it moved and then opened.

First, the boys saw a hand with a small lamp, and then Eleazar stepped into the room, a Hebrew wearing only the soiled tunic of a slave. He did not acknowledge the little prince. His eyes were fixed on his son, and with one gesture, he called Phinehas to follow him back into the secret tunnel, back to their community.

Phinehas looked at the prince. Then he looked at his father. For a moment, he felt torn. Then within his chest, something stirred, and he had to respond. He ran to Eleazar. Before leaving with his father, Phinehas looked back at his friend, the prince. The boy gave a slight nod, permission was granted.

Father and son stepped into the tunnel. Together, they closed the panel behind them. "How did you know about this tunnel?" Phinehas asked.

His father answered, "Prince Moses lived in these apartments many years ago."

At the river's edge, Eleazar led his son through the tall reeds to the place where he had hidden a small papyrus skiff. Within moments, the little boat was skimming over the smooth waters of the Nile. The full moon made the Nile look like an endless carpet of fine linen.

It was an unusual night. At first, Phinehas could not figure out what was so different. Then he realized that all of the typical night insects were silent. As their boat passed the estates of the wealthy, not even a guard dog barked. All of nature seemed to be holding its breath.

Eleazar paddled steadily, pushing their little craft to move faster than the assisting current. There was an unspoken urgency in each stroke. Phinehas picked up a paddle. He matched his strokes to the strokes of his father. Together, they sped toward Goshen on a night like no other.



"Hurry! Hurry!" Eleazar urged Phinehas to jump out of the little boat and run over the marshy delta toward the mud huts where the descendants of Levi lived.

Phinehas obediently began an energetic sprint, passing his father but stopping short at the doorway to his home. His hand was on the doorpost, and just above his fingertips, the wood was deeply stained with blood. "Father? What is this?"

"Blood," Eleazar answered as he pushed his son through the door. "That blood will keep you alive tonight!"

Before Phinehas could say more, he found himself wrapped in his mother's arms.

Squirring out of his mother's embrace, Phinehas looked around the room. He saw that even though it was very late at night, his uncles and cousins had come for a visit. Everyone was dressed for travel. The men were holding their staffs. The whole

family was standing around a table unusually laden with a whole roasted lamb. There were bowls of bitter herbs and piles of new fresh greens. Unleavened bread was stacked on the table, and more of the flat bread had been piled into baskets. Everyone was eating quickly, grabbing chunks of meat, and dipping flat bread into crushed bitter herbs.

Phinehas's mother guided him to the table and placed a piece of unleavened bread in his hands. "Eat as much as you can," she said.

Bewildered, Phinehas turned to his father. "What is happening tonight?"

Between bites, his father answered, "We are leaving Egypt!"

Phinehas looked from person to person. "Did Pharaoh give us permission?"

This time an uncle responded, "No! But after tonight—"

Grandfather Aaron interrupted, "After the Fear of Isaac walks through the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will send us out of this land."

"The Fear of Isaac?" Phinehas repeated.

Grandfather Aaron responded, "I am speaking of our God, the Creator of the Earth. He promised a Deliverer to restore the children of Adam to the pleasures of the garden. He is the God who visited with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. He made promises to those men—a home for our people. Our God always keeps his promises."

"Why is our God walking through the land of Egypt, tonight?" Phinehas asked.

"He will be looking for the blood," Grandfather answered.

"The blood on the doorframe?"

"The blood of this lamb," Eleazar clarified as he pointed to the meat on the table. "Every firstborn male who is not in a shelter marked with blood will die tonight."

"Does Pharaoh know this is going to happen?" Phinehas asked.

"Why do you care?" an uncle interjected.

“The crown prince, he is my responsibility,” Phinehas countered. “He is also my friend.”

Eleazar held up a silencing hand so that his brother would not reply. Then Eleazar looked at his son. “Pharaoh is responsible for his own son, just like I am responsible for you.”

Grandfather Aaron stopped eating and looked at Phinehas. His eyes were old and soft.

Everyone in the room knew that the head of their family was about to say something important, so they also stopped eating.

“A message has been sent to Pharaoh. It contains the exact words of God. *About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die.*”¹¹ At that moment, a distant moaning broke the stillness of the late night.

“There is no blood on the door of the royal apartments!” Phinehas cried in alarm.

Eleazar responded. “Pharaoh was warned. He could have taken steps to save his son.”

Grandfather Aaron spoke again. His voice was gentle but firm. “Tonight, God’s Appointed Death walks through the land of Egypt. For the firstborn in every family, there is only one way to live. The blood of the Passover lamb must be on the doorpost and that person must be in the house.”

“God’s Appointed Death?” Phinehas repeated. “Grandfather, you say it like it is the name of a person?”

Aaron stopped eating. He thoughtfully placed the chunk of meat that was in his hand back into the wooden bowl.

Everyone at the table stopped eating. Without consciously realizing, each person held their breath. Their eyes were on the head of their family, waiting for his answer to a child’s question.

For a long moment, Aaron also appeared to be waiting for the answer. Finally, he nodded his gray head in satisfaction.

The family expelled their breath.

Aaron looked directly at Phinehas. “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob spoke to Moses and said, *The blood will be a*

sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you."¹² Aaron thoughtfully paused. Then he solemnly pronounced, "God's Appointed Death is God, himself, stretching out his powerful arm and acting on his word. He is using blood, wooden beams, and human obedience to bring forth our deliverance."

Chapter 1

AT THE FEAST OF DEDICATION

Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade.

—John 10: 22–23

“**F**ather, my death is approaching. I feel the appointed time pressing on my soul.” Jesus moaned as a wave of sadness engulfed him. “Every day, my enemy taunts me. His evil angels accuse me through the unholy caretakers of your Temple. Demonically inspired hecklers join them to mock me. Their words rake like claws, gouging my heart.” In the comfortable darkness of the olive-press cave, Jesus leaned into the solid strength of the limestone walls. Tears ran down his face and wet his beard.

“Yeshua my son, I feel their words too.” The voice of God rolled through the underground chambers. His audible words did not disturb the sleeping disciples. Only Jesus heard. Only Jesus was comforted.

God continued, “Our angels in the throne room gasp at the audacity of that rebellious cherub called Satan. I know he constantly shoots deceptive thoughts into your mind. I know you are battling every moment, taking captive every lie and giving it no place to take root in your mind.” God smiled tenderly, and Jesus felt the warmth of his Father’s approval.

For a quiet moment, Jesus held that warmth in his heart. Then he responded, "Truth and security, I know it only exists in your holy kingdom. I cling to every word in the Torah and the prophets. I cherish every directive and every explanation from your Spirit. In every feast and every Temple ritual, I see myself and my mission."

The walls of the cavern vibrated. Jesus felt the movement of sinless feet, and he knew his own angelic army was marching.

God spoke again. "The choice remains with you. At any time, you are free to abandon the humanity you have chosen. Thousands of angels stand ready to battle Satan for you."

"It would be a hollow victory," Jesus answered. "I would annihilate Satan and his kingdom. I would regain unchallenged ownership of Earth, but the law of our kingdom would still defeat me."

"*For the wages of sin is death,*"¹ God quoted the statute Jesus was referring to.

"I am the only one who can pay for all the rebellion. I am the only one who can fulfill the promise I made to Adam and meet the requirements of our kingdom law." Jesus sighed.

God did not disagree. Instead, he informed, "Your army wishes to pay their respects. They are waiting for you on the walls of the city, at the entrance to the Temple."



At the mouth of the cave, Jesus paused to quickly immerse in a small pool of water. Coming up out of the water, the crisp predawn air washed over his wet body. Redressed, he then exited the cave and walked through the enclosed garden, down the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives toward the bridge that crossed the Kidron Valley. Ahead of him, the city glowed. A ring of fire hovered over its walls, and above the entrance to the Temple, warrior angels with outstretched swords formed a glowing tower that disappeared into the predawn clouds.

Jesus stopped. He smiled to himself, and with a remembering tone, he said, “Thank you, Father. You comfort and reassure me like you reassured Jacob in his distress.”

Then Jesus heard his Father’s reply, an exact phrase that he had spoken to Jacob, “*Earth will be blessed through you.*”²

With confidence in his step, Jesus continued toward the city. At first, Jesus heard the music just in his heart. Then it grew louder and louder. His angelic army was singing.

*Lift up your heads, O you gates;
Be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O you gates;
Lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is he, this King of glory?
The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory.*³

From the highest point on the angelic stairway, a seraph flew directly toward Jesus, bowing as his feet touched the road.

Jesus beckoned for the messenger to stand and speak.

“Singing has now ceased in heaven. All eyes are on you. Our hearts are with you. You can be certain. We will hold back the forces of the Evil One until God’s appointed time. This is the word of God for you, ‘*It is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc; no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.*’”⁴

Taking the angel’s hand, Jesus spoke. “Your name is Ophaniel, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” The angel bowed his head, humbled by the personal recognition.

Jesus smiled. “Sometimes, the Spirit opens my heavenly memory.” Then Jesus continued, “In this human body, with

this human mind, there is always a struggle to be confident in my divinity and my mission. Today, I needed reassurance from heaven. Thank you.”

From the pinnacle of the Temple, one trumpet blast welcomed the dawn. Immediately, the heavenly army vanished, and Jesus found himself standing at one of the entrances to the Temple. On the other side of the gate, he heard a team of Levites pulling together to open the massive doors. The first to arrive, he slipped off his sandals, tied them to his sash, and then entered the outer court of the Temple.

The torches of night were slowly dying. Without the normal crowds, Jesus moved easily over the vast paved area reserved for non-Jews, through the entrance to the Court of the Women, past the low wall that indicated the entrance to the Court of the Israelites. Closer and closer, he moved toward the place where all morning and evening worship began, the Altar of Burnt Offerings.

Jesus could see. The morning sacrifice had already begun. The lamb was hanging from rings attached to one wall of the Temple. Blood was spurting from its slashed throat, pouring into a golden basin.

Directed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus watched. Basin after basin filled, and each was quickly carried to the altar. Some blood was sprinkled on the white stone walls on each side of the massive altar. The rest was then dashed into a large opening at the base of the altar. Day after day, morning and evening, blood was thrown against the large white stones that made the lower portion of the altar. The entire lower section of the altar, all four sides, was permanently stained. Jesus knew that blood could never be washed away.

He turned back to the lamb. Its blood was no longer spurting, just slowly oozing. The animal hung like a limp bag of wool.

The Holy Spirit spoke. “Blood is the life-giving part of the sacrifice.”

Jesus nodded, acknowledging the instruction.

At that moment, Jesus felt the Holy Spirit, like a warm breeze encircling his chilled body, engulfing his humanity. Unexpectedly, the breeze stopped, and Jesus sensed that the Spirit was all around him like a protective embrace. The Holy Spirit's commentary on the morning service continued, but now, Jesus viewed the activities around the altar through the glowing mist of heaven.

"So much blood," Jesus commented.

"The battle begins with blood," the Holy Spirit replied. "It was the first plague. All of God's people were enslaved, not one was free. Aaron took the wooden rod and touched the water of the Nile. Blood spread to every region where God's people lived in captivity. There must be enough blood for everyone."

Jesus responded to the Holy Spirit, "Every captive touched the blood. Then frogs, the symbols of demons, attacked. Both Egyptians and Israelites were tormented by those creatures from the pit of Satan."

The Holy Spirit then turned Jesus back to the lamb. Its skin had been removed, and it was being cut into six sections.

Obediently, Jesus watched, waiting for further insight. He noted the carefulness of those who used the knives. No bones were broken. Muscle was separated from muscle. Six white-robed priests waited. Each received a portion of the lamb. Solemnly, they processed up the ramp toward the burning fires on the upper surface of the altar. They were joined by two other priests. One carried the wine offering, and the other carried the unleavened bread offering.

The Holy Spirit spoke again. "Do you remember when your cousin John heard my voice? He pointed to you and said, *'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.'*⁵ It will be the time of the morning sacrifice when you, like this lamb, become the sacrifice."

Two priests walked between the fires that burned on top of the altar. Each one added a long beam of wood to the central fire.

Handfuls of salt were then thrown onto each part of the morning sacrifice. The Holy Spirit said, "I will preserve your life."

Then the six priests who carried the sacrifice began tossing the body of the lamb, piece by piece, into the fire. The bread was broken; half of each loaf was added to the flames. The wine was poured, like blood, into the proper place on the altar.

"The end?" Jesus chokingly asked.

"No," the Spirit answered. "Watch!"

While the coals glowed, red and orange, the flames licked the wood and the meat. Then one priest approached with a long poker. Methodically, he began to move the six parts of the lamb within the fire until he had put the pieces back together in the shape of the original animal.

"Surely your life will be separated from your body. Your flesh will be cut. Your blood will be poured out. But I will remain with you. I will restore your body and call it back to life after three days," the Holy Spirit confidently stated.

"What about the bread?" Jesus asked.

The Holy Spirit answered, "Half of the bread is placed on the fire for the morning sacrifice, and the other half is placed on the fire for the evening sacrifice. Then the sacrifice is complete."

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One." The deep male voices of the priests who had completed the morning sacrifice rose like the smoke from the burning meat. Chanting as they moved in single file, the priests walked past Jesus to their next assignment.

Beyond the altar, Jesus saw one priest slowly ascending the stairs to enter the Holy Sanctuary and burn incense on the small altar that stood in front of the great veil.

Immediately, there was activity everywhere in the vicinity of the great altar. Barefooted priests and early worshipers gathered. The Levitical choir lined up. A loud clang reverberated through the Temple courts. Every man prostrated himself on the stone floor. Jesus also stretched himself fully across the flat stones, his arms extended toward the sanctuary. Soon, white smoke billowed

out from the open doors of the Holy Place. It floated upward like the pillar of cloud that led Israel out of Egypt.

“The prayers of all mankind and especially your prayers come before God every day,” the Holy Spirit whispered. “They rise like this smoke.”

*“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”*⁶ With outstretched hands, the priests who had served that morning chanted the blessing over the people.

The choir began to sing.

*The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed in majesty and is armed with strength.
The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.
Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.*⁷

“Before we created this planet, before you breathed life into Adam and Eve, we recognized the potential for sin, and we made a plan,” the Holy Spirit whispered.

“I remember,” Jesus responded. “It is not an easy plan.”

The silver trumpets sounded. The choir began the second verse, and the people got up from the floor. Jesus moved to the place where the rabbis sat and taught whoever stopped to listen. He took his usual place.

Nicodemus walked by and greeted him. A few of the early morning worshipers stopped.

“Rabbi?” a man called to Jesus. “I heard that you cast a demon from a man who could not speak. When the demon was gone, he began to speak.”

“Is that true?” another asked.

“It is true! I was there,” Peter shouted a response as he led the other disciples to join Jesus.

“He does these things by the power of Satan!” the Pharisees muttered as they pressed close, attempting to gather evidence and to counter his influence.

Others in the gathering crowd tested him by demanding for a miraculous sign.

Jesus knew the thoughts of both the skeptical and the Temple elite so he said to them: "A nation divided by disagreements will be ruined, and a building without proper supports will collapse... Now if I heal and drive out demons by the power of the Evil One, by whom do these other teachers in the Temple drive them out?"

Above the melee of opinions, a woman exclaimed, "Your mother is such a fortunate woman!"

Jesus responded, "More fortunate are those who hear the word of God and obey it." These words were directed toward the Pharisees who hung on the periphery of the crowd, conferring after each statement. Peter kept a wary eye on those men. He sent James and John to casually stroll by and listen to what was being said.

James returned, reporting to Peter that those men wanted an opportunity to speak to Jesus privately, away from the crowds.

Jesus was still teaching. "The people of Nineveh will fare better at the judgment than the citizens of this nation. They repented when Jonah brought them a message of salvation. Now one greater than Jonah brings you a message from God, but so many here reject it." He paused and looked at the faces that surrounded him. Many appeared angry.

Jesus stood. He was finished with this unreceptive crowd. But before he could signal his disciples that they were leaving, one of the Pharisees approached and invited him to an afternoon meal.

In his heart, Jesus heard the Spirit's direction. So he, with his disciples, followed the man away from the Temple to the wealthy section of the city. Everyone went in, and without stopping at the water jars, Jesus and his disciples settled themselves around the low table in the dining hall. The Pharisees remained standing by the water jars, dipping and pouring, carefully alternating hands for the prescribed washings.

Peter was the first to notice their condemning glances and pious scowls. He whispered to his brother, Andrew, "I forgot. In a home like this, we are expected to dip and pour water over our hands before sitting at the table."

Andrew glanced at Jesus. Then he responded to his brother. "Jesus didn't wash. I just watched him and did what he did. What do I know about the protocol for homes in the upper city?"

Peter turned his head so he could see Jesus comfortably reclining, leaning on his left elbow. But the atmosphere in the room was not comfortable. Jesus had locked eyes with the condemning eyes of his host. With confident directness, Jesus addressed the standing men and their spirits. "You foolish Pharisees, you carefully clean the outside of the cup, but you leave the inside filthy. You are so concerned with appearances. That is why you make a show of counting each leaf and each seed when you give God a tenth of your harvest. At the same time, you neglect justice and godliness. Oh, and when you go to the market and the synagogue, how you love to be recognized and respectfully greeted." Jesus stood and stepped away from the table. His disciples followed their master's lead, standing and stepping away from the table. They exchanged glances that said, I don't think we will be eating this meal.

Then Jesus led his disciples to exit the room, but he paused in the entryway. There was a pregnant silence as Jesus stood face-to-face with his host and the other important guests. "Unclean—you are unclean, like unidentified graves which people stumble over, unaware.

One well-known teacher responded with alarm, "Rabbi, you insult us!" Jesus faced him. "You are a man with great education, but you do not use your knowledge to help people. Instead, you burden them down by adding convoluted regulations to the laws of Moses. Woe to you on Judgment Day."

Jesus stepped back so he could take in the entire group of men, representative of the Temple leadership. "You revere the

men of old who killed the prophets. You build their tombs and pay respect with your words; therefore, you are also responsible for the blood of God's prophets."

Angry voices fueled by evil spirits shouted back.

"How can this man who accepts the title 'Master Rabbi' speak such gross insults?"

"Is this any way for a guest to behave?"

"Truly, this man is from Galilee! Only Galileans would be so rude!"

By the Spirit, Jesus could feel his own disciples pull back in fear. They knew these angry men wielded enough power to have them beaten and imprisoned. These men could expel them from the Temple and from every synagogue in the land.

Over the melee of comments, another expert in the law voiced a final objection and Jesus answered him directly. "You experts in the laws of Moses—I fear for you! You have hidden the true knowledge of God from yourselves and from the people,"

Then Jesus turned and left. His disciples followed silently. The Pharisees and teachers followed him outside, berating and challenging him for every word he spoke.

Leaving most of them behind, Jesus with his disciples returned to the Temple. The day had progressed. The crowds had grown. In the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women, thousands had gathered shoulder-to-shoulder so movement was difficult. Looking over his shoulder, Jesus could see that a few Pharisees were still following, but not as closely because of the pressing people.

Beside one of the columns, Jesus paused and the men who were his close followers gathered around to hear his thoughts.

"As I have said many times before, *'Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.'*"⁸

Jesus pointed to the table where the poor were paying for the small birds that would be their sacrifices. "*Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed,*

the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."⁹

The Pharisees who had been following Jesus were now pressing close, trying to involve themselves in the private moment that Jesus was having with his disciples.

Jesus saw them and addressed his next remark to them. *"And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven."*¹⁰ When you throw up a barricade against the quiet urging in your heart that says believe, you are denying the Spirit of God."

Jesus turned back to his disciples. "Do not fear these men. Their authority is limited. *When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.*"¹¹

Someone walking by recognized Jesus and shouted, "There is the healer!"

"The rabbi from Galilee is here!" another announced.

The crowd surged.

The strong fishermen who were Jesus's disciples made a barricade with their bodies so Jesus would not be physically overwhelmed.

From somewhere in the sea of pressing bodies, a voice called, "Rabbi, tell my brother that he must divide the inheritance evenly with me."

Jesus answered, "Am I an arbiter of estates?"

Immediately, Jesus made eye contact with some of the teachers of the law. "No, I am a teacher who expounds on the word of God. Be careful! Greed is a trap. Once you are ensnared, it is difficult to escape."

One teacher dropped his head as Holy Spirit conviction tried to establish a foothold in his heart.

Jesus then turned back to the crowd and began telling a story. "The fields of a certain rich man produced a larger crop than

expected. After pondering the problem of sales and storage, the man decided to tear down his old barns and build larger ones. With satisfaction in his heart, he said to himself, ‘Now, I will have more than enough for many years.’”

Jesus paused to let his eyes roam over the faces in the crowd. Most were open to the idea of prosperity. Some were even living in luxury.

The Holy Spirit highlighted one man, and Jesus looked directly at him as he continued the story. “That very night, God spoke to the man, ‘You are a fool! Before dawn, your life will be taken from you. Then who will inherit all you have stored?’”

Jesus returned his attention to the whole audience. “Right now, stop worrying about enough food and adequate clothing. Do not lay awake at night considering various ways to protect and grow your wealth. Our Father in heaven knows your needs. Seek him and his kingdom first. Do not be afraid to sell all you own and donate to the poor. That way, you will acquire treasure in heaven. It cannot be stolen or lost. Remember, your heart remains close to your treasure.”

A man in the crowd then pushed through and loudly asked, “Rabbi, did you hear about the men who were killed by Pilate’s soldiers while they were at the altar offering their sacrifices?”

“It happened yesterday,” another shouted.

More voices added information.

“They were Galileans, probably Zealots.”

“Did you know them?”

“Were they worse sinners than Jews from Jerusalem?”

Jesus shook his head negatively as he began to respond.



Governor Pilate and Chief Centurion Longinus looked down on the milling masses in the Temple courts.

Pilate commented, “Usually, I only leave my comfortable palace by the Great Sea for the major gatherings in Jerusalem, but now, with so much unrest, I feel obligated to show up for every occasion, even their Feast of Dedication.”

Longinus responded, “If we could just get that bandit who calls himself Barabbas then things would settle down. Some say he is another deliverer like Judah Maccabee who will put an end to all foreign occupation.”

Pilate looked at the commander of the fortress that was attached to the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. “At this feast, more than any other, the Jews dream of throwing off the oversight of Rome and living as an independent nation. They believe it will happen when their Messiah emerges from the population.” Pilate shook his head at the absurdity of such thinking. Then, he turned back to his military commander. “What do we know about this man Barabbas?”

“Yesterday, we killed some of his followers, but we kept one man for questioning.”

Pilate gave a satisfied nod.

Longinus continued, “Barabbas heads up a network of rebels. His men are responsible for most of the highway robbery in Judea. They are also attacking the estates of the wealthy. His men used to work mostly in Galilee, but now, they have extended into our jurisdiction.”

“Old Antipas can’t take care of the problems in his own territory. He lets them grow until they spill over into my region,” Pilate complained.

Pragmatically, Pilate then returned to dealing effectively with this threat to Rome’s authority. “Did you find out where this bandit messiah is hiding?”

Longinus answered. “We believe he is somewhere beneath the northern area of this city.”

Pilate raised a questioning brow.

“From the Temple Mount, extending beyond the northern walls of the city, there is a maze of underground caverns and winding passages. Some are man-made. Some are natural. We have good access through the stone quarry. I have sent men in there. A few never returned,” Longinus reported.

“Smoke him out,” Pilate tersely directed.

“I’ll meet with my officers tomorrow. We will devise a plan,” Longinus replied.

Pilate gave another satisfied nod, then he changed the subject. “I brought twelve gold shields with me from Caesarea. I had them specially made to honor our emperor and to commemorate the new territories that have been added to the empire. I want the shields hung in the banquet hall in Herod’s old palace. They are to be in place within two days. On the first day of next week, the military officers who defeated the Nabataeans are gathering here, in Jerusalem, to toast Rome and to celebrate their victory. We are hosting the occasion. Everyone will be housed in the old palace. Food and drink will be plentiful.”

“Since King Antipas caused the problem that forced Rome to attack the Nabataeans, is he paying for some of this?” Longinus asked.

“I’ll send him a bill,” Pilate smugly replied. “But I am not sending him an invitation.”

Longinus chuckled. “May the gods of Rome always smile on you and frown on all your enemies, both political and military.”

Pilate nodded again. Then he became very serious. “I received a letter from my cousin in Rome. By order of the emperor, there has been a major bloodbath. Nearly everyone who was appointed to a position of importance by Sejanus has been executed. Their immediate and sometimes their extended families have been killed: wives, children, servants—everyone! The violence associated with this retribution is horrible: pillage, rape, even desecration of the bodies. Barbarians behave with more decency than those who acted on behalf of Rome in this instance.”

Longinus's face mirrored the seriousness of his superior. "I know you received the appointment to govern this province from Sejanus. I want to assure you, I have had no communication from Rome calling for your detainment."

Pilate gave another affirmative nod. At the same time, an unintended sigh of relief slipped out.

Both men then turned their attention back to the masses of people filling each section of the Temple.



Jesus pulled on the sleeve of Peter's robe. Peter made eye contact with him, and Jesus indicated that it was time to break free from the crowd that had gathered around them.

Peter signaled the others and together the men made a human wedge, forcing an opening in the crowd so Jesus could walk toward an exit.

Escaping most of the people, Jesus, with his friends, strolled through Solomon's Colonnade. Suddenly, he was noticed again. A crowd gathered around him. "How long will you allow us to wonder? Are you the Messiah? If so, announce it."

Jesus stopped walking. "I have told you and shown you, but you do not believe. I speak and I heal in my Father's name. Isn't that the answer to your question? Some recognize my authority like sheep recognize their shepherd. They follow me, and I have promised them eternal life."

Then the crowd became angry. They picked up stones and raised their hands to throw them.

But Jesus responded to their anger with a question. "I have healed and fed many. Which specific good deed offends you?"

"Your good deeds do not offend us. It is the way you speak, like you are equal to God. That is blasphemy!"

Jesus answered, "I have not spoken an unlawful word. I have only done the works of my Father. He is in me, and I am in him."

Angry hands reached for his robe. Stones flew through the air. After a few moments, confusion reigned because Jesus and those with him had slipped away, escaping their grasp.

Then Jesus took the twelve who were his closest disciples across the Jordan to the place where they had begun their ministry with John the Baptist.