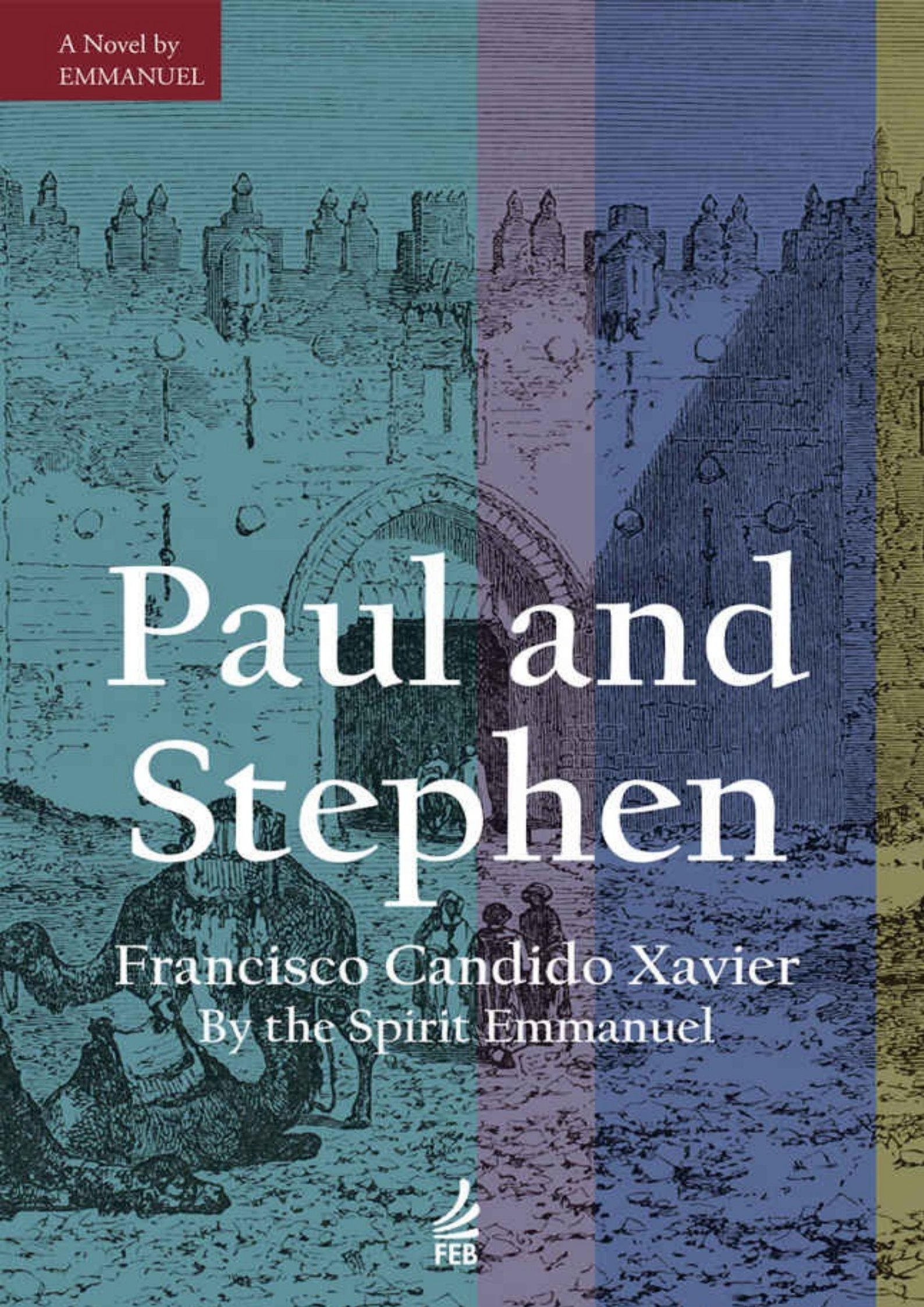


A Novel by
EMMANUEL



Paul and Stephen

Francisco Candido Xavier
By the Spirit Emmanuel



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Francisco Candido Xavier

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Historic episodes of primitive christianity

A novel dictated by the Spirit
Emmanuel

Translated by: Darrel W. Kimble and Ily Reis



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Preface

There is no small number of works around the world concerning the glorious endeavors of the Apostle to the Gentiles. It is right, therefore, to expect the question: Why another book about Paul of Tarsus? Is it an homage to the great worker of the Gospel or does it contain more-detailed information on his life?

As for the first question, we will be the first to acknowledge the fact that the Damascus convert does not need our petty homage; as for the second, we will answer in the affirmative so as to reach our proposed goal, i.e., using the resources within our reach, we aim to transfer onto paper something from the traditions of the spirit world regarding the work entrusted to the great friend of the Gentiles.

Our main purpose will not be simply to recall the sublime events of apostolic times, but rather to specially present the figure of the faithful worker in his true character as a man transformed by Jesus Christ and mindful of his divine ministry. We would also emphasize the fact that it is not our intention to produce only a biography in the form of a novel. The world is replete with these instructional records regarding its most notable figures. Our highest and most sincere desire is to call to mind the harsh struggles and bitter testimonies of an extraordinary soul who rose above human struggles in an incessant effort to follow the steps of the Master.

Today's lukewarm churches and believers' misguided desires in the various sectors of Christianity justify our intentions.

Everywhere, there is a tendency toward spiritual idleness and displays of least effort. Many disciples compete for the privileges of this condition, while others intentionally avoid honorable work by praying for supernatural watch-care from heaven. Churches and devotees give themselves joyfully to accommodating situations, preferring materialistic rules and pleasures.

In observing this regrettable panorama, it would be worthwhile to recall the unforgettable figure of the generous Apostle.

Many have written about Paul's life, but when they have not attributed to him certain titles of favor granted by heaven without cost, they have presented him as a dry-hearted fanatic. To some, he was a predestined saint, to whom Jesus appeared in a mechanical maneuver of grace; to others, he was an arbitrary mind, domineering and strict, prone to strife with his fellow men with almost ruthless vanity.

We will not confine ourselves within these two extremes.

We certainly want to remember that Paul received the holy gift of the glorious vision of the Master at the gates of Damascus, but we must not forget Jesus' declaration regarding the suffering that awaited him for the love of His name.

The fact is that the unforgettable weaver and tentmaker did indeed have his own divine ministry, but who in this world does not have a ministry from God? Many will say they do not know what their particular calling is, that they are ignorant in this respect; however, we will answer that, besides ignorance, there is neglect and much pernicious caprice. Those who are more exacting will remark that Paul received a direct call from God, but in reality all ordinary men and women have been personally called to serve Christ. The form may vary but the essence of the summons is always the same. The call to the ministry sometimes arrives subtly, unexpectedly; most people, however, are resistant to the Lord's generous invitation. Very well, Jesus is not a Master of forceful means, and if the figure of Paul appears to be greater in our eyes, it is because he hearkened to the call, repented, denied himself, took up his cross and followed Christ to the end of his work on the earth. Amid persecution, infirmities, derision, mockery, disillusionment, desertions, stonings, beatings and imprisonment, Paul of Tarsus was a courageous and sincere man walking in the darkness of the world to meet the Master who made Himself heard at the crossroads of his life. Paul was much more than a predestined individual; he was an accomplisher who strived daily to reach the light.

The Master calls him from his realm of immortal radiance. Paul fumbles in the darkness of human experience and replies: "Lord, what would you have me do?"

Between Jesus and him there was an abyss, which the Apostle crossed over in decades of ongoing, redemptive struggle.

Our objective is to demonstrate this struggle as an example of how much effort we must put into our own endeavor to meet Jesus.

Another purpose of this humble effort is to acknowledge the fact that the Apostle could not have achieved his potential in this world by himself.

Without Stephen, we would have no Paul of Tarsus. The great martyr of nascent Christianity exerted much more influence on the Pauline experience than we could imagine solely through the known texts of earthly studies. The lives of both men were entwined in mysterious beauty. The contribution of Stephen and other personages of this true story confirm the necessity and universality of the law of working together. And to demonstrate the breadth of this concept, we should remember that Jesus, whose compassion and power touched everything, sought the company of twelve helpers in order to undertake the world's renewal.

Moreover, without working together, love could not exist; and love is the power of God that gives balance to the universe.

I can already see the critics consulting texts and matching Bible verses in order to point out the errors of our humble endeavor.¹ To the well-meaning, we are sincerely grateful for their acknowledging our condition as a fallible being, and we would state that this unpretentious book was written by a spirit for those who live in spirit. And in answer to ever-present dogmatic or literary pedantry, we would seek recourse in the Gospel itself and repeat that if the letter kills, the spirit gives life.

Therefore, in offering this humble work to our earthbound brothers and sisters, we hope that the example of the Great Convert may enlighten our minds so that all disciples may understand how much they need to work and suffer for the love of Jesus Christ.

EMMANUEL

Pedro Leopoldo (MG), Brazil, July 8, 1941.

¹ Emmanuel is referring to the apparent inconsistencies between his narrative and the biblical texts, particularly the Acts of the Apostles. We have offered explanations for some of these "inconsistencies" in an attempt to harmonize the author's text with the biblical record as far as possible; however, we would urge the reader to bear the author's statement in mind while reading the account. Emmanuel is telling the story based on the traditions of the spirit realm. – Tr.

PART ONE

I

Afflicted Hearts

The morning dawned joyful and sunny, but the main streets of Corinth were nearly deserted.

Blowing in from far away, the usual scented breeze was playing in the air; however, neither the unconcerned smiles of the children nor the normal movement of the luxurious chariots on their daily rounds was to be seen on the magnificent public streets.

Rebuilt by Julius Caesar, the city was the most beautiful jewel of old Achaia and served as the capital of the charming province. After a century of deplorable neglect following its destruction by Mumius, one could no longer find the Hellenic spirit in all its ancient purity within its walls, because in restoring it, the great emperor had transformed Corinth into an important colony of Romans, into which flowed a large number of freemen anxious for paid work or merchants in search of the promise of fortune. A huge stream of Jews had joined them, along with a considerable percentage of “children” of other races, thereby transforming the city into a meeting place for all sorts of adventurers from the East and the West. Its culture was far removed from the intellectual accomplishments of the most eminent Greek taste, with a wide array of temples mingled together in its squares. Perhaps in obedience to this heterogeneity of sentiments, Corinth had become famous for the libertine traditions of the great majority of its inhabitants.

The Romans found a huge outlet for their passions there, giving themselves over frenziedly to the venomous fragrance of that garden of exotic flowers. Alongside the splendor and the sparkling gems, the swamp of moral debauchery exhaled its sickening stench. Tragedy has always been the pain-filled price of easy pleasures. From time to time, huge scandals demanded ruthless repression.

In the year 34 A.D. the whole city had been afflicted by a violent revolt

of its oppressed slaves.

Terrible crimes had been committed in the shadows, demanding severe inquiries. The proconsul had not hesitated before this grave situation. He dispatched official messengers to Rome requesting the resources he needed. And the resources were not long in coming. Aided by favorable winds, a galley bearing the imperial eagle soon brought in its hold authorities on a punitive mission that would clarify the situation.

That is why on that radiant and cheery morning, the residential buildings and business shops were enveloped in deep silence, half-closed and somber. There were few pedestrians except for groups of soldiers, who crossed the streets carefree and content like those who gladly indulge themselves with novelties.

A few days ago a Roman official – whose name was associated with a somber tradition – had been received by the Provincial Court to assume the high post as Caesar's legate. He was surrounded by a large number of political and military agents, and wrought terror among all classes with his infamous actions. Licinius Minucius had come to power using every resource of intrigue and slander. Returning to Corinth, where he had been stationed years before, but without a great amount of authority, he was now risking everything in order to increase his fortune, the fruit of an insatiable and unscrupulous greed. He intended to retire some day in that place, where his private properties had reached grand proportions in anticipation of his decrepitude. Thus, in order to consummate his criminal purposes, he had initiated a large program of arbitrary expropriations under the pretext of guaranteeing public order on behalf of the powerful Empire represented by his authority.

Numerous families of Jewish origin had been chosen as the preferred victims of his wicked extortion.

The outcries of the oppressed could be heard everywhere, but who would dare the recourse of a public or official complaint? Slavery always awaited those who yielded to any impulse of freedom against the expressions of Roman tyranny. It was not only the despicable figure of the hateful official that was a distressful and permanent threat to the city. His cohorts were stationed at various points on the public streets, creating unbearable scenes characteristic of unconscionable perversity.

It was mid morning when an elderly man with a basket in his hands – giving the impression he was heading for the marketplace – slowly crossed a large, sunny square.

A group of Roman tribunes shouted at him with degrading jests amid sarcastic guffaws of laughter.

The old man, whose facial features revealed he was Jewish, showed that he was aware of the ridicule being hurled at him, but he avoided the military patricians as if to protect himself by moving along more timidly and humbly in silence.

At that moment, though, one of the tribunes, whose authoritative look betrayed malicious intent, approached him and exclaimed rudely: “Hey you despicable Jew, how dare you walk by without greeting your masters!”

The old man froze, pale and trembling. His eyes revealed a strange anguish, which in its silent eloquence summed up all the infinite suffering that afflicted his race. His wrinkled hands trembled slightly, while he bowed respectfully, pressing his long, white beard against his chest.

“Your name?” the officer asked between disrespect and sarcasm.

“Jochedeb, son of Jared,” he answered meekly.

“And why did you not greet the imperial tribunes?”

“Sir, I did not dare!” he explained, nearly in tears.

“Did not dare?” asked the officer gruffly.

And before the older man could explain himself further, the imperial mandatary closed his fists and began pummeling the venerable face with successive, merciless blows.

“Here! Take that!” he exclaimed rudely at the roar of laughter from his buddies, who were all in a festive mood. “Keep this as a souvenir! Loathsome dog, learn to be grateful and show some good manners!”

The old man reeled but did not fight back. One could perceive a deep inner revolt in the smoldering, indignant glance he cast at his assailant with grim composure. He spontaneously glance at his arms, wrinkled from struggle and suffering, and realized how useless it would be to retaliate. That was when the unexpected tormentor, observing Jochedeb’s silent calm, seemed to measure the extent of his own cowardice. Placing his hands on the intricate

armor of his belt, he said with profound contempt: “Now that you have had your lesson, you can go look for the marketplace, you insolent Jew!”

His victim gave him a look of anxious bitterness, in which all the pain-filled heartaches of a long existence were obvious. Framed by his simple tunic and venerable old age, haloed by hair whitened by the most painful experiences of life, his gaze was similar to an invisible dart that would forever pierce the conscience of his disrespectful and evil aggressor. However, his wounded dignity did not hold its posture of inexpressible reproach for long. Without further ado and enduring the jests of the officers’ mockery, he proceeded toward the objective that had brought him into the street in the first place.

Old Jochedeb was experiencing strange and embittering thoughts. Two warm, dolorous tears ran down his gaunt face to become lost in the gray strands of his venerable beard. What had he done to deserve such ruthless abuse? The city had been afflicted by the rebelliousness of numerous slaves, but his small home continued in the peace of those who work with devotion and obedience to God.

The humiliation he had suffered made him turn his thoughts back to the most trying periods of the history of his people. For what reason and for how long would the Jews endure being persecuted by the world’s most powerful? For what reason had they always been stigmatized in every corner of the earth as unworthy and wretched? Nonetheless, they sincerely loved that Father of justice and love who watched from heaven over the greatness of their faith and the everlastingness of their destiny. While other peoples had squandered their spiritual strength, trading sacred hopes for expressions of selfishness and idolatry, Israel had kept the law of the one God, making an effort in every circumstance to keep her religious heritage intact, though at the cost of her political independence.

Distressed, the old man reflected on his own fate.

A dedicated husband, he had been widowed when that same Licinius Minucius – quaestor of the Empire years earlier – had established abominable procedures in Corinth in order to punish certain elements of its discontent and rebellious population. Jochedeb’s own large personal fortune had been drastically reduced and he had had to suffer unjust imprisonment as the result of false accusations, causing him great grief and costing him the extensive confiscation of his properties. His wife could not bear the successive blows

that had mortally wounded her sensitive heart and they brought her to her death, vexed with bitter grief. She left him two children who were the crown of hope for his laborious existence. Jeziel and Abigail had nearly grown up under his loving care, and because of them, in the accumulation of his sacred domestic obligation, he felt that the snow of the human pathway had whitened his hair prematurely as he devoted his holiest experiences to God. The graceful profile of his children then came to enliven his mind. For their sake it was soothing to know the pleasing aspect of the world's experiences. The filial treasure repaid him for the afflictions he endured at each incidental occurrence in life. The memory of home, where the tender love of his children fed his fatherly hopes, relieved his bitterness.

What did the brutality of the Roman conqueror matter when his old age was graced with the most sacred affections of the heart? Comforted by this consolation, he arrived at the market where he bought what he needed.

The activity in the market that day was not as heavy as usual. However, there was a certain amount of competition among the buyers, especially the freedmen and the small scale proprietors who flowed in off the roads from Cenchrea.

Jochedeb had barely finished buying some fish and vegetables, when a plush litter stopped in the middle of the square. A patrician official got off and unrolled a large scroll. At his motion for silence every other voice became mute while the voice of the strange figure rang out loudly as he faithfully read the decree:

“Licinius Minucius, imperial quaestor and legate of Caesar, charged with opening in this province the inquest required for re-establishing order in all Achaia, hereby invites all inhabitants of Corinth who consider themselves to have been harmed in their personal interests, or who find themselves in need of legal help, to appear tomorrow at noon at the provincial palace next to the Temple of Venus Pandemos in order to express their complaints and claims, which shall be fully attended to by the relevant authorities.”

After reading the proclamation, the messenger returned to his elegant carriage, which, borne by herculean slaves' arms, disappeared around the first corner, enveloped in a cloud of dust raised by the swirling morning wind.

There was a rash of speculation and opinions amongst the onlookers.

The complainants were countless. Right from the start the legate and his agents had taken away small territorial estates from the majority of the

humblest families whose financial resources were unable to meet the costs of suing in the provincial court. Consequently, a wave of hope captivated the hearts of many, while pessimism filled those of others who saw nothing in the edict but a new trap to force the complainants to pay very dearly for their just claims.

Jochedeb had listened to the official communication and placed himself immediately among those who deemed themselves entitled to expect legal compensation for damages suffered in the past. Encouraged by high hopes, he began the walk home, choosing a longer route so as to avoid a new encounter with those who had so rudely humiliated him.

He had not gone far when another group of Roman officers talking loudly appeared before him, flooding the clear morning with cheer.

After having faced the first group of tribunes, and sensing himself now the target of demeaning comments expressed in sneering laughter, the old Israelite thought: "Should I greet them or should I go my own way mute and reverent as I tried to do the first time?" Concerned about avoiding another confrontation that might worsen the humiliation of the day he bowed deeply like a miserable slave and murmured timidly: "Hail, valorous tribunes of Caesar!"

He had barely spoken, when a hard-looking and gruff officer approached him angrily: "What is this? A Jew impudently addressing patricians? Has the condemnable tolerance of the provincial authorities gone so far? We'll just take justice into our own hands."

And blows once again struck the aching face of the unfortunate man, who had to concentrate all his strength on the will not to fight back in desperation. Without a word to explain himself, the son of Jared endured the cruel abuse. His racing heart seemed to burst with anguish in his old chest; however, his look reflected the intense revolt he held in his oppressed soul. Unable to coordinate his thoughts due to the unexpected aggression, in his humble posture he noticed that this time blood was gushing from his nose, staining his white beard and his plain linen garment. But this fact did not bother the aggressor, who struck one final blow on his wrinkled forehead, murmuring: "Away with you, you cur!"

Jochedeb made an effort to bear the basket hanging from his trembling arms and staggered away, suppressing the explosion of his extreme despair. "Ah! To be old!" he thought. At the same time, the symbols of his faith

changed his spiritual disposition and he felt in his heart the old word of the Law: “You shall not kill.” And yet, in his view the divine teachings contained in the voice of the Prophets advised him to retaliate: “An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth.” His spirit harbored the intent of reprisal as an answer for the reparation he thought he was entitled to, but his physical strength was not up to the requisites of the reaction.

Deeply humiliated and afflicted by anguishing thoughts, he headed home, where he would seek counsel from his loving children, in whose affection he would certainly find advice and the inspiration he needed.

His modest house was not far, and in his distress he saw in the distance the small, simple roof of the little house that he had made the shrine of his love. He hurriedly strode down the path that ended at a rustic gate that was nearly smothered by Abigail’s roses exhaling a strong and delightful fragrance. Green-leafed trees spread shade and freshness, diminishing the severity of the sun. A clear, friendly voice came from afar to his ears. His fatherly soul guessed whose it was. At that hour Jeziel, according to the schedule he himself had outlined, was plowing the soil, preparing it for the first sowing. His son’s voice seemed married to the joy of the sun. The old Hebraic song flowing from the young man’s warm lips was a hymn of exaltation to work and nature. The generous melodious verses spoke of the love of the land and the constant watch-care of God. The father made an effort to repress the tears in his heart. The folk melody transported him to a world of reflection. Hadn’t he worked all his life? Hadn’t he been an honest man in the smallest deeds of his life so that he would never lose the title of being righteous? Nevertheless, the blood of cruel persecution was there, dropping from his venerable beard upon his white tunic, yet free of any blemish that could torment his conscience.

He had hardly passed through the rustic gate to the humble little house, when a loving voice cried out, urgent and frightened: “Father! Father! What’s this blood?”

A young girl of remarkable beauty ran to embrace him with immense tenderness while taking the basket from his trembling and aching hands.

Abigail, in the candidness of her eighteen years, graciously summed up all the beauty of the women of her race. Her silky hair fell over her shoulders in whimsical curls, molding her attractive face in a harmonious combination of kindness and beauty. And yet, the most impressive feature of her slender,

girlish figure was her deep black eyes, in which an intense inner vibration seemed to speak of the highest mysteries of love and life.

“My little child; my dear daughter!” Jochedeb murmured, supporting himself in her gentle arms.

He quickly told her all that had happened. And while the old father bathed his injured face in the soothing balm his daughter had carefully prepared, she called Jeziel to hear what had happened.

The young man came running promptly and concerned. He embraced his father and listened to his bitter tale word by word. In the flower of his youth, Jeziel could not have been more than twenty-five years old, but the restraint of his gestures and the seriousness with which he expressed himself led one to see a noble spirit, judicious and served by a crystal clear conscience.

“Take heart, father!” Jeziel exclaimed after hearing the woeful account, adding an accent of tenderness to his expressions of firmness. “Our God is just and wise. Let us trust in his protection.”

Jochedeb contemplated his son from head to toe and gazed into his benevolent and calm eyes. He hoped to perceive at that moment the indignation that seemed to him natural and just, filled as he was by the desire for revenge. It was true that he had raised Jeziel for the pure joy of duty in obedience to loyally fulfilling the law; nonetheless, nothing compelled him to abandon his thoughts of retaliation so as to avenge the outrage he had experienced.

“Son,” said Jochedeb after a long pause for thought, “the Lord is full of justice, but as his chosen ones, the children of Israel also must exercise justice. Could we be just if we were to forget the offenses against us? I could not rest if my conscience was not clear for having fulfilled my duties. I must point out the wrongs to which I have fallen victim both now and in the past, so tomorrow I shall go to the legate to settle my score.”

The young Hebrew made a gesture of surprise and added: “Are you perchance going to the quaestor Licinius in hopes of a legal settlement? What about what happened the last time, Father? Wasn’t he the same patrician who confiscated your large estate and threw you into prison? Can’t you see that he has the power of evil in his hands? Shouldn’t we fear a new attack to extort what little we have left?”

Jochedeb looked deeply into his son's eyes, but according to the rigidity of his character and accustomed to seeing his will through to the end, he said almost dryly: "As you know, I have both old and new scores to settle, and in conformance with the edict, tomorrow I shall take advantage of the opportunity the provincial government has given us."

"Father, I beg you," warned the young man between respect and tenderness, "do not seek this recourse!"

"What about the persecutions?" exploded the old man forcefully. "And this incessant whirlwind of disgrace enveloping our people? Will there never be an end to this path of unending sorrow? Will we watch defenseless the affront of our most sacred possessions? My heart revolts against these hateful crimes that strike us with impunity."

His voice had become weary and melancholic, revealing extreme discouragement. However, Jeziel was unphased by his father's objections and pursued the matter: "But these torments are nothing new. Centuries ago Egyptian Pharaohs took their cruelty so far with our forebears that the boys of our people were murdered at birth. In Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes ordered women and children beheaded in their own homes. From time to time in Rome, all Jews suffer abuse and confiscation, persecution and death. But certainly, Father, God allows these things to happen so that Israel may recognize her divine mission amid the most atrocious suffering."

The old Israelite seemed to consider his son's words; however, he added firmly: "Yes, all this is true, but farthing by farthing, justice must be done, and nothing will persuade me otherwise."

"Then tomorrow you will go before the legate, after all?"

"Yes!"

At that moment, Jeziel gazed at the old table where the family's collection of the Sacred Scriptures lay. Animated by sudden inspiration he said humbly: "Father, I have no right to persuade you otherwise, but let us see what God's word tells us about what you are thinking right now."

And opening the text at random as was the custom of the time, and in order to find out what suggestions the sacred words might offer them, he read from the book of Proverbs: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, nor resent His rebuke, for the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights."²

The old Israelite widened his eyes in surprise, revealing the amazement that the indirect message had caused him; and as Jeziel gazed at him at length, longing to know his innermost thoughts in light of the advice of the sacred scroll, he said: "I acknowledge the warning of the Writings, my son, but I'll not resign myself to injustice, and as I have decided, I shall take my claim to the relevant authorities."

The young man sighed and said with resignation: "God help us."

* * *

The following morning a dense crowd began building up next to the popular Temple of Venus. From the old building where an improvised court was at work, one could see the luxurious and extravagant vehicles that were crisscrossing the large square in all directions. They contained either patricians headed for hearings in the Provincial Court or old proprietors of Corinth's private wealth who indulged in the day's entertainment at the expense of the sweat of wretched captives. Unusual activity was underway, and one could from time to time observe drunken officials as they left the debauched environs of the famous goddess's temple clogged with heady perfume and condemnable pleasures.

Jochedeb crossed the square without stopping to notice any details in the crowd around him. He went into the enclosure where Licinius Minucius, surrounded by several assistants and soldiers, was dispatching numerous orders.

There were only a little more than a hundred who had dared to press a public complaint. After giving their individual statements under the legate's piercing stare, they were conducted one by one to the solution of their respective cases.

When his turn came, the old Israelite explained his specific claims regarding the undue expropriations of the past and the offenses of which he had been the victim the day before, while from atop his seat the proud patrician took note of all his words and postures as if he had already known this person for a long time. Jochedeb was led back inside and awaited with others the solution to his request for the indemnification he felt he deserved. However, as the others were called by name to settle their accounts with the provincial government, he noticed that the ancient building was becoming shrouded in silence, and he thought that maybe his case had been postponed for reasons he could not imagine.

When he was called by name to appear before the judge, Jochedeb was greatly surprised to hear that his case had been denied. An official who worked as the secretary of that jurisdiction read the sentence: "In the name of Caesar, the imperial legate hereby has resolved to order the confiscation of the alleged property of Jochedeb ben Jared, granting him three days to vacate the land he unduly occupies, as it belongs in all legality to the quaestor Licinius Minucius, who is able to prove, at any time, his right of ownership."

This unanticipated decision brought the old Israelite intense distress. In his mind, the words he heard had the effect of a death sentence. He could not even begin to express his heartbreaking surprise. Hadn't he trusted in justice and hadn't he looked forward to its redemptive action? He wanted to shout out his hatred, to express his poignant disillusionment, but his tongue seemed petrified in his contracted and trembling mouth. After a minute of profound anxiety, Jochedeb fixed his gaze on the detestable figure of the old patrician who had now brought him this ultimate ruin. Enveloping the Roman in the wrath of his rebelling and suffering soul, he found the strength to say: "O most illustrious quaestor, where is the equity of your sentence? I came here to implore the intervention of justice and you reward my trust with one more extortion that will ruin my life? In the past, I suffered the improper divestiture of all my landed possessions, retaining at great sacrifice the humble little farm where I intend to await death! ... Is it possible that you, the owner of such opulent estates, feel no remorse in taking from a poor old man his last crust of bread?"

Without a gesture that would denote a hint of emotion, the arrogant Roman replied dryly: "Away with you! No arguing an imperial decision!"

"No arguing?" Jochedeb protested, already out of his mind. "Shall I not raise my voice to curse the memory of the Roman criminals who dispossessed me? Your hands have been poisoned with the blood of your victims and the tears of widows and dispossessed orphans; where will you hide them when the hour of judgment strikes in the Tribunal of God?"

But then suddenly remembering his home filled with the tenderness of his loving children, his mental attitude changed as he was touched in his innermost sentiments. Throwing himself on his knees in convulsive weeping, he exclaimed movingly: "Have mercy on me, Excellency! Leave me my humble home, where above all I am a father ... My children wait for me with sincere and devoted affection!"

And suffocated by tears he added: "I have two children who are the hopes of my soul. Spare me for God's sake! I promise to be content with my lot. I shall never complain again!"

However, the impassive legate reacted coldly, addressing a soldier: "Spartacus, remove this impertinent Jew with his lamentations and give him ten lashes."

The soldier prepared to carry out the order immediately, but the implacable judge added: "Be careful not to cut his face so that the blood will not upset passers-by."

On his knees, poor Jochedeb endured his punishment. When it was over, he got up and staggered to the sunny square under the muffled laughter of those who had witnessed the degrading scene. Never in his life had he felt such intense despair as right now. He wanted to weep but his eyes were cold and dry; he wanted to mourn his immense misfortune but his lips were frozen with revolt and sorrow. He looked like a zombie wandering unconsciously among the carriages and pedestrians gathered in the huge square. He contemplated the temple of Venus with extreme inner repugnance. He wished he had a powerful, resounding voice so that he could humiliate all onlookers with words of condemnation. Observing the crowned courtesans, the armored Roman tribunes and the indolent attitude of the lucky people who passed by unaware of his suffering as they lay lazily on the stately litters of the time, he felt as if he were submerged in one of the most hateful swamps in the world, among the sins that the prophets of his people never tired of condemning with all the power of souls dedicated to the Almighty. To his eyes Corinth was a new rendition of the condemned and despicable Babylon.

Suddenly, in spite of the torments that troubled his exhausted soul, he again remembered his dear children and felt beforehand the profound sorrow that the news of the verdict would cause their sensitive and affectionate spirits. The memory of Jeziel's tenderness touched his heart now galvanized by suffering. Jochedeb had the impression of still seeing him at his feet, begging him to give up any idea of complaining; and in his ears the exhortation of the Scriptures now resounded more intensely: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline!" But at the same time, thoughts of destruction entered his tired and pain-filled mind. The sacred Law was full of allegories of justice. And to him it had been a supreme obligation to seek the reparation that seemed appropriate. Now, he was returning home in utter desolation, despoiled of all his most humble and simple possessions – and at the end of

his life! Where would tomorrow's bread come from? Without work and with no roof over his head, he felt he was being forced into a parasitical situation alongside the youth of his children. Unthinkable mental torment suffocated his soul.

Dominated by bitter thoughts, he approached the beloved place where he had built his family nest. The hot afternoon sun made the shade of the luxuriant, green branches of the trees sweeter. Jochedeb walked onto the lot that was his property, and dismayed at the prospect of abandoning it forever, he allowed terrible temptations to infiltrate his mind. Didn't Licinius's land border his small farm? He walked off the path leading to his home and went into the nearby thicket. After a few steps he looked for some time at the borderline between his and his tormentor's fields. The land on the other side did not look well cared for. Due to the lack of proper distribution of the common water, one could perceive a certain overall dryness. Only a few sparse trees softened the landscape with their shade, refreshing the region deserted amid briers and weeds choking the good grass.

Obsessed by the idea of reparation and revenge, the old Israelite decided to set his neighbor's pasture on fire. He would not consult his children; they would probably make him change his mind, inclined as they were to tolerance and benevolence. Jochedeb walked back a few steps, and making use of some materials kept nearby, he set fire to a patch of dry grass. The flames spread rapidly and in a few minutes the fire was spreading with lightning speed.

Having finished his task and with his bones aching, he returned groggily home, where Abigail in vain asked him the reason for such acute low spirits. Jochedeb lay down and waited for his son. However, a deafening roar soon resounded in his ears.

Not far from the small farm, the fire was destroying trees and verdant foliage, reducing the green pastures to handfuls of ashes. A huge area was burning out of control, and he could hear the mournful cries of the birds fleeing in despair. Some of the quaestor's small improvements, including a few of his picturesque thermal baths built amid the trees, were also burning to black ashes. Here and there, the uproar of the field laborers could be heard as they desperately fought to save the powerful patrician's country house from destruction, or as they tried to isolate the fiery serpent that was licking the soil in every direction and approaching the neighboring orchards.

Hours of anxiety led to the direst outlook, but by the late afternoon the fire had been contained after a huge effort.

To no avail, the old Jew had sent messengers to look for his son within the confines of his small property. He wished to talk to Jeziel about his needs and the grievous situation facing them once again. He longed to rest his tormented mind in the soothing words of his tender son. However, only at night, garments burnt and hands slightly injured, did Jeziel enter the house, displaying on his worn-out face the laborious task in which he had taken part. Abigail was not surprised by his appearance. She knew that her brother would have been helping his neighbor's fellow workers in the events of that afternoon. She began preparing an aromatic balm to soothe his tired feet and injured hands, but as soon as Jochedeb saw him and noticed his burnt hands, he exclaimed in surprise: "Where have you been, my son?"

Jeziel informed him of his voluntary help to save the neighboring property, and as he related the sad events of the day, his father betrayed his own anguish on his shadowed face, on which were stamped the rude vestiges of the resentment devouring his heart. After a few minutes, Jochedeb spoke in a weary voice full of emotion: "My children, I am very sorry to tell you this, but we have been despoiled of the last scraps of what we had left ... Caesar's legate rejected my sincere and just claim and ordered the sequestration of our home. The unjust sentence is the road to our total ruin. According to its provisions, we must leave our little farm within three days!"

And lifting his eyes toward heaven as if pleading divine mercy with eyes dimmed in tears, he exclaimed: "All is lost! ... Why have you forsaken me, my God? How can your faithful people be free if everywhere they persecute and kill us without pity?"

Heavy tears rolled down his face while in a trembling voice he told his children the abuse he had suffered. Abigail kissed his hands tenderly, and Jeziel, without mentioning his father's defiance, embraced him after his sorrowful account, comforting him with love: "Father, why are you so frightened? God is never short of compassion. The Sacred Writings teach us that before anything else, He is the zealous Father of all the downtrodden of the earth! Such defeats come and go. You have my arms and Abigail's tender care. Why grieve if tomorrow we can leave this house with divine help and look for another somewhere else in order to devote ourselves to honest work? Didn't God guide our people through the sea and the desert when they were

expelled from their home? Then why would He refuse to help us, we who love Him so much in this world? He Himself is our compass and home.”

Jeziel fixed his eyes on his old father in a deep and loving plea. His words revealed the sweetest love of his heart. Jochedeb was not insensitive to these beautiful manifestations of tenderness, but faced with such trust in the divine power he felt ashamed after the extreme act he had committed. Resting in the tenderness that his children’s presence offered his desolate spirit, he gave way to sorrow-filled tears, which flowed from his soul, pierced by bitter disillusionment. However, Jeziel continued: “Don’t weep, Father! Count on us! Tomorrow I will go myself to arrange for our removal as is necessary.”

Then Jochedeb said in a somber voice: “That is not all, my son!”

And slowly, he painted the picture of his repressed anguish and his justifiable fury that had culminated in the decision to set fire to his detested tormenter’s property. The children were stunned as they listened to him, displaying the true pain that their father’s behavior caused them. After a look of infinite love and profound worry, the young man embraced his father, murmuring: “Father, Father, why did you lift your arm in vengeance? Why didn’t you wait for the action of divine justice?”

Although disturbed by his son’s loving admonition, Jochedeb explained: “It is written in the Commandments, ‘You shall not steal.’ In doing what I did, I was trying to rectify the breaking of the Law, for we have been despoiled of everything comprising our humble heritage.”

“But Father, above all other commandments,” added Jeziel without anger, “God has carved the teaching of love. We are to love Him above everything else, with all our heart and mind.”

“I love the Most High but I cannot love the cruel Roman,” sighed Jochedeb bitterly.

“But how can we display our devotion to the Almighty who is in heaven,” continued Jeziel compassionately, “while destroying his work? In the case of the fire, we must not only consider the fact that we have shown our mistrust in God’s justice, but the fields that give us shelter and bread have suffered because of our attitude. Moreover, Caius and Ruphilius, two of Licinius Minucius’s best servants, were seriously injured as they struggled in vain to save the legate’s favorite hot springs from the fire. Although they are only slaves, they have been our best friends. We owe the fruit trees and vegetable beds on our property to them, not only because of the seed they

brought from Rome, but also because of their effort and help with my work. Wouldn't it have been better to have honored their dedicated and diligent friendship, sparing them unjust punishment and suffering?"

Jochedeb seemed to be pondering his son's loving remarks. While Abigail wept silently, the young man added: "We have lived in peace, safe from the defeats of the world because we had a clean conscience, but we must now face what will come in retaliation. While I was struggling against the fire, I noticed many of Minucius's men looking at me with undisguised suspicion. By now he will have already returned from the Provincial Court. We must commend ourselves to God's love and mercy, for we are not unaware of the tortures the Romans hold waiting for all those who affront their orders."

A sorrowful cloud of sadness plunged the three into the darkness of concern. A terrible anxiety mixed with pain and poignant remorse showed in the old man, and both Jeziel and Abigail displayed looks of unexceedably inexpressible and sorrow-filled anguish.

Jeziel took the old sacred scrolls from atop the table and said to his sister: "Abigail, let us recite the Psalm our mother taught us to use during times of trouble."

Both kneeled and their emotional voices, like distressed birds, quietly intoned one of the beautiful prayers of David that they had learned on their mother's lap:

*The Lord is my Shepherd,
I shall lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He gently leads me
to quiet waters,
He restores my soul,
He guides me on paths of righteousness
Out of love for his name.
Even if I were to walk
Through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I would fear no evil,
For You are with me...
Your rod and your staff comfort me.
You prepare a love feast for me
In the presence of my enemies,
You anoint my head with balm,
My cup overflows with joy!
Surely, goodness and mercy
Will follow me all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the House of the Lord
For many days.³*

Old Jochedeb followed the sorrowful canticle, feeling oppressed with bitter emotions. He was beginning to understand that all suffering sent by God is beneficial and just, and that all evil done by human hands invariably brings atrocious torment to the negligent conscience. His children's muffled canticle filled his heart with pungent sadness. He now remembered his dear wife whom God had called back to the spirit life. How many times had she calmed his tormented soul with those unforgettable verses of the prophet? Listening to her kind and faithful admonitions was enough for him to sense the obedience and justice speaking loudly to his heart.

Jochedeb wept along with the rhythm of the tender and sad melody, which displayed a singular accent in the voices of his beloved children. From the small open window of the humble room, his eyes anxiously looked toward the blue sky that had begun to fill with tranquil darkness. Night had embraced nature, and the first stars had begun to twinkle faraway in the sky above. Lost in the inspiring grandeur of the firmament, he felt intense upheavals in his anxious soul. A profound tenderness made him get up, and longing to show his children how much he loved them and how much he was expecting from them at this crucial time of his life, he opened his arms in an expression of love. When the last notes of the kneeling Jeziel and Abigail's canticle faded away, Jochedeb embraced them in tears: "My children! My dearest children!"

At that moment the door opened and a menial servant from the neighborhood announced with dread in his eyes: “Sirs, the soldier Zenas and some of his companions are calling you to the door.”

The old man raised his right hand to his heavy chest, while Jeziel seemed to think for a moment; however, revealing the firmness of his resolute spirit, the young man exclaimed: “God will watch over us.”

The messenger heading the small escort read the order to imprison all three. It was unconditional and irrevocable. The accused were to be taken to prison immediately and their situation would be examined the following day.

Upheld by his children, the poor Israelite walked in front of the escort who looked at them without pity.

Jochedeb glanced at his flowerbed and his beloved trees next to the little house where he had woven all the dreams and hopes of his life. Singular emotion took possession of his tired spirit. A flood of tears flowed from his eyes, and as they crossed through the little flowered gate he looked up at the clear sky, now claimed by the night stars, and said in a loud voice: “Lord, have mercy on our bitter fate!”

Jeziel tenderly gripped his father’s wrinkled hand as if to ask him to be composed and calm, and the group walked silently under the light of the stars.

² Prov. 3:11,12

³ Psalm 23 – Emmanuel.

II

Tears and Torture

The prison that received our personages in Corinth was a large old building with damp, dark corridors. Although the room given to the three lacked any comforts whatsoever, it had the advantage of a barred window that granted the desolate environment a view to the outside world.

Jochedeb was exhausted. Using a covering that he had just happened to bring along when they left home, Jeziel fixed him up a makeshift bed on the cold tiled floor. Tormented by a stream of thoughts, the old man rested his aching body while concentrating on sorrowfully reflecting on the problems of human destiny. He was at a loss about how to express his pungent grief, and fell into anguished silence, avoiding his children's eyes. Jeziel and Abigail approached the window, and holding on to the unyielding iron grid they tried with difficulty to stifle their worries. Both looked instinctively up at the sky; its expanse had always represented a source of most tender hope for those who weep and suffer.

The young man took his sister very gently in his arms and said emotionally: "Abigail, do you remember our reading from yesterday?"

"Yes," she answered with innocent serenity in her deep black eyes. "I now have the feeling that the Scriptures gave us a profound message, because the point of our study was exactly the one in which Moses contemplated the Promised Land from afar without being able to enter it."

The young man smiled happily at seeing that she had attuned to his thought, and confirmed: "I see we are in perfect accord. The sky tonight is offering us the perspective of a bright, distant homeland. There," he continued, pointing to the starry canopy, "God works out the triumph of true justice, and gives peace to the grieving and comfort to the downhearted. Surely, our mother is with God, waiting for us."

Abigail was very impressed by her brother's words and asked: "Are you grieving? Are you angered by what our father did?"

"Not at all," Jeziel hurried to say, stroking her hair. "We are undergoing an experience that must be most suited for our redemption; otherwise, God would not have sent it to us."

"No, we mustn't be angry at Father," said Abigail. "I was thinking that if Mother had been with us, he would not have taken his complaints so far with such sad consequences. We don't have the power of persuasion that she had, always caring, always enlightening our home. Do you remember? She taught us that God's children must always be ready to carry out the divine wishes. The Prophets in turn explain to us that men are rods in the field of creation. The Almighty is the farmer and we must be the flowering or fruitful branches of his work. God's word teaches us to be good and kind. The good must be the flowers and fruit that heaven asks of us."

At this point, the beautiful girl paused; her big eyes were covered with a fine veil of tears that did not quite fall.

"However," she continued, affecting her loving brother, "I have always wanted to do something good, but have never had any success at it. When our neighbor was widowed, I wanted to help her with money but I didn't have any; whenever an opportunity to open my hands arises, they are poor and empty. So now I believe that our imprisonment might be useful. Wouldn't it be fortunate for us to be able to suffer something out of love for God while we're in this world? Those who have nothing still have their heart to give. I'm convinced that heaven will bless us for our resolution to joyfully serve God."

Jeziel drew her closer to him and said: "God bless you for your understanding of His laws, little sister!"

A long pause settled between them, while their loving and anxious eyes dove into the immensity of the clear night.

Suddenly, Abigail turned to Jeziel to consider: "Why are the children of our people persecuted everywhere; why must they experience injustice and suffering?"

"I believe," answered Jeziel, "that God allows it in the same way as a loving father who relies on his older and more experienced children to educate the younger and more unlearned ones. While other peoples have deadened their power in domination by the sword or in condemnable

pleasures, our witness to the Most High through pain and grief has increased in our spirits the ability to endure, and at the same time other peoples have learned to consider religious truth as a result of our efforts.”

He fixed his serene gaze on the firmament above and added: “But I believe in the Redeemer Messiah, who will come to shed his light on all things. The Prophets have stated that men will not understand Him. Nonetheless, He will come to teach love, charity, justice and forgiveness; He will be born among the humble; He will set an example amidst the poor; He will enlighten the people of Israel; He will lift up the sad and oppressed; and He will lovingly receive all who suffer in the abandonment of their hearts. Who knows, Abigail? He might already be in the world and we don’t even know it. God works in silence and doesn’t compete with human vanity. We have our faith, and our trust in heaven is a source of inexhaustible power. The children of our people have suffered a great deal, but only God knows why. He would not send us problems that we did not need.”

Abigail seemed to meditate for a long time and then stated: “Since we are on the subject of suffering, what should we expect tomorrow? I foresee big problems at the interrogation; what will the judges do to our father and us?”

“We mustn’t expect anything but anguish and disillusionment, but let’s not miss out on the chance to obey God. When Job experienced his wife’s sarcasm in the midst of extreme misfortune, he remembered well that if the Creator gives us possessions for our joy, He may also send us sorrows for our benefit. If Father is accused, I will say that I myself was actually the author of the crime.”

“And if they punish you for it?” She asked anxiously.

“I will hand myself over to infamy with my conscience at peace. If you are with me at that moment, you will sing with me the prayer of the afflicted.”

“And if they put you to death, Jeziel?”

“We will ask God to watch over us.”

Abigail lovingly embraced her brother, who could barely hide the emotion in his soul. His dear sister had always been his affectionate treasure throughout life. Ever since death had snatched away their mother, he had devoted himself to his sister with all his heart. His pure life had been divided between work and obedience to his father; between the study of the Law and

the sweet companion of his childhood. Abigail contemplated him tenderly while he held her close in the rapture of the pure friendship that binds two similar souls.

After meditating for several minutes, Jeziel said movingly: “If I die, Abigail, promise me you will strictly follow Mother’s advice to live a life without blemish in this world. You must remember God and our life of sanctifying labor, and you must never listen to the voice of temptation, which leads us to fall into the abyss along the way. Do you remember Mother’s last remarks on her death bed?”

“Yes, I do,” she answered with a tear. “I feel like I’m still listening to her last words: ‘... and you my children, are to love God above everything, with all your heart and with all your mind.’”

Jeziel felt his eyes grow moist at those memories, and said softly: “I’m happy that you haven’t forgotten.” And changing the course of the conversation, he added sensitively: “Now you must rest.”

Although she refused to rest, he took her simple robe and improvised a bed under the misty moonlight entering through the bars, and kissing her forehead with inexpressible tenderness, he advised her affectionately: “Rest. Don’t worry about the situation; our destiny belongs to God.”

Just to please Jeziel, Abigail settled down as best she could, while he approached the window to contemplate the beauty of the star-sprinkled night. His young heart was full of anguishing cogitations. Now that his father and sister were resting in the dark, he gave free rein to the profound introspection that filled his kind-hearted soul. He longingly sought answers to the questions he was sending out to the distant stars. He hoped sincerely and trustingly in his God of wisdom and mercy, to whom his parents had introduced him. To his eyes, the Almighty was always infinitely just and good. He, who had enlightened his father and comforted his sister, now asked himself the reason for this painful trial. For such a simple cause, how could one justify the unexpected imprisonment of an honest old man, a hard working younger one and an innocent child? What irreparable crime had they committed to deserve such heartbreaking expiation? He was overcome with tears as he remembered his sister’s humiliation, but as they flooded his face he did not try to hide them from Abigail, who was perhaps watching him in the dark. He remembered one by one all the teachings of the Sacred Writings. The Prophet’s lessons comforted his troubled soul. However, there was an infinite

longing roaming about in his heart. He remembered the maternal love that death had taken from him. If she were present in this time of distress, she would know how to comfort them. When he was a child, she used to teach him during his little troubles that in everything God was good and merciful; that in illness, he corrected the body, and in the distress of the soul, he enlightened the heart. In the parade of his reminiscences, he remembered too that she had always incited him to courage and joy, enabling him to feel that a person convinced of the Divine Father is strong and happy in the world.

Feeling more uplifted in his faith, Jeziel recovered his courage and after a long time of reflection, he settled down on the cold tiles to rest as best he could in the still of the night.

The day broke full of dire anticipation.

Within a few hours Licinius Minucius, surrounded by several guards and cohorts, received the prisoners in the room reserved for common criminals. An assortment of instruments of punishment and torture were in plain sight.

Jochedeb and his children showed on their pale faces the profound emotion that dominated them.

The customs of that era were too extremely inhuman to expect the ruthless judge and most of the people present to be moved to pity by the miserable look on the prisoners' faces.

A number of bailiffs were standing next to the instruments of torture, from which merciless whips and shackles hung loosely.

There were no opening statements or witnesses' testimonies as one might have expected before such hateful procedures, and when he was gruffly called by the legate's metallic voice the old Hebrew approached, unsteady and trembling.

"Jochedeb," began the impassive and grim monster, "those who profane the laws of the Empire are to be punished by death, but I shall try to be magnanimous in consideration of your helpless old age."

A look of anguished expectation transfigured the defendant's face while the patrician mouthed an ironic smile.

"Some laborers at my estate," Licinius continued, "saw your wicked hands at work yesterday afternoon when you set my pastures ablaze. That act resulted in severe damage to my property, besides causing perhaps irreparable

harm to two highly useful servants. As you have nothing of your own to pay for the damage, you shall receive the punishment you deserve by being whipped, so that you will never again raise your ravenous claws against Roman interests.”

Under the anguished and tearful look of his children, the old Israelite knelt on the floor and said: “Excellency, have pity.”

“Pity?” roared Licinius. “You commit a crime and beg for favors?! It is well said that your race is composed of loathsome and despicable worms.”

And pointing to the stake, he said coldly to one of the partisans: “Pescenius, right now! Twenty lashes!”

In front of the silent affliction of his children, the respectable old man was bound tightly.

The punishment was about to begin, when Jeziel broke the expectant mood, approached the quaestor and spoke humbly: “Most illustrious quaestor, forgive my cowardice for having been silent until now, but. I can assure you that my father is being accused unjustly. It was I who set fire to your property. I was angered by the sentence of confiscation registered against us. Therefore, please release him and punish me instead. I will accept it willingly.”

The patrician’s darting cold eyes flared in surprise and he asked: “But did you not help my men save part of the hot springs? Were you not the first to attend to Ruphilius?”

“Excellency, I did so because I was taken with remorse,” replied Jeziel, anxious to exempt his father from the imminent punishment. “When I saw the fire spreading to the trees, I was afraid of the consequences of what I had done; but now I confess to having been its author.”

Meanwhile, fearing his son’s fate and tortured inwardly, Jochedeb exclaimed: “Jeziel, do not blame yourself for a wrong you did not commit!”

However, marking his words with extreme irony, the legate addressed the young Hebrew: “All right. Based on the erroneous information I was given, I have spared you until now; however, you will have your share in the punishment. Your father shall pay for the crime he was unmistakably seen committing, and you shall pay for the one you have confessed voluntarily.”

Taken aback by this unexpected decision, Jeziel was led to the torture pole in front of his anguished father. Pescenius’s companion took Jeziel and

mercilessly tied him to the bronze rings; the first lashes began to lick his back, pitiless and in uniform intervals.

One ... two ... three ...

Jochedeb showed profound debility. His chest heaved painfully, while his son tolerated his suffering with heroic composure; the eyes of both were fixed on Abigail, who gazed back at them, extremely pale, revealing the excruciating torture of her loving soul in the burning tears streaming down her face.

The dreadful punishment was half finished, when a messenger rushed into the room. In a loud voice he announced to the legate in a solemn tone: "Excellency, messengers from your house wish to inform you that your servant Ruphilius has just died."

The cruel patrician furled his brow as was his habit in moments of explosive temper. Rancorous emotion showed plainly on his face, which the wickedness of exacerbated selfishness had wrinkled with ingrained lines.

"He was the best of my men!" he shouted. "These damned Jews will pay very dearly for this affront."

"Philocrius, whip him twenty more times and then take him to prison from where he will leave to be a slave on the galleys.

A look of inexpressible significance was exchanged between the poor victims and Abigail. Such slavery meant ruin and death. They had not yet recovered from the cruel surprise, when the inexorable judge continued: "As for you Pescenius, continue. This old unscrupulous criminal shall pay for the death of my faithful servant. Strike his hands and feet so that he will be unable to walk and practice evil ever again."

In the face of this atrocious sentence, Abigail fell on her knees in ardent prayer. Her brother's chest was heaving deeply, and pain-filled tears clouded his eyes at the thought of the inexorable fate of his little sister, while their father anxiously looked at them in the fear of that extreme hour.

The lashes continued without a break, but at one certain stroke Pescenius lost his aim and the sharp end of the bronze whip cut deep into the throat of the poor Israelite. Blood began spurting profusely. The children understood the grave situation and looked at each other anxiously. In prayers of sublime fervor, Abigail prayed to God, that gentle and loving God whom her mother had taught her to worship. Philocrius finished his chore. Jeziel lifted his head

with difficulty, displaying a pasty sweat tinted with blood. His eyes were fixed on his much-loved sister, but every aspect of him manifested a profound weakness that broke down his last resistance. Abigail was incapable of defining her own thoughts and divided her anguished attention between her father and brother. However, a few moments later at the incessant flow of blood that ran in abundance, Jochedeb bowed his white head forever. The blood streamed down his garment and turned to glue at his feet. Under the cruel stare of the legate, no one dared to utter a word. Only the whip, cutting the lukewarm ambient of the room, broke the silence with a peculiar hiss. However, they could see that from the victim's chest a few confused words managed to escape in a final expression of love.

“My children; my dear children!”

Perhaps the young girl could not grasp the fact that the final moment had come, but Jeziel, in spite of the terrible suffering of that hour, understood it all. In a profound effort he cried to his sister: “Abigail, father is dying; have courage, trust ... I cannot follow you in prayer ... but pray for us all ... the prayer of the afflicted.”

Showing an unshakable faith under such embittering circumstances, the young girl, on her knees, gazed on her father whose lungs no longer breathed. Then lifting her eyes on High she began to chant in a trembling but harmonious, clear voice:

*Lord God, father of those who weep,
Of the sad and oppressed,
Fortress of the defeated,
Comfort of all pain,
Despite the bitter misery
Of the weeping over our errors,
From this world of exile,
We call for your love!
In the afflictions of the way,
In the night most tormenting,
Your generous fount is*

*The good that will never go dry...
You are in everything the light eternal
Of joy and peace,
Our doorway of hope
Which will never close.*

Her singing filled the room with indefinable sonority. The chant seemed more like a chirp of pain, a wounded nightingale singing at dawn in springtime. She displayed such greatness, such sincerity in her faith in the Almighty that her attitude was of a loving, obedient daughter, communicating with a silent and invisible father. Her weeping interfered with her trembling voice, but with the most beautiful expression of trust in the Most High she fearlessly repeated the prayer she had learned at home.

A pain-filled sentiment of grief took overcame everyone. What to do with a child singing about the suffering of her loved ones and the cruelty of their tormentors? The soldiers and guards could hardly hide their emotion. Even the quaestor himself seemed paralyzed as if dominated by a troublesome uneasiness. Unaware of people's wickedness, and imploring the help of the Almighty, Abigail did not know that her canticle was useless for saving her loved ones; however, it had awakened compassion for her own innocence, thereby securing her freedom.

Licinius recovered his composure, and perceiving that the scene had touched the heartstrings of everyone present, he strove not to lose the hardness of his own heart and ordered one of the old servants in an imperious voice: "Justinius, take this woman to the street and release her, but see to it that she does not sing one more note!"

At the resounding order, Abigail did not finish her prayer; she fell silent instantly as if obeying a strange staccato.

She cast an unforgettable look at her father's bloody corpse, and quickly contemplating her beaten and shackled brother, with whom she exchanged the most intimate communication in the language of afflicted and anxious eyes, she felt the calloused hand of an old soldier who told her gruffly: "Come with me!"

Abigail trembled; however, addressing Jeziel a final, expressive look, she followed Minucius's soldier without a struggle. After passing down several damp, dark corridors, Justinus, changing his tone of voice noticeably, expressed his feelings of compassion for that almost childlike figure and whispered in her ear emotionally: "My child, I too am a father and I understand your extreme suffering. If you would listen to a friend, follow my advice. Flee Corinth as quickly as you can. Take advantage of this instant of your tormentor's sensibility and do not come back here."

Abigail had recovered some of her strength, and feeling encouraged by this unforeseen sympathy, she asked, all out of sorts: "And my father?"

"Your father is at rest forever," said the kindly soldier.

Abigail's tears became more copious and gushed from her grieving eyes. However, anxious to shield herself from the perspective of loneliness, she asked further: "And ... my brother?"

"No one returns from slavery on the galleys," Justinus replied with an sympathetic look.

Abigail raised her small hands to her heart, wishing to drown her pain. The hinges of the old door creaked slowly and her unexpected protector pointed to the busy street and exclaimed: "Go in peace; may the gods protect you."

It did not take long for the poor creature to feel all alone among the ranks of passers-by who were hurriedly crossing the avenues. She was accustomed to a loving home, where her father's words replaced the language of the streets; she felt like a stranger in the midst of so many troubled people overburdened with material interests and worries. Nobody noticed her tears, nor was there a friendly voice to ask about her inner sorrows.

She was all alone! Her mother had been called by God many years before; her father had just succumbed, murdered by a coward; her brother had been imprisoned and enslaved without hope of pardon. Despite the midday sun, Abigail felt intensely cold. Should she return home? But for what purpose if they had been expelled? Who could she turn to in her great misfortune? She remembered an old friend of the family and went to see her. The widow, Sosthenia, had been very dear to her mother and received her with the generous smile of aged kindness.

Dissolved in tears, the unfortunate girl told her everything that had happened.

The venerable old lady caressed Abigail's curly hair and said movingly: "In past persecutions, our sufferings were like yours."

And making it plain that she did not want to revive old, painful memories, Sosthenia added: "Utmost courage is essential in grievous situations like this. It's not easy to lift one's heart in the midst of such terrible ruin. But we must trust in God during the bitterest of times. What can we do now that all resources seem to have vanished? For my part, I have nothing to offer you except a friendly heart, for I too am here out of the charity of the poor family who lovingly offered me shelter during the last storm of my life."

"Sosthenia," Abigail said with a sigh, "my parents prepared me for an existence of courage and self-effort. I'm thinking of going to the legate and begging him to give me back a little piece of our farm on which to live an honest life in hopes of seeing Jeziel and his brotherly company again. What do you think of the idea?"

Observing the indecision of her old friend, Abigail continued: "Who knows? Perhaps the quaestor Licinius will be sorry for my fate. Maybe he will be touched by my resolve; I shall go back home and take you with me. You shall be my second mother for the rest of my life."

Sosthenia held Abigail to her heart and said with moist eyes: "My darling, you are an angel, but the world is still the property of the wicked. I would love to live with you forever, my good Abigail, but you do not know the legate and his cronies. Listen child! You must flee Corinth in order not to incur any more harsh humiliation."

The young girl let out a disheartened exclamation, and after a long pause she added: "I will accept your advice, but before doing anything else I need to go back home."

"Why?" Sosthenia asked in surprise. "You must leave as soon as possible. Do not go back home. It is possible that it may already be occupied by unscrupulous men who would dishonor you. You must keep an attitude of true moral strength, for we live at a time when, like Lot and his family, we need to flee damnation; otherwise, we run the risk of turning into useless pillars of salt by looking back."

In light of this unforeseen possibility, Jeziel's sister absorbed these words with sorrow-filled wonder.

After a moment, Sosthenia raised her hand to her forehead as if remembering an opportune thought, and said enthusiastically: "Do you remember Zechariah, son of Hanan?"

"Our friend who lives on the road to Cenchrea?"

"That's right. I was told that he and his wife have prepared to leave Achaia for good because their only son was killed by unconscionable Romans a few days ago."

Encouraged by this ardent hope, she concluded anxiously: "Flee to Zechariah's house! When you find him, tell him I sent you. Ask him for shelter. Ruth has a good soul and she will extend her generous hands to you. I know she will welcome you with a mother's embrace."

Abigail seemed indifferent to her fate as she took this all in. However, Sosthenia enabled her to see the necessity of this course of action, and after a few more minutes of mutual comfort, the young girl set out under the burning sun of early afternoon, headed for Cenchrea. She walked like an automaton wandering on the road. Countless pedestrians and many vehicles were moving to and fro. The port of Cenchrea was far from the center of Corinth. It was situated so as to serve communications with the East; its populous districts were full of Jewish families who had either settled in the area of Achaia for a long time or were on their way to the capital of the Empire and nearby towns.

Jeziel's sister arrived at Zechariah's home in a dreadful. Besides the vigil of the night before and the sufferings of the day, physical exhaustion aggravated her discouragement. On unsteady legs and remembering her dead father and imprisoned brother, she had not even noticed the miserable state of her own ill, undernourished body. Only when she was in front of Zechariah's modest house did she realize that a fever had begun to ravish her insides, forcing her to think of her own needs.

Zechariah and Ruth, his wife, answered Abigail's call and received her in surprise and concern.

"Abigail!"

The cry of both revealed that they were taken aback by the young woman's disheveled hair, burning red face, sunken eyes and tattered clothes.

Overcome by weakness and fever, Jochedeb's daughter fell at the couple's feet and exclaimed in a heartrending voice: "My friends, have pity on me in my misfortune! In this moment of grief, our good Sosthenia has reminded me of your kind souls. I, who already had no mother, have just seen my father murdered and Jeziel unpardonably enslaved. If it is true that you are leaving Corinth, have compassion and take me with you!"

Abigail embraced Ruth anxiously while the kind lady caressed her amidst tears.

Abigail sobbed as she related the events of the day before and the sad episode of today.

Zechariah, whose paternal heart had just suffered a terrible blow, embraced her caringly, and comforting her, he exclaimed kindly: "We will be returning to Palestine before the week is up. I do not know yet where we are going to settle, but as we have lost our dear son, we will have in you a much-loved daughter. Take heart! You shall come with us and be our daughter forever."

Unable to express her jubilant gratitude, and tormented by the high fever, the young woman knelt in tears as she tried to express her loving and sincere thanks. Ruth held her tenderly in her arms, and like a watchful maternal angel, took her to a soft bed. Attended by the two kind-hearted friends, Abigail suffered from delirium for three days, between life and death.

III

In Jerusalem

The young Hebrew contemplated his father's body in grief and then watched his sister in apprehension until she disappeared through the access doors to one of the prison's long corridors. He had never experienced such profound emotion. His mother's counsels flocked to his tormented mind; she used to assure him that one should love God above everything else. He had never known such bitter tears as those now rolling down his face in torrents from his broken heart. How would he recover his courage and reorganize his life? Suddenly, he wanted to break free from his chains, approach his lifeless father, caress his white hair, while at the same time he wanted to fling open the doors, run after Abigail, embrace her and never more be separated from her on the paths of life. In vain, he twisted on the punitive stake, and in retribution for his efforts the blood only flowed more profusely from the gaping wounds. Pain-filled sobs racked his chest where his tunic had become red tatters. Cast into an inner abyss, he was finally taken to a damp cell, where for thirty days he immersed himself in profound thought.

At the end of the month his wounds had scarred over, and one of Licinius's subordinates deemed the time had come to send him to one of the galleys on the trade route, where the quaestor had interests in profitable enterprises.

Jeziel had lost the rosy color in his cheeks and the innocent tone of his loving and joyful facial expression. The cruel experience had given him a sorrowful and somber look. There was an indefinable sadness in him and wrinkles foretold premature aging; however, in his eyes was the same sweet serenity, the result of his inner trust in God. He had endured the bitter torture as had other descendants of his race, but he had held to his faith like the divine aureole of those who truly know how to act and hope. The author of Proverbs had recommended that serenity of the soul was crucial in all the

vicissitudes of human life, because from serenity issued forth the purest founts of life; Jeziel had kept this recommendation in his heart. Orphan of father and mother, captive of cruel torturers, he would learn how to hold on to the treasure of hope. If one day he managed to receive the kiss of freedom on his enslaved forehead, he would go to the farthest corners of the world in search of his sister.

Followed closely by merciless guards as if he were a common vagrant, he crossed the streets of Corinth toward the port, where they placed him in the infectious hold of a galley flying the flag of the Roman eagle.

Though he had been reduced to the wretched condition of being condemned to perpetual labor, Jeziel faced his new situation full of trust and humility. The foreman, Lisipus, marveled at his good conduct and his poised and generous efforts. He was accustomed to dealing with criminals and unscrupulous creatures who frequently required the discipline of the whip, so he was surprised to find in the young Jew the sincere attitude of someone who had handed himself over to torment without rebellion or indignity.

Working the heavy oars with complete serenity like someone who had grown accustomed to a habitual task, he felt the abundant sweat pouring down his youthful face while movingly remembering the toilsome days at his friendly plow. The foreman soon recognized him to be a slave worthy of respect and consideration, one who had impressed even his companions with the natural kindness that flooded his soul.

“Woe to us!” exclaimed a disheartened colleague. “It is rare for anyone to bear these damned oars for more than four months!”

“But all work is God’s work, my friend,” answered Jeziel highly inspired. “And since we are here doing honest labor with a clear conscience, we should hold to the conviction of being servants of the Creator and help in His work.”

For all the complexities of his new way of life, Jeziel had a conciliatory formula for bringing harmony to the more excitable minds. The foreman was surprised by his caring behavior and his capacity for work, which were combined with the highest values of the religious education he had received at home.

Even in the dark bilge of the ship, his faith had not wavered. He divided his time between the hard work and sacred meditation. Over all his thoughts

soared his longing for his family home and the hope of one day seeing his sister again, no matter how long his captivity lasted.

After leaving Corinth the big ship anchored at Cephalonia and then Nicopolis, from where she would return to the ports of Cyprus after a quick passage along Palestine's coast, following the route established to take advantage of the dry weather, and taking into account the fact that in winter all navigation stopped.

Dedicated as he was to work, it was not difficult for Jeziel to adapt – under Lisipus's watchful eye – to the heavy burden of loading and unloading the goods, the maneuvering of the relentless oars, and the helping of passengers whenever required.

Upon returning from Cephalonia, the galley took on a distinguished passenger. He was young Roman, Sergius Paulus, who was going to the city of Citium on a commission of a political nature. His destination was the port of Paphos, where some friends were awaiting him. The young patrician immediately became the center of great attention. Given the importance of his name and the official character of his mission, the captain, Servius Carbus, had reserved the best accommodations for him.

However, well before they anchored again at Corinth, where the galley would remain for a few days before proceeding along the pre-ordained route, Sergius Paulus came down with a high fever and purulent ulcers covered his body. In secret, people were whispering that an unknown plague was raging around Cephalonia. The physician on board could not explain the illness and the patient's friends began to keep their distance. After three days, Sergius Paulus had become almost completely isolated. The captain was worried about this situation and was afraid for himself. He called Lisipus and asked him to appoint an educated, well-mannered slave who was capable of assisting the eminent passenger. The foreman named Jeziel at once, and that very afternoon the young Hebrew entered the patient's cabin with the same serene spirit he customarily displayed in difficult and perilous situations.

Sergius Paulus's bed was in disarray. At the height of the fever, he would frequently raise up suddenly, delirious and pronouncing incoherent words. The flailing of his arms aggravated the ulcers bleeding all over his body.

"Who are you?" he asked in delirium as soon as he saw the silent and humble figure of the young man from Corinth.

“My name is Jeziel, the slave who has come to serve you.”

From that moment on, Jeziel devoted himself to the sick man with all his heart. With permission from Sergius’s friends, and following a treatment he had learned at home, he used all the resources he had at hand on board the ship. For many days and long nights, Jeziel stood watch over the illustrious Roman with devotion and goodwill. Balms, essences and ointments were mixed and applied with extreme care, as if he were one of Jeziel’s close and very dear family members. During the most critical hours of the grievous disease, Jeziel talked to him about God and recited old passages from the Prophets, which he knew by heart, heaping comfort and fraternal care on the patient.

Sergius Paulus understood the gravity of the disease holding his dear friends at bay, and during these days with Jeziel he developed an affection for his good and humble caretaker. Some days later, after Jeziel had fully gained his admiration and recognition for acts of unexcelled kindness, the patient entered into rapid convalescence, bringing joy to all.

However, the day before Jeziel was to return to the stuffy hold, the young captive himself began to show the first symptoms of the unknown disease raging in Cephalonia.

After consulting some of his crew, the captain called Sergius Paulus, who by now had nearly recovered, and asked his permission to throw the young slave into the sea.

“It would be better to poison the fish than to risk the danger of infecting so many priceless lives,” declared Servius Carbus with an evil smile.

The patrician thought for a minute and asked to see Lisipus in order to discuss the subject together with the captain.

“What is the lad’s situation?” asked the Roman with interest.

The foreman explained that the young Jew had come aboard with other men enslaved by Licinius Minucius during the latest uprisings in Achaia. Lisipus liked the youth from Corinth very much and tried to faithfully portray a picture of his good behavior, his distinguished manners and the beneficial moral influence he exerted over his often desperate and insubordinate companions.

After thinking at length, Sergius concluded with great dignity: “I cannot approve of Jeziel being thrown into the sea at my acquiescence. I owe this

slave a dedication that is worth my own life. I know Licinius, and if necessary I can tell him later about my decision. I have no doubt that Cephalonia's plague is at work in his body, and for that reason I ask your cooperation in setting this young man free for good."

"But that's impossible!" exclaimed Servius reservedly.

"Why?" asked the Roman. "When will you be arriving at the port of Joppa?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Well then, I hope you will not oppose my plans. As soon as we reach port, I will take Jeziel in a skiff to the shore, pretending to be in need of exercising my muscles – which indeed I am. There we will give him his freedom. It is something I must do in obedience to my principles."

"But sir!" said the captain hesitantly.

"I will not accept any restraints; Licinius Minucius is an old friend of my father."

After thinking for a moment, he continued: "Weren't you going to throw the lad into the depths of the sea anyway?"

"Yes."

"Well, write in your records that the slave Jeziel was attacked by an unknown disease caught in Cephalonia and was buried at sea before the plague could affect the crew and passengers. So that the lad doesn't put himself in jeopardy, I will instruct him accordingly with specific orders. Moreover, I noticed that he is probably too weak to successfully overcome the culminant phases of the disease. Who can guarantee he'll make it anyway? Who knows but that he'll die two minutes after being released?"

The captain and the foreman exchanged a knowing look of implicit mutual agreement.

After a long pause, Servius acquiesced and agreed:

"Fine! So be it."

The young patrician shook their hands and said: "You have done my conscience a favor for which you can always count on me as a friend."

Within moments, Sergius approached Jeziel who was half asleep near his cabin and already taken by the beginning of the high fever. Sergius spoke

politely and kindly: “Jeziel, how would you like to be set free?”

“Oh, sir!” exclaimed the young man, his body animated with a gleam of hope.

“I wish to repay you for your dedication during the long days of my illness.”

“I am your slave, sir; you owe me nothing.” Both were speaking in Greek, and suddenly pondering the future, Sergius asked: “Do you know the common language in Palestine?”

“I am the son of Israelites; I learned our mother tongue in my childhood.”

“Then it won’t be difficult to start your life over again in that province.”

And measuring his words as if afraid of some surprise that would spoil his plans, he stressed: “Jeziel, you know that you’re ill, perhaps as badly as I was some days ago. The captain was concerned about the possibility of a ship-wide contagion owing to the great number of men on board, and he had intended to throw you into the sea; however, tomorrow afternoon we will arrive at Joppa and I’ll take advantage of it to give you back your freedom. You must be aware, however, that in doing so I am violating certain important rules that govern the interests of my countrymen, and so I would ask for your secrecy regarding the matter.”

“Yes sir,” replied Jeziel, extremely weak and trying hard to coordinate his thoughts.

“I know that the disease will assume grave proportions soon,” said his benefactor. “I will give you your freedom but only your God can grant you life. Nonetheless, in case you do survive, you must be a new man with a different name. I do not want to be accused of being a traitor to my own friends, and I am counting on your cooperation.”

“I will obey you in everything, sir.”

Sergius looked at him kindly and ended: “I shall make all the arrangements. I will give you some money for your immediate needs and you will put on one of my old tunics. But as soon as you can you must leave Joppa and move farther inland. The port is always full of curious and wretched Roman seamen.”

The ailing man made a gesture of gratitude, while Sergius left him to heed the call of friends.

On the following day at the predicted time, the row-houses of Palestine came into view. And as the first stars began to twinkle in the night sky, a small skiff approached the silent shore, crewed by two men whose shadows were lost in the darkness. Sergius spoke his final words of good advice and farewell, and the young Jew kissed his benefactor's right hand emotionally. The Roman quickly returned to the galley with a clear conscience.

Jeziel had barely taken his first steps, when he had to sit down racked by pain all over his body and natural weakness owing to the consuming fever. Confused thoughts danced in his mind. He wanted to think about his good fortune at having been set free; he wanted to focus his mind on the image of his sister, whom he would look for at the first opportunity. But a strange lethargy paralyzed his faculties, resulting in overpowering drowsiness. He looked up indifferently at the stars that populated the sea breeze freshened night. He noticed that there was movement in the nearby houses, but he remained inert in the brush he had crawled into along the shore. Strange nightmares dominated his physical repose while the breeze caressed his feverish brow.

At dawn he woke up at the contact of unknown hands brazenly going through the pockets of his tunic.

He opened his eyes and was startled to see that the first light of dawn had appeared on the horizon. A cunning looking man was bending over him, anxiously looking for something, which the young Hebrew guessed immediately. He was convinced that it was one of those petty criminals eager for somebody's moneybag. Jeziel shivered and made an involuntary movement upon seeing that the unexpected assailant had raised his right hand, holding an instrument and about to end his life.

"Don't kill me, friend," he murmured with trembling voice.

At those pleading words, the vagrant arrested the murderous blow.

"I'll give you all the money I own," said Jeziel sadly.

And searching for the pocket where he kept the little money the patrician had given him, he gave it all to the stranger, whose eyes sparkled with greed and glee. In a second, that constrained face was transformed into the smiling appearance of someone who wished to alleviate his pain and help him.

“Oh! You are exceedingly generous!” he murmured, taking possession of the full pouch.

“Money is always good,” said Jeziel, “when with it we can acquire men’s understanding or mercy.”

The man pretended not to perceive the philosophical scope of those words and replied: “Your kindness, however, dispenses with the need of any outside elements for winning good friends. For example, I was on my way to work at the port, but I felt such compassion for your situation that I’m here to offer you as much help as you need.”

“What is your name?”

“Irenaeus of Crotona, at your service,” answered the man, visibly happy with the money in his pocket.

“My friend,” exclaimed Jeziel, extremely weak, “I’m ill and I don’t know this city well enough to make any decisions. Could you tell me of any place or anybody who could be charitable and give me shelter?”

Irenaeus made a face of false pity and said: “I’m sorry; I have nothing to offer you and I don’t know where to find a shelter equipped to receive you in your condition. The truth is, everybody’s ready to practice evil, but to practice the good...”

After thinking hard for a few moments he added: “Ah! Now I remember! ... I know some people who might be able to help you. They are men of the Way.”⁴

A few more words and Irenaeus offered to take Jeziel to the nearest group he knew of, supporting his sick and trembling body.

The morning sun had begun awakening nature with its warming and comforting rays. Walking through a rough shortcut and supported by the scoundrel turned benefactor, Jeziel came to the door of a humble looking house. Irenaeus went in and came back with a pleasant looking elderly man, who shook hands cordially with the young Israelite, saying: “Where do you hail from, my brother?”

Jeziel marveled at such affability and politeness in a man he was seeing for the first time. Why did he call him by a family label reserved for the innermost circle of persons born under the same roof?

“Why do you call me brother if you do not even know me?” Jeziel asked, touched.

The elderly man renewed his kind smile and added: “We are all one big family in Christ Jesus.”

Jeziel did not understand. Who could this Jesus be? A new god for those who did not know the law? Realizing that his illness was not lending him the ability to ponder religious or philosophical matters, Jeziel answered simply: “May God reward you for your generosity. I have come from Cephalonia. I was taken badly ill on the journey and that is why I appeal to your charity in this condition.”

“Ephraim,” said Irenaeus addressing the owner of the house, “our friend has a fever and his overall condition needs care. As a good man of the Way, welcome him with the heart dedicated to those who suffer.”

Ephraim approached Jeziel and remarked: “You’re not the first patient from Cephalonia whom Christ has brought to my door. The day before yesterday, another one arrived with his body covered in nasty sores. I realized how seriously ill he was and I intend to take him to Jerusalem later this afternoon.”

“But must you go so far?” asked Irenaeus with a certain surprise.

“Only there do we have a larger number of helpers,” explained Ephraim humbly. Listening to what they were saying, and considering the need to leave the port in obedience to the orders of the patrician who had proven to be such a friend by restoring his freedom, Jeziel addressed Ephraim in a humble, sad appeal: “Whoever you are, please take me to Jerusalem with you, for pity’s sake.”

In a show of natural goodness, Ephraim consented with no more ado.

“You shall go with me.”

Left by Irenaeus in Ephraim’s care, the ailing man received the special attention of a true friend. If it had not been for the fever, Jeziel would liked to have engaged in a more intimate conversation with this brother in order to get a more detailed understanding of the noble principles that had led him to extend his protective hand. However, he could barely keep his mind alert enough to answer Ephraim’s kind questions and take his medicine correctly.

At dusk, taking advantage of the fresh evening air, a cart carefully covered by cheap canvas left Joppa for Jerusalem.

Ephraim went slowly so as not to exhaust the poor draught animal, and took the two patients to the next town in search of the resources they needed. Resting here and there along the way, only on the following morning did the cart stop at the door of a large, run-down house. A young boy with a happy face came to meet the newcomers. Ephraim asked him familiarly: "Uriah, could you tell me if Simon Peter is in?"

"Yes, he is."

"Could you call him in my name?"

"Yes, I will."

Simon came accompanied by James, brother of Levi, and received the visitor with effuse displays of kindness. Ephraim explained the reason for his visit: Two of the world's abandoned were in need of urgent help.

"But this is going to be a big problem," said James. "We already have forty-nine patients abed."

Peter smiled kindly and replied: "Well, James, if we were still fishing it would be all right to avoid this or that duty if it went beyond the sphere of our unavoidable everyday obligations to our God-given family, but the Master has entrusted us with the work of giving assistance to all his suffering children. Right now, our time is meant for that, so let's see what we can do."

And the kind Apostle approached to receive the two sick men.

Ever since he had come from Tiberias to Jerusalem, Simon had been at the center of a great humanitarian movement. The philosophers of the world had always pontificated from comfortable cathedras, but had never descended to the plane of personal action alongside the most unfortunate. Setting a divine example, Jesus had revamped the entire system of preaching virtue. Calling to himself the afflicted and the sick, He inaugurated on earth the formula of true social benevolence.

The first organizations of assistance were established by the Apostles' efforts in response to the loving influence of the Master's teachings.

It was for this reason that Peter's residence – donated by a group of friends of the Way – was overflowing with the sick and the hopeless forsaken. There were elderly persons from Caesarea displaying nasty sores; insane

people from the most faraway places, brought by relatives anxious for relief; paralytic children from Idumea, carried in their mothers' arms: all attracted by the fame of the Nazarene Prophet who had raised the dead and knew how to restore peace to the hearts of the world's unfortunates.

Of course, not everyone could be healed, which forced the former fisherman to shelter all those in need with the care of a father. Living there with his family, he was at first helped particularly by James, son of Alphaeus, and by John, son of Zebedee; but soon Philip and his daughters also settled in Jerusalem and assisted in the great fraternal endeavor. So great was the number of the needy of all sorts, that for quite some time now, Simon had been unable to involve himself with his other task of preaching the Good News of the Kingdom. The expansion of concerns such as this one had linked the Apostle to the larger centers of the dominant Judaism. Peter had been forced to rely on the help of the most noteworthy members of the city, thereby feeling more and more a slave of his benefactors and his impoverished beneficiaries as they arrived from all over, demanding supreme devotion from his spirit as a sincere and selfless disciple.

In response to Ephraim's trusting request, Peter arranged for both patients to stay at his poor house.

Jeziel occupied a simple, clean bed, completely unconscious in the delirium of the fever that had waylaid him. His incoherent words, however, gave evidence of such a precise knowledge of the Sacred Texts that Peter and John became especially interested in this young man with the emaciated, sad face. But it was mainly Simon who spent long hours listening to him and took note of his profound ideas, although they were the offspring of feverish deliria.

After two exhausting weeks, Jeziel's health had improved and he was able to re-harmonize his thoughts to better analyze and surmise his new situation. He took kindly to Peter like an affectionate son to a true father. Noticing Peter's care in going from bed to bed, from one patient to the next, the young man experienced an inner delightful surprise: the still relatively young ex-fisherman from Capernaum was the living example of fraternal selflessness.

As soon as he had recovered, Jeziel was transferred to a more peaceful environment in the amenable shade of the large date-palms surrounding the old house.

From their first days together, the magnetic current of a great affective friendship had been established between Peter and Jeziel.

On this particular morning they were exchanging amiable remarks, and despite the reasonable curiosity hovering within his soul concerning his interesting guest, Peter had not yet gotten an opportunity for a more intimate exchange of ideas so as to probe Jeziel's thoughts or to inquire about his sentiments and origin. Under the leafy trees and in the gentle breath of the morning breeze, the Apostle worked up his nerve and at a certain point, after distracting the convalescing guest with some small talk, he tried carefully to pierce the mystery: "Friend," Peter said with a jovial smile, "now that God has restored your precious health, I'm delighted at having received you into our house. Our joy is sincere, since in the smallest details of your stay with us and by the knowledge you have of the sacred texts, you have displayed the spiritual status of a true son of a home organized with God in mind. When you were delirious with the high fever, I was so impressed with your references to Isaiah that I would like to know which tribe you descend from."

Jeziel understood that this sincere friend – rather, his caring brother in the most critical hours of illness – wished to know him better and to identify him intimately and deeply through delicate psychological subtlety. He thought this was only right and realized that, in order to refine his own spiritual energies, he should not slight the help of a truly fraternal soul.

"My father was a son from the environs of Sebaste and was descended from the tribe of Issachar," said Jeziel attentively.

"Was he so highly devoted to the study of Isaiah?"

"He sincerely studied the whole Testament, without preference, perhaps, to any particular order. As for me, however, Isaiah has always impressed me deeply because of the beauty of the divine promises he bore in announcing to us the Messiah, whose coming I have meditated on since childhood."

Simon Peter smiled happily with lively satisfaction and said: "But don't you know that the Messiah has already come?"

In his improvised chair Jeziel was taken by unexpected surprise.

"What do you mean?" he asked anxiously.

"Haven't you heard of Jesus of Nazareth?"

Although he vaguely recalled Ephraim's words, he declared: "No, I haven't!"

"Well, the Prophet of Nazareth has brought us the message from God for all time."

And Simon Peter, eyes lit with the luminous flame of those who are happy at remembering a time of blessing, spoke to Zeziel about what the Lord had done, sketching a perfect oral biography of the sublime Master.

In dashes of living color, Peter recounted the days when he had sheltered Jesus in his hovel on the shore of Gennesaret, their journeys to neighboring villages, their boat trips from Capernaum to places along the shore of the lake. Peter displayed inexpressible emotion in his voice and his inner joy at recalling Jesus' deeds and sermons on the shores of the whispering, wind-swept lake, the poetry and gentleness of the evening twilights. The Apostle's lively imagination was able to weave judicious and shining commentaries as he recalled a leper who had been healed, a blind man who had recovered his sight, a little sick child instantly restored to health.

Zeziel drank in every word of Peter's account, thoroughly thrilled as if he had encountered a new world. The message of the Good News entered his disenchanted spirit as a soothing balm.

When Simon seemed about to finish his story, Zeziel could not contain himself any longer and asked: "And the Messiah? Where is this Messiah now?"

"Over a year ago," exclaimed the Apostle, his liveliness fading away with the sad memory, "He was crucified right here in Jerusalem between two thieves."

Peter thereupon began to enumerate the poignant sufferings and heartrending ingratitude of which the Master had been victim, His final teachings and His glorious resurrection on the third day. Then he spoke of the first days of the apostolate, the events of Pentecost and the final appearances of the Lord in the ever-nostalgic scenery of far-off Galilee.

Zeziel's eyes were in tears. These revelations touched his heart as if he had actually known the Prophet of Nazareth. And linking the Master's profile to the passages he knew by heart, he spoke almost in a loud voice as if to himself:

"He will rise like a tender shoot in the ingratitude of an arid soil..."

He will be burdened with disgrace and be rejected by men.

Covered with shame, He will merit no consideration.

He will bear the heavy burden of our sin and suffering, taking upon Himself all our sorrows.

He will seem like a man stricken by God's wrath ...

Humiliated and afflicted, He will be led like a lamb, but from the moment He offers His life, the will of the Eternal will prosper in His hands.”⁵

Simon, surprised at such knowledge of the Sacred Texts, ended by saying: “I am going to bring you some new texts. They are notes by Levi⁶ about the resurrected Messiah.”

And in a few minutes, the Apostle handed him the parchments of the Gospel. Jeziel did not read; he devoured them. He read all the passages of the narrative out loud one by one. Peter followed along, inwardly very happy.

When Jeziel finished his quick analysis, he remarked: “I have found the treasure of life. I must examine it more carefully. I wish to soak myself in its light, for I sense here the key to the enigmas of humankind.”

Nearly in tears, he read the Sermon on the Mount, aided by Peter's heartfelt recollection. Next they began comparing Christ's teachings with the prophecies that had announced him. The young Hebrew was highly moved and wanted to know about the smallest episodes in the Master's life. Spiritually uplifted and happy, Simon tried to satisfy him. Jesus' generous friend, so misunderstood in Jerusalem, experienced a gratifying joy at having found a young man who was so enthusiastic about the examples and teachings of the incomparable Master.

“Ever since you took me into your house,” said Jeziel, “I have noticed that you share principles unknown to me. So much concern in helping the unfortunate represents a new lesson for my soul. The sick who bless you – as I do now – are wards of this Christ whom I did not have the good fortune to know personally.”

“The Master used to help all who suffered, and He commanded us to do the same in His name,” explained the Apostle emphatically.

“According to the instructions in Leviticus,” said Jeziel, “every city must have outside its gates a valley for lepers and people considered unclean; but

Jesus has given us a home right in the midst of those who follow Him.”

“Christ brought us the message of love,” explained Peter. “He completed the Law of Moses and inaugurated a new teaching. The Old Law is justice; the Gospel is love. While the code of the past prescribed ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,’ the Messiah taught us that we must ‘forgive seventy times seven times’; that if anybody wants to take our tunic, we should give him our cloak also.”

Jeziel felt moved and wept. That loving and good Christ hanging on the cross of human ignominy was the personification of all the heroism of the world. How relieved he felt in realizing this! He had been right for not having reacted against the despotism he had suffered. Christ was the Son of God and had not disdained suffering. His cup had overflowed and Peter made Jeziel feel that, at the direst moment, this unknown and humble Master had delivered a lesson of courage, self-sacrifice and life. As an example of His love, here was this simple and kind man, who called him brother and who sheltered him like a devoted father. Jeziel remembered his last days in Corinth and wept for a long time. It was then that, opening his heart, he took Peter’s hands and told him all about his tragedy, withholding nothing and pleading for his counsels.

When he had finished his tale, he added emotionally: “You have revealed to me the light of the world, so forgive me for having revealed to you my sufferings, which must have been just. You have the sunshine of the Savior’s words in your heart and you shall inspire my poor life.”

The Apostle embraced him and said: “I think it prudent that you remain anonymous, for Jerusalem is overflowing with Romans and it would not be fair to jeopardize the generous friend who restored you to freedom. However, your case is not new, my friend. I have been in this city nearly a year and some remarkable people have lain in these simple beds. I used to be a poor fisherman, but I have acquired a lot of worldly experiences in these past few months! Many men, once important politicians, have come in tatters to knock at these doors, along with leprous women who were almost queens! Having heard the stories of so many fortresses destroyed in the game of mundane vanities, I now realize that souls need Christ more than anything else.”

This extraordinary explanation gave comfort to Jeziel, who asked gratefully: “Do you think I could be of any help to you in anything? I used to

be a slave to men, but now wish to be enslaved to the Savior who lived and died for us all.”

“You shall be my son from now on,” said Simon in joyous rapture.

“And since I must be a new man in Christ, what shall I be called?” asked Jeziel, eyes blazing with joy.

The Apostle thought for a moment and said: “So that you do not forget Achaia, where the Lord deigned to seek you out for his divine ministry, I shall baptize you into the new creed with the Greek name Stephen.”

The ties of sympathy that had drawn them close since the first instant were consolidated even more and the young man would never forget that encounter with Christ under the shade of the date-palms haloed by light.

For a month, Jeziel, now known as Stephen, absorbed himself in the study of the entire exemplification and teachings of the Master whom he had not known directly.

At the Apostles’ house in Jerusalem there was more and more activity involving helping those in need, and this required a huge coefficient of care and dedication. There were the insane who came from all the provinces, abandoned old people, and squalid, starving children. And that was not all. At mealtime, long lines of common beggars implored the charity of a bowl of broth. With their tasks accumulating at enormous sacrifice, John and Peter were helped by some friends to build a modest ward intended for the work of the church that had been created to spread the message of the Good News. Their assistance to the poor, however, did not leave time for spreading the evangelical teachings. That was when John thought it was unreasonable for the Lord’s direct disciples to ignore the sowing of the Divine Word in order to spend all their available time working in the refectory and infirmaries, because the number of sick and unfortunate who came to the followers of Jesus as their last hope was increasing every day. There were sick people who knocked at the door, in addition to benefactors of the new institution who had special requests for their wards, and friends who demanded arrangements on behalf of orphans and widows.

At the next meeting of the humble church, Simon Peter suggested the appointment of seven helpers to work in the infirmaries and refectories, a resolution that was approved with general delight. Among the seven brothers that were chosen, Stephen was designated with unanimous approval.

A new life had begun for the young man from Corinth. The same spiritual virtues, which illuminated his personality and had contributed so much to the healing of the patrician who had restored him to freedom, spread the most sacred comfort among the sick and indigent of Jerusalem. A large number of the sick brought to the disciples' house recovered their health. Downcast elderly persons found encouragement under the influence of his words inspired at the divine fount of the Gospel. Afflicted mothers asked for his sensible advice; women of the common folk, exhausted by the work and anguish of life and anxious for peace and consolation, sought the comfort of his caring and fraternal presence.

Simon Peter was utterly delighted with his spiritual son's victories. Those in need got the impression of having received a new herald from God to alleviate their pain.

In a short time, Stephen became famous in Jerusalem for his almost miraculous deeds. Considered as one of Christ's chosen, his decisive and sincere work had made numerous adherents of the Gospel of love and forgiveness in just a few months. His noble efforts were not limited only to the task of mitigating the hunger of the poor. Illuminated by his pure and ardent faith, his word shone amid the Galilean Apostles in the church's preaching. Under the pretext of not wanting to harm old established principles, nearly all his companions refrained from broadening their comments in public beyond considerations that were agreeable to the dominant Judaism; but Stephen, commenting on the Master's life with his speech blazing with light, courageously presented to the multitudes the Savior of the world in the glory of the new divine revelations, indifferent to the controversies he might provoke. The Apostles themselves were surprised at the seeming magic of his profound inspiration. Because his soul had been tempered in the sublime forge of suffering, his preaching was full of tears and joy, appeals and aspirations.

In a few months time, his name was surrounded by an aura of surprising veneration. And at the end of the day, when it was time for evening prayers, the young man from Corinth sat beside Peter and John and spoke of his visions and hopes, filled with the spirit of that worshipful Master, who, through his Gospel, had sowed in his heart the blessed stars of infinite joy.

⁴ Early designation for Christianity – Emmanuel

⁵ Isaiah, chap. 53

6 That is, Matthew. – Emmanuel.

These notes do not comprise the canonical Book of Matthew, which most biblical scholarship has shown to be composed of at least three different sources: material from the Book of Mark (which both Matthew and Luke share in common with Mark, often word for word the same), material from a “lost document” called Q (which both Matthew and Luke also share in common, often word for word, but which is not contained in Mark) and some independent material by the redactor of the canonical book of Matthew. The possible material comprising the Q source may be found on the internet (for example, www.earlychristianwritings.com/q). We would suggest that Levi’s notes, referred to at various points of the present work, may comprise the Q document. – Tr.

IV

On the Road to Joppa

We are in old Jerusalem on a clear morning in the year 35 A.D.

Inside a stately building, where everything exudes the comfort and luxury of the time, a young man appears to be waiting impatiently for someone who is late. At the least noise from the street, he rushes to the window, only to return to his chair to study some papyri and parchments like someone who is amusing himself killing time.

Saddoc had arrived in the city after a week of exhausting travel and was now waiting for his friend Saul for the affable embrace of their long friendship.

Soon, a small vehicle resembling a Roman chariot and pulled by two superb white horses stopped in front of the door. In a short time, our personages embraced each other effusively, overflowing with joy and youthfulness.

The young Saul displayed all the vigor of a single man bordering on thirty years of age. On his face full of virility and handsome manliness, his Jewish features stood out particularly in his deep, penetrating eyes, characteristic of indomitable and passionate temperaments rich in intensity and resolve. Dressed in a patrician tunic, he preferred to speak Greek, which he had learned in his home town in the company of his much-loved teachers educated in the schools of Athens and Alexandria.

“When did you get here?” Saul asked his friend jovially.

“I’ve been in Jerusalem since yesterday morning. I visited your sister and brother-in-law, and they brought me up to date about you before they left for Lydda.”

“And how is life there in Damascus?”

“Always fine.”

There was a slight pause before Saddoc remarked: “But how you’ve changed! ... A Roman chariot, speaking Greek and...”

Saul, however, did not let him continue: “And in the soul of the Law, always desirous of submitting Rome and Athens to our own principles.”

“Always the same old Saul!” said his friend with an open smile. “And let me add to what you’ve just said. The chariot is essential for your visits to a flowered little house on the road to Joppa, and speaking Greek is required for conversing with a true descendant of Issachar born amid the flowers and marble of Corinth.”

“How did you find out about that?” asked Saul in surprise.

“Didn’t I say I was with your sister yesterday afternoon?”

The two men sat in comfortable chairs, and mixing their conversation with small glasses of heady “Cypriot” wine, they mostly touched on the problems of their personal lives related to small everyday events.

Saul was extremely cheerful as he told his friend that he was, in fact, in love with a young girl of his race, who combined the gifts of uncommon beauty with the highest treasures of the soul. Her devotion to home life was one of her holiest female attributes. Saul told Saddoc about the first time they had met. About three months ago he had gone with Alexander and Gamaliel to a private party that Zechariah ben Hanan, a well-off farmer living on the road to Joppa, threw for some well situated friends to celebrate the circumcision of his servant’s sons. He added that the host was an old Jewish merchant who had emigrated from Corinth after many years of working in Achaia, after having become disheartened due to the persecutions of which he had been the victim. After great hardship on the journey from Cenchrea to Caesarea, Zechariah had arrived at this port in dire financial straits. He had been helped out, however, by a Roman patrician who supplied him with the resources to buy a large property on the road to Joppa some distance from Jerusalem. Saul had been generously received at Zechariah’s now prosperous and happy home, and there he had met in the young Abigail a tender heart, holder of the most beautiful moral virtues that could possibly adorn a daughter of their people. She was in fact ideal: intelligent, versed in the Law, and above all sweet and affectionate. She had been adopted by the couple as a dear daughter after having suffered bitterly in Corinth, where her father had been murdered and her brother enslaved for life. They had known each other

for three months now, exchanging the most cheerful hopes – and who knows? Perhaps the Eternal One had reserved the conjugal union for them as the crowning of their youthful, sacred dreams. Saul spoke with the enthusiasm proper for his passionate and vibrant temperament. In his piercing gaze, one could see the living flame of resolute sentiments concerning the affection that dominated his emotional capacity.

“Have you told your parents about your plans?” Saddoc asked.

“My sister intends to go to Tarsus in a couple months and she will be the bearer of my intentions regarding my future plans. Besides, you know that this cannot be a matter for hasty decisions. I don’t think a man should settle a decisive issue of his destiny impetuously. In obedience to our age-old instinct for prudence, I have been analyzing my thoughts for a long time, and I have not yet taken Abigail to stay with Delilah for a few days in our home. I intend to do so only just before my sister leaves for our father’s home.”

“Since you are pondering so many plans for the future,” added his friend with kindly interest, “where do you stand regarding your ambitions for the post in the Sanhedrin?”

“I have no complaints, because the Tribunal has given me very special duties for now. You know that, for a long time now, Gamaliel and my father have been pressing for my transference to Jerusalem, where I have been promised a place of prominence in the administration of our people. We all know the old master is getting along in years and wishes to retire from public life. Soon, I will replace him in the deliberations of the most important matters and will receive a very good income besides the contribution coming to me periodically from Tarsus. My main political ambition is to increase my prestige among the rabbis. We mustn’t forget that Rome is powerful and that Athens is wise, and it is becoming more and more essential to awaken the eternal hegemony of Jerusalem as a tabernacle of the one and only God. Thus, we must see to it that the Greeks and the Romans bend their knees to the Law of Moses.”

However, showing that he was not paying much attention to Saul’s nationalist idealism, Saddoc stayed focused on the situation at hand and warned tactfully: “From what you are telling me, I’m pleased to know that your father is progressively improving financially. And to think that he used to be a simple weaver...”

“Perhaps,” said Saul, “that is the very reason why he taught me that particular skill when I was a boy so that I would never forget that a man’s progress depends on his own efforts. Nowadays, however, after having worked at the loom for so long, he and my mother are rightfully resting at a venerable old age without any worries. His caravans and camels travel all over Cilicia, guaranteeing him an ever increasing income.”

The conversation continued lively and at a certain moment the young man from Tarsus asked his friend about what had motivated him to come to Jerusalem.

“I came to check out the healing of my uncle, Philodemus. He was healed of his blindness through some mysterious process.”

And as if his mind were full of all sorts of questions for which he had not found the answers according to what he had discovered on his own, he added: “Have you heard of the men of the Way?”

“Ah! Andronicus told me about them quite some time ago. Aren’t they a few poor, ragged, ignorant Galileans who have taken refuge in despicable neighborhoods?”

“Yes, precisely.”

Then Saddoc told him about a man called Stephen, supposedly a bearer of supernatural powers – in the common folks’ opinion – who had restored his uncle’s sight to the amazement of many people.

“But how?” asked Saul, surprised. “How could Philodemus submit himself to such a sordid experience? Doesn’t he perchance understand that this might have come from the enemies of God? Ever since Andronicus told me about them for the first time, I have heard many stories about those men. I have even exchanged ideas with Gamaliel about how we might stop their pernicious activities; but with his characteristic tolerance, he pointed out the fact that these people have been helping many persons who don’t have any money.”

“Yes,” said Saddoc, “but I’ve heard that Stephen’s preaching is luring many learned individuals to new principles that in some ways invalidate the Law of Moses.”

“But wasn’t it an uneducated, obscure Galilean carpenter who originated the movement? What could we expect from Galilee? Has it perchance produced something besides fish and vegetables?”

“Even so, this martyred carpenter has become an idol to his followers. In trying to undo my uncle’s impressions and call him back to his senses, yesterday I was taken to observe the charity house managed by one Simon Peter. It’s an odd institution but extraordinary nonetheless: abandoned children find care, lepers recover their health, infirm elderly and people down on their luck rejoice in comfort.”

“But the sick, where are they kept?” asked Saul, surprised.

“They all stay with these incomprehensible men.”

“They’re all crazy!” said the young man from Tarsus, with the spontaneous frankness characteristic of his personality.

Both men exchanged personal impressions about the new doctrine, punctuating with irony their comments regarding a number of religious incidents that had gripped the attention of Jerusalem’s simple folk.

When they finished the conversation, Saddoc added: “I’m not at all pleased at seeing our principles debased, and although I’m living in Damascus, I would like to cooperate with you in laying the foundations for the suppression of such activities – it’s crucial. With the privileges as a future rabbi with clout in the Temple, you could head up a resolute action against these deceivers and false conjurers.”

“Absolutely,” answered Saul. “And I’m ready to take whatever steps the matter requires. Until now, the Sanhedrin’s attitude has been one of greatest tolerance, but in view of these assaults on our principles and the fact that these men deserve to be severely punished, I will see to it that all my colleagues change their minds and proceed as is fitting.”

Almost ominously, he concluded: “On what days does this Stephen preach?”

“On the Sabbath.”

“Well, the day after tomorrow we will go together to check out these fools,” replied Saul. “In case their teachings actually turn out to be innocuous, we will leave them in peace with their crazy talk in the midst of human maladies; otherwise, they will pay very dearly for their audacity at offending our religious codes in the very metropolis of Judaism.

They discussed at length social events, the intrigues of the Pharisaism to which they belonged, the successes of the present and hopes of the future.

In the early evening of that same day, the elegant chariot of Saul of Tarsus passed through the gates of Jerusalem on its way to the harbor of Joppa.

The hot sun was still high above the horizon and covered the road with its blazing light. The face of the young doctor of the Law radiated a wild joy at the long stride of the horses as they broke into a full gallop from time to time. He was happy at remembering the sport that he had taken a fancy to in his native city, and which was so much to the Greek taste in which he had been educated, thanks to his father's care. With eyes fixed on the fiery and speedy horses, he recalled the victories he had won among his playmates in his carefree youth.

A few miles ahead, a comfortable house appeared, set among tall date palms and blossoming peach trees. All around were large vegetable patches alongside a fine stream of water intelligently utilized in the extensive garden. The property was an integral part of one of the many small villages that had sprung up around the holy city wherever there were conditions favorable for the small-time farming that was of such interest to the markets of Jerusalem, set in the midst of extraordinary dryness. It was there that Zechariah had settled with his family to re-start his honest life. Ruth and Abigail strove to help him in his noble endeavors as an industrious, hardworking man. He raised both fruit and flowers, thus making use of all the land available.

Upon leaving Corinth, the generous Israelite had met with great difficulties until he disembarked at Caesarea, where he exhausted his last resources. However, some countrymen had introduced him to a well known Roman patrician who was a large landowner in Samaria. He lent Zachariah a good sum of money and suggested that particular region of Joppa, where he could rent him the property of a friend. Zechariah accepted his help and everything was now going stupendously well. The sale of fruit and vegetables, as well as the raising of livestock and poultry rewarded him well for his hard work. Though far from Jerusalem, he had had the opportunity to visit the city more than three times. With the help of Alexander, a close relative of Annas, Zechariah had succeeded in being included among the privileged merchants who were allowed to sell animals for the Temple sacrifices. Helped by influential friends such as Gamaliel and Saul of Tarsus, who had left the status of pupil to graduate to lawful authority in the highest tribunal of Judaism, Zechariah had been able to pay back a great part of his debt and had risen straight up to a fine position of financial independence in

the country of his birth. Ruth rejoiced in her husband's success, seconded by Abigail in whom she found the dedicated affection of a true daughter.

Jeziel's sister seemed to have recast the delicacy of her feminine features in the forge of the suffering she had gone through. Her graceful looks and the blackness of her eyes had been combined with a veil of subtle melancholy, which had enveloped her completely since those tragic and lugubrious days of her past in Corinth. How she wished for some brief and banal news of the brother whom destiny had made a slave of cruel torturers!... To this end, Zechariah had from the beginning spared neither time nor effort, and had asked a loyal friend from Achaia to do everything possible to find Jeziel. However, he had only managed to find out that Jeziel had been taken in chains aboard a merchant ship sailing for Nicopolis. Nothing more. Abigail had insisted again. Friends in Corinth had made new promises to continue investigating Licinius Minucius's inner circle in order to discover the young captive's whereabouts.

On this particular day, Abigail had strong memories of her dear brother, his always caring warnings and counsels.

Since she had begun her relationship with the young man from Tarsus and was now anticipating the possibility of marriage, she anxiously prayed to God for the consoling assurance that her brother was still alive, wherever he might be. She knew that Jeziel would like to get to know her heart's chosen one, for his thoughts too were inspired by the sincere ardor to serve God well. She would tell Jeziel that the inclination of Saul's soul was also interlaced with religious and philosophical thoughts, and there had been many, many occasions when both she and Saul immersed themselves in the contemplation of nature, comparing its colorful lessons with the divine symbols of the Sacred Writings. Saul had been much help to her in cultivating the flowers of the faith that Jeziel had sown in her simple soul. He was not excessively sentimental or given those effusions of affection that occur without great meaning, but she had understood his noble and loyal spirit, which indicated a profound sense of self-discipline. Abigail was sure that she understood his innermost aspirations, revealed in the lofty dreams that thrilled his youth. What a sublime attraction it was that drove her to this wise, willful and sincere young man! Sometimes he seemed too austere and strong-willed. His understanding of the Law allowed for no leeway. He knew how to get what he wanted, and was displeased with any expression of disobedience to his purposes. During those months of seeing him nearly every day, she had gotten

to know his untamed and restless temperament, as well as his eminently generous heart, where a fount of unknown tenderness lay deeply hidden.

Abigail was lost in reverie, sitting on an elegant stone bench next to the blossoming peach trees, when she saw Saul's chariot approaching at a full trot.

Zechariah greeted him some ways away, and they entered the house together engaged in lively conversation. Abigail followed.

The conversation – an oft-repeated weekly occurrence – was very cordial. Then, against the dazzling backdrop of the sunset, and in keeping with their habit, the two lovers walked hand in hand like a nearly-engaged couple down to the orchard, which was interspersed with spacious beds of oriental flowers. The sea was several miles away, but the fresh air of the afternoon had the feel of the gentle breezes blowing in from the coast. Saul and Abigail at first talked about everyday trivialities. However, at one point, observing the veil of sadness stamped on his companion's face, Saul asked tenderly: "Why are you so sad today?"

"I don't know," she answered with moist eyes, "but I've been thinking a lot about my brother. I'm anxiously awaiting news of him, because I'm still hopeful that he will meet you sooner or later. Jeziel would listen to you with enthusiasm and happiness. One of Zechariah's friends has promised us information about him and we are awaiting news from Corinth."

After a short pause, Abigail looked at Saul with her big eyes and continued: "Listen, Saul, if Jeziel is still a prisoner, will you promise me your help on his behalf? Your prestigious friends in Jerusalem could intervene with Achaia's proconsul to set him free! Who knows? My hopes now rest entirely with you."

He took her hand and replied tenderly: "I will do everything I can for him."

And setting his commanding and amorous eyes on hers, he asked emphatically: "Abigail, do you love your brother more than me?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, understanding the delicacy of the question. "You know my tender heart and that saves me from having to say any more. As you know, my dear, Jeziel was my source of strength when my mother died. He was my childhood companion and a dear friend in a youth empty of dreams. He was the loving brother who taught me to understand the

Commandments and to sing the Psalms with hands folded, delivering me from the ways of evil and inclining me to the good and to virtue. Everything you have found in me is a gift from the generous help of an attentive brother.”

Saul noticed her eyes moist with tears and said gently: “Don’t cry; I understand your sacred loving reasons. If necessary, I’ll go to the ends of the earth to find Jeziel, in case he is still alive. I’ll take letters from Jerusalem to the provincial court in Corinth. I’ll do all I can. So don’t you worry. According to what you’ve said, he must be a saint. But let’s change the subject. There are pressing problems to solve. What about our plans, Abigail?”

“God will bless us,” she said emotionally.

“Yesterday, Delilah and her husband went to Lydda to visit some of our relatives. But everything has been arranged for you to be with us in Jerusalem two months from now. Before my sister makes her next journey to Tarsus, I want her to get to know you more intimately so that she will be able to openly break the news to my parents about our plans to get married.”

“I’m very touched by your invitation, but...”

“No reservations or being bashful. We’ll come to fetch you. I’ll make all the necessary arrangements with Ruth and Zechariah; I won’t allow them to lay out any expenses for what you might need to get settled in a big city. I’ve already arranged for several Greek-style tunics to be delivered to you within a few days.”

He finished his remarks with a beatific smile: “I want you to appear in Jerusalem as a perfect example of our people, as someone who has grown up amid the ancient beauties of Corinth.”

The girl made a shy gesture showing inner contentment.

They walked a bit further and sat down under the old flowering peach trees, breathing in long draughts of the soft breezes scenting the air. The cultivated ground and colorful roses of all sorts gave off a sweet fragrance. The end of a sunset is always full of sounds that pass quickly as if the souls of things were all anxious for silence, the friend of deep repose ... There were leafy trees standing watch in the shadows, a few left-over wandering birds fluttering quickly by, and caressing breezes coming from far-away, rustling the large boughs and accentuating the gentle murmuring of the wind.

Inebriated with indefinable bliss, Saul contemplated the first stars that were smiling in the twilight embroidered sky. Nature is always a faithful mirror of the innermost emotions, and those waves of fragrance that the breezes were bringing from far away found an echo of mysterious joy in his heart.

“Abigail,” he said, holding her little hand in his, “nature always sings along with hopeful and believing souls. How longingly I waited for you on the path of my life! My father spoke to me about the home and its sweetness, and I waited for a woman who could understand me completely.”

“God is good,” she said, enchanted, “and only now do I realize that, after so much suffering, he has reserved for me in his infinite mercy the greatest treasure of my life: your love in the land of my ancestors. Your love, Saul, anoints all my thoughts. Heaven will make us happy. When we are married, I will pray fervently every morning to the angels of God to teach me how to weave a web of joy for you; at night, when the blessing of rest envelops the world, I will correspond with renewed affection. I will take your tormented mind off the problems of life and will anoint your head with the caresses of my hands. I will live with God and you alone. I will be faithful to you my whole life, and out of love for your life and your name, I will love any suffering the world may cause me.”

Saul squeezed her hands even more tenderly and replied, enchanted: “I in turn will give you my sincere and devoted heart. Abigail, my spirit used to hold only love for the Law and my parents. My youth was very restless, but pure. I will not offer you an unscented flower. Since the early days of my youth, I have known companions who encouraged me to follow their uncertain steps in the intoxication of the senses, the precursor of the death of our noblest concerns in this world, but I have never betrayed the divine ideal that vibrates within my sincere soul. After the initial studies of my career, I met women who beckoned to me, taken by a perilous and mistaken notion of love. In Tarsus, after winning the highest awards during the magnificent days of the youth games, I used to receive declarations of love and marriage proposals from adoring women, but the truth is that I remained insensitive to those ostentatious gatherings of purple and flowers to wait for you as the unknown heroine of my dreams. When God brought me here to meet you, your eyes in a flash spoke to me of sublime revelations. You are the heart of my mind, the essence of my reasoning and you will be the guiding hand of my edification throughout life.”

While Abigail, touched and happy, had a sea of tears in her eyes, the passionate young man continued: “We shall live for each other and have children faithful to God. I shall be the ordering of our lives and you shall be the obedience of our peace. Our home shall be a temple. Love for God shall be its strongest pillar, and when my work forces me to be absent from home, you shall watch over the tabernacle of our happiness.”

“Yes, my darling. What wouldn’t I do for you? You shall command and I shall obey. You shall be the order of my life and I shall pray to God to help me be a balm of tenderness for you. When you’re tired, I’ll remember my mother and will put your kind soul to sleep with the most beautiful prayers of David! ... You shall interpret God’s word for me. You shall be the law; I shall be your servant.”

Saul was moved at hearing such adulatory expressions. They were the most beautiful words he had ever received from a female soul. No woman except Abigail had ever spoken like that to his impetuous spirit. Accustomed to long and complex reasoning, racking his brains in the syllogisms of the scribes in hopes of a brilliant future, he had felt that his soul had gone dry in its thirst for true idealism. He had received a healthy home education as a child, and ever since then he had kept pure the primary impulses of the heart. He had never contaminated them in the weave of easy pleasures or the fire of violent passions that leave in the soul only the ashes of pain without hope. Used to the sports and games of the time and to the sharing of the company of friends leading hectic lives, Saul had nevertheless displayed the sacred heroism of placing the demands of the Law over his own natural tendencies. His concept of service to God did not allow for concessions to the self. In his opinion, every man should keep himself from inferior contacts with the world until he reached the nuptial bed. The home was to be a tabernacle of unending blessings; children, the first fruits offered on the altar of Highest Love and consecrated to the Supreme Lord. Not that his youth was exempt from desires. Saul of Tarsus had experienced all the cravings of youthful impetuosity. He imagined situations of satisfied yearnings; however, obedient to his mother’s love, he had promised himself he would never transgress. The life of the home was the life of God, and Saul was saving himself for more sublime emotions. He watched as the years went by from hope to hope, praying that divine inspiration would determine the course of his ideals. He waited and trusted. Here or there, his parents thought they had found the one they thought he should choose. However, strong-willed and resolute, Saul dismissed the intervention of his loved ones concerning the choice that would

affect the decision of his destiny. Abigail had filled his heart. She was the mystic flower of his ideal, the soul who would understand his aspirations through perfect resonance of thought. With his eyes fixed on her delicate features illuminated by the pale moonlight, he longed to hold her forever in his strong arms. At the same time, sweet tenderness vibrated in his soul. He wished to draw her to him as one does with a sweet child and caress her silky hair with all the wealth of his love.

Enraptured with spiritual pleasure, they talked for a long time about the love that manifested in them the same aspirations for happiness. All their most intimate discussions made God the sacred participant in the hopes of the future promised to them sanctified in unending joy.

Hand in hand, they exulted in the marvelous full moon. The oleanders seemed to smile at them. The oriental roses, haloed by moonbeams, were like a message of fragrance and beauty.

When it was time for Saul to bid adieu, he added happily: "In two days time I will return to see you again. It's settled. When Delilah leaves, she'll take the news about us to my parents, and in exactly six months from today I want to have you with me forever."

"Six months?" Abigail asked, half blushing and surprised.

"I don't think there is anything keeping us from it; we already have all the essentials."

"And if we have no news of Jeziel by then? I want to get married convinced of his contentment and approval."

Saul smiled slightly, barely hiding his disappointment, and clarified: "As for that, don't worry. First we'll take care of my parents' approval, which is of more immediate concern. As soon as that is done, I'll go personally to Achaia if need be. It's highly unlikely that Zechariah will not have received any more news from Corinth in the next few weeks. Then we'll make more solid arrangements."

Abigail made a gesture of satisfaction and gratitude.

Joined now in the same vibration of joy and before going back into the house, where Ruth and Zechariah were occupied with reading the Prophets while waiting for them, Saul raised Abigail's hands to his lips and whispered the customary: "Faithful forever!"

Within minutes, after a brief chat with his friends, the trot of the horses could be heard on the road returning to Jerusalem. The small chariot rolled along speedily under the moonlight in a cloud of dust.

V

Stephen's Preaching

Saul and Saddoc entered the humble church in Jerusalem and noticed the compact crowd of poor and miserable people gathered together with a ray of hope in their forlorn eyes.

Built at the cost of so much sacrifice, the simple structure was no more than a large shed with a tile roof and fragile walls, lacking any and all comfort.

James, Peter and John were particularly surprised at the presence of the young doctor of the Law, who had become popular in the city for his fiery oratory and accurate knowledge of the Scriptures.

The kind Galileans offered him the most comfortable bench. He accepted the kindness, smiling with undisguised irony at everything he saw. Inwardly, he thought that Saddoc himself might have been the victim of a false assessment. Amid all these elderly, invalids and infirm people, what could these unlearned men do? What could be dangerous to the Law of Israel in these abandoned children and half-dead women, in whose hearts all hope seemed to have been extinguished? He felt ill at ease in looking at so many faces that leprosy had devastated, that malignant ulcers had mercilessly disfigured. Here an old man with purulent sores wrapped up in fetid pieces of cloth, yonder a lame man barely covered in rags next to tattered orphans who humbly tried to make themselves comfortable.

The famous doctor of the Law noticed the presence of several people who had listened to him interpret the Mosaic texts in the synagogue of Cilicia; others who had closely followed his work in the Sanhedrin, where his intelligence was held out as a pledge of hope for the Jewish people. By their looks, he grasped the fact that these friends were also there for the first time. His visit to the unknown temple of the nameless Galileans had attracted many followers of the dominant Pharisaism, anxious for the service to begin so they

could determine who they were and report on them to the most important authorities. Saul concluded that that part of the audience, at least, was there on his account and would show solidarity in any measure he might take. Such attitude seemed to him natural, logical, and suitable to his purposes. Hadn't they been told of the incredible deeds performed by the followers of the Way? Mightn't such deeds comprise gross and scandalous deceit? Who could say that it was not all the ignoble product of witchcraft and condemnable sorcery? In case he discerned any dishonest purposes, he could, right then and there, count on a large number of religious cohorts ready to defend the strict fulfillment of the Law, even at the cost of the heaviest sacrifice.

Noticing one or another scene much less pleasant than the luxurious environment he was accustomed to, he avoided looking at the lame and the sick who were elbow to elbow in the room, calling Saddoc's attention to them with sarcastic and witty remarks. When the vast room – deprived of ornaments or symbols of any sort – was full, a young man walked between the long rows, flanked by Peter and John. The three mounted a natural platform made of piled-up stones.

“Stephen!... It's Stephen!”

Muffled voices indicated the preacher while his more fervent admirers pointed at him with joyful smiles.

Sudden silence kept everyone in extraordinary expectation. The thin and pale young man, in whose help the most unfortunate individuals deemed to have found an unfolding of Christ's love, prayed in a loud voice, asking for himself and the assembly the inspiration of the Almighty. Next, he opened a scroll and read a passage from Matthew's notes.

“But instead, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying: The kingdom of heaven has come.”²

Stephen looked out over the crowd with his serene and fulgurant eyes. Not at all disturbed by the presence of Saul and his numerous friends, he began speaking these words – more or less – in a clear and vibrant voice: “Friends, thus the time has come for the Shepherd to gather His sheep around Him in his unlimited devotion. We used to be slaves of imposed thoughts, but today we have been freed through the Gospel of Christ Jesus. From time immemorial, our race has guarded the light of the Tabernacle, and God finally sent us His Son without blemish. Where are those in Israel who have not yet heard the message of the Good News? Where are those who have not yet

found happiness through the joys of the new faith? In His divine response to our millenary expectancy, God sent us the revelation from heaven to make clear our ways. In accordance with the promises of the prophecy to all those who have cried and suffered out of love for the Eternal One, the Divine Emissary came into the den of our bitter and deserved suffering to illumine the night of our unrepentant souls so that the horizons of redemption might unfold before us. The Messiah answered the anguishing problems of the human creature with the solution of love, which redeems all beings and cleanses all sins. Master of the labor and perfect joy of life, His blessings represent our inheritance. Moses was the door; Christ is the key. With the crown of martyrdom, He obtained for us the immortal laurel of salvation. We were captives of error but His blood set us free. In life and death, in the joy of Canaan as well as in the anguish of Calvary, in what He did and in all He did not do during His glorious stay on earth, He is the Son of God illumining the way.

“Above all human thought, above from all the conflicts of earthly ambitions, His kingdom of peace and light shines in the conscience of souls redeemed.

“O Israel! You, who have waited for so many centuries: your sufferings and heartrending experiences have not been in vain! ... While other peoples have argued over menial interests, gathering around the false idols of false worship, while at the same time promoting wars of extermination with wicked perversity, you, O Israel, have hoped in the God of justice. You have carried the chains of human impiety in desolation and in the desert; you have converted the ignominy of captivity into hymns of hope; you have endured the infamy of earth’s powerful; you have seen your men and women, your youths and children exterminated under the iron glove of persecution, but you have never doubted the justice of heaven! Like the Psalmist, you have affirmed with your heroism that love and mercy that have pulsed within you throughout all your days! Down through the centuries you have wept in your sorrows and injuries. Like Job, you have lived from your faith, subjugated by the world’s oppression, but you have received the sacred pledge from the Most High: the one and only God! ... Oh! Eternal hope of Jerusalem, sing with jubilation, be glad even though you have not been entirely faithful in your understanding, for you led the Beloved Lamb to the arms of the cross. His wounds, however, bought heaven for us at the high price of the ultimate sacrifice!

“Isaiah foresaw Him bent under the weight of our iniquities, flourishing in the dryness of our hearts like a flower from heaven on parched ground, but he also revealed that, from the hour of His extreme self-denial in an infamous death, the sacred divine cause would prosper in His hands forever.

“Dear friends, where are those sheep who could not or did not know how to wait? Let us seek them out for Christ as lost drachmas of his unveiled love! To all those without hope, let us proclaim the glories and the joys of His kingdom of peace and immortal love!

“The Law kept us in the spirit of a nation without erasing from our soul the human desire for earthly supremacy. Many of our race have waited for a conquering prince who would enter the holy city in triumph with the bloody trophies of a battle of ruin and death; who would enable us to wield a hateful scepter of power and tyranny. But Christ has freed us forever. Son of God and Emissary of His glory, His greatest commandment confirms Moses, recommending loving God above everything else with all our heart and mind, and adding to it the most beautiful divine decree that we are to love one another as He Himself loved us.

“His kingdom is one of a righteous conscience and a purified heart in the service of God. Its doors comprise the marvelous path of spiritual redemption, opened equally to the children of all nations.

“His beloved disciples will come from all the world over. Apart from His light there will always be storms for the hesitant traveler of earth, who, without Christ, will fall defeated in the fruitless and destructive struggles of the strongest heart. Only His Gospel brings peace and freedom. It is the treasure of the world. In its sublime glory, the righteous shall find the wreath of triumph; the unfortunate, comfort; the downcast, a fortress of good cheer; and sinners, the redemptive path of merciful deliverance.

“It is true that we did not understand Him. Throughout His great witness, people failed to understand His divine humility, and His closest friends forsook Him. His wounds cried out to our criminal indifference. No one shall be exempt from this offense, for we are all heirs of His heavenly gifts. Where all enjoy the benefit, no one can escape the responsibility. That is why we must all answer for the crime of Calvary. However, His wounds are our light; His suffering, the most ardent appeal of love; His example, the open route to the sublime and immortal good.

“Therefore, come and commune with us at the table of the divine banquet! No more feasts of corruptible bread, but the eternal food of joy and life ... No more fermented wine, but the comforting nectar of the soul diluted in the fragrance of immortal love.

“Christ is the substance of our freedom. A day will come when His kingdom will encompass the children of the East and West in one embrace of fraternity and light. Then we shall understand that the Gospel is God’s answer to our appeals in light of the Law of Moses. The Law is human; the Gospel, divine; Moses is the guide; Christ, the Savior. The Prophets were faithful stewards; Jesus, however, is Lord of the vineyard. Under the Law we were slaves; under the Gospel we are free children of a loving and just Father!”

At that point, Stephen suspended the words that were flowing harmoniously and vibrantly from his lips, inspired by the purest sentiment. The listeners, of all categories, were unable to hide their amazement in light of his ideas of living revelations. The crowd was captivated with the principles he expounded. The beggars directed a smile of approval at the preacher in a lofty expressive of joyful hope. John set his tender eyes on Stephen, identifying once more in his ardent speech the evangelical message interpreted by a beloved disciple of the unforgettable Master who was never absent from those who gathered together in His name.

Saul of Tarsus, emotional by temperament, was caught up in the wave of general wonder. Although highly surprised, he discerned the difference between the Law and the Gospel being announced by these strange men whom his intellectual power was unable to grasp. In one glance, he realized the danger this new doctrine would cause to mainstream Judaism. He turned against the proclamation he had heard in spite of its echo of mysterious beauty. To his mind, it was imperative to eliminate the confusion that was beginning to be sketched regarding Moses. The Law was one and unique. This Christ, who ended in defeat between two thieves, appeared to his eyes as a deceiver unworthy of any consideration. Stephen’s victory – like the one he had just witnessed – caused him indignation. These Galileans might be pious, but they were also criminals by subverting the inviolable principles of the Jewish race.

The orator was about to resume his momentarily interrupted sermon, which was awaited with joyful expectation, when the young doctor audaciously stood up and spoke almost angrily, coloring what he had to say with obvious sarcasm.

“Pious Galileans, where is the sense in this strange and absurd doctrine? How dare you proclaim the false supremacy of an obscure Nazarene over Moses right here in Jerusalem itself, where the destiny of the invincible tribes of Israel is being decided? Who was this Christ? Was he not a simple carpenter?”

At the arrogant intonation of this unexpected interruption, a sort of restrained fear took over the room, but the unfortunate individuals to whom the message of Christ was supreme nourishment shot a glance of defense and jubilant enthusiasm at Stephen. The Galilean Apostles could not hide their apprehension. James was white. Saul’s friends noticed his mocking attitude. The preacher had also paled, but displayed in his resolute look his usual trait of undisturbed serenity. Gazing at the doctor of the Law – the first man in the city who had dared disrupt the generous effort of the Gospel – Stephen, without betraying the energy of love overflowing his heart, showed Saul the sincerity of his words and the nobleness of his thoughts. Before his companions had recovered from their surprise and with remarkable presence of mind, Stephen, indifferent to the feelings of group fear, stated: “It is fortunate that the Messiah was a carpenter, for humankind will no longer be without shelter. In fact, He was the Shelter of peace and hope! Never again will we wander aimlessly in the storms or in the wake of chimerical ideas of so many who live by calculation without the clarity of sentiment.”

This concise, fearless reply caught the future rabbi off guard. In more educated circles, he was used to being successful in every joust of words. Stern and red-faced, displaying profound rage, Saul bit his lip in a gesture peculiar to him and added in a commanding voice: “Where are we going with such excessive interpretations regarding a commonplace deceiver whom the Sanhedrin punished with the scourge and death? What is there to say about a Savior who could not save Himself? As an emissary clothed in heavenly power, why did He not avert the humiliation of such an infamous sentence? The God of Hosts, who rescued His chosen people from captivity; who guided them through the desert and opened a passageway through the sea; who satisfied their hunger with divine manna; who, out of love, caused solid rock to gush forth in a spring of living water: had He no other means to distinguish His envoy except on the cross of martyrdom between common criminals? Have you in this house so cheapened the glory of the Supreme Lord? All the doctors of the Temple know the story of the impostor whom you celebrate in the simplicity of your ignorance! Do you not hesitate to deprecate our values by presenting a Messiah pierced and bloody under the

sneers of the people? You cast shame over Israel and desire to found a new kingdom thereby? It would be fitting to let us know in its entirety the purpose of your pious fairy tales.”

Taking advantage of a pause in Saul’s denouncement, Stephen responded with dignity: “Friend, it was well stated that the Master would come into the world to confound many in Israel. The entire edifying story of our people is a document of God’s revelation. However, in the marvelous deeds by which Providence guided the Hebrew tribes in the past, do you not see the manifestation of the extreme care of a Father eager to build the spiritual future of children dear to His heart? As time goes by, we notice that a child’s mind gives way to broader educative principles. What yesterday was care is today energy coming from the great loving expressions of the soul. What yesterday was peace and verdure for the nourishment of sublime hope, today may be a tempest to give strength and endurance. In the past, we were children even when dealing with revelation; now however, the men and women of Israel have reached the age of adulthood in their knowledge. The Son of God brought the light of truth to all, teaching them the mysterious beauty of life by means of their spiritual growth through selflessness. His glory was summed up in loving us as God loves us. For this very reason, He has not yet been understood. Could we perchance expect a Savior according to our inferior designs? The Prophets affirmed that the ways of God might not be the ways we desire, and that His thoughts may not always harmonize with ours. What would we say of a Messiah who wielded a worldly scepter, striving with the princes of iniquity for a garland of sanguinary triumph? Is not the earth already weary of battles and dead bodies? Let us ask a Roman general how much the victory over an obscure village cost him; let us consult the dark list of those who were conquerors in keeping with our mistaken ideas of life. Israel could never expect a Messiah to show Himself in a chariot of magnificent glory in the physical realm, susceptible of stumbling on the first slippery step of the way. Such transitory expressions belong to the ephemeral scene, where the most radiant purple returns to dust. Contrary to all who claimed they were teaching virtue, resting in the satisfaction of their own senses, Jesus accomplished His task among the simplest and most unfortunate individuals, where one often finds the manifestations of the Father who teaches through the unsatisfied hopes and sufferings in which human existence labors from cradle to grave. Christ built his kingdom of love and peace among us on divine foundations. His example has been projected into the human soul with eternal light! Understanding all this, who among us

could thus see in the Emissary of God a warlike prince? No! The Gospel is love in its most sublime expression. The Master allowed Himself to be sacrificed in order to provide us an example of redemption through the purest love. As the Shepherd of a huge flock, He does not want to lose even one of His beloved sheep, nor does He want to condone the death of one sinner. Christ is life, and the salvation He brought to us is found in the sacred opportunity of our exaltation as God's children practicing His glorious teachings."

After a pause, and as the doctor of the Law was about to stand up to retort, Stephen continued: "And now, my brothers, I ask your leave to finish. If I have not spoken to you as you would have wished, I have nonetheless spoken as the Gospel counsels us, reproaching myself in an inner condemnation for my great wrongs. May the blessings of Christ be upon you all."

Before Stephen could leave the platform to mingle with the crowd, the future rabbi got up suddenly and stated in a rage: "I demand that we continue the argument! The preacher shall wait, for I have not finished what I must say."

Stephen answered with serenity: "I'll not argue."

"Why not?" asked Saul angrily. "You are ordered to continue."

"Friend," Stephen answered calmly, "Christ advised us that we are to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. If you have any legal accusation against me, do not be afraid to expose it and I will obey you; however, if it pertains to God, only He can reproach me."

Such a lofty spirit of resolve and composure nearly unhinged the doctor of the Sanhedrin; however, understanding that impetuosity would only be prejudicial to his clarity of thought, he added more calmly, despite the imperious tone that rendered all his energy plainly visible: "But I must elucidate the errors of this place. I must ask and you shall answer me."

"Regarding the Gospel," replied Stephen, "I have already offered you the principles I am aware of and have explained all that is within my grasp. As for anything else, this humble temple is for the building up of faith and not for confrontations of casuistry. Jesus had the foresight to recommend His disciples to flee from the trouble caused by arguments and quarrels. That is why it would not be right for us to waste time on needless contention when Christ's work begs our attention."

“Always Christ! Always the impostor!” roared Saul irascibly. “My authority is offended by your fanaticism in this place of misery and ignorance. Deceivers, you reject the possibility of enlightenment I offer you; uneducated Galileans, you do not want to consider my worthy letter of challenge. I shall avenge the Law of Moses that you have repudiated. You deny his authority, but you shall not escape my retaliation. You shall learn to love the truth and to honor Jerusalem, renouncing this insolent Nazarene who paid on the cross for his criminal follies. I shall appeal to the Sanhedrin to judge and punish you. The Sanhedrin has the authority to put an end to your condemnable hallucinations.”

Thus concluding, he seemed possessed by fury. However, not even in such a state did he succeed in disturbing the preacher, who answered in a serene spirit: “Friend, the Sanhedrin has a thousand ways to make me weep, but I do not recognize its power to force me to renounce my love for Jesus Christ.”

Having said that, Stephen stepped down from the dais with the same humility, not letting himself be taken by the gestures of approval directed at him by the children of misfortune, who had listened to him as a defender of their sacred hopes.

A few isolated protests were voiced.irate Pharisees shouted insulting and sarcastic remarks. The crowd became nervous, foreseeing imminent trouble. However, before Stephen had walked ten steps toward the middle with his companions, and before Saul could reach him with other personal and direct objections, an elderly tattered woman presented him with a poorly dressed young girl and exclaimed full of trust: “Sir! I know you are continuing the kindness and deeds of the Prophet of Nazareth, who one day saved me from death in spite of my sins and weakness. For pity’s sake, you too must help me. My daughter became mute over a year ago. I brought her here from Dalmanutha, overcoming enormous difficulties and trusting in your fraternal assistance!”

Before doing anything, Stephen thought of the danger of any personal caprice on his part, but wishing to help the old woman, he looked at the girl with sincere compassion and said: “We have nothing of our own to give, but it is right to expect from Christ the gifts we may need. He who is just and generous has not forgotten you in the holy distribution of His mercy.”

And as if moved by a foreign power, he stated: “You shall speak so that you may praise the good Master!”

Then, a remarkable event occurred, impacting the large assembly. With a ray of infinite joy in her eyes, the girl said: “I shall praise Christ with all my soul forever.”

The girl and her mother were overcome by emotion, fell on their knees and kissed Stephen’s hands. Stephen’s eyes, however, were now wet with tears as he himself was profoundly touched; he himself was the first to marvel at the healing, and he had no way other than heartfelt tears to express the intensity of his gratitude.

The Pharisees, who had approached him for the purpose of disturbing the peace of the humble place, retreated stupefied, whereas the poor and afflicted filled the room with exclamations of sublime hope as if they had received an affirmation from heaven for the triumph of the pure faith.

Saul witnessed the scene, unable to disguise his rage. If he could, he would have torn Stephen to pieces with his own hands. However, despite his impulsive temperament, he concluded that an aggressive act would draw his friends into a conflict of major proportions. He also thought that perhaps not all the followers of the Way would, like the preacher, be inclined to restrict the battle to the realm of lessons of a spiritual order, and probably would not turn down a physical fight. He saw at a glance that some were armed, that the elderly had walking sticks and the lame displayed solid crutches. A physical fight in that precariously constructed place would have regrettable consequences. He tried to coordinate his thoughts more appropriately. He would have the Law on his side. He could count on the Sanhedrin. The most distinguished priests were his devoted friends. He would fight Stephen until his mental resistance caved in. If he could not make him submit, he would hate him forever. To satisfy his caprices, he would succeed at removing any obstacle.

Realizing that Saddoc and two other companions were about to start a scuffle, Saul shouted to him in a grave and imperative voice: “Let’s go! The followers of the Way shall pay very dearly for their defiance.”

At that moment, when all the Pharisees seemed ready to comply with his order, the man from Tarsus saw Stephen pass right next to him on his way to the interior of the house. Saul felt shaken in every fiber of his pride. He gazed

at Stephen with near hatred, but the preacher responded with a serene and amicable look.

As soon as the young doctor of the Law left with his many companions – none of whom could disguise their anger – the Galilean apostles were filled with apprehension as they began to consider the consequences that might follow from the unexpected incident.

On the following day as usual, Saul of Tarsus entered Zechariah's house in the afternoon, allowing his inner storm to show on his face. He was relieved somewhat of the dark thoughts that had been troubling him, thanks to the tenderness of his beloved Abigail, who asked him why he was so worried. Recounting the events of the day before, he added: "This Stephen shall pay dearly for the humiliation he meant to inflict in public. His subtle reasoning might confuse the less astute, and our authority must prevail over those who are not competent to interpret the sacred principles. Today, I discussed with some of my friends the measures we must take. The more tolerant ones allege the inoffensive, calm and charitable character of the Galileans, but I am of the opinion that one bad sheep can lead the whole flock astray."

"I'm with you in the defense of our beliefs," said Abigail gladly. "We mustn't abandon our faith to the exploitation and caprice of individual and incompetent interpretations."

After a pause, she added: "Ah! If Jeziel were here he would be your right hand man in the exposition of the sacred knowledge. He would certainly be pleased to defend the Testament against any unreasonable or unfaithful expression."

"We shall fight the enemy who threatens the authenticity of the divine revelation," exclaimed Saul, "and I will not cede ground to these uneducated and fraudulent innovators."

"Are there many of these men?" asked Abigail apprehensively.

"Yes, and what is more dangerous is that they mask their intentions behind pious deeds in order to excite the fickle imagination of the people with pretentious, mysterious powers that are of course fed by witchcraft and sorcery."

"In any case," advised the girl after thinking for a moment, "it is better to proceed with calm and prudence to avoid abusing authority. Who knows but that they might be more in need of education rather than punishment."

“Yes, I’ve already considered all that. Moreover, I don’t intend to bother the simple and unpretentious Galileans in Jerusalem, who have surrounded themselves with the lame and sick; we are under the impression that they are simply peaceful lunatics. However, I will have to restrict their preacher, whose lips, in my opinion, are dripping powerful venom into the fickle spirit of the masses who have no perfect awareness of the principles they are espousing. It’s important to enlighten the latter, but the former must be eliminated as we do not know his objectives, which are perhaps criminal and revolutionary.”

“I have nothing to disapprove your conclusions,” said Abigail.

Next, as usual, they talked about the sacred sentiments of their hearts. The young man from Tarsus always found singular enchantment and soothing balm in the affectionate remarks of his dear companion.

A few days later, arrangements were made in Jerusalem for Stephen to be taken to the Sanhedrin to be interrogated as to the purposes of the proclamations of the Way.

Owing to the conciliatory intercession of Gamaliel, the event would be a discussion in which the preacher of the new interpretations would come before the highest court of the Jewish race to clarify his points of view so that the priests, as judges and defenders of the Law, could expound the truth in the proper terms.

The invitation to appear in court arrived at the humble church, but Stephen refused it, alleging that a dispute would not be in accordance with the Master’s teachings, and despite the arguments of James, son of Alpheus, who feared the prospect of a fight with the authorities. It seemed to James that a refusal might offend public opinion. Saul, in turn, could not force his antagonist to agree to the challenge because the Sanhedrin could only employ compulsory means in the case of a public denouncement after the institution of proceedings in which the accused was deemed to be a blasphemer or slanderer.

Due to Stephen’s repeated refusals, the doctor from Tarsus became exasperated. And after inciting the majority of his colleagues against his adversary, he engineered an elaborate plan to force Stephen into an argument in which he would seek to humiliate him before all in the highest court of Judaism.

After one of the usual sessions of the Tribunal, Saul called to one of his officious friends and spoke to him in a low voice: "Nehemiah, our cause needs the cooperation of a decisive man and I thought of you to defend our sacred principles."

"What is it about?" Nehemiah asked with an enigmatic smile. "Command and I shall obey."

"Have you heard talk of a false wonder-worker named Stephen?"

"One of those despicable men of the Way? I heard him myself and realized his ideas were those of a true madman."

"I'm glad you have seen him up close," said the young doctor, satisfied. "I need someone to accuse him as a blasphemer before the Law, and I'm asking for your cooperation."

"That's it?" asked Nehemiah, cunningly, "That's easy and I would be delighted. Didn't I hear him saying that that crucified carpenter is the foundation of the divine truth? That is more than blasphemy. He's a dangerous revolutionary who must be punished as a slanderer of Moses."

"Very good," exclaimed Saul with a broad smile. "I'm counting on you, then."

On the following day, Nehemiah appeared before the Sanhedrin and denounced the kindly preacher of the Gospel as a blasphemer and slanderer, adding a few criminal observations of his own. In the indictment, Stephen appeared as a common sorcerer, a teacher of subversive precepts in the name of a false Messiah, whom Jerusalem had crucified years before due to identical accusations. Nehemiah made himself out to be the victim of a dangerous sect that had affected and disturbed his own family, and he affirmed he had witnessed menial sorcery practiced by Stephen to the harm of others.

Saul of Tarsus made note of the least declarations, emphasizing the incriminating details.

The news exploded in the church of the Way, causing a striking and dolorous reaction. Those who were less resolute – led by James – allowed themselves to be carried away by all sorts of apprehensions and were afraid of being persecuted. But Stephen, together with Simon Peter and John, remained completely composed, receiving with high spirits the order to bravely answer the libel.

Full of hope, Stephen prayed to Jesus not to forsake him so that he could bear witness to the richness of his evangelical faith.

Stephen awaited the event with faithfulness and joy.

7 Matthew 10:6-7 – Emmanuel

VI

Before the Sanhedrin

On the appointed day, the great hall of the highest Jewish fraternity was packed with a veritable crowd of believers and curious onlookers eager to witness the first debate between the priests and the pious, strange men of the Way. The assembly was composed of the most aristocratic and educated men that Jerusalem could put together. Beggars, however, had no access even though it was deemed a public meeting.

The Sanhedrin put its most distinguished personalities on display. In the mixture of priests and teachers of Israel were the most prominent men of Pharisaism. There were also representatives from all the synagogues.

Aware of Stephen's intellectual acuity, Saul had wanted to confront him against a backdrop where his own talents would be in control, as opposed to the humble church of the followers of the Nazarene carpenter. Deep down, his purpose was rooted in an arrogant demonstration of superiority, nourishing at the same time the inner hope of conquering Stephen for the hosts of Judaism. Consequently, he had prepared the meeting with all the requisites for making an impression on Stephen's senses.

Stephen was appearing as a man called to defend himself against the accusations imputed to him, and not as a common prisoner forced to settle accounts with justice. Thus, upon studying the situation, he insisted that the Galilean apostles not accompany him, taking into consideration not only the need for them to remain with their suffering wards, but also the possibility of a serious clash if the followers of the Way were to appear with him. His firm objective was to safeguard the purity and freedom of the Gospel of Christ. Besides, the resources they could spare were pitifully limited and it would not be right to exhaust them on the overwhelming power of the priests, who had found the resources to crucify the Messiah himself. On the Way's behalf, there were only the unfortunate sick, the pure convictions of the humblest and

the gratitude of the most ill-fated – the only forces powerful enough, due to their content of divine virtue, to help their cause before the dominant authorities of the world. Thinking along such lines, Stephen argued that he would be glad to assume sole responsibility for his attitude, without compromising any of his friends – just as Jesus had done one day on His sublime mission. If it became necessary, he himself would not disdain the possibility of making the ultimate sacrifice in a sacred testimony of love to Jesus’ grand and merciful heart. Suffering for Him would be pleasant and sweet. His reasoning had won the good wishes of even the most insistent of his friends. Therefore, without support from any of them he appeared before the Sanhedrin, highly impressed by its greatness and splendor. Accustomed to the sad, impoverished backdrop of the outskirts of Jerusalem, where unfortunates of all sorts were sheltered, he was dazzled by the wealth of the Temple, the superb appearance of the Roman Tower, the Greek-style residential buildings and the exteriors of the synagogues scattered all about.

The Sanhedrin had understood the importance of the session – which the best of society had hastened to attend due to their extraordinary interest in Saul, who at the time represented the most vibrant youth of Judaism – and had requested the help of the Roman authorities to keep order. The provincial court had not spared any measures. A large number of Roman aristocracy living in Jerusalem arrived to witness the big event of the day. It was to be the first legal action involving the ideas taught by the Nazarene Prophet since his crucifixion, which had left so much perplexity and doubt in the public mind.

When the great hall was overflowing with individuals of high social prominence, Stephen was led by a minister of the Temple to a previously designated seat where he remained under the guard of soldiers who mockingly stared at him.

The session began with all the regimental ceremony. Upon opening the hearing, the high priest announced that, in accordance with his own wishes, Saul had been chosen to question the accused and ascertain the extent of his guilt in defiling the sacred principles of the Jewish race. When he received the call to act as judge during the event, the young man from Tarsus had smiled triumphantly. With an imperious gesture, he now ordered the humble preacher of the Way to approach the center of the lavish room. Stephen approached calmly, accompanied by two frowning guards.

The young man from Corinth took in the scene surrounding him, considering the contrast between this assembly and the former one at his poor

church, when he had been compelled to become acquainted with this highly obstinate antagonist. Mightn't these be the "lost sheep" of the house of Israel to whom Jesus alluded in his forceful teachings? Even if Judaism had not accepted the mission of the Gospel, how did it reconcile the sacred statements of the Prophets and their lofty example of virtue with such avarice and excess? Moses himself had been a slave, and out of devotion to his people he had suffered countless hardships everyday of the life that he had consecrated to the Almighty. Job had endured nameless misfortunes and had borne witness to his faith in the bitterest suffering. Jeremiah had wept because he was misunderstood. Amos had experienced the bile of ingratitude. How could the Jews harmonize selfishness with the loving wisdom of the Psalms of David? It was very strange that in being so zealous for the Law they had given themselves over completely to petty interests, while Jerusalem was full of families – sisters by race – who were completely abandoned. As a coworker in a humble community, he knew first hand the needs and afflictions of the people. In making these comparisons he now saw the Master of Nazareth exalted much more in his eyes, spreading among the afflicted the purest hopes and the most comforting spiritual truths.

He had not yet recovered from his amazement in examining the bright white tunics and gold jewelry that abounded in the hall, when Saul's voice, clear and vibrant, called him back to reality.

After reading the accusation, to which all paid close attention, and wherein Nehemiah was stated as the principal witness, Saul began to sternly and harshly interrogate Stephen: "As you can see, you have been accused of blasphemy, slander and sorcery before the most respectable authorities. However, before any decision is reached, the Tribunal wishes to know your origin in order to ascertain any rights that might assist you at this moment. Are you perchance from an Israelite family?"

Stephen went pale, thinking of the problems that might arise in case a full identification was called for, but he answered firmly: "I belong to the children of the tribe of Issachar."

The doctor of the Law was taken aback slightly by surprise imperceptible to the assembly, but continued: "As an Israelite, you have the right to freely object to my questions; however, I must make it clear that your status will not exempt you from heavy punishment if you persevere in expounding the crass errors of a revolutionary doctrine whose founder was condemned to the infamous cross by the authority of this very Tribunal,

where the most venerable sons of the tribes of God pontificate. Furthermore, in surmising your origin by supposition, I invited you to argue openly with me at our first encounter in the assembly of the men of the Way. I closed my eyes to the misery surrounding me to analyze only your gifts of intelligence; however, you displayed a strange excitement of mind, and perhaps owing to sorceries whose influences are obvious there, you kept oddly silent in spite of my reiterated appeals. Your inexplicable attitude gave occasion for the Sanhedrin to consider the present denouncement of your name as an enemy of our ordinances. You are hereby obligated to answer all appropriate and necessary questions, and I hope you realize that the title of Israelite will not free you from the punishment reserved for traitors of our cause.”

After a rather lengthy pause in which both judge and accused could sense the eager expectation of the assembly, Saul began the interrogation: “Why did you refuse my invitation to argue when I honored your sermon in church of the Way with my presence?”

Stephen’s eyes flashed as if inspired by a divine power and answered in a firm voice, without revealing the emotion that had come over him: “The Christ whom I serve recommended to His disciples that they avoid at all times the incitement of quarrels. As for having honored my humble sermon with your presence, I thank you for your undeserved interest, but with David I prefer to consider the fact that our soul should boast in the Lord, since we have nothing of goodness within us if God does not help us with the greatness of His glory.”⁸

In light of the subtle lesson that had been thrown in his face, Saul of Tarsus bit his lip in rage and spite, trying now to avoid any personal allusion so as not to fall into another situation as before, and continued: “You are accused of blasphemy, slander and sorcery.”

“Please allow me to ask in what sense,” said Stephen calmly.

“Blasphemy when you proclaimed the carpenter of Nazareth as a Savior; slander when you degraded the Law of Moses, denying the sacred principles that rule our destinies. Do you confirm all this? Do you accept these accusations?”

Stephen replied without hesitation: “I hold to my belief that Christ is the Savior promised by the Eternal One through the teachings of the Prophets of Israel, who wept and suffered over many centuries for transmitting to us the sweet joy of that Promise. As for the second accusation, I believe that it

proceeds from a mistaken interpretation of my words. I have never ceased venerating the Law and the Sacred Scriptures, but I consider the Gospel of Jesus to be their divine complement. The former are the work of men, the second is God's wages for his faithful workers."

"So you are of the opinion," stated Saul without disguising his ire before such firm answers, "that the carpenter is greater than the great lawgiver?"

"Moses is justice by revelation, but Christ is living and everlasting love."

To this reply by the defendant there was an uproar in the large assembly. A few enraged Pharisees shouted insults. Saul, however, made an imperative motion for silence so that he could continue the interrogation. And lending his voice a tone of severity, he proceeded: "You are an Israelite and still quite young. An appreciable intelligence serves your effort. Therefore, before you are sentenced to any punishment, it is our duty to work for your return to the fold. It is crucial to call the deserting brother with love before the extreme recourse of might. The Law of Moses can confer on you a status of great prominence, but what advantage can you get from the insignificant and inexpressive word of an ignorant laborer from Nazareth, who dreamed of glory only to pay for his insane hopes on an ignoble cross?"

"I disdain the purely conventional worth that the Law could offer me in exchange for supporting the worldly politics that change every day, considering the fact that our security resides in a conscience enlightened with God and for God."

"But what do you expect from the deceiver who caused confusion among us only to die on Calvary?" asked Saul ardently.

"Disciples of Christ must know whom they serve and I am honored to be a humble instrument in His hands."

"We do not need a change-maker for Israel to live."

"One day you will understand that to God, Israel means the whole of humankind."

In response to this daring answer, nearly the entire assembly began to jeer in a manifestation of open hostility toward the accused. The Jews were accustomed to an intransigent nationalism and they could not tolerate the idea of fraternizing with peoples they regarded as barbarians and gentiles. While the more fanatical expressed their vehement protests, the Romans observed the scene curiously and interestedly as if participating in a festive ceremony.

After a long pause, the future rabbi continued: “You have confirmed the accusation of blasphemy by enunciating such a principle against the status of the chosen people. That is your first condemnation.”

“I am not afraid,” said the defendant, resolutely. “Instead of the prideful delusions that would lead us to chasms of darkness, I prefer to believe with Christ that all men and women are children of God and deserve the love of the same Father.”

Saul bit his lip in fury, and emphasizing his severe attitude as judge he continued caustically: “You slander Moses with such words. I await your answer.”

This time Stephen gave him a meaningful look and uttered: “Why do you await my answer while you obey an arbitrary criterion? The Gospel does not know the complications of casuistry. I do not disdain Moses, but I must nevertheless proclaim the superiority of Jesus Christ. You can pass sentence and proffer anathemas against me. However, somebody must work with the Savior in reestablishing the truth above all else and in spite of the most painful consequences. I am here to do that and for the Master’s sake I am willing to pay the price for my most pure loyalty.”

After the murmurs of the assembly had died down, Saul stated: “The Tribunal recognizes you to be a slanderer and therefore subject to the relevant punishment appropriate for this hateful offense.”

As soon as these statements were written down by the scribe who was recording the stipulations of the inquiry, Saul continued without disguising the anger gripping him: “We must not forget that you are also accused of sorcery. How do you respond to that charge?”

“What are they accusing me of specifically?” asked the preacher of the Way bravely.

“I myself saw you heal a young mute girl on the Sabbath, and I do not know the nature of the sorcery you used.”

“It was not I who did this act of love – as you obviously heard me affirm – it was Christ, because of my inability to do anything good of my own.”

“Do you think you will prove your innocence with such a naive statement?” asked Saul sarcastically. “Putting on airs of humility will not absolve you. I witnessed the incident and only sorcery could explain your strange powers.”

Far from being intimidated, the inspired defendant answered: “And yet Judaism is full of these incidents that you deem incomprehensible. What sort of sorcery did Moses use to make a rock gush forth a spring of living water? What sort of sorcery was at work when the chosen people saw the turbulent waves of the sea open up to them for their escape from captivity? With what magic did Joshua employ to halt the march of the sun? In all this do you not see the resources of Divine Providence? We have nothing of our own, and yet, in carrying out our duty we must expect everything from the divine mercy.”

In analyzing the logical, irrefutable reasoning this concise answer the doctor from Tarsus nearly gnashed his teeth. A quick glance at the assembly made him realize that his antagonist had the sympathy and admiration of many, which quite disconcerted him. How to recover his composure, given the fact that his impulsive temperament led him to emotive extremes? As he studied Stephen’s last assertion he found it difficult to coordinate a decisive argument. Unable to reveal his frustration and incapable of finding the appropriate response, he realized he urgently needed to find a way out of the subject, and addressed the high priest: “By his own words, the accused has confirmed the charges imputed to him. He has just confessed in public that he is a blasphemer, slanderer and sorcerer. However, on account of his birthright, he is entitled to a final defense, independent of my interpretations as judge. Therefore, I propose that the competent authority grant him this recourse.”

A large number of priests and distinguished persons looked at each other in surprise as if they were foreseeing the first defeat of the proud doctor of the Law, whose brilliant words had always triumphed over every opponent. Saul’s face was red with anger, revealing the storm raging in his heart.

The proposal set forth by the judge of the case was accepted. Stephen would have the right that was conferred on him by birth.

He stood up and nobly contemplated the anxious faces that sought him out on all sides. By their hostile expressions, he guessed that the majority of those present regarded him as a dangerous enemy of the traditions of their race, but he also noticed that a few of the Jews were regarding him with sympathy and comprehension. Taking advantage of this help, he got up the courage to calmly expound the sacred teachings of the Gospel. Instinctively, he remembered Jesus’ promise to His disciples that He would be present at the moment in which they should bear witness through words; therefore, it now behooved him not to tremble before the unconscious provocations of the

world. More than ever before, he felt the conviction that the Master would help him as he expounded the doctrine of love.

After a minute of anxious expectation, Stephen began his moving speech: "Israelites! As large as our differences of religious opinion may be, we must not alter our ties of fraternity in God: the supreme giver of all blessings. It is to this generous and just Father that I lift up my prayer on behalf of our faithful understanding of the holy truths. In former times, our ancestors heard the great and profound exhortations of the emissaries of Heaven. To ensure a future of solid peace for their descendants, our forefathers suffered the miseries and destitution of captivity. Their bread was soaked in tears of bitterness; their thirst was torment. All their hopes of independence were thwarted and countless persecutions destroyed their homes, worsening their suffering in the struggles of their course. The holy men of Israel walked above their dignifying agonies like a glorious crown of triumph. The word of the Eternal One nourished them through all their vicissitudes. Their experiences comprise a powerful and sacred heritage. From them we have the Law and the Writings of the Prophets. In spite of this, we cannot evade our thirst. Our concept of justice is the fruit of a millenary endeavor in which we have employed our greatest efforts, but we sense by intuition that something higher exists beyond that concept. We have prisons for those who err, the valley of the unclean for those who fall ill without family protection, stoning in the public square for fallen women, slavery for those in debt, thirty-nine lashes for the most unfortunate. Is that not enough? Are not the lessons of the past full of the word "mercy"? Something speaks to our conscience of a greater life, which inspires our most elevated and beautiful sentiments. Our work over the course of the centuries has been enormous, but our just God has answered the anguished appeals of the heart by sending us His beloved Son – Jesus Christ!"

The assembly had been listening spellbound; however, when the orator referred more emphatically to the Messiah of Nazareth, the Pharisees on the side of the young man from Tarsus broke out in protest, shouting madly: "Anathema! Anathema! Punishment to the renegade!"

Stephen endured the vehement storm calmly, and as soon as order was restored he continued firmly: "Why do you jeer me like this? All hasty judgment displays weakness. First, I did refuse to argue, considering that one should avoid all causes of discord; but each and every day, Christ calls us to a new endeavor, and the Master certainly has called me today to speak to you

about His powerful truths. Do you wish to impose ridicule and mockery on me? But that would comfort me because Jesus experienced the same treatment in the highest degree. Despite your repulsion, I am honored to proclaim the immeasurable glories of the Nazarene Prophet, whose greatness came to meet us in our moral ruin, lifting us to God through His Gospel of redemption.”

Another volley of interruptions cut his words short. Caustic shouts and harsh insults were hurled at him from all sides. Stephen did not lose heart. He turned calmly and fixed his gaze with poise on those attending the hearing, realizing that the most vocal would be the Pharisees, the ones most fundamentally struck by the new truths.

Waiting for calm to be restored, he spoke again: “Pharisees, my friends, why do you insist on not understanding? Do you perchance fear the truth of my statements? If your protests are based on this fear, please be silent so that I may continue. Remember that I am referring to our errors of the past, and those who associate themselves in guilt give testimony of love in the chapter of reparation. Despite our miseries, God loves us, and realizing my own deficiency, I could not speak to you except as a brother. However, if you express anger and revulsion, remember that we cannot escape the reality of our profound insignificance. Have you perchance read Isaiah’s lessons? It is important to consider his exhortation that we cannot leave in haste, or deceive ourselves or run from our duties, for the Lord will go before us and the God of Israel will be our rear guard.⁹ Listen to me! God is our Father, Christ is our Lord.

“You speak much about the Law of Moses and the Prophets; however, can you conscientiously affirm that you have fully observed their glorious teachings? Are you not blind at present by denying yourselves the comprehension of the divine message? He whom you sarcastically call the carpenter of Nazareth was a friend of all unfortunates. His preaching was not limited to expounding philosophical principles. Instead, by His example he renewed our customs and reformed our loftiest ideas with the seal of divine love. His hands ennobled labor, bandaged sores, healed lepers and restored sight to the blind. His heart was shared among all people in the new understanding of the love that He brought to us with the purest example.

“Are you perchance unaware of the fact that the word of God has both hearers and doers? You must determine whether you have been mere hearers of the Law in order not to falsify your testimony.

“Jerusalem does not seem to me to be the sanctuary of the traditions of the faith that my parents taught me from childhood. At present, it gives me the impression of a large bazaar where sacred things are sold. The Temple is full of merchants. The synagogues overflow with subjects related to mundane interests. The Pharisaic centers resemble a beehive of petty concerns. Your luxurious tunics dazzle the eyes. Your wasteful habits cause wonder. Do you not know that in the shadow of your walls there are unfortunate persons dying of hunger? I have come from the outskirts where most of our poverty is concentrated.

“I repeat: you speak of Moses and the Prophets. Do you believe that our venerable ancestors marketed God possessions? The great lawgiver lived amid terrible and dolorous experiences. Jeremiah experienced long nights of anguish working for the intangibility of our religious heritage in the midst of the sins of Babylon. Amos was a poor shepherd, a son of work and humility. Elijah suffered all sorts of persecutions and was driven into the desert, having only tears as the reward for his enlightenment. Ezra was the model of sacrifice for the peace of his compatriots. Ezekiel was condemned to death for having proclaimed the truth. Daniel endured the infinite anguish of captivity. Do you refer to our heroic instructors of the past only to justify the selfish pleasures of life? Where do you keep your faith? In idle comfort or in productive work? In the purse of the world or in the heart, which is the divine temple? Do you desire peace and yet incite revolt? Do you speak of love toward God and yet exploit your neighbor? Do you not remember that the Eternal One cannot accept praise from the lips while the heart remains far from him?”

Confronted with such sublime inspiration, the assembly seemed paralyzed, incapable of knowing what to do. A number of Jews believed they were seeing in Stephen the reappearance of one of the original prophets of their race. However, as if they had snapped out of the mysterious power that had silenced them, the Pharisees broke into a deafening uproar, waving in the air and proffering invectives for the purpose of attenuating the strong impression caused by the eloquent and ardent language of the orator.

“Let us stone the filthy dog! Let us slay the slanderer! Cursed be the ways of Satan!”

Saul stood up, red with rage. He could not conceal the fury of the impulsive temperament overflowing from his turbulent and blazing eyes.

He walked quickly to the accused, giving to understand that he was going to silence him; the assembly immediately quieted down, although the sound of muffled comments continued.

Perceiving that he was going to be coerced by force, and, moreover, that the Pharisees were calling for his death, Stephen looked at the more derisive and enraged, exclaiming in a loud yet tranquil voice: “Your attitude does not intimidate me. Christ was mindful when He recommended that we not fear those who can kill only our body.”

He could not continue. Hands on hips, hateful looking and with gross gestures as if facing a common criminal, Saul shouted furiously in Stephen’s ear: “Enough! Enough! Not one more word!... Now that the last recourse has been granted to you to no avail, I will also make use of what my birthright gives me in the face of a deserting brother.”

He then punched Stephen in the face with his clenched fists. Stephen made no attempt at all to react. The Pharisees applauded the brutal gesture in noisy delirium as if they were at a party. His sudden fury increasing, Saul struck without mercy. With no moral argument in the face of the logic of the Gospel, he resorted to physical force in satisfaction of his natural proclivity.

The preacher of the Way submitted himself to such extremes and implored Jesus for the help he needed in order not fail in his witness. Despite the radical reform that the influence of Christ had imposed on his innermost conceptions, he could not escape the pain of his wounded dignity. However, he tried to renew his inner strength by thinking of the selflessness that the Master had proclaimed as the supreme lesson. He remembered his father’s sacrifice in Corinth, recalling his suffering and death. He remembered the anguishing trial he himself had endured and considered that if solely in his knowledge of Moses and the Prophets he had derived enough moral strength to face those ignorant of the divine goodness, how could he not bear witness now with Christ in his heart? These thoughts came to his tormented mind as a balm of supreme consolation. Nonetheless, despite the fortress of courage that marked his character, he was shedding copious tears. When Saul noticed Stephen’s tears mixed with the blood pouring from the wounds inflicted by his fists, he stopped, his immense fury satiated. He could not understand the passiveness with which the victim had received the blows of his strength, hardened by years of practicing sports.

Stephen's composure disturbed him even more. Saul had no doubt that he was facing an unknown power.

With a mocking smile he said proudly: "Do you not retaliate, coward? Is your school also one of indignity?"

In spite of his wet eyes, the Christian preacher replied firmly: "Peace differs from violence as much as Christ's strength differs from yours."

Realizing such superiority of concept and thought, the doctor of the Law could not hide the contempt and fury showing in his flaming eyes. He appeared to be at the peak of an exasperation that was about to pour forth in major excess. He seemed to have reached the limit of his tolerance.

Turning around to observe the approval of his fellow partisans – who were in the majority – he addressed the high priest and entreated a harsh sentence. His voice trembled, worn out from physical effort: "Analyzing this condemnable matter," he added proudly, "and considering the grave insults spoken here, as judge of this case I ask for the defendant to be stoned."

Frenetic applause seconded his inflexible words. The Pharisees, hard hit by the ardent words of the disciple of the Gospel, believed that in this way they would avenge what they considered criminal contempt of their rights.

The high priest received the proposal and sought to put it to a vote in the reduced circle of the most distinguished colleagues.

It was then that Gamaliel, after a whispered conversation with his high-ranking colleagues, perhaps commenting on the frank character and irrepressible impulsiveness of his former disciple, gave them to understand that the proposed sanction would be the immediate death of the preacher of the Way. He stood up in the turbulent hall and proffered nobly: "Having a vote in this Tribunal and not wishing to be hasty in solving a problem of conscience, I recommend that the requested sentence be studied more thoroughly and that the accused be held in prison until his responsibility is cleared before justice."

Saul grasped his old teacher's point of view and perceived that he had put into play his well-known penchant for tolerance. Gamaliel's warning was very much at odds with Saul's resolute purposes; however, knowing that he could not supersede this venerable authority, he stated: "As judge of this case, I accept this recommendation. However, due to the delayed execution of the requested sentence, as well as the venom distilled by the irreverent and

ungrateful words of the defendant, I trust that he will be shackled and taken immediately to prison. I also propose a broader investigation into the supposed pious activities of the dangerous believers of the Way, so that their insubordination against the Law of Moses may be pulled out by the roots. It is a revolutionary movement of unforeseeable consequences, which essentially means disorder and confusion in our own ranks and ominous disregard of the divine ordinances, thus inciting the propagation of evil, whose growth will intensify the punishments.”

This new proposal was fully approved. With his profound experience involving humankind, Gamaliel understood that it was crucial to concede something.

Right then and there, Saul of Tarsus was authorized by the Sanhedrin to initiate broader enquiries regarding the activities of the Way, with orders to reprehend, correct and imprison all descendants of Israel possessed of the sentiments implied in the Gospel, which was considered from that moment onward by the Jewish community to be a repository of ideological venom, with which the audacious carpenter of Nazareth intended to revolutionize Israelite life, thereby causing the dissolution of its most authentic bonds.

Facing the prisoner Stephen, the young man from Tarsus received the official authorization with a triumphant smile.

Thus, the memorable session came to a close. A large number of colleagues surrounded the young Jewish man, congratulating him for his ardent speech affirming the leadership of Moses. Greeted by his friends, Gamaliel’s former disciple uttered with satisfaction: “I’m counting on all of you. We shall fight to the end!”

The work of that afternoon had been exhaustive, but the interest it had awakened was immense. Stephen was worn out. Facing the groups of individuals who were starting to leave while uttering the most diverse comments, he was shackled before being led off to prison. Polarizing the sentiments of the Master despite his weariness, his conscience was comforted. With sincere inner joy, he was aware that once again God had given him the opportunity to witness to his faith.

In a few moments, the shadows of sunset seemed to change quickly into the darkness of night.

After enduring the most painful humiliations from a few Pharisees who left under profound impressions of contempt, and now in the custody of rude

and insensitive guards, Stephen was taken to prison in heavy chains.

8 Psalms of David 34:2 – Emmanuel

9 Isaiah 52:12 – Emmanuel

VII

The First Persecutions

Struck by Stephen's courage for having confronted his authority and fame, Saul's impulsive character caused him to be seized with the idea of revenge. In his opinion, the preacher of the Gospel had inflicted a public humiliation on him that called for just amends.

Despite the short time he had resided in the city, all the social circles of Jerusalem showed their admiration for him. The Temple intellectuals saw in him a forceful personality, a sure guide; to them he was a master of unsurpassable rationalism. The oldest priests and doctors of the Sanhedrin recognized his astute intelligence and placed their hopes for the future in him. At the time, his dynamic youthfulness – almost entirely devoted to serving the Law – was concentrated on his interest in casuistry. With the psychological acuity that characterized him, the young man from Tarsus knew the role for which Jerusalem had destined him. Hence, Stephen's argumentations pained the most sensitive fibers of his soul. Deep down, his resentment was the appanage of a sincere and ardent youth; however, his wounded vanity, his racial pride and his domineering manner blinded his spiritual sight.

At the core of his thought he now hated that crucified Christ because he detested Stephen, whom he now regarded as a dangerous enemy. He could not tolerate any expression of the apparently simple doctrine that had arrived to shake the foundations of established principles. He would persecute the Way unbendingly and any person connected with it. He would intentionally mobilize all the sympathy available to him in order to foment this crucial inquisition. Obviously, he would have to reckon with the conciliatory admonitions of a Gamaliel and other rare minds that, in his opinion, would be coaxed by the philosophy of goodness that the Galileans had engendered with their new scriptures; but he was convinced that, politically speaking, the

Pharisaic majority would be on his side and encourage him as he began his task.

The day following Stephen's imprisonment, Saul used all his abilities to start organizing the first detachment of persecutors. In seeking out sympathy for the wide-ranging persecutions he intended to instigate, he visited the most eminent dignitaries of Judaism, but avoided seeking the cooperation of those he knew to be pacifists. He was not interested in the inspiration of prudent men. He needed those whose temperaments were like his own so that the enterprise would not fail.

After coming to an agreement with his countrymen about his overall plans, he requested a hearing at the Provincial Court in order to obtain the support of the Romans, who were in charge of solving all political matters of the province. Although officially residing in Caesarea, the procurator was temporarily stationed in Jerusalem, and there he had received word of the interesting events of the day before. When he received the petition of the prestigious doctor of the Law, he praised the plan and pledged his full support. Seduced by the fluent speech of the young rabbi, the procurator related so thoroughly to Saul with the indifference of a man of the state at all times and in any circumstance involving religious matters that he recognized in Pharisaism more than enough reasons to combat the ignorant Galileans who were disturbing the rhythm of the expressions of faith in the sanctuaries of the holy city. To solidify his promises, he immediately granted the young man from Tarsus the necessary authorization for his plan, reserving, of course, rights of a political nature, which the supreme Roman authority would keep untouchable.

However, for the new rabbi the support of the public authorities was enough for the plan he had in mind.

Encouraged in his purpose by almost unanimous approval, Saul began coordinating the first steps for uncovering the activities of the Way in its least expressions. He was obsessed by the idea of public revenge and imagined sinister scenarios in his overexcited mind. He would arrest all involved as quickly as possible. In his opinion the Gospel was a disguise for imminent sedition. He would present the concepts of Stephen's oratory as the sign of a revolutionary banner in order to awaken the opposition of his less watchful friends, who were used to making a pact with evil under the pretext of accommodating tolerance. He would combine the texts of the Law of Moses and the Sacred Writings to justify the fact that one should drag to their deaths

deserters of the principles of their race. He would demonstrate the irreproachability of his unyielding conduct. He would do all he could to have Simon Peter thrown into the dungeon. In his opinion Peter should be cast as the intellectual author of the subtle plot that was being formed around the memory of an ordinary carpenter. In the flurry of hasty ideas, he believed none would be spared his irrevocable decisions.

On that day, highlighted by his visit to the appropriate authorities with the intention of attracting them to his cause, other surprising incidents arose to worsen the concerns overwhelming him. After hearing Stephen's self-defense in the Sanhedrin and impressed with the eloquence and rightness of his concepts, Hosea Mark and Samuel Nathan, two wealthy countrymen from Jerusalem, had distributed to their children the inheritance due to each of them and donated the balance of their possessions to the Way. In doing so they had gone to see Simon Peter and had kissed his work-calloused hands after listening to him talk about Jesus Christ.

The news resounded in Pharisaic circles with the characteristics of a true scandal.

Saul of Tarsus heard the news on the following day and surmised the general disturbance that Stephen had provoked. The two co-religionists' defection to the Galileans caused him a profound sentiment of repugnance. Moreover, it was said that in giving all their possessions to the Way, Hosea and Samuel had declared in tears that they accepted Christ as the promised Messiah. His friends' comments on this incident incited him to stronger reprisals. Since he was regarded by popular current opinion as being the youngest defender of the Law, he felt more and more compelled to display his ascendancy in this post that he deemed so sacred. In defense of his mandate he would ignore any considerations threatening to weaken his severity, which he believed to be a divine duty.

In light of the seriousness of this last occurrence, which threatened Judaism's stability amongst its most distinguished members, he once more called on the supreme authorities of the Sanhedrin and asked that they hasten the envisioned repressions.

Caiaphas was mindful of the authorization granted by the highest political powers of the province and proposed that the zealous doctor from Tarsus be appointed head and prosecutor of all relevant and indispensable measures taken for safeguarding and defending the Law. Thus, it would be

Saul's duty to promote all resources he deemed appropriate and useful, but he would reserve for the Sanhedrin the final decisions, especially those of a more serious nature.

Satisfied with the results of the meeting, Saul remarked to his friends before he left: "This very day I will requisition the corps of troops that will operate around the perimeter of the city. Tomorrow I will order Samuel and Hosea to be retained until they decide to come to their senses, and over the weekend I will see to the capture of the riffraff of the Way."

"Aren't you afraid of their sorceries?" asked Alexander ironically.

"Not at all," he answered pointedly and decisively. "I've heard that even the soldiers are becoming superstitious under the influence of the strange ideas of these people, so I'll be leading the raid in person because I intend to put Simon Peter himself in the dungeon."

"Simon Peter?" asked someone present at the meeting, surprised.

"Why not?"

"Do you know why Gamaliel isn't here right now?"

"No."

"Because he received an invitation from the same Simon Peter to observe the premises and the deeds of the Way. Don't you find all this is extremely odd? We get the general impression that the humble leader of the Galileans disapproved of Stephen's attitude before the Sanhedrin and wishes to remedy the situation by trying to approach our administrative authority. Who knows? Perhaps all this will be useful. At the least, it's quite possible that we are moving toward reharmonization."

Saul was more than surprised; he was stupefied.

"But how could that be?! Gamaliel visiting the Way? I have come to doubt his mental integrity."

"But we know," Alexander interrupted, "that the teacher has always marked his actions and thoughts with utmost discernment. It would have been better if he had declined such an invitation out of consideration for us; however, if he did not, it is equally necessary that we not disrespect his decision, which he of course has made with the nobility of purpose that has always inspired him."

“I agree,” said Saul, somewhat perturbed. “Nonetheless, despite our friendship and my gratitude toward, not even Gamaliel can change my mind. It’s possible that Simon Peter may justify himself and emerge unharmed from the trials he will be submitted to. Be that as it may, he will still have to go to prison to be questioned. I do not trust his apparent humility. Why would he leave his nets and set himself up as the gracious benefactor of the poor of Jerusalem? I see in all this the purposes of a sedition that is close at hand. The most humble and ignorant walk ahead of the danger; the lords of destruction appear later.”

The conversation continued lively for some time around the general expectation of what was to come, until Saul left and returned home to settle the last details of his plan.

Stephen’s imprisonment had had broad repercussions in the humble church of the Way, raising justified fears among the Galilean Apostles. Peter received the news with profound sadness. He had found in the young man from Corinth a devoted helper and brother. Moreover, due to the worthiness of his affective qualities, Stephen had become a central figure on which everybody focused their attention. Many problems converged on his inspired mind, and the ex-fisherman from Capernaum could no longer dispense with his cooperation for finding solutions. Loved by all the afflicted and suffering, he always had an encouraging word that uplifted the most dissolute heart. Peter and John were more worried out of love than for any other reason. However, James, son of Alphaeus, could not hide his displeasure in light of the bold behavior of his brother in the faith, who had not hesitated to affront the dominant faction of Pharisaic power. In his opinion Stephen had been wrong in his exhortations; he should have been more careful and had deserved prison for his hasty arguments in his own defense. There was a heated discussion. Peter gave him to understand the opportunity of the incident so that the freedom of the Gospel could be revealed, whereas James reinforced his arguments with the logic of the facts. Hosea and Samuel’s decision to give themselves to Christ was invoked to justify the Way’s spiritual success. The whole city was talking about it; many individuals were approaching the church with a sincere desire to know Christ better, and this should mean victory for the cause. James, however, was not convinced by these strong arguments. A disagreement was taking shape, but Simon and Zebedee’s son placed the interests of Jesus’ message above everything else. The Master had been the emissary of all the unfortunates and infirm, who already knew about the humble church of Jerusalem, having been enlightened

with the word of life and truth. The infirm, those down on their luck, the unprotected of the world, the sad: all came to the church for the consoling enlightenment of their souls. It was a sight to behold as they rejoiced in their suffering when they were told of the eternal light of the resurrection. Elderly, trembling persons opened their eyes wide as if they were gazing at new horizons of unforeseen hope. Individuals tired of the earthly struggle smiled happily when, upon hearing the Good News, they understood that embittered existence was not all there was.

Peter observed these sufferers, whom Jesus had loved so much, and experienced renewed energy.

Aware of Gamaliel's honorable attitude in light of the accusations of the doctor from Tarsus, and certain that only that fact had saved Stephen from being stoned right then and there, Peter had conceived the plan to invite him to visit the humble installations of the Way's church. When he told his friends about it, the idea was approved unanimously. John was the chosen messenger for the task.

Gamaliel not only received the emissary in a gentlemanly fashion, but also showed great interest in the invitation and accepted it with the magnanimity that extolled his venerable old age.

With the arrangements set, the wise rabbi entered the poor house of the Galileans, who received him with unbridled joy. Simon Peter, profoundly respectful, explained the purposes of the institution. He told Gamaliel about its deeds and spoke about the comfort given to those who found themselves forsaken. Peter kindly offered him a copied parchment of all Matthew's annotations regarding the person of Christ and His glorious teachings. Gamaliel graciously thanked the ex-fisherman, treating him with the deference and consideration of an equal. Wishing to expose all the programs of the humble church for Gamaliel's respectable appraisal, Simon took the old doctor of the Law to see every room of the humble property. When they arrived at the long infirmary where all the sick were lodged, the great rabbi of Jerusalem could not hide his feelings and was moved to tears by the scene appearing before his startled eyes. On sheltering beds he saw elderly people with hair made white by the winters of life, and squalid children whose grateful eyes followed Peter's shadow as if they were in the presence of a father. He had not walked ten steps around the simple and clean furniture, when he stopped in front of an old, miserable-looking man. Immobilized by

the illness that had debilitated him, the poor man seemed to recognize Gamaliel.

A dialogue immediately ensued.

“Samonius, you are here?” asked Gamaliel in wonder. “You actually left Caesarea?”

“Ah! It is you, sir,” replied the old man with tears in the corner of his eyes. “I am fortunate that one of my countrymen and friends has come to see my great misery.”

Tears choked his voice and he could not continue.

“But your children? And your relatives? Who is in possession of your Samarian properties?” asked the old master, perplexed. “Do not weep; God always has much to give us.”

After a long pause in which Samonius seemed to be collecting his thoughts to explain himself, he wiped his tears and continued: “Ah, sir! Like Job, I saw my body rotting amid the comforts of my home. The Lord in His wisdom had reserved great hardships for me. I was denounced a leper and in vain I asked for help from the children whom the Creator gave me in my youth. They all forsook me. My relatives beat a quick retreat, leaving me all alone. The friends who use to dine with me in Caesarea fled to who knows where. I was left alone and helpless. One day, to my utter despair, the executors of justice came to notify me of a cruel sentence. Having agreed amongst themselves on iniquitous counsel, my children were to take possession of all my possessions and money, which represented all my hopes for an honest old age. Finally, to top off my suffering they took me to the valley of the unclean, where they left me as if I were a criminal sentenced to death. I felt such loneliness and hunger, and I experienced such need – perhaps because I had spent all my life working and living in comfort – that I fled the valley of lepers and made the long journey on foot in hopes of finding in Jerusalem the valued friendships of the past.”

The old master had tears in his eyes as he listened to this sad tale. He had known Samonius during the happiest days of his life. Gamaliel had been honored in his home while passing through Caesarea and he was now shocked by his despairing poverty.

After a short silence in which Samonius tried to wipe away his sweat and tears, he slowly continued: “I set out on the journey but everything conspired

against me. Soon, my wounded feet could no longer walk. I dragged on as best as I could, overcome with fatigue and thirst, when a poor cart-driver felt sorry for me, picked me up and brought me to this house where suffering finds fraternal comfort.”

Gamaliel did not know how to express his amazement – such was the emotion that shook him inside. Peter was equally moved. Accustomed to practicing the good without ever thinking about the patient’s past, he saw in Samonius’s case another consoling display of the power-filled love of Christ.

The great rabbi was astonished at all he saw and heard in the place. In his characteristic sincerity he could not hide his grateful friendship toward the poor patient, but with no resources to take him out of that poor shelter, he extended his gratitude to Simon Peter and his coworkers. Only now did he realize that Judaism had not thought of these loving places of rest. Finding his leper friend there, he sincerely wished to help him. But how? For the first time he considered the heartbreaking possibility of having to send a loved one to the valley of the unclean. Even though he had recommended such recourse to so many people, he now had to consider the situation of this dear friend. The episode unnerved him enormously. Trying to avoid philosophical rationalization in order not to arrive at hasty conclusions, he said gently: “Yes, you are right to thank your benefactors for their efforts.”

“And Christ’s mercy too,” pointed out the sick man tearfully. “I now believe that, with the testimony of love He brought us, the kind Prophet of Nazareth is indeed the promised Messiah.”

The great rabbi grasped the success of the new doctrine. Ignored by Jerusalem’s most learned society, that unknown Jesus had triumphed in the hearts of unfortunates by the contribution of selfless love that He had brought to fate’s most disinherited persons. At the same time, he understood that, due to his responsibilities in public life, he had to be discreet in that humble place. Since he felt as though he had to continue the conversation in order to display his altruism and piety, he stated with a smile: “I believe that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact a model of self-denial regarding ideas that to date I could neither inquire into nor comprehend, but to consider Him the Messiah Himself...”

These reticent words revealed the scrupulousness of his sensitive mind caught between the old Law and the new revelations of the Gospel. Simon Peter grasped this fact, and in vain he tried to change the subject of the conversation. But as a ward of the Master, it was Samonius himself who

helped the Apostle out by replying to Gamaliel thoughtfully: “If I were healthy, fully part of my family and enjoying the assets I acquired with effort and work, perhaps I too would doubt this comforting reality. However, I am debilitated and forgotten by all, and I know who has extended me a friendly hand. As Israelites and lovers of the Law of Moses, we have waited for a Savior in the mortal person of a worldly prince, but such belief could only prevail in a temporary situation. Erroneous, preconceived ideas have led us to anticipate a reign of perishable power. Illness is a loving and enlightened counselor, however. What good would a prophet be who could save the world only to disappear later amid the unknown remains of a rotting corpse? Isn’t it written that all iniquity will perish? And where is the powerful prince of the earth who rules without the guarantee of weapons? The bed of pain is a place of sublime and luminous instruction. On it the worn-out soul learns to regard the body as a mere tunic. Consequently, everything having to do with that garment gradually loses its importance. But our spiritual reality continues. The ancients stated that we are gods. In my present situation, I get the perfect impression that we are gods thrown into a whirlwind of dust. In spite of the pestilent sores that have segregated me from my dear ones, I continue to think, to want, to love. In my dark chamber of suffering, I found the Lord Jesus and how to understand Him better. Today I believe that His power will rule the nations because it is the power of love triumphing over death itself.”

In its solemn timbre, the voice of that man marked by black and blue sores seemed like the trumpet of truth coming from a pile of dust. Peter was happy to see the moral progress of that anonymous beggar as he analyzed the regenerating power of the Gospel. Gamaliel in turn was bewildered by the deep meaning of such concepts. The preaching of Christ on the lips of a destitute and ill man reflected a mysterious, remarkable beauty. Samonius had spoken in the tone of someone who had had the direct experience of a true encounter with the Nazarene Prophet. Trying to avoid any potential for religious argument, the benevolent rabbi smiled and added: “I can see that you speak with great wisdom. If it cannot be denied that I am at an age when it would not be useful to alter my principles, I cannot argue against your beliefs, since I am healthy, I enjoy my loved ones and I have a peaceful life. My faculty of judgment, therefore, must operate in a different direction.”

“Yes, you are correct,” said Samonius. “For now, you do not need a savior. That is why Christ stated that He had come to the sick and afflicted.”

Gamaliel grasped the reach of those words, which were food for thought for an entire lifetime. He felt tears in his eyes. Samonius's remark had pierced deep into this righteous man's sensitive soul. Nevertheless, perceiving that he had to be careful in order not to confuse the sentiments of the people, and mindful of the official position he occupied, he smiled kindly at Samonius, patted him lightly on the shoulder and with a tone of fraternal sincerity added: "Perhaps you are right. I shall look into your Christ."

Remembering the short time he had at his disposal, he entrusted his friend to Simon, and saying goodbye to Samonius with an embrace, he followed the Apostle from Capernaum to the remaining rooms.

Before he left, the wise rabbi congratulated Jesus' followers for the work they were doing in the city, and understanding the delicacy of their mission in a sometimes hostile environment, he advised Peter not to put aside all outward practices of Judaism at the Way's church. In his view it would be appropriate that they see to the circumcision of all who knocked at the door; that they avoid unclean meat; and that they not forget the Temple and its principles. Gamaliel knew the Galileans would not be exempt from persecution, especially considering the fact that it was an organization begun by someone who had been condemned to death by the Sanhedrin. With these counsels, Gamaliel had it in mind to mitigate the blows of violence that would have to come sooner or later.

Peter, James and John thanked him for this caring admonition and the old doctor of the Law returned home deeply impressed by the lessons of the day, taking with him Matthew's notes, which he began reading immediately.

Another two days passed and the persecutions led by Saul of Tarsus began to shake all areas of Jerusalem's religious activities.

Though they were not charged, Hosea Mark and Samuel Nathan were imprisoned to face severe questioning. The supporters of the movement drew up a long list of names of the most distinguished Israelites who frequented the meeting at the church of the Way. Saul of Tarsus had ordered the opening of a general inquest. However, after Hosea and Samuel were put in prison, and because he wanted to impress on his opponents the fact that he meant business, he felt that he needed to initiate more-telling arrests in the very stronghold of the obscure Galileans who had dared to affront his authority.

It was on a clear morning when, surrounded by a number of companions and soldiers, the future rabbi knocked at the door of the humble house,

making a big show of the purpose for his insidious visit. Simon Peter answered the door in person with great composure in his eyes. Unmasked fear spread among the most timid, while two young men accompanying the Apostle ran back inside to spread the news.

“Are you Simon Peter, the former fisherman from Capernaum?” asked Saul with certain insolence.

“Yes, I am,” answered Peter firmly.

“You are under arrest,” said the leader of the raid in a gesture of triumph. And asking two of his companions to step forward, he ordered the Apostle to be shackled right then and there. Peter did not offer the least resistance. Saul was shocked by the peaceful temperament that the followers of the Nazarene continued to display, and said sarcastically: “The Master of the Way must have been an outstanding model of do-nothingness and cowardice. I have not yet found any evidence of dignity in his disciples – their reactive faculties appear to be dead.”

The ex-fisherman took the full brunt of the insult and answered serenely: “You are mistaken in your judgment. Disciples of the Gospel are enemies of evil only, and in their work they place love above all other principles. Moreover, they believe that, with Jesus, every yoke is gentle.”

In spite of all the power he held, Saul could not hide the discomfort that Peter’s reply caused him, and pointing to Jesus’ follower he said to a man in the guard: “Jonas, take care of him.”

Pointing his words with sarcasm, Saul addressed the other members of the guard in a gesture of spite toward the shackled apostle, who gazed at him calmly, though surprised: “Let’s not argue with this man. These people of the Way are always full of absurd rationalizations. We do not have to waste time on blind ignorance. Let’s go inside and arrest the other leaders. The carpenter’s followers shall be persecuted to the end.”

He resolutely led the way, brazenly entering the house to search the innermost rooms. Going from door to door, he found beggars who looked at him with surprise and sorrow. The amount of misery sheltered under that roof filled him with astonishment; however, he made an effort not to lose his implacable nerve, so as to carry out his plans to the smallest detail. Next to a large infirmary he found the son of Zebedee, who listened to the order for his imprisonment without changing his peaceful expression.

Feeling the soldier's rough hands placing him in chains, John raised his eyes On High and uttered simply: "I give myself to Christ."

The leader of the troupe looked at him with deep contempt and said proudly to his companions: "Two of the suspects are missing. Let's look for them."

Saul was referring to Philip and James, the direct disciples of the Nazarene Messiah.

Another few steps and they found the former easily. Philip allowed himself to be shackled without protest. His daughters surrounded him, afflicted and in tears.

"Courage, my daughters," he said without fear. "Are we better than Jesus, who was persecuted and crucified by men?"

"Did you hear that, Clement?" Saul asked one of his closest friends. "We hear nothing except references to that bizarre Nazarene! The first spoke of the yoke of Christ, the second gave himself over to Christ, and this one alludes to the superiority of Christ ... where are we going with all this?"

After breathing out his anger in spiteful words, he ended with the same refrain: "We shall press on to the end!"

With these three prisoners secure, only James was missing. Someone remembered to look for him behind the rough partition he normally occupied. Sure enough, they found him there on his knees. Before him was a parchment scroll on which the Law of Moses was written. A marble pallor appeared on his face as Saul approached him harshly: "What's this? Is there actually somebody here who cares about the Law?"

Levi's brother looked up with his eyes overflowing with true fear and explained humbly: "Sir, I have never forgotten the Law of our fathers. My grandfathers taught me to receive on my knees the light of the holy prophet."

James's attitude displayed no pretence. Having the greatest respect for the liberator of Israel, he had always heard that the sacred writings were touched by holy virtue. With the prospect of prison, he was in fear of imminent peril. Unlike his companions, he had not fully grasped the divine and hidden meaning of the Gospel's lessons. Sacrifice inspired him with undisguised dread. After all – he thought in his partial understanding of Christ – who would stay to supervise the work they had begun? The Master had died on the cross, and the Apostles of Jerusalem were being imprisoned at this

very moment. He had to defend himself with the means at hand. So, all he could think of was to resort to the supernatural virtues of the Law of Moses, in accordance with his old beliefs. He had awaited his executioners on his knees.

Confronted with James's unforeseen attitude, Saul of Tarsus was bewildered. Only minds deeply dedicated to Judaism read the teachings of Moses while on their knees. He could not in clear conscience order the imprisonment of this man. The reason that justified his task to the political and religious authorities of Jerusalem was to fight the enemies of their traditions.

“But are you not a friend of the carpenter?”

With enviable presence of mind, James answered: “I did not realize that the Law says we cannot have friends.”

Saul was disturbed by his reply but continued: “But which have you chosen? The Law or the Gospel? Which of the two do you accept as being first?”

“The Law is the first divine revelation,” said James intelligently.

In light of this disconcerting answer, the man from Tarsus thought for a moment and then addressed the onlookers: “OK. We'll leave this man alone.”

Inwardly happy with the results of his initiative, the son of Alphaeus now truly believed that the Law of Moses was touched by living and permanent grace. To him the code of Judaism was the talisman that had preserved his liberty. From that day onward the brother of Levi would solidify his superstitious inclinations forever. The fanaticism that Christian historians have found in his enigmatic personality had its origin there.

After leaving James's room, Saul was preparing to leave when, returning to the entrance door to order the departure of the prisoners, he witnessed the scene that had the most impact on him.

All the sick who could drag themselves and all the patients who were capable of moving surrounded Peter, weeping movingly. Some of the children called him “Father”; trembling elderly persons kissed his hands...

“Who will take pity on us now?” asked an old woman dissolved in tears.

“Father, where are they taking you?” asked an affectionate orphan, embracing the prisoner.

“I am going to the mount, my son,” answered the apostle.

“And if they kill you?” asked the little boy with much questioning in his blue eyes.

“I shall meet the Master and return with Him,” explained Peter kindly.

At that moment, the figure of Saul appeared. Contemplating the crowd of disabled, blind, lepers and children filling the room, he exclaimed irately: “Move back! Clear the way!”

Some retreated in terror at seeing the soldiers’ approach, while the more resolute did not move a step. One leper, who could barely stand up, stepped forward. It was old Samonius. Remembering the time when he could give orders and be obeyed, he approached Saul with great courage: “We must know where these prisoners are going,” he said gravely.

“Stand back!” exclaimed Saul, with a gesture of repugnance. “Since when must a man of the Law answer to someone old and unclean?”

The armed guards started to advance to punish the brave man. However, the leprosy defended Samonius from their attack. Taking advantage of this situation, the former proprietor from Caesarea retorted firmly: “When he is fulfilling his duties correctly, the man of the Law does not have to give an accounting except to God; however, the codes of humanity are spoken in this house. To you I am unclean but to Simon Peter I am a brother. You arrest the good and free the bad. Where is your justice? Do you believe only in the God of armies? It is crucial for you to know that if the Eternal One is the supreme factor of order, the Gospel teaches us to find in His providence the love of a Father.”

On listening to that dignified voice, which flowed from misery and suffering like an appeal of despair, Saul stopped in wonder. After a long pause, the beggar continued resolutely: “Where are your shelter houses for those oppressed by fate? When have you ever thought of an asylum for the most unfortunate? You are mistaken in suspecting apathy in our attitude. The Pharisees led Jesus to Calvary to be crucified, depriving the needy of His ineffable presence. For having practiced the good, Stephen was thrown into prison. Now the Sanhedrin demands the Apostles of the Way, repaying their kindness with the darkness of the dungeon. But you are mistaken. We, the miserable of Jerusalem, shall fight against you. We will even fight for Simon Peter’s shadow. If you deny our pleas, you must remember that we are lepers.

We will poison your wells. You will pay for your wickedness with your health and your life.”

At that point he could not continue.

Before the anguishing expectation of all, Saul of Tarsus replied harshly: “Shut up, you wretch! How could I have listened to you this long? Not one more word!”

And indicating him to one of the soldiers, he said with contempt: “Synesius, ten lashes. We shall punish him for his insolent and viperous tongue.”

His companions drew back in fear as Samonius received his punishment right there in front of everyone without uttering one complaint. Peter and John’s eyes were wet with tears. The other sick shrank from fright.

When the beating was over, a great silence fell on the anxious and pain-filled hearts. The doctor from Tarsus broke the expectancy with the order to depart for the prison.

Two pallid children then approached the ex-fisherman and asked in tears: “Father, who will look after us?”

Peter turned to them, downcast, and replied tenderly: “Philip’s daughters will look after you ... Jesus permitting, my children, I will not be long.”

Inwardly, Saul himself was moved; however, he did not want to betray himself by allowing himself to be overcome by the emotion the scene had caused him.

Peter understood that the silent tears of all the humble wards of the Way meant unveiled love for him at that moment of sorrowful farewell.

After this event, Saul of Tarsus doubled his efforts in the first persecution felt by the individual and collective expressions of the rising Christianity. Jerusalem was full of people interested in the ideas of the Nazarene Messiah – more than one might suppose. Saul availed himself of that fact to make felt once again the ideological peril that the Gospel represented. Many were imprisoned. A great exodus from the city had begun. Friends of the Way with financial means preferred to enter upon a new life in Idumea or Arabia, in Cilicia or Syria. Those who could fled the severity of the violent inquests, which had begun with the repercussions of a public scandal. The most prominent individuals were thrown into prison incommunicado, but

the unknown, the humble and the plebs suffered great abuse in the facilities of the tribunal where the interrogations occurred. The guards paid by Saul for carrying out the abominable work were excessively abusive.

“Are you of the Way of Christ Jesus?” one of them asked an unfortunate woman while laughing sarcastically.

“I ... I ...” stuttered the poor woman, understanding the delicacy of the situation.

“Come, come now. We’re in a hurry here,” said the official disrespectfully.

The miserable creature turned pale from shaking, thinking about the heavy punishment that would be imposed on her, and replied in deep fear: “I ... no...”

“So what were you doing at one of their seditious gatherings?”

“I went to get medicine for my ill son.”

In light of this negative reply, the Sanhedrin’s agent seemed to mellow a bit, but he quickly exclaimed to one of his helpers: “Very well then! The detainee may go in peace. But before she leaves, the regulation demands that she receive a few blows from a rusty old sword.”

It was useless to resist. Throughout the following days, punishments of all sorts were inflicted in that singular tribunal. Incarceration, floggings, the rusty old sword, cudgeling, macerations and scorn depended on the answers of the accused.

Saul became the central figure in the dreadful movement and was despised by all sympathizers of the Way. Multiplying his efforts, he visited daily the centers of the work that he called “the cleansing of Jerusalem,” developing an astonishing endeavor, within which he kept a constant watch on the administrative authorities, encouraged helpers and agents, and instigated other persecutions of Jesus’ followers, without letting his religious zeal for the Sanhedrin decrease.

Within a week after the arrests at in the humble church, the memorable session was held in which Peter, John and Philip were to be judged. The exceptional gathering awakened the greatest curiosity. All the distinguished individuals of the dominant Pharisaism were there. Gamaliel participated, displaying profound low spirits.

The attitude of the beggars was discussed in a general manner, because even though these unfortunate souls were not allowed entrance, they nevertheless crowded the great square and protested noisily. They were cudgeled left and right but to no avail, for the mass of sufferers had assumed proportions never seen before. It was a curious and alarming scene. Measures to disperse the mob seemed an impossible job. The wayfarers and the sick numbered in the hundreds. It was no use to try to suppress isolated pockets since it only worsened the rebelliousness and ire of the others. Shouting loudly, they clamored for Simon Peter to be freed. The tumultuous crowd demanded his release as if they were demanding a legacy of their legal rights.

Within the stately hall, not only was the audience talking about the event, but even the judges were unable to disguise their profound wonder. Annas himself told of the insistence with which he had been approached on behalf of the privileged of Jerusalem. Alexander alleged that hundreds of the afflicted had come to his residence to ask for favors on behalf of the prisoners. From time to time Saul answered this or that question in quick monosyllables. His grim face displayed his ill intentions regarding the fate of the Apostles of the Good News, who were there in front of him at the back of the room, humble and peaceful on the bench for common criminals.

It was then that Gamaliel engaged in a private conversation with the high priest for a few minutes, arousing great curiosity among his colleagues. The venerable doctor of the Law called his former disciple for a private conversation before the hearing began. His colleagues surmised that the tolerant and kind rabbi would act as attorney for the followers of the Nazarene.

“What is the sentence to be proposed for the prisoners?” asked Gamaliel with kind interest as soon as they were far enough away from the noisy groups.

“Since they are Galileans,” said Saul with emphatic authority, “they will have no right to speak in the courtroom; therefore, I have already decided their punishment. I am going to propose death for all three of them, as well as for Stephen.”

“What are you saying?” exclaimed Gamaliel surprised.

“I see no other recourse,” said the young man from Tarsus. “We must pull up by the roots the evil that has started. I believe that if we face the

movement with tolerance, the prestige of Judaism will be shaken by our own hands.”

“Nonetheless, Saul,” replied the old teacher with profound kindness, “I must invoke my ascendancy over your spiritual formation to defend these men from the death penalty.”

The temperamental young man went pale. He was not used to compromising his opinions and decisions. His wish was always tyrannical and inflexible. However, Gamaliel had been his best friend at all times. Those wrinkled hands had taught him the holiest examples. From them he had received all the help he needed every day of his life. He understood that he was now confronting a powerful obstacle to the full execution of his plan. The venerable rabbi perceived Saul’s perplexity and immediately continued to insist: “No one knows better than I the generosity of your heart and I am the first to realize that your resolutions obey immeasurable zeal in the defense of our millenary principles; however, Saul, the Way seems to have a great purpose in the renovation of our human and religious values. Who among us has ever remembered to help the unfortunate by providing them with a loving and fraternal home? Before you began your corrective diligence, I visited that simple institution and was comforted in observing its excellent program.”

Saul was pale as he listened to such concepts. In his opinion they were a positive sign of weakness.

“But is it possible,” he asked surprised, “that you too have read the Galileans’ Gospel?”

“I am reading it,” confirmed Gamaliel without hesitating, “and I intend to meditate a bit longer on the phenomena that are happening at present. I foresee great changes everywhere. I intend to retire from public life in a few days in order to take up the way of the desert. It is clear, however, that my words must be kept by you as a token of mutual trust.”

Shocked, Saul did not know what to say. He believed the respectable teacher to be mentally disturbed by too many deliberations. The master, however, as if guessing his thoughts, added: “Do not think that I am mentally ill. The old age of my body has not erased my capacity to think and discern for myself. I understand the scandal that would arise in Jerusalem if a rabbi of the Sanhedrin publicly changed his innermost convictions. However, at this moment I am talking to a spiritual son, and by openly exposing my point of

view, I do so only to defend good and just men from a wrongful and undeserving sentence.”

“What you have revealed,” said Saul abruptly, “disappoints me deeply!”

“You have known me since your childhood and you know that an authentic man cannot worry about those who praise or lament him in the fulfillment of a sacred duty.”

And lending a kinder tone to his voice, he added: “Do not make me go with you into this assembly and into the scandalous and shameless public arguments that would threaten the loving features that every truth should bring with itself. You shall free these men in consideration of our past of mutual understanding. That is all I ask of you. Leave them in peace for the sake of our friendship. In a few more days you will not have to concede anything else to your old teacher. You will replace me in this hall, for I intend to leave the city soon.”

And since Saul was hesitating, he continued: “You do not have to think about it very long. The high priest is aware of the fact that I was going to ask your clemency for the prisoners.”

“But ... my authority?” asked the young man proudly. “How can tolerance be reconciled with the need to repress evil?”

“All authority is from God. We are simple instruments, my son. No one will be diminished by being good and tolerant. The noblest action in this case is to grant freedom to all of them.”

“All?” asked Saul in a gesture of great astonishment.

“Why not?” confirmed the venerable doctor of the Law. “Peter is a generous man, Philip is a family man extremely dedicated to fulfilling his duties, John is a simple man and Stephen has devoted himself to the poor.”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted Saul, “I will agree to free the first three, under one condition. Because Peter and Philip are married they may remain in Jerusalem, restricting their activities to helping the sick and needy; John will be banished; but Stephen must suffer the ultimate sentence. I have already publicly proposed his stoning and I do not see any reason for compromise. At least one of the disciples of the carpenter should die as a warning.”

Gamaliel understood the power of that resolution by the vehemence of the words that conveyed it. Saul had made it very clear that there would be no

compromise regarding the sorcerer. The old rabbi did not insist. To avoid a scandal he understood that Stephen would have to pay with martyrdom. Moreover, considering the obstinate temperament of his former disciple, to whom the city had conferred such vast attributions, it was no small thing to obtain clemency for the three just men consecrated to the common good.

The respectable rabbi grasped the situation and said: “Fine then, so be it!”

And with a kind smile, he left Saul somewhat worried and perplexed.

Within a few moments, to the general surprise of the assembly, Saul of Tarsus proposed to free Peter and Philip, to banish John, and to reiterate his request for Stephen’s stoning, considering him the most dangerous member of the Way. The authorities of the Sanhedrin evaluated the proposals, and satisfied in knowing that the measure would please the mob, they gave their unanimous consent and Stephen’s death was set for a week later. Saul invited his friends to the tragic public ceremony, over which he himself would preside.

VIII

The Death of Stephen

Despite his intense activities, the young man from Tarsus never failed to appear right on time at Zechariah's house, where, in Abigail's heart, he found the repose he needed so much. If the struggles in Jerusalem consumed his energies, he appeared to recover them at his beloved's side in a sweet enchantment with which he awaited the fulfillment of his dearest hopes. He felt that the world was a battlefield on which it was up to him to fight for God's law; however, since the Eternal One was just and generous, He had granted Saul repose in the consolation of his chosen one's devotion.

Abigail was his world of sentiment. He poured into his betrothed's heart, full of love, compassion and righteousness, all the everyday battles, the stern measures his job required of him and the harshness with which he had to deal with issues entrusted to his forum. She received his thoughts with loving attention and seemed to temper them in the tenderness of her feminine soul, handing them back to her beloved in the form of caring and upright suggestions.

Saul had gotten used to such precious daily exchanges. Whenever he missed these sweet consolations of the road to Joppa, he felt troubled by his own forceful and impulsive sentiments. Abigail set his spirit straight. She smoothed out the edges of his forceful and gruff nature, and helped to attenuate the severity of his authoritative decisions. For hours on end, Saul of Tarsus delighted himself by listening to her as if her sentiments of goodness were sweet nourishment for his soul, which the strict reasoning of the world was used to overheating. He had not experienced the gallant adventures of a young man of his age because he had always been conscious of keeping himself pure in light of the Law, but now he had discovered in his chosen one the personification of all the dreams of his expectant youth.

The night after the memorable session at the Sanhedrin, Saul of Tarsus abandoned all his immediate preoccupations and headed for Zechariah's house, more troubled than ever. The weariness of the day had sapped his strength. He wanted to cover the distance quickly, to be absorbed in the affection of his betrothed and to forget all the concerns that were burning in his mind taxed by the most conflicting thoughts.

The evening was already unrolling a mantle of moonlight over nature when the young doctor crossed the threshold, surprising the generous family with warm and affectionate greetings.

His betrothed's presence was a cool balm of sweetness to his soul. In a few short moments, he appeared comforted. Now in a good mood because his inner energies were resting in her soft caresses, he enthusiastically narrated his latest success. Zechariah, as a faithful observer of the Law, said he had more than enough reasons for the decisions he had made. The person of Stephen was discussed in detail. Gamaliel's ex-disciple of course explained the case his own way, portraying the preacher of the Way as an intelligent, and at the same time, dangerous man due to the revolutionary ideas that his fluent speech had been spreading.

Abigail and Ruth listened in silence while the other two kept up a lively conversation.

After a while, in response to a direct comment by Saul, Abigail asked: "But mightn't there be a way to change the sentence at least?"

"What would you have us do?" asked Saul emphatically. "Considering the insolence of the strange things they preach, it's no small thing that we freed the three most obvious leaders. As for Stephen as a direct descendant of the tribes of Israel, we did everything we could to bring him back to his senses. His rebelliousness was his condemnation, however. He insulted me publicly in the Sanhedrin, scorned our most sacred principles and criticized the most distinguished figures of Pharisaism with deceitful and ungrateful remarks."

And he concluded: "As for myself, I'm satisfied. I consider the coming stoning to be one of the most important feats for the future of my career. It will attest to my zeal in defending our highly esteemed heritage. We must consider the fact that, in more somber times, Israel preferred religious freedom to political independence. Could we perchance expose our most precious moral values to the degrading influence of some mad-brain?"

Saul tried to change the subject, while Ruth ordered glasses of comforting wine to be served.

Before leaving, Saul invited his betrothed for their usual walk. On that night nature seemed full of wonder. The moonlight, highlighting all the flowers in pastel tones, was saturated with sweet fragrances. Hand in hand on a rustic bench, the couple contemplated the scene in rapture. Saul felt a soothing comfort. He felt at ease. If Jerusalem had darkened his mind in a turmoil of worry, that simple abode on the road to Joppa seemed to unburden him of all his troubles, lavishing upon his spirit an enormous potential for consolation.

“Now, my dear, everything is set,” he said solicitously. “Six days from today, Delilah will come for you in person. You will get to know the city, and my friends will honor in your kind soul my happy choice. Aren’t you glad?”

“Very,” whispered Abigail tenderly.

“I have organized an exhilarating itinerary. I want to take you to Jericho, where our relatives await us with great joy. In Jerusalem, I’ll introduce you to all the most important buildings. You’ll marvel at the Temple and the treasure guarded there by the religious dedication of our people. You’ll see the Tower of the Romans. My countrymen who attend the synagogue of the Cilisians want to present you with a priceless gift.”

Abigail delighted at listening to him. That young man, impulsive and harsh to those who did not know him but affectionate and sensitive to those who did, was her exact ideal, the man hoped for by her kind soul.

“No one can offer me a present more priceless than the one sent by God into my life in your loyal and generous heart,” said Abigail with an open smile.

“I myself have received much more,” said the doctor of Tarsus, “in receiving the rare jewel of your love which will enrich my entire life. Sometimes, Abigail,” he continued with the enthusiasm proper of dreamy youth, “in my idealism of victories for Jerusalem over the great cities of the world, I think of reaching old age as a victor covered with traditions of wisdom and glory. Since I met you, my faith in destiny has grown; I have consolidated my hopes and I will have your cooperation in the immense task that is unfolding before me. To their victors the Romans offer a triumphal wreath of laurel leaves and roses. If one day Jerusalem grants me its

triumphal wreath, I will not set it on my brow but will leave it at your feet as a tribute of eternal and sole love.”

“Just today,” continued Saul, confident in the future, “Gamaliel told me that he is leaving the Sanhedrin so that I can succeed him in his prestigious position. That, my dear, is our first victory of great importance. As soon as Delilah returns from Tarsus, we can set the joyful day for our wedding. I believe that having you always at my side will correct my impulses, my job will be easier, and life lighter and happier. The home is a blessing. And we shall have that home.”

“I have never felt so happy,” exclaimed Abigail with tears of joy.

He caressed her hands and since he wished her to share his innermost sentiments, he added: “You will come to the city with us on the day before the death of the sermonizing revolutionary. That act of justice will conform to the ceremony established by our customs, and I mean for you to witness it in my company.”

“But why?” asked Abigail slightly shaken.

“Because we will meet our closest friends there and I wish to take advantage of the opportunity to introduce you indirectly to all of them.”

“Isn’t there a way to spare me such a spectacle?” she insisted shyly. “I have never gotten my father’s death at the hands of brutal soldiers out of my mind.”

Saul did not disguise the fact that he was upset: “But don’t you see? Stephen’s case is much different. He is a man of no significance to us, one who has set himself up as a seditious and insolent reformer. In fact, he personifies the continuity of disrespect and insult against the Law of Moses that began with a movement of huge proportions by a crazed carpenter from Nazareth. Don’t you think we should punish the thief who robs a house? Don’t those who blaspheme in the sanctuary of the Eternal One deserve punishment?”

The young girl grasped the fact that she would displease her betrothed if she showed a difference of opinion, and added: “I can see that you’re right. I shouldn’t argue with your wise and just concepts. Besides, I have every intention of winning over your friends in the Sanhedrin because I haven’t lost hope in your handling of Jeziel’s case as soon as an opportunity arises for a

new search in Achaia. But listen, Saul, if you allow it, I will go when the ceremony is almost over. All right?"

Noticing her conciliatory goodwill, Saul displayed a broad smile of satisfaction.

"Yes, we're agreed. However, I hope you will watch everything with peace of mind, certain that I could only make right decisions in carrying out my duties. It is regrettable that the prisoner showed himself to be recalcitrant to the point of compelling me to such an extreme measure. However, you must know that I did everything I could to avoid the ultimate recourse. I employed every conciliatory means available to dissuade him from such perilous delusions, but his conduct was so aggravating that any tolerance became practically impossible."

They continued their exchange of feelings of affection for some time, which the friendly night kindly guarded under a blanket of stars. They were tender vows of immortal love with God's blessing and expressed the highest wishes of their thoughts, plans and hopes for the future.

It was late when Saul left, returning to Jerusalem as a happy soul.

In a few days Abigail, accompanied by Saul and his sister, left for the city. Its interesting profile was something completely new to her. On the night of her arrival, Delilah's home was filled with friends who brought to Saul's chosen the tribute of their admiration; and the young woman from Corinth delighted everybody with her natural endowments combined with her solid spiritual upbringing. Her speech, full of tenderness, seemed to be far removed from the trivialities that characterized most young women of the time. She was able to express the most refined concepts on all the subjects she was asked about, drawing beautiful conclusions from the Law and the Sacred Scriptures to define a woman's position regarding the innermost duties of family life. The doctor from Tarsus felt proud at noticing the general admiration around her vibrant and loving person. Abigail was the synthesis of his greatest ideal and filled his heart with marvelous promise. The admiration of his friends, who sent him looks of congratulation, brought new joy to his ardent soul.

The following day broke clear and beautiful. Under the blazing sun of Jerusalem, Saul said goodbye to his betrothed to attend the early work at the Sanhedrin.

"So I'll see you at the Temple," he said tenderly.

“At the Temple?” asked Delilah in surprise as she embraced Abigail.

“Yes,” he explained. “Abigail is going to witness the final part of Stephen’s punishment.”

“But how? asked Delilah. “Women at the ceremony?”

“The stoning will occur near the altar of burnt offering and not in the sacred atria,” he explained. “I don’t think there will be any restriction on women, and even if the priests did make a last minute resolution the measure would not affect my personal decision. I wish for Abigail to take part in my first victory in defense of our sovereign principles.”

Both women smiled happily at noticing his excellent mood.

“As a final recourse, Saul,” said Abigail in a gesture of serenity and tenderness, “please don’t forget to offer the condemned man one last opportunity to save himself from death. After two months in prison, it’s possible that he has recast his deepest sentiments. Ask him once more if he insists on insulting the Law.”

Glad to see such greatness of heart, Saul gave her a satisfied and approving look and added: “I shall.”

Since early that day, there had been unusual movement in the highest Tribunal of Israel. The execution of the preacher of the Way was the subject of extensive discussion. The Pharisees, especially, wanted to know all about it. Nobody wanted to miss the sad spectacle. However, members of Simon Peter’s humble church did not dare approach to ask any questions. Saul, as the stated persecutor, had used the prerogatives of his legal investiture and had ordered the proclamation that no follower of the Way could attend the execution, which would take place in one of the large courtyards of the sanctuary. Long lines of soldiers were stationed in the large square to disperse any groups of beggars who might form with unknown intentions, and since the early hours of the morning, many beggars of Jerusalem had been immediately sent running with blows from the rusty old sword.

After midday, the authorities and onlookers, eager for a thrill, gathered in the hall of the Sanhedrin, talking in muffled voices. They awaited the condemned man, who finally arrived surrounded by an armed escort as if he were a common criminal.

Stephen looked quite disfigured, though his face reflected his inward serenity. His slow steps, his extreme fatigue and the bruises on his hands and

feet showed the heavy physical torment that had been inflicted on him in the dungeon darkness. His beard had grown, changing his appearance, but his eyes displayed the same brilliance of crystal clear kindness.

Amid general curiosity, Saul of Tarsus looked at him, pleased. At last, Stephen would pay for his incomprehension and insults.

At the appointed time, the unbending doctor read the indictment. However, faithful to what he had promised, before pronouncing the final sentence he asked the soldiers to shove the prisoner to his bench. Facing the preacher of the Gospel without any expression of mercy, he asked harshly: "Would you be willing now to swear against the Nazarene carpenter? Remember that this is your last chance to save your life."

Such words, spoken mechanically, sounded strange to the young Corinthian, who received them in his sensitive and kind soul as new darts of sarcasm.

"Do not insult the Savior!" exclaimed the messenger of Christ firmly. "Nothing in the world will make me renounce His divine watch-care! To die for Jesus means glory when we know that He offered Himself on the cross for all humankind."

A torrent of insults cut his words short.

"Enough! Stone him right now! Death to the evil one! Down with the sorcerer! Blasphemer! Slanderer!"

The shouts were taking on fearful proportions. A few of the more enraged Pharisees diverted the guards and approached Stephen to try to drag him down without pity. However, at the first forceful pull on his rotting collar, a piece of the threadbare tunic was left in their hands. Armed men had to intervene so that the young man from Corinth would not be torn to pieces right then and there by the furious and delirious mob. In a loud voice, Saul ordered the intervention of the soldiers. He wanted the execution of the disciple of the Gospel, but with all due ceremony.

Stephen's face was now reddened with shame. Semi-naked, he was helped by a Roman legionary to rearrange what was remaining of his garment, which had been torn to pieces above his kidneys, so that he would not be entirely naked. With a hand shaking from the mistreatment he had received, he tried to wipe the spit that the more fanatical had thrown in his face. A strong blow on his shoulder was causing intense pain in his whole

arm. He understood that the last moments of his life were drawing to a close. The humiliation hurt him deeply. But he recalled Simon's descriptions of Jesus in his final distress. In front of Herod Antipas, Christ had suffered the same abuse from the Jews. He had been scourged, jeered at and wounded. Nearly naked, He had borne all the offenses without one complaint, without one unworthy expression. He who had loved the unfortunates, who had worked to found a doctrine of peace and love for all, who had blessed the most crestfallen and received them with love, had received the garland of the cross in immeasurable suffering. And Stephen thought, "Who am I and who was Christ?" This inner questioning brought him a certain comfort. The Prince of Peace had been dragged through the streets of Jerusalem under the derision of the greatest insults, and He was the awaited Messiah, the Anointed of God! Therefore, why would he, Stephen, a fallible man and bearer of many weaknesses, hesitate at the moment of testimony? And with tears running down his lacerated face, he heard the tender voice of the Master in his heart: "Let anyone who would share in my kingdom deny himself, take up his cross and follow me!" He had to deny himself to accept the benefic sacrifice. At the end of all his suffering, he would find the glorious love of Jesus and the beauty of His immortal tenderness. The humiliated and wounded preacher remembered his past endeavors and hopes. It seemed like he was revisiting his loving childhood, when his mother's care had instilled the fundamentals of a comforting faith; later, the noble aspiration of his youth, his father's dedication and the love of his little sister, whom the circumstances of destiny had taken from him. When he thought of Abigail he felt a certain anguish in his heart. Now that he had to face death, he wished to see her again to give her his final recommendations. He remembered that last night when they had exchanged so many tender feelings, so many fraternal promises in the dark prison in Corinth. Despite the renewing activities of faith, in whose work he had shared in Jerusalem, he had never been able to forget his duty to look for her wherever she might be. While around him the insults were multiplying in the turmoil of shouts and revolting threats, the condemned man wept over his memories. As he took refuge in Christ's promises in the Gospel he felt a soothing relief. The idea that his little sister would remain in the world and in Jesus' care diminished the anguish of his soul.

He had barely left his sorrowful reminiscing, when he heard Saul's imperious voice addressing the guards: "Shackle him again; it is over; let us proceed to the atrium."

As he extended his wrists to receive the cuffs, Simon Peter's disciple suffered such forceful blows from one unscrupulous soldier that the blood from his wounded wrists started to flow freely.

Stephen did not make the slightest attempt to resist. From time to time, he lifted his eyes as if to implore help from Heaven in his final minutes. In spite of the insults and the wounds that lacerated him, he felt an unknown peace of spirit. All these ceremonial sufferings were for Christ. This hour was his divine opportunity. The Master of Nazareth had called his faithful heart to bear public witness to the spiritual worth of His glorious doctrine. Fully trusting, he thought: "If the Messiah had accepted the infamous death of Calvary to save all, would it not be an honor to give my life for Him?" Should not his heart, always eager to bear witness to the Master ever since he had come to know the Gospel of redemption, now rejoice at the chance of offering Him his own life? The order to walk tore him from his lofty thoughts.

The kind preacher of the Way faltered in staggering steps, but his eyes were firm and serene, displaying fearlessness in his final moments of testimony.

In those early hours of the afternoon, the sun in Jerusalem was a burning brazier. In spite of the unbearable heat, the crowd moved with great interest. It was the first case entailing the activities of the Way after the death of its founder. Standing out from all Jewish sects there, in token of the prestige of the Law of Moses, the Pharisees put on a big show of pomp. They flanked the condemned man and shouted the most scornful remarks in his face.

Although displaying profound sadness, Stephen walked half-naked, serene and imperturbable.

The meeting room of the Sanhedrin was not far from the Temple atrium where the gruesome ceremony would take place. Only a few yards and the journey came to an end, exactly in the place where the enormous altar of burnt offering stood.

Everything was prepared suitably, just as Saul had requested.

At the back of the spacious courtyard, Stephen was bound to a stake so that the stoning could start at the precise time appointed.

The executioners would be the representatives of the city's many synagogues, since it was an honorable function granted to those who were in a position to defend Moses and his principles. Each synagogue had appointed

its own delegate and at the beginning of the ceremony, Saul, as leader of the event, greeted them one by one as he stood next to the victim. In accordance with practice, he held in his hands their bright, purple-adorned mantles.

Another order from Saul and the execution began amid loud laughter. Each executioner aimed coolly at a chosen point, making an effort to hit it on the mark.

General scorn followed each strike.

“Let’s save the head,” said one of the most excited, “to keep the show intense and interesting.”

Each Judaic faction enthusiastically accompanied the executioner appointed by the synagogue elders to the shouts of “Death to the traitor! The sorcerer!...”

“Strike the heart in the name of the Cilicians!” exclaimed someone from amongst the crowd.

“Split a leg for the Idumeans!” seconded another impudent voice.

A little ways away from the crowd and closely watching the movements of the condemned man, Saul of Tarsus was satisfied and comforted as he appraised the people’s reaction. In any case, the death of the preacher of Christ represented his first great triumph in winning the attention of Jerusalem and its prestigious political elite. At that time, as he was the focus of such a high level of acclamation from the people of his race, Saul was proud that he had decided to persecute the Way without consideration or rest. However, Stephen’s composure did not fail to impress him strongly at the core of his temperamental and unbending soul. From what source could he be drawing such peace? Under the hail of stones those eyes gazed at his executioners without blinking, without displaying any fear or trouble!

As he knelt down at the stake, the young Corinthian did in fact have a look of peace in his translucent eyes, from which silent tears ran abundantly. His bare chest was a bloody wound. His tattered garments were glued to his body, plastered with sweat and blood.

The martyr of the Way felt supported by powerful and intangible forces. With each new blow, he felt the unending suffering increase as his macerated body was punished, but inwardly he had the feeling of a sublime gentleness. His heart was beating irregularly. His chest was covered in deep wounds, his ribs broken.

At that ultimate hour, he remembered the smallest ties of faith that bound him to a higher life. He remembered all his favorite prayers from childhood. He made an effort to visualize the death of his tortured and misunderstood father. Inwardly, he repeated Psalm 23 of David as he had been used to doing with his sister in situations that seemed insuperable. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want...” The words of the Sacred Writings as well as Christ’s promises in the Gospel were in the core of his heart. His body was broken but his spirit was tranquil and hopeful.

Now he had the feeling that two loving hands were passing lightly over his grievous wounds, providing him with a soft sensation of relief. Without any fear, he felt that the sweat of final agony had come.

Dedicated friends from the spirit realm surrounded the martyr in his final minutes. At the highest point of physical pain, as if he had passed through infinite abysses of perception, the young man from Corinth noticed that something had been torn in his anxious soul. His eyes seemed immersed in glorious visions of another life. The legion of Jesus’ emissaries lovingly surrounding him seemed like the court of Heaven. On the path of light unfolding in front of him, he saw someone approaching with open arms. From Peter’s descriptions, he perceived that he was beholding the Master himself in all the splendor of His divine glory. Saul saw that the condemned man’s eyes were ecstatic and blazing. That was when then the Christian hero exclaimed in a loud voice: “I see the heavens opened and Christ resurrected in the grandeur of God!”

Then, two young women approached the persecutor with gestures of familiarity. Delilah gave Abigail to her brother and said goodbye to answer the call of another friend. The young betrothed was wearing a Greek-style tunic, which highlighted her beautiful face. Whether because of the sorrowful scene that was occurring or because of the presence of his beloved, Saul showed he was somewhat perplexed and moved. It might be said that Stephen’s invincible courage had led him to consider the unknown serenity reigning in the martyr’s spirit.

Faced with the shouting that surrounded her, and noticing the wretched situation of the victim, the young girl could hardly contain a cry of astonishment. Who was that man bound to the stake of torture? That chest gasping for breath and plastered with blood, that hair, that pale face disfiguring by a beard: were they not her brother’s? Ah! How to speak of the immense anguish in the unexpected surprise of one minute? Abigail trembled.

Her afflicted eyes followed the smallest movements of the hero, who seemed indifferent in the ecstasy absorbing him. In vain Saul discreetly called her attention so as to save her from pain-filled shock. Abigail seemed to see nothing but the condemned man perishing in the blood of martyrdom. She now remembered ... In fleeing the dungeon after her father's death, she had left Jeziel in the same state of torture: the abominable stake, the merciless shackles, and her poor brother on his knees! She felt compelled to throw herself in front of the executioners so that she could clarify the situation, to know the identity of that man.

At that moment, unaware that he was the target of such attention, the preacher of the Way came out of his dazed state. Seeing Jesus sadly contemplating the doctor from Tarsus as if to grieve his condemnable detour, Simon Peter's disciple felt in his heart a sincere friendship for his executioner. He knew Christ but Saul did not. Full of true fraternity and wishing to defend his persecutor, he exclaimed in a moving voice: "Lord, do not hold this sin against him!"

Upon saying that, Stephen turned his eyes to gaze compassionately upon his executioner. But it was then that he saw next to him the figure of his sister dressed as on those happy days at their father's house. It was his beloved little sister, for whose affection his heart had so often beaten with longing and hope. How could her presence there be explained? Had she perhaps also been taken to the Master's kingdom and had returned now with him in spirit to welcome Stephen to a better world? He wanted to cry out in his infinite joy, to attract her attention, to listen to her voice singing the Psalms of David, to die embraced in her love, but his throat no longer produced any sound. Emotion took hold of him in this extreme hour. He felt that the Master of Nazareth was caressing his brow where the last stone had opened a flow of blood. He heard far-off silvery voices singing hymns of love about the glorious motives of the Sermon on the Mount. Incapable of enduring the torment for much longer, the Gospel's disciple felt faint.

Listening to the condemned man's words and receiving his burning and clear look, Abigail could not hide her anguishing astonishment.

"Saul! Saul! ... It's my brother!" she exclaimed in alarm.

"What do you mean?" stuttered Saul in a low voice, opening his eyes wide. "He can't be! Are you crazy?"

"No, no, it's him, it's him!" she repeated, looking extremely pale.

“It’s Jeziel.” Abigail insisted in dread. “Darling, give me one minute; let me talk to the dying man for only one minute.”

“Impossible!” retorted Saul in ire.

“Saul, for the Law of Moses, for the love of our fathers, please!” she exclaimed, ringing her hands.

Gamaliel’s ex-disciple could not believe such a coincidence was possible. Moreover, there was the difference in names. This point had to be clarified before anything else. He was sure that Abigail’s mistaken impression would be undone at the first direct contact with the dying man. Her sensitive and kind temperament justified what in his mind was absurd. Gathering these thoughts for a second, he addressed his betrothed sternly: “I will go with you to identify the dying man, but until we do so, keep still ... not one word, do you hear me? You must not forget the respectability of this place.”

He immediately called dryly to a high order functionary: “Order the body to be taken to the priests’ chamber.”

“Sir,” answered the man respectfully, “the condemned is not dead yet.”

“It does not matter; go anyway. I will extract his confession of repentance in his final hour.”

The order was immediately carried out. In the meantime Saul asked for several amphoras of fine wine to be served to his friends and admirers to commemorate his first victory. Then, frowning and apprehensive, he left almost furtively for the room reserved for the priests of Jerusalem, accompanied by Abigail.

Passing through the groups greeting him with frenetic acclamations, Saul seemed distracted. He took Abigail’s arm gently, but he did not say a single word to her. This surprise had stricken him mute. What if Stephen were in fact that Jeziel whom they had awaited so anxiously? Absorbed in anguishing thoughts, they entered the lonely chamber. Saul ordered the assistants to leave and cautiously locked the door.

Abigail approached her blood-covered brother with infinite tenderness. And as if he had been called back to life by a powerful and invincible force, they both noticed that the victim was moving his bleeding head. Displaying a pain-filled effort of final agony, Stephen murmured: “Abigail!”

The voice was almost a whisper, but the look was calm and clear. Upon hearing his faltering and laggard voice, Saul drew back, taken with fear. What did it all mean? There was no doubt about it. The victim of his implacable persecution was the beloved brother of his chosen one. What mechanism of fate had created such a situation – which was to grieve him for the rest of his life? Where was God, who had not inspired him in the labyrinth of circumstances that had led him to that irremediable and cruel outcome? He felt possessed of unlimited grief. He, who had elected Abigail to be the protecting angel of his existence, would have to renounce her love forever. Human pride would not allow him to marry the sister of the supposed enemy who had confessed and been sentenced as a common criminal. He remained there, bewildered, as if an irrepressible power were holding him to the floor, transforming him into the object of unbearable irony.

“Jeziel!” exclaimed Abigail, kissing the dying man and bathing his brow in tears. “Just look at you! ... It seems you have endured martyrdom ever since the day we parted ways,” she sobbed.

“It’s all right,” said the disciple of Jesus, doing all he could to move his broken hand to let her know his desire to caress her hair as in the days of their childhood and early youth. “Do not cry! ... I am with Christ!”

“Who is Christ?” whispered Abigail. “Why do they call you Stephen? Why have they changed you so?”

“Jesus ... is our Savior...” explained the dying man in order not to waste the minutes quickly slipping away. “And now they call me Stephen ... because a generous Roman freed me ... but asked for ... absolute secrecy. Forgive me ... It was out of gratitude that I followed his advice. One cannot be thankful to God if he does not show gratitude to men.”

Seeing that his sister continued sobbing, he continued: “I know I’m dying ... but the soul is immortal ... I’m sorry to leave you ... when I’ve just seen you again, but I shall help you from wherever I might be.”

“Listen, Jeziel,” exclaimed Abigail in a whisper: “What did this Jesus teach you to lead you to such a grievous end? Wouldn’t whoever abandons a loyal servant like this be a cruel master instead?”

The dying man seemed to admonish her with his eyes.

“Don’t think like that,” he continued with difficulty. “Jesus is just and merciful ... He promised to be with us until the end of time ... later you will

understand. He taught me to love my executioners.”

She embraced him tenderly, awash in abundant tears. After a pause in which the victim showed that he was in the final moments of physical life, he made a supreme effort to move.

“With whom shall I leave you?”

“This is my betrothed,” explained Abigail, pointing to Saul, who looked petrified.

The dying man looked at him without hate: “May God bless you both ... Your betrothed is not my enemy, but a brother ... Saul must be good and generous; he defended Moses to the end ... when he meets Jesus, he will serve Him with the same zeal ... Be a loving and faithful companion for him.”

The preacher’s voice was now hoarse and nearly imperceptible. In the throes of death Stephen contemplated Abigail in brotherly sadness.

When the doctor from Tarsus heard these last words, he went pale. He wanted to be hated, cursed. Stephen’s compassion, the fruit of a peace that he, Saul, had never known in the eminence of worldly status, struck him profoundly. He could not explain it, but the dying man’s resignation and gentleness were assailing his hardened heart. He endeavored inwardly not to be moved by the sorrowful scene. He would not bend to a matter of sentimentality. He would detest that Christ who seemed to be calling him everywhere, even to the point of placing himself between him and his adored Abigail. The future rabbi’s tormented mind bore the pressure of a thousand fires. He had disregarded family pride and had chosen Abigail for his companion in life, although he did not know her family ancestors. He loved her through the ties of the soul and had discovered in her delicate feminine heart everything he had dreamed of in matters of a temporal nature. She synthesized his hopes as a man; she was the surety of his destiny; she represented God’s reply to the appeal of his idealistic youth. Now a gaping chasm had opened between them. The sister of Stephen! Nobody had ever dared to affront his authority except that zealous preacher of the Way, whose ideas could never marry his. He had hated that young man impassioned by the strange ideal of a carpenter, and it had culminated in thoughts of vengeance. If he were to marry Abigail they would never be happy. He would be the executioner, she the victim. Moreover, his family, holding fast to the strictness of the old traditions, could not tolerate the union after knowing all the circumstances.

He raised his hands to his chest, overcome with tormenting dismay.

In tears, Abigail accompanied the sorrowful agony of her brother, whose final minutes were draining slowly away. Heartrending emotion took possession of all her energies. In the pain that lacerated her in her most sensitive fibers she seemed not to see her betrothed who, between shock and dismay, was following her slightest movements. Abigail very carefully supported the dying man's head after having sat down to hold him lovingly.

Realizing that her brother was looking at her for the last time, she exclaimed in dismay: "Jeziel, don't go ... Stay with us! We will never again be separated!"

About to expire, he whispered: "Death does not separate ... those who love each other."

And as if remembering something very dear to his heart, he opened his eyes widely in an expression of immense joy: "As in the Psalm ... of David ..." he said hoarsely, "we can ... say ... that love ... and mercy ... have followed us ... all the days ... of our life."¹⁰

The young woman listened to his final words, highly moved. She wiped the bloody sweat from his face, which was illumined by a superior peacefulness.

"Abigail," murmured Stephen still in a whisper, "I go in peace ... I wish to hear you say the prayer ... of the afflicted and dying."

She remembered the last moments of her father's torment on the unforgettable day of their separation in the dungeons of Corinth. In a glance, she understood that other forces had been at work there: not Licinius Minucius and his cruel minions, but her own betrothed transformed into an executioner by a terrible mistake. She caressed the bleeding head more tenderly. She drew the dying man to her heart as if he were a beloved child. Then, although rigid and unyielding in appearance, Saul of Tarsus observed closely the scene that he would never forget. Holding the dying man in her lap, Abigail lifted up her eyes, displaying the tears streaming down her cheeks. She did not sing, but the prayer left her lips like a natural supplication from her soul to a loving, invisible father.

"Lord God, Father of those who weep,

Of the sad, the oppressed,

*Fortress of the defeated,
Comfort in all pain,
Despite the bitter misery
Of the weeping over our errors,
From this world of exile
We clamor for Your love!*

*In the afflictions of the way,
In the night most tormenting,
Your generous fount
Is the good that shall never dry up...
You are in everything the light eternal
Of joy and peace;
Our door of hope
Which shall never close.*

*When everything despises us
In this world of iniquity,
When the tempest comes
Upon the flowers of illusion!
Oh Father, You are the light divine,
The hymn of certainty,
Overcoming all harshness,
Overcoming all affliction.*

*On the day of our death,
In abandonment or in torment,
Help us to forget*

The shadow, the pain, the evil!...

That in our final moments

We may feel the light of life,

Renewed and forgiven

In happy and immortal peace.

When Abigail finished her prayer, her face was bathed with tears. Under the soft caress of her hands, Jeziel became still. A snow-like pallor appeared on his corpse-like face, as well as a profound serenity. Saul understood that he was dead. While the young girl from Corinth raised herself carefully as if her brother's body needed all the tenderness of her kind spirit, Saul approached her with a frowning look and said sternly: "Abigail, everything has ended and is finished between us as well."

The poor creature turned in fear. Were the blows she had just received not enough? Could it be possible that her beloved would not have a word of kind conciliation at this difficult hour of her life? Was she to receive the coldest humiliation with Jeziel's death only to be forsaken in the end? Dismayed by everything she had found in Jerusalem, she understood the need to gather all her strength so as not to fail the harsh trials that had been reserved for her. She saw right away that she would find no comfort in Saul's pride. In an instant she came to the most disturbing conclusions regarding the role that had befallen her in such a shameful turn of events. Without resorting to her female sensibility, she recovered her courage and spoke with dignity and nobility: "Everything is finished between us? Why? Suffering should not put true love to flight."

"Don't you understand?" retorted the proud man. "Our union has become impracticable. I cannot marry the sister of an enemy of damnable memory for me. It was unfortunate to have chosen this occasion for your visit to Jerusalem. I feel ashamed not only before the woman whom I will never be able to marry, but also before my family and friends because of the bitter situation that these circumstances have interposed on my path."

Abigail was pale and painfully shocked.

"Saul ... Saul ... do not be ashamed on my account. Jeziel died accepting you. His body is listening to us," she said sorrowfully. "I cannot force you to marry me, but do not transform our affection into mute hatred ... be my

friend! ... I will be eternally grateful to you for the blessed months you have given me. I will go back to Ruth's house tomorrow ... you will not be ashamed of me! I will tell no one that Stephen was my brother, not even Zechariah! I do not want any of our friends to consider you an executioner."

Seeing Abigail's humble generosity, Saul felt impelled to press her to his heart as he would a child. He wanted to reach out, pull her to his chest and cover her kind and innocent brow with kisses. But his titles and duties suddenly came to mind; he saw Jerusalem shocked, blackening his reputation with bitter mockery. The future rabbi could not be defeated; the doctor of the strict and implacable Law would have to suffocate the man forever.

In a display of insensitivity Saul said in a harsh voice: "I accept your silence regarding today's regrettable events; you will return tomorrow to Ruth's house, but you should not expect me to continue to visit you, not even out of unwarranted courtesy, for in the authenticity of our people, one who is not a friend is an enemy."

Jeziel's sister listened to these explanations in profound astonishment.

"Then you are forsaking me completely?" she asked in tears.

"You are not being forsaken," he murmured inflexibly. "You have your friends on the road to Joppa."

"But why did you hate my brother so much after all? He was always kind ... he never offended anybody in Corinth."

"He was a preacher of the disgraced carpenter of Nazareth," he explained, constrained and gruff. "Moreover, he humiliated me in front of the entire city."

Compelled by the severity of his responses, Abigail was silenced completely. What power did this Nazarene have to attract such devotion and provoke such hatred? Thus far, she had not been interested in that famous carpenter who had died on the cross like a criminal; but her brother had told her that in Him he had found the Messiah. To seduce a pristine character like Jeziel, Christ could not be an ordinary man. She recalled her brother's past and remembered that in the case of her father's rebellion he had managed to remain above kinship to lovingly admonish his father. If he had had the strength to analyze his father's actions with such precise discernment, then this Jesus must have been very great for him to consecrate himself to Him, offering Him his very own life upon recovering his freedom. In her opinion

Jeziel could not be mistaken. She knew his character from birth, and it was not possible for him to have allowed himself to be misled regarding his religious convictions. She now felt attracted to this unknown and unjustly hated Jesus. He had taught her brother to love his executioners. What, then, might He not reserve for her heart thirsty for love and peace? Jeziel's last words had had a profound influence on her.

Lost in deep thought, she noticed that Saul had opened the door, calling some assistants who rushed to obey his orders. In a few minutes, Stephen's body was removed while numerous friends surrounded the young couple, enthusiastically talkative and happy.

"What is this?" one of them asked Abigail, noticing her blood-stained tunic.

"The condemned man was an Israelite," replied Saul, eager to provide explanations, "and as such we helped him in his final moments."

He looked at Abigail sternly, giving her to understand that she would have to contain her emotions far and above the truth of the matter.

In a few minutes, old Gamaliel arrived and asked his former pupil for a few minutes of his attention in private.

"Saul," he said kindly, "I hope to leave for Damascus next week. I am going to rest at my brother's place and take advantage of the night of old age to meditate and rest my spirit. I have done what was needed to notify the Sanhedrin and the Temple, and I believe that within a few days you will be appointed to replace me."

Saul made a slight gesture of thanks. Its coldness barely concealed the distress of his soul.

"However," continued the kind rabbi, attentively, "I have one last request to make. I regard Simon Peter as a friend. This confession might be astonishing to you, but I feel good in making it. He has just come to visit me and has asked my intervention for the victim's body to be given to the church of the Way, where it will be buried with much love. I am the intermediary for the request and I hope you will not refuse me this favor."

"Did you say 'victim'?" asked Saul, astonished. "The existence of a victim implies an executioner and I am no one's executioner. I defended the Law to the end."

Gamaliel understood the objection and retorted: “Do not see the mark of recrimination in my words. Neither the time nor the place is fitting for an argument. However, with all the sincerity that you have always known in me, I must tell you right off that I have arrived at some profound conclusions regarding the so-called carpenter of Nazareth. I have carefully reflected on his work in our midst; however, I am too old and weak to start any movement of renewal within the seat of Judaism. There comes a time in our lives when it is not right for us to intervene in collective problems, but at any age we can and should work for the enlightenment and improvement of ourselves. That is what I am going to do. The desert, in its silent majesty of isolation, was always seducing to our forefathers. I shall leave Jerusalem; I shall avoid the scandal that my new ideas and attitudes would certainly provoke; I shall look for solitude in order to find the truth.”

Saul of Tarsus was stupefied. Even Gamaliel seemed to be suffering the influence of strange sorceries! There could be no doubt that those men of the Way had bewitched him, sapping his last strength ... the old master had ended up capitulating in an attitude of unforeseeable consequences! Saul was about to rebuke and argue with him, to call him back to reality, when, sensing the antagonistic vibrations from his ardent spirit, the venerable mentor of his Pharisaic youth stated: “I already know the content of your inner response. You deem me weak and won-over, and each one analyzes as he can; but do not drag me into a loathsome controversy. I am here only to ask you a favor and I trust you will not refuse it. Could I arrange for Stephen’s remains to be removed immediately?”

Saul hesitated, pressed by strange thoughts.

“Grant it, Saul ... It is the final favor for your old friend.”

“I grant it,” he said at last.

Gamaliel said goodbye, sincerely grateful.

Once more surrounded by many friends who sought to cheer him up, the young doctor of the Law was lost in his own thoughts. To no purpose he raised his glass to the greetings. His empty, preoccupied look displayed the deep alienation in which he had become engulfed. The unexpected events brought to his mind a whirl of anguished thoughts. He wanted to think, he wished to be alone with his thoughts in order to examine the new perspectives of his destiny, but he had to remain in the scene of social conventions until sunset, attending his friends until the end.

Alleging the need to change her blood-soaked garment, Abigail left immediately after the interview with Gamaliel.

At Delilah's house the poor girl was taken with a high fever, to the distress and alarm of all who were there.

Saul returned at nightfall to his sister's home where he was told about Abigail's condition.

He was resolved to give new direction to his life and tried to stifle his emotions in order to face the facts as casually as possible.

In tears, the young woman from Corinth had asked to be taken back to Zechariah's house, fearing of the development of the illness. Delilah and her family had tried in vain to intervene with loving care. Abigail's request was movingly communicated to Saul, and in the austerity that characterized his attitude, Gamaliel's former disciple took all the measures needed to satisfy Abigail's wishes.

And at night a simple wagon discreetly left Jerusalem on the road to Joppa.

Ruth received the young woman in her arms, moved and afflicted. She and her husband then remembered that only after Abigail's father's death had she had such a high temperature, followed by profound downheartedness. Saul frowned as he listened to them, making an effort to hide his emotions. And while Abigail's friends tried lovingly to assist her, the future rabbi succumbed to a storm of adverse thoughts and headed back to Jerusalem with the intention of never returning to Joppa again.

IX

Abigail the Christian

After Stephen's martyrdom, the persecution against all disciples or sympathizers of the Way grew much worse. As if overcome by delusion upon replacing Gamaliel in the most important religious functions in the city, Saul of Tarsus gave himself over to suggestions of cruel fanaticism.

Ruthless inquiries were ordered regarding any family that displayed any attraction or sympathy for the ideas of the Nazarene Messiah. The lowly church, where Peter in his goodness continued helping the most unfortunate, was strictly monitored by soldiers who had been ordered to put a stop to the sermons that had been gentle consolation for unfortunate beings. Obsessed by the idea of safeguarding the Pharisaic heritage, Saul devoted himself to the greatest outrages and tyranny. Morally upright men were banished from the city on mere suspicion. Honest workers and mothers, even, were interrogated in scandalous public proceedings, which the persecutor himself insisted on leading. A huge exodus began, the likes of which Jerusalem had not seen in ages. The city became empty of workers. The Way had attracted to its sweet consolations the soul of people who had grown weary of misunderstanding and sacrifice. Free of the wise counsels of Gamaliel, who had retired to the desert, and without the loving help of Abigail, who had give him such immense inspiration, the future rabbi seemed like a madman whose heart had withered in his chest. Defenseless women begged for mercy in vain and wretched children futilely implored lenience for their parents, abandoned as unfortunate prisoners.

Saul seemed to be possessed by criminal indifference. In him the most sincere pleas met a stone wall. Incapable of understanding the circumstances that had changed his plans and hopes in life, he imputed the failure of the dreams of his youth on that Christ whom he was incapable of understanding. He would hate him as long as he lived. Since it was impossible to exact direct

revenge on him, he would persecute him in the person of his followers in every way possible. To Saul, that anonymous carpenter was the cause of his failure with regard to Abigail's love, now poisoned in his impulsive heart by strange sentiments, which, day by day, were digging a deeper gully between her unforgettable figure and his dearest memories. He had not returned to Zechariah's house, and though his friends on the road to Joppa insistently asked for news about him, he kept himself unbending in the circle of his all-consuming selfishness. From time to time he felt oppressed by a peculiar longing. He greatly missed Abigail's tenderness; her memory had never left his hard and disquieted soul. No woman could ever replace her in his heart. Amid dire distress, he remembered Stephen's agony, his enviable peace of mind, his words full of love and forgiveness; then he would see Abigail kneeling beside him, imploring Saul's help with a radiance of kindness in her supplicating eyes. He would never forget the moving and heartrending prayer she had offered when she embraced her brother in his last moments of life. Despite the cruel persecution that had turned him into the central cog of all the activities against the humble church of the Way, Saul sensed that spiritual needs were multiplying in his consolation-thirsty soul.

Eight months of unending struggle had passed by since Stephen's death, when Saul, surrendering before the love and longing dominating his soul, decided to see once more the flowery landscape along the road to Joppa. He was certain he could win back Abigail's love to such an extent as to reorganize all his plans for a happy future.

With a heavy heart, he mounted the small chariot. How hesitant he had been to humble himself, to overcome his vanity as a conventional and inflexible man and return to the former state of affairs! The twilight filled nature with reflections of glistening gold. The deep blue sky, the greenery of the countryside, the soft breezes of the afternoon were the same as before. He felt revived. His hopes and dreams continued untouched. He was trying to figure out the best way to win back the devotion of his chosen wife without humiliating his vanity. He would tell her of his despair, his sleepless nights and the continuation of his immense love for her, which no circumstance had been able to destroy. Though he would remain firm in his purpose of avoiding any allusion to the carpenter of Nazareth, he would tell Abigail that he regretted not having helped her out at the moment when all the hopes of her female soul had been shaken before the unforeseen and heartrending death of her brother under such bitter circumstances. He would explain all the details of his sentiments. He would mention the indelible remembrance of her

distressed and ardent prayer when Stephen entered upon the threshold of death. He would draw her back to the heart that had never forgotten her; he would kiss her hair and would formulate new plans of love and happiness.

Immersed in such thoughts, he reached the entrance door while noticing the rose bushes in bloom.

His heart was racing when Zechariah appeared, greatly surprised. A long embrace marked the re-encounter. Saul's first question was about Abigail. Surprisingly, he noted that Zechariah became sad.

"I thought that some of your friends might have already given you the bad news," he started saying, while the young man listened to him anxiously. "Abigail fell ill with lung problems over four months ago, and to be frank, we have no hope."

Saul turned pale.

"As soon as she came back unexpectedly from Jerusalem, she lay for more than a month hanging between life and death. Ruth and I tried to restore her youthful vigor and color, but to no avail. The poor girl began wasting away, bedridden. I anxiously asked for you so that we could decide what was best for her, but you didn't come. I thought that new surroundings might restore her health, but I didn't have ample enough resources."

"But has Abigail complained about me at all?" asked Saul apprehensively.

"Not in the least. Moreover, her unexpected return from Jerusalem, her sudden illness and your unwarranted absence were enough to cause us doubt and fear; but she seemed to improve soon after a period of high fever and she explained everything. She said your absence was necessary and that she was aware of your many responsibilities and political duties. She was thankful for your family's hospitality, and whenever Ruth tries to comfort her by saying that you are behaving ungratefully, Abigail is always the first to defend you."

Saul wanted to say something while Zechariah paused, but nothing came to mind. The emotion that his betrothed's spiritual integrity caused him paralyzed his thoughts.

"Despite her efforts to reassure us," continued Ruth's husband, "we think our adopted daughter is oppressed by a profound grief she is trying to hide. While she could still walk, she would visit the peach trees at the same hour she used to go with you. At first my wife found her weeping in the night

darkness and we tried to probe into the cause of her inner suffering, but it was no use. The only reason she gave was the illness, which had begun to waste her physical body away. Later, however, a poor, old man named Ananias was in the area for about a week and something strange occurred: Abigail began meeting him at our tenant farmers' house and every afternoon she would listen to him for hours on end; from then on she displayed great spiritual strength. When the poor beggar left he gave her as a memento some notes containing the teachings of the famous carpenter of Nazareth..."

"The carpenter?" Saul cut in, obviously upset. "And then?"

"Then she became a devoted reader of the so-called Gospel of the Galileans. We thought it might be appropriate to keep her away from such a spiritual novelty, but Ruth decided that it was now her only distraction. Actually, ever since she began talking about the disputed Jesus of Nazareth, we have noticed that Abigail has felt greatly consoled. And the fact is that we have not seen her weeping any more, though her downcast appearance has not lost its pain-filled expression of anguish and melancholy. Her conversation since then seems to have acquired a different inspiration. The sorrow has been transformed into a comforting expression of inner happiness, and she talks about you with a love that grows purer each day. She seems to have discovered the energy of a new life in the mysterious corners of her soul."

After a sigh Zechariah ended: "Even so, the change has not altered the progress of the illness slowly devouring her. Day after day we see her bending toward the grave, like a flower that withers on the stalk from the force of the mighty wind."

Saul was feeling undisguised anguish. Pain-filled emotions were churning around in his generous and sensitive soul. How to define himself? His spirit was crushed by bitter questions. Who, after all, was this Jesus with whom he collided everywhere he went? Abigail's interest in the persecuted Gospel revealed the victory of the Nazarene carpenter over the dreams of his youth.

"But Zechariah," he asked irritably, "why didn't you prevent such contact? These old sorcerers travel the roads spreading confusion. I'm shocked by your tolerance, because our loyalty to the Law does not allow, or at least never should allow, such acquiescence."

Zechariah received the recrimination calmly and pointed out: "Before anything else, you must remember that I asked in vain for your presence to

guide me. And besides, who would have the courage to withhold medicine from a dear patient? Ever since I saw her holy resignation, I have made sure not to mention her new points of view in matters of religious belief.”

And as Saul was absorbed in deep thought, unable to respond, Zechariah concluded: “Come with me and see it with your own eyes.”

The young man wavered as he followed him. His mind was in turmoil. This unexpected news was poison to his heart.

Lying in bed and assisted by Ruth’s maternal affection, the young woman from Corinth displayed a profound frailty on her face. She was very thin and her complexion had taken on an ivory color, but her clear eyes displayed complete spiritual peace. A sweet serenity showed on her sorrowful face. From time to time, her breathing became very difficult in prolonged agony. Abigail was facing the open window as if she could find relief for her weariness there through the fresh breezes coming in from the generous bosom of nature.

Saul could not hide his shock when he saw her. On her part, the young woman welcomed the joyful surprise, overcome with sincere and overflowing happiness.

They exchanged affectionate greetings as their eyes revealed the anguished longing with which they had been waiting for this moment. The future rabbi caressed her delicate hands, which now seemed composed of translucent wax. They talked about the hopes that had continued to comfort them before this re-encounter. Noticing they wanted to be alone in order to open their hearts more freely, Zechariah and Ruth left discreetly.

“Abigail!” exclaimed Saul, highly moved as soon as they were alone. “I have abandoned my pride and vanity as a public figure to come here to ask you whether you have forgiven me – whether you have forgotten me!”

“Forgotten you?” she responded with moist eyes. “No matter how dry and long the season of the burning sun may be, the leaf in the desert will never forget the beneficent rain that gave it life. And don’t talk to me about forgiveness either; can one perchance forgive oneself? We belong to each another forever, Saul. Didn’t you say many times that I was the heart of your mind?”

Listening to the tender timbre of that loving voice, Saul was moved to the core of his own enraptured and ardent being. That humility and that tone

of tenderness pierced his heart, enabling him regain his discernment for the right path to take.

He held his betrothed's pale hands in his and exclaimed with a flash of happiness in his eyes: "Why do you say 'you were the heart,' if you still are and will be forever? God will bless our hopes. We will fulfill our ideal. I have come back to take you with me. We will have a home and you will be its queen!"

Overcome by indefinable joy, his betrothed gazed at him in tears and murmured: "Saul, I do not believe that the homes of earth were made for us! ... God knows how much I wished to be the loving mother of your children, how I held onto that ideal above everything else, how I aimed to embellish your life with my loving care! Ever since I was a little girl in Corinth I have seen women who have wasted their heavenly treasure, symbolized by the love of their husband and children; and I thought the Lord would grant me the same patrimony of divine hopes, because I waited for the blessings of the sanctuary of the home to glorify Him with all my heart. In praise of Him I imagined the life of the beloved man who would help me set up the altar of motherhood, and as soon as you came into my life I made big plans for a holy and happy existence in which we could honor God."

Saul listened, highly moved. He had never noticed the great breadth of reasoning and lucidity as displayed in that tranquil and tender tone.

"But Heaven," she continued resignedly, "has taken from me the potential for such earthly happiness. During my first days of being alone, I would visit secluded places as if looking for you, calling for the help of your affection. Our favorite peach trees seemed to say that you would never come back; the amiable night advised me to forget; the moonlight, which you taught me to love, made my memories worse and deadened my hopes. I would return from each night's wandering with tears in my eyes, the daughters of the despair in my heart. I waited for your comforting word in vain. I felt utterly alone. In order to recall and follow your advice, I remembered that the last time we met you called my attention to Zechariah and Ruth's friendship. It's true that I have no other friends more faithful and generous than they; however, I couldn't be a heavier weight on their lives than I already was. So, I avoided disclosing my anguish to them. During the first months of your absence, I grieved my misfortune without any comfort. That was when a respectable old man named Ananias appeared around here and introduced me to the sacred light of the new revelation. I learned the story of Christ, the Son

of the Living God; I devoured his Gospel of redemption and strengthened myself in His examples. Since that time I have begun to understand you better by understanding my own situation.”

A sudden coughing spell cut her tale short.

His betrothed's words fell onto his heart like drops of bile. He had never experienced such sharp morally-caused pain. Seeing the natural sincerity and the loving sweetness of those confessions, he felt pierced by bitter remorse. How could he have forsaken his soul's chosen like that and forget his loyalty and love? Where had he found the hardness of spirit to forget such sacred duties? Now, he found her lifeless and disillusioned about fulfilling the dreams of her youth. Above all else, the hated carpenter seemed to have taken his place in his adored betrothed's heart. At that moment he not only felt the desire to destroy the doctrine and its followers, but in his obstinate soul he was also jealous of Him. What powers could this obscure and martyred Nazarene possess to win the purest sentiments of his beloved?

“Abigail,” he said emotionally, “let go of these sad thoughts; they could poison the dreams of our youth. Don't give yourself over to illusions. Let's renew our hopes. Soon you'll be healthy. I know you've forgiven me for your brother's death, and my family will welcome you in Tarsus with true joy! We will be happy, very happy!”

His eyes seemed to be floating in a delightful dreamland as he tried to revive in her loving heart his plans for earthly happiness.

But mixing smiles and tears, she added: “Darling, I too would love to get well! Honestly I would! ... To be yours, to fulfill the dreams of your youth, to create stars for the firmament of your existence: these all comprise my ideal as a woman! ... Ah! If I could, I would go to your family with love and would win them to my heart at a price of great affection; but I can see that God's plans are different concerning our destinies. Jesus has called me to His spiritual family...”

“Woe is me!” exclaimed Saul, cutting her words short. “Everywhere I go I run up against talk about the carpenter of Nazareth! What torment! Please don't repeat such things. God would not be just if He snatched you away from my love. How could someone like this Christ come between our wishes?”

But Abigail gazed at him in supplication: “Saul, what good would it do us to despair? Wouldn't it be better to bow down patiently to the sacred designs? Let's not nourish harmful doubts. This bed is one of meditation and

death. I have coughed up blood several times – my end is at hand. But we believe in God and we know the end is only physical. Our soul will never die; we will love each other forever.”

“I do not agree,” he replied in extreme distress. “These assumptions are the result of absurd teachings, like the ones of this fanatic Nazarene who died on the cross between humiliation and cowardice. You were never sad and disheartened like this; only the sorceries of the Galileans could have convinced you of such dire absurdities. Please try to reason it out for yourself! What has this crucified man given you except sadness and ruin?”

“You’re wrong, Saul! I don’t feel sad, although I am convinced of the impossibility of my earthly happiness. Jesus was not an ordinary teacher of sorceries; He was the Messiah, the giver of consolation and life. His influence has renewed my strength and has filled me with courage and true understanding of the supreme designs. His Gospel of forgiveness and love is the divine treasure of the sufferers and the disinherited of the world.”

Saul could not hide the anger spreading in his soul.

“Always the same refrain,” he said, confused. “Invariably, the affirmation that He came for the miserable, the sick, the unfortunate. But the tribes of Israel are not comprised only of these sorts of individuals. What about the valorous men of the chosen people? And the families from respectable traditions? Would they be outside the influence of the Savior?”

“I’ve read the teachings of Jesus,” said Abigail firmly, “and I suppose I can understand your objections. In fulfillment of the sacred word of the Prophets, Christ shows us that life is a collection of honorable concerns of the soul, enabling us to make our way toward God on pathways of righteousness. We mustn’t conceive of the Creator as an idle, isolated judge, but as a watchful Father who cares for His children. The valorous men whom you mention, those unencumbered by infirmities and suffering, and who are in possession of real blessings from God, they should be His hardworking children, concerned with the result of the task they have been called to fulfill on behalf of their brothers’ happiness. But in the world, against our higher inclinations, we are faced with enemies that have been installed in our souls: Selfishness attacks our health and jealousy harms the divine command just as rust and moths render our tools and clothes useless if we neglect them. Few are those who remember the divine watch-care during the happy days of abundance, just as rare are those who work in spite of suffering. This shows

that Christ is a way for everybody, a consolation for those who weep and a guide for discerning souls called by God to contribute to the holy concerns of the good.”

Saul was impressed by her clear reasoning. But the conversation demanded much effort from Abigail and resulted in great fatigue. Her breathing became difficult and it was not long before blood began gushing from her chest in a prolonged hemoptysis. That suffering, adorned with tenderness and humility, both deeply touched and exasperated Saul. He understood that, in front of his betrothed, it would be cruel to attack that Jesus whom he would persecute to the end. He did not want to believe that his Abigail was on the verge of death. He preferred to face the future with optimism.

Once she recovered, he would return her to the old point of view. He would not tolerate the interference of Christ in the sanctuary of their home. As he gazed inward, however, he concluded that he needed to give his antagonistic thoughts a rest in order to consider the essential problems regarding his own peace of mind. The young patient’s big eyes were composed and lucid after the crisis that had lasted many sad minutes. Contemplating her in that gentle attitude of supreme resignation, Saul of Tarsus experienced tender inner emotions. His impetuous temperament was easily given to extreme feelings. He drew closer to his betrothed with tears in his eyes. He wished to caress her as he would a child.

“Abigail,” he murmured tenderly, “let’s not speak any more of religious ideas. Forgive me! Let’s remember our promising future and forget all else in order to gather our best hopes.”

His words boiled with ardent emotion. The love he was displaying was a symptom of the repentance and the noble and sincere dreams that now labored in his afflicted spirit. However, as though seized by extraordinary weakness after the effort she had made, Abigail was languid, afraid of continuing the conversation because of the coughing fits that often threatened her. Her worried betrothed grasped the situation, and squeezing her transparent hands, he kissed them tenderly.

“You need to rest,” he said lovingly. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll give you my own strength. Soon you’ll get well.”

He enveloped her in a look full of gratitude and infinite tenderness and said: “I’ll come back to see you every night that I’m able to leave Jerusalem,

and as soon as you can, we'll see the moonlight again in the garden so that nature may bless our dreams under God's eyes."

"Yes, Saul," she said slowly, "Jesus will grant us what is best. Whatever may come, however, you will be in my heart always, always..."

The doctor of the Law was about to say goodbye but realized that his betrothed had said nothing with regards to her brother. The thoughtfulness of that silence struck him. He would prefer to be accused, to discuss the deed and its painful circumstances so that he could justify himself. But instead of reprimands, he had met with caresses; instead of reproach, a generous peacefulness in which the young woman was able to hide the deep wounds in her soul.

"Abigail," exclaimed Saul somewhat hesitantly, "before I leave, I would like to know whether you have honestly forgiven me for Stephen's death. I've never been able to speak to you about the contingencies that led me to such a sad ending; but I'm convinced that in your goodness you have forgotten my wrong."

"Why are you bringing that up?" she asked, making an effort to keep her voice firm and clear. "My soul is at peace now. Jeziel is with Christ and he died bequeathing you a well-meaning thought. How could I complain on my part if God has been so merciful to me? Even now I thank the righteous Father with all my heart for the gift of your presence in this house. For a long time, I have been asking Heaven not to let me die without seeing you and hearing your voice once more..."

Saul measured the extent of that spontaneous generosity and his eyes became moist. He said goodbye. The fresh night was full of suggestions for his spirit. He had never pondered more deeply the unfathomable designs of the Eternal as at that moment when he had received such a profound lesson on humility and love from his beloved. Within his heavy soul he was experiencing the clash of two opposing forces, fighting each other for possession of his generous and impulsive heart.

He could not comprehend God except as a powerful and unyielding master. All human concerns bowed before His sovereign will. However, he had begun to search for the reason for his distressing uneasiness. Why was he unable to find anywhere the peace he so ardently desired? And yet, smiling and serene, those miserable people of the Way were handing themselves over to the chains of prison. Infirm and sickish individuals without any hope in the

world bore his persecutions with praise in their hearts. Stephen himself, whose death had served as an unforgettable example, had blessed him out of his love for the carpenter of Nazareth for the torture he had received. Those helpless creatures enjoyed a serenity unknown to him. The picture of his ill betrothed remained before his eyes. Abigail was sensitive and affectionate but he remembered her feminine anxiety and the intensity of her concerns as a woman when he was unable to appear punctually at the lovely house on the road to Joppa. That unknown Jesus provided her heart with strength. If it was undeniable that the illness was extinguishing her life little by little, the rejuvenation of her spiritual energies was also obvious. His betrothed had spoken to him as if touched by new inspiration; those eyes seemed to contemplate inwardly the landscape of other worlds.

Such thoughts did not give him a chance to admire nature. As he entered Jerusalem, he had the impression he was awakening from a dream. In front of him appeared the majestic lines of the great Temple. The pride of his race spoke more strongly to his spirit. It was impossible to confer any superiority on the people of the Way. The sight of the Temple was all it took for him to find within himself the understanding he wanted. In his opinion, the serenity of the disciples of Christ came, of course, from the ignorance that was their natural endowment. Generally speaking, those who were sympathetic to the Galileans were only individuals that the world had dishonored with physical decadence, lack of education and extreme abandonment. A responsible man obviously could not find peace at such a cheap price. It seemed to him that he had solved the riddle. He would continue the fight. He was counting on the speedy recovery of his betrothed; as soon as possible he would marry Abigail and would easily dissuade her from the perilous delusions of those damnable teachings. From the ambit of his happy home he would continue to persecute all those who would forget the Law in exchange for other principles.

These thoughts in a way calmed his worries.

However, the following morning a messenger from Zechariah smote his soul with grave news: Abigail had worsened; she was dying!

Forthwith, he took the road to Joppa, anxious to rescue his beloved from imminent peril.

Ruth and her husband were disconsolate. At dawn the patient had fallen into onerous exhaustion. She was vomiting blood continuously. One could say she was only waiting for her betrothed to come so she could die. Saul

listened to them, white as wax. Speechless, he went to her bedroom, where the fresh air flowed in softly, bringing a message from the flowers of the orchard and garden, which seemed to be sending their farewells to the delicate and loving hands that had given them life.

Abigail welcomed him with a ray of infinite joy in her translucent eyes. The ivory tint of her drained face had intensified greatly. Her chest was heaving perilously and her heart was beating irregularly. Her overall expression showed that she was in the final pangs of death. Saul approached her, distraught. For the first time in his life he felt himself trembling before the inevitable. Her look, that marble-like pallor and that affliction touched with anguish told him the end was at hand. After asking her the reason for the unexpected relapse, he took her limp hands, bathed in the cold sweat of the dying.

“How can this be, Abigail?” he asked in distress. “Just yesterday I left you so full of hope ... I sincerely asked God to heal you for me!”

Extremely moved, Zechariah and his wife left the room.

Seeing that Abigail was having great difficulty in expressing her final thoughts, Saul knelt by her side and covered her hands with ardent kisses. Her heartrending agony seemed like unjustifiable suffering, which Heaven had sent upon an angel. His spirit had become withered by the hermeneutics of human laws, and now he was weeping intensely for the first time. Reading his emotion in the tears streaming silently from his eyes, Abigail, with infinite difficulty, made a gesture of love. She knew Saul and had become quite familiar with his unbending nature. That weeping revealed the inner Calvary of her beloved, but also demonstrated the dawning of a new life for his spirit.

“Don’t weep, Saul,” she murmured with difficulty, “Death is not the end of it all.”

“I want you with me for the rest of my life,” he said, dissolved in tears.

“And yet, we must die in order to truly live,” added the dying woman, her words dotted with heaving breathing. “Jesus taught us that the seed falling onto the soil remains a seed only, but if it dies it yields much fruit! ... Don’t rebel against the supreme designs that are now taking me from your material life! If we had been united in marriage, perhaps we would have had much joy; we would have had a home with our children. But by shattering our hopes of temporary happiness on earth, God has multiplied our generous dreams ... While we await our indissoluble union, I will help you from wherever I might

be and you will consecrate yourself to the Eternal One in a sublime and redemptive endeavor.”

The dying young woman made a supreme effort to say her last words.

“Who gave you such ideas?” asked Saul torn by grief.

“Last night, after you left, I felt someone approach me, filling the room with light ... Jeziel had come to me ... When I saw him, I remembered Jesus in the ineffable mystery of His resurrection. Jeziel told me that God had indeed sanctified our dreams of blessedness but that I would be taken this very day to the spirit world. He taught me to break the selfishness of my soul, he filled me with courage and brought me the good news that Jesus loves you very much and has great hopes for you!... Then I realized that it would be useful to give myself joyfully into death’s hands, because who knows ... if I were to stay in the world, I might harm the mission for which the Savior has destined you ... Jeziel affirmed that he and I will be aiding you from a higher realm! How, then, could I stop being your companion? ... I will accompany your steps along the way, I will lead you to where our brothers in the world are abandoned, and I will inspire your thoughts to continue to seek the truth!... You have not accepted the Gospel yet, but Jesus is good and He will have some means to join our thoughts in true understanding!”

The dying woman had made a tremendous effort. Her voice died out. The tears ran abundantly from her deeply lucid eyes.

“Abigail! Abigail!” Saul cried desperately.

But after many minutes of anguish, she said in one final gasp: “Jeziel is here ... to take me.”

Instinctively, Saul understood that the fatal moment had come. In vain he called to the dying woman, whose eyes had become dull; in vain he kissed her cold hands, now covered in pallor like translucent snow. Like a madman he shouted to Zechariah and Ruth. The latter, sobbing and dissolved in tears, embraced Abigail, who, since the death of her son, had been her entire maternal treasure.

The dying woman fixed her eyes on each one of them in turn as if to show her loving gratitude. Then ... a single silent tear was her last goodbye.

Soft fragrances came from the nearby garden; the sky of sunset was tinted with shining gold clouds, while flocks of birds crisscrossed happily through the air....

Heavy grief fell over the house on the road to Joppa. The favorite daughter, the beloved betrothed, the tender friend of the flowers and birds had ascended to Heaven.

Saul of Tarsus remained speechless, in dread, while Ruth, awash in tears, covered the seemingly sleeping body with roses.

X

On the Road to Damascus

Saul remained with his generous friends for three days, remembering his unforgettable betrothed. Deeply distraught, he sought relief for his inner grief by contemplating the scenery that Abigail used to love so much. As sad consolation for his despairing heart, he wanted to know all of Abigail's concerns during her final months, and with tears in his eyes, he listened to Ruth's loving accounts regarding everything relating to his dear Abigail. He blamed himself for not having come sooner to snatch her away from the consuming disease. Bitter thoughts were tormenting him with anguished regret. In the end, because of his unbending passions, he had destroyed all potential for happiness. Because of the relentlessness of his implacable persecution, Stephen had met a terrible death. Because of the unyielding pride in his heart, he had condemned his betrothed to the impenetrable darkness of the grave. Nonetheless, he could not forget that all these pain-filled coincidences were due to that crucified Christ whom he was unable to comprehend. Why in everything did he come across traces of that humble carpenter of Nazareth whom his willful spirit detested? Ever since the first controversy at the church of the Way, he had not gone one day without meeting him in the face of some passer-by, in the reprehension of friends, in the official documents of his punitive actions, or on the lips of miserable prisoners. Stephen had died talking of him with love and joy; Abigail, in her last moments, had found consolation in remembering him and had exhorted Saul to follow him. Owing to this whole pile of considerations weighing on his exhausted mind, Saul of Tarsus's personal hatred for the scorned Messiah became galvanized. Now that he was alone and entirely free from private concerns of an affectionate nature, he would seek to concentrate all his efforts on punishing and correcting as many as he could find who had strayed from the Law. Deeming himself to have been harmed personally by the spread of the Gospel, he would reinvigorate the infamous persecution. With no other

hopes, with no new ideals, and since he now lacked the foundations for building a home, he would give himself body and soul to defending the Law of Moses, thereby preserving the faith and well-being of his countrymen.

On the eve of his return to Jerusalem, we find the young doctor in private conversation with Zechariah, who is listening to him attentively.

“After all,” exclaimed a concerned Saul, “who is this old man who succeeded in deluding Abigail to the point of making her embrace the strange teachings of the Nazarene?”

“Well,” answered Zechariah without much interest, “he is one of those impoverished hermits who normally indulge in periods of extended contemplation in the desert. I was concerned about the spiritual legacy of the ward whom God had entrusted to me, so I asked about his origin and life’s activities and discovered that he is an honest man despite being extremely poor.”

“Be that as it may,” objected Saul sternly, “I have not yet understood the reason for your tolerance. Why didn’t you take any actions against this innovationist? I have a feeling that the unfortunate, absurd ideas of the followers of the Way contributed decisively to the illness that victimized our poor Abigail.”

“I thought about that myself, but our dear Abigail’ mental attitude was clothed in immense consolation after talking with this honest and humble hermit. Ananias always treated her with profound respect, he was always joyful in attending to her and he never asked for any compensation whatsoever; in a display of unbounded kindness he even treated the servants like that. So, would it have been right to oppose him, to disregard such benefits? It’s true that in my own area of knowledge I could never accept any ideas other than those taught by our respected and generous forefathers, but I didn’t feel I had the right to take away from another the object of her most precious consolation. Furthermore, your absence put me in a serious bind. Abigail had made you the center of all her affectionate interests. I was unable to understand why you had vanished from our house, so I took pity on the inner suffering, which manifested itself in immutable sorrow. The poor girl couldn’t hide her sadness from our loving eyes. Finding a remedy was providential. From the moment Ananias intervened, Abigail changed. All her despair seemed converted into hopes for a better life. Though ill, she welcomed every beggar who came to talk to her about this Jesus whom I

cannot understand either. They were friends from around here, simple people with whom she seemed to be happy. Since we could see that the incurable disease was consuming her, Ruth and I observed all this kindheartedly. How couldn't we if the spiritual peace of a favorite daughter in her last days of life was at stake? Perhaps you still don't understand why I behaved the way I did, but in my clear conscience I feel justified because I know I fulfilled my duty by not hindering the resources she felt necessary for her consolation."

Saul listened to him in wonder. Zechariah's composure and thoughtfulness mitigated the strongest heat of reprimand and severity. The veiled accusations against his absence from his betrothed without good reason pierced his heart with pangs of sharp remorse.

"Yes," Saul replied less harshly "I have a better grasp of the reasons that induced you to go along with all this, but I do not wish to – nor can I, nor should I – exonerate myself from the commitment I have undertaken to defend the Law."

"But what commitment are you talking about?" asked Zechariah, surprised.

"I mean that I must find this Ananias in order to duly punish him."

"What is this, Saul?" objected Zechariah, painfully shocked. "Abigail has barely been lowered into the grave, her sensitive and loving spirit suffered so much for reasons unknown to us but perhaps known to you, the only comfort she found was the fatherly friendship of this good and honest old man, and now you want to punish him for the good he did for us and our unforgettable loved one?"

"But it is the defense of the Law of Moses that is at stake," retorted Saul firmly.

"Nevertheless," warned Zechariah sensibly, "from what I remember of the sacred texts there is no provision that authorizes one to punish well-doers."

The doctor of the Law revealed his displeasure in light of this righteous remark, but taking advantage of his hermeneutical knowledge, he astutely offered: "It's one thing to study the Law and another to defend it. In the superior task in which I find myself involved, I must determine whether or not the good hides the evil that we must condemn. That is where we disagree.

I must punish those who stray just as you must prune the trees in your orchard.”

A long silence followed. Absorbed in deep meditation and separated mentally and inwardly from each other, it was Saul who began the conversation again by asking: “When did Ananias leave the area?”

“Over two months ago.”

“Do you know what route he took?”

“Abigail told me that, due to the difficult situation created by the persecutions, he had been called to Jerusalem in order to comfort the sick in the poor districts.”

“Well, his disgraceful influence shall also be cut short by the strength of our vigilance. I intend to return to the city tomorrow and I shall try to locate his whereabouts. Ananias will not madden other minds! Even though we have not met personally he has no idea of the reaction he has stirred in my soul.”

Zechariah could not hide how displeased he was: “In the simplicity of my rural life, I cannot comprehend the religious battles in Jerusalem; in the end, however, they are problems inherent to your professional duties and I must not get involved in decisions that may be most appropriate.”

Saul was thoughtful for a long time and then changed the subject.

The following day, Saul was very disconsolate as he returned to the city, anxious to fill the emptiness in his heart. He felt lost in the labyrinth of time. He revealed to no one the overwhelming bitterness in his soul. Closing himself off in absolute silence, he looked beleaguered as he resumed his religious duties.

On a clear, sunny morning, we find Saul in the Sanhedrin, eagerly questioning one of his helpers: “Isaac, have you complied with my orders about the information I requested?”

“Yes sir. Among the prisoners I found a young man who knows the old Ananias.”

“Very good,” said Saul, obviously satisfied. “And where does this Ananias live?”

“Ah! That he did not want to say, despite my insistence. He claimed he didn’t know.”

“Well, he may be lying,” said Saul gruffly. “These men are capable of anything. Make immediate arrangements for him to be brought here as soon as possible. I’ll get the truth out of him.”

As someone who was familiar with his irrevocable decisions, Isaac humbly obeyed. In about an hour, two soldiers entered Saul’s chamber accompanied by a young man displaying a look of dread. Without showing any emotion, Saul of Tarsus ordered them to go to the torture chamber, where he would meet the prisoner in a few minutes.

Once he had finished writing on a few papyri, Saul walked resolutely to the chamber. The odious and abominable instruments of the politico-religious persecutions that poisoned Jerusalem in the conflicts of the time were all lined up.

Saul sat down emphatically and began interrogating the wretched prisoner harshly: “Your name?”

“Matathias Johanan.”

“Do you know the old Ananias, an itinerant preacher of the Way?”

“Yes sir.”

“How long?”

“I met him on the day before my imprisonment about a month ago.”

“And where does he live, this follower of the carpenter?”

“This I do not know,” said the young man timidly. “When I met him he was living in a poor district in Jerusalem where he was teaching the Gospel. But Ananias had no fixed address. He came from Joppa, staying in various villages where he preached the truths of Jesus Christ. Here, he lived from district to district in his labor of mercy.”

Saul did not pay any attention to the man’s attitude of profound humility, and frowning, he said in a threatening voice: “Do you think you can lie to a doctor of the Law?”

“Sir, I swear.” said the young man anxiously.

Saul did not condescend to notice his supplicating gesture. Turning to one of the guards, he said: “Julian, we cannot waste any more time. I need this information. I think the fingernail torture will convince him not to continue hiding the truth.”

The order was immediately obeyed. Sharp iron barbs were taken from a large, dust-filled cupboard. In a few moments, after binding the poor man to a wooden stake, Julian and his cohort applied the sharpened instruments to the tips of his fingers, provoking piercing screams. The young prisoner wailed to no avail in atrocious pain as his torturers listened to him indifferently. When blood started gushing from a nail that had been forcefully extracted, the victim screamed in a loud voice: "Have mercy ... I'll confess everything. I'll tell you where he is! ... Have mercy on me!"

Saul ordered a stop to the punishment for a few moments in order to hear what he had to say.

"Sir," said the wretch in tears, "Ananias isn't in Jerusalem anymore. At our last meeting three days before we were imprisoned, the old disciple of the Gospel said goodbye and told us he was going to live in Damascus."

That sorrow-filled voice echoed the deep bitterness repressed in a youthful heart already filled with the painful disillusion of life. Saul, however, seemed indifferent to the sight of such suffering.

"Is that all you know?" he asked.

"I swear it," said the young man humbly.

In light of that categorical affirmation, obvious in the sincere look and the moving and sad voice, the doctor of the Law felt satisfied and sent him back to prison.

In two days' time, Saul of Tarsus called what he regarded as a singularly important meeting of the Sanhedrin. All his colleagues answered the call without exception. The doctor of the Law opened the session and explained the reason for the meeting.

"Friends," he began passionately, "for quite some time we have been meeting to examine the character of the religious struggle that has been created in Jerusalem due to the activities of the cohorts of the carpenter of Nazareth. Fortunately, we were able to intervene soon enough in order to avoid serious damage, given the craftiness of the false miracle workers from Galilee. At the cost of much effort, the environment has been cleaned up. It is true that the prisons of the city are overflowing, but the measure is justifiable because it is crucial to repress the revolutionary instinct of the ignorant masses. The so-called church of the Way has limited its activities to assisting the forsaken sick. Our poorest districts are at peace. Serenity has returned to

our duties in the temple. However, we cannot say the same regarding the neighboring cities. We have learned from my enquiries to the religious authorities in Joppa and Caesarea that the disturbances that the followers of Christ have been maliciously provoking have caused serious harm to public order. We need to expand our cleansing work not only to these centers, but just now alarming news has come from Damascus, requiring immediate attention. Dangerous elements are at work there. An old man named Ananias is disturbing the lives of those who need peace in the synagogues. It would not be right for the highest tribunal of the Jewish people to remain disinterested in Jewish communities in other areas. Therefore, I propose that we extend the benefits of this campaign to other cities. To do so, I offer all my personal services at no cost to the house we serve. The required document of jurisdiction will be all I need in order to apply all the resources I see fitting, including the death penalty itself when deemed necessary and appropriate.”

Saul’s proposal was received with shows of approval. There was even someone who proposed a special vote of praise for his vigilant zeal, with unanimous applause from the small assembly. The room lacked the thoughtfulness of a Gamaliel, and compelled by the overall approval, the high priest did not hesitate to grant Saul the letters he needed entailing broad authorization to act at his discretion. Those present congratulated the young rabbi with accolades for his acute and energetic spirit. Obviously, that youthful and strong mentality comprised an auspicious guarantee for a better future for Israel’s political emancipation. A target of flattery and encouragement from his friends, Saul of Tarsus motivated the pride of his people, hopeful for the days to come. It was true that he suffered bitterly from the ruin of his dreams of youth, but he would give his solitary existence to the struggles he regarded as sacred in the service of God.

Bearing the letters of jurisdiction to act as fitting in cooperation with the synagogues of Damascus, he agreed to be accompanied by three respectable men who offered to go with him as servant friends.

Three days later the small troupe left Jerusalem for the expansive plains of Syria.

On the day before his arrival and nearly at the end of the difficult and arduous journey, the young man from Tarsus felt that the bitter memories constantly assaulting him had grown stronger. Secret powers were forcing him into profound self-examination. He recalled the early dreams of his youth. His soul was facing serious doubts. He had lacked inner peace ever

since adolescence. He thirsted for stability in order to establish his career. Where to find the peace of mind that early in his life was the object of his most innermost thoughts? The teachers of Israel proclaimed that it could be found by fully observing the Law. He had held to its principles above all else. Ever since the early impulses of youth he had hated sin. He had consecrated himself to the ideal of serving God with all his might. He had not hesitated to carry out everything he considered to be his duty, even the most violent and cruel actions. If it was undeniable that he had many admirers and friends, he also had powerful enemies, thanks to his unyielding character in fulfilling the obligations he deemed sacred. Where, then, was the spiritual peace he craved so much in his daily endeavors? No matter how much energy he spent, he saw himself as a laboratory of deeply sorrowful unrest. His life was marked by powerful ideas, but deep down he fought against irreconcilable conflicts. The concepts of the Law of Moses did not seem enough to satisfy his overwhelming thirst. The enigmas of fate engrossed his mind. The mystery of pain and differentiated destinies gave rise to insoluble riddles and somber doubts. Those followers of the crucified carpenter, however, possessed an unknown peace of mind! The alleged ignorance of the gravest problems of life did not apply in their case, for Stephen had possessed a powerful mind and had shown, upon dying, an impressive composure accompanied by spiritual values that were truly amazing.

In spite of the fact that his companions were calling his attention to the first sights of Damascus outlined in the distance, Saul could not rid himself of this gloomy soliloquy. He appeared not to see the camels resignedly plodding along under the burning hot midday sun. He was invited to eat but declined. Stopping for a while at a small, charming oasis, he waited for his traveling companions to finish their meals, and then set out again, absorbed in the intensity of his innermost thoughts.

He himself could not explain what was happening. His memories were reaching back to the time of his early childhood. His entire industrious past appeared clearly in that introspective examination. Among all the familiar figures, the memory of Stephen and Abigail stood out the most as if urging him to question himself even further. Why had these two siblings from Corinth acquired such prominence amid all the problems of his inner self? Why had he waited for Abigail along all the paths of his youth for the ideal of a pure life? He remembered his most noteworthy friends, but in none of them did he find moral qualities like those of that young preacher of the Way, who had challenged his politico-religious authority right there in front of all

Jerusalem, disdaining humiliation and death, only to die thereafter, blessing Saul's iniquitous and implacable decision. What power had brought them together in the labyrinth of the world in such a way that his heart would never forget them?

The painful truth of the matter was that he had found no inner peace despite his victories and the enjoyment of all the prerogatives and privileges of the most eminent personages of his people. He lined up in his mind the young women he had met throughout his life, including those from his childhood, but in none of them could he find the same characteristics as in Abigail, who had divined his innermost wishes. Tormented by these deep inquiries absorbing his mind, he seemed to wake up from a long nightmare. It should be about midday. Still far off, the backdrop of Damascus displayed its contours: dense orchards and grey domes profiled in the distance. Sitting well in the saddle and displaying the aplomb of a man used to the pleasures of sports, Saul led the little caravan in a commanding posture.

All of a sudden, however, when he had barely awakened from his disturbing thoughts, he finds himself enveloped by a light different than that of the sun. He has the impression that the air has been rent asunder like a curtain under invisible and powerful pressure. Inwardly, he feels gripped by unexpected giddiness after his persistent and painful mental effort. He wants to turn, to ask his companions for help, but he cannot see them to ask for their assistance.

"Jacob! ... Demetrius ... Help me!" he cries desperately.

But the confusion of his senses throws him off balance and he falls helplessly from his mount onto the hot sand. His vision seems to have extended to the infinite. Another light bathes his dazzled eyes, and on the path, which the rent atmosphere has unveiled to him, he sees the figure of a man of majestic beauty, giving the impression that He was coming down out of Heaven to meet him. His robe is made of luminous points of light; His hair touches his shoulders in Nazarene fashion; His magnetic eyes, full of sympathy and love, illuminate a grave but gentle face, haloed by divine sorrow.

Saul of Tarsus contemplates Him in profound wonder, and it is then, with the intonation of an unforgettable voice, that the unknown figure makes Himself heard: "Saul! ... Saul! ... Why do you persecute me?"

The young man from Tarsus did not realize that, instinctively, he was on his knees. Unable to grasp what was happening, he pressed his heart in a gesture of desperation. An irrepressible sentiment of adoration had overtaken him completely. What could this mean? Who was the divine figure he was beholding framed against the open firmament, and whose presence was flooding his heart with unknown emotions?

While his traveling companions surrounded the kneeling man, without seeing or hearing anything despite having at first sensed a great light in the sky, Saul asked in a trembling and fearful voice: “Who are you, Lord?”

Haloed by a balsamic light and in a tone of inconceivable tenderness, the Lord responded: “I am Jesus!”

It was then that the proud and unyielding doctor of the Law bent to the ground in convulsive weeping. One could say that the passionate rabbi of Jerusalem had received a mortal blow, experiencing in a moment the destruction of all the principles that had formed his spirit and guided his life until then. Right there before very his eyes, here and now, was the magnanimous and misunderstood Christ! The preachers of the Way had not been deluded after all! Stephen’s word had been the pure truth! Abigail’s belief was the path of truth! That man was the Messiah! The marvelous story of His resurrection was not a fairytale for fortifying people’s strength! Yes. He, Saul, was beholding Him right there in the splendor of His divine glory! And what love could have animated His mercy-filled heart to come to meet him on the desert roads; to him, Saul, who had set himself up as the implacable persecutor of the most faithful disciples! In the sincerity of his ardent soul, he considered all this in one fleeting minute. He felt insuperable shame about his cruel past. A torrent of impetuous tears bathed his heart. He wanted to speak, to do penance, to protest his infinite illusions, to proclaim loyalty and dedication to the Messiah of Nazareth, but the sincere contrition of his repentant and lacerated spirit stifled his voice.

That was when he noticed Jesus approaching, and contemplating him lovingly, the Master touched his shoulders tenderly and said in a fatherly voice: “Do not kick against the goads!”

Saul understood. Ever since his first encounter with Stephen, great powers had compelled him at every moment and everywhere to meditate on the new teachings. Christ had been calling him by every way and means.

Unable to understand the divine grandeur of that moment, his traveling companions watched him as he wept even more copiously.

The man from Tarsus sobbed. In light of the gentle and persuasive words of the Nazarene Messiah, he thought about the time he had wasted on harsh and barren roads. From now on he would have to reform the patrimony of his innermost thoughts; the vision of the resurrected Jesus before his mortal eyes renewed his religious concepts completely. Certainly, the Savior had had mercy on the loyal and sincere heart that he had consecrated to the service of the Law, and had descended from His glory to reach out His divine hands to him. He, Saul, was the lost sheep on the crag of arid and destructive theories. Jesus was the friendly Shepherd who deigned to close His eyes to the ungrateful briars in order to lovingly save him. In a flash the young rabbi considered the extent of that gesture of love. The tears gushed from his embittered heart like pure lymph from an unknown fount. Right there in the august sanctuary of his spirit he made a vow to give himself to Jesus forever. Suddenly, he remembered his hard and grievous trials. The dream of a home had died with Abigail. He felt alone and ashamed. From now on, however, he would give himself to Christ as a humble slave of His love. He would make every effort to prove to Him that he was able to understand His sacrifice supporting him along the dark pathway of human iniquities at that decisive instant of his destiny. Bathed in tears as never before, then and there, under the shocked stare of his companions and in the burning midday heat, he made his first profession of faith.

“Lord, what would you have me do?”

That resolute soul, even in a trance of unconditional surrender, humiliated and wounded in its most-esteemed principles, disclosed its nobility and loyalty. Finding the greater revelation in the light of the love that Jesus was showing him, Saul of Tarsus did not choose the endeavors in which he would serve Him in the renewal of his efforts as a man. Giving himself body and soul as if he were a lowly servant, he asked with humility what the Master desired of his cooperation.

Contemplating him more lovingly and enabling him to understand the need for people to work together for the common spiritual evolution of all in universal love and in his name, Jesus said kindly: “Get up Saul! Go into the city and there you will be told what to do!”

Then, amid the feeling of being immersed in a sea of darkness, the man from Tarsus no longer perceived the loving figure. In extreme exhaustion, he continued to weep, causing his companions to pity him. He rubbed his eyes as if he wished to tear off the veil that shrouded his sight, but he could only fumble in the midst of dense darkness. Little by little, he began to sense the presence of his friends, who seemed to be commenting on the situation: “Well, Jacob,” said one of them, very worried, “what should we do now?”

“I think we should send Jonas to Damascus for help right now,” Jacob answered.

“But what has happened?” asked the respectable old man who answered to the name of Jonas.

“I really don’t know,” said Jacob, impressed. “At first I saw an intense light in the sky and right afterward I heard him asking for help. I didn’t get the chance to assist him because right then he fell off his mount without waiting for any assistance.”

“What I’m worried about,” said Demetrius, “is that dialogue he had with the invisible. Who was he talking to? If we can hear his voice but can’t see who he’s talking to, how can we understand what’s going on?”

“Can’t you see that he’s delirious?” objected Jacob prudently. “Long journeys under the burning sun can get to the hardest body. Besides, we could see that he’s been oppressed and ill ever since this morning. He didn’t eat and he’s gotten weak from the strain of these long days of hardship since leaving Jerusalem. If you ask me,” he concluded, nodding his head sadly, “it’s a case of one of those fevers that attack suddenly in the desert.”

Old Jonas, however, was looking eyes wide-open at the sobbing rabbi. After listening to the opinion of his companions, he said fearfully as if he might offend some invisible entity: “I’ve had a lot of experience with these journeys under the burning sun. I spent my youth leading camels throughout the deserts of Arabia. But I have never seen anyone come down ill with these symptoms in such surroundings. The fever of those who fall exhausted on the road does not manifest in delirium and tears. They fall in exhaustion and can’t move. But here, our leader seems to be talking with a man we can’t even see. I’m reluctant to accept this premise, but I suspect in all this that there is a sign of the sorcery of the Way. The followers of the carpenter know magical processes that we are far from comprehending. We know that the doctor dedicated himself to the endeavor of persecuting them wherever they might

be. Who knows if they haven't plotted some sort of cruel revenge against him? I offered to come to Damascus in order to escape from my own relatives, who seemed to have been seduced by these new doctrines. Where have we ever seen somebody's blindness healed with a simple laying-on of hands? Nevertheless, my brother was healed by the famous Simon Peter. In my opinion, only witchcraft can explain such things. Seeing so many mysterious incidents in my own home, I was afraid of Satan and fled."

Withdrawn into himself and astounded in the midst of the dense darkness that had enveloped him, Saul could hear what his friends were saying and experienced great frailty as if he were returning exhausted and blind from a huge defeat.

He wiped his tears and called one of them in extreme humility. They all hastened to attend to him.

"What happened?" asked Jacob, worried and distraught. "We're concerned about you. Are you ill, sir? ... We'll do what you think is best."

Saul made a sad gesture and said: "I'm blind."

"But what was it?" asked the other.

"I saw Jesus of Nazareth!" he said contritely, completely changed.

Jonas gave a significant sign to his friends as if to confirm that he was right. They looked at each other in wonder. They understood instinctively that the young rabbi was deranged. Jacob, who knew him best, took the initiative for the first steps and pointed out: "Sir, we're sorry about your illness. We need to decide what to do with the caravan."

The doctor of Tarsus, however, displaying a humility that had never agreed with his domineering temperament, let a tear roll down his cheek and answered with profound sorrow: "Jacob, don't worry about me ... As for what I myself must do now, I need to get to Damascus without delay. As for the rest of you ..." His reticent voice broke painfully as if oppressed by a great anguish. Then he concluded in a forlorn tone of voice, "You may do as you please. Until now you have been my servants, but from now on I too am a slave; I no longer belong to myself."

On hearing that humble, sad voice, Jacob started to weep. He was fully convinced that Saul had gone utterly mad. He called his two companions aside and explained: "You will return to Jerusalem with the sad news while I go into the city with the doctor to make the best arrangements possible. I'll

take him to his friends and we'll find a doctor ... I can see that he's extremely disturbed."

The young rabbi was not surprised at all when told of the decision. He passively accepted his servant's decision. At that time, submerged in deep, thick darkness, his imagination was full of transcendental conjectures. The sudden blindness did not afflict him. Within the ambit of the darkness that filled the eyes of his body the radiant figure of Jesus seemed to emerge to his mind's eye. It was right for his visual perception to have ceased in order to keep forever the memory of the glorious minute of his transformation to a more sublime life.

Saul received Jacob's suggestions with childlike humility. Without complaint, without resistance, he heard the caravan turning around, while the old servant, gripped by infinite concern, offered his friendly arm.

With tears streaming from his inexpressive eyes, as if lost in some impenetrable vision in the emptiness, the proud doctor of Tarsus, guided by Jacob, followed on foot under the burning sun of the early hours of the afternoon.

Moved by the blessing he had received from the highest realms of life, Saul wept as never before. He was blind and away from his family. Pain-filled anguish choked his heavy heart. But the vision of Christ resurrected, His unforgettable words, His expression of love were all present in his transformed soul. Jesus was the Lord, untouchable by death. He would guide his steps along the way; He would give him new orders; He would dry the sores of vanity and pride that had gnawed his heart away; above all, He would grant him strength to amend the wrongs of his days of illusion.

Troubled and sad, Jacob led his leader friend, asking himself the reason for that incessant and silent weeping.

Enveloped in the darkness of temporary blindness, Saul could not perceive that the thick blanket of sunset was beginning to embrace nature. Dark clouds foretold of nightfall, while oppressing winds blew in from the vast plain. He had a hard time accompanying Jacob, who was in a hurry in case it rained. Resolute and energetic in spirit, Saul did not notice the obstacles ahead of him on his painful journey. He could not see and he needed a guide, but Jesus had ordered him to enter the city, where he would be told what to do. It was necessary to obey the Savior who had honored him with the supreme revelations of life. With faltering steps, his feet hurting at each

uncertain movement, he would walk in any manner possible in order to carry out the divine orders. It was indispensable not to mind the difficulties, it was vital not to forget the purpose. The darkness, the return of the caravan to Jerusalem, the painful walk to reach Damascus, the mistaken assumption of his companions about the unforgettable event, the loss of honorific titles, the repudiation of his priest friends, the incomprehension of the whole world – what did they matter before the culminating event of his destiny?

Saul of Tarsus, with the profound sincerity that characterized his smallest actions, only needed to know that God had changed his plans. He would be faithful to Him till the end.

As the darkness of sunset became thicker, two unknown men entered the outskirts of the city. Although the wind was blowing the storm clouds toward the desert, heavy drops of rain were falling here and there upon the hot dust of the streets. The windows of the houses were shutting with a clap.

Damascus could remember the handsome and triumphant man from Tarsus. It had known him during its lustrous feast days, and used to acclaim him in the synagogues. However, as it watched those two tired and sorrowful men passing through its streets, it could never recognize that young man who staggered along with deadened eyes ...

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

I

Into the Desert

“Where are we going, sir?” Jacob dared to ask timidly as soon as they entered the winding streets.

Saul thought for a moment and said: “I do have some money with me; however, I am in a very difficult situation. I feel I need moral support more than physical rest. I need somebody to help me get a grasp on what happened. Do you know where Saddoc lives?”

“Yes,” answered Jacob regretfully.

“Take me there ... after I’ve visited my friend, I’ll think about lodging.”

It was not long before they were at the door of a splendid-looking building. Well-defined walls surrounded a large courtyard decorated with bushes and flowers. Sitting down to rest on a bench near the entrance gate, Saul told his companion: “It’s not right for me to show up unannounced like this. I have never visited Saddoc like that. Go into the courtyard, call him and tell him what happened. I’ll wait here, since I can hardly move on my own.”

The servant promptly obeyed. The bench was only a few steps from the broad gate, but once alone and longing to hear a friend who would understand him, Saul stood up and identified the wall by feeling it. Hesitant and shaky, he stumbled to the gate and waited there.

Answering the servant’s call at the door to the house, Saddoc tried to determine the reason for such an unexpected visit. Jacob humbly explained that he had come from Jerusalem accompanying the doctor of the Law, describing the smallest details of the journey and its purpose; however, when he mentioned the main event, Saddoc opened his eyes wide in astonishment. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. But he could not doubt the truthfulness of the servant, who could not conceal his own astonishment. Jacob then spoke of the miserable state of his master: his blindness and his

copious tears. Saul weeping? Saddoc received the strange news with immense surprise, summing up his first impressions in a bewildered reply to Jacob: “What you are telling me is incredible. What is more, under such circumstances I am afraid I cannot let you stay here. Since the day before yesterday, I have had a house full of important friends who recently arrived from Citium¹¹ for a meeting in the synagogue next Sabbath. It seems to me that Saul has become unexpectedly deranged and I do not want to expose him to undignified criticism and remarks.”

“But sir, what shall I tell him?” asked Jacob reluctantly.

“Tell him I’m not home.”

“But ... I’m alone with him, he’s disturbed and ill, and as you can see, the night is stormy.”

Saddoc thought for a moment and added: “That won’t be hard to remedy. At the next corner you will come to Straight Street and after a short walk you’ll see Judas’s Inn. They always have plenty of rooms available. Later on, I’ll get there to find out what happened.”

Listening to these words – which seemed more like an order than an answer to a friend’s request – Jacob took his leave, surprised and disheartened.

When he got back to the gate he said to the rabbi, “Sir, unfortunately your friend Saddoc is not home.”

“Not home?” asked Saul in wonder. “I heard his voice from here, though I couldn’t make out what he was saying. Is it possible that my hearing is also disturbed?”

Jacob could not hide the truth in light of that expressive and sincere remark and told Saul about the way he had been received and Saddoc’s reserved and cool attitude.

Saul accompanied his servant, listening to everything in silence after wiping away a tear. He had not planned on such a reception from a colleague he had always considered worthy and loyal in every circumstance of life. The surprise was shocking to him. It was natural for Saddoc to be afraid of his new way of thinking, but it was not right to abandon an ailing friend to the night’s bad weather. However, in the swirl of sorrows that were beginning to swell in his heart, he suddenly remembered the vision of Jesus and reflected on the fact that he had experienced something that Saddoc could not possibly

have understood. He arrived at the conclusion that perhaps he would have done the same if their roles were switched.

When Jacob finished his account Saul commented resignedly: “Saddoc was right. It would not have been a good thing to trouble him with a description of what happened, when he is hosting friends with public responsibilities. Besides, I am blind ... I would have been a burden, not a guest.”

These considerations moved his servant, who had let the young rabbi become aware of his own fears. Saul perceived a vague feeling of unwarranted fright in Jacob’s words. Saddoc’s behavior had perhaps added to Jacob’s misgivings. His comments were reticent and hesitant. He seemed scared, as if foreseeing threats to his personal peace of mind. In the simplest expressions he revealed the fear of being accused of having any link with the Way. In his broad psychological awareness, Saul understood it all. It was true that he had stood as the supreme leader of the terrible persecution, but from now on, consecrating his life to Jesus, he would compromise anyone who approached him directly or ostensibly. His transformation would provoke many an outcry within Pharisaic circles. He sensed in Jacob’s indecision the fear of being accused of some sort of sorcery or witchcraft.

In fact, after they had comfortably settled in at Judas’s modest inn, Jacob said worriedly: “Sir, I’m sorry to bring up my own needs, but according to prior arrangements, I need to return to Jerusalem where my two children are waiting for me so that we may settle in Caesarea.”

“That’ll be fine,” answered Saul, respecting Jacob’s scruples. “You may leave tomorrow morning.”

That voice, so aggressive and authoritarian before, had now become compassionate and kind, touching the servant’s soul in its most sensitive fibers.

“However, sir, I’m hesitant to leave,” said the old servant, stung by remorse. “You’re blind, you need help to recover your sight and it grieves me to abandon you.”

“Don’t worry about me,” said Saul, resigned. “Who said I’d be abandoned? I’m convinced that my eyes will be healed very soon.”

“Besides,” he continued as if to comfort himself, “Jesus told me to enter the city in order to find out what to do. I’m sure he will not keep me in

ignorance about it.”

In saying such a thing, Saul could not see Jacob’s disconcerted and vexed facial expression.

However sorry he was to be leaving his master in that state, he remembered the punishments inflicted on the followers of Christ in Jerusalem and could not dismiss his inner fears. He left at daybreak.

Saul was now alone. In the thick veil of darkness, he gave himself over to deep and sad thoughts.

His full and generous moneybag assured him the attention of the innkeeper, who from time to time came to see about his needs; but he could not convince his guest to take part in the meals and entertainment, because nothing would draw him away from his reserved isolation.

Those three days in Damascus were comprised of strict spiritual discipline. His dynamic personality had put a stop to mundane activities so that he could examine the errors of his past, the difficulties of his present and the undertakings of his future. He needed to adjust to the inescapable reform of his inner being. In the anguish of his spirit he felt truly deserted by his friends. Saddoc’s attitude was typical and it would be the same with all his co-religionists, who would never agree with his adhesion to new ideas. No one would believe in the power of his unexpected conversion; however, he would have to struggle against all skeptics, since Jesus, in order to speak to his heart, had chosen the brightest and most resplendent time of the day in a wide open place and in the company of only three men much less educated than he and thus incapable of understanding anything in their intellectual poverty. In appraising human values Saul experienced the unbearable anguish of those who are completely forsaken, but in the whirlwind of his memories the figures of Stephen and Abigail stood out, offering him consoling sentiments. He now understood that Christ who had come into the world principally for the unfortunate and sad of heart. Previously, he had rebelled against the Nazarene Messiah, in whose act he had seen some sort of incomprehensible pleasure in suffering; however, he had come to study himself better now, drawing from his own experience the most useful reflections. In spite of his titles in the Sanhedrin, his public responsibilities and the fame that made him an admired figure everywhere, who was he except a man in need of divine watch-care? Worldly conventions and religious biases had given him apparent peace of mind; however, the

intervention of unforeseen pain was enough to make him ascertain his immense need. Deeply immersed in the blindness that enveloped him, he prayed fervently for God not to leave him helpless, and asked Jesus to clear his mind tormented by thoughts of despair and abandonment.

On the third day of fervent prayer the innkeeper came to inform him that someone was looking for him. Could it be Saddoc? Saul was yearning for a caring and friendly voice. He bade the caller to enter. A little old man with a calm and loving face stood there without the convert being able to see his white hair and kindly smile.

The silence of the caller indicated he was unknown to him.

“Who are you?” asked the blind man in wonder.

“Brother Saul,” he replied kindly, “the Lord who appeared to you on the road has sent me to this place so that you may recover your sight and receive the illumination of the Holy Spirit.”

Listening to him, Saul of Tarsus fumbled anxiously in the darkness. Who was this man who knew what had happened on the road? Someone known to Jacob? But ... what about that tender and loving voice?

“Your name?” he asked, almost terrified.

“Ananias.”

The reply was a revelation. The persecuted sheep had come seeking out the voracious wolf. Saul grasped the lesson that Christ was teaching him. Ananias’s presence called back to his memory his most sacred appeals. He was the one who had initiated Abigail into the doctrine and the very reason Saul had come to Damascus, where he met Jesus and the renewing truth. Overcome by deep veneration, he wanted to step forward, drop to his knees before the Lord’s disciple who lovingly called him “brother,” and tenderly kiss his benevolent hands, but he only fumbled in the emptiness without fulfilling his strong desire.

“I would like to kiss your tunic,” he said with humility and gratitude, “but as you can see, I’m blind!”

“Jesus has sent me here so that you may have the gift of sight once again.”

The old disciple of the Lord was highly moved in noticing that the bloodthirsty persecutor of the disciples of the Way had been completely

transformed. Listening to his faith-filled words, Saul of Tarsus let signs of great inner joy show on his face. From his darkened eyes flowed crystalline tears. The passionate and capricious man had learned to be humane and humble.

“Jesus is the eternal Messiah! I have put my soul in his hands!” he exclaimed between regret and hope. “I repent for the way I have lived!”

Bathed in tears of sincere repentance and not knowing how to show his gratitude at that moment because of the darkness that made his steps difficult, he humbly fell on his knees.

In light of his own condition as a fallible and imperfect human being, the kindly old man wanted to step forward to put a stop to that supreme gesture of ultimate renunciation; however, wishing to encourage all the resources of that ardent soul in recognition of his complete conversion to Christ, he approached deeply touched. Placing his calloused hand on that tormented brow he exclaimed: “Brother Saul, in the name of Almighty God I consecrate you to the new faith in Christ Jesus!”

In the midst of the ardent tears streaming from his eyes, Saul said contritely: “May the Lord forgive my sins and enlighten my purposes for a new life!”

“Now,” said Ananias tenderly placing his hands on the sightless eyes, “in the name of the Savior, I pray to God that you may see again.”

“If it pleases Jesus to make it so,” stated Saul penitently, “I offer my eyes to His holy service forever and ever.”

And as if powerful and invisible forces were at play, something similar to scales fell from Saul’s pain-filled eyelids as his sight began to return, drenched in light. Through the open window he saw the clear sky of Damascus, experiencing indefinable bliss in that sea of brilliance. Like fragrance from the sun, the morning breeze bathed his brow, translating to his heart a blessing from God.

“I can see! ... Now I can see! ... Glory to the redeemer of my soul!...” he exclaimed, extending his arms in an ecstasy of gratitude and love.

Ananias could not contain himself either. Faced with such extraordinary proof of Jesus’ mercy, the old disciple of the Gospel embraced the young man of Tarsus, weeping with gratitude to God for the grace they had received.

Trembling with joy, he lifted him with his generous arms, upholding his surprised and jubilant soul.

“Brother Saul,” he said eagerly, “this is a great day for us. Let us embrace each other in the sacrosanct memory of the Master who has made us brothers in His immense love!”

The Damascus convert could not say a word. Tears of gratitude stifled him. Saul embraced the old preacher in an expressive and silent gesture as if he had found a dedicated and loving father for his new life. They remained silent for a few moments in wonder of the divine intervention, like two very dear brothers who had been reconciled under the eyes of God.

Saul now felt strong and alert. In one minute he seemed to regain all his energies. Coming back to himself amid the divine contentment he was feeling, he took the hand of the old disciple and kissed it in veneration. Ananias’s eyes were wet with tears. He himself could never have foreseen the infinite joy that had been awaiting him in the simple inn on Straight Street.

“You have given me a new life for Jesus,” exclaimed Saul joyfully. “I shall be His forever. His mercy shall compensate for my weakness, He shall take pity on my wounds and He shall send help for the misery of my sinful soul so that the clay of my spirit may be changed into the gold of His love.”

“Yes, we belong to Christ,” agreed Ananias with joy overflowing his eyes.

And as if he had suddenly become a boy eager to learn, Saul of Tarsus sat next to his benefactor and asked him everything there was to know about Christ, His teachings and His immortal acts. Ananias told him everything he knew about Jesus, which he had learned through the Apostles after the crucifixion. He too had attended the event in Jerusalem on that tragic afternoon of Calvary. He explained that he was a shoemaker in Emmaus and had gone to the holy city for the temple celebrations. He had followed the bitter drama in the streets crowded with people. He talked about the pity he felt for the Messiah crowned with thorns and mocked by the violent and unconscionable mob. Deeply moved, he described Jesus’ painful march with the cross, overseen by merciless soldiers as the raving mob acclaimed the heinous crime. Curious at the development of these events, he had followed the condemned man to the hill. From the cross of sacrifice, Jesus had cast him an unforgettable look. To his mind, that look meant a sacred call that had to be understood. Profoundly impressed, he watched everything up to the end. In

three days' time and still under the weight of those anguishing impressions, he received the good news that Christ had risen from the dead to the eternal glory of the Almighty. His disciples were inebriated with joy. Ananias then had gone to see Simon Peter in order to better understand the person of the Savior. Such a sublime account, such lofty teachings, so profound was the revelation that shed light on his spirit, that he accepted the Gospel without any hesitation. Eager to share in the work that Jesus had bequeathed to his Apostles, he returned to Emmaus, disposed of his material possessions and waited for the Galilean Apostles in Jerusalem, where he joined Peter in the first activities of the church of the Way. The essence of Christ's teachings had recharged his spirit. The ailments of old age had disappeared. As soon as John and Philip came to Jerusalem to work with the ex-fisherman from Capernaum in spreading the Gospel, they arranged for his transfer to Joppa in order to attend to numerous requests from the brethren there, eager to know about the doctrine. He had stayed there until the persecutions that had intensified with the death of Stephen forced him to leave.

Saul was taking in his words, spellbound like someone who had discovered a new world. The reference to the persecutions rekindled his bitter remorse. In compensation his soul was replete with sincere vows promising a new life.

"It is true," said Saul when Ananias made a long pause. "I came to Damascus with a warrant from the temple to take you prisoner to Jerusalem, but it was you who came to me with the warrant from Jesus and you have joined me to Him forever. If I had taken you in shackles, in my ignorance I would have tortured you to death; however, in saving me from sin, you have made me into a voluntary and happy slave!"

Ananias smiled, completely happy.

Saul then asked him to tell him about Stephen and was answered in all kindness. Next, he wanted to know about his journey from Joppa to Jerusalem. Very prudently, he wished from his benefactor any reference to Abigail. He formulated his request with such a loving inflection that the old disciple guessed his intention and spoke to him tenderly.

"You do not have to confess your longings of youth. I have read in your eyes what you want to know most of all. Between Joppa and Jerusalem I rested for a long time in the neighborhood of a fellow citizen, who, although a Pharisee, never denied his employees the right to receive the sacred joys of

the Good News. This man, Zechariah, had under his roof a true angel from heaven. She was the young Abigail, who after receiving consecration at my hands, confessed she loved you very much. She spoke of your love with ardent tenderness and many times she asked me to pray to Jesus Christ for your conversion!”

Saul listened to him with deep emotion, and after a short pause in which the kind old man seemed to meditate, he said as if talking to himself: “Yes, if only she were still here!”

Ananias heard the remark without surprise and added: “At the time she first approached me I saw that Abigail would not stay long on the earth. Her pale color and the intense brightness of her eyes spoke to me of her condition as an angel in exile. But we must believe that she lives in the immortal realm. And who knows? Perhaps her prayers at Jesus’ feet contributed to the Master having called you to the light of the Gospel at the gates of Damascus!”

The old disciple of the Way was moved. Saul wept upon hearing those loving recollections. Yes, he knew that Abigail could not be dead. His vision of the resurrected Jesus was enough to dissipate all his doubts. Of course his soul’s chosen one had felt sorry for him in his misery and had prayed insistently to the Savior to help his pitiful spirit, and by a happy coincidence the same Ananias who had prepared her soul for the blessings of heaven had extended his friendly, charitable and forgiving hands to him as well. Now, he would belong forever to that loving and just Christ, the promised Messiah. In the extreme emotions that characterized his sentiments he began to consider the power of the Gospel, examining its unlimited transforming resources. He wanted to immerse his spirit in its illuminating and sublime lessons, to bathe in that river of life whose waters of Jesus’ love irrigated the driest and most barren hearts. That profound thought now seized his entire soul.

“Ananias, my master,” said the former rabbi enthusiastically, “where can I get a copy of the sacred Gospel?”

The old disciple smiled kindly and remarked: “Before anything else, do not call me master. The Master is and will always be Christ. We others, by extension of divine mercy, are disciples, brothers and sisters in need and in the work of redemption. As for acquiring the Gospel, only at the church of the Way in Jerusalem could we obtain a complete copy of Levi’s notes.”

Reaching inside his worn out tunic, Ananias took out some yellowed parchments on which he had managed to put together some writings of the

apostolic tradition. Presenting these random notes, he added: “Orally, I know nearly all the teachings by heart; however, as for the written part, this is all I’ve got.”

Surprised, the young convert took the notes. He immediately leaned over the old scribbles and began devouring them with undisguised interest.

After thinking for a few minutes, he stated: “If possible, I would like to ask you to leave these precious teachings with me until tomorrow. I will spend the day copying them for my private use. The innkeeper will buy me the parchment.”

And as if already enlightened by the missionary spirit that would underscore his least actions for the rest of his life, he said attentively: “We must find a way to spread the new revelation as widely as possible. Jesus is our help from heaven. To delay His message is to prolong humankind’s despair. Besides, the word “Gospel” means “Good News.” It is crucial for us to spread this news that has come from the highest plane of life.”

While the old preacher of the Way observed him with interest, the Damascus convert called to the innkeeper and asked him to buy the parchment. Judas was amazed at seeing Saul’s remarkable cure. Satisfying his curiosity, the young man from Tarsus spoke openly: “Jesus sent me a doctor. Ananias came to heal me in His name.”

And before the man could recover from his surprise, Saul told him what he needed in the way of parchment and gave him the money.

Yielding to the enthusiasm in his soul, he addressed Ananias again to tell him of his plans: “I used to occupy my time with the study and exegesis of the Law of Moses; now, however, I shall fill my hours with the spirit of Christ. I shall work at that task until the end of my days and I shall try to begin my work right here in Damascus.”

After a pause Saul asked his benefactor, who had been listening to him in silence: “Do you know a Pharisee named Saddoc here in the city?”

“Yes, he is the one who has been heading the persecutions.”

“Well then,” continued Saul attentively, “tomorrow is the Sabbath and there will be a lesson in the synagogue. I intend to look for my friends and to tell them publicly about my call from Christ. I want to study your notes some more today because they will give me subject matter for my first sermon on the Gospel.”

“Frankly,” said Ananias with his worldly experience, “I think you should be very prudent during this new religious phase. It is quite possible that your friends at the synagogue are not prepared to receive the light of the whole truth. Bad faith always has a way of trying to confuse what is pure.”

“But if I saw Jesus, I have no right to hide such an incontestable revelation,” exclaimed the neophyte as if to specially emphasize the good intentions animating him.

“No, I do not mean that you should avoid bearing witness,” the old disciple explained calmly, “but I must stress an attitude of extreme prudence, not for the sake of the doctrine of Christ – superior and invulnerable to any human attack – but for your own.”

“As for me, I have nothing to fear. If Jesus restored light to my eyes, He will also illumine my ways. I want to tell Saddoc about the event that has given new direction to my destiny. And the occasion could not be more opportune because I know he is still lodging some renowned Levites who recently arrived from Cyprus.”

“May the Master bless your good intentions,” said the old man, smiling.

Saul felt happy. Ananias’s presence comforted him greatly. They had lunch together like old and loyal friends. Right afterward, the generous envoy of Christ went home, leaving the former rabbi the meticulous job of copying the texts.

The following day Saul rose from bed cheerful and confident. He felt reinvigorated as he began his new life. The bitter recollections had deserted his memory. Jesus’ influence filled him with substantial and lasting joy. He had the impression that a new door had been opened in his soul through which inspiration blew in swiftly from a higher world.

After breakfast, and in spite of the chagrin that Saddoc’s attitude had caused him, he went to visit his friend, moved by the sincerity that marked the smallest actions of his life. He was not at home, however. A servant told him that he had gone to the synagogue with some of his guests.

Saul went there. The day’s work had begun. The reading from the texts of Moses had finished. One of the Levites from Citium was making relevant comments on the reading.

The former rabbi’s entrance caused general curiosity. The majority of those present were aware of his personal importance as well as his fervent,

sure speech. However, when Saddoc saw him he went pale and even paler when Saul asked him for a word in private. Although constrained, he agreed. They greeted each other without disguising the new feeling they now had toward each other.

In light of the new evangelist's first amicable remarks, Saddoc explained, displaying his offended pride: "In fact, I did know you were in the city and I even came to see you at Judas's inn; however, what the innkeeper told me was such that I refrained from going to your room. I went so far as to ask him to keep my visit a secret. It truly seems incredible that even you have passively surrendered to the sorceries of the Way! I cannot understand such a transmutation in your stalwart mind!"

"But Saddoc," replied Saul calmly, "I saw Jesus resurrected."

The other made a great effort to contain an outburst of laughter.

"Your sentimental character used to be so much against mysticism," he objected mockingly. "Is it possible that it has surrendered to such grounds? Do you actually believe in such visions? Mightn't you believe yourself to be a victim of some shameless follower of the carpenter? Your current attitude will cause us profound shame. What will unthinking men say, those who know nothing about the Law of Moses? And what about our position in the ruling party of the Jewish people? Our colleagues in Pharisaism will stare with eyes wide open when they learn of your calamitous defection. When I accepted the position to persecute the followers of the common laborer of Nazareth and to subdue their subversive activities, I did so out of my dedicated friendship to you; does not the betrayal of your vows of the past cause you any pain whatsoever? Consider how difficult our purpose will be when the news spreads that you yourself have capitulated before these uneducated and unconscionable people."

Saul looked at his friend, displaying immense concern in his anxious eyes. These accusations were the forecast of the welcome awaiting him amongst his old brothers-in-arms and religious thought.

"No," he said, feeling each word deeply, "I cannot accept your arguments. I repeat, I saw Jesus of Nazareth and I must proclaim that in Him I acknowledge the Messiah promised by our most eminent prophets."

While Saddoc made a broad gesture of astonishment upon observing that inflection of certainty and sincerity, Saul continued with conviction: "What is more, I believe that at all times we can and ought to amend our errors of the

past. And it is with this burning faith that I intend to reconstruct my own pathway. From now on, I shall work because of my certainty in Christ Jesus. I must not get lost in sentimentalist arguments, forgetting the truth; and thus I will proceed on behalf of my own friends. The lovers of the reality of life have always been detested most while they were yet alive. What to do? Up until now my preaching has derived from the texts received from our venerable forefathers, but today my assertions are based not only on the repositories of tradition, but also on the proof of witnesses.”

Saddoc could not hide how shocked he was.

“But ... your position? And your family? And your name? And everything you have received with fervent commitment from those around you?” asked Saddoc, taking him back to the past.

“Now I am with Christ and we all belong to Him. His divine word has called me to more ardent and active endeavors. To those who will understand me I of course owe the most sacred gratitude; however, toward those who cannot comprehend me I will keep a most serene attitude, remembering that the Messiah Himself was led to the cross.”

“Have you been infected with the obsession of martyrdom also?”

Saul maintained a comely expression of personal dignity and concluded: “I cannot indulge in futile opinions. I will wait for your friend from Cyprus to finish his speech and then relate my experience to all.”

“Are you talking about doing it here?”

“Why not?”

“It would be more reasonable if you would rest from your journey and illness in order to think more clearly on the matter, because I hope you will reconsider what happened.”

“You know I am not a child and it is my duty to explain the truth in any circumstance.”

“And if they jeer you? And if you are considered a traitor?”

“In our eyes loyalty to God should be greater than all this.”

“It is possible that they will refuse to let you speak,” Saddoc remarked after clashing with the power of such convictions.

“My status is such that nobody will dare deny me what is my right.”

“Then, so be it. You will answer for the consequences,” concluded Saddoc, constrained.

At that moment both grasped the immensity of the dividing line that separated them. Saul perceived that the friendship that Saddoc had always showed him had been based on purely human interests. Having abandoned the false career that had given him prestige and fame, he now saw Saddoc’s cordiality disappear. However, the thought immediately came to his mind that he himself would probably have behaved the same way if he didn’t have Jesus in his heart.

Serene and resolute, he avoided approaching the place where the distinguished visitors were seated and aimed for the large platform where a new podium had been set up. When the Levite from Citium finished his exposition, Saul stood before all of them and they greeted him with looks of expectation. He politely greeted the directors of the meeting and asked permission to expound his ideas.

Saddoc did not have the heart to create a hostile atmosphere, leaving it all to run its course. That was why the priests shook Saul’s hand with the usual warmth, welcoming his proposal with immense joy.

The former rabbi lifted his brow nobly, just as he used to do in his days of triumph: “Men of Israel!” he began in a solemn tone. “In the name of the Almighty I have come today to proclaim to you for the first time the truths of a new revelation. Until now we have ignored the culminating event in the life of humankind. The promised Messiah has come in accordance with what the prophets who were glorified in virtue and suffering affirmed. Jesus of Nazareth is the Savior of sinners.”

If a bomb had exploded in the room it would not have had a greater impact. Everyone looked at Saul aghast. The assembly was stunned. Saul, however, continued courageously after a pause: “Do not be startled at what I am saying. You know my conscience because of my upright life and my loyalty to the divine laws. Well then, it is with this legacy from my past that I am speaking to you today, repairing the unintentional wrongs I committed in the sincere pursuit of a cruel and unjust persecution. I was the first to condemn the disciples of the Way in Jerusalem. I brought about the unity of Romans and Jews for the unmitigated repression of all activities relating to the Nazarene; I violated sacred homes; I imprisoned women and children; I had some put to death; I was responsible for a huge exodus of workers who

used to work peaceably in the city for its progress; I created for the most sincere spirits a reign of darkness and terror. I did it all in the mistaken belief that I was defending God, as if the Supreme Father needed miserable defenders! ... But on my journey to this city, and authorized by the Sanhedrin and the provincial court to invade homes and persecute innocent and inoffensive people, Jesus appeared to me right at your gates and asked me at full midday in the desolate and desert landscape: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

At this recollection Saul’s eloquent voice became softer and the tears ran. He had interrupted his account upon remembering the decisive event of his destiny. The listeners looked at him with astonishment.

“What is this?” asked some.

“The doctor of Tarsus is playing a joke!” said others smiling, convinced that the young lawyer was looking for greater oratorical effect.

“No friends,” he said vehemently, “I have never joked with you while on the sacred rostrum. The just God did not allow my criminal violence to play out its course to the detriment of the truth, and He mercifully consented that this miserable servant would not meet death before bringing to you the enlightenment of the new belief!”

In spite of the ardor of his preaching resounding full of emotion in every ear, a strange commotion erupted in the room. A few of the more irate Pharisees asked Saddoc in low voices about the unexpected surprise and received confirmation that Saul in fact did seem extremely disturbed, alleging that he had seen the carpenter of Nazareth on the outskirts of Damascus. Enormous confusion immediately took hold of the room, because there were those who viewed the case as a dangerous defection by the rabbi, whereas others thought that sudden illness had rendered him deranged.

“Men of my old faith,” thundered Saul’s voice, more incisive, “it is no use trying to hide the truth. I am neither treasonous nor ill. We are facing a new era in the light of which all our religious caprices are meaningless.”

A rain of insults suddenly cut his words short.

“Coward! Blasphemer! Dog of the Way! Away with this traitor of Moses!”

The derision came from all sides. Those most sympathetic toward the former rabbi – the ones who were inclined to believe him to be the victim of a

grave mental disturbance – came into conflict with the harshest and strictest Pharisees. Some walking-sticks were violently thrown at the podium. The two groups got into a scuffle, causing an uproar in the synagogue, and Saul perceived that he was on the verge of an irreparable disaster.

That was when one of the oldest Levites approached the large platform, raising his voice with all the muster he was capable of and asking the assembly to accompany him in reciting one of the Psalms of David. The invitation was accepted by all. The more riled ones repeated the prayer, taken with shame.

Saul followed the scene with profound interest.

When the prayer had finished, the priest said with irritable emphasis: “We regret this episode, but let us avoid turmoil, which will get us nowhere. Until yesterday Saul of Tarsus honored our ranks as a paradigm of triumph; today his words are for us a twig of thorns. Despite a respectable past, his attitude now deserves condemnation. Perjury? Dementia? We do not know for certain. If anybody else were on the platform, we would not hesitate to stone him here and now; but with a former colleague, different measures are in order. If he is ill, he deserves only compassion; if a traitor, only complete scorn. Let Jerusalem judge him as its ambassador. As for us, let us finish the synagogue speeches and retire in peace as faithful followers of the Law.”

The ex-rabbi endured the rebuke with great serenity in his eyes. Inwardly his self-esteem was crushed. The vestiges of the “old man” were demanding revenge and immediate reparation right then and there in front of everybody. He wanted to speak again, to demand to be heard, to force his colleagues to listen to him, but he felt restrained by irrepressible emotions that weakened his explosive impetuosity. Motionless, he watched as his old friends from Damascus left the room calmly, without even a gesture of greeting. He also noticed that the Levites from Citium seemed to understand him by their looks of sympathy, whereas Saddoc looked at him with sarcasm and a smile of triumph. Repudiation had come knocking at his door. Accustomed to applause wherever he appeared, he had been the victim of his own illusion for thinking that to speak successfully about Jesus the ephemeral laurels he had already won in the world would be enough. He had been badly mistaken. His colleagues had discarded him as useless. Nothing hurt him more than not being effective when priestly devotion was burning in his soul. He would have preferred for them to have slapped his face, imprisoned him, flogged him, but not to have taken away the opportunity to argue without fetters,

winning and convincing all of them with the logic of his explanations. That abandonment wounded him deeply because, more than any other consideration, he knew he was not working on his own behalf out of vanity or selfishness, but for his co-religionists, tied to their strict and inflexible conceptions of the Law. Little by little the synagogue became deserted under the burning heat of the early hours of the afternoon. Saul sat on a rustic bench and wept. The struggle between the vanity of the past and self-renunciation had begun. To comfort his oppressed soul, he remembered Ananias's account of when Jesus had told the old disciple that He would show him how important it was to suffer for the love of His name.

He left the synagogue in sorrow to look for his benefactor in order to be comforted by his words.

Ananias was not surprised to hear what had happened.

"I can see myself surrounded by enormous difficulties," said Saul, somewhat perturbed. "I feel that I must spread the new doctrine to uplift our fellow beings; Jesus has filled my heart with unexpected strength but human brutality is enough to frighten the strongest."

"Yes," explained the old man patiently, "the Master has given you the job of sower. You are full of goodwill, but what does a man do upon receiving such responsibilities? Before anything else, try to gather the seeds into your private coffers so that your efforts may be productive."

The neophyte understood the scope of this comparison and asked: "But what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that a man living a pure and upright life, without the errors of his own good intentions, is always ready to plant goodness and justice along the route he takes; but the one who has already made mistakes, or who is harboring some guilt, needs to bear witness to his own suffering before he can teach others. Those who are not entirely pure or who have not suffered along the way will never be understood by those who simply listen to their words. Their lives contradict their teachings. Besides, everything that is of God demands great peace and deep understanding. In your case you must think of Jesus' lesson as He dwelt for thirty years among us, preparing Himself to endure our presence for only three. To receive a task from heaven, David lived with nature herding his flocks; to prepare the way for the Savior, John the Baptist meditated for a long time in the harsh deserts of Judea."

Ananias's sensible thoughts fell on Saul's heavy soul like a vitalizing balm.

"When you have suffered more," continued his benefactor and true friend, "you will have improved your understanding of people and things. Only pain teaches us to be human. When people enter the most dangerous period of their lives, after early childhood and before the night of old age; when their lives are abounding with energy, God sends them children so that in raising them their hearts will become compassionate. From what you have told me it is possible you are not to become a father, but you will have children of Calvary far and wide. Didn't you see Simon Peter in Jerusalem surrounded by unfortunate beings? Of course you will find a larger home on earth where you will be called to practice fraternity, love, forgiveness ... it is necessary to die to the world so that Christ may live in us."

Those sound and meek remarks pierced the spirit of the former rabbi like a balm of consolation from much broader horizons. His loving words made him remember someone who used to love him very much. Saul's mind was tired from the clashes that day and he made a great effort to focus his thoughts. Ah! ... Now he remembered perfectly. That someone was Gamaliel. Suddenly he felt the desire to see his old master. He understood the reason for that recollection. The last time they had met, Gamaliel too had talked to him about the need he felt for solitary places to ponder these sublime new truths. He knew Gamaliel was in Palmyra with a brother. Why hadn't he remembered his former teacher before, who had been almost like a father to him? Gamaliel would surely receive him with open arms, would rejoice at his recent attainments and would give him generous counsel as to which road to follow.

Immersed in loving memories, Saul thanked Ananias with a meaningful look, adding sensibly: "You're right ... I will go into the desert instead of returning to Jerusalem in a hurry, perhaps without enough strength to face the incomprehension of my colleagues. I have an old friend in Palmyra who will welcome me with open arms. I shall rest there for some time until I can confine myself in the desert regions to meditate more on the lessons I have received."

Ananias approved his idea with a smile. They remained in conversation for a long time until night immersed all things in its veil of thick darkness.

The old preacher then led the neophyte to a humble meeting being held on that Sabbath of the former rabbi's great disillusionment.

Damascus did not have an actual church per se; however, it did have a large number of believers united by the religious ideal of the Way. The place of prayer was at the home of a poor washerwoman who rented out her sitting room to support her paralytic son. Saul was very surprised to see that the place was a miniature of the scene he had observed the first time, when he had had the invincible curiosity to attend the famous preaching of Stephen in Jerusalem. Around the rustic table were miserable plebeians, whom he had always kept at a distance from his social sphere; illiterate women with children on their laps; rough old bricklayers; washerwomen who could not speak two words correctly; elderly people with trembling hands, supported by strong walking sticks; miserable sick people who displayed the symptoms of dolorous diseases. The ceremony seemed even simpler than those of Simon Peter and his fellow Galileans. Ananias presided over the meeting. Sitting at the table like a patriarch in the bosom of his family, he prayed for Jesus' blessings for the goodwill of all. Next, he gave a reading from the teachings of Jesus, pointing out a few of the Divine Master's words contained in the loose parchments. After commenting on the page he had read, illustrating it with significant facts known to him or taken from his own personal experience, the old disciple of the Gospel left his seat, went to the rows of benches and laid his hands on the sick and the needy. Normally, according to the custom of the early Christian groups of the first century, upon remembering the joy of Jesus when He served the meal to his disciples, there was a small distribution of bread and pure water in the name of the Lord. Saul was highly moved as he ate a piece of the simple cake. To his soul, the small bit had the divine flavor of universal fraternity. The clear, fresh water from the rustic jug seemed like the fluid of love coming from Jesus and spreading to all beings. At the end of the meeting, Ananias prayed fervently. After telling them about Saul's vision and his own, during the simple comments of that evening, he asked the Savior to protect the new servant on his trip to Palmyra so that he could ponder more profoundly the immensity of His mercy. Listening to his prayer, which the warmth of their friendship clothed with particular tenderness, Saul wept in appreciation and gratitude, comparing the emotions of the rabbi he had been with the servant of Jesus he now wanted to be. During the opulent meetings of the Sanhedrin he had never heard a colleague entreat heaven with greater sincerity. Among the most enthusiastic he had only found empty praises, ready to switch to vile slander

when he could not transform them into material favors: everywhere, superficial admiration, the offspring of the game of worldly interests. Here, the situation was different. None of these creatures deprived of fortune had come to ask for favors; they all seemed happy to serve God, who had brought them together for a period of exhaustive and painful work. And at the end they asked Jesus to grant them peace of mind for their undertaking.

When the meeting ended, Saul of Tarsus had tears in his eyes. In the Way's church in Jerusalem, the Galilean apostles had treated him with special deference, owing to his political-social position and as holder of the prerogatives that worldly conventions conferred on him; but the Christians of Damascus impressed him more deeply; they conquered his soul, enrapturing it with imperishable affection through their gesture of trust and love, treating him as a brother.

One by one they shook his hand, wishing him a happy journey. A few humble old men kissed his hands. Such displays of affection gave him new strength. If his spiteful and hostile friends of Judaism had despised his words, he had now begun to encounter on his path the children of Calvary. He would labor for them; he would devote to their consolation the energy of his youth. For the first time in his life he showed an interest in the smiles of children. As if wishing to repay the display of love he had received he took a sick boy in his arms. In front of the poor smiling and thankful mother he smiled at him and clumsily caressed his hair. From the aggressive thorns of his passionate soul the flowers of tenderness and gratitude had started to blossom.

Ananias was happy. Together with some of the more trustworthy brothers, he went with the neophyte to Judas's Inn. The modest and unknown group walked through the streets bathed in moonlight, closely united and comforting one another with Christian conversation. Saul was surprised to have so quickly found the key of harmony that gave him sure confidence in all. He had the impression that friendship in the genuine Christian communities was different from everything that had been shown to him in mundane gatherings. In the diversity of social struggles the dominant trait of relationships in his eyes were now summed up in the advantages of one's personal interests, whereas in the unity of efforts in carrying out the Master's work there was a divine stamp of trust as if the commitments had original, divine ascendance. They all talked as if born under the same roof. If they proposed an idea worthy of more pondering, they did it with serenity and general understanding of their duty; if they talked about light and simple

subjects, the conversation showed open and comforting joy. None of them displayed any concern with being less than sincere in defending their own points of view; instead, they showed honesty without any trace of hypocrisy, because, as a rule, they felt they were under the tutelage of Christ, who, to the conscience of each one, was the invisible and present friend whom nobody could deceive.

Comforted and happy at having found friends in the true meaning of the word, Saul came to Judas's Inn and bade farewell to all of them, deeply moved. He himself was surprised by the intimacy with which his words emerged from his lips. Now he understood that the word "brother," broadly used among followers of the Way, was not in vain and useless. Ananias's companions had won his heart. He would never forget the brothers of Damascus.

On the following day, hiring a servant recommended by the innkeeper, Saul of Tarsus – surprising the proprietor with his resolute spirit – began his journey at daybreak on his way toward the famous city located on an oasis in the middle of the desert.

In the early hours of the morning, two modestly dressed men left the gates of Damascus, leading a small camel loaded with the necessary provisions.

Saul made sure of leaving on foot so as to begin his new life with the austerity that would be of utmost use to him later. He would no longer travel as a doctor of the Law surrounded by servants, but as a disciple of Jesus, committed to His plan. That is why he considered it preferable to travel as a Bedouin, so as to learn to always count on his own strength. Under the burning hot sun of the day or under the fresh blessings of dusk, his thoughts were fixed on the One who had called him from the world to a new life. The desert nights, when the moonlight fills the desolate landscape with dreams, are touched with mysterious beauty. Under the fronds of a solitary date palm, the Damascus convert took advantage of the silence for deep meditation. The starry firmament now held comforting and lasting messages for his spirit. He was convinced that his soul had been transported to new horizons, because through everything in nature he seemed to receive the thought of Christ speaking lovingly to his heart.

II

The Weaver¹²

In spite of being accustomed to the ongoing spectacle of foreigners coming into the city – given its privileged status in the desert – the passers-by in Palmyra were deeply interested as they observed the entry of that Bedouin followed by a humble servant pulling a camel panting from fatigue. Of course they recognized the Jewish profile in the characteristic traits of his face and in the serene energy transpiring in his eyes.

Saul, in turn, walked with an air of indifference as if he had been familiar with the scenery for a long time.

He knew that his former teacher's brother was one of the city's most well-known and well-off businessmen and thus he had no problems receiving information from a compatriot who pointed out his residence.

Settling in at an ordinary inn to freshen up from the fatigue of the journey, he looked into his pouch to determine his course of action. His was running out of money and would barely have enough to pay the dedicated companion who had been his loyal friend throughout the arduous journey. When he was informed of the amount he would need for the inn, he saw he would come up short, so he spoke humbly to his servant: "Judah, at the moment I don't have enough to pay you in full for your services. However, I will give you half in cash, plus the camel in payment for the rest."

Even the servant was moved by the humble tone of Saul's proposal.

"You don't have to pay me so much, sir," he responded, confused. The value of the camel alone is more than enough; that way you won't be left penniless. I'll be content with just a few coins to pay for my return.

Saul looked at him gratefully, and stating that it would be impossible to retain him any longer, he said goodbye with words of comfort and well-wishes for a happy return to Damascus.

Afterward he retired to the simple room he had taken and began to meditate in detail on the latest events in his life.

He was alone, without family, without friends, without money.

Not long before his decision to leave Jerusalem to track down Ananias, he would not have hesitated to order the death of anyone who would have foretold the future awaiting him. His life, his plans had been transformed down to the smallest detail. What to do now? What if he could not find Gamaliel's help in Palmyra as he had hoped? He considered the extent of the problems unfolding before him. Everything was so hard. He was like a man who had lost his family, his country, his home. Profound despair threatened to invade his heart. Suddenly, however, he remembered Christ and the recollection of the glorious vision filled his disconsolate spirit with comfort. Trusting much more in the One who had reached out to him than in his own strength, he sought to calm his inner anguish, bringing repose to his weary body.

Late in the morning of the next day he went out onto the street worried and anxious. Following the information he had received, he stopped at the door of an inviting building fronted with large shops.

He asked for Hezekiah and was immediately met and amicably greeted by an elderly man with a kind and respectable smile. He was Gamaliel's brother, who took right away to the recently-arrived countryman from afar and engaged him in comforting conversation. Tactfully seeking to garner news concerning the venerable rabbi of Jerusalem, Saul obtained the necessary details from Hezekiah who showed profound interest: "My brother," he said, concerned, "has seemed very different ever since he arrived in Palmyra. It is possible that the move from Jerusalem had some influence on such a profound transformation. The difference in social environment, the change in customs, the climate, lack of the usual work – all this may have contributed to harming his health."

"How so?" asked Saul without disguising his concern.

"Well, he spends day after day in an abandoned hut that I own in the shade of some date palms in one of the many oases around here; and this – mind you – only to read and ponder some unimportant manuscript that I couldn't understand. Moreover he seems completely disinterested in our religious practices; he lives like an alien to the world. He speaks of visions from heaven and constantly refers to that carpenter who supposedly became

the Messiah of our people, living on imaginary things and unreal dreams. Sometimes I observe his mental decline with deep sorrow. My wife attributes it all to his advanced age, but I want to believe that it is due completely – or at least mostly – to the intensity of his study and long periods of meditation.”

Hezekiah paused while Saul gave him a penetrating and meaningful look, grasping the condition of the old teacher.

After another remark by Saul, Hezekiah continued: “When he’s with my family Gamaliel is treated like a father. Besides, I owe the starting of my life to his immense, brotherly dedication. For that very reason my wife and I have agreed with our children to surround the dear and noble ailing man with an atmosphere of peace. Whenever he talks about the religious illusions that excite his mental state, nobody in the house contradicts him. We know that he no longer speaks for himself. His powerful mind has faded away; the star has died out. When I consider these painful circumstances I thank God for having brought him here so that he can end his days in the warmth of our family’s care, free from the scorn that he could have perhaps been subjected to in Jerusalem, where not everybody would be able to understand him and honor his distinguished past.”

“But the city has always venerated him as an unforgettable master,” said Saul as if he wanted to defend his own sentiments of friendship and admiration.

“Yes,” said Hezekiah with certainty, “a man of your intellectual level would be prepared to understand it all, but what about the others? You are of course aware of the ruthless persecutions being carried out by the authorities of the Sanhedrin and the Temple against the sympathizers of the famous Nazarene carpenter. Palmyra got wind of it through the countless poor countrymen who left Jerusalem in a hurry at the threat of prison and death. Well, it was precisely in connection with that man that Gamaliel displayed the first symptoms of mental weakness. If he were in Jerusalem, what would become of him in his forsaken old age? Of course many friends like you would be ready to defend him, but the case could take a serious turn and political enemies could emerge demanding severe measures. And we ourselves wouldn’t be able to do anything to stabilize the situation, because, in reality, his insanity is peaceful – nearly unnoticeable – and in no way could we possibly side with him on his defense of the criminal whom the Sanhedrin sent to the cross of thieves.”

Saul felt extremely ill at ease listening to such remarks, now so unjust and superficial in his opinion. He understood the delicate situation and the psychological resources he would have to employ so as not to compromise himself and worsen even more the position of the illustrious teacher.

Wanting to change the subject, he asked: “What about the doctors? What is the opinion of the experts?”

“During his last examination at our insistence, it was discovered that, besides being disturbed, the esteemed patient is suffering from an unusual organic weakening that is consuming his last vital forces.”

Saddened, Saul made a few more remarks, and after reconsidering his first impressions regarding Hezekiah’s amicable hospitality he was helped by a servant and went to the place, where his old mentor welcomed him with surprise and joy.

The former disciple noticed that Gamaliel was in fact displaying symptoms of profound physical weakness. He embraced him affectionately in infinite joy, lovingly kissing his wrinkled and trembling hands. His hair seemed whiter; his complexion furrowed with venerable wrinkles gave the impression of alabaster, reflecting an indefinable paleness.

They talked at length about their longings and successes in Jerusalem and also about their friends far away. After these affectionate preliminaries, Saul told the elderly teacher of the grace he had received at the gates of Damascus. His voice had the vibrant inflexion of that passion and sincerity he used to impress on his emotions. Gamaliel listened to his story with inexpressible wonder; tears of joy pooled in his lively and serene eyes without falling. That proof filled him with deep consolation: he had not accepted in vain that wise and loving Christ whom his colleagues had not understood. At the end of his account, Saul of Tarsus also had tears in his eyes. The kind old man embraced him movingly and held him close to his heart.

“Saul, my son,” he said joyfully, “I knew I was not mistaken about the Savior who spoke to me so profoundly in my exhausted old age through the spiritual light of His Gospel of redemption. Jesus has deigned to stretch out His loving hands to your devoted spirit. The vision at Damascus will be enough for you to consecrate your entire life to the Messiah’s love. It is true that you worked hard for the Law of Moses without hesitating to adopt extreme measures in its defense; but the time has come for you to work for the One who is greater than Moses.”

“But I feel so disoriented and confused,” murmured Saul, full of trust. “Ever since the event I have noticed that I have been the object of peculiar and radical changes. Obedient to my completely sincere character, I wanted to begin my work for Christ in Damascus, yet I received a major show of contempt and ridicule from our friends there. I suffered greatly from it. I suddenly found myself without friends, without anyone. Members at the meeting of the Way comforted my beaten soul with fraternal words, but they were not enough to pay for the bitter disillusionment I was going through. Saddoc himself, who in childhood was my father’s pupil, showered me with recrimination and mockery. I wanted to return to Jerusalem, but after the scene at the synagogue in Damascus I understood what would be waiting for me on a greater scale with the authorities of the Sanhedrin and Temple. Of course the profession of rabbi no longer holds any interest for my sincere spirit, because I would be lying to myself. Without work, without money, I found myself in a maze of irresolvable questions, without the help of someone more experienced than I. That is why I decided to go into the desert to seek your help.”

Concluding his appeal with pleading eyes, revealing the tormenting anguish of his soul, he exclaimed: “Beloved teacher, you were always able to find solutions for the good, where my imperfection found nothing but bitter darkness!... Help my soul sunk in pain-filled nightmares. I must serve the One who deigned to snatch me from the darkness of evil, but I cannot do without your help during this difficult time in my life!”

These words were spoken with a profoundly moving inflection. Eyes firm yet illumined by intense tenderness, the generous old man grasped Saul’s hands and spoke movingly: “Let’s take a look at the issues in particular so that we can find an adequate solution to all your problems in the light of the teachings now shining their light on us.”

And after a pause in which Gamaliel seemed to be clarifying the issues, he continued: “You have mentioned the humiliation you experienced in the synagogue in Damascus; however, such examples are clear and convincing. At present, I too am considered a peaceable lunatic in my own circles. In Jerusalem you saw Simon Peter vilified for loving God’s poor and giving them shelter; you saw Stephen stoned to death and who knows what else? Christ himself – the redeemer of humankind – did not escape being martyred on a scornful cross between criminals condemned by the justice of this world. The Master’s lesson is too great for His disciples to expect political control or

wealth in His name. If the One who was pure and sinless par excellence walked this world amid suffering and misunderstanding, it would not be right for us to expect repose and an easy life in our miserable condition as sinners.”

Saul listened to those soft but stern words with a pain-filled soul, especially those referring to the persecution inflicted on Peter and those involving the memory of Stephen, wherein his old friend had the tact not to allude to the persecutor by name.

“As for the difficulties you say you’ve been experiencing since the incident in Damascus,” continued Gamaliel serenely, “nothing could be more just and natural in my experienced view of the world’s problems. Before receiving the manna from Heaven, our forefathers had to go through the dark times of misery, slavery and suffering. Without the trials of the desert, Moses would never have found the spring of living water in the dry rock. And perhaps you haven’t pondered enough the revelations of the Promised Land. How significant would that region be if, in keeping with a more far-ranging understanding of God, we were to discover sources of His watch-care everywhere in the world? Leafy, protective date palms flourish in the burning sands. Don’t these generous trees transform the desert itself into a blessed place loaded with divine bread to satisfy our hunger? During my solitary reflections I came to the conclusion that the land promised by divine revelation is the Gospel of Christ Jesus. And meditating on the matter suggests even deeper comparisons. While our courageous ancestors were laboring to conquer the privileged region, many people tried to dishearten the more tenacious ones, asserting that the land was inhospitable; that the air was unhealthy and carried deadly fevers; that the inhabitants were wild and ate human flesh. But in a heroic effort Joshua and Caleb entered the unknown land, overcame the first obstacles they came up against and returned saying that it was flowing with milk and honey. Isn’t that a perfect symbol? The divine revelation must refer to a blessed region where the spiritual climate is made of peace and light. To adapt ourselves to the Gospel is to discover another country whose greatness is spread in the infinity of the soul. Alongside us are those who do everything to discourage us from fulfilling our purposes. They accuse Christ’s lesson of being criminal and revolutionary, they see in His example the intent to bring about disorder and death and they classify an apostle like Simon Peter as being a presumptuous and ignorant fisherman. But in thinking of the astonishing serenity in which Stephen gave his soul to God, I see him as the figure of a courageous friend who returned from the lessons of the Way to tell us that, in the land of the Gospel, there are

springs of the milk of wisdom and the honey of divine love. So, we must set out without rest and without counting the obstacles on the journey. Let us seek the infinite mansion that has allured our hearts.”

Gamaliel made a pause in his friendly and highly consoling advice. Saul was amazed. Those so very simple comparisons, those precious deductions from the Old Law with reference to Jesus left him perplexed. The old man’s wisdom was renewing his strength.

“You allege you feel strange,” continued the venerable friend, while Saul regarded him with growing interest, “due to the change of your line of work and the lack of money for your immediate needs ... However, Saul, if you would meditate a bit on the reality of the facts you would see clearly. An old man like me is in the same situation as Moses, beholding the Promised Land but unable to enter it. But as for you, you must realize that you are still very young. You can increase your energies by training your strength, and enter the land of the Savior’s aspirations regarding us. To do so, it is crucial that you simplify your life and begin the struggle all over again. Joshua could not have overcome the difficulties along the way by merely reading sacred texts or by receiving favors from those who loved him. Of course, at the cost of super-human efforts he made use of crude instruments and smoothed the ruts in the road.”

“And what would you advise me to do?” Saul asked with concentrated attention while the old teacher made a long pause.

“I want to say that I know your father, as well as his wealthy status. Of course out of love he would not refuse to provide you with all the help possible in this urgent state of affairs. However, he is human and may be called tomorrow to the spirit life. So his help would be valuable but precarious if you do not cooperate with your own efforts in order to solve your problems. And you are living in a phase in which industrious labor is crucial. Now that we have examined your family issue, let’s take a look at your professional standing. Until now you have been a rabbi of the Law, preoccupied with other people’s errors, discussions concerning casuistry and your prominence amongst the other scholars. You made your living by watching over others, but God has called you to examine your own wrongs, just as He has called me. The Promised Land lies before us. We must overcome the obstacles and proceed. This would no longer be possible for you as a doctor of the Law; hence, you must begin your work all over again

like a man who searched for gold where there was none. The problem is one of labor, of personal effort.”

Saul rested his eyes moistened with emotion on the kind old man and exclaimed: “Yes, now I understand.”

“What did you learn during childhood prior to achieving your position?” asked the wise old man.

“In keeping with the customs of our people my father sent me to learn the work of a weaver, as you know.”

“Your father could not have given you a more priceless gift,” said Gamaliel with a peaceful smile. “He had the foresight of all the heads of the families of God’s people. He sought to accustom your hands to work before your mind was filled up with a lot of ideas. It is written that we must eat our bread by the sweat of our brow. Labor is the sacred movement of life.”

Pausing as if to think more deeply, Saul’s old mentor of his Pharisaic youth then stated: “You were a humble weaver before earning the honorable titles of Jerusalem ... Now that you propose to serve the Messiah in the Jerusalem of humankind, it might good if you went back to being a modest weaver again. Simple work is a great teacher of the spirit of submission. Don’t feel humiliated at returning to the loom. It appears that it might be a generous friend for now. You have neither money nor material resources ... Considering your distinguished situation in the world, it might at first seem right to ask your family or friends to help you out. But you are neither ill nor old. You are strong and healthy. Mightn’t it be worthwhile to convert these two assets into elements of self-help? All honest work is sealed with God’s blessing. To me, being a weaver after having been a rabbi is more honorable than resting on illusory titles earned in a world where the majority of men ignore goodness and truth.”

Saul understood the greatness of Gamaliel’s concepts. Taking his hand, he kissed it with profound respect, saying gently: “I expected nothing from you except your honesty and sincerity to illumine my mind. I shall once again learn about the path of life; I shall find in the sound of the loom the gentle and friendly encouragement of sanctifying work. I shall live with those less smiled upon by fortune. I shall more intimately become involved in their daily troubles. In contact with other people’s pain I shall learn to conquer my own lower impulses, becoming more patient and more humane!”

Taken with great joy, Gamaliel patted his shoulder and exclaimed emotionally: “May God bless your hopes!”

They remained silent for a long time as if desirous of prolonging that glorious moment of understanding and harmony forever.

Displaying much inner concern in his eyes, Saul was the one who broke the silence, saying fearfully: “I intend to take up the occupation of my early days but I have no money for the journey. If possible I would like to start working right here in Palmyra.”

He spoke hesitantly, allowing his old friend to perceive the shame he was feeling at having to make such a confession.

“Well, why not?” asked Gamaliel kindly. “I would imagine that the problems involved in going back would not be small. And I’m not including money problems amongst them, because we could somehow acquire some for your most urgent expenses. I’m simply referring to the dangers of the situation you have gone through. I think you should return to Jerusalem or Tarsus only after having been completely integrated into your new duties. Every plant is fragile when it first begins to grow. The intrigues of Pharisaism, the erroneous knowledge of the doctors, and family vanities could all choke the glorious seed that Jesus has sown in your ardent heart. The most promising bud will not develop if covered with waste and mire. It would be better to return home to friends and family as a leafy tree honoring the dedication of the Divine Cultivator.”

“But what shall I do?” asked Saul, worried.

His former teacher thought for a moment and explained: “You know that the desert regions hold a large market for leather goods. Transportation depends entirely on able and dedicated weavers. My brother understood this fact and set up several work tents in isolated oases to meet the needs of his trade. I’ll talk to Hezekiah about you. I won’t tell him that it involves a great rabbi of Jerusalem who intends to exile himself for a while – not for fear of shaming your name or your origin, but because I think it would be useful for you to experience humility and solitude on your new pathway. Conventional concerns could disturb you now that you need to do away with the ‘old man’ with blows of sacrifice and discipline.”

“I understand, and I shall follow your advice for my own good,” said Saul attentively.

“Besides, Jesus exemplified all this by remaining in our midst without our being aware of it.”

Saul thought of the importance of the advice he had received. He would begin a new life. He would humbly take up the loom. He was happy to remember that the Master Himself had not despised the carpenter’s bench. The desert would provide him consolation, work and silence. He would no longer earn the easy money of undue admiration, but would earn the resources needed for his existence, with the added value of overcoming obstacles. Gamaliel was right. It would not be fair to ask for favors from others when God had done him the biggest favor of all by enlightening his consciousness forever. It was true that in Jerusalem he had been a cruel executioner, but he was only thirty years old. He would seek to reconcile himself with all those he had offended in his sectarian ruthlessness. He felt young and would work for Jesus as long as he had the strength.

Loving words from his old teacher brought him back from the depths of thought.

“Do you have the Gospel with you?” asked the old man with kind interest.

Saul showed him the fragment, explaining the effort it had cost him in Damascus to copy it from the manuscripts of the kind preacher who had healed his sudden blindness. Gamaliel examined it closely, and after focusing on it at length he said: “I have a complete copy of Levi’s notes. He was a tax collector in Capernaum who became a disciple of the Messiah. This copy was a generous gift from Simon Peter for my unworthy friendship. At present I no longer need these sacred parchments. To engrave the Master’s lessons on my memory, I recopied all of His teachings to fix them in my mind forever. I have already made three complete copies of the Gospel without the help of any scribe. So, considering Peter’s gift as a holy token of noble friendship, I want you to have it. Take with you these pages, written at the Way’s church, as loyal companions in your new endeavors.”

The former rabbi listened to those affectionate words with deep emotion.

“But why deprive yourself of such a loving gift on my account?” asked Saul, moved. “I’d be quite happy with one of the copies made by your hands.”

The old teacher gazed out over the peaceful landscape and stated in a prophetic voice: “I have come to the end of the road and must now await the death of my body. Instead of abandoning Peter’s gift to persons who might

not appreciate the value we attribute to it, I prefer to give it to a loyal friend who will cherish its sacred character. Furthermore, I'm convinced that I'll be unable to return to Jerusalem. In this world it will be impossible for me to have any direct conversation with the Galilean Apostles about the light that the Savior has shed on my spirit. And I'm afraid that Jesus' followers may not understand you right away when you return to the holy city. You will have this souvenir at that time to introduce yourself to Peter in my name."

That prophetic tone had an impact on Saul, who looked down with tears in his eyes.

After a long pause, as if trying to compose his thoughts with perfect wisdom, Gamaliel continued kindly: "I see you in the future devoted to Jesus with the same ardent zeal with which I saw you consecrated to Moses! If the Master has called you to serve, it is because He trusts your understanding as a loyal servant. When the effort of your hands has granted you the freedom to choose the new course to follow, God will bless your soul so that you may spread the light of the Gospel among humankind until your last day of life here on earth. In this work, my son, if you encounter misunderstanding and struggle in Jerusalem, do not despair or become dismayed, and do not give up. Since you have surely sown confusion there in people's minds, it is just that you reap the consequences. In every task, however, remember Christ and carry on with your sincere effort. Do not be disturbed by mistrust, slander and bad faith; remember that Jesus valiantly overcame all that!"

Saul felt deep comfort in that loving, tender, loyal exhortation. As he listened to it, he shed ardent tears that testified to his remorse for the past and his hope for the future.

That afternoon Gamaliel left his rustic tent and went with his former disciple to the home of his brother, who welcomed Saul under his roof with undisguised pleasure.

Saul's fulgurant intelligence and sociable youthfulness won over Hezekiah and his family in a beautiful expression of spontaneous friendship.

That same night, after observing the final customary repast, the old rabbi of Jerusalem told the businessman about his protégé's situation. He explained that Saul had been his disciple ever since he was a little boy, praising his personal worthiness and concluding by disclosing his truly critical financial needs. And in front of Saul, whose admiration for the generous and wise old man had grown even more, Gamaliel explained that Saul would like to work

as a weaver in the desert, and asked Hezekiah to kindly help such noble aspirations of labor and self-effort.

Hezekiah was surprised.

“But the young man,” said Hezekiah kindly, “needn’t isolate himself to earn a living. I have means to place him right here in the city, where he will be in permanent contact with us.”

“Nevertheless I would prefer your generous help there in the desert,” Saul stressed firmly.

“But why?” asked Hezekiah, amazed. “I don’t understand why a young man like you would want to exile himself in the vastness of endless sand. The unmarried immigrants of the exodus from Jerusalem turned down the conditions I offered them in the distant oases. Only a few married couples took up my offer and went. As for you, with your intellectual talents, I do not understand why you would prefer to be a humble weaver isolated from everybody.”

Gamaliel understood that his brother’s puzzlement could lead him to erroneous assumptions about his young friend, and before any unjust suspicions were expressed, he offered wisely: “Your question is reasonable, Hezekiah. Saul’s resolution would concern any practical man. The young man is brimming with talent, he holds great promise, and above all, he is well-educated. Those less informed might go to the extreme of presuming in his attitude the desire to escape from the consequences of some crime. But it’s nothing like that at all. To be honest with you, I should mention that, later on, my former disciple wants to consecrate himself to spreading the word of God. So, do you think that if he had chosen the pathway of the triumphant youth of our time, Saul would prefer Palmyra to Jerusalem? The situation, therefore, is not only one of financial need; it also entails the desire for meditation on the most serious problems of life. We know good and well that the prophets and men of God went to solitary places in order to sense the true inspirations from the Most High before ministering successfully to the sanctity of the word.”

“Well, if that’s the case...” said Hezekiah, won over.

And after thinking for a few moments, he said: “In the region we know as ‘the Oasis of Dan’, about fifty miles from here, I gave work to a young couple of weavers about a month ago. They arrived with the last group of refugees. The husband’s name is Aquila. His wife, Prisca,¹³ was a young,

abandoned orphan and became my wife's servant. These two good workers are at present the only inhabitants at the oasis. Saul can stay with them. There are proper tents there, a comfortable house and the looms needed to do the work."

"And what is the work system?" asked Saul, interested in the new job.

"The specialty of this remote post," explained Hezekiah with a certain pride, "is the preparation of wool carpets and strong fabric made from goat hair for travel tents. These goods are supplied by our warehouse on a large scale, but in placing their manufacture so far away I had in mind the immediate needs of groups of camels used in my trade throughout Syria and other more flourishing commercial centers in general."

"I shall do everything to merit the trust you have put in me," confirmed the former rabbi, comforted.

The conversation continued at length, touching on the prospects, conditions and advantages of the business.

Three days later, Saul bade a highly emotional farewell to Gamaliel. He had the feeling that that final embrace would be their last, and until the camels of the caravan set out toward the vast plain, the younger man enveloped the venerable older one in loving expressions of a sorrowful adieu.

The next day, Hezekiah's servants, flanking a long line of submissive camels, left Saul with a voluminous load of leather in the company of Aquila and his wife at the large oasis flourishing in the middle of the desert.

The two workers of the small workshop welcomed him with a great display of fraternity and affinity. Saul saw in one glance that they possessed the noblest of spiritual qualities. The youthfulness of the kind couple was manifested in beautiful expressions of work and cheerfulness. Prisca worked hard to imprint her loving care on everything. Her old Hebraic songs resounded in the great silence like notes of supreme and harmonious beauty. When she finished her housework she sat next to her husband, working at the loom until late in the evening. Her husband in turn seemed to be of the privileged temperament of those who work without having to be forced. Fully integrated into his responsibilities, Aquila worked without rest under the shade of the welcoming and friendly trees.

Saul understood the blessing he had received. He got the impression of having found in those two fraternal souls – who would never be separated

spiritually from the magnitude of his mission – two inhabitants of a different world which until then he had not known.

More than just husband and wife, Aquila and Prisca seemed like true siblings. On their first day of work together Saul noticed their mutual respect, the perfect harmony of their ideas, the high ideal of duty characterizing their mannerisms, and above all, the healthy joy radiating from their smallest gestures. Their pure and generous habits enchanted Saul's soul, disillusioned by human hypocrisy. The meals were simple; each utensil had its own use and proper place; and the conversation, when touching on topics other than their common circle of joy, never sank to gossip or frivolousness.

The first day proceeded with very pleasant surprises for the ex-rabbi eager for peace and solitude for his new studies and meditations. Aquila went out of his way to help Saul with his little problems in the work that he had not practiced for so long. Of course Aquila found Saul's delicate hands strange, his manners different – not like those of a common weaver at all – but in his characteristic integrity, he did not ask any questions about the reason for his seclusion.

After work on that same afternoon, the couple got comfortable at the foot of a leafy palm tree while looking at Saul with questioning eyes filled with undisguised uneasiness. Silently they unrolled some old parchments and began to read attentively.

Saul noticed their apprehensive attitude and approached them.

“In fact,” he said caringly, “afternoons in the desert are an invitation to meditation ... the infinite blanket of sand seems like a still ocean ... the soft breeze represents the message from cities far-away. It feels to me like we are in a temple of imperturbable peace away from the world.”

Aquila wondered at such evocative images and experienced greater sympathy for the anonymous young man, isolated perhaps from his loved ones and contemplating the endless plain with immense sadness.

“That's true,” he answered politely. “I have always believed that nature preserved the desert as an altar of divine silence so that God's children have on earth a place for perfect repose. So let's take advantage of our state of solitude to think on the holy and righteous Father and consider his magnitude and greatness.”

At that time, Prisca leaned over the first part of the parchment roll, absorbed in reading.

Glancing at it from where he was, Saul saw the name of Jesus. He drew closer, and unable to hide his great interest, he asked: “Aquila, I have so much love for the Nazarene Prophet that I would ask whether your reading on the greatness of the Heavenly Father is from the teachings of the Gospel.”

The young couple felt profoundly surprised at this unexpected question.

“Yes ...” explained Aquila hesitantly, “but if you have come from the city you know about the persecutions against all those associated with the Way of Christ Jesus.”

Saul could not disguise his joy at seeing that his companions – lovers of reading – were in a position to exchange uplifting ideas about his new learning.

Encouraged by Aquila’s confession, Saul sat down on the rough stones, and taking the parchments with interest, he asked: “Are these Levi’s notes?”

“Yes,” answered Aquila, more at ease and certain of having found a brother of the same ideal. “I copied them in the church at Jerusalem before I left.”

Saul immediately took out his copy of the Gospel, which was, for his soul, one of the most precious gifts of life. They happily compared the texts and teachings.

Overcome with sincere fraternal interest, the former rabbi asked solicitously: “When did you leave Jerusalem? I rejoice whenever I meet brethren who know our holy city first hand. When I left Damascus, I didn’t think Jesus would be reserving such pleasant surprises.”

“We left months ago,” explained Aquila, now full of trust because of Saul’s voluntary remarks. “We were forced to leave because of the persecutions.”

That indirect and sharp reference to his past pierced Saul to the core of his being.

“Have you ever met Saul of Tarsus?” asked Aquila with great innocence in his eyes. “By the way,” he continued while Saul tried to find an answer, “the infamous enemy of Jesus has the same name as yours.”

The former rabbi thought it would be better to follow Gamaliel's advice to the letter. It would be better to hide, to experience the justified reproach of his condemnable past and to humble himself before other people's judgment – as implacable as they might be – until the brethren of the Way could fully testify to the authenticity of his witness.

"I know of him," said Saul vaguely.

"Well then," Aquila continued, beginning the tale of his woes, "it's quite possible that, during your stays in Damascus and Palmyra, you had only partial knowledge of the suffering the infamous doctor of the Law imposed on us. It was often quite arbitrary. I believe that perhaps Saul himself didn't even know about the atrocities committed by the unscrupulous men under his command, because the persecutions were of such a nature that, as a brother of the Way, I cannot believe that an educated rabbi could assume personal responsibility for so many wrongful actions."

While the former doctor of the law searched in vain for a fitting reply, Prisca entered the conversation, stating simply: "Of course the rabbi from Tarsus could not have known about all the crimes committed in his name. On the eve of our secret departure at night, Simon Peter himself affirmed that no one should hate him, because, despite the role he had played in Stephen's death, it would be impossible for him to single-handedly instigate so many hateful and wicked measures."

Now, as he was listening to the humble couple, Saul understood the extent of the heinous campaign he had unleashed, giving his subordinates and sectarians the opportunity to commit so many abuses.

"But," he asked surprised, "did you suffer that much? Were you yourselves condemned to any punishment?"

"Not a few suffered the same abuse as I," murmured Aquila, "given the condemnable behavior of a number of fanatics chosen as worthy helpers for the movement."

"How so?" asked Saul with great interest.

"I'll give you an example. Imagine that a countryman named Jochai had asked my father many times about the possibility of buying his bakery in Jerusalem. I looked after my shop and my old father took care of his own business. We were happy and had peace of mind, and despite the attempts of this ambitious man, my father never thought of giving up his source of

income. Jochai, however, obtained a position of prominence at the very beginning of the persecutions. In such cases evil characters always win the day. It was enough for him to be given a little authority and the greedy man quickly expanded his criminal ambitions. It is true that Prisca and I were among the first to attend the Way's church, not only because of an affinity of sentiment, but also because we owed to Simon Peter the healing of an old illness I had had since childhood. My father, however, although he was receptive toward the Savior, continued to allege that he was too old to change his religious beliefs. He held fast to the Law of Moses and could not understand an overall renewal of the principles of the faith. This, however, did not nullify the ambitious man's evil instincts. One day Jochai knocked at our door accompanied by an armed escort and an order to arrest all three of us. It was useless to resist. The Tarsian doctor had issued a decree by which any resistance meant death. We went to prison. In vain my father swore faithfulness to the Law. After the interrogation, Prisca and I were ordered to go home but my father was imprisoned without pity. His modest possessions were immediately confiscated. After extensive measures on our part we succeeded in bringing him back to us, and the brave old man, whose only support in his old age and widowhood was my filial devotion, died in our arms the day after his awaited release. When he came back to us, he looked like a ghost. Charitable guards brought him, almost dead. I could see his broken bones, the open wounds and his skin bruised by the lashes. In unsteady words he described the deplorable prison experience. Surrounded by his henchmen, Jochai himself was the author of the final punishment. My father was unable to endure it and gave his soul to God!"

Aquila was deeply moved. Furtive tears accompanied his sorrowful tale.

"What about the authorities?" asked Saul, distraught. "Were they unaware of the crime?"

"I think so. The cruelty was too much for the abuse to have been attributed only to religious grounds."

"But didn't you make any appeal for justice?"

"Who would dare do that?" asked Hezekiah's worker with surprise. "I have friends who tried, but they paid for their desire for justice with even more violent abuse."

The former rabbi knew that Aquila was right. Only now did he have enough breadth of spiritual insight to appraise the old blindness that had

blackened his soul. Yes, Aquila was right. He had many times been deaf to the most heartrending pleas. He had invariably upheld his henchmen's most absurd decisions. He did remember Jochai – he had seemed so useful during his days of ignorance.

“And what do you think of Saul now?” he asked abruptly.

Far from knowing with whom he was exchanging his most innermost thoughts, Aquila replied without hesitation: “The Gospel says that we are to consider him a brother very much in need of the light of Jesus Christ. I never saw him personally. I feared the iniquities practiced in Jerusalem and fled to this place in haste. I have prayed to God for him, hoping that a ray from heaven will enlighten him, not so much because of myself – I am nobody – but because of Peter, whom I consider a second, very dear father. I believe that marvelous things could happen if the church of the Way could work freely. I think that the Galilean Apostles deserve a field without thorns for the sowing of Jesus.”

While Saul remained silent Aquila turned to his wife: “Prisca, do you remember how earnestly we entreated the Lord for the persecutor in the intimate prayers at the church? Many times, in order to clarify our weak spirits about forgiveness, Peter taught us to consider the implacable rabbi as a brother whom violence had darkened. So that our deepest resentment would melt away, he used to tell us about his own past. He too, out of ignorance, had denied the Master more than once. He emphasized our human weaknesses, inducing us to a better understanding. One day he even declared that Saul's entire persecution was useful because it made us think of our sins so that we might be watchful regarding our responsibilities to Jesus.”

Gamaliel's former pupil's eyes were wet with tears.

“There can be no doubt that the famous fisherman from Capernaum is one of the great brothers of the unfortunate,” he said convincingly.

The conversation took another direction after Prisca's input. She stated that she knew many women in Jerusalem, who, having husbands and children imprisoned, sincerely prayed to Jesus for the enlightenment of the infamous persecutor of the Way. Next, they talked about the Gospel. The mantle of stars arose over their great hopes, while Saul took in the pure stream of true friendship in that new, much smaller world.

Amid those loving and fraternal conversations the days passed quickly. From time to time food supplies and other resources arrived from Palmyra.

The three inhabitants of the silent oasis interwove their thoughts and aspirations around the Gospel of Jesus, the only book for meditation in that remote landscape.

The former rabbi's appearance had changed as a result of direct contact with the aggressive forces of nature. His suntanned complexion gave the impression of a man accustomed to the inclemency of the desert. The beard he had grown had changed his features. His hands, used to dealing with books, had become calloused and rough. However, the solitude, the austere discipline and the laborious loom had enriched his soul with light and peace. His calm, deep eyes bore witness to the new character of his spirit. He had finally understood the unknown peace that Jesus had desired for His disciples. He was now able to comprehend Peter's devotion, Stephen's serenity at the moment of his ignominious death, Abigail's fervor, and the moral virtues of the congregation of the Way persecuted by him in Jerusalem. In the absence of resources self-education had taught his smitten soul the sublime secret of giving himself to Christ, of resting in His merciful, invisible arms. Ever since he had consecrated his heart and soul to the Master, his remorse, pain and troubles had disappeared from his spirit. He accepted all work as a blessing, all necessity as a lesson. He effortlessly took kindly to Aquila and his wife as if they had been born under the same roof. Once, Aquila was taken ill and nearly died from a violent fever. Their difficult situation and the increase of the sand storms also weakened Prisca's energies and she fell ill with little hope of surviving. Saul showed undaunted courage and zeal, however. Taken with true trust in God, he waited for her restoration to peace and joy. Happily he saw Aquila return to the loom and his wife to her home duties, both full of new expressions of peace and trust.

When more than a year had gone by in that solitude, a caravan from Palmyra brought a brief note to Saul. Hezekiah informed him of the sudden but long-expected death of his brother.

Gamaliel's departure to the kingdom of death was nonetheless a heartbreaking surprise. After his father, the old teacher had been the best friend Saul had found in life. He meditated on his last advice and thought of his profound wisdom. Under his influence he had achieved the desired peace to adjust to the spiritual condition he needed in order to reorganize his life. On that day thoughts of deep longing tormented his sensitive soul.

That afternoon, after his meal and at the usual time for meditation, the former rabbi contemplated the couple with a greater tenderness transpiring in

his sincere eyes.

All three were immersed in meditation on the Divine Gospel, when Saul spoke with a certain shyness contrary to his normally resolute attitude.

“Aquila, many times in the solitude of our work I have thought of the enormity of the evil that the doctor of Tarsus caused you. “What would you do if one day you suddenly found yourself face to face with this persecutor?”

“I would try to regard him as a brother.”

“And you, Prisca?” he asked the woman, who was looking at him curiously.

“It would be a good opportunity for us to testify to the love Jesus exemplified in His divine lessons.”

The former rabbi recovered his composure, and raising his voice he said convincingly: “I have always believed that a man called to administer must answer for the errors of his subordinates in the overall plan of action. Therefore, to my way of thinking, I would not blame Jochai too much for becoming a common criminal by abusing a prerogative given to him to carry out such shameful vengeance.”

“Who would you blame, then, for my father’s murder?” asked Aquila while his friend made a short pause.

“I believe that Saul of Tarsus should answer for it. It is true that he himself did not authorize the cruel crime, but he became guilty due to his personal indifference as to the details of the task he was responsible for.”

The couple began to wonder about the reasons for such questions, while Saul shyly fell silent.

Finally, with a humble and moving voice, Saul began to speak: “My friends, under the Lord’s inspiration it is right that we confess to one another. My hands calloused from work and my efforts to learn well the virtues of the faith that both of you have exemplified to me should be a testimony to my spiritual renewal. I am Saul of Tarsus, the cruel persecutor-become-penitent servant. If I have erred much, today I need much. In His mercy Jesus rent the miserable tunic of my illusions. Regenerative suffering came to my heart, washing it with the tears of pain. I lost everything that implied worldly deference and gain by taking up the cross and following the Master on the path of spiritual redemption. It is true that I have not yet embraced the cross

of constructive and sanctifying struggle, but I am persevering in the effort of denying myself, despising my past of iniquity in order to merit the cross of my ascension toward God.”

Aquila and his wife were staring at him in astonishment.

“Do not doubt my words,” he continued with teary eyes. “I assume full responsibility for my pitiful deeds. But forgive me, taking into consideration my criminal ignorance!”

The weaver and his wife understood that his tears were choking his voice. Overcome by great emotion, Saul began to weep convulsively. Aquila approached and embraced him. That loving gesture seemed to worsen his pain-filled contrition and now the tears ran abundantly. He remembered the moment when he had found Ananias’s sincere friendship, and now feeling himself in the arms of a brother, he let his tears wash his soul completely. He felt the need to expand his affective sentiments. His old life in Jerusalem had been conventional and dry. As a prominent doctor of the Law he had had many admirers but he had never felt fraternal affinity toward any of them. In that corner of the desert, however, the picture was different. In front of him was an honest and honorable man, a dedicated companion and worker, a former victim of his cruel and unyielding persecutions. How many like Aquila and his wife were scattered across the world, eating the bitter bread of exile because of him? The great sentiments never inhabit the soul all at once in their full beauty. An individual poisoned by evil is like a container of vinegar, which needs to be emptied little by little. The vision of Jesus had been a living, immortal event; but in order to comprehend the full extent of his new duties, he would have to walk the narrow path of bitter and harsh trial. He had seen the Christ; but to get to Him, he had to go back and cross over the abysses. The disappointment in the synagogue of Damascus, the comfort of the humble brethren under Ananias’s leadership, the lack of financial means, Gamaliel’s austere counsels, the anonymity, the loneliness, the abandonment by those dearest to him, the heavy loom under the blazing sun, the lack of any physical comfort whatsoever, the daily meditation on the illusions of life – all these had represented priceless help for his victorious decision. The Gospel had worked as a light on the difficult journey of discovering himself in order to appraise the most pressing difficulties.

Tightly embracing his friend, who was trying to wipe his tears, he remembered that in Damascus, after the grand vision of the Messiah, he had perhaps still harbored deep inside himself the pride of knowing how to teach,

the love for the teacher's cathedra in Israel, the despotic tendency of forcing his fellow men to think like him; whereas now, he could examine his blameworthy past and feel the joy of reconciliation, turning to his victim with humility. At that moment he felt as if Aquila represented the community of all those harmed by his cruel excesses. Gentle peace filled his heart. He felt more distanced from pride, vanity, bitter ideas and terrible remorse. Each teardrop was a little bile being expunged from his soul, renewing his feelings of tranquility and relief.

"Brother Saul," said Aquila without hiding his joy, "let us rejoice in the Lord, because as brothers we were separated but now we are together again. Let us not talk of the past, but of the power of Jesus who transforms us with His love."

Prisca was also crying and broke in tenderly: "If Jerusalem were to find out about this victory of the Master, they would render thanks to God."

All three were now seated on the sparse grass of the oasis in the breeze that softened the harshness of the afternoon heat, united in the sublimity of the faith they had in common. The young Tarsian told them about the unforgettable outcome of his journey to Damascus, revealing to them how profoundly his life had been transformed.

Aquila and Prisca wept with emotion and joy listening to Saul's account of Jesus' mercy, which to their pious eyes represented not only a loving gesture to the wayward servant but a blessing of love for all humankind.

From then on their work seemed lighter and the difficulties less painful. Not a single sunset passed without their commenting on the glorious gift of Christ at the gates of Damascus.

"Now that the Master has brought us together," exclaimed Aquila happily, "let's leave the desert; let's proclaim Jesus' blessings throughout the whole world. Prisca and I don't have many family obligations. Because of my father's death we are alone with no heavy responsibilities, and we shouldn't miss out on the opportunity to help spread the Good News. Besides Levi's notes, we now have the vision of Jesus resurrected to illumine our word."

After a long time, and on the eve of returning to the struggle in the large and crowded cities, Saul heeded their enthusiastic appeals and asked about what they had in mind.

“Since your revelation,” exclaimed Aquila trustingly and hopefully, “I’ve been nourishing a great desire. It may seem incredible at first sight, but I dream of going to Rome and proclaiming Christ to the brothers of the old Law before I die. Your vision on the road to Damascus has filled me with courage. I will describe the event to those most indifferent and I will give a little light to the most foolish. As a humble servant of men, I will be able to devote myself to the interests of the Savior.”

“But when do you intend to go?”

“At the first chance when the Master shows me the way; we will leave Palmyra then.”

After a pause, during which Saul remained thoughtful, Aquila continued: “Why don’t you come to Rome with us?”

“Ah! If I could!” said the former rabbi, revealing his wishes. “I believe that, before anything else, Jesus will want to see me completely reconciled with all those I injured in Jerusalem. Besides, I need to see my parents to comfort the longing of my heart.”

In fact, after the arrival of the caravan that brought their replacements, the three companions of the Way left the oasis with one camel and headed toward Palmyra, where Gamaliel’s family received them with love.

Aquila and his wife would remain there for some time in Hezekiah’s service, until they could fulfill their beautiful dream of working in the powerful Rome of the Caesars, but Saul of Tarsus – now strong as a Bedouin – after thanking his benefactor for his generosity and bidding a tear-filled farewell to his friends, once again headed toward Damascus, radically changed by three years of meditation in the desert.

¹² The Bible, in Acts 18:3, refers to the Apostle Paul as being a tentmaker, whereas in this chapter Saul (not yet Paul) is described as being a weaver. This may be explained by the fact that tents during New Testament times were made out of woven goat’s hair and were used by both Arabic and Jewish peoples. For a description of such tents, see Benner, Jeff A. The Goat Hair Tent, www.ancient-hebrew.org/33_tent. – Tr.

¹³ Biblical references to Aquila and Prisca (diminutive Priscilla): Acts 18:2-3; 18:18; 18:19; 18:26; Rom. 16:3-4; I Cor. 16:19; II Tim 4:19. The accounts of Paul in Acts state that after his conversion, Paul remained in Damascus to preach in the synagogues, and that after a plot to kill him was revealed, he went to Jerusalem where he joined the disciples and moved about freely in the city (Acts 9:19-28). However, Paul states in his Letter to the Galatians that he did not go immediately to Jerusalem, but instead went into Arabia. He did not go to Jerusalem until three years later, and met only Peter and James (Gal. 1:17-18). The account here covers this three-year period. – Tr.

III

Struggle and Humiliation

The journey went smoothly. However, in his new solitude Saul realized that invisible powers were conferring lofty and consoling inspirations on his mind. In the star-filled night he had the feeling he was hearing a loving and wise voice expressing itself through appeals of infinite love and hope. From the moment he parted ways with Aquila and his wife's loving company and felt completely alone for the great undertaking of his new destiny, he had found an unexpected inner strength unknown to him before.

He could not define that spiritual state, but the fact was that Stephen remained nearby as a loyal companion under Jesus' guidance from then on.

Those exhortations, those gentle and friendly voices that were to assist him throughout his whole apostolic journey, and which he attributed directly to the Savior, in fact came from the kindhearted martyr of the Way. Stephen would follow him in spirit for thirty years, continually renewing his strength as he carried out the redemptive task of the Gospel.

In this way Jesus willed for the first victim of the Jerusalem persecutions to remain forever united to the first executioner of the converts to His doctrine of life and redemption.

Instead of sentiments of remorse and perplexity due to his blameful past and the longing and discouragement that had sometimes threatened his soul, he now felt radiant promises within his renewed spirit even though could not explain the sacred origin of such profound hopes. In spite of the remarkable physiological changes that the life, discipline and climate of the desert had wrought on him, he entered Damascus with sincere joy in his soul now completely devoted to Jesus' service.

With unspeakable joy Saul embraced old Ananias and filled him in on his spiritual progress. The venerable elder returned his affection with

immense kindness. This time the former rabbi had no need to isolate himself in an inn amongst people he did not know, because the brethren of the Way offered him open and loving hospitality. The comforting emotion of the first meeting he had attended before retiring to the desert was repeated daily. The small, fraternal congregation gathered every night to exchange new thoughts on Christ's teachings, to comment on worldly events in light of the Gospel, and to exchange objectives and conclusions. Saul was told all the news regarding the doctrine, which was now experiencing the initial effects of the clash between the Jews and the friends of Christ over the issue of circumcision. His passionate temperament sensed the extent of the task reserved for him. The conventionalist Pharisees of the synagogues were no longer opposed to the activities of the Way, provided that Jesus' followers were, before anything else, faithful observers of Moses' principles. Only Ananias and a few others perceived the subtlety of the casuists, who were deliberately provoking confusion far and wide, thereby hindering the victorious progress of the redemptive Good News. The ex-doctor of the Law realized that, in his absence, the persecution process had become more insidious and imperceptible; that the cruel but open nature of the initial movement had given way to manifestations of Pharisaic hypocrisy, which, under the pretext of acquiescence and benevolence, actually immersed the personality of Jesus and the grandeur of His divine lessons in a criminal and deliberate oblivion. Consistent with the new disposition of his conscience, Saul had not intended to return to the Damascus synagogue because he did not want to look like a pretentious teacher fighting for the salvation of others before attending to his own betterment. However, in light of what he was seeing and gathering with his acute psychological perception, he understood that it would be useful to face all the consequences and point out the disparities between Pharisaic formalism and the Gospel regarding what circumcision was and what the new faith was. Upon revealing to Ananias his plans to foment discussion on the subject, the kind old man encouraged his intention to reestablish the truth on its real fundamentals.

To that end, on the second Sabbath of his stay in the city the stalwart preacher went to the synagogue. No one recognized the rabbi from Tarsus in his threadbare tunic with his suntanned skin, his thin face and the livelier glow in his deep eyes.

Once the traditional reading and commentary were over and the floor was given to sincere scholars of the religion, the unknown man ascended the platform of the masters of Israel. Seeking to win the interest of the large

assembly, he spoke first of the sacred character of the Law of Moses, discoursing passionately on the wonderful and wise promises of Isaiah before embarking upon the study of the Prophets. Those present listened to him with profound attention. Some made an effort to identify that somehow strangely familiar voice. His vibrant preaching led to far-reaching and beautiful conclusions. Immense spiritual light overflowed from his rapturous words.

The former rabbi realized the magnetic power he now held over the large audience and began to speak of the Nazarene Messiah, comparing His life, deeds and teachings with the texts in the sacred writings that had announced His coming.

When he raised the problem of circumcision the assembly broke into a furious uproar.

“It’s him! ... It’s the traitor! ...” exclaimed the most insolent after recognizing the former doctor of Jerusalem. “Stone the blasphemer! ... It’s the outlaw from the sect of the Way!”

The leaders of the religious service recognized their former colleague. He was now considered a deserter of the Law and subject to severe and cruel punishment.

Saul was witnessing a repetition of the same scene that had occurred when he spoke to the selective meeting of the Levites from Cyprus. He faced the situation impassively until the religious authorities managed to calm the turbulent crowd.

After the most acute phase of the commotion the head of the synagogue stood up and ordered Saul to step down from the platform to answer his questions.

The Damascus convert understood at a glance that he would have to remain fully composed if he wanted to emerge successfully from this ordeal, so he obeyed readily without any protest.

“Are you Saul of Tarsus, the former rabbi of Jerusalem?” asked the authority emphatically.

“Yes, by the grace of Christ Jesus!” he answered firmly and resolutely.

“References to the carpenter of Nazareth are of no import at the moment. We are interested only in your immediate arrest, in accordance with

instructions received from the Temple!” explained the Jewish leader solemnly.

“My arrest?” asked Saul, surprised.

“Yes.”

“I do not acknowledge your right to arrest me,” said the preacher.

In the face of such a firm reply there was a general gasp of amazement.

“Why resist? You need only obey.”

Saul of Tarsus looked at him squarely: “I refuse, because in spite of having changed my religious concepts, I am still a doctor of the Law, and furthermore, on political grounds I am a Roman citizen and do not have to comply with verbal arrest orders.”

“But you are being arrested in the name of the Sanhedrin.”

“Where is the warrant?”

This unexpected question bewildered the priest. The official document had in deed arrived from Jerusalem over two years ago, but nobody could have foreseen this incident. The writ had been filed away carefully but could not be presented right away, as the circumstances now required.

“The parchment will be presented within a few hours,” added the leader of the synagogue, somewhat unsure of the fact.

And as if to justify himself, he added: “We have had orders from Jerusalem to arrest you ever since the scandal of your last sermon here in Damascus.”

Saul looked him in the eye, and addressing the assembly, which, surprised and marveling, had taken note of his moral courage, he stated loudly and clearly: “Men of Israel, I have brought to your souls the best I have to offer, but you refuse the truth, exchanging it for outward formalities. I do not condemn you. I feel sorry for you, because I too used to be as you are. However, when my time came I did not refuse the generous help that Heaven offered me. You hurl accusations against me and you reproach the religious convictions I now hold; but who among you is willing to discuss them with me? Who is the sincere warrior of the spiritual arena who wishes to probe the Holy Scriptures with me?”

A deep silence followed.

“Nobody?” asked the ardent artisan of the new faith with a triumphant smile. “I know you because I too have trod such paths. However, let us admit that Pharisaism has caused our loss by casting our most sacred hopes into an ocean of hypocrisy. You revere Moses in the synagogue; you are excessively careful with outward conventions; but what is the state of your home life? How much heartache you hide under your immaculate tunics! How many wounds you disguise with deceitful words! Like me, you should feel immense disgust with so many ignoble pretenses! If we were to point out the sinful acts that are practiced in the shadow of the Law, we would have neither whips enough to punish the guilty nor the exact number of curses required for such abominations! I too suffered your sickness; I too poisoned myself in the same darkness; but I have come here to bring you the vital remedy. You deny me your fraternal support; however, in vain you resist the processes of regeneration, for only Jesus can save us! I have brought you the Gospel, I have offered you the door of redemption for our old blemishes, and you want to repay my efforts with prison and curses? I refuse to receive such pay in exchange for having come here voluntarily! ... You cannot arrest me, for the word of God is not bound by shackles. If you yourselves reject it, there are others who will understand me. It would not be right to surrender myself to your caprices when the work I must do requires my dedication and goodwill.”

Even the leaders of the meeting seemed spellbound by powerful and inexplicable magnetic powers.

Saul looked intently at them one by one, revealing the strength of his powerful character.

“Your silence speaks louder than words,” he concluded almost daringly. “Jesus will not permit you to arrest His humble and loyal servant. May His blessings enlighten your minds with a true understanding of life’s realities.”

Having said that, he walked resolutely toward the door as the startled assembly watched him until, with a firm step, he disappeared into one of the narrow streets leading to the large square.

As if awakening after the daring challenge, the meeting degenerated into heated argument. The chief priest seemed extremely impressed with Saul’s statements and could not conceal his indecisiveness, struggling between Saul’s bitter truths and the order for his immediate arrest. His more strong-willed colleagues tried to boost his sense of authority. This brazen preacher had to be arrested at any cost. The more resolute began looking immediately

for the parchment from Jerusalem, and as soon as they found it they decided to request help from the civilian authorities and asked for their immediate attention to the matter. Within three hours all measures for the arrest of the audacious preacher were in place. The first contingents were placed at the various city gates. In order to prevent any attempt at escape, a small group of Pharisees and two soldiers were posted by each one.

Next, they started a mass search of the homes of all sympathetic persons suspected of having links with the disciples of the Nazarene.

As for Saul, upon leaving the synagogue he went to see Ananias, anxious for his caring advice.

The wise old man listened to his account of what had happened and approved of the posture he had assumed.

“I know the Master condemned arguing and never associated with contentious persons,” Saul stated finally, “but he also never gave in to evil. I am ready to repair my wrongful past. I shall face the incomprehension of Jerusalem in order to witness to my radical transformation. I shall ask the forgiveness of those I harmed in the foolishness of my ignorance, but in no way shall I pass up the opportunity to prove myself sincere and truthful. Would I be serving the Master by bowing my head to lower ideals? Jesus struggled against them as much as possible and His disciples cannot do otherwise.”

The kind old man nodded as he listened to what Saul was saying. After reassuring him of his approval he advised him to be very careful. It would be better to leave his hideout as soon as possible. The Jews in Damascus knew the part Ananias had played in healing Saul, and because of it he often had to endure their insults and scorn. They would certainly come looking for Saul there in order to arrest him. He thus suggested that Saul should go to the house of a sister in faith, a washer-woman. They used to pray and study the Gospel there, and she would receive him kindly.

Saul accepted the advice without hesitation.

Within three hours old Ananias was sought out and interrogated. Because of his tight-lipped behavior, he was taken to prison for further questioning.

When interrogated by the religious authorities he would reply only: “Saul must be with Jesus.”

Within the scruples of his conscience he felt that, in this way, he was neither lying to men nor compromising a loyal friend. He was imprisoned and denied the means or right to communicate for 24 hours, and was then released after suffering twenty blows with a cudgel, leaving his face and hands badly hurt. As soon as he was free, however, he waited for nightfall and cautiously went to the humble hovel where the Way's sermons were delivered. Meeting his friend again, Ananias told him the plan he had come up with to remedy the situation.

"When I was a child," said Ananias cheerfully, "I watched a man escape over the walls of Jerusalem."

And as if remembering the smallest details of the incident in his tired memory, he asked: "Saul, would you be afraid of escaping in a wicker basket?"

"Why would I be?" he asked, smiling. "Didn't Moses begin life in a basket upon the waters?"

The old man was pleased with the comparison and revealed his plan. Tall trees stood next to the city walls not far from there. They would lift the fugitive in a large basket, and then without much effort he could be let down on the other side ready to begin his journey to Jerusalem as he intended. The former rabbi felt immense joy. That very hour, the washer-woman went to fetch three reliable brothers to help with the plan, and when the sky became darker shortly after midnight a small group met next to the wall at a point far away from the center of the city. Saul kissed Ananias's hands, nearly in tears. He whispered a goodbye to his friends while one of them gave him a large pack of barley cakes. Near the top of a leafy, dark tree the youngest of the brothers awaited the signal. Saul got into his improvised vessel and escaped in the middle of the silent night.

Once on the other side Saul quickly climbed out of the basket, beset by strange thoughts. Did he really have to escape like this? He had not committed any crime. Would he not be a coward by refusing to appear before the civil authorities to explain himself? At the same time, he considered the fact that his behavior had not resulted from puerile or lower sentiments; after all, he was going boldly to Jerusalem to seek out his former colleagues and talk to them openly. Thus he concluded that it would not be reasonable to surrender, defenseless, to the tyrannical fanaticism of the Damascus synagogue.

The fugitive was far away by daybreak. With him he had the barley cakes as his only provision and the Gospel given to him by Gamaliel as a remembrance of his long time of solitude and struggle.

The journey was quite difficult and arduous. He was compelled to stop many times because of fatigue. More than once on the hard trip he had to turn to the charity of others. The travel from Damascus to Jerusalem by camel, horse or dromedary took no less than a week of exhausting riding; Saul, however, was on foot. He could perhaps join up with some caravan where he could get the resources he needed, but he preferred to acquaint his powerful will with the hardest obstacles. Whenever fatigue suggested that he wait for the help of others to arrive he would try to overcome his discouragement and get up again, supported by an improvised walking stick.

After the fond remembrances experienced in the place where he had had the glorious vision of the resurrected Messiah he again had tender emotions on entering Palestine, slowly crossing the extensive regions of Galilee. He made it a point of getting to know the theater of the Master's first struggles, to identify himself with that most endearing landscape, to visit Capernaum and Nazareth, and to listen to the natives of the region. At that time the ardent Apostle to the Gentiles already wanted to get to know all the facts regarding the life of Jesus, anxious to coordinate them accurately so as to give his brothers and sisters in humanity the best repository of information on the Divine Emissary.

When he arrived in Capernaum, a golden sunset cast an enchanting light over the bucolic countryside. The former rabbi walked down reverently to the shores of the lake. He became enraptured as he contemplated the lapping waters. Thinking of Jesus, of the power of His love, he wept, overcome by a singular emotion. He wished he had been a humble fisherman in order to have received the sublime teachings at the source of His kind and immortal words.

Saul stayed there for two days in gentle rapture. Without revealing who he was he looked for Levi, who welcomed him with delight. Saul revealed his love and knowledge of the Gospel, and spoke of the possibility of making a few notes. The son of Alphaeus was happy as he listened to those intelligent and comforting words. In Capernaum Saul spent marvelous hours of delight for his emotive spirit. He went to the place where the Master used to preach; a little further down was Peter's simple house, and then the tax collector's office where the Master had called Levi to carry out an important role among the Apostles. He embraced hale and hearty men who had been blind and

leprous, healed by the merciful hands of the Messiah. He went to Dalmanutha, where he met Mary Magdalene. He enriched the impressive extent of his observations with the gathering of new information.

A few days later after having rested in Nazareth Saul was at the gates of the holy city of the Israelites, exhausted and fatigued from the long and arduous walk and from the sleepless nights whose sufferings often seemed endless.

In Jerusalem, however, other no less painful surprises awaited him.

He was gripped by anxious questions. He had not heard any news regarding his parents, friends, loving sister or relatives – all whom he had kept alive in his memory. How would those who had been his truest colleagues receive him? He could not expect an affable reception from the Sanhedrin; the episode in Damascus had given him to understand the state of mind of the members of the Tribunal. Obviously he had been summarily expelled from the most prominent theater of the Jewish people; on the other hand, he had been admitted by Christ to the infinite realm of the eternal truths.

He was dominated by these thoughts as he passed through the city gate while remembering the times when, in a speedy chariot, he had headed for Joppa to visit Zechariah's house. The memories of the most fortunate times of his youth filled his eyes with tears. The passers-by in Jerusalem could not possibly have imagined who that lean and pale man was with his long beard and sunken eyes, stumbling wearily along.

After much effort he reached a familiar house. His heart beat quickly. Like a simple beggar, he knocked at the door in anxious expectation.

A stern-looking man answered dryly.

“Could you please tell me,” Saul asked humbly, “if a woman named Delilah still lives here?”

“No,” the man answered gruffly.

His hard look did not encourage further questions, but even so, Saul ventured: “Could you perchance tell me where she has moved to?”

“Since when,” answered the man irately, “do I have to account to a beggar? Soon you'll be asking me if I bought this house, and then you'll ask

me the price, demand dates, and ask for more information on the former residents; you'll waste my time with a thousand idle questions.”

And looking at Saul impassively, he ended bluntly: “I don't know anything, you hear? Get lost!”

The fugitive of Damascus returned calmly to the street while the man expressed his ill temper by slamming the door.

Gamaliel's former pupil reflected on the bitter reality of his first reception. Obviously Jerusalem would no longer recognize him. In spite of this poignant thought he would not let himself be overcome with discouragement. He decided to look up Alexander, a relative of Caiaphas and his colleague at the Sanhedrin and Temple. Very tired, he knocked at the door with little hope. After the first question, a servant came back to tell him that his master would see him right away.

In fact Alexander received the stranger with undisguised surprise.

Happy at having gained the attention of an old friend, Saul greeted him effusively.

The illustrious man could not hide his displeasure but asked as kindly as he could: “Friend, why have you come to this house?”

“You really don't recognize me?” Saul asked in good spirits in spite of his fatigue.

“Your face seems somewhat familiar, but...”

“Alexander!” he exclaimed happily, “Have you forgotten all about Saul?”

A big embrace was the reply of his friend, whose attitude changed immediately. “Well, well! At last! Thank God I see you have been healed! I wasn't wrong to hope for your return! Great is the power of the God of Moses!”

Saul immediately understood the ambiguity of those words. Perceiving how difficult it would be to make himself understood, he searched for the best way to explain himself successfully while his friend continued: “But look at you! You look more like a Bedouin of the desert ... Tell me! How long did the stubborn illness last?”

Saul worked up his nerve and emphasized: “Well, there's obviously been a mistake or you are not well informed, because I was never ill in the first

place.”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Alexander, visibly displeased after such a display of affection. “Jerusalem is full of stories about you. Saddoc came here about three years ago to ask the Sanhedrin to take strict measures regarding your situation, and after a lot of discussion he took with him an order to have you arrested. Ever since then I have fought desperately for the terms of the warrant to be changed. I proved that, if you had adopted a sympathetic attitude toward the people of the Way, your decision was obviously based on reasons that we were not able to understand immediately, such as, for example, to better probe the extent of their revolutionary activities.”

Saul could not contain himself and objected before his friend could continue: “But in that case I would be a disloyal hypocrite and unworthy of both my position and myself.”

Constrained, Alexander frowned: “At any rate I considered all the hypotheses, and since I couldn’t take you for a hypocrite,” he added, trying to smooth things over, “I succeeded in proving that your attitude in Damascus was the result of temporary insanity. It wouldn’t be right to think otherwise or else you would have been untrue to us in the circles of Pharisaism.”

The former rabbi sensed how delicate the impasse was. His religious concepts had been renewed but he was now before a friend; while many had forsaken him, Alexander had received him like a brother. He must not offend him. Nonetheless it was impossible to hide the truth. He felt his eyes filling with tears. He had to witness to Christ at any cost, even if he had to lose his greatest affections in the world.

“Alexander,” he said humbly, “it is true that I initiated the great persecution of the Way, but now I must confess I was wrong. The Galilean Apostles were right. We are on the threshold of great changes. At the gates of Damascus Jesus appeared to me in his glorious resurrection and exhorted me to serve his Gospel of love.”

He spoke shyly; he did not wish to offend his friend’s beliefs. Alexander’s blanched face displayed profound displeasure nonetheless.

“Do not voice such absurdities!” he exclaimed with a sarcastic smile. “Unfortunately I see that the illness continues to undermine both your physical and mental strength. The synagogue in Damascus was right after all. If I hadn’t known you from childhood I would now label you as a blasphemer and deserter.”

Despite his strength Saul was downcast.

“Moreover,” continued Alexander, assuming the airs of a protector, “when you first started out on your journey I disagreed with the small escort you had chosen. Jonas and Dimitrius are daft and Jacob is senile. In such company anything that went wrong with you would mean a great moral disaster for our position.”

“Nevertheless, Alexander,” said Saul somewhat humiliated, “I must insist on the truth. I saw the Messiah from Nazareth with my own eyes; I heard the words of His living voice. Understanding the errors of my ways and my defective ideas about faith, I went into the desert. I lived there for three years doing hard work and meditating at length. My conviction is not superficial. Today I believe that Jesus is the Savior, the Son of the Living God.”

“Your illness,” repeated Alexander arrogantly, changing his tone of intimacy, “has upset the life of your whole family. Ashamed at hearing the news from Syria, Jacob and Delilah moved from Jerusalem to Cilicia. When your mother learned of the Sanhedrin’s order to arrest you, she died in Tarsus; your father, who educated you so carefully, expecting your mind to glean the highest honors of the Jewish people, spends his days downcast and unhappy. Tired of enduring the people’s sarcasm in Jerusalem, your friends have become withdrawn and humiliated after having looked for you without success. Doesn’t such a picture pain you? Wouldn’t such heartache as this be enough for you to come to your senses?”

The former doctor of the Law’s heart was stricken with anguish. So many anxious days, so much bitterness in hopes of regaining some understanding and rest with his loved ones; but he now saw that it had all been illusion and ruin. His family had fallen apart, his mother was dead, his father unhappy; his friends hated him; Jerusalem mocked him.

Seeing Saul in such a state of affairs, his friend was happy inside, anxiously anticipating the effect of his words.

After thinking for a minute, Saul pointed out: “I’m sorry for such sad consequences, and God as my witness, I did not mean for this to happen. However, according to the old Law, even those who have not yet accepted the Gospel should understand that we must not be proud. Despite the force of his commandments Moses taught goodness. The prophets who succeeded him were emissaries of profound messages for our souls, which had become lost

in iniquity. Amos urged us to search for the Lord so that we might live. I am sorry that my loved ones feel offended, but we must remember that, before listening to any idle worldly judgment, we must seek the judgments of God.”

“Do you mean to persist in your errors?” asked Alexander, almost hostile.

“I do not feel I am in error. Owing to this widespread misunderstanding,” remarked the former rabbi, “I too am in a painful situation; but the Master will not withhold His aid. I remember Him and experience great comfort. The love of my family and the consideration of my friends were all the wealth I had in the world. However, I found in Levi’s notes the case of a rich young man¹⁴, and it indicates how I must proceed at this time. Ever since my childhood I have tried to fulfill my duties without wavering, but if I must resort to the balance of my wealth in order to reach Jesus’ light, I will renounce the esteem of the world itself!”

Alexander seemed moved by the melancholic tone of those last words. Saul gave the impression of someone about to weep.

“You are deeply disturbed,” objected Alexander. “Only a madman could behave like this.”

“Gamaliel wasn’t a madman and he accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah,” added the former doctor, evoking the venerable memory of the great rabbi.

“I don’t believe it!” said Alexander, putting on superior airs.

Saul looked down in silence. He felt greatly humiliated. After being taken as a madman he was taken to be a liar. Nevertheless, at the height of his perplexity he remembered that his friend was not in a position to understand him fully. He was reflecting on the embarrassing situation when Alexander said: “Unfortunately I must be convinced of your precarious state of mind. For the time being you may stay in Jerusalem as you please, but it would be best not to add to the scandal of your illness with false praise for the carpenter of Nazareth. I worked hard to get the Sanhedrin to change their decision, but it might not last. As for the rest of the matter,” he said by way of goodbye, “you know I will be at your disposal at any time should you decide to change your attitude.”

Saul understood the warning. There was no need to prolong the conversation. With good manners his friend was throwing him out.

Two minutes later, Saul was back on the street. It was almost noon on a very hot day. He was thirsty and hungry. He looked in his pouch and it was almost empty. There was very little left from what he had received from Gamaliel's brother on leaving Palmyra for good. He looked for the cheapest inn in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Then, after a frugal meal, and before the caressing shadows of the afternoon began to fall, he walked full of hope toward the renovated old house where Simon Peter and his companions carried out their activities on behalf of Jesus' cause.

On the way he remembered when he had gone with Saddoc to listen to Stephen. How everything was now happening in reverse! The critic of yesterday had now returned to be criticized. The judge-turned-defendant's heart was immersed in singular anxieties. How would they receive him at the church of the Way?

Saul stopped in front of the humble house. Immersed in the past, and with a heavy heart, he thought of Stephen. When he had stood before his friends before the authorities of Judaism at the Sanhedrin his attitude had been otherwise. He knew their individual weaknesses since he too had donned the pharisaical mask and could surmise their clamorous errors. However, now that he was about to face the Galilean Apostles his conscience was overcome with a sense of sacred veneration. These men might be unrefined and simple, and they might be living outside the intellectual values of the time, but they had been Jesus' first helpers. Moreover he could not approach them without experiencing profound regret. All of them had suffered shame and humiliation because of him. If it had not been for Gamaliel perhaps Peter himself would have been stoned. He needed to solidify his sentiments of humility in order to express his ardent desire for sacred cooperation with Christ. In Damascus he had struggled in the synagogue against the hypocrisy of old friends; in Jerusalem he had faced Alexander without fear; however, it seemed to him that his attitude here should be different, that he should renounce himself in order to be reconciled with those he had harmed.

Deep in thought, he knocked on the door, almost trembling.

Prochorus, one of the helpers who worked inside, answered the door politely.

"Brother," said Saul humbly, "could you please tell me if Peter is in?"

"I'll check," he answered amicably.

“If he is,” continued Saul somewhat hesitant, “tell him that Saul of Tarsus wishes to speak with him in Jesus’ name.”

Prochorus went pale and stuttered a “Yes,” fixing his startled eyes on the visitor before leaving hesitantly, unable to disguise his great surprise. It was the persecutor; he had returned after three years. He now remembered Saul’s first argument with Stephen when the great preacher of the Gospel had suffered so many insults. In a few moments he reached the room where Peter and John were discussing internal problems. The news hit them like an explosion. Nobody could have foreseen such a thing. They did not believe the story that Jerusalem had elaborated upon with unknown details at each telling. There was no way that the implacable persecutor of the Master’s disciples had converted to the cause of His Gospel of love and redemption.

Before sending Prochorus back to the unexpected visitor the former fisherman of the Way called James so that all three could decide what to do.

The son of Alphaeus, now a strict ascetic, opened his eyes wide.

After the first hurried exchange of justifiably fear-filled opinions Simon stated with great prudence: “It is true that Saul caused us all the harm he was capable of. However it is not for ourselves that we should be afraid, but for the work of Christ that has been entrusted to us.”

“I’ll bet this whole story about his conversion is a farce to lead us into a new trap,” said James somewhat uneasily.

“As for me,” said John, “I pray to Jesus to enlighten us even though I remember the whippings that Saul ordered to be inflicted on me in prison. Before anything else we must find out if Christ did in fact appear to him at the gates of Damascus.”

“But how can we find out?” asked Peter with deep understanding. “Our proof lies in Saul himself. He is the field that will either reveal or not reveal the sacred seedling of the Master. In my opinion, since we are in charge of a legacy that does not belong to us personally we must proceed in accordance with human prudence. It would not be right to open our doors when we do not know his intentions. The first time he came here Saul of Tarsus was treated with all the respect that the world accorded him. I offered the best seat for him to listen to Stephen. Unfortunately his disrespectful and sarcastic attitude caused a scandal that ended in the imprisonment and death of our friend. He came intentionally and returned later to arrest us. He repaid our fraternal love with shackles and ropes. Having said that, however, I must not forget the

Master's lesson regarding forgiveness, and so I would reaffirm the fact that I am not thinking only of ourselves but the responsibilities that have been entrusted to us."

The others were silent before such wise remarks, while the ex-fisherman continued: "Consequently, despite my willingness to do so I cannot allow him to be received into this house without making a better study of the situation. That said, I shall call a meeting for tonight. The matter is very grave. Saul of Tarsus was the first persecutor of the Gospel and I want everyone's help in deciding what to do. I do not want to seem unjust or imprudent."

And after a long pause he said to Prochorus: "Go and tell him to come back later; that I cannot leave more urgent matters for the time being."

"What if he insists?" asked the worried deacon.

"If he has in fact come in the name of Jesus he will understand and wait."

Saul was anxiously awaiting the messenger's return. He had to find someone who could understand him and acknowledge his transformation. He was exhausted. The church of the Way was his last hope.

Prochorus delivered the message with utter hesitation. Saul understood the situation at once: the Galilean Apostles did not believe him. He now examined the situation more clearly and perceived the great and indefinable mercy of Christ visiting him unexpectedly at the deepest point of his spiritual abyss before the gates of Damascus. Judging from how very difficult it had been for him to meet Jesus, he realized how much goodness and compassion had been necessary for the Master to welcome him and address him with sacred exhortations during that unforgettable encounter.

The deacon looked at him sympathetically. Saul received the reply highly disappointed. He went pale and shook as if he were ashamed of himself. Moreover he looked ill, had sunken eyes and was all skin-and-bone.

"I understand, brother," he said nearly in tears, "Peter is right."

Those words moved Prochorus to the core of his soul. Showing a willingness to help and demonstrating a full knowledge of the facts, he said: "Haven't you brought any sort of introduction from Ananias in Damascus?"

"I already have the Master's."

"How so?" asked the deacon, surprised.

“Jesus told me in Damascus,” said Saul peacefully, “that he would show me how much I must suffer for the love of His name.”

Deep down the former rabbi felt immensely homesick for the brothers of Damascus who had treated him with the greatest of simplicity. Nevertheless he also realized that this was the right way to proceed for now, since he had given proof in the synagogue and to Ananias that his attitude left no room for pretence. Upon realizing that everyone in Jerusalem was receiving him as a common liar he felt hot tears welling up in his eyes. But so that the deacon would not see his wounded sentiments, he made up the excuse: “My eyes have become tired due to the desert sun! Could you give me a little fresh water, please?”

The deacon complied immediately.

In a few moments Saul was immersing his hands in a large jar, washing his eyes in pure water.

“I’ll come back later,” he said, shaking the hand of the deacon, who, impressed, went back inside.

Suffering from physical weakness, fatigue, the abandonment of friends and bitter disillusionment, Saul walked unsteadily away.

At night and as planned, Simon Peter, showing admirable good sense, gathered his companions to consider the matter. Besides the Galilean Apostles the meeting included the Nicanor brothers, Prochorus, Parmenas, Timon, Nicolas and Barnabas. Barnabas was a member of the most direct helpers at the church because of the elevated qualities of his soul.

With Peter’s permission James began the discussion. He was opposed to any kind of immediate help to the last-minute convert. John then proffered the fact that Jesus had the power to transform the most evil spirits as well as to uplift the most unfortunate. Prochorus spoke of his impressions regarding the obstinate persecutor of the Gospel and emphasized the compassion that his state of health would awaken in the most unfeeling soul. Barnabas in turn told them that, when he was still in Cyprus before moving permanently to Jerusalem, he had heard some Levites describing the courage with which the convert had spoken in the synagogue of Damascus soon after his vision of Jesus.

Peter was impressed with Barnabas’s opinion and asked for more details. He explained as much as he knew and asked for the issue to be resolved with

the greatest benevolence.

Nicolas saw the atmosphere of sympathy forming around the figure of the former rabbi and objected firmly on principle: “We mustn’t forget that it would not be right to forget the maimed in this house, victims of the hateful cruelty of Saul’s henchmen. It is written in the Scriptures that we should be careful with wolves that enter the flock in sheep’s clothing. The doctor of the Law, who caused us such harm, always displayed a penchant for outrageous statements against the Gospel in the Sanhedrin. How can we be sure he isn’t preparing another one of his traps?”

In light of such a question the kind Barnabas looked down with nothing to say. Peter noticed that the meeting was divided into two groups: on one side were John and himself heading the favorable opinion; on the other were James and Philip leading the opposition. In deference to Nicolas’s warning Peter added gently: “Friends, before making any statement from a personal point of view we must reflect on the infinite goodness of the Master. During my life’s labors before Pentecost I must confess that I committed all sorts of wrongs on my path as a weak and sinful man. I didn’t hesitate to stone unfortunates and I even advised Christ to do the same! As you know, I denied the Master in His last hours. However, in view of the knowledge we received by way of heavenly inspiration, we must remember Christ in any initiative. We must realize that, if Saul of Tarsus is trying to use such means to deal a new blow to the servants of the Gospel, then he is even more despicable than before when he tormented us openly. Therefore since he is a person in need, I don’t see any reason to refuse him our fraternal hand.”

Noticing that James was preparing to defend Nicolas’s opinion, Simon Peter continued after a brief pause: “Our brother has just mentioned the symbol of the wolf that appears within the flock in the clothing of a gentle and humble sheep. I agree with this expression of caution. Mindful of the responsibilities entrusted to me, I myself could not have received Saul today when he knocked at our door. I didn’t want to decide anything without consulting with you first. The Master taught us that no worthwhile work can be done on earth without fraternal cooperation. However, in light of Nicolas’s opinion let’s examine this unexpected problem with sincerity. It’s true that Jesus warned us to beware the leaven of the Pharisees and stated that disciples should be gentle as doves but wise as serpents. Let us consider the possibility that Saul of Tarsus could in fact be the symbolic wolf. Even with this hypothetical knowledge we would still have a serious issue to resolve. If we

are involved in a labor of peace and love, what are we to do with the wolf after having identified it? Kill it? We know that this isn't in our line of conduct. Wouldn't it be more reasonable to think of the possibility of taming it? We know that unrefined men can tame ferocious dogs. So where would be the spirit that Jesus bequeathed to us as a sacred legacy if out of petty fear we didn't practice goodness?"

Peter's concise speech had a remarkable effect. James himself seemed ashamed of his initial thoughts. Nicolas searched in vain for further objections. Observing the heavy silence that had set in, Peter concluded calmly: "Therefore my friends, I propose that we appoint Barnabas to visit Saul personally in the name of this house. He and Saul do not know each other, which is an advantage, since upon seeing Barnabas, Saul will have nothing to remind him of his past in Jerusalem. If he were visited for the first time by one of us, he would perhaps be distressed and think that we were calling him to account."

John applauded the idea enthusiastically. In light of Peter's wise words, James and Philip were satisfied and serene and it was agreed that Barnabas would visit Saul the next day. They would await Saul of Tarsus with great interest; if his conversion were in fact real, so much the better.

The deacon from Cyprus was noted for his great goodness. His humble and caring words and his conciliatory spirit contributed to the peaceful solution of all matters in the church.

With a kind smile Barnabas embraced the ex-rabbi the following morning at the inn where he was staying. In his new personality there was not a trace of the infamous persecutor who had made Simon Peter call his friends together to decide whether or not to receive him. The former doctor of the Law was full of humility and he was ill. He displayed undisguised fatigue in his smallest gestures. His face told of great suffering. He responded to Barnabas's loving words with a sad, shy smile. Even so, Barnabas could see how pleased Saul was with the visit. Barnabas's goodwill gesture touched him. At his request Saul told him about his journey to Damascus and the glorious vision of the Master, which was now the unforgettable landmark in his life. Barnabas could not hide his affinity for Saul and within a few hours he felt so attuned to his new friend that it was almost as if they had known each other for many years. After their talk Barnabas excused himself for a moment, went to the innkeeper and paid Saul's expenses. He then invited

Saul to accompany him to the church of the Way. Saul hesitated but Barnabas insisted.

“I’m afraid,” said Saul somewhat indecisively, “because I have offended Simon Peter and the other friends a great deal. Only by Christ’s mercy was I given a ray of light so that I would not throw my life away completely.”

“Well now!” Barnabas exclaimed, kindly tapping Saul’s shoulder. “Who hasn’t erred in life? If Jesus has helped us all, it is not because we deserved it but because as sinners we needed it.”

In a few minutes they were on their way. Barnabas noticed the former rabbi’s poor state of health. Very pale and weak, he seemed difficult for him to walk; his hands were shaking and he was feverish. He allowed himself to be led like someone who knew how much he needed help. His humility moved Barnabas, who had heard so many dreadful things about him.

When they arrived Prochorus opened the door, but this time Saul would not be kept waiting. Barnabas kindly took his arm and they went to the large room where Peter and Timon awaited them. They greeted each other in Jesus’ name. The former persecutor became even paler. Upon seeing him, Simon in turn could not hide his surprise at how different he looked.

His sunken eyes and extreme weakness told the Galilean Apostles of his profound suffering.

“Brother Saul,” Peter said movingly, “Jesus welcomes you to this house.”

“Amen,” answered Saul with tears in his eyes.

Timon embraced him with affectionate words in John’s stead. John had left early in the morning to work at the church in Joppa.

In a few moments, overcoming the constraint of his first contact with the Master’s personal friends after such a long time, the young Tarsian responded to their request and told them about his journey to Damascus, giving all the details of the great event and displaying singular emotion in the tears that streamed down his face. He was highly moved at remembering such immense grace. Peter and Timon had no more doubts. The former rabbi’s vision had been real. Along with Barnabas both followed the tale to the end with eyes full of tears. The Master had indeed returned to convert the great persecutor of His doctrine. Asking Saul of Tarsus to join His fold of love, He had revealed once more the immortal lesson of forgiveness and mercy.

When the ex-rabbi finished his tale he was tired and drained. Encouraged to tell them about his new hopes, his plans for spiritual work, and what he intended to do in Jerusalem, he immediately professed his deep gratitude for their loving interest and said timidly: “I must begin working actively to undo my blameful past. It is true that I caused much harm to Jesus’ church in Jerusalem, but if His mercy prolongs my stay in the world I will use my time to extend this house of love and peace to other places.”

“Yes,” said Peter thoughtfully. “The Messiah will surely renew your strength so that you may fulfill such a noble commitment when the time is right.”

Saul seemed comforted with these words of encouragement, and wanting to solidify the trust of the others, he took out a parchment scroll from the folds of his threadbare tunic. Presenting it to Peter, he said movingly: “Here is a souvenir of Gamaliel’s friendship; I always carry it with me. A little while before he died he gave me a copy of Levi’s notes concerning the Savior’s life and deeds. These notes meant a lot to him because he received them from this house on his first visit here.”

Upon recalling this fact Peter took the manuscript with lively interest. Saul saw that Gamaliel’s gift had the effect foreseen by its generous giver. From then on Peter looked at Saul with more trust. Peter told him how good the kind rabbi had been to them, and wanted to know about his life in Palmyra, his last days and his passing. Saul was happy to comply.

Returning to the subject of his new perspective on things, he humbly explained more broadly: “I have many work plans for the future but I feel weak and ill. The effort of my last journey without means of any kind worsened my health. I feel feverish, my body is aching and my soul is exhausted.

“Are you short on money?” asked Simon.

“Yes,” he answered hesitantly.

“Such needs,” said Peter, “have already been provided for in part. Don’t worry about it too much. I told Barnabas to pay for your initial expenses at the inn. As for the rest, we invite you to stay with us as long as you wish. This house is yours too. Make use of what we have.”

Their guest was very touched. Remembering the past, he felt his self-esteem wounded, but at the same time, he prayed to Jesus to help him not to

disparage the opportunity to learn.

“I accept,” he answered reticently, showing his shyness. “I will stay with you while my health needs care.”

And as if having great difficulty in adding a request to the favor he had just accepted, after a long pause in which he was making an effort to speak he asked movingly: “If possible, I would like to occupy the same bed that Stephen slept in when he was generously sheltered in this house.”

Barnabas and Peter were greatly moved. They had all agreed not to mention the preacher who had been slain under a hail of mockery and stones. They did not want to bring up the past in front of the Damascus convert, even if his attitude turned out not to be sincere.

Peter nearly wept at hearing Saul. He very graciously acceded to Saul’s request and took him to the room, where Saul laid down on very clean sheets. Peter did even more: grasping the profound significance of Saul’s wish, he brought him the simple parchments that the martyr had used daily in his study and meditation on the Law, the Prophets and the Gospel. Despite his fever Saul rejoiced. He was overcome by powerful emotions as he read the favorite passages of the sacred parchments, where he found the name Abigail written many times. There were phrases peculiar to his beloved’s mannerisms; expressions and dates that coincided perfectly with her innermost revelations, when both had enjoyed talking about the past in Zechariah’s orchard. The word Corinth was also repeated many times. Those documents seemed to have a voice of their own. They spoke to his heart of a great and holy fraternal love. He listened in silence and ardently kept his conclusions to himself. He would reveal to no one his inner pain. The great errors of his public life, his remorse and his self-corrections, which, although made openly, very few friends were able to comprehend – this was all others needed to know about. Peter noticed his attitude of constant meditation and made every effort to offer him his brotherly assistance: friendly words of encouragement, comments on the power of Jesus, nourishing broths, rich fruits. Touched by all this care, the convalescent did not know how to express his undying gratitude.

However he noticed that James, son of Alphaeus, perhaps afraid of Saul’s past actions, would not say one word to him. James had made himself a strict follower of the Law of Moses within the church of the Way and Saul saw him only from time to time, an impassive shadow gliding among the sick,

murmuring soundless prayers. At first James' lack of interest hurt Saul, but soon he considered the need to humble himself before all. He had not yet done anything that would demonstrate his new convictions. When he had been a dominant figure in the Sanhedrin he too was unforgiving of last minute adherents.

As soon as he began to recover his health and was fully accepted into Peter's affections, Saul asked his advice regarding the plans he had in mind. He requested utmost sincerity so that he could face the situation however hard the circumstances might be.

"I personally," said the Apostle thoughtfully, "do not think it is wise to stay in Jerusalem for now during this period of renewal. To be frank with you, we must view the new state of your soul as a precious plant that has just begun to sprout. You must give the divine seed of faith room to grow. If you were to stay here, every day you would find, on the one hand, inflexible priests at war against your soul; on the other, persons who do not comprehend and speak of how hard it is to forgive, although they know full well what the Master taught about it. You mustn't ignore the fact that the persecution of sympathizers of the Way has left deep marks on people's souls. It is not rare for maimed persons to come here cursing the persecution. For us, Saul, that is in a past that shall never return; however, such individuals could not understand you right away. You would be out of place in Jerusalem. The seed of your convictions would find a thousand hostile elements and perhaps you would be at the mercy of exasperation."

Saul was greatly distressed as he listened to Peter's advice, but he did not protest. The Apostle was right. Throughout the city he would meet with destructive and vile criticism.

"I think I shall go back to Tarsus," he said humbly. "Maybe my old father will understand the situation and help me out. I know Jesus will bless my efforts. If I must begin my life anew, I shall do so in the home that gave me birth."

Simon contemplated him tenderly, surprised at that spiritual transformation.

Both engaged in friendly conversation every day. The Damascus convert's astute intelligence displayed insatiable curiosity regarding the person of Christ, His smallest deeds and His subtlest teachings. At other times he asked the ex-fisherman all the details possible about Stephen; he rejoiced

in his memories of Abigail although he ardently kept secret the details of the romance of his younger years. He learned of the hard labor of the preacher of the Gospel when he was a slave, his devotion to a Roman patrician named Sergius Paulus, his escape in miserable health at the Palestine port, his admittance to the Way's church as a beggar, his first notions of the Gospel and his consequent enlightenment in Christ Jesus. Saul would listen with enchantment to Peter's simple and loving accounts as he displayed his veneration for the martyr while at the same time avoiding wounding the susceptibilities of the repentant persecutor.

As soon as was able to get out of bed, he went to listen to the preaching in the same room where he had insulted Abigail's brother the first time. The preachers of the Gospel were usually Peter and James. The former spoke with profound wisdom while making use of marvelous allegories; the latter, however, seemed tormented by Judaic influences. To most listeners James gave the impression of having embraced Pharisaic rules. His preaching avoided the standard of freedom and love in Jesus Christ. He showed he was imprisoned in the narrow-minded concepts of the predominant Judaism. Long segments of his sermons referred to unclean meat, obligations toward the Law and the imperative of circumcision. The congregation also seemed completely different. The church looked much more like an ordinary synagogue. Israelites solemnly consulted parchments and papyri containing Moses' prescriptions. Saul looked in vain for the impressive presence of the sufferers and disinherited he had seen when he had gone there the first time. Highly curious, he noticed that Simon Peter was very kindly tending to them in an adjacent room. He got closer and saw that, while the preaching reproduced the exact scenario found in the synagogues, there was a continuous flow of the afflicted to and from the former fisherman's humble room. Some left with vials of medicine, others with olive oil and bread.

Saul was shocked. The church of the Way seemed completely different now. Something was missing. The overall ambient seemed to be suffocating all notions of the Nazarene. He no longer found there the great feeling of fraternity and the unification of principles for spiritual independence. After giving it some thought he attributed it all to Stephen's absence. After his death the power of the Gospel of freedom had been extinguished, for he had been the divine yeast of renewal. Only now was Saul able to evaluate the greatness of Stephen's exalted task.

Saul wanted to speak as he had in Damascus, to lash out at the errors of interpretation, to shake out the dust that had accumulated over Christ's immense and sacred ideal, but he remembered Peter's advice and kept still. It was not right – for the time being – to reproach others' behavior when he did not yet have any deeds testifying to his own renewal. If he tried to speak he would perhaps receive fully justified criticism in return. Additionally he noticed that people he recognized from the past, and who now attended the church without giving up their previous erroneous principles, were looking at him suspiciously without hiding their contempt. They regarded him as mentally disturbed. It took a supreme effort to stifle the desire to cross swords right then and there for the restoration of the pure truth.

After that first meeting Saul looked for an opportunity to be alone with Peter to ask him about the changes.

“The storm that came upon us,” explained Peter kindly, without mentioning Saul's former conduct, “led me to ponder matters deeply. After the Sanhedrin's first raid on this place I watched as James underwent a profound transformation. He turned to a life of strict asceticism and an unyielding obedience to the Law of Moses. I pondered this change of attitude for quite some time, but on the other hand I remembered that he was not a bad person. He was a zealous friend, devoted and loyal. I kept quiet and later concluded that everything was happening for a reason. When the persecutions tightened around us, James's attitude had its beneficial side, although not very laudable in the light of the freedom of the Gospel. The severest persecutors respected his devotion to the Law and his sincere friendships within Judaism enabled us to safeguard Christ's legacy. John and I anguished for hours over the matter. Were we being insincere or falsifying the truth? Anxiously we prayed for the Master's inspiration. With the help of His divine light we came to a judicious conclusion: Would it be right for the still-tender grapevine to strive with the stalwart fig tree? If we were to obey our personal impulse to fight the enemies of the freedom of the Gospel, we would forget our community work and that would be fatal. It is not right for the steersman to want to show off his excellent nautical abilities and cast the boat against the shoals, thereby bringing harm to the lives of those who had trusted in his efforts. Thus we realized that the problems were many-faceted, and although our ability to act was severely reduced we needed to preserve the still-fragile tree of the Gospel for those who would come after us. Besides, Jesus taught us that we would achieve lofty objectives in this world only if we gave something of ourselves. Through James Pharisaism has agreed to walk with

us. Well then, in keeping with the Master's teachings we will walk all the miles possible. I even realized that, if Jesus was teaching us in this manner it was because that on this journey we have the opportunity to teach something and to reveal who we are."

While Saul looked at him with even greater admiration for his judicious ideas the Apostle concluded: "This too shall pass! The work is Christ's. If it were ours it would surely fail; however, we are nothing more than simple and imperfect coworkers."

Saul internalized the lesson and retired thoughtfully. In his mind Peter seemed much greater now; that composure, that ability to understand the smallest facts gave Saul an idea of his profound spiritual enlightenment.

With his health restored but before any decision about his next move, Saul wanted to see Jerusalem again on a natural impulse of affection for the places that had given rise to so many fond memories. He visited the Temple and experienced conflicting emotions. He lacked the courage to enter the Sanhedrin but he anxiously sought out the synagogue of the Cilicians, where he thought he might reencounter the affable friendships of times gone by. However, even there, where his fellow countrymen living in Jerusalem got together, he received an icy reception. Nobody invited him to speak. Only a few who knew his family shook his hand dryly, ostensibly avoiding his company. When the religious service was over the more cynical asked him questions with scornful smiles. His conversion at the gates of Damascus was commented upon with hurtful, degrading words.

"Mightn't it have been some kind of spell by the sorcerers of the Way?" asked some. "Mightn't it have been Dimitrius dressed up like Christ to dazzle his ill and tired eyes?" asked others.

He perceived the irony of which he was the object. They treated him as demented. Unable to bridle the impulsiveness of his honest soul, he daringly mounted a platform and spoke proudly: "Brothers of Cilicia, you are mistaken. I am not mad. Do not seek to interrogate me, because I know you and I know the extent of Pharisaic hypocrisy."

A battle ensued immediately. Old friends voiced loud insults. Those more moderate surrounded him as they would an ill person and told him to shut up. Saul had to make a heroic effort to contain his indignation. With difficulty he controlled himself and left. Back out on the street, he was assailed with scathing thoughts. Wouldn't it be better to fight openly, to

preach the truth with no consideration for the religious masks that filled the city? In his eyes it was right to think about declaring open war on the errors of Pharisaism. And what if, contrary to what Peter had suggested, he were to become the head of a larger movement in Jerusalem on behalf of the Nazarene? Hadn't he had the courage to persecute His disciples when the rest of the doctors of the Sanhedrin were all complacent? Why not assume a reparative posture now by heading a counter movement? He would find some friends to join him in his ardent efforts. With this gesture he would be helping his own brothers in their worthy labor on behalf of the needy.

Fascinated with such prospects he entered the famous Temple. He remembered the old days of his childhood and youth. The movement of the people inside no longer awakened his interest as it had in the past. Instinctively he approached the place where Stephen had succumbed. He remembered the heartrending scene detail by detail. Grievous anguish filled his soul and he prayed fervently to Christ. He entered the room where he had been alone with Abigail, listening to the last words of the martyr of the Gospel. He finally grasped the greatness of that soul who had forgiven him in extremis. Each word of the dying man now resounded strangely in his ears. Stephen's spiritual loftiness fascinated him. The preacher of the Way had sacrificed himself for Jesus! Why shouldn't he do the same? It would be right to stay in Jerusalem, to follow his heroic steps so that the Master's lessons could be understood. As he recalled the past Saul immersed himself in fervent prayer. He prayed for Christ's inspiration for his new direction. It was then that, exteriorizing his spiritual faculties – the fruit of painful discipline – the Damascus convert saw a luminous form appear suddenly next to him, speaking with ineffable tenderness: "Leave Jerusalem. Your former colleagues will not accept your testimony for the time being."

Under the canopy of Jesus, Stephen was accompanying Saul's steps along his path of discipleship despite the transcendental nature of his invisible assistance. Of course Saul thought that Christ Himself was the author of the loving counsel, and deeply impressed he went to the Way's church to tell Simon Peter what had happened.

"Nevertheless," he finished telling the kind Apostle, who was listening to him in wonder, "I can't hide the fact that I intended to stir up the religious thought of the city, defend the Master's cause and re-establish the truth in its complete form."

While the ex-fisherman listened to him in silence as if to reinforce his response the new disciple continued: “Didn’t Stephen hand himself over to be sacrificed? I feel that we now need courage equal to that of the martyr who succumbed to the stones of my ignorance.”

“No, Saul,” said Peter firmly. “It would not be reasonable to believe that. I have more experience in life although I do not have your wealth of intelligence. It is written that the disciple cannot be greater than the master. Right here in Jerusalem we saw Judas fall into such a trap. During the pain-filled time of Calvary, when the Lord proved the excellence and divinity of His love while we proved the bitter testimony of our meager faith, we condemned our unfortunate friend. Some of our brothers still hold to their initial opinions, but in my contact with the reality of the world I came to the conclusion that Judas was more unfortunate than evil. He didn’t believe in the value of deeds without getting paid for them, nor did he accept a power other than that of the princes of the world. He was eager for the immediate triumph of Christ’s ideas. Many times we saw him arguing impatiently for the building of Jesus’ Kingdom according to the political principles of the world. As someone who was in charge of His divine plan, the Master would smile and pretend not to understand the insinuations. Before becoming a disciple Judas was a merchant. He was used to selling goods and receiving immediate payment. As I reflect upon it nowadays Judas was not able understand the Gospel in any other way. He could not grasp the fact that God is a creditor full of mercy, kindly waiting for all of us, who are nothing more than miserable debtors. Perhaps he loved the Messiah profoundly; however, his eagerness made him miss a sacred opportunity. Due only to his desire to hasten victory, he engineered the tragedy of the cross with his lack of vigilance.”

Saul was surprised as he listened to these just remarks, while the kind Apostle continued: “God is Providence for all of us. No one is forgotten. In order to judge the situation better, let’s say that you were more fortunate than Judas. Let’s say that you were personally victorious in what you have proposed to do, and let’s say that you were able to attract the entire city to the Master. Then what? Should you and could you answer for all who responded positively to your efforts? The truth is, you might attract them, but you could never convert them. Since it would not be possible for you to attend to all of them individually, you would wind up being hated just the same. If Jesus, who could do everything in this world under the auspices of the Father, is waiting patiently for the conversion of the world, why can’t we wait also?”

The best position in life is one of balance. It is not just a matter of wanting to do either less or more than what we can; even the Master stated that each day has enough troubles of its own.”

Saul was overly surprised. Simon Peter’s arguments were irrefutable. His inspiration amazed Saul.

“In light of what happened,” continued the ex-fisherman calmly, “it would be better if you were to leave as soon as night falls. The fight you started in the Cilician synagogue is much more serious than the one in Damascus. It’s possible that they will try to arrest you tomorrow. Besides, the warning you received in the Temple is not such that we can put off making the necessary arrangements.”

Saul agreed with the suggestion wholeheartedly. Rarely in life had he heard such sensible remarks.

“Do you intend to return to Cilicia?” asked Peter in a fatherly tone of voice.

“I have nowhere else to go,” answered Saul, smiling resignedly.

“Well then, you shall leave for Caesarea. We have true friends there who will be able to help you.”

Simon Peter’s plan was followed to the letter. That night as Jerusalem was enveloped in dead silence, a humble rider passed through the city gates and headed for the great port of Palestine.

Tormented by the constant apprehension of his new life, Saul arrived in Caesarea determined not to stay there very long. He delivered Peter’s letters recommending him to his loyal friends. He was received amicably by all and had no difficulty in taking the road to his hometown.

En route to the stage of his childhood, he felt greatly moved by the smallest recollections: here, an irregularity on the road brought back fond memories; there, a group of old trees aroused special notice. He frequently passed by camel caravans, bringing his father’s activities to mind. His spiritual life the last few years had been so intense, his transformation so great, that home life seemed like a pleasant dream that had long faded away. Through Alexander he had received his first news of home. He lamented his mother’s departure just when he needed her loving understanding the most, but he handed his cares over to Jesus in that regard. He had no reason to hope

to be better understood by his old father. A conventional spirit rooted completely in Pharisaism, he certainly would not approve of his conduct.

He reached the first streets of Tarsus with a heavy heart. The memories came in succession without stopping.

Knocking on the door of his paternal home, he realized by the servants' indifferent reaction how much he had changed. The two oldest servants did not recognize him at all. He kept still and waited. After a long while his father came to the door. Supporting himself on a cane due to an advanced state of persistent rheumatism, old Isaac could not conceal his surprise. He recognized his son immediately.

"My son!" He exclaimed with a steady voice, trying to control his emotion. "Could it be that my eyes deceive me?"

Saul embraced him affectionately and both went inside.

Isaac sat down, and trying to look into his son's inner being with a penetrating gaze, he asked in a tone of criticism: "Could it really be that you have been healed?"

To Saul such a question was yet another wounding blow to his affectionate sensibility. He felt tired, defeated, disillusioned; he needed courage to recommence his life of higher idealism, yet even his own father reproved him with absurd questions! Longing to be understood, he answered movingly: "My father, have pity and welcome me! I've never been ill, but my spirit is now in need! I don't think I can start over in life without some rest first. Please help me out!"

Knowing his father's austerity and the extent of his own needs at that difficult time, the ex-doctor of Jerusalem humbled himself completely, putting into his voice all the weariness contained in his soul.

The old Israelite contemplated him firmly and solemnly, and asked without compassion: "You were never ill? Then what was the meaning of the sad comedy in Damascus? Children can be ungrateful and forget, but parents can never get them out of their minds, and they feel all the more the cruelty of their behavior ... Doesn't it pain you to see us overcome and humiliated with the shame you cast over our house? Vexed with grief, your mother found relief in death; but me? Do you think I haven't been hit hard by your desertion? If I held on, it was because I had hope in the Lord. I believed it had all just been a misunderstanding, that a mental disturbance had thrown you

into incomprehension and the unwarranted criticisms of the world!... I raised you with all the care that a father of our people is should devote to his only male child ... You epitomized glorious promises for our lineage. I sacrificed myself for you. I gave you my loving care and spared no efforts for you to have the most learned teachers. I watched over your youth and filled you with the tenderness of my soul. And this is the way you repay the dedication and love of your home?"

Saul could face several armed men without losing the unabashed courage that marked his disposition. He could reproach the condemnable behavior of others, he could sit on the most frightening tribunals for the examination of human hypocrisy; but before that old man who was unable to be renewed in his faith, and considering the breadth of his sacred paternal feelings, he did not react and began to weep.

"You weep?" asked the old man dryly. "I was never the example of such cowardice! I struggled bravely on the most difficult days so that you would lack nothing. Your moral weakness is the child of perjury and treason. Your tears come from unavoidable remorse! How could you have taken the path of abominable lies? With what purpose did you create a scene in Damascus to repudiate the principles that have nourished you since birth? How could you have forsaken your brilliant career as a rabbi for whom we held out so much hope and turn to the company of outcasts who never had the loving tradition of a home?"

In the face of these unjust accusations, the young Tarsian sobbed, perhaps for the first time in his life.

"When I heard that you were going to marry a girl of parents unknown to us," the old man continued implacably, "I was surprised and waited for you to explain yourself in person. Later, Delilah and her husband were forced to leave Jerusalem in a hurry, overcome with shame because of the Damascus synagogue's arrest warrant against you. I often wondered if it was not that inferior creature you had chosen, who was the cause of such moral disasters. For more than three years I have been waking up every day to reflect on your criminal behavior in detriment of your sacred duties!"

On hearing those uncalled-for remarks about Abigail, Saul recovered his courage and murmured humbly: "My father, that creature was a saint! God did not will for her to continue in this world! Perhaps if she were still alive, my mind would be better balanced for harmonizing my new life."

His father did not like this response, although the objection had been made in a tone of obedience and love.

“New life?” He said angrily. “What do you mean by that?”

Saul wiped his tears and answered resignedly: “I mean that what occurred in Damascus was not an illusion and that Jesus has changed my life.”

“Can’t you see utter madness in all this?” continued his father in amazement. “Impossible! How can you forsake the love of your family, the venerable traditions of your name and the sacred hopes of your loved ones to follow an unknown carpenter?”

Saul understood the mental suffering conveyed in his father’s words. He wanted to throw himself into his loving arms; to talk to him about Christ; to make him see the reality of the situation. But perceiving how hard it would be to make himself understood, Saul looked at his father resignedly, while Isaac continued speaking with tears in his eyes in a display of the bitterness and anger that dominated him.

“How can this be? If the disgraceful doctrine of the carpenter of Nazareth imposes sinful indifference on the most sacred ties of life, how can one deny how noxiousness and subversive it is? Would it be right to prefer a renegade, who died between two criminals, to your worthy and hard-working father, who has grown old in honest service to God?”

“But father,” said Saul in a pleading voice, “Christ is the promised Savior!”

Isaac’s fury seemed to increase even more.

“You blaspheme?!” he shouted. “Have you no fear of insulting Divine Providence? The hopes of Israel could not possibly rest on a brow whose blood was shed in punishment between thieves! ... You’re crazy! I demand you reconsider your behavior!”

While he paused, the convert objected: “It is certain that I have a blameworthy past, when I did not hesitate to persecute the expressions of the truth. But from the last three years up to now, I do not recall anything that needs reconsideration.”

The old man seemed to reach the peak of his rage and exclaimed harshly: “I am sorry that my words do not square with your disturbed mind. I can see

that I have hoped in vain to die without hating anybody. Unfortunately, I am forced to recognize in your current decisions either a madman or a common criminal. Therefore, in order to define our positions clearly, I am asking you to choose once and for all between me and the despicable carpenter!”

His father’s voice was choked and hesitant at issuing such an ultimatum, evidencing profound grief. Saul understood and in vain he looked for a conciliatory way to reason with his father, whose incomprehension brought him great anguish. He never thought so much and so intensely on Jesus’ teachings about family ties. He felt tightly bound to the generous old man. He wanted to help him in his intellectual rigidity, to soften his tyrannical character, but he understood the barriers that had been erected against his sincere wishes. He understood the severity with which his own character had been formed. Judging beforehand the uselessness of any emotional appeal, Saul whispered between humility and longing: “Father, we both need Jesus!”

The unyielding old man cast him an austere look and retorted brashly: “You’ve made your choice! You shall have nothing more to do with this house!”

The old man was trembling. One could see how much intense spiritual effort it had taken to make that decision. Brought up in the intransigent concepts of the Law of Moses, Isaac was suffering as a father. Nonetheless, he was throwing his son out, the depository of so many hopes, as if he were fulfilling a duty. His loving heart suggested mercy, but his reasoning as a man held him prisoner in the implacable Jewish dogmas that stifled his natural impulse.

Saul contemplated his father in a silent and supplicating attitude. His home had been his last hope. He did not want to believe this final loss was possible. He fixed his nearly tear-filled eyes on the old man, and after a long moment of expectation he implored him in a moving gesture unusual to him: “I have nothing, my father. I am tired and ill! I have no money. I need the mercy of others.”

And emphasizing his sorrowful plea, he asked: “Would you add to it by throwing me out?”

Isaac felt Saul’s appeal vibrating in his innermost being. But perhaps deeming that firmness was more effective than tenderness in this case, he answered dryly: “Rephrase that because no one is throwing you out. You yourself have completely deserted your friends and purest affections!... You

are in need? It is only right, then, that you ask the carpenter for what you need. He who committed such absurdities ought to be powerful enough to help you.”

Immense grief gripped the former rabbi’s spirit. Such allusions to Christ pained him much more than the direct reproach he received. Unable to restrain his sorrow, he felt burning tears streaming down his desert sun-darkened face. He had never experienced such bitter tears. Not even during his blindness following the vision of Jesus had he wept so grievously. In spite of having been forgotten in a nameless inn, blind and distressed, he had at least felt the watch-care of the Master who had called him into His divine service, and he had had the impression of being closer to Him. He had actually rejoiced in that bitterest of pain because he had received His glorious and direct call at the gates of Damascus. Since then, however, he had sought in vain for human support to begin his sacred task, with the less antagonistic asking him to please stay away. And finally, here he was, before his old and well-off father who was refusing to assist him at the most trying moment of his life. His father was throwing him out in open manifestation of aversion to his regenerative ideas. He could not tolerate his son’s standing as a friend of Christ. Through the tears streaming from his eyes, Saul remembered Ananias. When everyone else had forsaken him in Damascus, Christ’s messenger had appeared to restore his spirits. His father had spoken to him sarcastically of the Lord’s powers. No, Jesus would not withhold the resources he needed. Giving his father one last unforgettable look, Saul said humbly: “Then goodbye, Father!... You have spoken rightly, for I am sure the Messiah will not abandon me!”

With wavering steps he approached the door. He cast a tear-glazed look at the old furnishings in the room. His mother’s armchair was in its usual place. He remembered the time when she had read to him the first lessons of the Law. He thought he could see her shadow wave to him with a loving smile. He had never experienced such emptiness in his heart. He was alone and afraid of himself because he had never been in such straits.

After this grief-filled contemplation, he left without a word. He looked indifferently at the comings and goings in the street like someone who had lost all interest in living.

He had not walked far toward his uncertain destination when he heard someone calling him insistently.

He stopped in expectation and saw his father's old servant running toward him.

Seconds later the servant handed him a heavy pouch, exclaiming amicably: "Your father wished to give you this money as a remembrance."

Down deep, Saul felt the revolt characteristic of his former behavior. He thought of invoking his personal dignity and returning the humiliating gift. That way he would teach his father that he was a son and not a beggar. He would teach him a lesson and show him his personal worth; but at the same time he remembered that all these severe trials were perhaps occurring with Jesus' permission so that his still-obstinate soul would learn true humility. He felt that he had overcome many obstacles; that he had proven himself stronger than in Damascus and Jerusalem; that he had overcome the hostility of the desert; that he had endured the unforgiving climate and pain-filled weariness. But the Master was now suggesting to him an inner struggle so that the "man of the world" would cease to exist, giving him a chance for the rebirth of the firm but loving and tender heart of a disciple. This was to be perhaps the greatest of all his struggles. He grasped this fact at a glance, and striving to overcome himself, he took the pouch with a resigned smile. Humbly, he put it away in the folds of his tunic, acknowledged the servant thankfully, and making an effort to look joyful, he said: "Synesius, tell my father of the happiness he has brought me with his loving gift and that I pray that God may help him."

Following the uncertain course of his new situation, he saw in his father's attitude the reflection of the old customs of Judaism. As a father, Isaac did not want to seem ungrateful and unbending in trying to help his son; but as a Pharisee he would never tolerate his renewed mind.

With a demeanor of indifference, Saul ate a light meal in a modest eatery. However, he could not bear the busy streets. He longed for meditation and silence. He needed to listen to his conscience and his heart before laying new plans for his life. He sought to leave the city. Like an anonymous hermit, he would head for the countryside. After a long, aimless walk, he reached the environs of the Taurus Mountains¹⁵. The procession of the gloomy shadows of late afternoon had begun. Exhausted, Saul rested near one of the many abandoned caves. In the distance Tarsus lay nestled amongst the trees. The evening breeze vibrated in the air without disturbing the tranquility of things. Immersed in the peacefulness of nature, Saul went back in his mind to the day of his radical transformation. He remembered his abandonment at Judas's inn

and Saddoc's indifference regarding their friendship. He recalled the first meeting in Damascus, where he had endured so much scorn, irony and sarcasm; how he had gone to Palmyra anxious for Gamaliel's help to enter Christ's cause, but the noble teacher advising him to isolate himself in the desert. He remembered the hard work at the loom and the lack of resources of all sorts at the lonely oasis. On those long, silent days, he had never been able to forget his betrothed and had struggled to rise spiritually above his shattered dreams. No matter how much he studied the Gospel, inwardly he experienced a singular remorse for Stephen's martyrdom, which, from his point of view, had been the tombstone of his blissful engagement. His nights had been full of endless anguish. Sometimes, in heartrending nightmares, he found himself again in Jerusalem signing iniquitous sentences. The victims of the great persecution accused him, looking at him in fear as if his face were that of a monster. His hope in Christ, however, had revived his resolute spirit. After the harsh trials were over, he had left his life of solitude to return to social life. In Damascus once again, the synagogue had received him with threats. His former friends cast heartless epithets at him with profound contempt. He had to escape like a common criminal, climbing over walls in the still of the night. Then he had gone to Jerusalem, hoping to make himself understood. However, Alexander, in whose learned mind he had hoped to find better understanding, had received him as a visionary liar. Extremely exhausted, he had knocked at the door of the church of the Way, but had been forced to retire to a poor inn because of the justified suspicions of the Apostles of Galilee. Ill and weak, he had been taken to Simon Peter, who taught him lessons of great wisdom and immense kindness, but like Gamaliel, Peter had advised him to meditate, to be discreet; in short, to learn. In vain he had looked for a way to harmonize the circumstances of his life so that he could cooperate in the work of the Gospel, but every door seemed closed to his endeavors. He had finally gone to Tarsus, longing for family support for starting his life over. His father's attitude had only worsened his disillusionment. His father's rejection had cast him into an abyss. He was now beginning to grasp the fact that starting life over did not mean returning to the activities of his former home; it meant beginning an inner effort from the depths of his soul, forgetting the smallest vestige of the past; in other words, to become a different man altogether.

He had begun to understand his new situation, but he could not stop the tears that flowed in streams from his eyes.

When he finally came to, the night had fallen completely. The eastern sky was full of stars. A soft breeze blew in from far away, refreshing his burning brow. He made himself as comfortable as he could between the rocks, afraid to leave the friendly silence of nature. In spite of continuing along the course of bitter thoughts, he felt more at peace. He entrusted his pungent worries to the Master, asked Him for the medicine of His mercy, and sought to maintain a state of repose. After a fervent prayer, he stopped weeping and it seemed to him that a higher, unseen power was soothing the wounds of his oppressed soul.

Soon, in the sweet quietude of his pained mind, he felt sleep coming over him. A gentle sensation of repose provided him with great relief. Was he sleeping? He had the impression of having entered a delightful dreamland. He felt agile and happy as if he had been taken to an open field touched by springtime light, separate and far from this world. Lush, brilliant flowers, as if made of colored powder, blossomed along marvelous roads in a region bathed in indefinable light. Everything spoke to him of a different world. Gentle harmonies were sounding in his ears somewhat like a cavatina being played far away on divine harps and lutes. He wanted to identify the landscape, to define its contours and to enrich his observations, but a profound sentiment of peace had overpowered him completely. He must have entered a marvelous kingdom, for the spiritual wonders that were opening to his eyes were beyond all comprehension.¹⁶

He had barely awakened from this rapture when he was taken by a new surprise of someone walking softly toward him. In a few more instants he saw Stephen and Abigail in front of him, young and beautiful, dressed in garments so white and radiant that they looked more like shrouds of translucent snow.

Incapable of expressing the sacred emotion engulfing his soul, Saul of Tarsus knelt and began to weep.

Brother and sister, who had returned to encourage him, drew nearer, smiling broadly.

“Get up, Saul!” said Stephen with profound kindness.

“What is this? You weep?” asked Abigail sweetly. “Would you feel so discouraged when your task has just begun?”

Now back on his feet, Saul wept convulsively. Those tears were not only the relief of a heart forsaken by the world. They expressed boundless joy, an

immense gratitude to Jesus, always lavish with His watch-care and benevolence. He wanted to kiss Stephen's hands, to beg for forgiveness for the tragic past, but it was the martyr of the Way, who, in the light of his glorious resurrection, embraced the former rabbi effusively as if Saul were a beloved brother. After kissing his brow, he whispered tenderly: "Saul, do not stay stuck in the past! Who in the world is exempt from wrongdoings? Only Jesus was sinless!"

Gamaliel's former disciple felt immersed in a veritable sea of bliss. He wanted to speak of his boundless joy, to give thanks for such a gift, but uncontrollable emotion sealed his lips and confounded his soul. Aided by Stephen, smiling at him in silence, he saw Abigail, more beautiful than ever, reminding him of the spring flowers at the humble house on the road to Joppa. He could not escape his thoughts as a man or forget his shattered dreams, remembering them above all at that glorious moment of his life. He thought of the home he might have had; the tenderness with which the young woman from Corinth would have taken care of their dear children; the irreplaceable love that her devotion could have given him. But understanding his innermost thoughts, his spirit-betrothed took his right hand calloused by the hard labor in the desert, and spoke to him movingly: "We shall never lack a home ... Our home shall be in the hearts of all those who come our way. As for children, we have the immense family that Jesus has bequeathed us in His mercy ... The children of Calvary are our children too ... They are everywhere, awaiting their inheritance from the Savior."

Saul understood the loving admonishment and stored it in the core of his heart.

"Do not hand yourself over to disheartenment," continued Abigail kindly. "Our ancestors knew the God of Armies, of bloody triumphs and the gold and silver of this world; we, however, know the Father who is the Lord of our hearts. The Law accentuated our faith by the wealth of material gifts in sacrifices, but the Gospel knows us by our inexhaustible trust and active faith in the service of the Almighty. You must be faithful to God, Saul! Even if the whole world were to turn against you, you would still have the boundless treasure of a faithful heart. The triumphant peace of Christ lies in the industrious soul that obeys and trusts in Him ... Do not refuse to accept great suffering. Empty your mind of worldly thoughts. Once you have exhausted the last drop of the posca¹⁷ of earthly disappointments, Jesus will fill your spirit with light immortal!"

Experiencing infinite consolation, Saul was vexed at not being able to utter a word. Abigail's exhortations would be with him forever; never again would he allow discouragement to overwhelm him. An enormous hope now filled his soul. He would work for Christ everywhere and in all circumstances. The Master had sacrificed Himself for all humankind. To dedicate his life to Him represented a noble duty. While he was formulating these thoughts, he remembered the difficulty he had in getting along with other people. He would encounter struggle. He remembered Jesus' promise that He would be present wherever there were brethren gathered in His name. However, everything seemed suddenly difficult in this quick intellectual analysis. The synagogues were fighting amongst themselves. The church of Jerusalem itself was once more leaning toward Judaizing influences. Abigail again answered his innermost appeals with infinite tenderness: "You ask for people who are in agreement with you in the construction of the Gospel. You must remember, however, that even Jesus did not have them. The Apostles could not concur with the Master except with help from heaven after the resurrection and Pentecost. Those most beloved to Him slept as He prayed in agony in the garden. Some denied Him; others fled at the decisive hour. Be in agreement with Jesus only and work. The way to God is subdivided into a veritable infinity of planes. The spirit will pass alone from one realm to the next. All spiritual evolution is difficult, but only thereby will we find true victory. Remember the 'narrow door' of the Gospel lesson and press on. When the time is right Jesus will call to your endeavors those who can concur with you in His name. Dedicate every moment of your life to the Master. Serve Him with energy and tenderness, as someone who knows that spiritual accomplishments demand the concourse of all the sentiments that ennoble the soul."

Saul was in ecstasy. He could not express the feelings of love in his heart overcome with ineffable bliss. New hopes blossomed in his soul. A radiant future was unfolding before the eyes of his spirit. He wanted to move, to give thanks for this sublime gift, but his emotions deprived him of any expression of affection. One big question, however, still hovered in his mind. What to do from here on out to triumph? How to fulfill the sacred notions that fell to him to put into practice, without taking note of the sacrifices involved? Letting him perceive that she heard his innermost questions, Abigail offered lovingly: "Saul, to be sure of victory on the difficult pathway, remember that it is necessary to give! Jesus gave everything He had to the world, and above all,

He gave us the intuitive understanding of our own weaknesses in order for us to tolerate human miseries.”

The young Tarsian noticed that, at this point, Stephen was bidding him goodbye, casting a fraternal look in his direction.

Abigail in turn held his hands tighter with immense tenderness. The former rabbi wanted to prolong the beautiful vision for the rest of his life, to be with her forever, but the cherished spirit displayed a gesture of affectionate farewell. Saul then made an effort to hurriedly list all his spiritual needs, desirous to hear her on the problems facing him. Anxious to make the most of the smallest fragment of the glorious, fleeting minute, Saul mentally arrayed a large number of questions. What could he do to acquire a perfect understanding of Christ’s designs?

“Love!” answered Abigail spontaneously.

But how could he proceed in order to grow richer in divine virtues? Jesus ordered us to love even our enemies. He realized, however, how difficult it would be to do that. It was difficult to practice devotion without others’ real comprehension. What could he do for his soul to reach such an elevated expression of effort in Jesus Christ?

“Work!” exclaimed his beloved, smiling kindly.

Abigail was right. It was necessary to work for inner progress. He ardently desired to do so. For this reason he had isolated himself in the desert for more than a thousand days. However, upon returning to the environment of collective effort at the side of former friends, he had nourished blossoming hopes that soon turned into heartbreaking bewilderment. What measures could he adopt against such destructive discouragement?

“Hope nonetheless!” she said further, in a gesture of tender solicitude like someone who wished to clarify that the soul must be ready to attend to the divine plan in any circumstance, regardless of any personal whims.

As he listened to her, Saul remembered that hope had always been with him in his most difficult days. He would know how to hope in the future with the blessings of the Most High. He would trust in His mercy. He would not disdain the opportunity for redemptive service. But ... what about other people? Everywhere, confusion flourished in their spirits. He in fact realized that overall agreement regarding the teachings of the Divine Master represented one of the most difficult tasks besetting the unfolding of the

Gospel; but more than that, people also seemed uninterested in the truth or enlightenment. The Jews were clinging to the Law of Moses, intensifying the system of Pharisaic hypocrisy; the followers of the Way were getting closer to the synagogues, avoiding the Gentiles and submitting strictly to the practice of circumcision. Where was the freedom in Christ? Where was the endless hope that His love had brought to all humankind without excluding the children of other peoples? He agreed that loving, working and hoping were indispensable, but how was he to behave amongst such diverse forces? How was he to reconcile the grand lessons of the Gospel with human indifference?

Abigail squeezed his hands even more tenderly to show that she was saying goodbye, and emphasized gently: “Forgive!”

Then her shining figure seemed to dissolve as if made from fragments of sunshine.

Enraptured by this marvelous revelation, Saul was now alone without knowing how to come to grips with his own wonderment. In that region crowned with infinite brightness, he had felt vibrations of mysterious beauty. From far away, the echoes of sublime, sidereal harmonies continued to reach his ears, seemingly bringing messages of love originating on distant suns ... Saul knelt and prayed. He thanked the Lord for the wonder of His blessings. Within moments, as if an imponderable power had returned him to the earthly realm, he felt himself back on his improvised rustic bed among the rocks. Incapable of explaining the prodigious phenomenon, Saul of Tarsus gazed up at the heavens, enraptured.

The infinite blue of the firmament was not just an abyss in whose depths the stars shone ... To his eyes, space had taken on a whole new meaning: it must be full of expressions of life, which ordinary persons were not given to understand. There had to be heavenly bodies, just as there were earthly bodies. Humans, in particular, had not been personally abandoned by the supreme powers of the creation. God’s goodness exceeded all human intelligence. Those who had freed themselves from the flesh returned from the spirit plane to comfort those who remained afar. To Stephen, he had been a cruel executioner; to Abigail, an ungrateful betrothed. Nonetheless, God had permitted both to return to the dark stage of the world to encourage his soul. Planetary existence acquired a new meaning in his profound ponderings. No one was forsaken. The most miserable persons would have in Heaven those who followed them with caring devotion. As hard as human experiences might be, life now assumed a new aspect of eternal harmony and beauty.

Nature was at peace. The moonlight gleamed from above in vibrations of indefinable enchantment. From time to time the wind whispered lightly, scattering mysterious messages. A caressing breeze cooled Saul's brow as he remained enraptured in the close remembrance of his wondrous visions of the invisible world.

Experiencing a peace unknown to him until then, he believed he had been reborn at that moment to a very different existence. A singular serenity touched his soul. A different understanding came over him for happily recommencing his journey in the world. He would guard Abigail's words forever. Love, work, hope and forgiveness would be his inseparable companions. Full of devotion toward all creatures, he would await the opportunities that Jesus would give him; he would refrain from provoking situations, and in this regard, he would be able to tolerate the ignorance or weakness of others, aware that he too was carrying a condemnable past, which, nevertheless, had deserved Christ's compassion.

Only much later, when the soft breeze of dawn announced a new day, was Saul able to sleep. When he awoke it was late morning. Far away, Tarsus had begun its customary bustling activities.

He arose, encouraged as never before. The encounter with Stephen and Abigail's spirits had renewed his strength. He instinctively remembered the pouch his father had sent him. He took it out to calculate the financial potential for his new endeavors. His father's gift was abundant and generous. However, he could not immediately decide what to do.

After much thought, he decided to buy a loom. It would be the restart of the struggle. In order to strengthen his new, inner resolve, he deemed it would be useful to work in Tarsus as a weaver, since there in his place of birth he had once stood out as a worthy intellectual and acclaimed athlete.

In a short time, he was recognized by his countrymen as a humble weaver.

The news had unpleasant repercussions in his former home, causing old Isaac to disinherit him publicly and to move to one of his properties on the banks of the Euphrates, where he awaited death in the company of a daughter, incapable of understanding his beloved firstborn.

Thus, for three years the solitary weaver in the vicinity of the Taurus Mountains exemplified humility and labor, waiting devotedly for Jesus to call him to bear witness.

14 Mt. 19:16-23. – Emmanuel.

15 Tarsus was the capital of the Roman Province of Cilicia, situated between the Taurus Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. – Tr.

16 Later, in II Corinthians (12:2-4), Paul affirmed: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I do not know, or whether out of the body, I do not know: God knows) was caught up into the third heaven. And I know that such a man was caught up to paradise and heard ineffable words that man is not permitted to tell.” From this glorious experience, the Apostle to the Gentiles gleaned new conclusions about his famous ideas regarding the spirit body. – Emmanuel

17 Posca: a beverage popular among the Roman legions, made from diluted water and wine that had started to go sour and turn into vinegar. In the Gospel, a Roman soldier is described as giving Jesus a sponge soaked in posca to quench his thirst. (Mt. 27:48). – Tr.

IV

The First Apostolic Endeavors

Now a simple workman, Paul of Tarsus displayed a remarkable change in his features. His ascetic appearance had grown more pronounced. His eyes, however, giving evidence of a thoughtful and resolute man, also revealed a profound and indefinable peace.

Realizing that his situation did not allow him to envision far-ranging work plans, he was happy to do what he could. He delighted in displaying his change of behavior to old comrades of past triumphs on festive occasions in Tarsus. He was almost proud to be living on the modest income from his hard work. Many times, he crossed the busy squares carrying heavy bales of goat hair. His countrymen admired this humble attitude, which was now his main trait. The prominent families looked at him with pity. Those who had known him in the golden age of his youth never tired of lamenting his transformation. Most treated him as a peaceable lunatic. For this reason, the weaver was never short of orders in the vicinity of Taurus. The sympathy of his fellow citizens – who would never fully understand his new ideas – had the virtue of intensifying his labor, thus increasing his meager resources. On his part, he lived peaceably and happily. Abigail's advice was a permanent message for his soul. He got up every morning aiming to love everything and everybody; he worked as hard as he could to continue on the straight and narrow. If troubling wishes or worries urged him to intensify his apostolic activities before the appropriate time, he knew to hope in the future; if someone felt sorry for him, if others called him a madman, a deserter or a dreamer, he tried to forget their incomprehension with sincere forgiveness, remembering the many times he himself had offended others out of ignorance. He was without friends or loved ones, quietly enduring the disenchantment of loneliness; and if he did not enjoy the company of loving companions, neither did he have to bear the anguish of unfaithful friendships. Each day presented itself to him as a valuable partner full of opportunity, and

within this frame of mind he weaved intricate carpets and tents, exercising the patience that would be crucial for the other tasks still awaiting him at the crossroads of life. Nighttime was a blessing for his spirit. Thus, he was leading an existence without any particulars of greater importance, when one day he was surprised by an unexpected visit from Barnabas.

The Cyprian ex-Levite arrived from Antioch, where serious responsibilities had fallen upon his shoulders. The church there was in need of the help of intelligent servants. There were countless spiritual difficulties to be resolved, much work to be done. The church had been founded by disciples from Jerusalem under Simon Peter's generous auspices. The ex-fisherman from Capernaum felt they should take advantage of the break in the persecutions to expand Christ's reach, and Antioch was one of the largest working centers. There was no lack of contributors to share in the costs of the work at hand since the Gospel message had had repercussions in the humblest workplaces; however, educated workers were scarce. Once more it was due to Peter that the weaver from Tarsus would not lack the opportunity to serve. Evaluating the difficulties, and after appointing Barnabas to head the Way's church there, Peter advised him to seek out the Damascus convert so that his abilities would reach a new level of spiritual exertion.

Saul welcomed his friend with immense joy.

Discovering that he had been remembered by his brethren far away, he felt as if he were receiving a breath of new air.

Barnabas told him about the church's far-reaching plan, which needed his fraternal concurrence, the development of its services, and the continuing collaboration at their disposal for broadening their work for Jesus. Barnabas praised the dedication of the humble individuals who were working with him. Nonetheless, the church needed devoted brothers with a thorough knowledge of the Law of Moses and the Gospel of the Master so that the task of intellectual enlightenment would not be neglected.

The former rabbi felt uplifted by Barnabas's account and had no doubts about responding to his appeal. He had only one condition: he would continue with his work as a weaver in Antioch so as not to be a burden to the others. It was useless for Barnabas to make any objection in this regard.

Ready and willing, Saul of Tarsus was soon settled in Antioch, where he began working actively with the friends of the Gospel. During the long hours of the day, he repaired carpets or kept busy weaving. Thus, he earned what he

needed to live on and became a model in the new church. Using the great wealth of experiences he had already acquired in his worldly battles and sufferings, he was never seen to occupy the most prominent places in the church. In the Acts of the Apostles, his name is always the last to be mentioned when reference is made to Barnabas's helpers. Saul had learned how to wait. He preferred the lowliest tasks in the community. He felt content attending to the numerous sick. He remembered Simon Peter and sought to fulfill his new duties guided by unpretentious kindness, albeit impressing on everything he did the characteristics of his almost pointed sincerity and frankness.

The church was not wealthy but the goodwill of its members seemed to supply it with abundant blessings.

A cosmopolitan city, Antioch had become a center of great immorality. Against its backdrop adorned with precious marble displaying the opulence of its inhabitants, every sort of vice proliferated. The wealthy gave themselves over to unbridled, licentious pleasure. Stylish groups would gather in the manmade park where every sort of activity was sinfully tolerated. Public wealth provided vast opportunities for all sorts of extravagances. The city was full of merchants who fought amongst themselves without respite. It was also replete with ambitions of the lowest nature and dramas of passion. Every night, however, the simple house that served as the Way's local base welcomed large groups of bricklayers, impoverished soldiers and poor farm laborers, all longing for the message of a better world. Women of humble origin also attended in great number. Most of the attendees were interested in counsel, consolation and medicine for the wounds of body and spirit.

Barnabas and Manahen were usually the main preachers in the ministering of the Gospel to the heterogeneous group. Saul of Tarsus limited himself to helping out. He himself had sensed that Jesus had obviously recommended the complete restarting of his endeavors. On one occasion he employed all his efforts to present the general address but was unsuccessful. The words that had come so easily in the past seemed to stick in the back of his throat, but he understood it to be just to suffer the torments of starting all over again since having squandered his earlier opportunity. In spite of the obstacles he encountered, he never let himself become disheartened. If he tried to speak from the pulpit, he had extreme difficulty in expressing the simplest ideas. Sometimes, he would blush with shame before the audience awaiting his comments with great interest, given his fame as a preacher of

Moses in the Temple of Jerusalem. Moreover, the sublime event of Damascus surrounded him with illustrious and explainable curiosity. Barnabas himself had been surprised many times by his confused approach in interpreting the Gospel and wondered about the tradition of Saul's past as a rabbi – whom he never met personally – and the shyness that came over him right at the moment of winning his audience. For this reason Saul was discreetly excused from preaching and directed to do other tasks; however, he understood and did not lose heart. If it were not possible to return right away to the task of preaching, he would prepare himself once again for it. With that purpose in mind, he kept humble brothers in his work tent, and while his hands weaved confidently, he talked to them about the mission of Christ. At night he promoted lectures in the church, involving everyone present. While they were waiting for the people in charge to start the service, Saul sat with the laborers and soldiers who attended in large numbers, attracting the interest of washerwomen, sick children and humble mothers. He sometimes read passages from the Law and the Gospel, making comparisons and offering new points of view. Amid such constant activities, the lessons of the Master seemed to be touched by progressive illumination. Gamaliel's former pupil soon became a friend loved by all. Saul was immensely happy. He always rejoiced when his humble tent was full of sympathetic brothers who came to see him. He was never short of orders. There was always enough work so that he would not be a burden to anybody. There he met Trophimus, who would be his loyal companion during many difficult times; there he welcomed Titus for the first time when this devoted collaborator had barely emerged from childhood.

Life for the ex-rabbi could not have been more peaceful or beautiful. His day was filled with harmony arising from his constructive and dignified work; at night he went to the church in the company of the other brethren to focus pleasantly on the sublime tasks of the Gospel.

The church at Antioch was at that time much more appealing than the church in Jerusalem itself. It had an environment of pure simplicity, without any concern for the strict dispositions of Judaism. There was wealth because there was no lack of work. Everyone loved their daytime obligations, waiting for the restfulness of nighttime in the church meetings as if it were a blessing from God. Away from the focal point of Pharisaic demands, Jews cooperated with Gentiles, all feeling united by the overriding bonds of fraternity. Those who mentioned circumcision were very rare, and because they were a weak minority, they were constrained by the loving invitation for union and

fraternity. The meetings were dominated by the profound influence of spiritual love. Solidarity had been set on divine foundations. The pains and joys of one person were shared by all. The unity of thought around one single objective provided occasions for beautiful manifestations of spirituality. On appointed nights the phenomena of “direct voices” occurred. The church at Antioch was one of the few apostolic centers where such manifestations reached indefinable heights. The fraternity that reigned there justified this concession from Heaven. On days of rest the small community organized evangelical studies in the countryside. The interpretation of Jesus’ teachings would take place in some balmy and solitary corner of nature, almost always on the banks of the Orontes.

Saul had found in all this a completely different world. He interpreted his stay in Antioch as an aid from God. Mutual trust, devoted friends and an agreeable understanding comprise sacred nourishment for the soul, and he sought to take advantage of the opportunity to enrich his inner repository.

The city was full of ignoble moral scenery, but the humble group of unknown disciples continued increasing in true spiritual worth.

The church became respected for its charitable deeds and for the phenomena for which it became the central point.

It was often visited by distinguished, highly interested travelers and the most generous ones made it a point to support its activities of social welfare. It was at this time that a young doctor named Luke appeared. On passing through the city he approached the church, driven by a sincere desire to learn something new. He turned his attention specifically to that man of an almost rough appearance, who would stoke everyone’s thoughts before Barnabas proceeded with the opening of the service. Because he displayed a generous desire to teach and learn at the same time, Saul’s attitude impressed Luke to the point of introducing himself to the former rabbi, eager to listen to him more often.

“Certainly,” said the Apostle happily, “my tent is at your disposal.”

While Luke remained in the city, both engaged daily in worthwhile conversation regarding Jesus’ teachings. Saul of Tarsus was gradually regaining his powers of debate and soon infused Luke’s mind with the healthiest convictions. From their first encounter, the visitor to Antioch did not miss even one of those simple and constructive meetings. On the eve of

his departure, he made a remark that would forever change what disciples of the Gospel were called.

Barnabas had finished the evening's comments, when the doctor asked to say a few words of farewell. He spoke movingly and at the end he concluded fittingly: "Brothers, as I say goodbye, I take with me the purpose to work for the Master and shall employ all the resources of my humble abilities to that end. I have no doubt as to the how far this spiritual movement will spread. From what I have seen, it will transform the whole world. However, I feel the need for us to imprint the best expression of unity on its endeavors. I am referring to the label that identifies us within the community, that is, I do not see in the word "Way" a designation that rightly expresses what we are doing. Christ's disciples have been called "travelers", "pilgrims" and "wayfarers", but there are travelers and roads of every sort. Evil, too, has its pathways. Wouldn't it be better to call one another "Christians"? This label will remind us of the Master's presence, it will give us strength in His name and it will characterize perfectly our activities in accordance with His teachings."

Luke's suggestion was approved with overall joy. Barnabas himself embraced him and thanked him warmly for his opportune suggestion, which pleased the particular aspirations of the whole community. Saul in turn solidified his excellent impressions of Luke's emerging, higher calling.

The following day, the new convert bid farewell to the former rabbi with tears of gratitude. He would leave for Greece, but would make it a point to remember Saul in every detail of his new endeavor. From the door of his rustic tent, the ex-doctor of the Law followed Luke's silhouette until it disappeared in the distance, and then returned to the loom with tears in his eyes. Greatly moved, he realized that, due to his work with the Gospel, he had learned to be a loyal and dedicated friend. He compared his current sentiments with his former concepts and found profound differences. Previously, his relationships were attached to social conveniences, and friends came and went without leaving any great impression on his vibrant soul; but now his heart had been renewed in Jesus Christ and had become more sensitive in its contact with the divine. Sincere affections were engraved on it forever.

Luke's proposal quickly extended to all the evangelical centers, including Jerusalem, where it was received with special regard. In a short time the word "Christianity" replaced the term "the Way" everywhere.

The church at Antioch continued to display the finest marks of progress. Sincere coworkers were arriving from all the large cities. The meetings always entailed a large number of revelations. Numerous brothers¹⁸ prophesied, animated by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ It was there that Agabus, greatly inspired by the powers of the higher realms, received the message regarding the sad trials to which Jerusalem would fall victim.²⁰ The leaders of the church became greatly troubled. At Saul's insistence, Barnabas sent a messenger to Simon Peter with the news, urging him to be vigilant. The emissary returned telling of the astonishment of the former fisherman, who was thankful for the timely advice.

In fact, within a few months a messenger from the Jerusalem church hastened to Antioch with alarming and heartrending news. In a long letter Peter told Barnabas the latest events besetting him. He had written it on the day that James, son of Zebedee, was put to death in front of a large crowd. Herod Agrippa had not tolerated his sermons full of sincerity and righteous appeals. John's brother had come from Galilee imbued with the openness of the earlier days of the preaching of the new Kingdom. He had not adapted to Pharisaic conventionalism and had taken the meaning of his profound exhortations too far. An exact replica of the events that had marked Stephen's death ensued. The Jews became exasperated by his ideas of religious freedom, and his sincere and simple attitude was taken as an act of rebellion. Cruel, uninterrupted persecutions broke out. Peter's message also told of the church's great difficulties. The city was suffering from starvation and epidemics. While the ruthless persecutions were closing in, long lines of hungry and sick people knocked at their door. Peter was requesting all the help possible from Antioch.

Barnabas presented the news with a heavy heart and the industrious community united in goodwill to meet the needs of Jerusalem.

After collecting donations, Barnabas himself prepared to be the bearer of the church's response. However, he could not go alone and it was hard to decide who would accompany him. Without hesitating, Saul of Tarsus offered to go along. He was self-employed, he explained, and could therefore accompany Barnabas without neglecting his obligations – they could await his return.

Simon Peter's disciple was very pleased and accepted the offer happily.

Within two days they both departed courageously for Jerusalem. The journey was quite difficult but they arrived in a short amount of time.

Great surprises awaited the emissaries from Antioch. Peter was nowhere to be found in Jerusalem. The authorities had imprisoned him right after the dolorous execution of the son of Zebedee, and bitter trials had befallen the church and its disciples. Saul and Barnabas were received kindly by Prochorus, who filled them in on all that had happened. Simon Peter had been mercilessly and disrespectfully arrested by Herod's henchmen for having personally requested James's body in order to bury it. However, a few days later an angel visited the prison and set him free. Prochorus related the incident with eyes burning with faith. He told of the brethren's joy when Peter appeared that night and told them about his deliverance. His most foresightful friends convinced him to leave Jerusalem and to wait at the budding church in Joppa until the situation returned to normal. Prochorus told them how the Apostle had been reluctant to give in to this wise suggestion, although John and Philip had already left. The authorities had tolerated the church only because of James, son of Alphaeus, whose deeply ascetic conduct had impressed the popular mentality, creating around him an atmosphere of untouchable respect. On the same night of his escape and at his insistence, Peter went to the church with his friends. He wanted to remain, come what may; but when he saw the house full of the sick, the hungry and ragged beggars, he had to hand over the running of the community to James and leave for Joppa so that the situation of the unfortunates would not be in peril because of him.

Saul was greatly impressed by all this and went right away with Barnabas to hear what James had to say. The Apostle received them amicably, but his fear and concerns were immediately apparent. He repeated the information given by Prochorus in a low voice as if he feared the presence of traitors. He alleged the need for compromise with the authorities. He invoked the precedent of Zebedee's son's death and referred to the crucial changes he had introduced to the church. He had created new rules in Peter's absence. Nobody could speak of the Gospel without referring to the Law of Moses. Sermons could only be attended by those who had been circumcised. The church replicated the synagogues. Saul and his companion listened to him with great surprise and in silence they gave him the financial help from Antioch.

Simon's absence had changed the structure of the evangelical work. To the two recently-arrived brothers, everything seemed different and downgraded. Barnabas noticed one thing in particular more than anything else: As pro-tem head, James had not invited them to stay at the church. In light of this fact, Peter's disciple left for the house of his sister, Mary Mark – mother of the future Evangelist – who received them with great joy. Saul felt much at ease in that environment of simple and pure fraternity. Barnabas in turn realized that his sister's house had become the favorite spot for the most dedicated brethren of the Gospel. They met there secretly at night as if the true church of Jerusalem had transferred its headquarters to a small family circle. Observing the closely-knit gatherings at this home sanctuary, the former rabbi remembered the first meeting in Damascus. All was affability, tenderness, hospitality. John Mark's mother was a most generous and fearless disciple. Realizing the difficulties of the brethren of Jerusalem, she had not hesitated to offer her resources to all those in need, nor did she hesitate to open her doors so that the evangelical meetings in their purest form would not suffer discontinuity.

Saul's conversation greatly impressed her. She was especially attracted to his description of the fraternal atmosphere of the Antiochian church, whose virtues Barnabas did not hesitate to affirm.

Mary told her brother her great dream: she wanted to dedicate her still-young son to Jesus. For a long time she had been preparing the boy for discipleship. However, Jerusalem was drowning in ceaseless religious battles. Persecutions emerged and re-emerged. The Christian organization of the city was facing bitter alternatives. Only Peter's patience was able to maintain the continuity of the divine ideal. Wouldn't it be better if John Mark went to Antioch to be with his uncle? Barnabas was not opposed to his enthusiastic sister's plans. John Mark in turn was following the conversation and showing how pleased he was. When asked his opinion, Saul noticed that brother and sister were discussing the matter without consulting John Mark, who was still happy and smiling as he listened to the plan. Thus, the ex-doctor of the Law, deeply familiar with the human soul, redirected the conversation in an effort to get John Mark more directly involved.

"John," said Saul kindly, "do you in fact feel truly called to the ministry?"

"Of course," confirmed the youth somewhat perplexed.

“But how would you define your purpose?” asked Saul.

“I think that Jesus’ ministry would be an honor,” he answered a bit shyly under the scrutiny of that intent and inquisitive look.

Saul thought for a moment and said: “Your intentions are praiseworthy, but you mustn’t forget that the least bestowal of worldly honor comes only after having worked for it. And if this is the way of the world, how much more will it be the case when it involves working for the kingdom of Christ! The truth is, on earth all honors pass, but the glory of Jesus is eternal!”

The young man registered the remark, and although disconcerted by such profound concepts, he added: “I feel I’m prepared for the work of the Gospel, and besides, my mother would like very much for me to receive the best instruction possible so that I may become a preacher of God’s truths.”

Mary Mark looked at her son, filled with motherly pride. Saul understood the situation, said something pleasant, and then emphasized: “Yes, mothers always wish us all the honors of this and the other world. From their perspective there is no such thing as wicked people. But from ours we must remember the Gospel traditions. Just yesterday I recalled the request of Zebedee’s wife, who longed for the glorification of her two sons!²¹... Jesus acknowledged her motherly wishes, but did not hesitate to ask whether the candidates for his kingdom were duly prepared to drink from his cup ... And we have just seen that the cup reserved for James contained posca as bitter as that of the Messiah’s cross.”

They all fell silent, but Saul continued in a pleasant tone, changing the overall mood.

“This does not mean that we should lose heart when faced with the difficulties involved in bringing about the true glories of Jesus’ Kingdom. Obstacles renew one’s strength. The divine purpose should represent our supreme objective. If you hold to that thought, John, I have no doubt that you will succeed.”

Mother and son smiled contently.

Right away they agreed that the lad would go with Barnabas. His uncle explained to him the indispensable discipline and spirit of sacrifice required by such a worthy mission. If Antioch represented an environment of great peace, it was also most certainly a center of active and constant labor. John Mark would need to ignore any feelings of discouragement in order to give

himself body and soul to the Master's service with a complete understanding of the most honorable duties.

The young man did not hesitate to make such a commitment under the loving gaze of his mother, who supported his decision with the sincere courage of a heart devoted to Jesus.

Within a few days the three left for the beautiful city of Orontes.

While John Mark contemplated the landscape in amazement, Saul and Barnabas engaged in long conversations concerning the general interests of the Gospel. The former rabbi was returning to Antioch deeply impressed by the situation of the Jerusalem church. He sincerely wished to go to Joppa to see Simon Peter. However, the brothers persuaded him not to. The authorities were watching. James's death had been demanded by several members of the Sanhedrin and Temple. Any telling movement on the road to Joppa might provide an opportunity for the tyranny of Herod's henchmen.

"Frankly," said Saul apprehensively, "I'm returning to our work in Antioch almost disheartened. Jerusalem gives the impression of profound disarray and great indifference toward Christ's lessons. I have no doubts about Simon Peter's upstanding qualities as head of the movement, but we need to close ranks around him. More than ever I'm convinced of the sublime reality that Jesus came to His own, but was not understood."

"Yes," pondered Barnabas, wishing to ease his friend's apprehension. "I trust in Christ above all else; and also, I expect much from Peter."

"Nonetheless," said Saul without hesitating, "we need to remember that, in everything, perfect balance must be our guideline. We cannot do anything without the Master, but we mustn't forget that Jesus established an eternal work in the world, and He chose twelve companions to initiate it. It's true that they did not always meet the Master's expectations; but they were chosen nevertheless. Thus, we must examine Peter's situation. He is without any doubt the true head of the apostolic school by virtue of the fact that his superior spirit is attuned to Christ's thoughts in all circumstances; but there is no way that he can work alone. As we know, of Jesus' twelve friends, four remained in Jerusalem. Of these, John was forced to leave; Philip, compelled to flee the city with his family; and James is gradually yielding to the Pharisaic community. What will become of Peter if he lacks the support he needs?"

Barnabas seemed to be seriously pondering the matter.

“I have an idea that seems to have come from much higher,” said Saul, sincerely moved.

He continued: “I do not believe that Christianity will attain its purposes if we count only on the Jews’ inflexibly constricted in the pride of the Law. Jesus stated that his disciples would come from the East and the West. We, who can foresee the storm, and I, especially, who am aware of its paroxysms for having played the role of persecutor, need to attract these disciples. What I mean, Barnabas, is that we must go to the Gentiles, wherever they may be found. Only in this way will the Christian movement acquire the character of universality.”

Simon Peter’s disciple made a gesture of surprise.

Saul noticed it and continued concisely.

“Of course, there will be many protests and enormous struggles connected with this approach; however, I see no other recourse. It would not be right to neglect the great work of the Jerusalem church involving the poor and needy, and I even believe that the pious assistance that its work entails has many times been the reason that it is still operating. There are, however, other arenas of activity, other fundamental perspectives to think of. Currently we are able to care for the sick and offer beds of repose to unfortunates, but there always were and always will be sick and tired bodies on the earth. In the Christian endeavor such efforts cannot be forgotten, but the illumination of the spirit must take precedence. If people had Christ in their hearts, the picture of their needs would be completely different. The comprehension of the Gospel and the examples of the Master would revamp perspectives on pain and suffering. The needy would find resources through their own efforts; the sick would feel in a long illness an outlet for their imperfections; nobody would be a beggar because they would all have the Christian light for mutual help; and finally, life’s obstacles would be cherished as the sacred corrections of a loving Father toward his troubled children.”

Barnabas seemed enthused about the idea, but after thinking for a minute he added: “But shouldn’t this undertaking begin in Jerusalem itself?”

“I don’t think so,” Saul replied immediately. “It would be absurd to give Peter something more to worry about. The influx of needy and discouraged people that knock at his door from all the provinces exceeds anything I could imagine. Simon is incapable of carrying out such a task.”

“But what about the others?” asked Barnabas in a spirit of solidarity.

“The others will protest, of course. Especially now that Judaism is absorbing the apostolic efforts, we can only expect a lot of complaining. However, nature itself provides lessons in this regard. Don’t we complain a lot about pain? But what is the most useful to us? Sometimes our redemption lies precisely in what seemed to be a real calamity at the time. We need to shake up the Jerusalem church’s indifference by calling to the uncircumcised, the sinners and those outside the Law. Otherwise, within a few years Jesus will be regarded simply as a commonplace charlatan. Of course, after Simon’s death the enemies of the principles taught by the Master will find it very easy to corrupt Levi’s notes. The Good News will be defiled and anybody asking about Christ fifty years from now will be told that the Master was a common criminal who paid for his sins on the cross. In the center of so many religious disagreements involving petty human politics, restricting the Gospel to Jerusalem would be the same as condemning it to extinction. We must take the news of Jesus to other peoples, to interconnect the places of Christian understanding, to open new pathways ... We should also write down what we know of Jesus and His divine example. Others of the Apostles, for example, could write about what they saw and heard, because from what I’ve been able to tell, Levi did not write down all there is to know about the Master. There are situations and incidents that he did not record. Wouldn’t it be fitting for Peter and John also to write down the observations that impressed them the most? I wouldn’t hesitate to say that coming generations will want to learn more about the task that has been entrusted to us.”

Barnabas rejoiced at such alluring prospects. Saul’s remarks were more than justified. They had to provide the world with a more in-depth account.

“You’re right,” he stated in admiration. “We need to consider such an endeavor, but where do we begin?”

“Well,” explained Saul, trying to smooth out the difficulties, “if you do indeed want to head up any effort in this regard, you can count on my unconditional cooperation. Our plan would be developed by organizing selfless missions, with no other purpose than to fully serve the spreading of the Good News of Christ. For example, we could start in areas that are not completely unfamiliar and we would establish the custom of teaching the evangelical truths to the many various groups located there. After finishing in one area we would move on to the next and take the Master’s lessons to other people.”

Barnabas listened to him, filled with real hope. Feeling encouraged once again, he suggested what might be the first step of their plan: “For a long time, Saul, I have felt the need to return home in order to resolve some family problems. Who knows, perhaps we could begin our apostolic work in the villages and cities of Cyprus? Depending on the result, we would then proceed to other regions. I have been told that the area around Antioch of Pisidia is inhabited by humble, generous people and I think we could harvest beautiful results in initiating an endeavor there.”

“You can count on me,” answered Saul resolutely. “The matter will require the cooperation of courageous brothers; the church of Christ cannot be victorious if everyone is selfish. I would liken the Gospel to an infinite field which the Lord has given us to cultivate. Some workers must remain close to its fountainhead and guard its purity; others must plough the land in specific areas; but we mustn’t discount the help of those who need to use crude instruments to get rid of thick creepers and cut down briars in order to let the sun shine on the pathways.”

Barnabas acknowledged the excellence of the plan, but considered: “However, we still need to deal with the money issue. I have some savings, but not enough to cover all our expenses. On the other hand, it wouldn’t be right to overburden the churches.”

“Of course not!” added the former rabbi. “Wherever we stop, I’ll use my weaving skills. Why not? Every poor village always has looms for rent. Well then, I’ll set up a portable workshop!”

Barnabas was amused by the idea. “Your sacrifices will not be small. Aren’t you concerned about unforeseen difficulties?”

“Why?” asked Saul firmly. “Obviously, if God didn’t allow me a family life it was so that I could dedicate myself exclusively to his service. Wherever we go we will set up the simple shop. And wherever there are no carpets to repair or weave, I can always make sandals.”

Simon Peter’s disciple became enthusiastic. The rest of the journey was dedicated to planning the upcoming excursion. However, there was something more to consider. Besides having to submit the plan for approval by the church at Antioch, they had to think of young John Mark. Barnabas tried to get his nephew interested in the conversation. The young man was soon convinced that he should join the mission if the Antiochian congregation

approved of the plan. He was interested in all its details. He would follow Jesus' work wherever need be.

"And if there are many obstacles?" asked Saul cautiously.

"I shall overcome them," answered John convincingly.

"But we may run into countless difficulties," continued the former rabbi, preparing John Mark's mind. "If Christ, who was without sin, met with a cross amidst mockery and flogging when He taught God's truths, what mightn't we expect in our condition as fragile and poor souls?"

"I shall find the strength I need."

Saul looked at him, admired the firm resolution evident in his words, and remarked: "If your witness is as great as the courage you are displaying, I have no doubt as to the greatness of your mission."

Amid comforting hopes the plan was finished with beautiful prospects of work for all three of them.

During the first meeting, after reporting his personal observations concerning the church at Jerusalem, Barnabas disclosed their plan to the congregation, who listened to him carefully. A few elders spoke of the gap that would be left open in the church with their departure. They emphasized their wish that the current harmonious, fraternal setting not be broken. However, Barnabas again explained the new necessities of the Gospel. He painted the picture of Jerusalem as faithfully as possible and made a short summary of his discussions with Saul, stressing how appropriate it was to call new workers into the Master's service.

After he had addressed the problem with all the seriousness it deserved, the leaders of the community changed their minds. A general agreement was reached. The situation explained by Barnabas was very serious indeed. His fervent opinions were more than justified. If moral apathy persisted in the churches, Christianity was doomed to perish. Right then and there, Simon's disciple received unrestricted approval, and at prayer time the voice of the Holy Spirit was heard in that environment of pure simplicity, indicating that Barnabas and Saul were to be entrusted with the evangelization of the Gentiles.

That higher commendation, that voice coming from the heavenly realms echoed in the former rabbi's soul like a song of spiritual victory. He felt as if he had just crossed an immense desert to once again meet the sweet and

eternal message of Christ. In striving for his spiritual integrity, he had experienced only affliction since his blindness in Damascus. He had longed for Jesus. He had had a terrible and scorching thirst. In vain he had asked for the understanding of his friends; in vain he had sought the gentle warmth of his family. But now that the word from On High was indeed calling him to serve, he was overwhelmed with infinite joy. It was a sign that he had been considered worthy of the efforts entrusted to the Apostles. Reflecting on how the pain of the past seemed so small and childish compared with the immense joy that inundated his soul, Saul of Tarsus wept copiously, experiencing the most wonderful emotions. None of the brothers present, not even Barnabas, could surmise the breadth of the sentiments revealed in those tears. Taken with profound emotion, the former doctor of the Law realized that Jesus had deigned to accept his oblations of goodwill, his struggles and sacrifices. The Master was calling him, and in his response to the appeal he would go to the farthest corners of the world.

Numerous friends took part in the initial preparations on behalf of the undertaking.

Soon, full of trust in God, Saul and Barnabas, accompanied by John Mark, said goodbye to the brethren and headed for Seleucia. The journey to the coast involved an atmosphere of much joy. From time to time they rested on the banks of the Orontes for a healthy meal. Under the shade of oak trees, in the peace of woods adorned with flowers, the missionaries exchanged their first hopes.

Arriving in Seleucia, they did not have to wait long to set sail. The city was always full of travelers on their way to the West, and a large number of all sorts of ships came to its shores. Encouraged by the welcome they had received from their brethren in the faith, Barnabas and Saul embarked for Cyprus after a moving and heartfelt goodbye.

They arrived at the island with young John Mark without any significant incident to speak of. Staying in Citium for several days, Barnabas was able to solve a number of family matters.

Before leaving, they visited the synagogue on a Sabbath with the purpose of beginning their efforts. As the head of the mission, Barnabas addressed the assembly, seeking to link the text of the Law studied that day with the teachings of the Gospel, and in doing so to point out the superiority of Christ's mission. Saul noticed that his companion was explaining the

subject with a somewhat excessive respect for the Jewish traditions. He could clearly see that, before anything else, Barnabas wanted to gain the sympathies of the audience. On some points he seemed afraid to press the issue and thus start a fight, which would be so much against his temperament. The Jews were surprised but content, but Saul was not entirely at ease as he observed this scene. To correct Barnabas would be ungrateful and disorderly; to go along with the smiles of his countrymen who persisted in the errors of Pharisaic hypocrisy would be to deny loyalty to the Gospel.

He tried to accept the situation and waited.

The mission went through numerous localities amid widespread feelings of sympathy. The messengers of the Good News stayed more than a week in Amatonte. Barnabas's preaching was deeply acquiescent. It was characterized over all by a great care not to offend Jewish sensibilities.

After much effort they arrived at Paphos, where the proconsul lived. The seat of the provincial government was a lovely city full of natural charm and marked by solid expressions of culture. Peter's disciple, however, was exhausted. He had never experienced such intense apostolic work. Remembering Saul's inadequacies in addressing the congregation in the church at Antioch, he was afraid of entrusting to the former rabbi the direct responsibilities of teaching. Even though extremely tired, he preached in the synagogue on the first Sabbath after their arrival. On that day, however, he was divinely inspired. His presentation of the Gospel was delivered with rare brilliance. Saul himself was deeply moved. The success was tremendous. The second meeting brought together the finest members; Jews and Romans assembled in expectation. The former Levite offered another apology²² about Christ, depicting concepts of marvelous spiritual beauty. In charge of the mission's informative work, Saul gladly attended to all consultations, requests and information. No other city had shown as much interest as this one. Romans came in large numbers to ask for clarification regarding the messengers' objectives, and upon receiving information about Christ they expressed joy and hope, displaying effusive gestures of voluntary kindness. Saul and Barnabas were encouraged with their success. They organized meetings and began a beautiful healing work in private homes specially granted for this purpose by those sympathetic to Jesus' doctrine. With unbounded joy the weaver from Tarsus saw the arrival of a long line of "children of Calvary": troubled mothers, the disillusioned sick, the hopeless elderly and suffering orphans – all were now seeking out the mission. News

of healings deemed impossible filled Paphos with great wonder. The missionaries laid their hands on those in need, praying earnestly to the Nazarene Messiah; at other times they distributed pure water in His name. Extremely tired and believing the new audience did not require deeper erudition, Barnabas asked his companion to preach the Good News; to his great surprise, he saw that Saul had changed radically. His words seemed inflamed with new light. He drew such profound conclusions from the Gospel that the former Levite now listened to him without hiding his amazement. He particularly noticed Saul's tenderness in presenting the teachings of Christ to the beggars and sufferers. He spoke like someone who had lived with the Lord for many years. He referred to certain facts of the Master's teachings with a fount of tears in his eyes. Extraordinary consolation descended over the minds of the crowd. Day and night, workers and students copied Levi's notes.

The events were shaking the thought of the whole city. The results were very comforting and it was at this point that the missionaries received a great surprise.

It was late morning. Saul was attending to a large number of people in need, when a Roman legionary came to see them.

Barnabas and Saul left John Mark in charge of the work and went to meet the visitor.

"The proconsul, Sergius Paulus," said the messenger in a solemn tone, "invites you to visit him at his palace."

The message was more of an order than a simple invitation. Simon's disciple grasped this fact and replied, "We thank you heartily and we shall go today."

Saul was confused. It was not only the political significance of the incident that bothered him especially. In vain he tried to remember: Sergius Paulus? Hadn't he heard of someone by that name? He tried to recall the young men of Roman origin, whom he had known. At last he remembered the conversation he had had with Peter regarding Stephen and concluded that the proconsul was none other than the savior of Abigail's brother.

Without expressing his inner feelings to Barnabas, he examined the situation with him. What was the purpose of the implied summons? Word had it that the proconsul was suffering from a persistent illness. Did he want to be healed or, induced by the Jews, to find a way to expel them from the island? The situation, however, would not be solved by conjectures.

Leaving John Mark in charge of attending those interested in more information on the doctrine, the two friends set out resolutely.

They were taken down long hallways and were led into the presence of a relatively young man lying on a large couch and showing himself to be extremely weak. Thin and pale, and displaying a singular disenchantment with life, the proconsul nevertheless showed an immense kindness radiating from his humble and melancholic eyes.

He welcomed the missionaries warmly and introduced them to a Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus, who had been treating him for quite some time. Sergius Paulus discreetly asked the guards and servants to leave. Only the four of them were left alone as the ailing man began to speak with bitter frankness.

“Sirs, many friends have brought me news of your success in this city of Paphos. You have healed dangerous diseases, restored faith to many disbelievers and have comforted miserable sufferers ... I have been taking care of my ruined health for more than a year now, and I am almost worthless for public life in this condition.”

Pointing to Bar-Jesus, who was looking maliciously at the visitors, the Roman proconsul continued: “Quite some time ago, I engaged the services of your countryman here, anxious and confident in the knowledge of our time; but the results have been insignificant. I have called you, desirous of experiencing your knowledge. Please do not be surprised by my attitude. If it had been possible, I would have come for you in person, for I know the extent of my prerogatives; but as you can see, more than anything else I am a person in need.”

Saul listened to these statements, deeply moved by the natural kindness of the distinguished patient. Barnabas was astonished and did not know what to say. However, master of the situation and almost certain that Sergius Paulus was the same man who had appeared in the life of the victorious martyr, the ex-doctor of the Law stated convincingly: “Noble Proconsul, we do in fact have with us the power of a great doctor. We are able to heal if the sick are willing to understand and follow him.”

“But who is he?” asked the patient.

“He is Christ Jesus. His medicine is sacred,” continued the weaver emphatically, “and it is meant to treat the cause of all ills. As we know, every body on this earth will have to die. So, due to the power of unavoidable

natural laws, we will never enjoy complete physical health while in this world. Our body suffers the action of all the environmental influences: heat makes us uncomfortable, cold makes us shiver, food transforms us and the acts of life determine changes in our habits. But the Savior teaches us to seek a more real and precious health: that of the spirit. Enjoying the health of the spirit means that we have changed the cause of our life's worries, and will therefore be able to enjoy the relatively good physical health the world can offer us in its transitory expressions.

While Bar-Jesus smiled ironically as he listened to this introduction, Sergius Paulus was attentive and moved as he followed the ex-rabbi's words.

"But where can I find this doctor?" asked the proconsul, more interested in the cure than the metaphysical meaning of Saul's remarks.

"He is perfect goodness," explained Saul of Tarsus, "and His consoling action is everywhere. Even before we understand it, He surrounds us with His infinite love!"

Observing the enthusiasm with which the Tarsian missionary was speaking, the political leader of Paphos sought Bar-Jesus's approval with an inquiring look.

The Jewish magician displayed deep contempt and exclaimed: "We thought you were equipped with some sort of new knowledge ... I cannot believe my ears. Do you think I do not know about the false prophet of Nazareth? Do you dare come to the palace of a governor in the name of a wretched carpenter?"

Saul ascertained the full extent of that sarcasm and answered without being intimidated: "Friend, when I used to don the Pharisaic mask, I too thought like that; but I have come to know the glorious light of the Master, the Son of the Living God!"

Those words were spoken with such ardent conviction that even the Jewish charlatan went white. Barnabas also became pale, whereas the noble patrician observed the fervent preacher with visible interest. After a painful wait, Sergius Paulus said: "I have no right to doubt anyone until conclusive proof has led me to do so."

And fixing his gaze on Saul, who returned his scrutinizing look, he continued calmly: "Your talk of this Christ Jesus fills me with wonder. You allege that His goodness helps us even before we know Him. How can I get

tangible proof of such a statement? If I do not understand this Messiah, how am I to know whether His assistance has influenced me on any one day?”

Saul suddenly remembered Simon Peter’s conversation regarding Stephen. In an instant, he lined up the smallest details. And taking advantage of every opportunity to emphasize Jesus’ infinite love – as displayed in the smallest incidents of His apostolic career – he stated with singular intonation: “Proconsul, listen to me! In order to reveal – no, let me rephrase that – in order to remind you of the mercy of Jesus of Nazareth, our Savior, allow me to call your attention to an important event.”

While Barnabas showed deep surprise at his companion’s unabashed attitude, the politician perked up his ears.

“This is not the first time you have experienced a serious illness. As you were taking your first steps in public life nearly ten years ago, you set sail from the port of Cephalonia on your way to this island. You traveled to Citium, but before the ship made port at Corinth, you fell ill with a terrible fever and your body opened in dreadful sores.”

A waxen whiteness showed on the face of the leader of Paphos. He placed his hand on his chest as if to contain his accelerated heartbeat and stood up, extremely disturbed.

“How do you know all this?” he uttered, startled.

“That is not all,” said the missionary calmly. “Wait for the rest. For many days you hung between life and death. In vain the doctors on board discussed your illness. Your friends deserted you. When you were completely forsaken in spite of the political prestige of your position, the Nazarene Messiah sent you someone in the silence of His divine mercy.”

At the awakening of old memories, the proconsul became deeply moved.

“Who was this messenger from the Savior?” continued Saul while Barnabas looked at him in unbelievable astonishment. “One of your family? An eminent friend? One of your illustrious colleagues who witnessed your pain? No! Only a humble slave, a nameless servant from the oars of death. Jeziel watched over you day and night! And what the knowledge of the world could not do, that heart full of Christ’s love could! Do you understand now? Your friend Bar-Jesus speaks of a nameless carpenter, a Messiah who preferred the condition of supreme humility in order to bring us the priceless abundance of His grace!... Yes, like that slave who restored your lost health,

Jesus too made Himself the servant of man to lead him to a better life!... When everyone else forsakes us, He is with us; when friends flee, His goodness comes even closer. In order to protect ourselves from the miserable contingencies of this mortal life, we must believe in Him and follow Him without rest!”

As the proconsul wept convulsively, Barnabas was bewildered and wondered: Where had his friend gotten such a profound revelation? To him, Saul of Tarsus at that moment was illuminated by the marvelous gift of prophecy.

“Sirs, all this is the pure truth! You have brought me the holy news of a Savior!” exclaimed Sergius Paulus.

Although very surprised, the Jewish magician recognized the capitulation of the generous patrician who had filled his money bag with abundance, and exclaimed vehemently: “That’s a lie!... These men are liars! All this is the work of Satan! These men are bearers of the abominable sorceries of the Way”! Down with their vile exploitation!”

He was foaming at the mouth and his eyes were burning with rage. Saul remained unflustered, impassive, almost smiling. Then he stated forcefully: “Compose yourself, my friend! Rage is not a friend of truth and almost always hides ulterior motives. You accuse us of being liars, but our words have not deviated one iota from the reality of what happened. You allege that our efforts proceed from Satan; however, where has there ever been a greater inconsistency? Where would we find an enemy working against himself? You state that we are bearers of sorceries; if love is comprised of such a talisman, then we hold it in our hearts, anxious to spread its benevolent influence to all. Finally, you brand us as unconscionable exploiters, yet we have come here called by someone who has honored us with sincerity and trust, and in no way could we offer the Savior’ grace for payment.

A heated discussion followed. Bar-Jesus made every effort to demonstrate the baseness of Saul’s intentions, while Saul made every effort to show nobility and cordiality.

In vain the proconsul tried to dissuade Bar-Jesus from continuing the dispute in such a tone. Barnabas in turn, trusting much more in the spiritual abilities of his friend, followed the battle without hiding his admiration for the infinite resources that the Tarsian missionary displayed.

The argument had gone on for more than an hour, when the magician made a most hateful remark against the person and deeds of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle assumed a more forceful posture and declared: "I have done everything to convince you without a more direct demonstration so as not to harm the respectable aspect of your convictions; however, you are blind, and it is in that condition that you shall see the light. Like you, I too used to live in darkness, and at the moment of my personal encounter with the Messiah, it was necessary for the darkness to become denser within my spirit so that the light could appear more brilliantly. You too shall receive this benefit. Your body's eyesight shall be closed so that you may behold the truth in spirit!"

At that instant Bar-Jesus cried out: "I'm blind!"

The room was immersed in confusion. Barnabas stepped forward to help Bar-Jesus as he fumbled around in affliction. Saul and the proconsul also approached him in surprise. Some caring and solicitous servants were called and took care of the needs of the moment. For four long hours, Bar-Jesus wept, immersed in the thick darkness that had invaded his tired eyes. At the end of that time the missionaries prayed on their knees ... A gentle peace filled the large room. Immediately thereafter, Saul laid his hands on Bar-Jesus's forehead, and with a sigh of relief the old Jew recovered his sight and left confused and defeated.

The proconsul, however, was highly impressed by the intense events of the day, called the missionaries in private and said movingly: "Friends, I believe in the divine truths you have proclaimed and I truly wish to share in the awaited Kingdom. Nonetheless, I would like to hear about your work objectives and your plans. I know you do not sell your spiritual gifts, but I would like to help with my services in any way I can. Could you tell me your plans?"

The two missionaries looked at each other in surprise. Barnabas still had not come out of the wonder that his friend had caused him. Saul in turn could hardly hide his own astonishment at the spiritual help he had received regarding his wish to confound Bar-Jesus's malicious intentions.

Recognizing the proconsul's lofty and sincere interest, however, Saul explained jubilantly: "The Savior founded the religion of love and truth, an invisible and universal institution where all people of goodwill are received. Our purpose is to give visible form to this divine work by setting up churches that are united in His name by the same principles. We realize the

delicateness of such an endeavor and we are certain that the greatest difficulties will come our way. It is almost impossible to find the human resources that are so vital to our commitment, but it is crucial to put the plan into action nonetheless. When the elements of the visible institution fail, we will hope in the infinite church, where, in the light of universality, Jesus will be the supreme head of all the forces consecrated to the good.”

“This is a sublime endeavor,” said the proconsul showing noble interest. “Where have you begun building these churches?”

“Our mission is just starting as we speak. The Messiah’s own disciples founded the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. At present we have no educational centers other than those. There are many Christians everywhere but their meetings take place in private homes. They have no temples per se to enable them to make more effective efforts of assistance and evangelization.”

“Then Paphos will have the first church, the fruit of your direct work.”

Saul did not know how to express his gratitude for that gesture of voluntary generosity. Deeply moved, he stepped forward, and together with Barnabas, he thanked the proconsul for the gift that would bring recognition to the apostolic endeavor and make it easier.

All three continued discussing the enterprise at length. Sergius Paulus asked them to suggest people capable of building the new church, while Barnabas and his companion expressed their hopes.

Only at night did the missionaries return to the humble preaching tent.

“I’m impressed!” exclaimed Barnabas recalling what had occurred. “What did you do? As far as I’m concerned, today has been the greatest day of your life. Your words had a sacred and different tone: you now possess the gift of prophecy ... Moreover, the Master has endowed you with the ability to control malignant ideas. Did you see how the charlatan felt the influence of powerful energies when you made your appeal?”

Saul listened attentively and with great simplicity, he emphasized: “I myself do not know how to express my astonishment at the grace I received. It was through Christ that we have become instruments for the proconsul’s conversion, because the truth is, we ourselves are not worthy.”

“I shall never forget today’s events,” said the former Levite in wonder.

And after a pause: “Saul, when Ananias consecrated you, didn’t he suggest changing your name?”

“I haven’t given it any thought.”

“Then I think that from here on out you should consider your life as new. You were illuminated by the grace of the Master, you had your Pentecost and you were consecrated as an Apostle for the divine work of redemption.”

Saul didn’t try to hide his own wonder and concluded: “It is very significant to me that a political leader would be attracted to Jesus through us, considering that our task is to call the Gentiles to the divine sun of the Gospel of salvation.”

Inwardly he remembered the sublime bonds that linked him to the memory of Stephen and the generous influence of the Roman patrician who had delivered him from the harsh labor of slavery, and invoking the memory of the martyr in a silent appeal, he said movingly: “I know, Barnabas, that many of our friends changed their names when they converted to Jesus’ love. They wanted to mark in this way their separation from the fatal errors of the world. I didn’t want to avail myself of that recourse at first. But the change in the proconsul and the light of the grace that was with us throughout the course of today’s events has led me to seek to mark these lasting memories also.”

After a long pause, showing how much thought he had given the decision before making it, he said: “Private and completely respectable reasons have compelled me to realize that from now on we will have a benefactor in the political head of this island. So, without changing my name formally, I will begin signing it Roman style.”

“Very well,” said Barnabas. “There’s no difference between Saul and Paul except in writing and pronunciation. This decision will be an excellent homage to our first missionary triumph among the Gentiles, and at the same time it will be a wonderful remembrance of such a generous spirit.”

This is how one letter in the name of Gamaliel’s former pupil was changed. Of an honest and strict character by nature, the ex-rabbi of Jerusalem – not even as a humble weaver – had wanted to modify his innate faithfulness once he started his Christian endeavors. If he had served Moses as Saul, he would serve Jesus Christ with the same name. If he had erred and had been wicked in his former condition, he would take the opportunity given by Heaven, correct his life, and be a good and just man in the latter. In this regard he had not given any thought to suggestions by his friends. He had

been the first persecutor of the Christian institution, the unbending tormentor of the rising spread of the Gospel, but he had insisted on continuing as Saul to remind himself of all the evil he had done and to make an effort to do all the good within his reach. But at that moment, the memory of Stephen spoke softly to his heart. He had been the greatest example for this spiritual journey. He was Abigail's beloved Jeziel. To find him, both had promised to go without hesitation to wherever he might be found. The brother and sister from Corinth were so alive within his sensitive soul that it was impossible to wipe from his memory the smallest facts of their lives. The hand of Jesus had led him to the proconsul, Jeziel's deliverer from the chains of captivity. The ex-slave had gone to Jerusalem to become Christ's disciple! In his turn the ex-rabbi felt happy for having been aided by divine forces to become the deliverer of Sergius Paulus, enslaved to suffering and the dangerous illusions of the world. It was right to keep in his mind an indelible memory of the one who had been his victim in Jerusalem and who was now a blessed brother whom he could not forget at any moment in his life and ministry.

From then on, in memory of the unforgettable preacher of the Gospel who had died by stoning, the Damascus convert began signing his name as Paul until the end of his days.

The news of the healing and conversion of the proconsul filled Paphos with great wonder. The missionaries no longer had any rest. In spite of subdued protests by the Jews, the community grew by leaps and bounds. Restored to good health, the provincial head supplied everything needed for building the church. The activity was exceptional. And the two messengers of the Gospel never ceased rendering thanks to God.

Success was surrounding them with great consideration, when one day Paul was visited by Bar-Jesus, who asked to have a word with him in private. The former rabbi did not hesitate. It was a good opportunity to prove to the old Jew that his purposes were generous and sincere. Thus, Paul received him warmly.

Bar-Jesus seemed overcome with great shyness. After greeting the missionary politely, he said with a certain embarrassment: "I would finally like to clear up our misunderstanding in the case of the proconsul. Nobody wished for the patient's health more than I, and consequently nobody is more grateful for your intervention in delivering him from such a grievous illness."

“I thank you for your concern and rejoice in your understanding,” said Paul kindly.

“However...”

The visitor was reluctant to expose his innermost intentions. Noticing his reticence without guessing the cause, Paul offered gently: “What would you like to say? Be honest. Forget about formalities!”

“It just so happens,” Bar-Jesus stated, feeling more encouraged, “that I have been nourishing the idea of consulting you regarding your spiritual gifts. I feel there could be no greater treasure for being successful in life.”

Paul was confused and did not know what direction the conversation would take. But focusing on the most delicate point of his intentions, Bar-Jesus continued: “How much do you earn in your ministry?”

“I earn God’s mercy,” said the missionary, finally grasping the full scope of the unexpected visit. “I live on my work as a weaver, and it would not be right to sell what belongs to our Father in Heaven.”

“That’s unbelievable,” murmured the magician, eyes wide open. “I was convinced that you had certain talismans, which I was ready to buy at any price.”

And while Paul contemplated him full of pity for his ignorance, the visitor continued: “Do you really do such deeds without resorting to sorcery?”

The missionary looked at him more attentively and said: “I know of only one ‘sorcery’ that really works.”

“What is it?” asked the magician with fiery, greedy eyes.

“Faith in God combined with selflessness.”

The old Jew showed that he did not grasp the full meaning of those words, objecting: “Yes, but life has its pressing needs. We must foresee them and store up resources.”

Paul thought for a moment and said: “As for me, I have nothing to make it any clearer, but God always has an answer for our simplest worries. Let’s consult his eternal truths. Let’s see what the message appropriate for your soul might be.”

He was about to open the Gospel, as was his custom, when the visitor remarked: “I know nothing of that scripture, so for me it holds no advice.”

The missionary understood his reluctance and asked: “Well, what do you know then?”

“Moses and the Prophets.”

Paul took a scroll of parchment containing the Old Law and gave it to the ill-meaning old man for him to open at random, according to the custom of the time. Obviously unwilling, Bar-Jesus, added: “I only read the Prophets on my knees.”

“You can read them as you like, because understanding is what we are most interested in at the moment.”

Emphasizing his Pharisaic arrogance, the charlatan knelt and opened the text solemnly under the serene and inquisitive look of the former rabbi. The old Jew went pale. He made a gesture that he did not want to read what was written, but Paul noticed the subtle movement. He drew closer and said with some urgency: “Let’s see what the lasting message of God’s emissaries has to say.”

It was a passage from Proverbs, which Bar-Jesus read out loud with enormous disappointment:

Two things I ask of you; do not refuse them before I die. Keep vanity and lies far from me. Give me neither poverty nor riches. Grant me only the nourishment I need, so that, being full, I may not deny you and ask: Who is the Lord? Or being poor, I may not steal and profane the name of my God.²³

The magician stood up, unhinged. The missionary himself was surprised.

“Do you see, my friend?” asked Paul. “The word of truth is very eloquent. It will be a great talisman in life to know how to live within our means, without exceeding what is necessary for our spiritual enrichment.”

“Actually,” answered the charlatan, “this way of consulting the Scriptures is very interesting. I shall meditate seriously on today’s experience.”

Then he said goodbye after muttering some monosyllables that hardly disguised how troubled he was.

Impressed, Christ’s devoted weaver made a note of the Scripture’s profound exhortation in order to consolidate his plan of spiritual activities without taking thought of inferior interests.

The mission remained in Paphos a few more days, overloaded with much work. John Mark helped as best he could. However, from time to time Barnabas caught him sad and complaining. He had not expected to find such an enormous amount of work.

“But it’s better like this,” Paul stressed. “Working for the good is a wall of defense against temptation.”

The young man acquiesced, but he was obviously upset.

Moreover, as a faithful observer of Judaism in spite of his passion for the Gospel, Mary Mark’s son had great misgivings about the broad vision of his uncle and the missionary regarding the Gentiles. He wanted to serve Jesus, yes, with all his heart, but he could not separate the Master from the traditions of his birth.

After the seeds sown in Cyprus had begun to germinate in the soil of people’s hearts, the Messiah’s workers left Paphos, filled with great hopes.

After much discussion, Paul and Barnabas decided to extend the mission to the people of Pamphylia. John Mark was surprised by this decision and became indignant.

“But what are we to do with such strange people?” asked the young man. “We heard in Jerusalem that that region is inhabited by extraordinarily ignorant individuals. And to top it off, there are thieves everywhere.”

“Nonetheless,” responded Paul, convinced, “That is exactly why I think we must go to there. To others, a voyage to Alexandria might offer more interest; but all such large centers are full of masters of oratory. They have important synagogues, lofty knowledge, great exponents of science, and wealth. If they do not serve God it is because of their ill will or hard hearts. Pamphylia, on the other hand, is very poor, rustic and in dire need of spiritual light. Rather than teaching in Jerusalem, the Master preferred to preach in Capernaum and other villages almost unknown in Galilee.”

Faced with this irrefutable argument, John did not insist.

Within a few days a simple boat dropped them off in Attalia, where Paul and Barnabas found extraordinary beauty in the landscape surrounding the Cestro.

In this very poor place, they preached the Good News in the open air with immense success. Observing his companion’s superior moral fiber,

Barnabas handed over the leadership of the endeavor to the former rabbi, whose words by then were able to rouse enthralling enthusiasm. The simple people welcomed Paul's preaching with deep interest. He spoke of Jesus as a prince from Heaven, who had visited the world and had left to await His beloved subjects in the realms of spiritual glory. The attention the inhabitants of Attalia gave to the subject was remarkable. Some asked for copies of the Gospel lessons, while others sought to give the Master's messengers the best they had to offer. Highly moved, the two received love offerings from their newfound friends, which almost always consisted of plates of bread, oranges or fish.

Their stay there brought new problems. For example, culinary skills were needed. Barnabas tactfully appointed his nephew to the task, but the young man could not hide his annoyance. Paul noticed his distress and intervened quickly: "Let's not worry about ordinary problems. From now on let's try to restrict our needs and preferences regarding food. We'll eat only bread, fruit, honey and fish. Thus, kitchen work will be simplified and reduced to the preparation of baked fish, in which I had a lot of practice during my retreat in the Taurus Mountains. John doesn't need to trouble himself over this problem because it's only right that I see to it."

In spite of Paul's benevolent attitude, the young man continued downcast.

The mission soon hired a boat and sailed to Perga. In this city of average importance for the region where it was located, they proclaimed the Gospel with great devotion. On the Sabbath they filled the small synagogue with much activity. A few Jews and several Gentiles – mostly poor and simple people – gladly welcomed the missionaries. The news about Christ aroused extraordinary curiosity and delight. The modest, broken-down house rented by Barnabas was always crowded with individuals eager to obtain a copy of Levi's notes. Paul rejoiced. He felt an indefinable joy in contact with these humble, simple souls who gave to his spirit the sweet feeling of virgin spirituality after having been worn out by casuistry. Some asked about Jesus' position in the hierarchy of the gods of paganism; others wanted to know the reason why the Messiah had been crucified without any consideration for His exalted entitlements as a Messenger of the Eternal One. The region was full of superstitions and myths. Jewish learning was restricted to the closed circle of the synagogues. The mission devoted its largest endeavor to the Jews by preaching amongst those who followed the Law of Moses, but it interested the

more obscure strata of society due to the healings and the loving invitation to join the Gospel movement, into which Jesus' workers put all their efforts.

Fully satisfied, Paul and Barnabas decided to depart for Antioch of Pisidia. When John Mark was informed of this, he could no longer hide his inner fears and asked: "I thought we weren't going any farther than Pamphylia. So how are we going to get to Antioch? We don't have the means to cross such dangerous lands. The woods are infested with robbers and the river is full of waterfalls that will not permit travel by boat. And what about the nights? How will we sleep? This journey should not be attempted without animals and servants, which we don't have."

Paul thought for a moment and said: "John, when we work for someone we must do it with love. I think we should feel honored in proclaiming Christ to those who do not know Him because of the many difficulties of nature. The spirit of service never casts its most difficult share on others. The Master did not hand his cross over to his friends. In our case, if we had slaves and horses, wouldn't they be bearing the heaviest responsibilities from a material point of view? Jesus' work, however, is too great in our eyes for us to impose on others for our own benefit any part of its execution."

The young man seemed even more upset. Paul's forcefulness was disconcerting.

"But wouldn't it be wiser," continued John Mark very pale, "to go to Alexandria and at least organize some easier means?"

While Barnabas followed the dialogue with his characteristic serenity, the former rabbi added: "You place too much importance on obstacles. Have you ever thought of the difficulties the Master must have had to overcome to dwell with us? Even though He could freely cross the abyss from the spirit world to reach our realm of wickedness and ignorance, we still have to remember the wall of filth erected by our visceral miseries ... And you are frightened by the mere distance that separates us from Pisidia?"

The young man kept still, obviously troubled. Paul's argument had been too much for him and did not give him the chance to raise any new objections.

That night Barnabas, obviously worried, approached his companion to inform him of his nephew's intentions. The young man had decided to return to Jerusalem by any means possible. Paul listened calmly to Barnabas's explanation like someone who could in no way oppose the decision.

“Couldn’t we at least accompany him to a spot nearer his destination?” asked Barnabas as a mindful uncle.

“Destination?” asked Paul, surprised. “But we already have a destination. Ever since our first understanding we have had the trip to Antioch in mind. I cannot keep you from going with him; however, on my part I mustn’t change course. In case you decide to return to Jerusalem, I will go on ahead alone. I think there is a right moment to act in undertaking Jesus’ endeavors; we need to take advantage of it. If we postpone the visit to Pisidia until next month, perhaps it will be too late.”

Barnabas thought for a few minutes and replied convincingly: “Your statement is uncontestable; I cannot break our commitment. Besides, John is a man and can return by himself. He has the money for it because of his mother’s foresight.”

“When not well-used,” replied Paul calmly, “money always undoes the holiest bonds and responsibilities.”

The conversation ended and Barnabas went to inform his nephew. John took it hard.

Two days before boarding the boat that would take him to the Cestro estuary, Mary Mark’s son said goodbye to the ex-rabbi of Jerusalem with a forced smile.

Paul embraced him joylessly and spoke to him in a tone of serene admonishment: “May God bless and protect you. Do not forget that progress toward Christ is accomplished by all in stages. We shall all arrive successfully; however, those who wander off course must arrive successfully by themselves.”

“Yes,” said the young man feeling ashamed. “I shall try to work and serve God with all my soul.”

“You speak rightly and you will fulfill your duty if you proceed as you say,” said the former rabbi convincingly. “Always remember that David remained faithful to the Almighty as long as he stayed busy, but when he rested he yielded to adultery; Solomon remained pure in faith during the heavy work of building the Temple, but when he rested he too was overcome by debauchery; Judas started out well and was a direct disciple of the Lord, but the Master’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem was all it took for him to

surrender to betrayal and death. With so many examples, it would be better if we never rested.”

Barnabas’s nephew left, sincerely touched by these words. They would follow him into the future as a constant reminder.

Soon after this incident, the two missionaries left for roads unknown. For the first time they had to spend the night in the open air in the bosom of nature. They climbed up a cliff and came across a rocky cave, which they entered to rest their mortified and aching bodies.

Their usual indomitable courage saw them through the second day of their trek. Their food consisted of a few loaves of bread brought from Perga and wild fruit picked here and there. Resolute and in good spirits, they faced and overcame every obstacle. From time to time they were faced with impassable barriers and had to cross to the other side of the river. At such times they cautiously felt their way across the current with long walking sticks or braved dangerous and unknown trails.

The solitude inspired them with beautiful thoughts. Sacred optimism poured forth from the smallest ideas. Both cherished loving memories from their devoted and hope-filled past. As men they experienced every sort of human necessity, but the loyalty with which they gave themselves to Christ was profoundly moving as they trusted in his love for the realization of their sacred desires for a higher level of life,.

Soon after the last hues of sunset on the second night, they settled down in a small cave a bit off the narrow trail. After a meager meal they had a lively conversation on the deeds of the church in Jerusalem. Night fell and their voices continued to pierce the dead silence. Expanding to other subjects, they talked about the excellence of the Gospel and praised the greatness of Jesus Christ’s mission.

“If people only knew...” said Barnabas, making comparisons.

“They would all gather around the Lord and find rest,” finished Paul, filled with conviction.

“He is the Prince who will reign over all.”

“Nobody has ever brought greater wealth to this world.”

“Ah!” Simon Peter’s disciple remarked. “The treasure of which He was the messenger will enrich the earth forever.”

They were continuing along these lines, making use of precious images from everyday life to symbolize the eternal possessions, when an odd movement grabbed their attention. Two armed men fell upon both of them under the dim light of the resin torch.

“Your money bag!” shouted one of the malefactors.

Barnabas went slightly pale but Paul remained calm and composed.

“Give me what you have or die,” said the other bandit brandishing a dagger.

Gazing firmly at his companion, Paul ordered: “Give them the rest of the money; God will provide for our needs some other way.”

Barnabas emptied the money bag, which he had been carrying between the folds of his tunic. The bandits greedily took the small sum.

Noticing the Gospel parchments the missionaries had been consulting under the light of the makeshift torch, one of the thieves asked suspiciously and ironically: “What are those documents? You were talking about of a rich prince ... We heard references to a treasure ... What were you talking about?”

With admirable presence of mind, Paul explained: “Yes, in fact those parchments are the script of the immense treasure brought to us by Christ Jesus, who shall reign over all the princes of the earth.”

One of the bandits was greatly interested and examined the scroll with Levi’s notes.

“Whoever finds this treasure,” continued Paul resolutely, “will never be in need again.”

The thief carefully tucked the Gospel away.

“You can thank God we didn’t kill you,” said one of them.

And extinguishing the flickering torch, they disappeared into the dark of night. Once they were alone, Barnabas could not hide his dread.

“And now?” he asked with a trembling voice.

“The mission is going well indeed,” commented Paul, full of good cheer. “We hadn’t counted on the excellent opportunity to pass the Good News on to thieves.”

Peter's disciple was amazed by such composure: "But they also took the last barley loaves as well as our cloaks."

"There will always be a little fruit along the way," explained Paul decisively, "and let's not be concerned about our cloaks; we'll never lack the moss of the trees."

And wishing to help his friend calm down, he added: "True, we have no more money but I don't think it will be hard to find work with the carpet makers in Antioch of Pisidia. Moreover, the region is quite far from the large centers and I can bring new ideas to my workmates. This opportunity will work to our advantage."

After weaving new hopes they went to sleep in the open air, dreaming of bliss in the Kingdom of God.

The following day Barnabas was still worried. Questioned by his companion, he confessed sorrowfully: "I've resigned myself to our complete lack of material resources, but I can't forget that they also took our Gospel notes. How are we to start our work again? Even though we know most of the teachings by heart, we won't be able to verify everything we say."

Paul, however, made a meaningful gesture, unbuttoned his tunic and took out something he had been keeping close to his heart.

"Wrong, Barnabas," he said with an optimistic smile. "I have here the Gospel reminder of Gamaliel's kindness. It was a gift from Simon Peter to my old mentor, who in turn gave it to me just before he died."

The Cyprian missionary pressed the treasure of Christ in his hands. Joy returned to illuminate his soul. They could do without all comforts of the world, but the words of Jesus were vital.

After overcoming every sort of obstacle they arrived in Antioch completely worn out. At certain times of the night Paul, especially, felt tired and feverish. Barnabas had frequent fits of coughing. Their first contact with hostile nature had left the two messengers' bodies strongly imbalanced.

In spite of his precarious health, the weaver from Tarsus left early in the morning of their arrival to get information about leather shops in the city.

Antioch of Pisidia had a large Jewish community. Its flow of trade was better than normal. The streets displayed well-supplied shops and a variety of small industries.

Trusting in Divine Providence, they rented a very simple room, and while Barnabas was resting from his extreme fatigue, Paul went to find a shop recommended by a fruit seller.

A Jew of good demeanor was overseeing an extensive work area. He was flanked by three helpers among several shelves stocked with sandals, carpets and other supplies pertaining to his profession. Paul had learned his name through previous inquiries and asked for Mr. Ibrahim, who attended him with obvious curiosity.

“My friend,” said Paul frankly, “I am your colleague in the trade. I have been forced by urgent needs to ask you the great favor of accepting me to work in your shop. I have a long journey ahead of me, and since I am without resources I would appeal to your generosity in hopes of a favorable response.”

The carpet maker looked at him sympathetically but somewhat suspiciously. He was surprised and pleased at the same time by Paul’s frankness and self-assurance. After thinking for a bit, he answered somewhat vaguely: “There isn’t a lot of demand for our type of work, and to be honest, I don’t have the money to pay too many employees. Not everybody buys sandals; harnesses have to wait for the caravans that pass by only from time to time; we sell few carpets, and if it weren’t for the leather used in makeshift tents, I don’t think we would have enough to keep the business going. As you can see, it wouldn’t be easy to find you any work.”

“Still,” said Paul, moved by the man’s sincerity, “I would dare to insist on my request. It would be only for a few days ... What is more, I would be happy to work in exchange for bread and shelter for myself and a friend who’s not well.”

The kind Ibrahim was moved by this confession. After a long pause, during which the carpet maker wavered between “yes” and “no,” Paul finished by saying: “So great is my need that I insist on my request in God’s name.”

“Come in,” said the businessman, finally won over by that statement.

Although unwell, Christ’s emissary threw himself vigorously into the work. An old loom was hurriedly set up next to a counter covered with knives, hammers and pieces of leather.

Paul began working with a look of friendship and had a good word for each of his coworkers. Far from flaunting his superior learning, he observed

the work procedures of Ibrahim's helpers and kindly and unpretentiously suggested new measures for improving them.

The owner of the place was moved by his sincerity and sent a meal to Barnabas, while the former rabbi valiantly overcame his initial difficulties, experiencing the joy of a great triumph.

That night, together with his companion-in-struggle, Paul lifted up a prayer of fervent thanks to Jesus. They both discussed their new situation. Everything was going well but they had to think about the money they would need to pay for the room.

Edified by his friend's example, it was now Barnabas who tried to comfort Paul: "It doesn't matter; Jesus will take our goodwill into account and will not desert us."

When Paul returned from the workshop the following day, he had to wait for his friend. He was somewhat anxious. Ibrahim's footman had taken Barnabas his meal but had not found him in the room. After some apprehension, Paul was greatly surprised when he opened the door for him. Barnabas seemed extremely weak, but profound joy shone in his eyes. He explained that he too had found a paying job. He had been taken on by a brickmaker in need of workmen to take advantage of the good weather. They embraced each other with great emotion. Had they overcome the world through easy wealth, they would not have felt such joy. A little bit of honest work was enough for their Christ-illuminated souls.

On the first Sabbath of their stay in Antioch, the two heralds of the Gospel went to the local synagogue. Ibrahim had been extremely satisfied with the work of his new employee and gave him two used tunics, which Paul and Barnabas donned gladly.

All the "God-fearing" population packed the room. Paul and Barnabas sat in the place reserved for visitors or unknowns. Once the study and commentaries on the Law and the Prophets was over, the director of the religious service asked them if they would like to say a few words to the assembly.

Paul immediately accepted the invitation. He ascended the modest podium with a noble bearing and began to discuss the Law, possessed of sublime eloquence. The audience was not accustomed to such lofty thoughts and followed his fluent speech as if they had found a true, wonder-spreading prophet. The Jews could not contain their delight. Who was this man, whom

even the Temple in Jerusalem would be proud of? At a certain moment, however, what the preacher was saying became almost incomprehensible to them. His sublime discourse announced a Messiah who had already come into the world. Some of the Jews perked up their ears. He was talking about Christ Jesus, through whom people should hope for the grace and truth of salvation. The former doctor of the Law noticed that several faces displayed displeasure, but most were listening to him with an indefinable sense of affinity. The account of Jesus' deeds, his divine exemplification and his death on the cross brought the audience to tears. The head of the synagogue himself was deeply moved.

When the long sermon ended, the new missionary was embraced by many of the congregation. Ibrahim had just seen him under a new light and greeted him radiantly. Eustace, the brickmaker who had given Barnabas work, approached highly impressed to greet him. There was no lack of malcontents, however. Paul's success troubled the Pharisaic components of the congregation.

The following day, Antioch of Pisidia was taken with the matter. Ibrahim's shop and Eustace's brickyard were venues for much discussion and commentary. Paul then spoke of the healing that could be performed in the Master's name. An elderly aunt of his employer was healed of a persistent illness with the simple laying on of hands and prayers to Christ. Two children of the brickmaker recovered their health due to Barnabas's intervention. The two Gospel emissaries won immediate respect. Simple people came to ask them for prayers and copies of Jesus' teachings, while many of the sick recovered their health. If the good was increasing, however, the animosity against them on the part of those more highly placed in the city was increasing also. A movement against Christ began. Although Paul continued to preach, persecutions, mockery and sarcasm were growing among the powerful Jews. The messengers of the Good News did not lose heart, however. Comforted by the most sincere persons, they founded a church in Ibrahim's house. But just when everything was going well, Paul fell gravely ill as a further consequence of the hardship he had experienced in crossing the marshes of Pamphylia. This worried all the brethren. He was under the malign influence of a devastating fever for a whole month. Barnabas and their new friends were inexhaustible in caring for him.

Exploiting Paul's illness, the enemies of the Gospel arrived on the scene to belittle the situation. For over three months these two men had been

proclaiming the new Kingdom, reforming the religious notions of the people and healing them of the most persistent diseases; so why in the world couldn't this powerful preacher heal himself? The city was teeming with these mocking remarks and disparaging ideas.

The brethren, however, were unbounded in their devotion. Paul was treated with extreme tenderness at Ibrahim's house as if it were his new-found home.

After his recovery the brave weaver returned even more auspiciously to preaching the new truths.

Observing his courage and reeling with envy, the Judaic element plotted to get rid of him one way or another. For several months the former doctor of Jerusalem struggled against the blows of the Pharisaism dominating the city and kept himself above slander and insult. But while he was displaying his power of resolution and firmness of spirit, the discontented Jews proceeded to threaten Ibrahim and Eustace with banishment and the suppression of privileges. The two old inhabitants of Antioch of Pisidia were accused of being partisans of revolution and disorder and were notified that only the departure of Paul and Barnabas could save them from being imprisoned and flogged.

Jesus' missionaries considered their friends' distressful situation and decided to leave. Ibrahim's eyes were filled with tears and Eustace could not hide how disheartened he was. When questioned by Barnabas, Paul told him his plan for their future activities. They would go to Iconium and preach God's truths there, and Barnabas approved without hesitation. Gathering the brethren on a night to remember for those who were present, the messengers of the Good News said goodbye. For more than eight months they had taught the Gospel. They had confronted mockery and sarcasm and had endured bitter trials. The world was rewarding their work with banishment as if they were common criminals, but the church of Christ had been established nonetheless. In spite of his tears, Paul was almost proud as he spoke of this, saying that new disciples of the Master should not be surprised by the world's incomprehension because the Savior himself had not escaped the ignominious cross; he added that the word "Christian" meant follower of Christ. In order to discover and know the sublimity of the Kingdom of God, it was necessary to work and suffer tirelessly.

The loving congregation received these exhortations awash in tears.

The following morning, armed with a letter of recommendation from Eustace and carrying a large supply of small tokens from their friends in the faith, they set out, brave and happy.

The journey of over sixty miles was difficult and painful, but the pioneers did not stop to consider any obstacle.

Once they arrived in the city they introduced themselves to Eustace's friend, a man named Onesiphorus. They were received with generous hospitality and on the next Sabbath, even before settling into their professional labors, Paul went to the synagogue to expound their purpose for passing through the area. His debut provoked lively discussions. The political element of the city was made up of rich Jews educated in the Law of Moses; however, a large contingent of Gentiles represented the middle class. The latter received Paul's words with great interest, but the former reacted strongly from the beginning. There was an uproar. The proud sons of Israel could not tolerate a Savior who had given Himself up to the cross of thieves without a fight. The Apostle's words, however, earned such great public favor that the Gentiles of Iconium offered him a large hall so that the evangelical teachings could be ministered to them every evening. They wanted news about the new Messiah; they were interested in His smallest deeds and simplest maxims. Paul accepted the endeavor, filled with gratitude and goodwill. Every day, once everyone got off work, a dense crowd of Iconians assembled, anxious to hear Paul's vibrant exposition. The Jews were in control of the city administration and did not take long to react; however, it was useless to try to intimidate the preacher with any threats. He continued preaching courageously, fearlessly. Onesiphorus in turn gave him strong support and in a short period of time the church was founded in his home.

The Jews kept alive the idea of expelling the missionaries, when an incident occurred in their favor.

A young bride-to-be, who listened occasionally to the Apostle's sermons, came daily to the hall seeking to learn more. Enchanted with Christ's promises and feeling an intense passion for the striking figure of the orator, she regrettably became a fanatic and forgot her duties to her betrothed and her mother's devotion. The young woman, Thecla, no longer paid any attention to the sacred bonds that she should have honored in the home. She abandoned her daytime duties to wait anxiously for the evening. Theoclia, her mother, and Thamyris, her betrothed, followed the case with disagreeable amazement. They attributed her instability to Paul. The former doctor of the

Law in turn was puzzled by the attitude of the young girl, who dropped in daily with questions, stares and peculiar antics.

One day, as he was getting ready to return to Onesiphorus's home with Barnabas, the girl asked to talk to him in private.

In answer to his attentive questions, Thecla blushed, stuttering: "I ... I ..."

"Speak, my child," said the Apostle, a little worried. "You may consider yourself to be in the presence of a father."

"Sir," she managed to say breathlessly, "I do not know why, but I have been very impressed with what you have been saying."

"What I have been teaching," Paul explained, "is not mine; it comes from Jesus, who wishes us all the best."

"Well, in any case," she said more timidly, "I love you very much!"

Paul was stunned. He had not been prepared for that declaration. The expression "I love you very much" had not been articulated in a purely sisterly tone, but with something of a personal touch, which the Apostle perceived in complete shock. After pondering this unexpected situation, he answered convincingly: "Child, those who love in spirit are united in Christ for all eternity with the holiest emotions; but could it be that you are in love with the perishable mortal flesh?"

"I need your love!" she exclaimed in tears.

"Yes," Paul explained, "but we both need Christ's love. Only in being supported by Him can we feel strengthened in our weakness."

"I shall not get over you," sobbed the girl, awakening his compassion.

Paul became pensive. He remembered his own youth. He recalled the dreams he had woven with Abigail. In an instant his spirit wandered through a world of gentle and painful memories, and as if he had returned from a mysterious country of shadows, he said as if talking to himself: "Yes, love is holy but passion is poisonous. Moses told us to love God above all things, and the Master added that we should love one another in all life's circumstances."

And fixing his light-filled eyes on the weeping girl, he exclaimed almost acrimoniously: "Do not fall in love with a man made of clay and sin, and who is destined to die!"

Thecla had not yet recovered from her own surprise, when her forlorn fiancé entered the solitary room. Thamyras began ranting and raving while the messenger of the Good News listened very calmly to his reproach. Thecla retorted angrily. She reaffirmed her feelings for Paul and openly revealed her innermost intentions. The young man was shocked. The Apostle waited patiently for her fiancé to question him, and when asked to justify himself, Paul explained in a fraternal tone: “My friend, do not be distressed or exasperated in the face of events that arise from serious misunderstandings. Your betrothed is simply ill. We are proclaiming Christ but the Savior has secret enemies everywhere, just as the enemy of light is permanent darkness. The light, however, will overcome darkness of any sort. We began our missionary efforts in this city without great obstacles. The Jews ridiculed us, and yet they did not find anything in our actions that would justify outright persecution. The Gentiles have embraced us with love. We have been carrying out our efforts peacefully and nothing can discourage us. The invisible enemies of the truth and the good have obviously resorted to influencing this poor child to make her an instrument to trouble our task. You will possibly not understand me right away, but that is the reality of the situation nonetheless.”

But revealing that he was suffering from the same pernicious influence, Thamyras yelled in rage: “You are a filthy sorcerer! That is the reality of the situation. You deceive simple and humble people and you are nothing more than an ordinary seducer of impressionable girls. You have insulted a widow and me as an honest man, worming in on the fragile spirit of a girl bereft of her father.”

Thamyras was foaming with rage. Paul listened to his diatribe with great presence of mind.

When the young man tired of raving, the Apostle picked up his cloak, made a gesture of farewell and pointed out: “When we are sincere we have a clear conscience; but each one accepts the truth as he can. So think it over and understand it as you might.”

He then left the room in search of Barnabas.

Thecla’s family, however, could not rest in light of what they considered an outrage. On the same night the Jewish authorities of Iconium took advantage of the incident and ordered the arrest of the emissary of the Good News. A group of malcontents came to Onesiphorus’s door yelling insults. In

spite of the intervention of friends, Paul was taken to jail to suffer the thirty-nine lashes. He was accused of being a seducer and an enemy of family traditions as well as a blasphemer and revolutionary, and it took a lot of doing by his newly-converted brethren to gain his release.

After five days of abuse in prison, Barnabas joyfully welcomed Paul back.

The incident with Thecla had created a huge scandal, but on the first night of his freedom the Apostle called a meeting in the house church he had founded with Onesiphorus and clarified the situation openly.

Barnabas thought it would be impossible to remain there much longer. Any new friction with the authorities could harm their work. Paul, however, proved to be unbending. If need be, he would go back to preaching the Gospel in the streets in order to proclaim the truth to the Gentiles while the children of Israel delighted in clamorous subterfuges.

When asked his opinion, Onesiphorus considered the situation of the poor, publicly scorned girl. Thecla was engaged and fatherless. Thamyras had made up the tale that Paul was no more than a powerful sorcerer. If she were to be found with the Apostle again while engaged, tradition would demand that she be burned at the stake.

Made aware of the regional superstitions, Paul did not hesitate for one minute. He would leave Iconium the very next day, not because he had capitulated before an invisible enemy, but because the church had been founded and it would not be right to have any part in the moral martyrdom of a child.

The Apostle's decision met with everyone's approval. The foundation for the continuation of the evangelical gatherings had been laid. Onesiphorus and the others assumed the commitment of watching over the seeds received as a heavenly gift.

During the discussion Barnabas was pensive. Where would they go? Wouldn't it be right to start thinking about going back? The difficulties had been increasing each and every day, and ever since their hardships on the banks of the Cestro their health had been very unpredictable. Nevertheless, Peter's disciple was aware of his companion's courage and resolute spirit, and waited patiently for the subject to be come up on its own.

In answer to Barnabas's concerns, one of their friends asked Paul: "When do you intend to leave?"

"Tomorrow," answered the Apostle.

"But wouldn't it be better to rest for a few days? Your hands are swollen and your face is wounded from the whipping."

Paul smiled and replied cheerfully: "This is Jesus' work and not ours. If we care too much for ourselves in the matter of suffering, we will not fulfill our obligations; and if we halt our progress on account of the difficult patches, we will be left with the stumbling blocks and not with Christ."

His picturesque and conclusive arguments spread an atmosphere of good humor.

"Will you return to Antioch?" asked Onesiphorus attentively.

Barnabas perked up his ears to hear the answer, while his friend replied: "Of course not. Antioch has already received the Good News of redemption. But what about Lycaonia?"

Turning to Barnabas as if to ask for his approval, he added: "We shall press on. Wouldn't you agree, Barnabas? People of that region need the Gospel. If we are so fulfilled because of the news of Christ, why deny it to those who need the baptism of the truth and new faith?!"

His friend nodded and agreed resignedly: "Of course. We shall press on; Jesus will help us."

And everyone began talking about the location of Lystra, as well as the interesting customs of its simple people. Onesiphorus had a widowed sister living there, named Lois. He would give a letter of introduction to the missionaries. They would be his sister's guests as long as they needed.

The two preachers of the Gospel rejoiced. Barnabas, especially, could not contain his happiness and dismissed the sad notion of their becoming completely all alone.

After an emotional send-off the following day, the missionaries took the road that would lead them to their new battleground.

They endured a dreadful journey to arrive in the town under a grey sunset. They were exhausted.

Onesiphorus's sister, however, was lavish with kindness. An elderly widow of a rich Greek, Lois lived with her also-widowed daughter and her grandson Timothy, whose boyish intelligence and good sentiments were a major delight to the two women. The messengers of the Good News were received into their home with unmistakable displays of affinity. The unequivocal love of this family was a comforting balm to both. As was his custom and at the first opportunity, Paul mentioned his immense desire to work during his stay in Lystra in order not to become the subject of slander or criticism. But Lois would hear none of it; they would be her guests. Onesiphorus's introduction was enough to put their minds at ease. Moreover, she explained, Lystra was a very poor town; it had only two humble shops and carpets were not woven in either one.

Paul was very touched by this kind welcome. On the same night of their arrival he observed the care with which the thirteen-year-old Timothy took out the parchments of the Law of Moses and the Sacred Writings of the Prophets. The Apostle let the two women and Timothy comment on the revelations until he was called on to take part. He took the opportunity to make the first introduction of Christ to the enraptured hearts of his listeners. As soon as he began to speak he noticed the profound impression on the two women, whose eyes shone tenderly; but young Timothy listened to him with such interest that many times Paul patted him on the head.

Onesiphorus's relatives received the Good News with infinite joy and the following day they talked of nothing else. The young boy asked questions of every sort and the Apostle answered him with joy and fraternal interest.

For three days the missionaries gave their physical strength a refreshing rest. Paul took the opportunity to talk to Timothy at length near the large stable where the goats were sheltered.

Only on the Sabbath did they seek closer contact with the townspeople. Lystra was full of the strangest folktales and beliefs. There were very few Jewish families and the simple people accepted all mythological allegories as fact. The town had no synagogue but did have a small temple consecrated to Jupiter, whom the peasants accepted as the absolute father of the Gods of Olympus. There was an organized cult. Meetings took place periodically and sacrifices were numerous.

A frugal market became active in the morning on a stark plaza.

Paul decided he would not find a better place for making his initial direct contact with the people.

Atop a makeshift platform of stones piled on top of each other, he began preaching in a strong and moving voice. People quickly gathered around him. Some came from peaceful houses to find out the reason for the small gathering. They forgot about buying meat, fruit or vegetables. They all wanted to listen to this unknown foreigner.

The Apostle first spoke of the prophecies that had proclaimed the coming of the Nazarene, and immediately thereafter began to narrate the deeds of Jesus. With his descriptive genius he painted the landscape of Galilee with the most brilliant colors and he spoke of the Messiah's humility and selflessness. When he mentioned the prodigious healings Christ had performed, he noticed that a small group directed offensive remarks at him. Inflamed with fervor in his eloquence, Paul remembered the day he had seen Stephen heal a young mute girl in the name of the Master.

Certain that the Master would not abandon him, he gazed at the crowd. A few yards away he saw a miserable beggar who dragged himself painfully along. Impressed by Paul's sermon, the lame man approached, crawling with his arms on the ground. Sitting up with difficulty, he fixed his eyes on the preacher who observed him compassionately.

Renewing the strength of his faith, Paul contemplated the beggar and said with authority: "Friend, in the name of Jesus, get up."

With eyes fixed on the Apostle, the beggar stood up easily while the crowd gasped in surprise. Some stepped back in fear. Others were dazzled and happy as they looked upon Paul and Barnabas. The lame man began jumping for joy. He had been known in the town for a long time, so there was no doubt about the prodigious healing.

Many people knelt down. Others ran to the four corners of Lystra to announce that they had received a visit from the gods. In a few minutes the square was packed. Everyone wanted to see the beggar who could walk again. News of the incident spread quickly. Barnabas and Paul were regarded as Jupiter and Mercury, who had come down from Olympus. The Apostles were jubilant over Jesus' gift but deeply perplexed by the Lycaonians' attitude. They soon perceived the misunderstanding. Amid general wonder, Paul once again mounted the improvised platform and explained that he and his companion were simple, mortal creatures proclaiming the mercy of Christ,

who had deigned to confirm the promise of the Gospel at that unforgettable moment. This explanation, however, proved futile. Everyone was on their knees, listening to him in ecstasy. At this point an elderly priest, vested according to the customs of the time and leading two oxen adorned with garlands of flowers, appeared suddenly, displaying affected manners and genuflecting solemnly. In a loud voice, the priest of Jupiter invited the people to take part in the ceremonial rite of sacrifice to the two living gods.

Paul saw what the people were doing, and descending the platform to the center of the plaza, he shouted with all his might, opening his tunic at the height of his chest: "Do not commit this sacrilege! ... We are not gods ... Look! ... We are simple creatures of flesh!"

Followed closely by Barnabas, he snatched from the hands of the elderly priest the fine leather braid holding the animals, freeing the two peaceful bulls which began to munch on the green garlands.

Jupiter's minister wanted to protest but fell silent, highly disappointed. And amid the most outrageous comments, the missionaries hastily left the square, anxious to find a place of prayer where they could lift up their vows of joy and acknowledgement to Jesus.

"A great triumph," said Barnabas, almost proud. "Christ's gifts were numerous; the Master has remembered us!"

Paul became pensive and replied: "Whenever we receive many favors, we must think of the many testimonies to come. I think great trials are headed our way. Besides, we mustn't forget that the Master's triumphal entry into Jerusalem preceded his suffering on the cross."

His companion considered the lofty meaning of those statements and began to meditate in deep silence.

Lois and her daughter were radiant. The healing of the lame man had conferred a singular prominent position on the messengers of the Good News. Paul took the opportunity to found the first center of Christianity in the town. The initial plans were laid in the home of the generous widow, who placed all her resources at the missionaries' disposal.

As they had done in Paphos, they set up a very modest shack as headquarters for activities involving information and aid. Young Timothy had replaced John Mark and was now helping with all the tasks. Numerous

persons copied the Gospel during the day, while the sick came from far and wide in need of immediate attention.

In spite of such success, animosity toward the new doctrine increased in equal measure.

The few Jews in Lystra decided to consult the authorities in Iconium regarding the two strangers. That was enough to darken the horizon. The delegates returned with a pile of unpleasant news. The Thecla incident had been painted in dark colors. Paul and Barnabas had been accused as blasphemers, sorcerers, thieves and seducers of honest women. Paul, especially, was portrayed as a fearful revolutionary. In Lystra the matter was discussed “behind closed doors.” The town administrators invited the priest of Jupiter to join in the campaign against the impostors, and with the same readiness that they had believed in their condition as gods, they now attributed the greatest perversions to the preachers. Criminal measures were agreed upon. Ever since the arrival of the strangers who spoke in the name of a new prophet, Lystra had been assaulted by strange ideas. Such abuses had to stop. Paul’s words were audacious and an effective correction was required. They finally decided that the fiery preacher was to be stoned the very next time he spoke in public.

Unaware of the conspiracy, on the following Sabbath the Apostle to the Gentiles left Barnabas in bed because he had been working too hard, and with young Timothy he went in late afternoon to the public square, where he proclaimed once again the truths and promises of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The place displayed uncommon activity. The preacher noticed the presence of many suspicious and completely unknown faces. They were all following his smallest gestures with obvious curiosity.

He very serenely mounted the platform and began speaking of the eternal glories that the Lord Jesus had brought to suffering humankind. However, he had barely begun his evangelical sermon, when, at a furious outcry from the most fanatical, a shower of stones began raining down on him.

Paul suddenly remembered the unforgettable figure of Stephen. Of course the Master had reserved the same type of death for him so that he could redeem the evil he had inflicted on the martyr of the church in Jerusalem. The small, hard stones struck his feet, chest and brow. He felt the blood running from his wounded head and knelt down without complaining, praying to Jesus to strengthen him in his anguish.

In the first few moments Timothy, scared to death, ran crying for help, but a man with athletic arms approached cautiously and murmured in his ear: “Be quiet if you want to be useful to him!”

“Is that you, Gaius?!” exclaimed the boy with tears in his eyes, experiencing a bit of comfort upon recognizing a friendly face in the surrounding pandemonium.

“Yes,” said the man in a low voice. “I’m here to help the Apostle. I cannot forget that he healed my mother.”

And looking at the criminal mob’s fury, he added: “There’s no time to lose. Soon they will take him to the garbage dump. If so, try to follow us with some water. If the missionary doesn’t die, you are to give him first aid until I can let your mother know.”

They immediately went their separate ways. Timothy was greatly afflicted as he watched the preacher on his knees gazing into heaven in unforgettable ecstasy. Drops of blood were streaming from his gaping forehead. Then he hung his head and his body tumbled over helplessly. The crowd seemed overcome with fear. Taking advantage of the situation, which showed no structured course of action, Gaius got closer. He approached the inert Apostle, made a deliberate gesture to the people and cried out: “The sorcerer is dead!”

His massive figure aroused the empathy of the unconscious mob. Thunderous applause broke out. Those who had provoked the loathsome attack disappeared. Gaius understood that nobody would dare assume personal responsibility. Under strange vibrations, the wickedest ones shouted: “Outside the gates ... Outside the gates! ... Sorcerer to the dump! ... Sorcerer to the dump!”

Disguising his compassion with mocking gestures, Paul’s friend addressed the gleeful mob: “I’ll drag the sorcerer’s body myself!”

The mob let out a deafening roar and Gaius tried to pull the missionary as carefully as possible. They passed down long alleyways amid loud shouting until they came to a deserted place somewhat far from the walls of Lystra, where they left Paul half-dead at the garbage dump.

The strong fellow bent over as if to check to see whether or not the stoned man was dead, but cautiously verifying that he was still alive, he

shouted: “Let’s leave him to the dogs; they’ll do the rest! We must celebrate with some wine!”

And following the leader of that afternoon, the crowd beat a retreat while Timothy approached the place, taking advantage of the darkness of the night that had begun to fall. He ran to a public well not far away, filled his waterproof hat with pure water and administered first aid to the victim. Bathed in tears, he noticed that Paul was breathing with difficulty as if he were immersed in a deep unconsciousness. The young Lystrian sat down next to him and tenderly washed his wounded forehead. After a few more minutes the Apostle came round and began studying the situation. Timothy told him everything. Paul very contritely thanked God, for he realized that only the mercy of the Most High could have performed the miracle of saving him from the criminal purpose of the unconscionable mob.

About two hours later, three silent figures approached. In great distress, Barnabas had left his bed in spite of his fever to accompany Lois and Eunice, who, warned by Gaius, came running with first aid.

They all rendered thanks Jesus while Paul took a small sip of comforting wine. Despite his physical bruises, Paul’s vigorous spiritual constitution enabled him to take hold of Barnabas’s arm, and lightly supported by him he got up and returned home with his friends.

The rest of the night was spent in loving conversation. The two emissaries of the Good News feared the people’s aggression against the generous ladies who had sheltered and helped them. They would have to leave to avoid further misfortune and complications.

In vain Lois tried to dissuade Christ’s preachers; in vain Timothy kissed Paul’s hands and asked him not to go. Afraid of more disheartening consequences, and after coordinating the instructions necessary for the nascent church, they passed through the city gates at daybreak and headed toward Derbe, some distance away.

After a painful trek they reached their new work arena, where they would stay for over a year. Although they got involved in manual work to earn their daily bread, the two companions needed six months to recover from their poor health. As an anonymous weaver and a brickmaker, Paul and Barnabas stayed in Derbe for a long time without raising public curiosity. Only after having recovered from the shocks they suffered did they begin their proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom of Jesus once more.

Visiting the surroundings, they aroused great interest in the simple people for the Gospel of redemption. Small Christian communities were founded in an atmosphere of much joy.

After a long time of work, they decided to return to the original place of their endeavors. Overcoming difficulties, they visited and encouraged all the brethren stationed in the various regions of Lyconia, Pisidia, and Pamphylia.

From Perga they went down to Attalia, from where they set sail for Seleucia and then Antioch.

Both had experienced the difficulty of the harshest work. Many times they were vexed by the intricate problems of the undertaking: in exchange for fraternal dedication, they had received mockery, whippings and treacherous accusations; however, through their physical frailty and scars they radiated invisible waves of intense spiritual joy. The reason for this bliss came from the fact that, amid the thorns of the rugged road, the two courageous companions always held high the divine and consoling cross, abundantly spreading the blessed seeds of the Gospel of Redemption.

18 In spite of the increasing importance given to women in the early church, it remained largely a male dominated organization. Paul himself states in I Corinthians 14:34, 35 that women are to remain silent in church and not speak, and if they have any questions they are to ask their husbands when they are at home. – Tr.

19 Actually, the “Holy Spirit” refers to the legion of spirits sanctified in light and love who have cooperated with Christ since the very beginnings of humankind. – Emmanuel

20 See Acts 11:28. – Tr.

21 See Mt. 20:20-23 – Tr.

22 A defense or justification of a cause or doctrine (Webster’s, 1991) – Tr.

23 Prov. 30:7-9

V

Battles over the Gospel

Paul and Barnabas's return was marked with immense joy in Antioch. The fraternal community was deeply moved and marveled at the deeds of the brothers who had taken the divine seeds of truth and love to such poor and remote regions.

For several nights in a row the new arrivals presented spoken, highly detailed reports on their activities. The Antiochian church rejoiced greatly and rendered thanks to Heaven.

The two devoted missionaries had returned at a time of great hardship for the church. Both of them perceived it and were greatly saddened. The conflicts in Jerusalem had extended to the entire community in Antioch; the battles over circumcision were ablaze. Even the most eminent leaders were divided by dogmatic affirmations. The differences had become so heated that the voices of the Holy Spirit no longer manifested. Manahen's work in the church was indispensable but he had withdrawn due to the unproductive and poisonous argumentation. The brethren were extremely confused. Some were adherents of obligatory circumcision; others fought for the unrestricted independence of the Gospel. Paul was greatly concerned as he observed the furious polemic on clean and unclean foods.

In an attempt to establish overall harmony on the teachings of the Divine Master, Paul explained that the Gospel was free and that circumcision was nothing more than a conventional characteristic of Judaic intolerance, but it was no use. Despite his indisputable authority, crowned with prestige before the whole community due to the great spiritual achievements of his mission, the misunderstandings persisted.

A group of individuals arrived from Jerusalem to make the situation even more complicated. The less strict spoke of the absolute authority of the Galilean Apostles. Others remarked cunningly that Paul and Barnabas, as

highly inspired as they might be in the lessons of the Gospel, did not have sufficient authority to speak in the name of Jesus.

The church of Antioch was faltering in a situation of immense confusion and had lost the sense of unity that had characterized it early on. Everyone articulated the doctrine from a very personal point of view. The Gentiles were treated with scorn; movements were organized in favor of circumcision.

Highly distressed over this state of affairs, Paul and Barnabas agreed on an extreme measure. They decided to invite Simon Peter for a personal visit to the Antiochian church. The two companions knew his spirit was free of religious prejudices and they wrote him a long letter explaining that the endeavors of the Gospel needed his cooperation and insisting on his influential presence.

The bearer of the letter took care in delivering it, and to the great surprise of the Antiochian Christians, the ex-fisherman from Capernaum came to the city in a display of great joy, having foreseen that the visit would afford him a period of physical rest.

Paul and Barnabas could not hide how pleased they were. Along with Simon Peter came John Mark, who had not completely given up his evangelical work. The group spent beautiful hours in intimate conversation discussing the missionary journeys – intelligently described by the former rabbi – and the events that had occurred in Jerusalem since the death of Zebedee's son – colorfully recounted by Simon Peter.

After being fully informed of the religious situation in Antioch, Peter added: "Our battles are the same in Jerusalem. On the one hand, the church is filled with the needy every day; on the other, ceaseless persecution. In the center of all the activities stands James making the strictest demands. At times I'm tempted to fight to reestablish the liberty of the Master's principles; but how to proceed? When the religious storm threatens to destroy the legacy we have managed to offer to the afflicted of the world, Pharisaism runs up against the strict observance of our friend James and is forced to halt the criminal actions it began some time ago. If I were to work to suppress his influence, I would be casting the Jerusalem church into the abyss of destruction due to the political climate of the city. And Christ's plan? And the needy? Would it be right to harm those unfortunate people because of a personal point of view?"

Encouraged by Paul and Barnabas's unwavering attention, their kind friend continued: "We know that Jesus didn't leave a direct solution to the problem of those who have not been circumcised; however, he taught that we will not reach the Kingdom through the flesh, but through the mind and the sentiments. Knowing good and well how the Gospel acts on people's souls, repressive Pharisaism has not taken its eyes off us and is doing everything possible to uproot the tree of the Gospel that has been blooming in the hearts of the simple and the peaceful. So it is crucial for us to take the utmost care not to damage the divine plant in any way."

Paul and Barnabas made expressive gestures of approval. Revealing a great ability to give direction to an idea and to reconcile the large number of converts at odds with one another, Simon Peter had an appropriate word for each situation and a correct explanation for the smallest problem.

The community of Antioch rejoiced. The Gentiles could not hide the happiness filling their souls. The kind Apostle visited each and every one without distinction or preference. He would always wear a gentle smile when faced with the apprehensions of his friends who feared "unclean" food, and would ask where the substances were that were not blessed by God. Paul accompanied him without hiding his inner happiness. In a commendable effort of conciliation, the Apostle to the Gentiles made it a point to take Simon Peter to wherever there were brothers troubled by the idea of obligatory circumcision. A remarkable climate of trust and uniformity of opinion was quickly established. All the brethren exulted with joy.

Unexpectedly, however, three emissaries arrived from Jerusalem, sent by James. They brought letters to Simon, who received them with a great display of affection. From then on, though, the situation changed drastically. The ex-fisherman, so much given to simplicity and independence in Christ Jesus, became immediately withdrawn. He no longer responded to invitations from the uncircumcised. The intimate and lively festivities organized in his honor were no longer graced by his joyful and friendly presence. In the church he modified his smallest gestures. Always in the ever-present company of the messengers from Jerusalem, he seemed grave and sad, never referring to the freedom the Gospel had granted to the human conscience.

Paul observed this transformation with profound displeasure. His mind was unrestrictedly accustomed to freedom of opinion, and it was all shocking and heartrending. It was even worse because it involved none other than a believer like Simon, highly distinguished and respected in every sense. How

to interpret that behavior in such complete disagreement with what was expected? Pondering the extent of his work with the Gentiles, the slightest question from his friends in this particular left Paul confused. In his passion for open attitudes, he was not one of those workers who could wait. So after two weeks of anxious expectations, and eager to give an explanation to the many uncircumcised members at Antioch, Paul, at the invitation to address the congregation, began by praising the religious emancipation of the world since the coming of Jesus Christ. He reviewed the generous demonstrations the Master had given to publicans and sinners. Peter listened to him amazed at his vast erudition and hermeneutical resources for teaching his audience the most difficult principles. James's messengers were equally surprised and the assembly listened to the speaker attentively.

At a certain point the weaver from Tarsus looked directly at the Galilean Apostle and exclaimed: "Brethren, in defense of our sentiment of unity in Jesus, I cannot hide our regret in view of the latest events. I want to refer to the attitude of our beloved guest, Simon Peter, whom we should call 'master' if that title did not in fact and by right fall to our Savior."²⁴

There was great surprise and overall astonishment. The Apostle from Jerusalem was also surprised but appeared composed. James's emissaries displayed great discomfort and Barnabas had gone ashen. But Paul continued undaunted: "Simon has personified a living example for us. The Master left him with us as a rock of undying faith. We have placed our highest hopes in his generous soul. How are we to interpret his behavior? He has avoided the uncircumcised brothers ever since the arrival of the messengers from Jerusalem. He used to come to our nightly meetings and eat the bread at our tables. If I am hereby trying to resolve these matters openly, it is not because I want to scandalize anyone in particular, but because I believe only in one Gospel free from all the world's mistaken preconceptions, considering that Christ's word is not chained to the lower interests of any sort of priesthood."

The atmosphere was charged. Touched and grateful, the Antiochian Gentiles fixed their eyes on the speaker. The Pharisaic sympathizers, on the other hand, could not conceal their rancor before that display of almost daring courage. As Paul paused, Barnabas, eyes ablaze with indefinable sentiments, took the floor and stated: "Paul, I am one of those who regret your attitude in this instance. What gives you the right to attack the pure life of the continuer of Christ Jesus?"

This was asked in a highly moving tone, with a voice choked with tears. Paul and Peter were his best and dearest friends.

Far from being taken aback by the question, Paul answered with the same frankness: “We do have a right: that of living with the truth, that of loathing hypocrisy, and, what is even more sacred, that of saving Simon’s name from the onslaughts of Pharisaism, whose subterfuges I am very familiar with, since they comprised the dark depths from which I was able to emerge into the light of the Gospel of redemption.”

The former rabbi continued frankly and sternly. From time to time Barnabas interjected, rendering the debate even fiercer.

Throughout the course of the discussion, however, the figure of Peter was the most impressive by the august serenity of his calm face.

In those fleeting moments the Galilean Apostle was considering the sublimity of his duties for the victories of the Gospel on the spiritual battlefield. On one side was James, performing a high-level mission within Judaism. From his conservative attitudes fortunate circumstances had emerged for maintaining the church at Jerusalem, erected as a starting point for the Christianization of the world; on the other side was the powerful figure of Paul, the intrepid friend of the Gentiles, carrying out a sublime task. From his heroic efforts a flood of illumination had been shed upon idolatrous peoples. Which of the two meant more to him – he who had lived with the Master and received from Him the loftiest lessons? At that hour Peter prayed to Jesus to grant him the inspiration he needed for the faithful observance of his duties. He felt the thorn of the mission thrust into the core of his heart, rendering him unable to justify himself only with the intentions of his actions, lest he cause a bigger scandal for the Christian institution that had barely dawned on the world. With tears in his eyes while Paul and Barnabas argued with each other, he had the impression of seeing once again the Lord on the day of Calvary. No one had understood Him. Not even His beloved disciples. Next, he seemed to see Him dying on the cross of sacrifice. A hidden power was leading him to contemplate the cross more attentively. The cross of Christ now seemed like a symbol of perfect balance: a horizontal line and a vertical line juxtaposed, together forming perfect right angles. Yes, the instrument of torture was sending him a silent message. It was necessary to be just, without partiality or wrong inclinations. The Master had loved everyone without distinction. He had shared the eternal riches with all creatures. In His compassionate and magnanimous eyes, Gentiles and Jews were brothers and

sisters. Peter began to experience a remarkable acuity for conscientiously examining the circumstances. He should love James for his generous care for the Jews, as well as Paul of Tarsus for his extraordinary dedication to all those who did not know the idea of a just God.

Simon Peter noticed that the majority of the assembly was looking at him curiously. The friends from Jerusalem displayed their inner rage in the extreme pallor of their faces. Everyone seemed to be calling him into the discussion. Barnabas's eyes were red from tears and Paul seemed to be growing blunter, reproving hypocrisy with his fulminating logic. The Apostle would have preferred to remain silent so as not to disturb the ardent faith of those who had gathered in the church under the light of the Gospel. He measured the extent of his responsibility during that unforgettable moment. To be angry would be to deny the values of Christ and have his work perish; to agree with James would display partiality; to uphold Paul's arguments would not be just either. He tried to array the teachings of the Master in his mind and remembered the unforgettable saying: "He who wishes to be the greatest, let him be the servant of all." This precept provided him with immense comfort and great spiritual strength.

The argument was escalating; the parties were polarized. The whole assembly was whispering in hushed tones. There was obviously going to be an outright explosion.

Simon Peter stood up. His face was composed, but tears had pooled in his eyes without falling.

Taking advantage of a long pause, Peter began to speak, immediately calming the tumult: "Brothers!" he said nobly. "I have erred much in this world. It is no secret to anyone that I even denied the Master at the most painful moment of the Gospel. I have measured the Lord's mercy by the depth of the abyss of my weakness. If I have erred among the beloved brothers of Antioch, I ask forgiveness. I submit myself to your judgment and ask that all submit themselves to the judgment of the Most High."

Everyone was stupefied. Grasping the effect of his words, Peter concluded his justification adding: "My brothers, realizing the extent of my spiritual needs and commending myself to your prayers, let us proceed to the commentaries on today's Gospel."

The assembly was astonished with this unexpected outcome. Everyone thought Simon Peter would make a long speech in reprisal. No one managed

to recover from their surprise. According to a previous agreement, the Gospel that night was to be expounded upon by the Galilean Apostle, but before sitting down again the former fisherman stated very calmly: “I will now ask our brother Paul of Tarsus the kindness of consulting and commenting on Levi’s notes.”

Despite his obvious embarrassment, the former rabbi considered the lofty reach of that request, renewed the extremist sentiments of his ardent heart, and in a beautiful impromptu he commented on the reading from the Good News.

Simon Peter’s premeditated approach had saved the nascent church. Considering the efforts of Paul and James in light of their true worth, he had prevented a scandal and uproar in the sanctuary. Owing to his personal selflessness, the incident passed almost unnoticed in the history of early Christianity, and not even Paul’s slight reference in his Epistle to the Galatians – in spite of the rigid narrative format characteristic of the time – can give an idea of the imminent peril of scandal that hovered over the Christian institution on that memorable day.

The meeting finished with no further conflict. Simon approached Paul and congratulated him on the beauty and eloquence of his discourse. He made a point to go back to the earlier incident and to talk about it in a positive way. The Gentile issue, Peter said, did in fact merit much attention. How was it possible to disinherit from the light of Christ what had been born far from the Judaic communities if the Master himself had affirmed that disciples would come from the East and the West? The gentle and kind conversation reconciled Paul and Barnabas, while Peter spoke intentionally to calm the animosity.

The former doctor of the Law continued to defend his point of view with solid argumentation. Inhibited at first in light of the Galilean’s benevolence, he then proceeded to express himself freely, reacquiring his inner composure. The problem was complex. “To move the Gospel into Judaism – wouldn’t that be the suppression of its divine potential?” asked Paul, reaffirming his opinion. “But what about the millenary efforts of the Jewish people?” inquired Peter, warning that, in his opinion, if Jesus had affirmed His mission as the exact fulfillment of the Law, it was not possible to separate the new revelation from the old. To behave otherwise would be to tear from the healthy trunk the green branch meant to bear fruit.

Pondering such sensible arguments, Paul of Tarsus thought it would be reasonable to convene a meeting of the most dedicated brothers in Jerusalem in order to debate the subject more broadly. In his opinion the results would be beneficial because it would present a just rule of engagement, without the possibility of the sophism that was so much to the Pharisaic taste and a part of their habit.

Like someone who was very happy at having found the key to a difficult problem, Simon Peter gladly agreed with the proposal and affirmed his interest in the meeting taking place as soon as possible. Deep down he thought it would be an excellent opportunity for the disciples from Antioch to observe the increasing difficulties in Jerusalem.

That night all the brethren came to the church to bid Simon farewell and to observe the customary prayers. Peter prayed with holy fervor and the community felt enveloped in beneficent vibrations of peace.

The incident had left everybody somewhat perplexed, but Peter's prudent and affable attitude had succeeded in maintaining overall cohesion around the Gospel for the continuation of the sanctifying work.

After affirming the full reconciliation of Paul and Barnabas, Simon Peter returned to Jerusalem with James's messengers.

Nevertheless, the situation in Antioch continued to be unstable. Futile discussions continued to blaze. The Judaic element fought the Gentiles and the free Christians offered unyielding resistance to the biased traditionalism. The former rabbi did not rest. He held meetings to clarify the goals of the gathering that Simon had promised them in Jerusalem at the first opportunity. Active fighter that he was, he multiplied his energies to preserve the independence of Christianity and promised publicly that he would bring letters from the church of the Galilean Apostles, guaranteeing the Gentiles' position in the consoling doctrine of Jesus by getting rid of the absurd imposition of circumcision.

His measures and promises incited new battles. The strict observers of the old precepts doubted that Jerusalem would make such concessions.

Paul did not lose heart. Inwardly, he idealized his arrival at the church of the Apostles, mulling over and over in his energetic mind all the powerful arguments to be employed and seeing himself victorious in the matter that was outlined before him as of essential importance for the Gospel's future. He would attempt to show the Gentiles' outstanding ability to serve Jesus. He

would recount the successes he and Barnabas had enjoyed during their long travels of more than four years through poor and nearly unknown regions, where the Gentiles had received the news of the Master with immense joy and much greater understanding than their Jewish brothers. Widening his courageous plans, he decided to take along young Titus, who, albeit coming from pagan ranks and not yet twenty years old, represented in the church at Antioch one of the brightest minds in the Lord's service. Ever since Paul had arrived from Tarsus, Titus had taken kindly to him as a generous brother. Noticing his industrious bent, Paul had taught him the craft of carpet weaving and he had been Paul's replacement in the humble tent throughout his first mission. The lad would be an exponent of the renewing power of the Gospel. If he were to speak during the meeting he would certainly surprise the most learned with his advanced exegetical arguments.

Nourishing his hopes, Paul of Tarsus took every measure to ensure the success of his plans.

At the end of four months an emissary from Jerusalem brought the awaited notification from Peter regarding the gathering. With Barnabas's added help, Paul sped up the necessary arrangements to leave. On the eve of his departure he ascended the rostrum and renewed his promise of the concessions expected by the Gentiles, disregarding the smug smiles that some of the Jews tried carefully to hide.

The following morning the small troupe departed. It was composed of Paul, Barnabas, Titus and two other brothers who accompanied them as helpers.

The journey was slow because they stopped in every village to preach the Good News and to disseminate healing and consolation.

After several days they arrived in Jerusalem, where they were welcomed by Simon with unsurpassed joy. Accompanied by John, the generous Apostle offered them fraternal hospitality. They all stayed in the same ward where numerous sick and needy were housed. Paul and Barnabas examined the changes that had been introduced at the house. Other humble wards extended farther on, covering a large area.

"Our services have increased," explained Simon kindly. "The sick who knock at our door multiply every day. It was necessary to build new facilities."

The rows of cots seemed endless. The lame and elderly distracted themselves under the sun amid shady trees in the courtyard.

Paul was surprised at the scope of the work. Soon, James and other friends came to greet the brothers from Antioch. The former rabbi examined the Apostle who was the head of the Judaic influences. The son of Alphaeus now seemed radically transformed. His appearance was that of a “teacher of Israel,” with all the indefinable characteristics of Pharisaic customs. He did not smile. His eyes exuded a presumptuousness of superiority bordering on indifference. His gestures were calculated like those of a Temple priest performing ceremonial acts. Paul drew his own conclusions and awaited the evening, when the preparatory discussions would begin. Several individuals unknown to Paul were seated around a large table under the light of a few torches. They were new collaborators of the Jerusalem church, explained Peter affably. The former rabbi and Barnabas did not have a good first impression of them. They looked like figures from the Sanhedrin in their hierarchic and conventional positions.

Upon entering the room the Damascus convert experienced his first disappointment. Noticing that the representatives from Antioch were accompanied by a young man, James asked: “Brothers, it would be right for us to know who the young man is whom you have brought into this reserved place. Our concern is based on the principles of tradition, which requires us to examine the origin of such youngsters so that God’s work may not be disturbed.

“This is our worthy coworker from Antioch,” explained Paul, both proud and pleased. “His name is Titus and he represents one of our greatest hopes in the work of Jesus Christ.”

The Apostle gazed at him without surprise and asked again: “Is he a son of the chosen people?”

“He is a descendant of Gentiles,” stated the former rabbi, almost proudly.

“Circumcised?” asked the son of Alphaeus cautiously.

“No.”

Paul’s “no” was said with a hint of annoyance. James’s questions were irritating him. Upon hearing the negative reply, the Galilean Apostle clarified

in a firm voice: “Then I think it would not be right to admit him to the assembly, since he has not yet complied with all the regulations.”

“We appeal to Simon Peter,” said Paul convincingly. “Titus is a representative of our community.”

Simon Peter went pale. Caught between these two great representatives of Judaism and Gentiledom, he had to resolve the unexpected impasse in a Christian manner.

Peter did not speak up right away, so Paul continued: “Moreover, this meeting will decide such throbbing issues in order to establish the legitimate rights of the Gentiles.”

Simon, however, knowing both contenders, hastened to give his opinion and stated in a conciliatory tone: “Yes, the topic will be the object of our close examination during the assembly.” And looking intentionally at the ex-rabbi, he continued: “You have appealed to me and I accept. However, we should study James’s objection in more detail. He is a dedicated leader in this place and it would not be right to disregard his assistance. The council will, in fact, discuss such matters, but this means that the issue has not yet been resolved. Thus, I propose that brother Titus be circumcised tomorrow so that he can take part in the debates with the high level of inspiration I know he is capable of. And with this simple measure the standard will be clear for the peace of mind of all disciples of the Gospel.”

The subtlety of the argument removed the obstacle. If it did not please Paul, it satisfied the majority, and as Titus returned to the interior of the house the assembly began the preliminary discussions. Paul was taciturn and disheartened. James’s attitude, the new members who were foreign to the Gospel – but who would have a vote in the meeting nonetheless – in addition to Simon Peter’s conciliatory gesture, displeased him immensely. The demand regarding Titus seemed like a crime to him. He felt like returning to Antioch and accusing the Judaizing brothers of being hypocrites and “whitewashed sepulchers.” But what about the letter of emancipation he had promised to the Gentiles? Wouldn’t it be better to restrain his wounded sensibilities out of love for his brothers-in-ideal? Wouldn’t it be more just to humble himself and await the final resolutions? The recollection that his friends were counting on his promises calmed him down. Deeply disappointed, Paul followed the opening arguments closely. The first topics

discussed gave him an idea of the great changes they had sought to introduce into the Master's Gospel.

One of the brothers even thought the Gentiles should be regarded as the "cattle" of God's people: barbarians who should be subjugated by force in order to be employed in the heaviest labors of the chosen ones. Another asked if the pagans were like other people converted to Moses or Jesus. An elderly man of hard features went as far as asserting the absurdity that a man could become complete only after being circumcised. Alongside matters addressing the Gentiles, other pointless themes came to light. There was a remark, for example, that the assembly should regulate the obligations concerning unclean foods as well as the most appropriate procedure for hand ablutions²⁵. James argued and reasoned with a profound knowledge of all precepts. Peter listened with great serenity. He never interrupted when the topic assumed an argumentative character and waited for the opportune moment to express himself. He took on a more forceful attitude only when one of the council members asked for the Gospel of Jesus to be incorporated into the books of the Prophets, thereby rendering it subordinate to the Law of Moses for all intents and purposes. It was the first time that Paul of Tarsus noticed the former fisherman become intransigent and almost brash as he explained how ludicrous such a suggestion was.

The merely preparatory phase of the endeavors came to a halt late that night. James gathered the parchments with the annotations, prayed on his knees and the assembly adjourned until the next meeting the following day.

Simon sought the company of Paul and Barnabas on the way to the rooms designated for rest.

Paul was thoroughly dismayed. Titus's circumcision appeared as a defeat of his intransigent principles. He could not accept it, and he made Peter feel the extent of his distress.

"But what is such a small concession," asked the always-affable Apostle from Capernaum, "in light of what we intend to accomplish? We need a peaceful atmosphere to clarify the problem of obligatory circumcision. Didn't you make a pledge to the Gentiles in Antioch?"

Paul remembered the promise he had made to the brothers and agreed: "Yes, that is true."

“Then let’s acknowledge the need of much presence of mind to reach a precise solution. The problems in this case do not affect only the church at Antioch. The communities of Caesarea and Joppa, as well as those of other regions, are troubled by these transcendent cases. We know good and well that all outward ceremonies are obviously useless to the soul, but in consideration for the respectable principles of Judaism we cannot suddenly declare war to the death on its traditions. It will be just to fight with much prudence without rudely offending anybody.”

Paul listened to the Apostle’s admonitions, and recalling the fights that he himself had witnessed in the Pharisaic circles, he pondered the matter in silence.

A few more steps and they reached the room that had been made into a bedroom for Peter and John. They went in. While Barnabas and the son of Zebedee engaged in a lively conversation, Paul sat down next to Peter, immersed in deep thought.

A few minutes later the ex-doctor of the Law emerged from his deep thought, called Peter and said: “It’s hard for me to agree to Titus’s circumcision, but I see no other recourse.”

Upon hearing this, Barnabas and John perked up their ears.

“But in yielding to such a measure,” he continued with extraordinary frankness, “I cannot help but recognize it as being a major display of dishonesty. I will be concurring in something I do not accept in the least. I almost regret having made any promises to our friends in Antioch. I didn’t know that the abominable policies of the synagogues had invaded the Jerusalem church so completely.”

The son of Zebedee set his lucid eyes on the Damascus convert while Simon answered serenely: “The situation is very delicate indeed. Especially after the sacrifice of some of our most beloved and helpful friends, the religious problems in Jerusalem have been increasing every day.”

And allowing his eyes to wander around the room as if wanting to express his thoughts faithfully, he continued: “When the situation began to worsen, I thought about transferring to another community; then I thought of accepting the struggle and reacting; but one night, as beautiful as this one, I was praying in this very room when I perceived the presence of someone approaching very slowly. I was on my knees when, to my great surprise, the door opened. It was the Master! His face was the same as in those beautiful

days in Tiberias. He looked at me gravely and tenderly, and said: ‘Peter, attend to the children of Calvary before thinking of your own urges!’ The marvelous vision lasted only a minute but soon afterward I began remembering the elderly, the needy, the ignorant and the sick who knock at our door. The Lord was calling my attention to the bearers of the cross. Since then I have not desired anything but to serve them.”

The Apostle had tears in his eyes and Paul felt deeply impressed, for he remembered hearing the expression “children of Calvary” from Abigail when she appeared to him in spirit in the glorious vision in the silence of the night at the time he was returning to Tarsus.

“In fact, the struggle is great,” agreed the Damascus convert, looking more composed.

And showing his conviction that the reality of daily life had to be examined despite the beauty of the prodigious manifestations of the invisible plane, he added: “Nevertheless, we must find a way to free the evangelical truth from human conventionalism. What is the main reason for the Pharisaic control over the Jerusalem church?”

Simon Peter explained without hesitating: “The biggest problems have to do with money. This place feeds more than one hundred people daily in addition to its work of assistance to the sick, orphaned and destitute. To keep the work afloat, we need much courage and faith because the debts we contract with suppliers from the city are unavoidable.”

“But the sick,” asked Paul attentively, “don’t they work after they have recovered?”

“Yes,” explained the Apostle. “I set up a vegetable and fruit garden for those who have recovered but who are unable to depart Jerusalem immediately. Thus, the house has no need to buy produce elsewhere. As for those who are on the road to recovery and feel well enough, they take on the job of caretakers for the most infirm. This measure has enabled me to dispense with two paid workers who used to help me assist the incurably insane or the more difficult to treat. As you can see, such details have not been neglected, but the church is overburdened nevertheless with expenses and debts that only the cooperation of Judaism can attenuate or pay off.”

Paul could see that Peter was right. Even so, he was anxious to provide independence for the work of his brothers-in-ideal. “It looks to me like we need to set up work principles that will enable this place to survive on its own

resources. The orphans, the elderly and the able-bodied men could do other things besides agricultural work and could produce something for the income you need. Each would work according to his own strength under the supervision of more-experienced brothers. The production from their work would guarantee the overall maintenance of the place. As we know, where there is work there is income, and where there is cooperation there is peace. This is the only recourse for freeing the Jerusalem church from the impositions of Pharisaism, whose artifices I have known all my life.”

Peter and John were thrilled. Paul’s idea was excellent. It met their anxious worries in the face of seemingly endless difficulties.

“Your plan is extraordinary,” said Peter, “and it would solve the major problems confronting us.”

John’s eyes were radiant with joy and he too rushed into the matter, objecting: “But what about the money? Where can we find the funds we need for this great endeavor?”

Paul thought deeply for a moment and then explained: “The Master will bless our good intentions. Barnabas and I undertook a long journey in the service of the Gospel and the whole time we lived on income from our own work, I as a temporary weaver and he as a brickmaker, wherever we went. After that first experience, we could return now to the same areas and visit others also, and request resources for the Jerusalem church. We would prove our personal disinterest by living solely off what we make and we would collect donations from all over. If we have been working for Christ, it is only right to solicit donations for the love for Christ. The collection would ensure the freedom of the Gospel in Jerusalem because it would represent the element needed for fortifying the sector of remunerated labor.”

And thus the work plan was drawn up and the generous Apostle to the Gentiles would follow it for the rest of his days. In carrying it out he would endure the cruelest accusations, but in the sanctuary of his sincere and devoted heart, Paul, throughout his great apostolic work, would take up collections on behalf of the church of Jerusalem until the end of his earthly life.

After listening to his plans, Simon rose and embraced him, stating movingly: “Yes, my friend, it was not in vain that Jesus looked for you personally at the gates of Damascus.”

Paul's eyes were filled with tears – rare occurrence in his life. He gave Peter a meaningful look, inwardly considering his debt of gratitude to the Savior, and said: "I will be doing nothing more than my duty. I could never forget that Stephen was watched over while lying on the cots here that have served as mine own also."

They were all extremely touched. Barnabas commented on the idea with enthusiasm and added numerous details to the plan.

That night Christ's devoted disciples dreamed of the independence of the Gospel in Jerusalem and the emancipation of the church, free of the absurd impositions of the synagogue.

The following day, Titus's circumcision went ahead solemnly under James's careful guidance and Paul's profound revulsion.²⁶

The nightly meetings continued for more than a week. On the first few nights, in order to set the stage to advocate the Gentile cause openly, Peter asked the representatives from Antioch to give their impression of their visits to the pagans of Cyprus, Pamphylia, Pisidia and Lycaonia. Paul was deeply upset with the requirements foisted on Titus and asked Barnabas to speak for him.

The ex-Cyprian Levite gave a long account of all the events, and his listeners were immensely surprised by his references to the extraordinary power of the Gospel amongst peoples who had not yet embraced a pure creed. Next, still complying with Paul's request, Titus spoke, deeply moved with the interpretation of Christ's teachings. He demonstrated that he possessed a beautiful gift for prophesy, for which he was admired even by James, who embraced him more than once.

When the discussions ended, they were still arguing over the obligatory circumcision of the Gentiles. Paul followed the debates silently, surprised by Simon Peter's power of endurance and tolerance.

When Peter realized that there was no end in sight for their differences, he stood up, asked permission to speak, and made the generous and wise exhortation contained in the Acts of the Apostles (15:7-11).

"Brothers," Peter began, compelling and composed, "you well know that long ago God chose us so that the Gentiles might hear the truths of the Gospel and believe in His Kingdom. The Father, who knows everyone's hearts, gave to the circumcised and uncircumcised the word of the Holy Spirit. On the

glorious day of Pentecost the voices spoke in a public square in Jerusalem to the children of Israel and of the Gentiles. The Almighty determined that His truths should be announced without distinction. Jesus affirmed that workers for the Kingdom would come both from the East and from the West. I do not understand so many controversies, when the situation is so clear before our eyes. The Master exemplified the need for constant harmony; He spoke with the doctors in the Temple; He visited the houses of publicans; He had words of courage for all who lacked hope; and He accepted the ultimate sacrifice between two thieves. Why should we maintain a posture of isolation from those who experience the greatest need? Another argument we should not forget is that the Gospel came into the world even though we already had the Law. If the Master lovingly brought it to us with the heaviest suffering, would it be right to cloister ourselves within conventional traditions and neglect the field of work? Did not Christ tell us to preach the Good News to all nations? Of course, we cannot disregard our Jewish heritage. Regarding the sons of the Law – who we are – we must love the expression of profound suffering and uplifting experiences that came to our hearts through those who preceded Christ in the millenary task of preserving the faith in the one God; but this acknowledgement should incline our souls toward our efforts for the redemption of all peoples. To abandon the Gentiles to their own fate would be creating a cruel captivity instead of practicing the love which effaces all sins. It is due to the fact that we understand the Jews deeply and honor the divine precepts profoundly, that we need to establish more fraternity with the Gentiles and convert them into elements of divine fructification. We believe that God purifies our hearts by faith and not by worldly ordinances. If today we render thanks for the glorious triumph of the Gospel, which established our freedom, how can we impose on new disciples a yoke that, deep down, we ourselves cannot bear? Thus, I believe that circumcision should not be an obligation for those who convert to the love of Jesus Christ, and I believe that we will be saved only by the Master's divine grace generously extended to us and to them as well."

The Apostle's words fell on the heated arguments like a jet of cold water. Paul was radiant; James could not hide his disappointment.

Peter's exhortation gave leeway to numerous interpretations. If he had spoken about his loving respect for the Jews, he had also referred to a yoke that was unbearable. Nobody, however, dared deny his indubitable prudence and common sense.

When the prayer time ended, Peter asked Paul to speak of his personal impressions regarding the Gentiles. More hopeful, the former rabbi spoke for the first time in the council, and inviting Barnabas for the general comments, both appealed to the assembly to grant the Gentiles the independence they needed regarding circumcision.

Everything now denoted an air of overall satisfaction. Peter's remarks had made a deep impression all the attendees. Then James spoke, and realizing that he was almost alone in his point of view, he stated that Simon had been highly inspired in his appeal; nonetheless, he asked for three stipulations to clarify the situation: the Gentiles would be exempt from circumcision, but they were to forsake idolatry, avoid sexual immorality and abstain from eating the meat of strangled animals.

The Apostle to the Gentiles was satisfied. The biggest obstacle had been removed.

The following day, the work ended and the resolutions were committed to writing. Arrangements were made for each brother to take with him a letter as proof of the decisions, as requested by Paul, who wished to display the document as an emancipation proclamation for the Gentiles.

Once they were alone Peter asked him about his personal impressions of the meeting and Paul said with a smile: "In short, I'm satisfied. The most difficult problem has been resolved. Obligatory circumcision for the Gentiles represented a sin from my point of view. As for James's amendments, have no problem with them because idolatry and sexual immorality are hateful practices in anyone's private life; and as for the food, I believe that all Christians can eat as they like as long they avoid excesses."

Peter smiled and explained his new plans to the former rabbi. He was hopeful about the idea of the general collection on behalf of the Jerusalem church, and displaying his characteristic prudence, he added worriedly: "I am very pleased with your plan to travel and spread the Good News while seeking to collect donations to solve our most pressing needs; however, I've been reflecting on the situation of the Antiochian church. From what I observed there, I've concluded that the institution needs dedicated helpers who can work shifts in the constant work of each day. Your absence as well as Barnabas's will result in difficulties if we don't take the necessary measures. That is why I would like to offer you the cooperation of two devoted workers who have replaced me here in the heavier duties. They are

Silas and Barsabbas, two disciples who are friends of the Gentiles and are of liberal principles. Sometimes they disagree with James – as is natural – and I believe they will be excellent helpers.”

Paul saw in the suggestion the proposal he was hoping for. Together with Barnabas, who was taking part in the conversation, he thanked Peter, deeply moved. The church at Antioch would have the help required for its evangelical endeavors. The measures proposed certainly pleased him, since from the beginning he liked Silas’s disposition; he saw him as a loyal, industrious and dedicated companion.

After the closing of the council, the missionaries from Antioch stayed in the city for another three days, during which Barnabas took advantage of the time to rest at his sister’s house. Paul, however, declined Mary Mark’s invitation and stayed at the church in order to study the future situation in the company of Simon Peter and the two new collaborators.

In an atmosphere of great harmony, the workers of the Gospel discussed all the requirements for the project.

A fact worth noting was Paul’s reclusion with the Galilean Apostles. He never went out on the street so as not to come in contact with the living scenery of his tumultuous past.

Finally, with everything ready and taken care of, the mission set out on its return. On every face there was a sign of gratitude and sanctified hope for the future. However, there was a curious detail worth mentioning. At his sister’s request, Barnabas decided to accept the company of John Mark in a renewed attempt to adapt him to the Gospel’s service. In light of the good intentions with which he had conceded to his sister’s request, Barnabas thought it unnecessary to consult Paul. The former doctor of the Law, however, was not offended, as one might expect. Somewhat surprised by his companion’s decision, he embraced John Mark affectionately and waited for Barnabas to explain himself later.

With the addition of Silas, Barsabbas and John Mark, the group began their journey to Antioch in friendly harmony.

Taking turns in the task of preaching the eternal truths, they proclaimed the Kingdom of God and healed the sick wherever they went.

They arrived at their destination with great displays of joy from the Gentiles, and organized their plan to put it into immediate effect. Paul told of

his intention to return to the Christian communities that had already been founded, and to extend the evangelical journey to other regions where Christianity was not yet known. The plan received overall approval. The Antiochian church would be under the direct oversight of Barsabbas and Silas, the devoted friends who until now had been two strong pillars of the work in Jerusalem.

After presenting the verbal account of what was planned ahead, Paul and Barnabas began to consider the last few items in particular.

“Now,” said Barnabas, “I hope you will agree with my decision concerning John.”

“John Mark?” asked Paul, surprised.

“Yes. I want to take him with us in order to mold him for the task at hand.”

Paul frowned – a characteristic gesture when he was upset – and said: “I don’t think so; your nephew is still too young for such a commitment.”

“But I promised my sister we would involve him in our endeavors.”

“It cannot be.”

An argument ensued, in which Barnabas displayed his displeasure. Paul sought to justify himself, while Peter’s disciple alleged the commitment he had made to his sister; he contested Paul’s position bitterly. He could not convince Paul, however. The readmission of John Mark, Paul said, would not be right. He could fail again, find a way out of his commitment and scorn the opportunity for sacrifice. He recalled the persecutions in Antioch of Pisidia, the unavoidable illnesses, the mental distress experienced in Iconium, and the cruel stoning in the square in Lystra. Would the young man perchance be prepared in so short a time to understand the scope of such events, in which the soul was compelled to rejoice at bearing witness?

Barnabas was hurt; he had tears in his eyes.

“Well,” he said in a moving tone, “none of these arguments are clearly convincing or enlightening. First of all, I don’t see why this should break our bonds of friendship...”

Paul did not let him finish and concluded: “That, never. Our friendship is well above such circumstances. Our bonds are sacred.”

“Well then,” Barnabas emphasized, “how should I interpret your refusal? Why deny the young man a new experience of regenerative work? Wouldn’t it be lack of charity to refuse a perhaps providential opportunity?”

Paul looked at his friend for a while and added: “My intuition on this matter is different than yours. Almost always, Barnabas, friendship with God is incompatible with friendship with the world. In lifting ourselves up to the faithful fulfillment of our duties, the concepts of the world rise up against us. We seem bad and ungrateful. But listen to me: no one will find the doors of opportunity closed, because it is the Almighty who opens them. The opportunity is the same for everybody, but the fields must be different. In human labor per se, experiences can be renewed everyday. This is just. But I believe that if we interrupt the task we have begun in the Father’s service, it is a sign that we have not had all the experiences that are crucial for becoming a complete person. If a person does not yet understand the noblest concepts regarding his life and earthly duties, how can he dedicate himself successfully to the divine service? Of course, we cannot tell whether this or that person has already finished the course of his human experiences and that from now on he will be capable of serving the Gospel; in this particular, each one will reveal himself by his own efforts. I even believe that your nephew will reach this position after a few more struggles. However, we must consider the fact that we are not going to attempt an experience, but to bear witness. Do you understand the difference?”

Barnabas understood the immense reach of that concise and irrefutable reasoning and fell silent. A few moments later he said: “You’re right. This time, however, I will not be going with you.”

Paul felt all the sadness overflowing from those words, and after thinking for a long time, he pointed out: “Let’s not be sad. I think it might be worthwhile for you to leave with John Mark for Cyprus. He would find there an adequate arena for the work he needs, and at the same time he could tend to the church we founded on the island. Under this plan, we would continue in perfect cooperation, even in regards to the collection for the church at Jerusalem, to say nothing of the usefulness of your presence in Paphos and Salamina. As for me, I would take Silas and go deep into the Taurus Mountains. The church at Antioch will retain the cooperation of Barsabbas and Titus.”

Barnabas was very happy. The plan seemed remarkable to him. In his eyes Paul remained the friend with the appropriate solutions.

Within a few days, on his way to Cyprus where he would serve Jesus until leaving later for Rome, Barnabas left with his nephew for Seleucia, after he and Paul embraced like two beloved brothers whom the Master had called to different destinies.

24 Paul's remark in the Epistle to the Galatians (2:11-14) refers to an incident that occurred before this meeting of the disciples. – Emmanuel

25 Ablution: a ritual washing, taking two main forms in Judaism: full body immersion or the washing of the hands in a cup. – Tr.

26 A reading of Gal. 2:3-5 would seem to indicate that Titus was not circumcised. However, according to New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, there are two possible interpretations of the passage, which turn on the word "compelled" (enankásthe in Greek). One interpretation is that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, and therefore was not; the other possible interpretation is that even though Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, he submitted to it nevertheless (Bruce, F.F. Galatians. *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 112). Emmanuel affirms the latter interpretation. – Tr.

VI

Journeys and Sacrifices

In the company of Silas, who had become harmonized with his work aspirations, Paul left Antioch, crossing the mountains and reaching his hometown after enormous difficulties. The companion appointed by Simon Peter soon adapted himself to Paul's method of work. Silas had a peaceable temperament and his noteworthy spiritual qualities had grown due to his full devotion to the Divine Master. Paul was highly pleased with his collaboration. Hiking on long, trackless roads, they ate sparingly – almost solely wild fruit found here and there. Silas, however, displayed the same joy no matter what happened.

Before reaching Tarsus they preached the Good News along the way. Roman soldiers, pauper slaves and humble caravaners received the comforting news of Jesus from their lips. And not a few rushed to copy various passages from Levi's notes, preferring those that applied most to their particular case. Through this process the Gospel spread ever more widely, filling hearts with hope.

In the city of his birth and more in command of his own convictions, the weaver who had consecrated himself to Jesus spread aplenty the joys of the Gospel of Redemption. Many admired their fellow citizen, who looked even more peculiarly transformed than before; others continued entrenched in their posture of irony and regrettable lack of self-awareness. Nonetheless, Paul had never felt so strong in his faith. He stood in front of the old house of his birth, saw once more the pleasant place where he had played in the early days of his childhood, and contemplated the sports arena where he had driven his Roman biga²⁷; but he exhumed all these memories without suffering their depressing influence, because he had given everything over to Christ as a patrimony into whose possession he could enter later, when he had completed his divine mandate.

After a short stay in the capital of Cilicia, Paul and Silas set out for the peaks of the Taurus Mountains, undertaking a new phase of the hard journey they had begun.

Nights out in the open, numerous tribulations, threats of bandits and countless perils confronted the missionaries, who, every night, handed over the results of the harvest to the Divine Master, and every morning prayed for His mercy so that they would not fail at this priceless opportunity to work no matter how hard the daily task might be.

Filled with this active trust, they arrived at Derbe, where the former rabbi movingly embraced the friends he had made there after his pain-filled convalescence on his first journey.

The Gospel continued to extend its sphere of action into all regions. As the work unfolded naturally, Paul was deeply moved as he began hearing about Timothy's previous endeavors in Derbe. From what he was told, the young son of Eunice had added greatly to his knowledge. The small Christian community owed him for all he had done for them. More than once the new disciple had hastened there to offer his help. He had disseminated healings and consolation and his name was blessed by all. Full of joy after finishing what he needed to do in the small town, Paul anxiously left for Lystra.

Lois received him and Silas with the same happiness as the first time. Everyone wanted news of Barnabas, which Paul furnished kindly and happily. On the afternoon of that same day, the Damascus convert embraced Timothy with immense joy overflowing his soul. The young man had just arrived from his daily job of tending the flock. In a few minutes Paul got to know the extent of his spiritual progress and victories. The community of Lystra was rich in grace. The Christian lad had been successful in contributing to the conversion of many people: two of the most influential Jews in the town's administration and who had been prominent amongst the ones who had instigated the stoning of the Apostle, were now faithful followers of Christ's doctrine. A church was being built, where the sick would be assisted and abandoned children would find a welcoming shelter. Paul rejoiced.

On that same night there was a large gathering in Lystra. The Apostle to the Gentiles found there a loving, greatly comforting atmosphere. He disclosed the objectives of his journey, revealed his concerns for the spread of the Gospel and added the issue pertaining to the church at Jerusalem. As in Derbe, all the brethren contributed what they could. Paul could not contain his

happiness at observing the tangible triumph of Timothy's efforts among the populace.

Taking advantage of Paul's stay in Lystra, the kind Lois confided her personal situation. She and Eunice had relatives in Greece, on her grandson's father's side, who requested their personal presence and their loving assistance. Their remaining resources in Lystra were almost exhausted. On the other hand, she wanted Timothy to consecrate himself to Jesus' service, illumining his heart and mind. The kind old lady and her daughter were definitely planning to move and they asked the Apostle about the possibility of accepting the lad's company, at least for a while, not only for him to acquire new worth on practical grounds, but also because it would make their move to such a distant place easier.

Paul happily consented; he would gladly accept Timothy's help. When Timothy learned of this decision, he was unable to express his deep gratitude, such was his joy.

On the eve of their departure Silas cautiously broached the subject and asked the Apostle if it might not be a good idea to circumcise the boy so that Judaic influences would not disturb their apostolic endeavors. To support his argument he recalled the obstacles and bitter struggles in Jerusalem. Paul thought about it at length, remembering the need to spread the Gospel without offending anybody, and agreed that it was the right thing to do. Timothy would be preaching in public. He would be living among Gentiles but even more so among Jews, at synagogues and other centers where religion was ministered to the people. It was right therefore to think about this measure so Timothy could travel in their company without being bothered with the matter.

Eunice's son obeyed without hesitation. A few days later after saying their farewells to the brethren and the generous women, who wept and wished them peace in God, the missionaries left for Iconium, filled with indomitable courage and a firm resolve to serve Jesus.

In the loving spirit of preaching and fraternity, expanding the power of the Gospel over souls and never forgetting to take up a collection for the church at Jerusalem, the disciples visited all the small villages of Galatia, staying some time in Antioch of Pisidia, where they worked in one way or another to support themselves.

Paul was extremely satisfied. His efforts with Barnabas had not been fruitless. In the most remote places and when he least expected it, news arrived from the churches they had founded together. It entailed benefits to the needy, improved health or healings for the sick and consolation to those in extreme despair. The Apostle felt the contentment of the sower who sees the first blossoms as radiant promises of the field.

The emissaries of the Good News passed through Phrygia and Galatia without any significant persecutions. The name of Jesus was now being spoken with more respect.

The ex-rabbi was continuing to work hard for the spread of the Gospel in Asia, when one night, after the usual prayers, he heard a voice saying to him in a loving tone: “Press on, Paul... Take the light of Heaven to other places of darkness; others are awaiting you on the way to infinity.”

It was Stephen, his friend every minute of the way, who, as the Divine Master’s representative, was rousing the Apostle to the Gentiles to sow in other places.

The valorous emissary of the eternal truths grasped the fact that the Lord had reserved new terrain for him to cover. On the following day he informed Silas and Timothy of what had happened, and concluded, highly inspired: “So I believe the Master is calling me to new endeavors. Besides, I can see that these regions have already received the divine seed.”

And after a pause, he emphasized: “We have not met with many difficulties on this occasion. The last time, Barnabas and I were expelled, imprisoned, beaten, stoned ... This time, however, none of that has happened, meaning that there are already secure bases for the victory of Christ around here. Thus, we must proceed to where the obstacles are and overcome them so that the Master may become known and glorified, for we are involved in a battle and cannot shy away from the front line.”

The two disciples listened and sought to meditate on the greatness of such concepts.

After a week they departed on foot toward Mysia. However, Paul perceived intuitively that that was not where their new arena of operations would be. He thought of heading for Bithynia but the voice, which the Apostle interpreted as being that of the “Spirit of Jesus”²⁸, suggested that he change course and head for Troas. On arriving there, they were exhausted and

lodged in a modest inn. In a spiritual vision Paul saw a man from Macedonia, whom he identified by his characteristic clothing, waving to him anxiously and exclaiming: “Come and help us!” The ex-doctor of the Law interpreted this incident as having been ordained by Jesus. He told his companions about it first thing the next morning, and they considered the extreme difficulty of the journey by sea and their lack of resources.

“Nevertheless,” he concluded, “I believe that once there the Master will give us what we need.”

Silas and Timothy were respectfully silent.

The Apostle went out with his two disciples into the morning’s sunlit street, espied a shop and immediately walked toward it filled with joy. He had seen Luke, who seemed to be buying something.

The former rabbi approached and tapped his shoulder kindly: “Well now, what are you doing around here?” asked Paul with a big smile.

They embraced each other with great joy. The preacher of the Gospel introduced his new companions to Luke and told him of the purpose of their journey in those parts. Luke in turn explained that for two years he had been in charge of the medical services on board a large ship anchored there in transit to Samothrace.

Paul received this information with profound interest. Very excited at their meeting, he told Luke about the revelation he had received regarding their course, as well as the vision of the night before.

Convinced of the Master’s assistance at that moment, Paul spoke confidently: “I’m sure the Lord has sent you as the help we need. We must go to Macedonia but we have no money.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that,” Luke answered frankly. I might not have a fortune, but I do have my earnings. We shall be traveling companions and it will be my pleasure to pay for everything.”

The conversation continued lively, with the former guest of Antioch telling them of his victories for Jesus. During his travels he had taken advantage of every opportunity on behalf of the Gospel, communicating the treasures of the Good News to all who approached him. When he told them he was now all alone in the world because his mother had departed to the spirit world, Paul offered him another suggestion: “Listen, Luke, if you have no

immediate commitments, why don't you devote yourself entirely to the work of the Divine Master?"

The question drew an emotional response from the doctor as if he had received a revelation. Once he had recovered from the surprise, Luke replied somewhat indecisively: "Yes, but I have to consider the duties of my profession."

"But who was Jesus but the Divine Doctor of the whole world? Until now you've been healing bodies which in one way or another will perish sooner or later. Wouldn't treating the spirit be a more worthwhile effort? I don't mean by this that one should disregard the medicine of the world; however, that job should be for those who do not yet possess the spiritual values that you bear. I've always believed that the medicine for the body is a set of sacred principles that people cannot dispense with until they decide on the divine and immutable principles of spiritual healing."

Luke pondered these words very seriously and replied: "You're right."

"Would you like to work with us to evangelize Macedonia?" asked Paul, feeling triumphant.

"I shall go with you," Luke decided.

There was enormous joy amongst the four disciples of Christ.

The following day they set sail for Samothrace. Luke explained himself to his commander as well as he could in requesting a one year leave of absence. And because he had found somebody to replace him, he easily got his wish.

On board, as he did everywhere, Paul took advantage of every chance to preach. The smallest incidents represented great evangelical themes in his higher way of thinking. The captain himself, a good-natured Roman, gladly indulged in the pleasure of listening to him.

It was on such travels that Paul of Tarsus established relationships with a vast circle of Gospel sympathizers, winning the many friends cited in his epistles.

After they had disembarked, the missionaries, now enjoying Luke's help, rested for two days in Neapolis and then headed for Philippi. When they approached the city gates, Paul suggested that Luke and Timothy continue on to Thessalonica, where the four of them would meet up later. By following

this strategy, not a single town would be missed and the seeds of the Kingdom of God would be sown in the simplest places. The idea was gladly approved.

Luke could not help asking whether or not Timothy had been circumcised. He knew how particular the Jews were in this regard and did not want any friction as they began their endeavors.

“That problem has already been taken care of,” explained the Apostle to the Gentiles. “Two humiliations inflicted on a young comrade whom I took to Jerusalem – not to a synagogue but to a meeting of the church – led me to think of Timothy, who will often need favors from the Jews during the course of his preaching. Until God circumcises such hardened hearts, we must act prudently, without any animosity that might harm our efforts.”

With that matter settled they entered the city where the doctor and the young man from Lystra would rest for a bit before setting course for Thessalonica by a different route, so as to multiply the fruits of the mission.

They stayed in a very poor inn that the people of the city reserved for foreigners. After three nights in the open air Jesus’ friends went to a house of prayer located on the banks of the Gangitis River. Philippi had no synagogue and the prayer sanctuary, although called a “house,” was nothing more than a pleasant corner in nature surrounded by crumbling walls.

Aware of the religious situation in the city, Paul went there with his companions. To their great surprise, the missionaries found only women and young girls in prayer. Paul entered resolutely into the female circle and spoke of the objectives of the Gospel as if he were in front of a large audience. The women were mesmerized by his ardent and sublime words. They discreetly wiped the tears that ran down their faces on receiving the news of the Master, and one of them, named Lydia, an honorable and generous widow, approached the missionaries, and confessing that she had been converted to the awaited Savior, offered them her own house to found a new church.

Paul of Tarsus looked at her with tears in his eyes. Listening to her voice overflowing with crystalline sincerity, he remembered that in the East, on the unforgettable day of Calvary, only women had followed Jesus to his dolorous death, and women were the first to see him after his glorious resurrection; and it was women again, who, in a sweet spiritual encounter, now received the word of the Gospel in the West for the first time. The Apostle to the Gentiles silently contemplated the large group of young girls kneeling under the loving shade of the trees. Observing their white-colored frocks, he had the

impression of seeing in front of him a gracious flock of snow-white doves ready to brandish the glorious flight of Christ's teachings across the marvelous skies of Europe.

Thus, contrary to what his companions expected, the compelling preacher answered Lydia affably: "We accept your hospitality."

At that very moment a beautiful friendship was begun between Paul of Tarsus and his loving church of Philippians.

Lydia, whose house was well furnished due to her trade in purple wares²⁹, welcomed the Messiah's disciples with indescribable joy. Meanwhile, Luke and Timothy continued their journey. Silas and Paul consecrated themselves to serving the Gospel among the generous Philippians.

The city was famous for its Roman spirit. In the streets there were many temples dedicated to the old gods. And since only women frequented the "house" of prayer, Paul, fearless as usual, decided to preach the Gospel in a public square.

At that time Philippi had a seer who had become famous in the area. As in the traditions of Delphi, her words were regarded as an infallible oracle. The girl's employers were marketing her psychic powers. Her mediumship was exploited by little-evolved spirits, who took pleasure in giving tips of a worldly nature. The situation was highly profitable for the ones who were uncharitably using her. It just so happened that the girl was present at Paul's first sermon, which was received by the people with unsurpassable success. When his evangelical exposition was over, the missionaries took notice of the girl, who, in a loud voice that impressed the audience, began crying out: "Receive these messengers from God Most High!... They are proclaiming salvation!"

Paul and Silas were somewhat perplexed; however, they did not say anything, discreetly guarding the incident in their hearts. The following day, however, the incident was repeated, and for one week, after each sermon, the disciples of the Gospel listened to the spirit speaking through the girl and praising them with compliments and pompous titles.

From the first manifestation, however, Paul had sought to find out who the nameless girl was and had become familiarized with the antecedents of the case. Encouraged by easy profit, her employers had set up a booth where

the seer could be consulted. She in turn had gone from being a victim to being a willing partner in the enterprise, whose profits were significant. Paul, who never agreed with the marketing of heavenly goods, perceived the hidden mechanism behind the incidents, and once he had mastered all the particulars of the situation, he waited for the visitor from the invisible world to appear again.

Thus, once his sermon in the square was over and the girl began shouting: “Receive the messengers of redemption! They are not men; they are angels of the Most High!...” Paul came down firmly from the platform, approached the girl dominated by the strange influence, and ordered the manifesting spirit in an imperative tone: “You perverse spirit, we are not angels; out of love for the Gospel, we are workers in a struggle with our own weakness. In the name of Jesus Christ I order you to leave forever! In the name of the Lord I forbid you to create confusion among people, encouraging the petty interests of the world to the detriment of the sacred interests of God!”

The poor girl recovered her senses immediately and was freed from the evil influence.

The incident caused enormous astonishment among the people.

Silas himself, who had been somehow pleased at hearing what the seer had been saying about them, interpreting it as a form of spiritual comfort, was dumbfounded.

When they were alone he asked Paul what had made him adopt such an attitude: “Wasn’t she speaking in God’s name? Wouldn’t her advertising have been a valuable help to us?”

The Apostle smiled and said: “Silas, while on earth can we perchance appraise any work before it is concluded? That spirit might have been able to speak of God but it did not come from God. What have we done to receive such praise? Day and night we fight against the imperfections of our soul. Jesus has ordered us to teach so that we may learn the hard way. You know that I am at war with the thorn of lower desires. Well then? Would it be right for us to accept undeserving titles when the Master himself rejected the label ‘good’? Of course, if that spirit had come from Jesus its words would have been otherwise. It would have encouraged our efforts, understanding our weaknesses. Besides, I got information on the girl and I know that she has been the key to a large profitable ruse.”

Silas was impressed by this highly justifiable explanation, but showing that he had difficulty grasping it completely, he added: “However, mightn’t the incident be a lesson for us not to entertain relations with the invisible realm?”

“How did you reach that conclusion?” answered Paul, very surprised. “Christianity without prophecy would be a body without a soul. If we closed the door to communication with the Master’s sphere, how would we receive His teachings? Priests are men; temples are made of stone. What would our task be without light from the higher realms? From the soil sprouts food aplenty, but only for the body; for nutrition for the spirit we must open up the abilities of our soul to Heaven and count on divine help. In this particular all our activity rests on the gifts we have received. Have you ever imagined a Christ apart from His resurrection and apart from His communicating with the disciples? No one can close the doors that link us with Heaven. Christ is alive and will never die. After Calvary He appeared to His friends in Jerusalem and Galilee; at Pentecost He brought a rain of light and knowledge to the Galilean coworkers; He called me at the gates of Damascus; He sent an emissary to free Peter when the good fisherman was weeping in jail.”

Paul’s voice took on a marvelous quality as he recalled these profound events. Silas understood and kept still with tears in his eyes.

The incident, however, had consequences far beyond what the Master’s disciples could have expected. The seer no longer received visits from the spirit who had handed out tips of every sort. In vain those addicted to consulting with the spirit knocked at her door. Finding themselves deprived of their easy income, the men who had suffered the loss fomented a large uprising against the missionaries. Gossip was spread that, due to the audacity of the revolutionary preacher, Philippi had been deprived of assistance from the spirits of God. The fanatics were up in arms. Three days later Paul and Silas were taken by surprise in the middle of the square and were attacked by the people, bound to thick poles and flogged mercilessly. They humbly submitted to the torture under the jeers of the ignorant masses. When they began bleeding under the cruel lashes, the authorities intervened and they were led off to jail, weak and staggering. In the dark and pain-filled night, and unable to sleep due to the excruciating pain, Jesus’ disciples remained awake in prayer anointed with luminous fervor. Outside, a tempest was raging with awful thunder and whistling wind. The whole of Philippi seemed shaken to its foundations by the clamorous storm. It was past midnight and the two

disciples were praying out loud. By the expression on their faces, the neighboring prisoners seemed to be watching them as they prayed. Paul looked at them through the bars, and with much effort he began preaching the Kingdom of God. On telling them of the unforeseen storm that had shaken the disciples' confidence while Jesus was asleep on the boat, a marvelous occurrence astonished the prisoners: the heavy doors of the many cells opened without a sound. Silas went pale. Paul understood and went out to meet the other prisoners. He continued fervently preaching the eternal truths of the Lord in an extraordinary tone of voice; and seeing dozens of men with hirsute chests, long beards and taciturn faces as if they had been completely forgotten by the world, the Apostle to the Gentiles spoke enthusiastically about Christ's mission and asked that no one try to escape. Those who acknowledged their guilt should thank the Father for the benefits of correction; and those who deemed themselves innocent should rejoice greatly, because only the sacrifice of the just could save the world. Paul's arguments restrained the entire small, strange audience. Nobody went for the exit door; instead, they gathered around the unknown man who was able to speak so well to unfortunates, and many of them knelt in tears, converting to the Savior he proclaimed with kindness and strength.

At daybreak, with the storm fading away, the jailor woke up, disturbed by the singular sound of loud voices. Seeing the doors all open, and frightened because of his responsibility, he instinctively moved to kill himself. But Paul stepped forward and stopped the extreme gesture, explaining what had occurred. All the prisoners humbly returned to their cells. Lucanus, the jailor, converted to the new doctrine, and before daylight settled upon the landscape, he brought emergency aid to the two disciples and dressed their wounds, moved as never before. He lived on the prison grounds. He took the two inside his home and ordered them to be served food and soothing wine. Early that day the Philippian judges were told of what had happened. They were filled with fear and ordered the release of the preachers; but wishing to secure guarantees for the Christian work that had begun in the church founded in Lydia's home, Paul claimed his Roman citizenship in order to instill more respect in the Philippian magistrates for the ideas of the Nazarene Prophet. He refused the order for his release and demanded the appearance of the judges, who came fearfully. The Apostle proclaimed the Kingdom of God to them, and presenting his titles, he obligated them to listen to him speak about Jesus. He made them aware of the evangelical work that was dawning on the city with Lydia's help, and commented on the rights of

Christians everywhere. The magistrates apologized and guaranteed peace for the budding church, and alleging the extent of their responsibilities to the people, they begged Paul and Silas to leave the city in order to avoid further uproar.

The former rabbi felt satisfied. Accompanied by Silas, who recognized his strength and was unable to hide his great astonishment, Paul returned to the house of the generous trader in purples and stayed there for a few more days outlining the work plan for the further sowing of Jesus' doctrine. Immediately thereafter, he set out for Thessalonica, stopping wherever there were farms or towns waiting for news of the Savior.

In this new center of struggle they met up with Luke and Timothy, who had been eagerly awaiting them. The work continued at full strength. Everywhere, the same conflicts: prejudiced Jews, ill-willed, ungrateful and indifferent men conspiring against the former doctor of Jerusalem and his devoted companions.

Paul kept himself strong and above the least frictions. There were annoyances, adversities in the public square, unjust accusations, cruel slanders; powerful threats sometimes fell on them unexpectedly on account of the disinterest in their divine endeavors; but the brave Apostle of the Lord continued serene and firm through the storms, living strictly off his own labor and compelling his friends to do likewise. It was essential for Jesus to triumph in people's hearts; this was their fundamental motivation. He disregarded any personal caprices, giving priority to this reality over any comforts, and the mission continued amid formidable pain and obstacles, but secure and victorious in its divine purpose.

After innumerable squabbles with the Jews in Thessalonica, the former rabbi decided to head for Berea. New work, new dedication and new suffering; the missionaries' labors, always initiated in peace, would continue under extreme struggle.

The likes of the unbending Jews of Thessalonica were not lacking in Berea. The city fomented a movement against the disciples of the Gospel and the people became all stirred up. Luke, Timothy and Silas were forced to leave and roamed the surrounding villages. Paul was arrested and flogged. At a cost of great sacrifice from Jesus' sympathizers, he was given his freedom on condition that he leave the city as soon as possible.

The former rabbi accepted readily. He knew that after him, and due to the most exhaustive efforts, there would always be a house church, which, aided by the Master's mercy, would continue to grow in order to proclaim the excellence of the Good News.

It was night when his brothers-in-ideal were able to take him from jail to the public street. The Apostle to the Gentiles sought information about his companions and learned of the troubles that had befallen them. He was told that Silas and Luke were ill and that Timothy needed to meet his mother at the port of Corinth. It would be better to give his friends a break from the whirl of renewed activities. It would not be right to ask for their help when he himself was in need of rest.

The brethren in Berea insisted on his departure. It was not advisable to provoke more conflict. That is when Paul decided to act on an old plan: he would visit Athens, fulfilling a long-held dream. Impressed by the Hellenic culture he had learned in Tarsus, he had often fed the desire to know about Athens' glorious monuments, its superb temples and its wise and free spirit. When still very young he had thought about visiting the magnificent city of the gods of old, longing to take to the city the treasure of the faith kept in Jerusalem: he would seek out erudite and independent audiences and would speak about Moses and his Law. Pondering this plan now, he realized he would be taking a much richer light to the Athenian mind: he would proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to the famous city. He was certain that when he would speak in the public square he would not encounter the uproars so much to the Jewish taste. He anticipated the pleasure of speaking to the crowds that enjoyed discussing spiritual matters. There was no doubt that the philosophers would be impatiently awaiting news of Christ. They would find in his evangelical preaching the true meaning of life.

Encouraged by these hopes, Paul decided to make the journey in the company of a few loyal friends. However, they turned back at the gates of Athens, leaving him completely alone.

Paul entered the city taken with great emotion. Athens still boasted much external beauty. The monuments of its age-old traditions were nearly all still standing; soft harmonies vibrated in the deep blue sky; beautiful valleys were covered with flowers and fragrance. The great soul of the Apostle was elated as he contemplated nature. He remembered the noble philosophers who had breathed that same air and he recalled the glorious riches of the Athenian past, feeling that he had been transported to a marvelous sanctuary. However, the

passers-by could not see his soul; they saw Paul only as a squalid body that hardship had rendered strange-looking. Many took him for a beggar, a human rag from the large mass continually flowing in from the helpless East. In the enthusiasm of his good intentions the emissary of the Gospel could not perceive the conflicting opinions about him. Filled with courage, he decided to preach in a public square on the afternoon of his arrival. He was eager to face the Athenian mind, as he had already done with the material greatness of the city.

His effort, however, was met with dismal failure. Several people approached when he first began, but when they heard references to Jesus and his resurrection, a large part of the audience burst into laughs of sarcasm.

“Is this philosopher a new god?” a passer-by asked mockingly.

“He’s too clumsy for that,” was the answer.

“Where have we ever seen such a god?” asked another. “See how his hands are shaking! He seems ill and weak. His beard is unkempt and he is covered with scars!”

“He’s crazy,” exclaimed an elderly man, putting on airs of wisdom. “Let’s not waste our time.”

Paul heard all this and watched as the lines of people left, indifferent and hard-hearted; an icy feeling hit his soul. Athens was far from what he had expected. The public gathering had given him the impression of a large group of individuals poisoned by false erudition. For more than a week he persevered in preaching in the street without appreciable results. No one was interested in Jesus, much less in offering him lodging as a simple matter of sympathy. It was the first time since he had begun his missionary task that he would leave a city without having founded a church. In the most rustic villages someone always appeared who would copy Levi’s notes to begin the evangelical work in a humble home. In Athens no one seemed interested in reading the evangelical texts. However, Paul appealed enough to a few prominent individuals for them to take him to the Areopagus³⁰ so that he could come in contact with the most learned and intelligent men of the time.

The members of the noble enclave received him more out of curiosity than interest.

The Apostle had been admitted as a favor from Dionysius, a learned and generous man who had complied with his request in order to observe how far

his courage would go in presenting the unknown doctrine.

Paul impressed the aristocratic audience at first by referring to the “Unknown God” honored on the Athenian altars. His vibrant words displayed singular variations (the images were much richer and more beautiful than those recorded by the author of Acts) and Dionysius himself was surprised. The Apostle was revealing himself to be quite different than when he had seen him in the public square. He spoke with high nobility, with emphasis; his images were clothed in extraordinary color; but when he broached the subject of the resurrection there was loud, prolonged buzzing of voices. The onlookers in the galleries laughed uproariously; acid remarks rained down on him. The Athenian intellectual aristocracy could not surrender its scientific prejudices.

The more scornful left the room laughing sarcastically, while out of respect for Dionysius, the more prudent approached the Apostle with vague smiles, stating they would be pleased to hear him again if he would not take the luxury of commenting on fictitious subjects.

Paul of course was crushed. At the time, he had not drawn the conclusion that false erudition will always find the expression of imaginary and meaningless things in true wisdom. The attitude at the Areopagus did not allow him to finish. Soon the splendid place was almost silent. The Apostle then thought that it would be better to rouse the uproar of the Jews after all. Where there was struggle, there would always be fruit to harvest. His arguments and conflicts with them in many cases represented the tilling of the spiritual ground for the divine seed. Here, however, he had encountered the coldness of stone. The marble of the superb columns immediately gave him a metaphor for the situation. Athenian culture was beautiful and well cared for and it was impressive in its outward magnificence, but it was cold with the stiffness of intellectual death.

Only Dionysius, a young woman named Damaris and a few servants of the palace remained at his side, extremely uncomfortable although sympathetic to the cause.

In spite of his disappointment Paul of Tarsus did his best to avert the sadness that was hovering over them all, starting with himself. He tried a smile of resignation and made an attempt to be good-humored. Dionysius consolidated even more his admiration for the powerful spiritual qualities of that man of slight appearance but strong and passionate in his convictions.

Before leaving, Paul spoke of the possibility of founding a church – even if it were only a humble home sanctuary – where the Gospel would be studied and commented upon. But the others were prodigal with their excuses and pretexts. Dionysius stated that he was sorry but he would not be able to support such a commitment due to his lack of time; Damaris alleged family problems; the servants of the Areopagus each mentioned extreme difficulties. One was too poor, another was misunderstood... Paul listened to all these excuses with a singular look on his face: that of a sower who sees himself surrounded by nothing but stones and briars.

The Apostle to the Gentiles calmly took his leave, but as soon as he was alone he wept copiously. To what could he attribute this heartbreaking failure? He could not immediately grasp the fact that Athens was suffering from centuries of intellectual poisoning, and feeling that he had been forsaken by the power of the higher realms, the ex-rabbi gave way to grim discouragement. He could not accept the Athenians' overall cold indifference, especially since the new doctrine did not belong to him but to Christ. He wept not only for his own grief, but for the Master, believing that he, Paul, had not met the Savior's expectations.

For many days he could not dissipate the cloud of worries that cast a pall over his soul. Nevertheless, he prayed to Jesus and implored His protection for the great duties of his life.

In this whirlpool of uncertainty and bitterness, help from the Master appeared for His beloved Apostle: Timothy had arrived from Corinth bearing glad tidings aplenty.

27 A two-horse Roman chariot. – Tr.

28 Acts 16:7. – Emmanuel

29 Purple dye was extracted from the purple fish, a relatively rare species of shell fish or mussel from which the dye color was derived; thus, the dye was quite valuable. – Tr.

30 Areopagus: the highest judicial and legislative council of ancient Athens. (American Heritage College). Tr.

VII

The Epistles

Lois's grandson had much comforting news for the former rabbi. He had already set up the two women in the city, he had brought some donations with him, and he told Paul of the spread of the Christian doctrine in the old capital of Achaia. One piece of news was particularly pleasing: Timothy mentioned meeting Aquila and Prisca. They had been so helpful in the extreme difficulties of the desert, and they were now working in Corinth for the glory of the Lord. Paul was profoundly happy. Besides the many personal reasons calling him to Achaia – chiefly his indelible memories of Jeziel and Abigail – the desire to embrace the couple was also a decisive one for his immediate departure.

The brave preacher left Athens quite disheartened. His failure, due to the Greek culture, compelled his questioning mind to the most tormented reasoning. He had begun to understand the reason why the Master had preferred Galilee with its humble and simple-of-heart people. He had begun to better grasp the reasons for Christ's plainspoken words about salvation and His natural predilection for the unfortunate.

Timothy noticed his sadness and tried to convince him that it would be most appropriate to travel by sea because of the conveniences found in Piraeus. Nonetheless, Paul insisted on going on foot in order to visit the isolated places en route.

“But I can tell you're ill,” objected the disciple, trying to dissuade him. “Wouldn't it be more reasonable to rest?”

Remembering the dismay he had experienced, the Apostle emphasized: “As long as we can work, we should view it as a tonic for all ills. Besides, it is right that we take advantage of the time and the opportunity.”

“But I think,” his young friend argued, “that you could at least wait for a while.”

“Why wait?” replied Paul, making every effort to undo the bitterness of Athens. “I’ve always had the conviction that God is in urgent need of a job well done. If this is true of the petty activities in matters of the world, how are we to postpone or fail to do the sacred duties of our soul regarding the Almighty?”

The young man pondered the good sense in Paul’s assertions and fell silent. Thus, they traveled more than forty miles over the course of several days, stopping along the way to preach. As he carried out this task among simple people, Paul of Tarsus felt happier. The peasantry received the Good News with more joy and understanding. Small house churches were founded not far from the Gulf of Saron.

Enraptured by loving memories of Abigail, he crossed the isthmus and entered the busy and noisy city. He embraced Lois and Eunice, who were staying in a small house near the port of Cenchrea, and the immediately went to visit his old friends from the “Oasis of Dan.”

The three embraced each other with unbounded joy. Aquila and his wife talked at length about the evangelical work to which they had been called through Jesus’ mercy. With eyes aglow as if they had won a great battle, they told the Apostle they had realized their dream of staying in Rome for some time. As poor weavers they had lived in a large, run-down old house in the Trastevere section, delivering the first proclamations of the Gospel in the city of the Caesars’ pomp. The Jews had declared open war on the new principles. At the first preaching of the Good News, great troubles had erupted in the ghetto of the poor and unprotected neighborhood. Prisca told him how a group of impassioned Jews had broken into their place at night with scourges and other devices of torture. Her husband had been delayed at the workshop and she could not escape being mercilessly beaten. Only later had she been helped by Aquila, who found her covered in blood. The Tarsean Apostle rejoiced. He in turn told his friends about the suffering he had experienced far and wide for the name of Jesus Christ. These shared sufferings were presented as grace from Jesus, as eternal deeds for His glory. One who loves longs to give something, and these three, who loved the Master, felt extremely fortunate for having suffered because of their devotion to His name.

Desirous of getting reestablished in the serenity of his endeavors and forgetting the Athenians' indifference, Paul commented on his plans to found a church in Corinth, to which Aquila and his wife promptly offered all their services. The ex-rabbi accepted their generous offer and lived with them while working every day as a weaver.

Corinth was a permanent reminder of the fond memories of his heart. Without telling his friends of the reminiscences that bubbled in his sensitive soul, he sought to see once again the places that Abigail had always referred to with such delight. With extreme care, he located the area where old Jochedeb must have had his small farm, now incorporated into the immense estate of Licinius Minucius's heirs, and he contemplated the old prison from where his beloved had fled to save herself from the criminals who had murdered her father and enslaved her brother. He meditated at the port of Cenchrea, from where Abigail had left one day to win his heart under the lofty, immutable designs of the Eternal One.

Paul gave himself body and soul to hard work. Active manual labor gently enabled him to forget about Athens. Understanding the need for a period of peacefulness, he persuaded Luke to rest in Troas, since Timothy and Silas had found work as caravaners.

However, before taking up his preaching once again, emissaries began arriving in Corinth from Thessalonica, Berea and other places in Macedonia where he had founded his beloved churches. The communities had urgent matters requiring tactful intervention on his part. Paul could tell that it would be difficult to attend to everything with due promptness, so he recalled Silas and Timothy for their indispensable cooperation. Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by their profession, both could contribute effectively to solving unforeseen problems.

Comforted by his friends' help, Paul spoke for the first time in the synagogue. His vibrant speech achieved extraordinary success. Jews and Greeks spoke enthusiastically about Jesus and the weaver was invited to continue his religious commentaries weekly. However, as soon as he began to address the relationship between the Law and the Gospel, frictions arose again. The Jews could not tolerate Jesus' superiority over Moses, and even if they might regard Christ as a prophet of their people, they certainly could not uphold Him as their Savior. Paul took on all challenges, but he did not succeed in dissuading such hardened hearts; the arguments continued for several Sabbaths, until one day, when the Apostle's inflamed and sincere

speech vehemently lashed out at Pharisaic errors, one of the main leaders of the synagogue spoke to him harshly: “Why don’t you just shut up, you impudent prattler! This synagogue has tolerated your falsehoods in a true miracle of patience, but in the name of the majority I must order you to leave for good! We do not want to know about your Savior, killed like a dog on the cross!”

On hearing such disrespectful remarks about Christ, the Apostle felt tears in his eyes. He pondered the situation and replied: “Up to this point in Corinth I have sought to tell the truth to the people chosen by God for the sacred repository of divine unity; but if you do not accept it, from this day onward I shall seek out the Gentiles!... May the unjust curses you have cast on Jesus Christ’s name fall upon you!”

Some of the more hot-tempered Jews wanted to attack him, causing an uproar. But a Roman named Titus Justus, who was present at the gathering and who had felt strongly attracted to the powerful personality of the Apostle ever since his first sermon, extended to him the arms of a friend. Paul was able to leave the synagogue and walk unhurt to his benefactor’s residence, where he was offered everything he needed to organize an active church.

The weaver was jubilant. It was the first victory toward an established church.

With the help of all the other sympathizers of the Gospel, Titus Justus acquired a house for starting religious activities. Along with Lois and Eunice, Aquila and Prisca were the main collaborators in carrying out the plans outlined by Paul in accord with the beloved church at Antioch.

The Corinthian church thus began producing the richest fruits of spirituality. The city was famous for its debauchery, but the Apostle used to say that the most beautiful lilies often sprout from swamps. And because where there is much sin there is much regret and suffering, the community, mirroring these circumstances, grew day by day, bringing together the most diverse believers who came eager to abandon that Babylon burning with vice.

The Corinthian church acquired exceptional importance due to Paul’s presence, and emissaries arrived from the remotest regions almost daily. They came from Galatia to ask for measures for the church at Pisidia; brothers arrived from Iconium and Lystra, from Thessalonica, Cyprus and Jerusalem. Around the Apostle a small school of followers was formed, composed of permanent coworkers who joined him in the smallest endeavors. Paul,

however, worried intensely. Matters were both urgent and diverse. He could not set aside the work for his sustenance; he had taken on heavy commitments with the brethren of Corinth; he had to be attentive to the collection for Jerusalem; yet he could not neglect the communities he had founded previously. Little by little he came to the conclusion that it was not enough to send emissaries. The requests were flooding in from all the places he had passed through when announcing the Good News. The loving and trusting brethren were counting on his sincerity and dedication, and this was driving him to work too hard.

One day, feeling unable to attend to all needs at the same time, the selfless disciple of the Gospel took advantage of the nighttime silence, when the church was deserted, to tearfully pray to Jesus that he not lack the help he needed to fulfill his mission.

When he finished the prayer he felt enveloped in a soft light. He had the clear impression that he was being visited by the Lord. On his knees and experiencing inexpressible emotion, he heard a serene and loving admonition: “Fear not,” said the voice. “Continue teaching the truth and do not be silent, for I am with you.”

The Apostle gave way to the tears flowing from his heart. That loving care from Jesus, that exhortation in answer to his appeal entered his soul in caressing waves. The joy of the moment was reward enough for all the pain and suffering along the way. Desirous to take advantage of the sacred inspiration of that fleeting instant, he thought of the problem of attending to the various fraternal churches. That was enough for the gentle voice to continue: “Do not torment yourself with the needs of this endeavor. Of course you cannot help everybody personally at the same time. But it is possible to help them simultaneously through the powers of the spirit.”

He tried unsuccessfully to deduce what this sentence implied.

However, the voice continued softly: “You can solve the problem by writing to all the brethren in my name; those of goodwill will be able to understand, because the worthiness of the task does not lie in the personal presence of the missionary, but in the spiritual content of his words, of his exemplification and his life. From now on Stephen will remain closer to you to transmit my thoughts to you, and the work of evangelization will be enabled to expand on behalf of the sufferers and the needy of the world.”

The devoted friend of the Gentiles saw that the light had gone out. There was silence once again between the simple walls of the church of Corinth. But as if he had drunk the divine water of eternal light, his spirit remained steeped in inexpressible joy. He would recommence his endeavor with more determination, and he would send word of Christ to the most distant communities.

In fact, on the following day emissaries from Thessalonica arrived with very unpleasant news. The Jews had succeeded in raising new and strange questions and inciting disputes within the church. Timothy confirmed it with personal remarks. They were urgently demanding the Apostle's presence; but he decided to put the Master's suggestion into practice, and remembering that Jesus had promised that He would associate Stephen with the divine task, he realized that he should not act on his own. Hence, he called Timothy and Silas to act as amanuenses for the first of his famous epistles.

Thus began the writing of those immortal letters, whose spiritual essence proceeded from Christ's realm through the loving contribution of Stephen – selfless and faithful companion of the one who, in his youth, had ascribed to himself the role of the first persecutor of Christianity.

Perceiving the need for the elevated spirit of cooperation in every divine work, Paul of Tarsus never wrote alone; he sought in these moments to surround himself with the most worthy companions, to hear their inspirations, aware of the fact that, when unable to find in his own emotional tonus the aptitude to transmit the Lord's wishes precisely, any messenger of Jesus could find in his friends an adequate instrument.

From then on, the beloved and famous letters – the treasure of vibrations from a higher world – were copied and cherished everywhere. And Paul continued to write, unaware, however, that those sublime documents, written many times during extremely distressing times, were not destined for one particular church but for Christianity the world over. The epistles enjoyed instant success. In the humblest places, brethren discussed them for their consoling content, and upon receiving the first copies in Jerusalem, Simon Peter himself gathered the community together, read them movingly, and stated that the letters of the Damascus convert should be interpreted as letters of Christ to His disciples and followers, affirming further that they marked a new and luminous period in the history of the Gospel.

Greatly comforted, the former doctor of the Law sought to enrich the Corinthian church with all the experiences he had brought from the Antiochian institution. The city's Christians lived in a sea of indefinable joy. The church had a department of assistance for those in need of bread, clothing and medicine. Venerable elderly ladies took turns in the holy work of attending to the most unfortunate. Meetings were held every night to comment on a passage in Christ's life. Following the main presentation and individual manifestations, they would all fall silent in order to ponder what they received from Heaven through the gift of prophecy. Those not gifted with prophecy possessed healing faculties, which were used on behalf of the infirm in an adjacent room. The Gospel-oriented mediumship of modern times is the same prophetic gift of the apostolic churches.

As sometimes happened in Antioch, small arguments would emerge on the points that were more difficult to interpret; Paul hastened to settle them without harm to the edifying fellowship.

At the end of each night's work, a sincere and loving prayer marked the time to rest.

The institution was progressing visibly. Joining the generosity of Titus Justus, other wealthy Romans embraced the Gospel and enriched the organization with new potential. Poor Jews found a generous home in the church, where God was manifested to them in demonstrations of benevolence, unlike the synagogues, where instead of bread for their voracious hunger, or balm for the sores of body and soul, they found only the harshness of tyrannical precepts on the lips of compassionless priests.

Paul had by now been in Corinth for a year and a half and had established a real and perfect harbor for the "Children of Calvary". Angered by his immense success, the Jews plotted a terrible persecution against the Apostle. The synagogue was becoming empty. The cause of the loss of its social prestige had to be eliminated. The former rabbi from Jerusalem would pay dearly for his audacity in proclaiming the Nazarene Messiah to the detriment of Moses.

The proconsul of Achaia residing in Corinth was a generous and illustrious Roman, who always acted in accordance with justice in his public life. The brother of Seneca, Junius Gallius was a man of great kindness and outstanding education. He was presented with a suit against Paul without him being at all aware of it. The list of accusations raised by the Jews was so long

that the proconsul was compelled to order the Apostle's imprisonment for arraignment. The synagogue was particularly emphatic that Gallius himself handle the task of bringing the accused to trial. The proconsul was completely unaware of the cause behind the request and issued a writ ordering the appearance of the interested parties in a public hearing the following day.

In possession of the writ, the more excitable Jews decided to arrest Paul that very day, at a time when it could shock the whole community.

That night as the former rabbi was commenting on the Gospel, taken with profound inspiration, the armed group stopped at the door and a few of the more eminent Jews went inside.

Paul was extremely composed as he listened to the arrest order; the same could not be said of the assembly, however. There was a big uproar in the church. Some of the more excitable young men extinguished the torches, but in a solemn and moving appeal the brave Apostle called out: "Brothers, do you perchance want Christ without having to bear witness?"

The question resounded in the room and put a damper on the excitement. Remaining composed, Paul ordered the torches to be relit, extended his wrists to the amazed Jews and said in an unforgettable tone: "Let's go!"

One member of the group was so angered by such a display of spiritual superiority that he struck Paul in the face.

A few of the Christians protested and the bearers of Gallius's order retaliated harshly; but without showing the slightest resistance the prisoner shouted in a loud voice: "Brethren, let us rejoice in Christ Jesus. Let us be at peace and joyful because the Lord has deemed us worthy!"

Great serenity came over the assembly. Several women were sobbing quietly. Aquila and his wife directed an unforgettable look at the Apostle and the small group left for the prison in the darkness of the night. Paul was thrown to the bottom of a damp cell, tied to the stake of torture and endured the thirty-nine lashes. He himself was surprised as sublime peace soothed his soul with soft consolation. Despite feeling alone among his ruthless persecutors, he was experiencing new trust in Christ. In this state of mind, the merciless lashes did not hurt; in vain his tormentors tried to provoke his ardent spirit with insults and mockery. During this harsh and painful trial, he joyfully grasped the fact that he had reached the region of divine peace within, which God grants his children after the bitter and constant struggle they have to endure in mastering themselves. In the past the love of justice

had led him into impassioned situations, badly-contained desires and heated arguments. But here, facing the lashes on his half-naked shoulders opening in bleeding stripes, he had a more living image of Christ, the feeling of having arrived in His merciful arms after the terrible and hard journey from the time he had fallen at the gates of Damascus under a storm of tears and darkness. Immersed in sublime thought, Paul of Tarsus felt his first real rapture. He no longer heard the mockery of his unyielding tormentors. He felt that his soul was expanding to infinity, experiencing sacred emotions of indefinable bliss. A soft sleep soothed his soul, and only at dawn did he awake from its gentle rest. The sun visited him warmly through the bars. The valorous disciple of the Gospel got up in a good mood, straightened his clothes and waited patiently.

Only after midday did three soldiers go down to the Jewish disciplinary cell to bring the prisoner out and escort him into the proconsul's presence.

Paul was immensely composed as he appeared before the bench. The place was full of riled Jews, but the Apostle noticed that the assembly was composed mainly of pleasant-looking Greeks, many of them known to him personally through the assistance work at the church.

Very conscientious of his office, Junius Gallius sat down under the anxious looks of the parties in interest.

According to protocol, the proconsul would have to hear the parties to the suit before pronouncing judgment in spite of the claims and accusations registered in writing.

One of the synagogue leaders, by the name of Sosthenes, would speak for the Jews, but when no representative from the Corinthian church came forward in defense of the Apostle, Sosthenes protested and asked that the proceedings begin without further delay. Paul was praying inwardly to Jesus to sponsor his cause, when a man came from amid the crowd and prepared to testify in the name of the church. It was the generous Roman, Titus Justus, who could not turn down the opportunity to act as a witness. Then something unexpected occurred: the Greeks in the assembly burst into frantic applause.

Junius Gallius ordered the plaintiff to begin its public statement.

Sosthenes began speaking with great approval of the Jews. He accused Paul of being a blasphemer, a deserter of the Law and a sorcerer. He bitingly referred to his past and stated that Paul's own relatives had abandoned him. The proconsul listened attentively while exhibiting a curious behavior: he

stuck his right index finger in his ear, seemingly oblivious to the overall astonishment. The synagogue leader, however, was unnerved by the gesture. When he finished with his impassioned and unjust slander, Sosthenes questioned the Achaian administrator about his attitude, which he thought demanded an explanation in order not to be taken as being inconsiderate.

Gallius very calmly answered with good humor: "I do not think I am here to give an explanation for my personal actions but to attend to the demands of justice. However, in keeping with the code of human fraternity, I would state that, in my opinion, every administrator or judge in a lawsuit must keep one ear open for the prosecution and the other for the defense."

While the Jews frowned extremely confused, the Corinthians laughed with delight. Paul himself found the Proconsul's statement humorous and could not disguise the smile that suddenly brightened his face.

The humorous incident over, Titus Justus approached and spoke briefly about the Apostle's mission. His words were expressed under a large breath of inspiration and spiritual beauty. As he listened to the Damascus convert's story from the lips of a fellow countryman, Junius Gallius showed that he was highly impressed and moved. From time to time the Greeks burst into exclamations of applause and joy. The Jews realized they were losing ground by the minute.

At the end of the hearing, the political leader of Achaia concluded that he did not deem that any crime had been committed by the disciple of the Gospel; that before making any unjust accusation, the Jews should have examined the generous work of the Corinthian church, because, in his opinion, there was no offense to Jewish principles; and that a mere controversy over words did not justify violence. He concluded by stating that the accusations had been frivolous and declared that he did not wish to act as a judge in matters of that sort.

As he stated each finding it was noisily applauded by the Corinthians.

When Junius Gallius declared that Paul should consider himself fully free, the applause reached delirium. The proconsul ordered all to leave in an orderly manner, but the Greeks waited for Sosthenes to come down, and when the solemn figure of the "master" appeared they attacked him mercilessly. An enormous tumult broke out on the long stairway separating the Tribunal from the street, and Titus Justus worriedly approached the proconsul and asked him to intervene. Gallius, however, continued preparing to return home, addressed

a look of sympathy at Paul and added calmly: “Let’s not worry about it. The Jews are quite used to such uproars. As judge I shielded one ear, but it seems to me that Sosthenes as accuser needs to shield his whole body.”

And he impassively went inside the building. Paul then mounted the top of the stairway and called out: “Brothers, settle down, for the love of Christ!”

The exhortation fell fully upon the large, tumultuous mob. The effect was immediate. The noise and swearing stopped and the last contenders’ arms dropped to their sides. The Damascus convert ran hurriedly to help Sosthenes, whose face was bleeding. At Paul’s appeal the implacable accuser of the day was taken home with extreme care by the Christians of Corinth.

The Jews of the city were highly upset with their failure and plotted new charges, but the Apostle gathered the Gospel community together and stated that he wished to leave for Asia in answer to insistent calls from John³¹ to finalize founding the church at Ephesus. The Corinthians protested in a friendly fashion to try to deter him, but the former rabbi argued firmly for how appropriate the journey was, and assured them he would return very soon. All the church workers felt crushed. Phoebe, especially, a noteworthy collaborator of his apostolic efforts in Corinth, could not hide her heartfelt tears. The devout disciple of Jesus enabled them see that the church was now founded and its only need was for its members to continue their care and love. It would not be right, in his opinion, to face the rage of the Jews again; with time the church would accomplish what it needed to.

In a month’s time Paul left for Ephesus, taking along Aquila and his wife, who wished to accompany him.

On leaving the city Paul turned his thought back to the past, to the hopes of the earthly fortunes that the years had absorbed. He visited the places where Abigail and her brother had played in their childhood, soaked himself in tender and unforgettable memories, and at the port of Cenchrea, in remembrance of the departure of his betrothed, he shaved his head, renewing his vows of eternal fidelity in accordance with the popular custom of the time.

After a difficult journey full of pain-filled incidents, Paul and his companions arrived at their destination.

The Ephesian church was vexed with problems. John had been struggling hard so that the evangelical endeavor would not to degenerate into

barren polemic, and the weavers' arrival from Corinth lent him a much-needed strong hand of cooperation.

Amid the unavoidable, inflamed discussions with the Jews in the synagogue, the former rabbi could not ignore certain sentimental aspirations he had been harboring for a long time. With extreme diplomacy he visited Jesus' mother in her simple little house facing the sea. He was deeply impressed by the humility of that humble and loving creature, who seemed more like an angel clothed as a woman. Paul of Tarsus was interested in her heartwarming stories regarding the night of the Master's birth. He engraved within him the divine accounts and promised to return at the first opportunity in order to gather vital information for the Gospel he intended to write for the Christians of the future. Mary joyfully offered her help.

However, after helping in the consolidation of the church for some time, and considering the fact that Aquila and Prisca were well settled and happy, the Apostle decided to leave in search of new places. The brethren tried to dissuade him and asked him to stay longer in the city, but it was no use. Promising to return as soon as circumstances allowed, he asserted that he needed to go to Jerusalem to take to Simon Peter the fruit of the collections from the places he had visited the past few years. The son of Zebedee was aware of the old project and agreed that Paul should make the journey without further delay.

Silas and Timothy were with Paul once again to accompany him on the new journey.

Enduring enormous difficulties, but continuing to preach the Good News with true devotional enthusiasm, they arrived at the port of Caesarea, where they stayed for a few days to teach those interested in knowing about the Gospel. From there they went on foot to Jerusalem, distributing consolation and healing along the way. When they arrived in the capital of Judaism, Simon Peter received them with unsurpassable joy. He seemed physically worn out due to the grim and incessant struggles involved in helping the church endure the early persecutions without major setbacks; his eyes, however, maintained the same serenity characteristic of faithful disciples.

Paul joyfully handed the small fortune to him, which would ensure that the Jerusalem church would be more independent for the legitimate development of Christ's work. Peter thanked him movingly and embraced

him in tears. The poor, the orphans, the forsaken elderly and the convalescing would all have a blessed institution of sanctified work from now on.

Peter noticed that the former rabbi was also physically feeble. Very thin, pale, and with already-graying hair, everything about him betrayed the intensity of the struggles he had been through. His hands and face were covered in scars.

Faced with such a sight, the Peter spoke to Paul enthusiastically about his epistles, which had begun to spread and to be read eagerly in all the churches. Profoundly experienced in matters of a spiritual nature, he stated that he was convinced that the letters had come from the Divine Master by direct inspiration, a remark that meant much to Paul because of his friend's spontaneity. Moreover – added Simon pleasantly – there could not possibly be an instructive element as far-reaching as those letters. He knew of Christians in Palestine who kept numerous copies of Paul's message to the Thessalonians, and the churches at Joppa and Antipatris regularly commented on the epistles sentence by sentence.

The former rabbi felt immensely comforted for carrying on with his redemptive struggle.

A few days later he went to Antioch with his disciples. He rested for some time with the beloved companions there, but his powerful drive did not allow him much time for repose.

At that time not a week went by that he did not receive representatives from various churches from the most distant regions. Antioch of Pisidia listed the problems it was having; Iconium requested new visits; Berea asked for assistance; Corinth needed explanations; Colossae insisted that he come there soon. Taking advantage of the friends he had on hand, Paul sent more letters, attending to all with utmost care. The Apostle to the Gentiles was never again alone in his evangelizing endeavors in such circumstances. Always assisted by numerous disciples, his epistles were mostly filled with tender and endearing personal references, and they would remain for the Christians of the future.

After he had finished his business in Antioch he returned to his place of birth to speak of the eternal truths, and he succeeded in awakening a large number of Tarseans to the realities of the Gospel. He then went once more to the highlands of Taurus and visited the communities throughout Galatia and Phrygia, spending a considerable amount of time lifting the spirits of his

companions in faith. In this tireless and incessant effort he managed to recruit new disciples for Jesus, distributing great benefits to all places as he illumined them with his edifying words and example.

He encountered persistent struggles, joys and sufferings, and the anguish and bitterness of the world everywhere he went, but these did not diminish his hopes in Jesus' promises. On the one hand were the unbending Jews – fierce and declared enemies of the Savior; on the other the indecisive Christians, vacillating between personal preferences and erroneous interpretations. Knowing, however, that the true disciple would have to experience the trials of the “narrow door” each and every day, the Tarsean missionary never allowed himself to become disheartened. Every hour he renewed his aim to endure it all – to act, to do and to build for the Gospel, entirely given over to Jesus Christ.

Having won weaponless battles, he decided to return to Ephesus. He was interested in writing the Gospel drawn from Mary's recollections.

He found that Aquila and Prisca were no longer there; they had returned to Corinth in the company of a man named Apollo, who had become renowned among the newly converted for his learning. Although Paul had intended to have only a few more lengthy conversations with the unforgettable daughter of Nazareth, he was forced to confront a serious struggle that John's coworkers were experiencing. The synagogue had achieved great political ascendancy over the church in the city, and it was threatening to cave in. The former rabbi perceived the danger and went into battle without reservation. For three months he argued in the synagogue at every meeting. The city, which had been mired in terrible doubt, seemed to have reached a more elevated and more richly enlightened understanding. One day while adding to his extraordinary healings by laying his hands on some infirm individuals, Paul was surrounded by an indefinable light from the spirit world. The same sanctified voices that had manifested in Jerusalem and Antioch spoke in the public square. The incident had enormous repercussions and lent more authority to the Apostle's arguments against the Jews.

Nothing else was talked about in Ephesus. The ex-rabbi had been uplifted to the heights of respect in just one day. The Jews were losing ground at every point, and the weaver took advantage of the opportunity in order to put down deeper evangelical roots in people's souls. Seconding John's efforts, he sought to establish assistance in the church for the most unfortunate. The institution was becoming rich in spiritual significance. Paul

of Tarsus grasped the importance of the Ephesian organization for all Asia and decided to remain longer. Disciples had arrived from Macedonia; Aquila and his wife had returned from Corinth; Timothy, Silas and Titus were actively helping out by visiting already established churches. Thus, with so much help the generous Apostle added to the healings and blessings in the Lord's name. Striving for the victory of the Master's principles, he helped many individuals abandon dangerous beliefs and superstitions in order to give themselves into Christ's loving arms.

This productive work rhythm had gone on for more than two years, when an event of vast repercussions occurred in Ephesus.

The city had a special cult devoted to the goddess Diana³². Little statues, tiny images of the mythological divinity, appeared in every nook and cranny as well as in personal decorations; but Paul's preaching had changed people's preferences. Almost no one was interested any longer in acquiring images of the goddess. The cult, however, had been so profitable that the goldsmiths of the time, led by an artisan named Dimitrius, initiated a vehement protest before the relevant authorities.

The complainants alleged that the Apostle's campaign had destroyed one of the best popular traditions of the notable and flourishing city. The worship of Diana had been handed down from their ancestors and deserved more respect; moreover, a whole class of craftsmen was out of work.

Dimitrius took action. The goldsmiths got together and paid some henchmen. They knew that Paul was going to speak in the theater on the night after they had finalized the conspiracy. The henchmen began spreading rumors among the most gullible, insinuating that the former rabbi was preparing to break into the temple of Diana in order to burn the objects of worship. They added that this iconoclastic mob would be leaving the theater to carry out their sinister plan. People became enraged. Dimitrius's plan struck a nerve in the imaginations of the simplest. In the late afternoon a large crowd began gathering in the large square in an attitude of expectation. Night fell and the crowd continued to grow. When the first lights in the theatre were lit, the goldsmiths believed the Apostle was inside. Shouting curses and making threatening gestures, the crowd advanced in an uproar; however, they found only Gaius and Aristarchus, two brothers from Macedonia, preparing the place for the night's sermon. Both were arrested by the mob. Realizing that Paul was not there, the mindless crowd went to Aquila and Prisca's tent, but he was not there either. The Christian couple's humble workshop was

totally and mercilessly ransacked. Their looms were broken, pieces of leather were thrown furiously into the street and they ended up being arrested to the jeers of the exacerbated mob.

The news spread like wildfire. Due to its festive character, the column of rebels garnered supporters from every street. Soldiers ran to contain the crowd but their greatest efforts proved useless. From time to time Dimitrius climbed up onto a makeshift platform and addressed the people, poisoning their minds.

Paul was staying at a friend's home when he was told of the grave events occurring because of him. His first impulse was to go immediately to see his imprisoned friends in order to free them, but the brothers kept him from leaving. He would never forget that grievous night. Stentorian shouts could be heard in the distance: "Great is Diana of Ephesus! Great is Diana of Ephesus!" But restrained forcefully by his fellow disciples, the Apostle had to desist from trying to explain things to the mob in the public square.

Only much later that night did the city scribe succeed in speaking to the people, encouraging them to take the case to court and to abandon the insane purpose of taking justice into their own hands.

The assembly dispersed a little before midnight, but obeyed the scribe only after seeing Gaius, Aristarchus and the weaver couple securely behind bars.

The following day the generous Apostle to the Gentiles went with John to appraise the damage at Aquila's tent. Everything was in tatters in the street. Paul thought of his imprisoned friends with immense grief, and said to the son of Zebedee with tears in his eyes: "This just breaks my heart! Aquila and Prisca have been my companions in struggle ever since the first hours of my conversion to Jesus. I should have suffered all this on their behalf because of the love I owe them; so I do not find it right for them to suffer on my account."

"It is on Christ's account," answered John rightly.

At that remark Paul seemed to resign himself and said: "Yes, the Master will comfort us."

And after thinking long and hard he said: "We have been struggling incessantly in Asia for more than twenty years ... I must now hasten to leave

Ionia. Blows have come from all sides. For the good we desire they do to us all the evil they can. Woe to us if we did not bear the marks of Christ Jesus!”

The valorous preacher, so courageous and resilient, was weeping. John saw this, contemplated his prematurely graying hair and tried to change the subject: “You can’t go yet,” he beseeched. “You’re still needed here!”

“Impossible,” Paul answered sadly. “The craftsmen’s rebellion would continue. All the brethren would pay dearly for my presence here.”

“But don’t you intend to write a Gospel based on Mary’s memoirs?” asked John gently.

“True,” confirmed the former rabbi with bitter serenity, “but I must leave nonetheless. In case I do not return, I will send a brother to gather the relevant notes.”

“But you could stay with us.”

The weaver from Tarsus looked serenely at his friend and explained humbly: “I don’t think so. I was born to a struggle without rest, and it must continue to the end of my days. Before I met the light of the Gospel I erred criminally, although with a sincere desire to serve God. I failed very early in my hopes for a home. I became hated by all until the Lord took pity on my miserable situation and called me at the gates of Damascus. Then, an abyss was set between my soul and my past. Forsaken by the friends of my childhood, I had to seek the desert and start my life all over again. From a seat on the Sanhedrin, I regressed to the heavy, rustic loom. When I returned to Jerusalem, Judaism regarded me as ill and a liar. In Tarsus I experienced abandonment by my loved ones. Then, in Antioch I began once more the task that had led me into God’s service. Since then, I have worked without rest because many centuries of service would not be enough to pay for what I owe Christianity. I went forth to preach, wandered through many cities and visited hundreds of towns; but I have never left a place without a bitter trial. I have always left by the prison door, by stonings and beatings. On voyages by sea I have endured shipwreck more than once; not even in the confines of a ship’s hold have I been able to avoid struggle. But Jesus has taught me the wisdom of inner peace in perfect communion with His love.”

These words were spoken in a tone of humility so sincere that John could not conceal his wonder.

“You are happy, Paul,” he said convincingly, “because you have understood Jesus’ plan for you. May you not grieve the memories of the tortures you have suffered, for the Master Himself was forced to leave the world by way of torment on the cross. Let us rejoice at imprisonment and suffering. If Christ left bleeding from such heinous wounds, we have no right to follow Him without our own scars.”

The Apostle to the Gentiles paid close attention to those consoling words and murmured: “How true!”

“Additionally,” added his companion movingly, “we should expect many Calvaries. If the Immaculate Lamb suffered on the cross of infamy, how many crosses will we need to reach redemption? Jesus came into the world out of immense mercy and gently called our attention to a better life ... Now, my friend, like the ancestors of Israel, who left captivity in Egypt at the cost of extreme hardship, we must escape from the enslavement of sin, constraining ourselves and disciplining our spirit in order to join the Master in repayment for His immense goodness.”

Paul nodded thoughtfully and added: “Ever since Christ deigned to call me into the Gospel’s service, I have thought of nothing else.”

They spoke at length in this cordial tone until the Apostle to the Gentiles concluded, feeling more comforted: “What I have deduced from all this is that my work in the East is finished. The spirit of service requires me to go beyond ... I hope to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom in Rome, in Spain and among the lesser known peoples.”

His gaze was full of glorious visions, and John murmured humbly: “God will bless your paths.”

Paul remained a while longer in Ephesus, doing all he could on behalf of the prisoners. After having attained their freedom, he decided to leave Ionia as soon as possible. He was profoundly disheartened, however. One could say that the latest struggles had contributed to dismantling his best energies. Accompanied by a few friends, he headed for Troas, where he stopped for some days to build up the brethren in their faith. His fatigue, however, was becoming increasingly pronounced. He was beset with worries. Deep down he experienced profound affliction, which was worsened each day by insomnia. Paul had never forgotten the tenderness of the brethren at Philippi and decided to look for a haven there, anxious to rest for a short while. The Apostle was welcomed with displays of love and consideration. The children

of the church outdid themselves in demonstrations of loving care. Another pleasant surprise awaited him there: Luke just so happened to be in the city and came to see him. Their meeting reinvigorated Paul's stricken spirit. When he saw his friend, the doctor became alarmed. Paul seemed extremely debilitated and sad despite the unshakable faith that nourished his soul and poured from his lips. He explained that he had been ill; that he had suffered much during his latest sermons in Ephesus; that he was now alone in Philippi after the few friends who had accompanied him had gone back; and that his more faithful coworkers had left for Corinth and were waiting for him there.

Luke was highly surprised as he listened to everything in silence, and then asked: "When do you plan to leave?"

"I intend to stay here two weeks."

And after gazing around at the landscape he concluded in an almost sorrowful tone: "Moreover, my dear Luke, I think this is the last time I shall rest in Philippi."

"But why? There's no reason for such a sad presentiment."

Paul noticed his friend's concern and hurried to dismiss his first impressions: "Because I believe that I must leave for the West," he explained with a smile.

"Great!" answered Luke, encouraged. "I'm going to finish the business that brought me here and I shall go with you to Corinth."

The Apostle rejoiced. He would be happy in the company of one of his most dedicated companions. Luke too was happy at being able to help him on the journey. He made a great effort to conceal the heartbreaking impact that the Apostle's health had had on him. Extremely thin, with a pale face and sunken eyes, the former rabbi gave him the impression of profound bodily distress. The doctor, however, did what he could to hide his painful conjectures.

As usual, during the journey to Corinth Paul of Tarsus spoke of his plans to go to Rome in order to take the message of Christ Jesus' love to the capital of the Empire. Luke's company and the change of surroundings had revitalized his physical strength. The doctor himself was surprised by the natural reaction of this man of powerful will.

As a result of occasional preaching along the way, a few more devoted friends joined them.

In Corinth once more, the former rabbi ratified his epistles, lovingly reorganized the structure of the church's assistance, and in the circle of his closest friends he spoke of nothing else but his great plans to visit Rome. He intended to help the Christians already in the city of the Caesars to establish institutions like those in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth and other important points in the East. Meanwhile, he regained the latent strength of his debilitated body. He worked hard on his plans, coordinating idea upon idea what he visualized for the imperial metropolis. He proposed numerous measures. He thought of preparing for his arrival by preceding it with a letter in which he would sum up the consoling doctrine of the Gospel and name with affectionate greetings all the brethren he knew of in Rome. Aquila and Prisca had returned from Ephesus to the capital of the Empire with the intent to start their lives over. They would be his dear helpers. To this end, Paul spent a number of days writing the famous document, finishing it with an abundance of individual and extensive greetings. Then an incident occurred, scarcely known to the followers of Christianity. Considering the fact that all brethren and preachers were persons excessively busy at their highly varied duties, and that Paul would thus have a hard time finding a bearer for his famous letter, a sister named Phoebe, a great collaborator of the Apostle to the Gentiles at the port of Cenchrea, told him that she had to go to Rome to visit some relatives and that she would gladly take the document destined to enlighten Christian posterity.

Paul and all the brethren exulted with happiness, and the epistle was finished with enormous joy and enthusiasm. As soon as the heroic emissary left, the former rabbi met with the small community of his dear disciples to finalize plans for the great journey. He began by explaining that winter was coming, but as soon as the season for sailing returned he would embark for Rome. After justifying the excellence of the plan, and since the Gospel had already been planted in the most important regions of the East, he asked his closest friends how far they would be able to go with him. Timothy asserted that Eunice could not do without his care at present, owing to the death of the venerable Lois. He explained that he had to return to Thessalonica, and Aristarchus concurred. Sopatrus spoke about problems in Berea; Gaius intended to leave for Derbe the following day; Tychicus and Trophimus alleged their urgent need to go to Ephesus, from where they intended to move to Antioch, their birthplace. Almost all the others were unable to take part in the journey. Only Silas confirmed that he would go, come what may. When his turn came, Luke, who had been silent until now, stated that he was ready

and willing to take part in the endeavors and joys of the mission to Rome. Out of the whole assembly, only two could accompany him. Paul, however, showed himself to be in agreement and highly satisfied. Silas and Luke were enough; both were used to his methods of preaching and they enjoyed a most wonderful history of work and loyalty together for Jesus' cause.

Everything was going perfectly. The agreed-on plan augured great hopes when, on the following day, a poor and downhearted traveler arrived in Corinth. He had disembarked from one of the last ships arriving at the Peloponnesus to weigh anchor for the long winter. He had come from Jerusalem. He knocked at the church door and immediately looked for Paul in order to deliver a confidential letter. The Apostle was surprised when he recognized the humble messenger. It was brother Abdias, to whom James had entrusted a letter to be delivered to the former rabbi. Paul took it and unfolded it somewhat apprehensively.

As he read the letter, he became paler and paler.

It was a private document of the utmost importance. The son of Alphaeus informed the ex-doctor of the Law of the heartrending events taking place in Jerusalem, warning him that the church was undergoing a new and extremely violent persecution by the Sanhedrin. The rabbis had decided to reactivate the line of tortures inflicted on the Christians. Simon Peter had been banished from the city. A large number of brethren were the target of new persecutions and suffering. The church had been attacked by unconscionable Pharisees and had not suffered greater damage only because of the people's respect for him personally. Maintaining a conciliatory posture, he had managed to placate the most excitable; but the Sanhedrin alleged the need for a meeting with Paul in order to grant a truce. The incessant and active endeavors of the Apostle to the Gentiles had succeeded in spreading seeds for Jesus far and wide. As a result the Sanhedrin was receiving questions, complaints and alarming news from all directions. The synagogues were being deserted and the situation required clarification. Based on these pretexts, the highest Tribunal of the Jews had ordered massive attacks against the Christian organization in Jerusalem. James related the events with great presence of mind and asked Paul not to abandon the church at that time of bitter struggle. He, James, was now aging and tired, and without Peter's help he feared he would succumb. So he was asking Paul to come to Jerusalem to confront the persecutions out of love for Jesus, so that the doctors of the Sanhedrin and Temple could be better informed of the situation. He believed

Paul would not suffer any harm because the former rabbi would know better how to address the religious authorities for the cause to achieve success. The trip to Jerusalem would have only one objective: to explain things to the Sanhedrin, which was crucial. After having done so – which James considered of the highest importance to save the church in the capital of Judaism – Paul could return peacefully and happily to wherever he pleased.

The message was full of bitter exclamations and urgent appeals.

Paul finished reading and remembered the past. What right did the Galilean Apostle have to make such a request? James had always placed himself in an antagonistic position. Despite his impetuous, frank and unyielding temperament, Paul could not hate him; however, he did not feel enough at ease with the son of Alphaeus to the point of becoming his main support in such a difficult situation. He looked for a secluded place in the church, sat down and reflected. Experiencing a certain inner reluctance to give up his departure for Rome despite the plans he had made in Ephesus the day before the goldsmiths' revolt to visit the capital of the Empire only after a new journey to Jerusalem, he sought the advice of the Gospel in order to resolve his great dilemma. He unrolled the parchments, and opening them at random, he read the admonition from Levi's notes: "Reconcile quickly with your adversary."³³

He was startled upon reading these wise words and regarded them as a divine suggestion for him not to disregard this opportunity to establish the sacred bonds of purest fraternity with the Galilean Apostle. It was not right to nourish personal caprices in Christ's work. In this circumstance it was not just James who was interested in his presence in Jerusalem: it was the church, the sacred institution that had become the protector of the poor and unfortunate. Wouldn't provoking the Pharisaic ire against the church be like casting a barrage of unforeseeable consequences on the needy and unfortunate of the world? He remembered his younger days and the extensive persecution he had carried out against the disciples of the Crucified. He clearly remembered the day he had arrested Peter as he was surrounded by weeping lame and sick persons. He remembered that Jesus had called him to divine service at the gates of Damascus; that since then he had suffered and preached, sacrificing himself and teaching the eternal truths, organizing loving and hospitable churches, where the "children of Calvary" could find consolation and shelter, in keeping with Abigail's exhortations. Thus, he came to the conclusion that he owed to the sufferers in Jerusalem something that he had to give back. In

the past he himself had fomented the uproar, depriving them of Stephen's loving help and initiating merciless banishments. In the city of the rabbis, many of the sick had been forced to deny Christ in his presence. Mightn't this be the perfect opportunity to pay off his enormous debt? Now enlightened by the holiest experiences of life with the Beloved Master, Paul of Tarsus got up and with resolute steps approached the messenger who was waiting meekly: "Friend, come and rest; you need it. You will take my reply in a few days."

"Will you go to Jerusalem?" asked Abdias with a certain anxiety as if knowing the importance of the matter.

"Yes," answered the Apostle.

The messenger was treated with much care. Paul listened to his personal impressions regarding the renewed persecution against Christ's disciples and he tried to come up with ideas about what needed to be done; but he could not avoid some deep, apparently unsolvable concerns. How to proceed in Jerusalem? What type of explanations should he give the Sanhedrin rabbis? What testimony should he bear?

Highly apprehensive, he finally went to sleep that night after tormenting and exhausting thoughts. He dreamed that he was on a long, clear road bathed in marvelous tones of opalescent light. He had not walked far when he was met by two loving and friendly spirits. They were Jeziel and Abigail, who embraced him with indescribable love. He was in such ecstasy that he could not utter a word. Abigail thanked him for the tenderness of his loving memories in Corinth, spoke of the joy in her heart and ended joyfully: "Don't be troubled, Paul. You must go to Jerusalem to bear crucial witness."

Deep down, the Apostle was still thinking about his plans to go to Rome and his noble wish to teach the Christian truths in the capital of the Empire. Merely thinking of that was enough for the dear voice to speak again in a familiar tone: "Don't worry, for you shall indeed go to Rome to fulfill a sublime duty; not as you would like, however, but in accordance with the designs of the Most High!"

And with an angelic smile: "Hereafter we will enjoy our eternal union in Jesus Christ for the divine task of love and truth under the light of the Gospel."

Those words fell on his soul with the force of a profound revelation. The Apostle to the Gentiles could not explain what was happening in the core of his spirit. He felt pain and pleasure, worry and hope all at the same time. The

surprise seemed to impede the manifestation of the unforgettable vision. Sending him gestures of love, Jeziel and his sister seemed to disappear in a bank of translucent fog. Paul woke up startled and concluded right away that he must prepare himself for bearing his final witness.

The following day he called a meeting of his friends and companions of Corinth. He asked Abdias to explain the situation in Jerusalem in his own words, and he told of his plan to go to the capital of Judaism before going to Rome. They all understood the sacred demands of his new decision. Luke, however, asked: "According to your change of plans, when do you intend to leave?"

"In a few days," answered Paul resolutely.

"Impossible," the doctor responded. "We cannot agree to your journey on foot to Jerusalem; besides, you need to rest for a while longer after so much hardship."

The former rabbi thought for a moment and agreed: "You're right. I'll stay in Corinth a few more weeks; however, I intend to travel in stages in order to visit our Christian communities. My intuition tells me that I will depart soon for Rome and that I will not see our beloved churches again in my mortal body."

These words were said in a tone of melancholy. Luke and the other friends fell silent and the Apostle continued: "I'll take advantage of my time to instruct Apollo on the crucial work of carrying the Gospel throughout Achaia."

Then, dismissing the impression of his discouraging statements regarding the journey to Rome, he inspired new enthusiasm in his listeners by voicing optimistic and hopeful ideas. He outlined a vast plan for the disciples, recommending that most of them prepare the communities throughout Macedonia so that all brethren could be ready for his farewell; others were sent to Asia with identical instructions.

After three months in Corinth, new persecutions by the Jews broke out against the church. The main synagogue in Achaia had received a secret order from Jerusalem: nothing less than the elimination of the Apostle, at any price. Paul found out about the conspiracy and prudently said goodbye to the Corinthians, leaving on foot with Luke and Silas to visit the churches of Macedonia.

He preached the word of the Gospel everywhere, convinced that it was the last time he would gaze upon those landscapes.

He bid an emotional farewell to his old friends. He made recommendations like someone who was leaving forever. Grateful women, elderly persons and children ran to kiss his hands. Arriving in Philippi, whose fraternal community had spoken most intimately to his heart, his words caused a torrent of tears. The loving church was flourishing for Jesus on the banks of the Gangitis, and it held a singular affection for the Apostle to the Gentiles. Obeying a very human impulse, Lydia and her many helpers wanted to keep him with them. They insisted that he should not go, afraid as they were of the Pharisaic persecutions. The Apostle, serene and confident, assured everyone: “Do not cry, brothers and sisters. I am convinced of what I must do, and I must hope for neither flowers nor happy days. It is my duty to await the end in the peace of the Lord Jesus. Human existence is an unceasing endeavor and the final suffering is the crown of testimony.”

These were exhortations full of hope and joy for comforting the most fearful and for renewing faith in the hearts of the weak and suffering.

When he had finished up his duties in Philippi Paul and his companions set sail for Troas. In this city the Apostle very successfully delivered his last sermon on the seventh night after his arrival. This was the setting for the famous incident involving the boy Eutychus,³⁴ who fell out of a window from the third floor of the building where the evangelical services were being held and was immediately helped by the former rabbi, who picked him up almost dead and restored his life in the name of Jesus.

In Troas other brethren joined the small group. Heeding Paul’s recommendations, they departed with Luke and Silas for Assos, where they could hire an old fishing boat at a reasonable price. The Apostle preferred to travel by other means between the numerous islands and ports in order to say goodbye to his friends and brethren who were working there. And so it was: while his coworkers took a comfortable boat, Paul went on foot more than twelve miles just for the pleasure of embracing the humble people who were continuing his grand apostolic endeavor.

Then, Paul and his disciples acquired an ordinary boat and continued their journey to Jerusalem, spreading consolation and spiritual help to humble and obscure communities.

On every shore there were moving gestures, sad goodbyes. In Ephesus, however, the scene was sadder yet because the Apostle asked the elderly and his friends to come meet him so that he could talk to them in private heart to heart. He did not wish to get off the boat, thus avoiding new conflicts that could delay his journey. In demonstrations of love and acknowledgement the whole community went to meet him, touching his loving soul with emotion.

Though advanced in years, Mary herself came from afar in the company of John and other disciples to bring a word of love to the intrepid defender of the Gospel of her Son. The elderly received him with ardent displays of friendship and the children offered him flowers and snacks for the journey.

Paul of Tarsus said an emotional goodbye, and when he affirmed his premonition that he would not return there in his mortal body, there were great outbursts of grief among the Ephesians.

As if touched by the spiritual splendor of that moment, almost everybody knelt on the white sand of the shore and prayed to God to protect the devout warrior of Christ. Receiving such beautiful expressions of love, Paul embraced them one by one with tears in his eyes. The majority threw themselves into his loving arms, sobbing and kissing his calloused and rough hands. Lastly, embracing the Holy Mother, Paul took her hand and kissed it with filial tenderness.

The journey continued along the same lines through Rhodes, Patara, Tyre, Ptolemais and finally Caesarea. In Caesarea he stayed in the home of Philip, who had been living there for a long time. The aging companion-in-struggle filled Paul in on all the minute details regarding Jerusalem, where there was much hope that his personal effort could assure the church's continuation. Quite old by now, the kind Galilean spoke of the spiritual scene in the city of the rabbis, without hiding the fear the situation caused him. This was not the only thing that saddened the missionaries. Agabus, already known to Paul in Antioch, had come down from Judea, and in a mediumistic trance during the first meeting at Philip's home, made dire predictions.³⁵ The prospects were so somber that Luke himself wept. Paul's friends implored him not to go: staying free and alive would be preferable on behalf of the cause.

Paul, however, always eager and resolute, referred to the Gospel, commented on the passage where the Master prophesied the suffering that awaited Him on the cross, and concluded passionately: "Why should we

weep, embittering our hearts? Christ's followers should be ready for anything. As for me, I am eager to bear witness even if I have to die in Jerusalem for the name of Lord Jesus!"

The impact of Agabus's prophecy had not yet disappeared when they received a new surprise on the following day at Philip's home. Some Caesarean Christians brought to the former rabbi a messenger from James, named Mnason. The Galilean Apostle had found out about the Damascus convert's arrival at the Palestinian port and hurried to communicate with him through a messenger devoted to the common cause. Mnason explained the reason for his presence to Paul, warning him of the perils he would confront in Jerusalem, where sectarian hatred was broiling and had resulted in the most atrocious persecutions. In view of the exasperation and vigilance of the Jews, Paul should not go immediately to the church, but stay at Mnason's house, where James would speak with him in private. There they would decide what would be best in the sacred interests of Christianity. The Apostle to the Gentiles would then be received at the Jerusalem church to discuss its fate with the current leadership.

Paul thought James's prudence and suggestions very reasonable, but he preferred to follow the messenger's verbal suggestions.

Anguishing darkness was hovering over the spirits of the great Apostle's companions when the troupe left Caesarea for the Jewish capital in Mnason's company. As always, Paul of Tarsus proclaimed the Good News in the humble towns.

After a few days of slow progress, ensuring that all apostolic endeavors were sufficiently met, the disciples of the Gospel passed through the gates of the city of the rabbis, assailed by grave worries.

Aged and worn out, the Apostle to the Gentiles gazed at the buildings of Jerusalem, resting his eyes on the arid and sad backdrop that reminded him of the years of his tumultuous and gone-forever youth. He lifted his thought to Jesus and asked that He inspire him in the fulfillment of his sacred ministry.

³¹ The Apostle John began his activities in the mixed church of Ephesus very early on, although he did not break his connections with Jerusalem. – Emmanuel

³² Goddess of nature, fertility and childbirth, and the Roman counterpart of the Greek goddess Artemis. – Tr.

³³ Matthew 5:25 – Emmanuel

³⁴ Act 20:7-10 – Tr.

35 Act 21:10, 11 – Tr.

VIII

Great Suffering in Jerusalem

Following James's advice, Paul of Tarsus roomed at Mnason's house before any meetings with the church. The Galilean Apostle promised to visit him on that same night.

Foreseeing important events in this phase of his life, the former rabbi spent the day outlining work plans for his closest disciples.

That night, when the thick mantle of darkness enveloped the city, James came and greeted Paul very humbly. He too was aged, exhausted and unwell. Unlike in the past, the Damascus convert felt extreme sympathy for him; he seemed entirely changed by the adversities and tribulations of life.

After they had exchanged their first impressions regarding evangelical journeys and achievements, James asked Paul to arrange a place and time for them to talk more intimately.

Paul complied immediately and they both went to a private room.

James began explaining the reason for his grave apprehensions. More than a year ago, rabbis Eliakim and Enoch had deliberated reviving the persecutions begun by Paul himself during his turbulent term at the Sanhedrin. They alleged that the former doctor had concurred in the sorceries and witchcraft of spurious people, thereby compromising the Jewish cause, and it was not right to continue tolerating the situation simply because the Tarsean doctor had lost his mind on the road to Damascus. The initiative had gained enormous popularity in the religious circles of Jerusalem, and the largest legislative body of the Jewish people – the Sanhedrin – had approved the proposed measures. Recognizing that Paul's evangelizing work was producing the marvelous fruit of hope everywhere – according to the news that continued coming in from all the synagogues of the regions he passed through – the great Tribunal began by ordering the arrest of the Apostle to the

Gentiles. Numerous suits involving individual persecutions that had been left half finished by Paul at the time of his unexpected conversion were revived; and what was even more serious was the fact that if the defendants had died, sentence was passed on their descendants, who were thus tortured, humiliated and dishonored.

The former rabbi listened to everything in silent astonishment.

James continued, explaining that he had done everything he could to lessen the severity of the situation. He had mobilized all the political influence within his reach and had managed to reduce some of the less significant sentences. In spite of Peter's banishment, he had tried to maintain the work of assistance to the destitute as well as the service auxiliary founded at Paul's suggestion, where convalescents and the needy could find an environment of remunerated and peaceable activity. After a number of agreements with the Sanhedrin by means of influential friends in Judaism, he had been able to mitigate the severity of the orders pertaining to Paul's case. The ex-doctor would remain free to act and could continue spreading his private convictions; however, he would have to publicly satisfy the preconceptions of the Jewish people by answering to the inquiry which the Sanhedrin would present to him through the mediation of James, who was known to be his friend. James explained that the demands had been quite severe to start with, but now, thanks to his enormous efforts, they were limited to an insignificant obligation.

Paul of Tarsus listened to him, extremely moved. Possessor of a luminous evangelical knowledge, he understood that the time had come to bear witness to his devotion to the Master in the exact same agency behind the persecution that in his ignorance he had engendered in the past. In those few moments he willingly recalled the horrifying scenes of those earlier days ... old men tortured in front of him so that he could feel the pleasure of their renunciation of Christ as they repeated vows of eternal faithfulness to Moses; mothers forcefully taken from their somber homes and forced to swear by the Ancient Law that they had nothing to do with the Carpenter of Nazareth, cursing the cross of His suffering and ignominy. The weeping of those humble women, who renounced their faith because they were struck in their noblest possession – their maternal instinct – now came to his ears as anguished cries clamoring for pain-filled atonement. All these old scenes unfolded in his mind's eye; not even the smallest detail was left out: strong men, the breadwinners for so many families, who would leave prison

maimed; younger men who clamored for revenge; children who decried their parents' imprisonment. These turbulent memories were followed by the scene of Stephen's dreadful death by stones and the people's insults. Next, he saw Peter and John once more, downcast and humble, at the Tribunal bench as if they were malefactors and criminals. Now back in the present, here was the son of Alphaeus – who had never fully understood him – speaking to him in the name of the past and in the name of Christ, as if to call him to the quittance of his last bitter debts.

Paul of Tarsus felt a tear welling up in his eyes without quite falling. What sort of torment was in store for him? What were the orders from the religious authorities to whom James was referring with obvious interest?

While James made a long pause, the former rabbi asked: "What do they want from me?"

The son of Alphaeus looked at him with serene eyes and explained: "The Jews who congregate at our church have reluctantly asked only that you pay for the expenses of four impoverished men who have taken the Nazarite vow³⁶ and that you come to the Temple with them for seven days in a row so that all the people can see that you are still a good Jew and a loyal son of Abraham ... at first sight this demonstration may seem puerile, but as you can see, it is meant to satisfy the Pharisees' vanity."

Paul made a gesture typical when annoyed, and replied: "I thought the Sanhedrin was going to demand my death!"

James grasped how much repugnance overflowed from this remark and objected: "I know very well that this disgusts you; however, I must insist that you accede, not just for ourselves per se, but for the church and those who will have to work with us in future."

"There is absolutely nothing honorable about this," Paul remarked profoundly disenchanted. "Such a demand is a profound mockery and is so frivolous that it reduces us to children. This is not persecution; it is humiliation. It represents the desire to put conscientious men on display as if they were ignorant, fickle boys."

However, displaying a caring attitude that Paul had never witnessed in any circumstance, James spoke with extreme fraternal tenderness, showing himself in a different light.

“Yes, Paul, I do understand your justifiable aversion. The Sanhedrin thereby means to ridicule our convictions. I know that being tortured in the public square would hurt you less; however, do you think that it does not represent many pain-filled years for me?... Did you perchance believe that my attitude was born out of an unconscionable and sinful fanaticism? I understood very early – during the first persecution – that the task of harmonizing the church with Judaism was most particularly in my hands. As you know, Pharisaism has always lived in an exuberant public display of hypocrisy; however, we must accept the fact that it is the dominant, traditional party of our religious authorities. Ever since day one I have had to ‘walk many miles’ with the Pharisees in order to get something to keep the church of Christ going. Was I being deceitful? Do not look at it like that. Many times the Master taught us in Galilee that the best witness is in dying slowly day by day for the victory of His cause. That is why He affirmed that God does not desire the death of the sinner, because it is in extinguishing our everyday caprices that we find the luminous stairway for ascending to His infinite love. The attention I have devoted to the Jews is the twin of the care you have devoted to the Gentiles. To each of us Jesus has entrusted a duty different in form but identical in essence. If many times I have caused my attitude to be interpreted wrongly, all of it has meant bitterness for my simple Galilean soul. What use would a harmful conflict be to us when we have such great duties to see to? It is important for us to know how to die so that our ideas may be transmitted to and flourish in others. Personal fights, on the contrary, cloud the best hopes. Wouldn’t causing splits and proclaiming prejudices within Christ’s church be the extermination of the sacred plant of the Gospel by our own hands?”

James’s words rang full of kindness and wisdom and came as a consoling revelation. The Galileans were much wiser than any of the most learned rabbis in Jerusalem. He, Paul, who had come to the religious world by means of famous schools and had always had Gamaliel’s inspiration in his younger days, now admired those seemingly uncouth men from the fishing huts who achieved unforgettable intellectual victories in Jerusalem only because they were able to remain silent when necessary, combining their life experiences with a broad expression of goodness and selflessness in the manner of the Divine Master.

The Damascus convert now saw the son of Alphaeus in a different light. His graying hair, his wrinkled and gaunt face spoke of arduous and incessant work. He now understood that life demands understanding more than

knowledge. He presumed to have known the Galilean Apostle based on his own psychological analysis, and yet he came to the conclusion that only at that moment did he really understand him in the light of the title bestowed upon him.

When James paused for a while longer, Paul contemplated him with immense sympathy and said: “I can see you are right, but the demand requires money. How much will I have to pay for the sentence? I have been away from Judaism for so many years that I do not know whether the ceremonies have changed appreciably.

“The precepts are the same,” answered James. “Since you will have to purify yourself with the Nazarites, according to tradition you will have to pay for fifteen lambs besides prescribed foodstuffs.”

“That’s absurd!” objected the Apostle to the Gentiles.

“As you know, the religious rules demand from each Nazarite three animals for the services of consecration.”

“A harsh demand,” exclaimed Paul.

“Nevertheless,” replied James smiling, “our peace is worth much more than that. Besides, we must not compromise Christianity’s future.”

Paul rested his chin on his right hand for a long time in deep thought and then finished speaking in a tone that revealed his great sensibility.

“James, just like you, I have today reached a higher level of comprehending life. I understand your arguments better. Human existence is really an ascension from the darkness to the light. Youth, the presumption of authority and the centralization of our personal universe cause many illusions that taint the holiest things with darkness. I shall have to bend to Judaism’s demands. After all, they are the result of a persecution that I myself initiated in the past.”

He stopped, showing how difficult it was to make a full confession. However, adopting a more humble attitude like someone who had no other recourse, he continued almost shyly: “In my struggles I have never believed myself to be a victim; I have always considered myself as an antagonist of evil. Only Jesus in his immaculate purity and love could claim the condition of an angel victimized by our dark wickedness. As for me, no matter how often they stoned and wounded me, I always thought it was very little in comparison with what I should suffer in bearing witness. However, James, at

the moment I am worried about a very small problem. As you know, I have lived solely on my work as a weaver and at present I do not have any money to cover the expenses you mentioned ... It would be the first time I would have to resort to somebody else's pouch at a time when the solution of the matter depends on me exclusively.”

His words displayed shyness coupled with the sadness commonly experienced in his days of humiliation and misfortune. In light of that expression of selflessness, James took his hand in a gesture of great spontaneity and kissed it, saying: “Don't worry about it. We in Jerusalem know the extent of your personal efforts and it would not be reasonable for the church not to be interested in these unjustifiable demands. We will pay for all the expenses. It is no small gesture that you have agreed to the sacrifice.”

They continued their conversation for a long time regarding problems relating to the matter of spreading the Gospel. On the following day Paul and his companions went to the Jerusalem church, where they were received by James and all the Jewish elders who were both sympathizers of Christ and followers of Moses, and who had gathered there to hear what he would have to say.

The meeting opened with a formal ceremony, and the ex-rabbi was able to perceive the extent of the Pharisaic influence on the institution whose purpose was to sow the light-giving seeds of the Divine Master. His companions were accustomed to the freedom of the Gospel and could not hide their surprise, but Paul made a gesture for them to keep silent.

When invited to explain himself, the former rabbi read a long report on his activities among the Gentiles, doing so with much thoughtfulness and great prudence.

However, the Jews, who seemed definitively settled in the church while at the same time retaining their old attitudes as teachers of Israel, gave their advice and criticism to Paul through their spokesman Cainan. They alleged that they too were Christians, albeit strict observers of the Old Law; that Paul should not work against circumcision and that he should give a full accounting of his actions.

To the profound amazement of his companions, the former rabbi remained silent, receiving the admonitions and reprimands with unexpected composure.

Cainan finally stated the proposal that James had mentioned the day before. In order to satisfy the Sanhedrin's demands, the Tarsean weaver was to purify himself in the Temple along with four impoverished Jews who had taken the Nazarite vow. He would be obliged to pay for all their expenses.

Paul's friends were even more surprised when he told the biased assembly that he was ready to comply with the request.

The elders' representative gave a long and pedantic discourse on the ordinances of the Jewish people while Paul listened with beatific patience.

As they returned to Mnason's house, the former rabbi tried to explain to his friends the reasons for his attitude. They were accustomed to trustfully accepting his decisions so they did not ask him a lot of perhaps superfluous questions; however, they did want to accompany the Apostle to the Jerusalem Temple to experience something of his sincere selflessness regarding the future of evangelism. Paul stressed that it would be more appropriate for him to go alone, but Trophimus, who was remaining in Jerusalem for a few days before returning to Antioch, insisted and succeeded in getting the Apostle to accept his company.

Paul's appearance at the Temple in order to purify himself along with four impoverished brothers of Jewish descent and to pay the expenses for their vows caused an enormous sensation in all the circles of Pharisaism. Heated and acerbic arguments ensued. As soon as the Sanhedrin saw the former rabbi submitting to the humiliation, they set about to impose even more demands, feeling that their initial imposition had not been enough. On the second day of the sanctification process, the number of people in the Temple had increased to amazing proportions. Everybody wanted to see the famous doctor who had gone mad at the gates of Damascus due to the sorceries of the Galileans. Paul observed the waves of commotion around his person and prayed to Jesus that he would not lack the strength he needed. On the third day, not having any excuse to condemn him further, a number of doctors claimed that Paul had had the audacity to enter a sacred place accompanied by a man of Greek origin who was foreign to Jewish traditions. Trophimus had been born to Greek parents in Antioch and had lived many years in Ephesus; nevertheless, in spite of the blood coursing through his veins, he knew the ordinances of Judaism, and in places consecrated to worship he behaved with the utmost respect. The authorities, however, did not want to consider such details. They had to condemn Paul of Tarsus again and would do so at any price.

The ex-rabbi perceived the plot being hatched and asked his disciple not to accompany him any more to Mt. Moriah, where the religious services were taking place. Pharisaic hatred, however, continued to ferment.

On the eve of the last day of the Judaic purification rite, the Damascus convert attended the ceremonies with the same humility. But as soon as he got in position to pray alongside his companions, a number of fanatics surrounded him with threatening words and gestures.

“Death to the deserter! Stones for his treason!” shouted a stentorian voice, shaking the place.

Paul had the impression that these cries were a signal for greater violence, because immediately thereafter an infernal uproar burst out. Some infuriated Jews grabbed him by the collar of his tunic while others forcefully held his arms. They dragged him to the large courtyard reserved for public gatherings.

“You shall pay for your crimes!” exclaimed some.

“You must die! Israel is ashamed of your presence in the world!” shouted others more furiously.

The Apostle to the Gentiles surrendered without the least resistance. At a glance he considered the profound objectives for his having come to Jerusalem in the first place and concluded that he had not been called there merely for the puerile duty of accompanying four impoverished brothers of his people to the Temple. It was his duty to prove in the city of the rabbis the strength of his convictions. He now grasped the subtlety of the circumstances that were leading him to bear witness: first, reconciliation and better acquaintance with his coworker James and obedience to a demand that seemed almost childish to him; next, the great opportunity to prove his faith and the consecration of his soul to Jesus Christ. With enormous surprise and overcome with profoundly painful memories, he perceived that the fanatical Jews were leaving him to the mercy of the furious mob in the very same courtyard where Stephen had been stoned twenty years ago. Some crazed individuals grabbed him forcefully and bound him to the stake. Engulfed in memories, the great Apostle barely felt the blows to his face. He quickly aligned the most singular thoughts. In Jerusalem, the Divine Master had suffered the most excruciating martyrdom; there too, under the blows and mockery of the mob, the kindhearted Jeziel had been sacrificed for his love of the Gospel. He then felt ashamed of the torment inflicted on Abigail’s brother

at his own initiative. Only now, bound to the stake, did he understand the extent of the suffering that fanaticism and ignorance caused the world. And he thought: the Master is the Savior of humankind, and He suffered here for people's redemption. Stephen was His devoted and loving disciple, and he too had experienced here the torment of death. Jesus was God's Son; Jeziel was His disciple. And him? Wasn't the past coming back here to claim a pain-filled redemption? Wasn't it just to suffer much for the amount of suffering he had inflicted on others? It was right for him to feel joyous at that bitter moment, not only by taking up the cross and following his beloved Master, but for having the chance to suffer what Jeziel had experienced with great affliction.

These reflections provided him some comfort. His conscience felt lighter. He was going to bear witness of his faith in Jerusalem where he had met Abigail's brother; and after his death he could approach his generous soul and speak to him with joy because of his own sacrifice. He would ask for his forgiveness and would praise God's goodness for having led him to the same place for his just expiation. Looking a bit farther, he saw the small access door to the small room where he had been with his betrothed and her brother as he was about to leave the world in his death throes. He still seemed to hear Stephen's last words mixed with kindness and forgiveness.

He had barely come out of his reminiscing, when the first stone awoke him to the people's shouting.

The large courtyard was full of irascible Jews. Sarcastic reproach sliced through the air. The spectacle was the same as the day when Stephen departed the earth: the same insults, the same scornful faces, and the same implacable coldness from the torturers of fanaticism. Paul was surprised at perceiving the remarkable coincidences. The stones hit his chest and arms, wounding him violently.

"This is in the name of the Synagogue of the Cilicians!" said a young man amidst a chorus of laughter.

The stone hissed through the air and for the first time the Apostle's face was struck. A stream of blood began soaking his clothes. Not for a minute, however, did he stop looking with disconcerting serenity at his torturers.

Trophimus and Luke, however, were made aware of the gravity of situation from the first instant by a friend who had witnessed the initial scene of the torment and they immediately sought the help of the Roman authorities.

Afraid of further complications, they did not disclose the true identity of the Damascus convert. They only said that it was a man who should not be suffering at the hands of fanatical and unconscionable Jews.

A Roman tribune immediately organized a group of soldiers. Leaving the stronghold, they entered the wide courtyard with a decisive attitude. The mob was in a frenzied whirl of altercations and uproar was deafening. Obeying orders, two centurions advanced firmly, untied the prisoner and snatched him away from the crowd, which anxiously wanted to keep Paul at the stake.

“Down with the enemy of the people! ... He’s a criminal! He’s an evildoer! Allow us to quash the thief!”

The strangest exclamations hovered in the air. When the Roman tribune could not find any rabbis who could provide him with an explanation, he ordered the accused to be shackled. The officer was convinced that Paul was the dangerous criminal who had had for some time been a terrible nightmare for the inhabitants of the province. He could not find any other explanation to justify such hatred.

With his chest bruised, face and arms wounded, Caesar’s soldiers took the Apostle to the Tower of Antonia while the crowd tailed behind the small procession shouting: “Die! Die!”

They were entering the first courtyard of the large Roman stronghold, when Paul, finally understanding that he had not come to Jerusalem only to escort four impoverished Nazarites to Mt. Moriah, but to bear a more eloquent witness to the Gospel, asked the tribune humbly: “May I say something?”

Noticing his distinguished manners and the noble inflexion of his words in flawless Greek, the leader of the cohort answered, startled: “Aren’t you the Egyptian bandit who some time ago organized a rabble of thieves that are plaguing this area?”

“I’m not a thief,” answered Paul, seeming an odd figure in light of the blood that covered his face and simple tunic. “I’m a citizen of Tarsus and I ask your permission to speak to the people.”

The Roman soldier was stunned by such a distinct manner and had no other recourse but to accede, although reluctantly.

Sensing that this was a great opportunity to bear witness, Paul of Tarsus climbed some steps of the enormous stairway and began speaking in Hebrew,

impressing the crowd with the profound serenity and elegance of his speech. He began by explaining his early struggles and his remorse for having persecuted the disciples of the Divine Master; he told of his journey to Damascus, the infinite goodness of Jesus who allowed him the glorious vision, addressing him with words of warning and forgiveness. Remembering Stephen, he spoke of the wrongs he had committed in consenting to his death.

As he listened to his words chiseled with mysterious beauty, Claudius Lysias, the Roman tribune who had shackled him, experienced indefinable emotions. He too had received help from that misunderstood Christ the speaker was referring to under such trying circumstances. Overcome with scruples, he called for the tribune Zelphos (who was of Egyptian origin and had acquired certain Roman titles by reason of his enormous fortune): “Comrade,” he said in an almost imperceptible voice, “I do not want to make any decisions right now regarding this man’s case. The crowd is all worked up and something very serious may occur. I would like your immediate cooperation.”

“Of course,” answered the Egyptian resolutely.

And while Lysias tried to closely examine the figure of the Apostle who spoke so impressively, Zelphos started making the appropriate arrangements. He reinforced the garrison of soldiers and began to cordon Paul off in order to protect him from an unforeseen attack.

After a detailed account of his conversion, Paul of Tarsus began speaking about the greatness of Christ and the promises of the Gospel, but when he began describing his connections with the spirit world, from where he received comforting messages from the Master, the irrational, furious mob became riotous. A large number of Jews took off their robes and threw dust into the air in a characteristic impulse of ignorance and malice. The moment was very grave. The most worked-up tried to break through the guards’ cordon in order to kill the prisoner. Zelphos acted quickly. He ordered the Apostle to be taken inside the Tower of Antonia. And while Claudius Lysias went home to meditate a bit on the sublimity of the concepts he had heard, his fellow officer took strong measures to disperse the crowd. Many continued to clamor in the street, but the military head ordered the defiant ones to be dispersed under the horses’ hooves.

Paul was taken to a damp cell and felt that the soldiers were treating him inconsiderately. His wounds hurt him painfully, his legs were aching and

shaky and his tunic was soaked with blood. The merciless and derisive guards bound him to a thick column like a common criminal. The Apostle felt exhausted and feverish and realized that he would not easily endure another sacrificial trial. He also felt that it would not be right to surrender completely to the perverse dispositions of the soldiers who were guarding him. He remembered that the Master died on the cross without resisting humankind's cruelty, but He also stated that the Father did not desire the death of the sinner. He could not nourish the vain thought to surrender like Jesus, because only He possessed enough love to be the Messenger of the Almighty; and since he recognized himself as a sinner converted to the Gospel, his desire was right to work until the last day of his life on earth on behalf of humankind and his own spiritual enlightenment. He remembered the wisdom that Peter and James had always demonstrated so that the duties entrusted to them would not suffer unjustifiable harm, and realizing that there was scant possibility of enduring much more physically in that unforgettable hour, he shouted to the soldiers: "You have bound me to the column reserved for criminals, when you have nothing to accuse me of! ... I can see that you are now preparing whips to flog me, when I am already soaked in blood from the torture imposed by the senseless mob!"

Somewhat sarcastically, one of the guards tried to cut short his words and said: "Well, well! ... Aren't you an Apostle of Christ? It is said that your Master died quietly on the cross and in the end he even asked forgiveness for his executioners, alleging that they did not know what they were doing."

The others guards burst into strident laughter. Paul of Tarsus, however, showing all the nobility of his soul in the brilliance of his eyes, replied without hesitation: "Yes, surrounded by the ignorant and unconscionable mob on the day of Calvary, Jesus asked God to forgive the spiritual darkness in which the crowd that had raised the ignominious cross was immersed; but agents of the imperial government cannot be like a crowd that is unaware of its own actions. The soldiers of Caesar must know what they are doing, because if you disregard the law that you are paid to enforce, it would be better for you to abandon your posts."

The guards stood without moving, taken by surprise.

Paul continued in a firm voice: "As for me, I ask you: is it legal to flog a Roman citizen before he has been sentenced?"

The centurion who was about to administer the flogging withheld the first lash. Stunned, they called Zelphos. The tribune was completely surprised upon finding out what had happened, and asked the Apostle: “Tell me. Are you in fact Roman?”

“Yes.”

At this firm reply, Zelphos thought it best to modify the prisoner’s treatment. Fearing complications, he ordered the former rabbi to be removed from the stake, allowing him to remain at ease in the narrow confines of the cell. Only then did Paul of Tarsus manage to get some rest on a hard cot after a pitcher of water was brought to him with more respect and consideration. He quenched his intense thirst and slept in spite of the bloody, painful wounds.

Zelphos was worried. He knew nothing about the situation of the accused. Fearing complications that might damage his politically enviable position, he went to find the tribune Claudius Lysias. After Zelphos had explained the reason for his concern, Lysias stated: “This is surprising because he told me he was a Jew, a native of Tarsus in Cilicia.”

Zelphos then explained that he was having difficulty discerning the truth, concluding: “From what you are saying, he seems to be a common liar.”

“Not exactly,” said Lysias. “Obviously, he must be a citizen of the Empire and acted for reasons we are not able to understand.”

Realizing that his comrade had become irritated with his first allegations, Zelphos hurriedly corrected himself: “Your opinions on the matter are correct.”

“I must express them in all conscience,” added Lysias, highly inspired, “because this man unknown to both of us has spoken of very serious problems.”

Zelphos thought for a moment and stated: “In light of all this, I think we should present him tomorrow to the Sanhedrin. I think that only by doing so can we find a way to resolve the matter.”

Claudius Lysias was cool to this suggestion; deep down he felt more inclined to uphold the Apostle’s defense. His faith-inflamed words had impressed him deeply. In a few quick moments of deliberation, he analyzed all the pros and cons of Zelphos’s suggestion. To shelter the accused from the persecution of the more turbulent Jews was a just course of action; however,

to contend with the Sanhedrin was something that required more prudence. He knew the Jews firsthand and more than once he had experienced the degree of their passions and capriciousness. He also grasped the fact that he should not arouse any suspicion in his comrade regarding his religious beliefs, so he nodded affirmatively and said: "I agree with your suggestion. Tomorrow we will hand him over to the appropriate judges in matters of faith. You can leave it to me, because the prisoner will be accompanied by an escort that will shield him from any violence."

And so it happened. On the following morning the highest Tribunal of the Israelites was notified by the tribune Claudius Lysias that the preacher of the Gospel would appear before the judges for arraignment in the early hours of the afternoon. The authorities of the Sanhedrin were euphoric. At last they were going to meet the deserter of the Law once again, face to face. The news spread like wildfire.

In the solitude of his cell, Paul himself was delighted by a big surprise on that morning of somber foreboding. With the permission of the tribune, an elderly lady and her young son entered the cell.

After much effort his sister Delilah and his nephew Stephanus had received permission for a brief visit. The Apostle embraced the dignified woman with tears of emotion. By now she had become aged and feeble. The young Stephanus took his uncle's hands and kissed them with veneration and tenderness.

Delilah spoke of how much she had missed him, recalling family episodes with the poetry of the feminine heart. The ex-doctor of Jerusalem received all the news, good and bad, with imperturbable serenity as if it proceeded from a world much different from his own. However, he tried to comfort his sister, who at a more sorrowful memory began weeping. Paul told them succinctly about his journeys, struggles and obstacles on the pathways he had walked out of love for Jesus. Although ignorant of the truths of Christianity, the venerable woman implied very delicately that she did not wish to touch on religious matters. She stuck to the affectionate reasons for her sisterly visit and wept copiously on saying goodbye. She could neither understand the Apostle's resignation nor duly appreciate his renunciation. Inwardly, she lamented his fate, and deep down, like the majority of her countrymen, she despised that Jesus who offered His disciples nothing but crosses and suffering.

Paul of Tarsus, however, had felt great comfort in her presence. Stephanius's intelligence and vivacity during their brief conversation had especially given him enormous hopes for his nephew's spiritual future.

He was still thinking of this happy impression when a large escort was stationed next to his cell to take him to the Sanhedrin at the appropriate time.

Soon after midday he appeared before the Tribunal bench and realized right away that the stage for the great doctors of Jerusalem was enjoying one of its best days, as a compact crowd filled it to capacity. His presence provoked a torrent of comments. They all wanted to see him and get to know the deserter of the Law, the doctor who had repudiated and deprecated his sacred titles. Highly moved, the Apostle once more remembered the figure of Stephen. He too would now bear witness to the Gospel of truth and redemption. The tumult in the Sanhedrin had the same timbre of times past. In this very spot he had inflicted the cruelest humiliations on Abigail's brother and Jesus' converts. It was just, therefore, now to expect severe and redemptive suffering. And then, to cap off his sorrow, a remarkable coincidence: The high priest presiding over the matter was also called Ananias! Chance? Irony of destiny?

Just as in Jeziel's case, after the reading of the accusations, the Apostle was given the chance to defend himself, according to his birthright.

Paul began his defense very respectfully. Restrained chuckles often broke the silence, indicating the sarcastically hostile temper of the audience.

When his sublime oratory began to have an impact because of its fidelity to the Christian witness, the high priest told him to be silent and shouted emphatically: "When he disrespects the traditions of this place with statements offensive to the memory of the Prophets, a son of Israel – even if a holder of Roman rights – is liable to severe punishment. The defendant seems unaware of his duty to explain himself properly and not to digress into sibylline concepts in keeping with his unruly and sinful obsession with the carpenter revolutionary of Nazareth! My authority does not put up with abuses in holy places. Therefore, I command that Paul of Tarsus be struck in the mouth in retaliation for his insulting words."

The Apostle sent him a look of inexpressible serenity and replied: "Watch your heart, Priest, so that you do not concur in unjust repressions. Men like you are whitewashed sepulchers, and you must not forget that you yourself will be struck by God's justice. I am quite familiar with the laws of

which you have made yourself the executor. If you are here to judge, how and why do you order that I be struck?”

Before he could continue, however, a small group of Ananias’s henchmen stepped forward with tiny whips and struck him on the lips.

“Do you dare offend the high priest?” they asked in rage. “You shall pay for such insults!”

The little whips tore at the wrinkled and venerable face of the former rabbi amid general applause. Unceasing, jeering voices rose from the wretched mob. Some demanded harsher measures; others shouted for stoning. The Apostle’s composure bore full witness and goaded the impulsive and criminal crowd even more. Certain groups of hateful Jews stood up, and in cooperation with his torturers, spat in his face. The chaos spread. Paul tried to speak, to explain himself in more detail, but the confusion was such that nothing could be heard and no one could understand one another.

The high priest deliberately permitted the tumult. The principal members of the Sanhedrin wanted to do away with the former doctor at any price. The Tribunal had only agreed to the interim judgment because it had perceived Claudius Lysias’s personal interest in the prisoner. Otherwise, Paul of Tarsus would have been murdered in Jerusalem to satisfy the hateful sentiments of the gratuitous enemies of his blessed apostolic endeavor. At the order of the tribune present at the memorable meeting, Ananias managed to reestablish order. After desperate appeals the assembly fell silent in expectation.

Paul’s face was bleeding and his tunic was in shreds; but to everyone’s surprise he displayed in his eyes a great fraternal tranquility – unlike other times in circumstances of this nature – showing that he understood and forgave the injuries of ignorance.

Believing he was in an advantageous position, the high priest stated arrogantly: “You should die like your Master, on a despicable cross! You are a deserter of the sacred traditions of the fatherland and a criminal blasphemer and the sufferings you have begun to feel among the true sons of Israel are not enough for a just punishment!”

Far from being intimidated, however, the Apostle replied calmly: “Yours is a hasty judgment ... I do not deserve the cross of the Redeemer, for His radiance is much too glorious for me; however, the sufferings of the entire world would be justly applied to the sinner that I am. You fear suffering because you do not know the life eternal; you consider trials from the point of

view of someone who sees nothing beyond the ephemeral days of human existence. Petty politics have distanced your spirit from the sacred visions of the Prophets! ... Christians, you can be sure, know about the spirit life; their hopes do not rest on the deceitful triumphs that will rot with the body in the tomb! Life is not what we see in the banality of our days on the earth, but the affirmation of glorious immortality with Jesus Christ!”

Paul’s words now seemed to be magnetizing the whole assembly. In spite of his full-scale rage, Ananias himself was incapable of reacting, as if something mysterious were compelling him to listen to the end. Imperturbable in his serenity, Paul of Tarsus continued: “Keep on wounding me! Keep on spitting in my face! Flog me! Such torture lifts me to a higher hope, because I have already created within me a sanctuary untouchable by your hands and where Jesus will reign forever.”

“What do you hope to accomplish,” he continued in a firm voice, “with your tumults and persecutions? After all, what is the reason for so many unfruitful and destructive battles? Like Moses, Christians work for the belief in God and in our glorious resurrection. It is useless to divide, foment discord and try to hide the truth with the illusions of the world. The Gospel of Christ is the sun that illumines the traditions and the facts of the Ancient Law!”

Meanwhile, notwithstanding the overall astonishment, there was another uproar. The Sadducees flung themselves against the Pharisees with frantic words and gestures. In vain the high priest tried to calm the assembly. A more fanatical group tried to get closer to the former rabbi, ready to strangle him.

That was when Claudius Lysias appealed to the soldiers and made himself heard in the assembly, threatening the contenders. Startled by this unusual act – since the Romans had never tried to intervene in their religious matters – the turbulent Jews settled down immediately. The tribune then addressed Ananias to order the session to be brought to an end, stating that the prisoner would return to his cell in the Tower of Antonia until the Jews decided to discuss the case with more discernment and composure.

The Sanhedrin authorities could not hide their enormous disappointment; but since the governor of the province was still in Caesarea, it would be wise to obey his representative in Jerusalem.

Before another uproar could break out, Ananias declared that, in keeping with the demand, the trial of Paul of Tarsus would continue at the next session of the Tribunal to be held in three days’ time.

The guards took the prisoner away cautiously, while the more eminent Jews tried to contain the isolated protests of those who accused Claudius Lysias of being partial and sympathetic toward the new creed.

Having returned to the silent cell, Paul was able to breathe and recover his spirit in order to ponder the situation.

Feeling real sympathy for that brave, sincere man, the tribune took new measures on his behalf. The former doctor of the Law felt more satisfied and relieved. There was a guard to attend him when he needed anything and he received plenty of water, medicine, food and visits from his closest friends. These expressions of consideration truly moved him. Spiritually, he felt even more comforted; however, his wounded body was aching and he was physically exhausted. He received permission to speak with Luke and Timothy for a few minutes, and afterward he felt certain painful worries embittering his soul. Would it be right to think about a journey to Rome, when his physical state was so precarious? Would he endure for a while longer the dreadful persecutions begun in Jerusalem? However, the voices from the higher realms had promised him that he would indeed make the journey to the capital of the Empire. He should not doubt promises made in Christ's name. A certain fatigue, together with a great bitterness, was beginning to undermine his always active hopes. But falling into a kind of trance, he saw, as before, that a living light was inundating his cell while a very soft voice whispered: "Rejoice for the pain that redeems and illumines the conscience! Even if the suffering increases, renew your divine joy of hope! Keep your spirits up, for as you have borne witness to me in Jerusalem, you must do so also in Rome!"

He immediately felt new strength permeating his frail body.

The morning light found him feeling much better. In the early hours of the day, Stephanius came anxiously looking for him. Paul welcomed him with affectionate interest and the lad informed his uncle about grim plans being plotted in the shadows. The Jews had sworn to murder the Damascus convert even if they had to assassinate Claudius Lysias himself to do so. The Sanhedrin was filled with hateful activity. They were scheming to kill the preacher to the Gentiles in full daylight during the next session of the Tribunal. More than forty of the most fanatic accomplices had solemnly sworn to carry out the ominous plan. Paul listened to everything, and calmly calling the guard said to him: "I beg you take this young man to the tribune leader on account of an urgent matter."

Stephanus was taken to Claudius Lysias, and told him about the plot. With the political tact that characterized his decisions, the astute and noble patrician promised to duly look into the matter, without mentioning the adoption of any definite measures to foil the conspiracy. Thanking Stephanus, he recommended that the lad be extremely careful on commenting upon the situation so as not to provoke the sectarians even more.

Alone in his office, the tribune thought seriously about the somber prospects. In its capacity for intrigue, the Sanhedrin could instigate demonstrations amongst the always fickle and aggressive people. Impassioned rabbis could mobilize criminals and perhaps kill Paul under spectacular conditions. However, the plot had been exposed by a boy – a child, almost. Moreover, he was a nephew of the prisoner. Was he telling the truth or was he a mere instrument of a possible sentimental nature born from rightful family concerns? He had not yet managed to dismiss his doubts in order to take action, when someone asked for the favor of an interview. Wishing to take a break from these serious thoughts, he promptly accepted. He opened the stately door and an old man with a serene face came in smiling. Claudius Lysias was thoroughly pleased. He knew the old man intimately and owed him some favors. The unexpected visitor was James, who had come to interpose his kind influence on behalf of the great friend of his evangelical endeavors. The son of Alphaeus retold the plan already exposed by Stephanus minutes before. He went even further. He told the moving story of Paul of Tarsus, disclosing himself to be an impartial witness to his entire life and explaining that the Apostle had come to the city at his insistence in order to set up crucial steps for the spread of the Gospel. He finished his careful account by asking his distinguished friend to take effective measures to foil the dreadful attack.

Now greatly apprehensive, Claudius Lysias stated: “Your considerations are justified; however, I would find it difficult to coordinate immediate measures. Wouldn’t it be better to wait for events to materialize and then act with force against force?”

James smiled doubtfully and replied: “I am of the opinion that your authority could enable you to find immediate recourse. I know Jewish passions and the furor of their demonstrations. I will never forget the hateful ferment of the Pharisees on the day of Calvary. If I fear for Paul’s fate, I fear for mine also. The hordes in Jerusalem have been criminal many times.”

Claudius Lysias frowned, reflecting at length. Pulling him from his indecision, the aging Galilean presented him with the idea of transferring the prisoner to Caesarea for a fairer venue. This measure would have the virtue of removing the Apostle from the excitable environment of Jerusalem, and the murderous plan would fail before it even started; furthermore, the tribune himself would be safe from unjustifiable suspicion, keeping intact the tradition of respect surrounding his name on the part of some malevolent and ungrateful Jews. The plan to move Paul would be known only to a very close group of people and the patrician would appoint an escort of courageous soldiers to accompany the prisoner. They would leave Jerusalem after midnight.

Claudius Lysias considered the excellence of this suggestion and promised to put it into effect that very night.

As soon as James left, the Roman called two of his trustworthy men and gave the first orders for the formation of a mighty escort of 130 soldiers, 200 archers and 70 horsemen, under whose protection Paul of Tarsus would come before the governor, Felix, in the great Palestinian port. In obedience to the instructions, one of the best mounts was reserved for the prisoner.

Paul of Tarsus was greatly surprised when he was called in the middle of the night. Claudius Lysias quickly explained the objective of his decision and the large troupe left in silence for Caesarea.

Given the secret character of the mission, the journey progressed without any incident worthy of mention. Only many hours after their departure did the news arrive from the Tower of Antonia, convincing the Jews, to their great disappointment, of the futility of any retaliation.

In Caesarea, the governor received the expedition with enormous surprise. He knew Paul's reputation and was not unaware of the struggles he had endured at the hands of the brothers of his own race; but this troupe of 400 armed men to protect a prisoner was true cause for amazement.

After the first arraignment, the highest agent of the Empire in the province stated: "Owing to the Jewish birth of the accused, I cannot pass sentence without hearing the authorized agency from Jerusalem."

And he ordered that the Sanhedrin send a representative to the seat of the government as soon as possible.

The Jews were only too happy to comply.

Consequently, five days after the transfer of the Apostle, Ananias himself made it a point to head the group of authorities from the Sanhedrin and Temple, and they made haste to Caesarea with very strange plans regarding their adversary's situation. The old rabbis knew the power of the logic and the beauty of Paul's words and arranged to be accompanied by Tertullian, one of the most notable minds serving on the fraternal council.

Once the court was set up to decide the matter, the orator of the Sanhedrin was given priority to speak. He brought dreadful charges against the defendant, painting all the activities of Christianity in dark colors, and he finished by requesting the governor to deliver the accused to the brothers of his race to be duly judged by them.

When Paul was given the chance to explain himself, he began speaking with great composure. Felix immediately noticed his lofty intellectual gifts and the beauty of his dialectics, and listened to his arguments with uncommon interest. The Jerusalem elders could not hide their anger. If possible they would have torn the Apostle to pieces right then and there, such was the rage that dominated them, contrasted with the transparent tranquility of the oratory and person of the opposing speaker.

The governor felt torn in pronouncing the "verdictum." On one hand, he saw the Jewish elders in an almost choleric attitude, claiming the rights of their race; on the other, he contemplated the Apostle of the Gospel, calm, imperturbable, spiritual master of the subject, clarifying all the obscure points of the exceptional suit with his elegant, thoughtful words.

Recognizing the great significance of that feeble and aged man, whose hair seemed whitened by pain-filled and sacred experiences, Governor Felix hurriedly changed his first impressions and ended the session with these words: "Gentlemen, I can see that the suit is more complicated than I thought at first. Therefore, I have decided to postpone the final sentence until the tribune, Claudius Lysias, is duly heard."

The elders bit their lips. In vain the high priest asked for the hearing to continue. Rome's envoy would not change his mind, and the large assembly adjourned, with immense regret by the Jews, who had to leave extremely disappointed.

Felix, however, began to consider the prisoner with more deference. The following day he went to visit him and granted him permission to be visited by friends. Understanding that Paul enjoyed immense prestige among all the

followers of the Nazarene Prophet's doctrine, he immediately thought of taking advantage of the situation. Each time he visited Paul he was surprised at his mental acuity and would focus his attention on his lively conversation filled with wise comments on the concept and experience of life.

One day, the Governor adroitly broached a matter of personal interest, insinuating to Paul the advantages of his freedom in order to attend to the aspirations of the Christian community, to which he lent so much importance.

Paul, however, replied resolutely: "I cannot agree with your opinion. I have always felt that the first virtue of a Christian is to be ready to obey the will of God anywhere. Obviously, I have not been imprisoned due to the lack of His assistance and protection, so I believe that Jesus has deemed it better for me to remain in prison for now. Thus, I shall serve Him as if I were completely free in the corporeal sense."

"But it would not be very difficult to arrange for your freedom," continued Felix, without the nerve to go straight to the point.

"How so?"

"Don't you have rich and influential friends in every corner of the province?" asked the government agent ambiguously.

"What do you mean?" asked the Apostle in turn.

"I believe that if you were to obtain enough money to meet the personal interests of those who would be involved in the process, you could be completely free of the juridical procedures within a few days."

Paul understood the poorly concealed insinuations and replied nobly: "I see. You're talking about a justice conditioned on wicked human caprice. That sort of justice does not interest me. I would rather meet death in jail than serve as an obstacle to the spiritual redemption of any of the humblest workers in Caesarea. Giving money in exchange for an illegal freedom would be to accustom them to the attachment of assets that do not belong to them. My actions would then take an admittedly perverse turn. Moreover, when we have a clear conscience, nobody can restrain our freedom, and here I feel as free inside as outside in the public square."

The Governor listened to this frank and direct remark, concealing his embarrassment. The lesson deeply humiliated him, and after that he became disinterested in the matter. However, he had already commented among his closest friends on the remarkable mind of the Caesarean prisoner, and in a

few days his young wife, Drusilla, wished to meet and listen to the Apostle in person. Against his will, but unable to back out, Felix took her to see the former rabbi.

A Jewess by birth, Drusilla was not content like her husband with simple and superficial questions. Wishing to probe his deepest ideas, she asked for an overall summary of the new doctrine he had embraced and was seeking to spread.

In front of distinguished members of the provincial court, the valorous Apostle to the Gentiles offered a brilliant exposition on the Gospel, emphasizing the unforgettable exemplification of Christ and the duties of the proselytism that was reaching every corner of the world. The majority of the audience listened to him with obvious interest, but when he began to speak about the resurrection and people's duties in light of their responsibilities to the spirit world, the governor went pale and interrupted his sermon.

"Enough for today!" he said with authority. "My family can listen to you another time if they wish. As for me, I don't even believe in God."

Paul of Tarsus received this remark serenely and answered benevolently: "I thank you for your frank declaration, honorable governor. However, I would dare stress the need to ponder the issue, since when a man affirms he does not accept the paternity of the Almighty, it is usually because he fears God's judgment."

Felix shot him an angry look and left with his family, promising himself he would leave the prisoner to his fate.

In view of this, although respected for his openness and loyalty, Paul had to bear two years of seclusion in Caesarea. Nevertheless, he took the opportunity to keep in constant touch with his beloved churches. Countless messages came and went, bringing requests for advice and taking back opinions and instructions.

At that time the ex-doctor of Jerusalem called Luke's attention to his former plan to write a biography of Jesus based on information supplied by Mary; he regretted not being able to go to Ephesus, so he entrusted Luke with the endeavor, which he considered of crucial importance to followers of Christianity. His physician friend satisfied his wishes completely, bequeathing to posterity the richly illuminating, divine, hope-filled account of the Master's life. When the rough draft of the Gospel was finished, the dynamic mind of the Apostle to the Gentiles emphasized the need for a work

that would contain an account of the apostolic activities immediately after Christ's departure, so that the world could know the glorious revelations of Pentecost; thus was born Luke's magnificent account of The Acts of the Apostles.

In spite of being held prisoner, the Damascus convert did not neglect his work for one single day and took advantage of all the resources within his reach on behalf of the spread of the Good News.

Time was flying by. The Jews, however, never gave up their initial plan to eliminate the brave champion of Heaven's truths. The governor was approached several times about the possibility of sending the prisoner back to Jerusalem, but when he remembered Paul, his conscience wavered. Along with what he himself had seen, he had heard from the tribune Claudius Lysias, who spoke of the former rabbi with unhidden respect. More for fear of the supernatural powers attributed to the Apostle than dedication to his duties as administrator, he resisted every attempt by the Jews and held firm to his intentions of safeguarding the accused until the opportunity for a more reasonable judgment would arise.

The great friend of the Gentiles had been in prison for two years, when an imperial order transferred Felix to the administration of another province. He could not forget the anguish that Paul's frankness had caused him and decided to abandon him to his own fate.

The new governor, Portius Festus, arrived in Caesarea amid noisy demonstrations by the people. Jerusalem could not be left out of the political tributes, so as soon as he took office the distinguished patrician went to visit the great city of the rabbis. The Sanhedrin seized the opportunity immediately to request their old enemy of so many years. A group of doctors of the Old Law sought to pay the generous Roman a ceremonial visit and asked for the prisoner to be returned for trial at the religious Tribunal. Festus received the group in a gentlemanly manner and showed he was inclined to comply; but cautious by nature and as a duty to his post, he said he would prefer to resolve the matter in Caesarea, where he had the means to study the case in more detail. To this end he invited the rabbis to accompany him on his return. The Jews were overjoyed. The most sinister plans were laid for receiving the Apostle back in Jerusalem.

The governor stayed there for ten days, but before he returned, someone else arrived in Caesarea with an oppressed and anxious heart. It was Luke,

who, diligent and careful, had taken it upon himself to inform the prisoner of noteworthy events. Paul of Tarsus listened to him attentively and serenely, but when Luke began telling him of the Sanhedrin's plans, the friend of the Gentiles turned white. It was definitely settled that the prisoner would be crucified like the Divine Master in the same place of the "Skull."³⁷ There were arrangements to faithfully restage the drama of Calvary. Facing the mockery of the people, the accused would carry the cross to the place, and there was even a rumor of the crucifixion of two thieves so that the Carpenter's martyrdom would be repeated in every detail.

Few times had the Apostle displayed such a look of utter astonishment. Finally, he bitterly and forcefully exclaimed: "I have experienced beatings, stoning and insults far and wide, but of all my persecutions and trials, this is the most absurd."

The physician himself did not know what to make of the plan, when the former rabbi continued: "We must avoid this by every means at hand. How can we face this outrageous plan to repeat the scene of Calvary? What disciple would have the courage to submit to such a parody with the petty idea of reaching the Master's ambit in testimony to men? The Sanhedrin is mistaken. Nobody in the world will attain a Calvary equal to Christ's. We know that in Rome the Christians have begun to die under tortures and be regarded as miserable slaves. The perverse powers of the world are unleashing a storm of ignominy upon the heads of the followers of the Gospel. If I must testify to Jesus, I shall do so in Rome. I will die there with my fellow Christians like an ordinary, sinful man; but I will not submit to the role of a false imitator of the promised Messiah. Therefore, since the suit is going to be argued again before the new governor, I will appeal to Caesar."

The doctor made a gesture of amazement. Like most eminent Christians down through time, Luke could not grasp that decision, which at first sight seemed like a denial of bearing witness.

"But," he objected with some hesitation, "Jesus did not resort to higher authorities when He went to the cross, and I'm afraid that disciples will not know how to interpret your attitude correctly."

"I disagree with you," answered Paul resolutely. "If the Christian communities cannot understand my decision, I would prefer to be looked upon as arrogant and heedless at this turning point of my life. I am a sinner and I must despise the praise of men. If they condemn me, they will not be in

error. I am imperfect and I must bear witness of this true condition of my life. Otherwise, it would disturb my conscience, causing an erroneous human appraisal.”

Highly impressed, Luke remembered this unforgettable lesson.

Three days after this conversation, the Governor returned to the seat of the provincial government, accompanied by an entourage of several Jews ready to take delivery of the famous prisoner.

With the composure that marked his political attitudes, Festus immediately sought to be informed about the situation. He reviewed the suit meticulously and became fully acquainted with the rights of the defendant’s Roman citizenship according to the legislation in force. And noting the insistence of the rabbis in displaying an enormous anxiety for the matter to be settled, he called a meeting for a new examination of the defendant’s statements for the purpose of satisfying the regional politics of Jerusalem.

The Damascus convert, feeble in body but still energetic in spirit, appeared before the assembly under the hateful eyes of the brothers of his race, who were requesting his removal at any cost. The Tribunal of Caesarea attracted a large crowd eager to follow the new trial. While the Jews discussed, the Christians commented on the debate in a defensive attitude. More than once Festus was forced to raise his voice, demanding order and silence.

When the proceedings of the singular assembly opened, the Governor questioned the accused with a forceful but noble tone.

Paul of Tarsus, however, answered all questions with his characteristic composure. In spite of the obvious animosity of the Jews, he declared he had not harmed them in the least and that he could not recall any deed in his life when he had attacked the Temple of Jerusalem or the laws of Caesar.

Festus perceived that he was dealing with a learned and eminent mind, and that it would not be as easy to deliver him to the Sanhedrin as he had thought at first. Some of the rabbis had insisted that he order Paul’s removal to Jerusalem purely and simply, bypassing any legal formalities. In this regard the governor would not hesitate to make use of his political influence, but he did not want to commit an arbitrary act before knowing the moral qualities of the man at the center of the Jewish intrigue. Inwardly, he knew that if he were dealing with an ordinary person, he would deliver him without concern to the tyrannical authorities of the Sanhedrin, who undoubtedly would eliminate

him. But that would not happen if he could ascertain the worthiness and intelligence of the prisoner, because, with his acute political sense, he did not wish to gain an enemy capable of harming him at some point. Upon recognizing the Apostle's lofty intellectual and moral endowments, he completely changed his posture. He quickly began to regard Paul more seriously, arriving at the conclusion that it would be a crime to act with partiality in the matter. Besides the culture and education the accused exhibited, he was a Roman citizen through legally acquired rights. Formulating new conjectures and to the immense surprise of the confident representatives of the Sanhedrin, Festus asked the prisoner if he would consent to returning to Jerusalem in order to be judged there in front of Festus himself and the religious Tribunal of his people. Paul of Tarsus was aware of the Israelites' snare and answered calmly, filling the assembly with astonishment: "Honorable Governor, I am before the Tribunal of Caesar in order to receive a definitive sentence. For more than two years I have been awaiting the decision of a suit I cannot understand. As you know, I have harmed nobody. My imprisonment originated only because of the religious intrigues in Jerusalem. In this particular, I challenge the notions of the most intelligent. If I have committed a shameful act, I myself ask for the death sentence. When I was called to trial once again, I believed you had the courage needed to break with the lower aspirations of the Sanhedrin, thereby doing justice to your forbearance as a conscientious and just administrator. I continue to trust in your authority, in your impartiality without favoritism, which no one would expect from your honorable and sensitive duties. Examine in detail the accusations that are keeping me prisoner in Caesarea! You will see that no provincial power can deliver me to the tyranny of Jerusalem! Recognizing this fact and invoking my rights – although I truly believe in your wise and just decisions – I hereby appeal to Caesar!"

This unexpected statement by the Apostle to the Gentiles caused general astonishment. Festus, utterly pale, immersed himself in serious thought. From his judge's bench he had generously taught the way to live to many defendants and evildoers. However, at this unforgettable time of his life, he had found a defendant who spoke to his soul. Paul's answer was worthy of a whole program of justice and order. With immense difficulty he asked for order in the court. The Jewish representatives were heatedly arguing among themselves; a number of Christians rushed to comment unfavorably on the Apostle's attitude, evaluating it superficially as if it comprised a denial of witness. The governor hurriedly convened a short meeting with the most

influential rabbis. The doctors of the Old Law insisted on adopting stronger measures, presuming Paul would change his mind with some cudgeling. However, without wasting the opportunity for another prestigious tutorial for his public life, the governor shut his ears to the intrigues of Jerusalem, stating that in no way could he compromise the fulfillment of his duties at this significant moment in his life. Disappointed, he apologized to the old politicians of the Sanhedrin and Temple, who glared at him with hateful eyes, and then pronounced the famous words: “You appeal to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!”

With this longstanding appeal the new trial ended. The representatives of the Sanhedrin left angrily, with one of them exclaiming in a loud voice to the prisoner, who received the insult calmly: “Only damned deserters appeal to Caesar. Go to the Gentiles, you unworthy impostor!”

The Apostle looked at him benignly while he prepared to return to his cell.

The governor did not waste any time and ordered the defendant’s petition to be written down for the continuation of the matter. On the following day he studied the case at length and was seized by great indecision. He could not send the accused to the capital of the Empire without justifying the reasons for his imprisonment for such a long time in Caesarea. How to proceed? However, a few days later Herod Agrippa and Berenice came to greet the new governor with a ceremonious and unexpected visit. The imperial procurator could not hide the worries absorbing him, and after the ceremonial protocol owing to such illustrious guests, he told Agrippa the story of Paul of Tarsus, whose personality gripped the most indifferent persons. The Palestinian king had heard of the fame of the former rabbi and wanted to see him up close. Festus agreed happily, not only for the possibility of pleasing his prominent guest, but also in the hopes of gleaning from his impressions something useful to shed light on the Apostle’s case, which he was responsible for sending to Rome.

Festus lent the event a festive character. He invited the most eminent personalities of Caesarea, thus gathering a pompous assembly around the king in the best and largest auditorium of the provincial court. To start with, there was dancing and music; then, the Damascus convert, duly escorted, was introduced by the governor himself in discreet but cordial and sincere terms.

Herod Agrippa was immediately impressed by the feeble and frail figure of the Apostle, whose serene eyes displayed the unbreakable strength of the Jewish people. Curious to know him better, he ordered him to defend himself out loud.

Paul grasped the profound meaning of that moment and began to relate the difficulties of his life with great erudition and sincerity. The king listened in astonishment. The former rabbi recalled his childhood, spent time reminiscing about his youth, explained his aversion to the followers of Jesus Christ, and exuberant with inspiration, drew the picture of his encounter with the resurrected Master at the gates of Damascus in the full light of day. Next, he began enumerating his deeds in his work with the Gentiles and the persecutions he had suffered far and wide for the love of the Gospel, urgently concluding without holding back that his preaching did not oppose but instead confirmed the prophecies of the Old Law since Moses.

Giving vent to his impassioned thoughts, Paul's eyes shone and were full of joy. The aristocratic assembly was eminently impressed with the events he related, displaying their enthusiasm and delight. White as a ghost, Herod Agrippa felt he had found one of the most profound voices of divine revelation. Portius Festus could not hide the surprise that had suddenly gripped his spirit. He had not presumed the prisoner to have such a stock of faith and persuasion. Listening to the Apostle describing the most beautiful scenes of his apostleship with eyes full of joy and light, transmitting unexpected and striking ideas to the attentive and moved audience, it seemed to the governor that he might be dealing with a sublime lunatic. In a loud voice during a prolonged pause he said to him: "Paul, you are out of your mind! Too much learning has rendered you delirious!"

Far from being unnerved, the ex-rabbi answered nobly: "You are mistaken! I am not insane! I would not dare to speak in this manner in light of your authority as an illustrious Roman, because I know you are not duly prepared to listen to me. The patricians of Augustus also belong to Jesus Christ, but they do not yet fully know the Savior. We must speak to each one according to his spiritual capacity. Here, however, Honorable Governor, if I speak daringly it is because I am addressing a king who is not unaware of the meaning of my words. Herod Agrippa has heard about Moses since childhood. He is a Roman by education, but he has been nourished by the revelation of God to his ancestors. Not one of my statements can be unknown to him; otherwise, he would betray his sacred origins, because all the children

of the nation that accepted the one sole God must understand the revelation of Moses and the Prophets. Do you believe so, King Agrippa?”

The question caused enormous amazement. The provincial administrator himself would not have had the courage to address the king with such boldness. The illustrious descendant of Antipas was shocked. Extreme pallor covered his face. No one, in all his life, had ever spoken to him like that.

Perceiving Agrippa’s mental attitude, Paul of Tarsus completed his powerful argument by adding: “I know you do!”

Confused by the orator’s courage, Agrippa shook his head as if wishing to expel some importunate idea, and smiling vaguely, giving to understand that he was in control of himself, he said jokingly: “Well, well! A little more and you would persuade me to make a profession of Christian faith...”

The Apostle insisted and replied: “Hopefully, for little or for more, you will become a disciple of Jesus; not only you, but all who have listened to me today.”

Festus understood that the king was much more impressed than he had supposed, and wishing to change the ambience, he proposed that the dignitaries break for an afternoon meal in the palace. The former rabbi was led back to his cell, leaving his listeners with a lasting impression. Highly moved, Berenice was the first to ask clemency for the prisoner. The others followed in the same wave of benevolent sympathy. Herod Agrippa tried to find a ruling that would enable the Apostle to be restored to freedom. The governor, however, explained that, knowing Paul’s moral fiber, he had taken his appeal to Caesar seriously, so the initial steps were already underway. Mindful of Roman law, he rejected the king’s suggestion, although he did ask Agrippa for his intellectual help in writing a letter of justification, with which the accused should be presented to the competent authority in the capital of the Empire. Desirous of maintaining his political stability, the descendant of the Herodian Dynasty did not offer any further suggestions, regretting only that the prisoner had already resorted to the highest appeal. He then sought to help in the drafting of the document, showing himself against the preacher of the Gospel only in the circumstance that he had incited several religious squabbles amongst the populace to the detriment of the unity of faith the Sanhedrin was striving for as a defensive bulwark of the traditions of Judaism. For this, the king himself signed as a witness, lending more importance to the allegations of the imperial procurator. Portius Festus

acknowledged his help, utterly delighted. The problem was resolved and Paul of Tarsus would leave with the first batch of prisoners for Rome.

Needless to say, he received the news serenely. After an understanding with Luke, he asked that the church at Jerusalem be told, as well as the church at Sidon, where the ship would surely take on cargo and passengers. Except Timothy, Luke and Aristharcus, who offered to accompany him to the capital of the Empire, all their friends in Caesarea were employed in the task of writing soul-stirring messages that the former rabbi addressed to his beloved churches.

The days passed quickly until the moment came when the centurion Julius, with his escort, came to take the prisoners on the harrowing journey. The centurion had full power to take any measures that might be necessary, and in a display of sympathy for the Apostle, he ordered him to be led to the ship unshackled, unlike the other prisoners.

Supported on Luke's arm, the weaver from Tarsus gazed peacefully at the organized network and noise of the streets, nourishing hopes for a higher life in which people could enjoy fraternity in the name of the Lord Jesus. His heart was immersed in sweet reflection and ardent prayer, when he was surprised by a large crowd jostling and stirring about in the broad square close to the sea.

Ranks of elderly, youngsters and children gathered around him a few yards from the shore. In front was James, aged and worn out, who had come from Jerusalem at great sacrifice to bring him the fraternal embrace. The ardent defender of the Gentiles could not control his emotion. Groups of children were throwing him flowers. In acknowledgement of the nobility of that heroic spirit, the son of Alphaeus took Paul's hand and kissed it fervently. He was there with all the Christians of Jerusalem who had been able to make the journey. Brethren from Joppa, Lydda, Antipatris, and all the provincial districts were there, too. The Gentile children joined the little Jewish ones in loving greetings to the Apostle-prisoner. Elderly and lame persons approached respectfully and exclaimed: "You must not leave!"

Humble women thanked him for benefits received from his hands. Individuals who had been healed spoke of the work auxiliary he had suggested and helped to found at the Jerusalem church, and proclaimed their gratitude out loud. The Gentile converts of the Gospel kissed his hands saying: "Who will teach us from now on to be children of the Most High?"

Affectionate children grasped his tunic under the eyes of their disconsolate mothers.

They were all asking him to stay, not to go, to come back soon for the blessed work of Jesus.

Suddenly, he remembered the old scene of Peter's arrest, when he, Paul, appointed as tormentor of the disciples of the Gospel, had visited the Jerusalem church ahead of a punitive raid. That loving care from the people spoke warmly to his soul. It meant that he was no longer regarded as the implacable tormentor, who, until then, had been unable to comprehend the divine mercy; it meant the quittance of his debt to the people's souls. Feeling his conscience relieved somewhat, he remembered Abigail and began to weep. He felt as if he were in the bosom of "the children of Calvary" who were embracing him in gratitude. These beggars, these lame, these little children were his family. At that unforgettable moment in his life, he felt fully identified with the rhythm of universal harmony. Soft breezes from different worlds soothed his soul as if he had reached a divine realm after winning a great battle. For the first time some little ones called him "father." He bent down very tenderly to the little children surrounding him. He regarded all the events of that unforgettable hour as a blessing from Jesus uniting him to all beings. In front of him the calm ocean seemed like an infinite and promising pathway of mysterious and ineffable beauty.

Julius, the centurion of the guard, approached movingly and said softly: "Unfortunately, the time has come to leave."

And witnessing the homage being paid to the Apostle, he too had tears in his eyes. He had already seen many defendants in like circumstances and they were all rebellious, desperate or repentant sinners. This one, however, was composed and almost happy. Inexpressive joy flowed from his radiant eyes. Moreover, he knew that this man, dedicated to the welfare of all creatures, had not committed any wrong. For that very reason he stayed close by him as if wishing to share in the loving displays of the people, as if showing him the consideration he deserved.

The Apostle to the Gentiles embraced his friends for the last time. They all wept discreetly, like true disciples of Jesus who did not weep without consolation: mothers and children knelt in the white sand; the elderly supported themselves with rustic sticks with immense effort. All who

embraced the champion of the Gospel were on their knees praying to the Lord to bless him on his new course.

In wrapping up the farewell, Paul emphasized with heroic serenity: “Let us weep with joy, my brethren! There is no greater glory in this world than to be on our way to Christ Jesus! ... The Master went to meet the Father through martyrdom on the Cross! Let us bless our daily cross. We must bear the marks of the Lord Jesus! I do not believe that I shall return here in this enfeebled body of my earthly battles. I hope that the Lord will grant me final witness in Rome; however, I shall be with you in heart; I shall return to our churches in spirit; I shall help your endeavors on the bitterest of days. Death shall not separate us, just as it did not separate the Lord from the community of His disciples. We shall never be far from one another, and for this reason, Jesus promised that He would be at our side until the end of time!”

Julius was greatly moved as he listened to Paul’s exhortation; Luke and Aristharcus sobbed quietly.

Then, the Apostle took the arm of his physician friend, and followed closely by the centurion, walked serenely and resolutely toward the ship.

In holy silence sprinkled with tears and prayers, hundreds of people watched the ship maneuver for departure. As it sailed slowly away, Paul and his companions contemplated Caesarea with tears in their eyes. The silent crowd of those who were left weeping waved from the shore gradually fading away in the distance. Joyful and grateful, Paul of Tarsus rested his eyes on the field of his bitter struggles, meditating on his many years of offenses and necessary expiations. He remembered his childhood, the dreams of his youth, the troubles of his early adulthood, and his worthy endeavors for Christ, feeling that he was leaving Palestine forever. He was engrossed in lofty thoughts, when Luke approached. Nodding toward the friends who were continuing to kneel in the distance, Luke said softly: “Few events in this world have moved me as much as this one! I will record in my notes how you were loved by all who received from your fraternal hands the blessings of Jesus.”

Paul seemed to ponder those words deeply and emphasized: “No, Luke. Do not write about virtues I do not possess. If you love me you must not expose my name to erroneous judgments. You must speak instead of the persecutions I carried out against the followers of the holy Gospel; of the grace the Master shed on me at the gates of Damascus, so that the most

hardened persons do not despair of salvation but await His mercy at the right moment; you shall recall the battles we have fought since the first moment due to the impositions of Pharisaism and the hypocrisies of our time; you shall comment on the obstacles we have overcome, the painful humiliations and the countless difficulties, so that future disciples do not expect the redemption of their spirit through the false repose of the world, trusting in the incomprehensible favor of the gods, but through hard work and blessed sacrifice for the betterment of themselves. You shall speak of our encounters with powerful and learned men; of our work with the unfortunate, so that the followers of the Gospel in the future do not fear the most difficult and trying situations, aware that the messengers of the Master will always watch over them when they become true instruments of fraternity and love along the pathways that unfold for the evolution of humankind.”

And after a long pause in which he observed the attention with which Luke was following his inspired thoughts, he continued in a serene and firm tone: “However, keep silent about the considerations and the favors we have received in our endeavor, because that garland belongs to Jesus alone. It was He who lifted us out of our anguishing misery to fill our emptiness; it was His hand that charitably took us and redirected us to the holy way. Didn’t you tell me of your bitter struggles in the distant past? Didn’t I tell you how wicked and ignorant I was in times gone by? In the same way that He illumined my darkness at the gates of Damascus, He led you to the church at Antioch so you could listen to His eternal truths. No matter how much we have studied, we still feel an abyss between us and the wisdom of eternity; no matter how hard we have worked, we are not worthy of Him who has watched over and guided us since the first instant of our lives. We have nothing of our own! ... The Lord fills the emptiness of our soul and does the good that we do not possess. When the trembling elderly embraced us in tears, when the children kissed us in tenderness, they did it to Christ. James and his companions did not come from Jerusalem only to demonstrate their loving fraternity; they came to bear witness of their love for the Master who has united us in the same vibration of sacrosanct solidarity, although they are unable to express the hidden mechanism of such glorious and sublime emotions. In the midst of all this, Luke, we are only poor servants who have taken advantage of the Lord’s possessions to pay our own debts. He has bestowed mercy upon us so that justice may be done. These joys and divine emotions belong to Him ... Therefore, let us not have the least concern about relating episodes that would

leave a door open to vanity. It is enough for us to have the profound conviction that we have paid our clamorous debts.”

Luke marveled as he listened to these opportune and righteous considerations without being able to define the surprise they caused him.

“You are right,” he said finally. “We are too weak to attribute any significance to ourselves.”

“Moreover,” added Paul, “Christ’s battle has begun. Every victory will belong to His love and not to our efforts as indebted servants ... So write your notes in the simplest manner possible and comment on nothing that is not for the glorification of the Master and His immortal Gospel!”

While Luke went looking for Aristharcus to communicate to him those wise and loving suggestions, the former rabbi continued gazing at the row-houses of Caesarea disappearing over the horizon. The ship was sailing gently away from the coast ... For many hours he remained there meditating on the past that appeared to his spiritual eyes as an immense sunset. Immersed in reminiscences sprinkled with prayers to Jesus, he remained there in meaningful silence until the first stars of the evening began to shine in the dark blue firmament.

³⁶ The Nazarite vow was a type of vow that set the men who took them apart from others for the service of God. The vow was either for life or for a specific period of time. – Tr.

³⁷ Skull: Calvaria in Latin, and Gulgoleth (Golgotha) in Hebrew. Although there is much speculation on the matter, the place probably took its name from its shape: a small barren elevation somewhat in the form of a human skull. – Tr.

IX

The Prisoner of Christ

On the following day the ship from Adramyttium of Mysia, on which the Apostle and his companions were traveling, stopped at Sidon with a repetition of the moving scenes of the day before. Julius allowed the former rabbi to go to his friends on the shore, where they said their goodbyes amid exhortations of hope and many tears. Paul of Tarsus exerted a moral influence over the captain, sailors and guards. His vibrant speech had won everyone's respect. He spoke of Jesus not as an unreachable personality but as a loving Master and friend of all people, closely following the evolution and redemption of earthly humanity since its beginning. Everybody wanted to listen to his concepts regarding the Gospel and what it meant for the future of humankind.

The ship frequently sailed by scenery that had a great deal of meaning to the Apostle. After moving along the coast of Phoenicia, the contours of the island of Cyprus emerged, bringing back loving memories. Near Pamphylia he exulted with inner joy for having fulfilled his duties there, and then he arrived at the port of Myra, in Lycia.

It was there that Julius decided to embark with Paul and his companions on an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy. The journey continued, but now the outlook was not good. The ship was overloaded. Besides a large quantity of wheat, there were 276 people on board. The season of difficult navigation was approaching; the winds were strong and constantly forced the ship off course. After several days they were still sailing around in the region of Cnidus. Having overcome extreme difficulties, they managed to make some stops on Crete.

The Apostle had been observing the obstacles of the journey, and obeying his intuition and trusting in Julius's friendship, he called the centurion in private and suggested they spend the winter in Kaloi Limenes.

The head of the cohort took the suggestion into consideration and presented it to the captain and the pilot, both who found it unacceptable.

“What do you mean by this, centurion?” asked the captain emphatically, with an ironic smile. “Do you actually believe these prisoners? I see it as some sort of escape plan plotted with subtlety and care ... At any rate the suggestion is unacceptable, not only because of the confidence we should have in our professional abilities but also because we need to reach the port of Phoenix before we rest.”

The centurion apologized as best as he could and left somewhat vexed. He would have liked to protest and explain that Paul of Tarsus was not an ordinary prisoner; that he was not speaking for himself only but also for Luke, who was a very competent seaman in his own right. However, it would not be appropriate to compromise his shining military and political situation by antagonizing the provincial authorities. It would be best not to insist, as he could be misunderstood by his peers. He went to Paul and told him their response. Instead of being offended, Paul stated calmly: “Let’s not worry about it! I’m sure the obstacles will be much greater than we might suspect, but we will reap some benefit from it nonetheless, because in desperate hours we will remember the power of Jesus’ timely warning.”

The journey continued amid fear and hope. The centurion himself was now convinced of the inappropriateness of dropping anchor at Kaloi Limenes, because in the two days following the Apostle’s advice the weather conditions had improved greatly. However, as soon as they were sailing on the high seas en route to Phoenix, an unexpected tempest suddenly befell them. None of the emergency measures were effective. The ship could not handle the storm and had to be left at the mercy of the impetuous wind, which carried it far off course amid dense fog. Isolated in the violent abyss of whitecaps, passengers and crew both suffered dreadful hardship. The storm seemed to last forever. For nearly two weeks the wind roared incessantly, destructively. The entire cargo of wheat was thrown overboard; everything representing excess weight and not immediately useful was swallowed up by the insatiable and howling monster!

The figure of Paul was regarded with veneration. The ship’s crew could not forget his prediction. The pilot and captain were confounded, and the prisoner became the object of unanimous respect and consideration. The centurion, especially, remained constantly near him, believing the former rabbi possessed supernatural and saving powers. The moral discouragement

and seasickness spread disheartenment and dread, but the generous Apostle attended to everybody one by one, pressing them to eat and offering moral support. From time to time he spoke eloquently, and with Julius's due permission he addressed his companions of that bitter hour, seeking to compare their spiritual questions with the convulsive spectacle of nature: "Brothers!" he would say in a loud voice to the strange, distress-filled assembly. "I believe that we will soon hit dry land! However, let us promise ourselves never to forget the terrible lesson of this hour. Let us seek to walk in the world like a watchful seaman, who, unsure as to when the storm will fall, is nevertheless certain that it will arrive. The passage from human existence to the spirit life is similar to the bitter time we have been experiencing on this ship for many days now. You must not ignore the fact that we were warned of all the dangers at the last port, where we were bid to stay, unconcerned about destructive episodes like this one. Nevertheless, we set out on the high sea on our own account. Christ Jesus also gives us a heavenly warning in His Gospel of Light, but frequently we opt for the abyss of dolorous and tragic experiences. Illusion, like the south wind, seems to belie the Savior's warnings and we continue on the path of our tainted imagination; however, the storm comes suddenly upon us. We must go from one life to another in order for us to make straight the course we must unavoidably follow. We start by jettisoning the heavy load of our cruel mistakes and we abandon our sinful caprices to fully accept the august will of God. We acknowledge our insignificance and misery, and an immense weariness from the wrongdoings we have been nourishing in our hearts strikes us and we feel the nothingness that we represent in this shell of fragile wood floating on the abyss, overcome by a peculiar seasickness that causes us extreme discomfort! The end of human existence is always a storm like this one in the unknown regions of our inner world, because we never respond when we hear to the divine warnings and we seek the route of the anguishing and destructive storm of our own making."

The terrified assembly listened to what he was saying, seized by indescribable fear. Observing that they were all huddled close together in shared anguish, he continued: "Let us contemplate the picture of our suffering. See how danger teaches us to be suddenly fraternal. Here we are: Roman patricians, merchants from Alexandria, plutocrats from Phoenicia, authorities, soldiers, prisoners, women and children... Although different from one another, before God the suffering unites our sentiments for the same purpose: being saved and restored to peace. I believe that life on dry land

would be much different if people there could understand each other as we are doing here and now on the expanse of the sea.”

Some were overcome by resentment at the Apostle’s words, but the great majority came closer to him in acknowledgment of his superior inspiration and eager to seek shelter under the shade of his heroic virtue.

After fourteen days of fog and storm, the Alexandrian ship ran aground on the isle of Malta, to everyone’s elation. However, seeing that the danger had passed, and feeling humiliated by the Apostle’s attitude during the journey, the captain suggested to two soldiers that they murder the prisoners from Caesarea before they could escape. The centurion’s agents took it upon themselves to carry out this idea, but Julius opposed it categorically, displaying the spiritual transformation he was now enjoying in the light of the redemptive Gospel. The prisoners who knew how to swim jumped bravely into the water, while others grabbed onto broken pieces of the ship in order to reach the shore.

The natives of the island, as well as a few Romans who lived there on administration duty, welcomed the castaways warmly; but since there were so many of them there were not enough accommodations. Even the strongest were freezing from the intense cold. Paul, however, displaying his courage and experience in confronting nature’s adversities, sought to set an example for the weaker ones and ordered fires to be made without delay. Bonfires were quickly lit to warm everyone up, but as the Apostle was throwing a bunch of dried branches onto the crackling flames, a viper sank its poisonous fangs into his hand. To everyone’s astonishment, the former rabbi held it calmly in the air until it fell into the fire. Luke and Timothy rushed to him in great distress. The head of the cohort and some friends were grief-stricken because when the natives saw what had happened, they alarmed everyone, affirming that the reptile was one of the most venomous of the region, and that its victim would not live more than a few hours.

The natives felt sorry for Paul and withdrew discreetly; others were very frightened and affirmed: “This man must be a great criminal, for after saving himself from the ferocious waves he came here only to meet the punishment of the gods.”

Not a few were counting the minutes, expecting the Apostle to die; Paul, however, warming himself as best he could, observed their faces and prayed

fervently. In light of the natives' prognosis, Timothy approached Paul more closely and told him what they were saying.

The former rabbi smiled and said: "Don't worry. The opinions of common folk are very inconstant; I have my own experience in this regard. Let's attend to our duties, because ignorance is always ready to shift curse into praise and vice-versa. It's quite possible that in a few hours they will consider me a god."

When they saw that he did not show the slightest hint of pain, the natives did in fact begin regarding him as a supernatural entity. Since he was immune to the viper's venom, he could not be an ordinary man but someone sent from Olympus – all should obey him.

Soon the highest official on Malta, Publius Appianus, arrived on site and arranged for the first measures to aid the castaways. They were taken to huge unoccupied sheds near where he lived, where they received hot broth, medicine and clothing. Mindful of the prestige of their respective positions, the imperial agent reserved the best rooms in his own residence for the captain of the ship and the centurion Julius until new accommodations could be arranged on the island. The head of the cohort, however, by now felt extremely close to Paul, and while praising the Apostle's heroic virtues, he asked the generous Roman official to receive the former rabbi with the deference he deserved.

Publius Appianus was aware of the elevated spiritual nature of the Damascus convert, and upon hearing about the extraordinary facts that were attributed to him regarding his healings, he told the centurion movingly: "How fortunate! I am glad you have told me this. My ill father is here and I wish to test the virtues of this holy man of the people of Israel!"

Paul acquiesced to Julius's invitation and went unafraid to Publius's house. Upon being taken to the elderly patient, he laid his rough, wrinkled hands on him in moving and ardent prayer. The old man had been burning up with a deadly fever, but he experienced immediate relief and rendered thanks to the gods of his beliefs. Overcome with surprise, Publius Appianus watched as he got up and tried to kiss his benefactor's hands in worship. The former rabbi, however, took advantage of the situation right then and there and praised the Divine Master, proclaiming the eternal truths and explaining that all goodness came from His merciful and just heart – not from poor and fragile creatures like him.

The imperial agent immediately wanted to know about the Gospel. Paul took from the folds of his tattered tunic the parchments containing the Good News – the only legacy he had in his hands after the storm – and almost proudly began expounding on the thoughts and teachings of Jesus. Publius ordered the document to be copied and promised to intervene in the Apostle’s case, using his influence in Rome in order to procure his release.

News of the incident had spread in just a few hours. Nothing else was talked about except the providential man whom the gods had sent to the island so that the sick could be healed and the people could receive new revelations.

With Julius’s consent, the ex-rabbi and his companions obtained an old hall from the administrator, where evangelical services began to be held regularly during the harsh winter months. Multitudes of the sick were healed, and in the light of the treasures of Christ, the impoverished elderly received new hope. When the season for sailing returned, Paul had already established on the island a huge Christian family filled with peace and worthy fruition for the future.

Attentive to the imperatives of his duties, Julius decided to leave with the prisoners aboard the ship “Castor and Pollux,” which had wintered there and was sailing for Italy.

The day they were to set sail, the Apostle had the consolation of assessing the loving interest of his new friends of the Gospel, receiving moving demonstrations of fraternal affection. There too, the august banner of Christ had been unfurled forever.

The ship sailed for the Italian coast beneath favorable winds.

Arriving in Syracuse, Sicily, and helped by the kind centurion (now a devoted friend), Paul of Tarsus took advantage of a three-day stay in the city to preach the Kingdom of God, attracting numerous people to the Gospel.

Next, the ship entered the strait, touched at Rhegium and from there steered toward Puteoli, not far from the Vesuvius.

Before disembarking, the centurion approached the Apostle respectfully and said: “My friend, until now you have been under the aid of my direct, personal friendship; but from now on we must travel under the questioning eyes of the inhabitants surrounding the metropolis, and we must bear in mind your status as a prisoner.”

Noticing his obvious embarrassment mixed with humility and respect, Paul exclaimed: “Don’t worry about it, Julius! I know that carrying out your duty requires you to cuff my wrists. Get on with it! It would not be right for me to compromise such a pure friendship as ours.”

The head of the cohort had tears in his eyes, but taking the cuffs from a small bag, he emphasized: “I’m happy to be remaining with you. I wish I were, like you, a prisoner of Christ!”

Paul was extremely moved as he held out his hand to be chained to the centurion³⁸ under the caring look of his three companions.

Julius ordered the common prisoners to be placed in barred prisons; Paul, Timothy, Aristarchus and Luke would be staying in his company at a modest inn. In view of the humility of the Apostle and his friends, the chief of the cohort seemed more generous and fraternal. Desirous of pleasing the aging disciple of Jesus, he immediately requested information as to whether there were any Christians in Puteoli, and if there were, they should come to see him in order to get to know the workers of the holy sowing of the Gospel. Within a few hours the soldier in charge of the mission arrived with a kind old man named Sixtus Flacus, whose face was overflowing with intense joy. As soon as he entered, he approached the old Apostle and kissed his hands, wetting them with tears in a rapture of spontaneous love. They immediately struck up a consoling conversation in which Paul of Tarsus participated movingly. Flacus told him that there had been a church in the city for a long time; that the Gospel was gaining ground in people’s hearts; that the former rabbi’s letters were the topic of meditation and study in all the Christian homes, which recognized in his activities the mission of a messenger of the Savior Messiah. From an old bag he took a copy of the epistle to the Romans, kept by the brethren of Puteoli with special care.

Paul listened to everything gratefully impressed, as if he had arrived in a new world.

Julius in turn was very happy. And giving vent to his natural enthusiasm, Flacus sent messages to his friends. Little by little, the modest inn filled with new faces. Bakers, merchants and craftsmen came, hoping to shake hands with the friend of the Gentiles. They all wanted to drink in the Apostle’s concepts, to see him up close, to kiss his hands. Paul and his companions were invited to speak at the church that same night, and aware that the centurion intended to proceed to Rome the following day, the sincere

disciples of the Gospel in Puteoli asked Julius to allow Paul to stay with them for at least seven days, to which the head of the cohort happily agreed.

The community experienced hours of immense joy. Flacus and his companions sent two emissaries to Rome so that friends in the imperial city would get wind of the Apostle's arrival. And singing praises in their hearts, the believers spent the days in unlimited blessedness.

After a week of fruitful, happy work, the centurion said it was time to leave.

They still had over 120 miles to go, which meant a march of seven exhausting days.

The small group departed, accompanied by more than 50 Christians from Puteoli, who accompanied the former rabbi as far as the Forum of Appius on resilient horses, keeping watch over the carts of the guards and prisoners. In that place, a little more than 40 miles from Rome, the first representation of the disciples of the Gospel from the imperial city were awaiting the Apostle to the Gentiles. They were elderly men surrounded by a few kind companions who nearly carried the former rabbi on their shoulders. Julius was unable to hide the surprise in his soul. He had never traveled with a prisoner of such renown. From the Forum of Appius, the troupe went to a place called "The Three Taverns," and was joined by a large wagonload of elderly Romans, always surrounded by strong and well-disposed horsemen. In this region, singularly named because of the great comfort of its inns, more wagons and new friends were awaiting Paul of Tarsus with sublime displays of joy. The Apostle was engrossed in soft and sweet emotions as he contemplated the regions of Lazio. He had the impression of having arrived in a world different from his Asia full of bitter struggle.

With Julius's permission, the most representative figure of the elderly Romans took a seat next to Paul for that joyful end to the journey. After confirming that the head of the cohort was sympathetic toward Jesus' doctrine, Old Apollodorus became livelier and more informative about what he was saying, gladly answering the questions of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

"You are coming to Rome at a good time," emphasized the old man in a resigned tone. "We get the feeling that our sufferings for Jesus are going to increase. We are in the year 61, but three years ago the disciples of the Gospel began dying in the arena for the august name of the Savior."

“Yes,” said Paul of Tarsus kindly, “I had not yet been imprisoned in Jerusalem when I heard of the indirect persecutions against the followers of Christianity by the Roman authorities.”

“And not a few have shed their blood in the murderous show,” added the old man. “Our fellow brethren have fallen by the hundreds under the jeers of unconscionable people, torn to bits by wild beasts or broken on the stakes of martyrdom.”

Very pale, the centurion asked: “But how can this be? Are there legal measures justifying these criminal acts?”

“Who could possibly speak of justice in Nero’s government?” replied Apollodorus with a smile of holy resignation. “I just recently lost a beloved son to the horrible carnage.”

“But how?” the head of the cohort asked again astonished.

“Very simple,” explained the old man. “Christians are led to the circuses of martyrdom and death as guilty, impoverished slaves. Since there are as yet no legal grounds justifying such condemnations, the victims are labeled as captives deserving of the ultimate sacrifice.”

“But isn’t there one politician, at least, who could unmask this shameful sophism?”

“Nearly all the honest and righteous statesmen have been exiled, not to mention many who were induced by the Emperor’s henchmen to commit suicide. We believe that an open declaration of persecution against the disciples of the Gospel will not be long in coming. The measure has been delayed only by the intervention of some women converts to Jesus, who have done everything they can for the defense of our principles. Otherwise, perhaps, the situation would be even worse.”

“We must deny ourselves and take up our cross,” exclaimed Paul of Tarsus, understanding the harshness of the times.

“All this is very strange to us,” said Julius bitterly. “We do not see any reason for such tyranny. The persecution of Christ’s followers as they work for a better world is an absurdity when so many pockets of wrongdoers are thriving, demanding legal repression. What is the pretext for promoting this underhanded movement?”

Apollodorus seemed to think for a moment and replied: “We are accused of being enemies of the state, that we are undermining its political bases with subversive and destructive ideas. The concept of goodness in Christianity provides an opportunity for many people to misinterpret Jesus’ teachings. Well-off and prominent Romans cannot tolerate the idea of human fraternity. To them an enemy is an enemy, a slave is a slave, a wretch is a wretch. It would not occur to them to give up their feast of easy and criminal pleasures for even one minute to think about social improvement. Those who worry about the plebeians’ problems are very rare. A charitable patrician is branded with mockery. In such an environment those who are down and out have found in Christ Jesus a beloved Savior and the greedy an enemy to be eliminated so that people will no longer cherish any hope. In light of all this we can imagine the progress of the Christian doctrine among the afflicted and poor, since Rome has always been an enormous wagon of worldly triumph, driven by authoritarian and tyrannical torturers while surrounded by starving crowds who pick up the leftover crumbs. The first Christian proclamations passed unnoticed, but when the popular masses showed that they grasped the lofty reach of the new doctrine, bitter struggles ensued. From being free in its manifestations, Christianity came under tight surveillance. It was said that our groups originated from witchcraft and sorcery. Next, as small slave rebellions arose in the noble palaces in the city, our meetings for prayer and spiritual benefit were prohibited and the gatherings were dispersed by force. However, in light of the security enjoyed by the funeral cooperatives, we began meeting late at night in the heart of the catacombs. Even so, our prayer groups were discovered by the Emperor’s henchmen and since then we have been experiencing heavy afflictions.”

“That is all just horrible!” exclaimed the centurion. “And it is surprising that there are authorities ready to carry out such unjust orders!”

Apollodorus smiled and added: “The current tyranny justifies everything. Aren’t you yourself escorting a prisoner Apostle? However, I recognize the fact that you are a good friend of his.”

The old and astute observer’s comparison rendered the centurion slightly pale.

“Yes, yes,” he muttered, trying to find an explanation.

Paul, however, realized his friend’s embarrassing position and came to his rescue: “The truth of the matter is that I was not imprisoned because of

wicked Romans – who do not know Jesus Christ – but because of my own countrymen. Besides, both in Jerusalem and in Caesarea I found the sincerest goodwill in the agents of the Empire. In all this, my friends, the command to serve the Master prevails. For the crucial success of their redemptive endeavors, His disciples cannot walk in the world without bearing the marks of the cross.”

The centurion and Apollodorus looked at each other in satisfaction. The Apostle’s explanation had clarified the problem completely.

The large group reached Alba Longa, where a new contingent of horsemen awaited the valorous missionary. From there to Rome the caravan moved more slowly, experiencing sublime feelings of joy. Paul of Tarsus was very touched as he admired the extraordinary beauty of the landscape along the Via Appia. A few more minutes and the travelers reached Porta Capena, where hundreds of women and children were awaiting the Apostle. It was a moving scene!

The cortege stopped so that friends could welcome him. Eminently moved, the centurion watched the unforgettable scene as he watched elderly women with snow-white hair kissing Paul’s hands with infinite affection.

The Apostle was enraptured by such outbursts of love and did not know whether to contemplate the prodigious panorama of the “city of the seven hills,” or to stop the course of his emotions to fall prostrate in spirit in due reverence of gratitude to Jesus.

Obeying Apollodorus’ friendly suggestion, the group dispersed.

The whole of Rome was softly bathed in an opalescent sunset. A refreshing breeze was blowing in from afar to soothe the hot afternoon. Mindful of the fact that Paul needed some rest, the centurion decided to spend the night in an inn and present himself with the prisoners to the Praetorian Guard on the following day after resting up from the long and exhausting journey.

Thus, the next morning he appeared before the relevant authorities to present the prisoners. It had been a wise move because the former rabbi felt perfectly strong again. The night before, Luke, Timothy and Aristarchus had left him in order to lodge in the company of Christian brothers until they could get settled in the new surroundings.

The Caesarean centurion met with officials in the Via Nomentana Guard. Even though they were perfectly capable of attending to him regarding the matter that had brought him to the capital of the Empire, he made it a point to await General Burrus, the Emperor's personal friend who was known for his honesty, before explaining the Apostle's case.

The general attended him quickly and kindly, and was sufficiently informed of the former rabbi's cause as well as his personal antecedents and the struggles and sacrifices he had had to endure. He promised to look into the case with great interest after carefully putting away the documents sent by the Caesarean justice. In the Apostle's presence he told the centurion that if the documents proved the Roman citizenship of the accused, he could enjoy the privileges of "custodia libera,"³⁹ living outside the prison and accompanied by only one guard until the magnanimity of Caesar decided his appeal.

Paul was taken to the prison with the others as a preliminary measure before the examination of his documentation. Julius bade an emotional adieu and the contrite and respectful guards embraced Paul. The high officials of the Praetorian Guard watched the scene with undisguised amazement. No prisoner had ever appeared there with such a demonstration of love and regard.

After one week, during which he had been permitted ongoing contact with Luke, Aristarchus and Timothy, the Apostle received an order to set up residence close to the prison – a privilege conferred because of his rights – although he had to remain under the supervision of a police guard until his appeal was finally decided.

With the aid of the brethren of the city, Luke rented a modest room on Via Nomentana, to where the valorous preacher of the Gospel was transferred, full of courage and trust in God.

Far from losing heart before the obstacles, Paul continued to write consoling and wisdom-filled epistles to the distant communities. On the second day in his new accommodations he recommended to his three companions that they should look for work so that they would not be a burden to the brothers, explaining that he himself would live on bread given to the prisoners – as was only right – until Caesar could hear his appeal.

And that is, in fact, what he did, going daily to the barred prison where he ate his ration of food. He took advantage of these hours of contact with the prisoners or the victims of human cruelty to preach the comforting truth of the

Kingdom, even though they were in shackles. Everybody listened to him in spiritual delight, joyful at the news that they were not abandoned by the Savior. There were criminals from Esquilinus, bandits from the provincial regions, malefactors from Subura, thievish slaves handed over to justice by their masters for the necessary “regeneration” and poor individuals persecuted by the tyranny of the time, suffering under the terrible influence of the corruption of the administration.

Paul of Tarsus’ words acted like a balm of holy consolation. The prisoners acquired new hope and many were converted to the Gospel, such as Onesimus the regenerated slave who has passed down through the history of Christianity in the loving epistle to Philemon.

On the third day of his new situation, Paul of Tarsus called his friends to decide on some undertakings he deemed indispensable. He pressed for an urgent understanding with the Jews. He needed to pass on to them the light of the Good News, but a visit to the synagogue was impossible for now. Without putting a stop to the dynamic impulses of his fertile mind, he asked Luke to call together the leaders of Judaism in the capital of the Empire in order to give them an exposition on the principles that he deemed appropriate.

That very afternoon, a large number of Jewish elders came to his room.

Paul of Tarsus expounded the generous news of the Kingdom of God, explained his position and referred to the riches of the Gospel. His listeners showed some interest, but aware of their traditions, they ended up taking a reserved and doubtful attitude.

When Paul finished up his enthusiastic oratory, rabbi Menandrus declared in the name of the others: “What you are saying deserves our greatest consideration; however, my friend, we have not yet received any information from Judea about you. Nevertheless, we do have some knowledge of this Jesus to whom you refer with such tenderness and veneration. He is talked about in Rome as a criminal revolutionary who, in Jerusalem, deserved the death reserved for thieves and wrongdoers. His doctrine is deemed contrary to the essence of the Law of Moses. Still, we sincerely wish to listen to you regarding the New Prophet. On the other hand, it is right that we here should not be the only ones who hear about this remarkable news. It would be appropriate for your concepts to be addressed to the majority of our brothers so that isolated judgments do not prejudice the interests of the whole.”

Paul perceived the subtlety of this remark and asked that they set a day for him to preach to a larger assembly. His suggestion was received by the elderly Jews with due interest.

On the appointed day a huge group packed to overflowing the humble room where the former rabbi had set up his “tent” for his evangelical work. He preached the lesson of the Good News and from morning to afternoon patiently explained the glorious mission of Jesus. A few of the brothers seemed to grasp the new teachings, while the majority engaged in noisy interruptions and unproductive arguments. The Apostle remembered the time of his journeys and saw here the exact repetition of the exasperating scenes from the Asian synagogues, where the Jews had engaged in bitter debates.

Night was approaching and the discussions continued heatedly. The sun was departing the landscape, gilding the top of the distant hills with gold. Noticing that the former rabbi had taken a pause to regain his breath, Luke approached and confided: “It hurts me to see how much effort you spend to win the spirit of Judaism!”

Paul thought for a few moments and answered: “Yes, to see their willful rebellion wearies my soul; however, worldly experience has taught me to somewhat discern the position of spirits. There are two classes of individuals for whom the renewing contact with Jesus is most difficult. The first I saw in Athens and it is comprised of individuals poisoned by the world’s erroneous knowledge, those who are crystallized in an imaginary superiority and who think much of themselves. In my opinion these are the most unfortunate. The second is comprised of the recalcitrant Jews, who, possessing a precious legacy from the past, do not understand faith without religious battles, are hardened in the pride of the Jewish race and persevere in an erroneous interpretation of God. From this we understand better the words of Christ, who classified the simple and peaceable of the earth as blessed creatures. Few educated Gentiles and few Jewish believers in the Old Law are prepared for the blessed school of perfection with the Divine Master.”

Luke considered how right the Apostle was; but at that moment the Jews’ noisy and aggravating conversations seemed to be quickly fermenting an unavoidable fight. Eager for peace, the former rabbi climbed back atop the podium and exclaimed: “Brothers, let us avoid sterile arguments and listen to the voice of our own conscience! Continue examining the Law and the Prophets, where you will find the promise of the Messiah who has already come ... Ever since Moses, all the teachers of Israel have referred to the

Master with characters of fire ... We are not to blame for your spiritual deafness. In light of the fierce arguments of a moment ago, I am reminded of Isaiah's lesson when he says that many will look without seeing and will listen without understanding. They are the hardened spirits, who worsen their own infirmity and wind up in desperate struggles so that Jesus may later convert them and heal them with the balm of His infinite love. However, you can be sure that this message will be gratefully received by the simple and unfortunate Gentiles, who are, in fact, blessed by God."

This frank and vehement statement by the Apostle struck the assembly like lightning. Complete silence ensued. Differing from the sentiments of the majority, an elderly Jew approached the Damascus convert and said: "I know exactly what you are saying, but I would ask you to continue to minister this Gospel to our people nonetheless. There are well-intentioned followers of Moses who can profit from Jesus' teachings to enrich themselves with His eternal values."

This loving and sincere appeal was made in a moving voice. Deeply moved, Paul embraced the sympathizer of the new doctrine and added: "This humble room is yours also. Come here to learn about the Gospel of Christ whenever you like. You can copy of all the notes I have."

"But don't you teach in the synagogue?"

"For now I am a prisoner and cannot, but I will write a letter to our brothers of goodwill."

In a few minutes the crowded meeting was adjourned amid the first darkness of night.

From then on, taking advantage of the last hours of each day, Paul's companions watched as he wrote a document to which he devoted profound attention. At times he was seen writing in tears as if he wished to make the message a repository of holy inspiration. In two months' time he gave the work to Aristarchus to copy, saying: "This is my letter to the Hebrews. I made a point of writing it myself and calling on my own resources. Since I am dedicating it to the brothers of my race, I have sought to write it from my soul."

His friend understood his intention, and before beginning to copy it he remarked on the singular style and the sublime and uncommon ideas.

Paul continued working incessantly to the benefit of all. His situation as a prisoner was the most comfortable possible. He became the dedicated benefactor of all the guards, who witnessed his apostolic endeavors. For some, he had relieved their hearts with the joys of the Good News; for others, he had healed chronic and painful illnesses. Frequently, the benefit was not restricted only to the person concerned, because the Roman legionaries also brought relatives, loved ones and friends so they could benefit from contact with that man dedicated to the interests of God. On the third day he was no longer shackled; the soldiers dispensed with that formality and guarded his door only as simple friends. These kind soldiers often invited him for a stroll around the city, especially along the Via Appia, which had become his favorite place.

Touched, the Apostle thanked them for these tokens of concession.

The benefit of his companionship became more obvious day by day. Impressed by his instructional conversation and his polite manners, many legionaries, who before had been degenerate and negligent, became useful elements to the administration and society. The guards began to compete for sentry duty at his door and this he cherished as the best testimonial of his spiritual worth.

Constantly visited by brothers and emissaries from his dear churches in Macedonia and Asia, he proceeded to double his energies in the loving task of assisting friends and collaborators from afar through highly inspired letters.

It had been almost two years since his appeal to Caesar had lain forgotten on the desks of indifferent judges, when an event of great importance occurred. One day, a legionary friend brought Paul a man of strong and hale features who looked about forty years old. He was Acacius Domicius, a person of great political influence who some time ago had become blind under mysterious circumstances.

Paul of Tarsus welcomed him kindly, and after laying his hands on him and explaining what Jesus wished for those who benefited from His generosity, he exclaimed movingly: “Brother, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I now invite you to see!”

“I can see! I can see!” cried the Roman, overcome with infinite joy; and immediately he instinctively knelt down in tears and murmured: “Your God is the true God!”

Profoundly grateful to Jesus, the Apostle offered his arm for the man to get up, and right there Domicius wished to know the spiritual content of the new doctrine in order to reform and change his life. He kindly wrote down the information regarding the former rabbi's legal process, emphasizing on leaving: "God will help me so that I can repay the good you have done for me. As for your situation, have no doubts about the outcome you deserve, because by next week we will have resolved the matter with Caesar's pardon!"

Four days later, in fact, the aging servant of the Gospel was called to make a deposition. In conformance with legal orders he appeared alone before the judges, answering the smallest questions with admirable presence of mind. The patrician magistrates saw the inconsistency of the complaint, the childishness of the arguments presented by the Sanhedrin, and not only considering the political status of Acacius, who had employed every possible effort in this case, but also because of the profound sympathy the Apostle evoked, they gave their instructions in the process in a most favorable light and sent it with Domicius for the Emperor's verdict.

Paul's generous friend rejoiced at this initial victory, convinced that soon his benefactor would be free. Without wasting any time, he mobilized his best friends – among them Poppaea Sabina⁴⁰ – and finally succeeded in obtaining the imperial pardon.

Paul of Tarsus received the news with an affirmation of acknowledgment to Jesus. His friends rejoiced more than he did, celebrating the event with memorable expressions of heartfelt feelings.

The Damascus convert, however, did not see in this only a reason for personal joy, but the obligation to intensify the spread of the Gospel of Jesus.

For one month at the beginning of the year 63, he visited the Christian communities of every district in the capital of the Empire. His presence was requested by all circles, who received him with loving demonstrations of respect and love for his moral authority. Organizing work plans for all the house churches in the city, and after countless sermons in the silent catacombs, the tireless worker decided to leave for Spain. In vain his coworkers intervened, begging him to give up the idea. Nothing could deter him. For a long time he had nourished the desire to visit the Far West, and if possible he would like to die convinced of having taken the Gospel to the ends of the world.

38 As was customary in ancient Rome, prisoners were bound by the hand to the soldiers who guarded them. – Tr.

39 Open custody, or house arrest. – Tr.

40 Second wife of the Roman Emperor Nero. – Tr.

X

Meeting the Master

On the eve of the Apostle's departure to seek out the Spanish Gentiles, he received a moving letter from Simon Peter. The ex-fisherman had written to him from Corinth to say that he would be arriving in the imperial city in the near future. The letter was affable and tender, albeit filled with sad and bitter information. Peter told his friend about his latest setbacks in Asia and demonstrated a keen interest in what had happened to Paul in Rome. He was unaware of the fact that the former rabbi had been freed and he sought to offer him brotherly comfort. He, Simon, had also decided to exile himself among the brethren of the imperial metropolis in the hopes of being useful to his friend in whatever circumstances. In the same intimate document he asked Paul to make use of its bearer to inform the Roman brethren of his intent to stay among them for some time.

The Damascus convert was highly touched, and read and re-read his friend's message.

He was told by the Peter's emissary – a brother from the Corinthian church – that the venerable Apostle of Jerusalem would be arriving in the port of Ostia within ten days, more or less.

Paul did not hesitate for a single moment. He took every measure needed, forewarned his closest friends, and prepared a modest house where Peter could stay with his family. He created the best environment possible to receive his esteemed friend. Using the argument that he would soon be leaving for Spain, he declined any personal aid from his friends, pointing out Simon's needs instead so that he would lack nothing. He took all his household furnishings from the modest place he had rented next to the Porta Lavernalis to the little house reserved for Simon next to the Jewish cemetery on the Via Appia. This example of cooperation was highly appreciated by all.

Even the poorest brothers made it a point to contribute small articles for the venerable Apostle, who would arrive without provisions of any sort.

When he received word that the ship was making port, the former rabbi made haste to Ostia. Along with some other devoted coworkers, Luke and Timothy – who were always in his company – helped him surmount small obstacles on the way, holding his arm here and there.

They had not been able to organize a more ostensive reception. The voiceless persecution of the Nazarene's followers was closing in from all sides. The Emperor's last honest counselors were "disappearing." Rome was dismayed with the enormity and number of crimes occurring daily. Members both of the aristocracy and the plebeians were victims of cruel attacks. An atmosphere of terror dominated all political activities, and in the mix of these calamities the Christians were the ones most cruelly abused due to the hostile attitude of those who were comfortable with the old gods, and who luxuriated in the pleasures of a dissolute and easy life. Jesus' followers were accused of and held responsible for any and all problems that arose. If there was a storm that was fiercer than usual, the phenomenon was due to the adherents of the new doctrine. If the winter was harsher, the accusation fell on them, because no one had disdained the sanctuaries of the old belief as much as had the disciples of the Crucified One, loathing the gifts and sacrifices to the tutelary spirits. From the reign of Claudius onward, terrible tales were spread regarding Christian practices. Eager for the distribution of wheat at the great festivities in the Circus, people's imaginations conjured up non-existent situations and engendered outrageous and absurd ideas regarding believers in the Gospel. For this reason, beginning in the year 58, peaceable Christians were taken to the arena as revolutionary slaves or rebels who had to be exterminated. The oppression had grown worse by the day. Romans who were more distinguished or less so – depending on their name and financial situation – and who sympathized with Christ's doctrine, continued to be immune to public shame; but the poor, the workers and the children of the plebeians were led to martyrdom by the hundreds. Thus, the friends of the Gospel did not prepare any public show of homage for Simon Peter's arrival. Instead they sought to make the occasion a completely intimate gathering so as not to awaken reprisals from opportunists.

Overcome with joy, Paul of Tarsus held out his arms to his old friend from Jerusalem. Simon had brought his wife and children, in addition to John. His kind words were filled with news for the Apostle to the Gentiles. In a few

minutes he learned of James's death and the new torments being inflicted by the Sanhedrin on the church in Jerusalem. The old fisherman, in a good mood, told him about the latest incidents of his life. He commented on the harshest events with a smile and interspersed the entire account with praises to God. After reporting on the struggles he had endured on many and repeated journeys, he told the former rabbi that he had sought refuge for a few days in Ephesus with John. The two had then gone to Corinth, where they decided to head for the capital of the Empire. Paul in turn told of the tasks he had received from Jesus over the past few years. One could not help but see the optimism and courage of these men, who, inflamed with the Messianic and loving spirit of the Master, were commenting on the disappointments and sorrows of the world as if they were the laurels of life.

After rejoicing over the re-encounter, the group walked discreetly to the little house reserved for Simon Peter and his family.

In light of the excellence of the loving reception, the ex-fisherman could not find words to express the joy in his soul. Like Paul when he arrived in Puteoli, Peter had the impression of being in a world different from the one he had lived in until then.

With Peter's arrival the apostolic work intensified; nonetheless, Paul did not give up his idea of going to Spain. Declaring that Peter would be a better replacement for him, he decided to embark as planned on a small ship sailing for the Gallic coast. Well-meaning protests were of no use, not even Peter's insistence that he should postpone the journey. Accompanied by Luke, Timothy and Demas, the old advocate of the Gentiles left at dawn on a beautiful day, filled with generous plans.

The missionaries visited part of Gaul⁴¹ on their way to the Spanish territory, and spent quite some time in the region of Tortosa. Everywhere they went the Apostle's words and deeds won new souls for Christ, increasing the work of the Gospel and renewing everyone's hopes in the light of the Kingdom of God.

In Rome, however, the situation was becoming increasingly more severe. With the perverse Tigellinus heading the Praetorian Prefecture, terror had become more acute among Jesus' disciples. At this point the only thing missing was an edict in which Roman citizens who were Gospel sympathizers would be condemned publicly, because freemen, descendants of other peoples and plebeians were already filling the prisons.

Simon Peter, as the eminent figure of the movement, had no rest. In spite of the natural fatigue of old age he tried to attend to every need that arose. His powerful spirit overcame every setback and he carried out the smallest duties with utmost devotion to the cause of the Truth. He assisted the sick, preached in the catacombs and traveled long distances, always in good spirits and happy. Christians all over the world would never forget that phalanx of selfless individuals who preceded them in the early years of bearing witness to the faith as they confronted dolorous and unjust situations, watered the seeds of Christ with blood and tears, and embraced each other in mutual comfort during the darkest times of the Gospel's history at the time of the heinous spectacles of the arena and the prayers of affliction rising from the abandoned burial grounds.

Tigellinus was a sworn enemy of the Nazarene's converts and sought to worsen the situation by all the means possible within his hateful and wicked reach.

John was preparing to return to Asia, when a group of thugs surprised him during a loving and inspired sermon in which he was bidding farewell to the brethren of Rome with touching exhortations of gratitude to Jesus. In spite of explaining himself respectfully, he was arrested and beaten mercilessly. With him, dozens of brothers were imprisoned in the filthy cells of the prison on Esquilinus⁴².

Peter received the news, grievously surprised. He knew how much work awaited his kind companion in Asia, and he prayed to the Lord not to forsake him in obtaining an acquittal. How to proceed under such trying circumstances? He resorted to the prestigious relationships the city offered him. However, his friends were equally lacking in political clout in the administrative posts of the time. The well-off Christians did not dare confront the overwhelming wave of persecution and tyranny. The aged leader of the Jerusalem church did not lose heart. He needed to free his friend and to do so he resorted to every means available. Understanding the natural timidity of the Roman sympathizers of Christ, he hurriedly called a meeting of close friends to examine the matter.

In the middle of the discussion someone remembered Paul. The Apostle to the Gentiles had a large number of prominent friends in the capital of the Empire. His own acquittal had come from the favored circle of Poppaea Sabina. Several of Afranius Burrus's military collaborators were her admirers, and Acacius Domicius, who had close ties with the Praetorian Guard, was her

dedicated and unconditional friend. No one other than the former weaver from Tarsus could be entrusted with the delicate mission of saving the prisoner. Wouldn't it be reasonable to ask for his help? The urgent character of the matter was discussed, especially because numerous Christians were dying every day on Esquilinus by being scalded with boiling oil. Tigellinus and some accomplices from the criminal administration amused themselves by torturing the victims. The oil was thrown on the unfortunates tied to the stake of torture. At other times the prisoners were tied by the wrists and dunked in large barrels of boiling water. The Praetorian Prefect demanded fellow believers to witness the torture as a warning example for everybody. The prisoners followed these sad procedures in silent tears. Once a victim's death was verified, a soldier was charged with throwing the remains to the starving fish in huge tanks in the hateful prison. Given the overall situation of terror, could they count on Paul's intervention? Spain was far away. It was possible that he might not arrive in time for John's personal case. Peter considered the suitability of the recourse and stated that they would continue working on John's behalf. Nevertheless, they would soon be forced to resort to Paul's influence because the situation was growing worse by the minute. That year, 64, had begun with terrifying prospects and they could not do without an energetic and resolute man heading the interests of the cause.

The congregation finally agreed that it was time. Brother Crescencius, who had become a devoted coworker of Paul in Rome, was sent to Spain with their urgent request. He left Ostia amid enormous anxiety and with a letter from Simon Peter.

After much traveling around, the Apostle to the Gentiles had settled in Tortosa for the time being. There he had succeeded in gathering a large number of coworkers devoted to Jesus. His apostolic endeavors remained very active, albeit less intensive due to his physical fatigue. His letter writing had slowed down but had not stopped altogether. In answer to the needs of the churches in the East, Timothy left Spain for Asia, bearing several letters and many friendly recommendations. A new contingent of diligent and sincere coworkers had formed around the Apostle. Everywhere, Paul of Tarsus taught service and selflessness, peace of conscience and the practice of the good.

As he was planning new journeys with Luke, Simon's messenger arrived in Tortosa.

The former rabbi read the letter and decided to return to the imperial city immediately. Through the affectionate lines of his old friend he perceived the

gravity of the situation. Furthermore, John had to return to Asia. Paul knew the beneficial influence he enjoyed in Jerusalem. In Ephesus, where the church was comprised of Jews and Gentiles, the son of Zebedee had always been a noble and exemplary figure free of the sectarian spirit. Paul surmised the needs of the evangelical endeavor among the eastern communities and concluded that John should return immediately. He thus decided to intervene in the matter without delay.

As before, his friends' protests regarding his health were to no avail. In spite of his gray hair the industrious and decisive man maintained the same resolute, lofty and firm spirit that had characterized him in his distant youth. Due to a large number of ships sailing at the beginning of May of 64, he had no trouble returning to the port of Ostia with his companions.

Simon Peter welcomed him tenderly. In a few hours the Damascus convert was told of the intolerable situation created in Rome by the criminal actions of Tigellinus. John was still incarcerated in spite of the appeals filed in the courts. In private, the old fisherman from Capernaum told his friend that he predicted new sufferings and crucial events for bearing witness. A prophetic dream had foretold persecutions and severe trials. On one recent night in particular, he had contemplated a remarkable scene in which a gigantic cross seemed to envelop the whole family of the Lord's disciples in its shadow. Paul listened to him with interest and agreed with his presentiments completely. In spite of the bleak horizon, they discussed a joint action to free the son of Zebedee.

It was the month of June.

The former rabbi immediately got to work and sought out Acacius Domicius to ask for his intervention and help. He did even more: he realized that the slow process could result in failure, so with the help of prominent friends he sought to meet several officials of the Imperial Court. He was finally able to see Poppaea Sabina herself and asked for her cooperation in John's case. Nero's notorious favorite listened to his pleas in amazement. Those revelations regarding an eternal life and that concept of the Divine One frightened her. Although a declared enemy of the Christians because of her sympathy for Judaism, Poppaea was impressed by the ascetic figure of the Apostle and the arguments supporting his request. Without hiding her admiration she promised to act on his behalf, and set to work immediately.

Paul left in hopes of his friend's acquittal, because Sabina had promised to have him freed within three days.

He returned to the community and told the brethren about his meeting with Nero's favorite; however, when he had finished his explanation he was somewhat surprised at perceiving that some of them disapproved of his initiative. He asked them to explain and justify any doubts they might have. Some presented weak arguments, which he welcomed with his unfailing serenity. They stated that it was not commendable to address a dissolute courtesan to request a favor. Such behavior seemed forbidden to followers of Christ. Poppaea was a woman of a notably licentious life. She indulged in the orgies at the imperial residence on Palatinus and was known for her scandalous lechery. Was it right to have asked her for the protection of a disciple of Jesus?

Paul of Tarsus accepted these importunate questions with beatific patience, and objected sensibly: "I respect and accept your opinions, but more than anything else I consider it necessary to free John. If I myself were the prisoner, I would not deem the case so urgent and grave. I am old and spent, and it would be best – even more useful, perhaps – for me to ponder Jesus' mercy behind prison bars. But John is relatively young; he is strong and dedicated. Christianity in Asia cannot do without his constructive activities until new workers are called to the divine sowing. Regarding your doubts, however, I must pose an argument that calls for pondering. Why do you consider a request to Poppaea Sabina to be improper? Would you have the same opinion if I had addressed Tigellinus or the Emperor himself? Aren't they victims of the same prostitution that stigmatizes the favorites of their royal court? If I had arranged with a drunken soldier of the palace on Palatinus the measures needed for our friend's release, perhaps you would have applauded my gesture without reservation. Brothers, it is necessary to understand that a woman's moral fall almost always results from a man's prostitution. I agree that Poppaea is not the most suitable figure for this enterprise due to her disturbing lifestyle; however, it is the best course of action indicated by the circumstances and we need to free the Lord's devoted disciple. Moreover, I decided on such recourse by remembering the Master's exhortation in which he recommends that people should win friends through the riches of iniquity.⁴³ I realize that any relations with the palace on Palatinus comprise an expression of iniquitous wealth, but I believe it useful to mobilize those who keep themselves 'dead' in sin for some act of charity

and faith, through which they sever the ties with their wicked past, helped by the intercession of loyal friends.”

The Apostle’s explanation spread great tranquility throughout the gathering. With just a few words Paul of Tarsus had shown his friends transcendental conclusions of a spiritual order.

Poppaea did not fail in her promise. Within three days the son of Zebedee was restored to freedom. John was very frail. The ill treatment, the witnessing of the terrible scenes in prison and the anguish of expectation had immersed his spirit in a painful turmoil.

Peter rejoiced, but the former rabbi, aware of the tense atmosphere, suggested that the Galilean Apostle return to Asia without delay. The church at Ephesus was waiting for him. Jerusalem was counting on his friendly and selfless cooperation. John did not have much time to think about it because Paul, as if possessed by bitter presentiments, went to the port of Ostia to arrange for his departure and made arrangements for him on a Neapolitan ship ready to set sail for Miletus. Unable to resist the resolute former rabbi, John yielded to these measures and set sail at the end of June of 64, while his remaining friends stayed in Rome for the good fight on behalf of the Gospel.

The more somber the horizon, the more united the group of brethren in the faith became in Christ Jesus. Their meetings multiplied in isolated and abandoned graveyards. In those days of suffering the preaching seemed more beautiful.

Paul of Tarsus and his coworkers were working hard for spiritual edification, when the city was suddenly shaken by a dreadful event. On the morning of July 16, 64 a violent fire broke out near the Circus Maximus, encompassing the entire district located between Caelius and Palatinus. The fire started in large storehouses full of flammable material and spread with frightening speed. In vain workers and individuals from the populace were called upon to fight the fire; in vain the large crowd employed means to alleviate the situation. The flames continued to rise, spreading furiously and leaving heaps of debris and ruins. Everyone in Rome witnessed the sinister spectacle, excited by their threatening and terrible passions. With extraordinary speed the fire surrounded Palatinus and invaded the Velabrum⁴⁴. The first day ended with bleak prospects. The sky was covered in thick smoke and a large part of the hills was lit up by the frightful glare of the terrible fire. The elegant buildings on Aventinus and Caelius looked like

scorched trees in a blazing forest. The affliction of the victims of the enormous catastrophe worsened. Everything was in flames around the Forum and an enormously difficult exodus began. The city gates were clogged with people seized by extreme terror. Frightened animals charged down the streets as if chased by invisible pursuers. Old buildings of solid construction fell with a sinister crash. All the inhabitants of Rome wanted to flee as far as possible from the burning area. No one dared fight the fire any longer – it was out of control. On the second day it was the same unforgettable spectacle. The people gave up trying to save anything; they focused on burying the countless dead that could be found in easy-to-reach places. Dozens of people ran through the streets laughing in horrible screeches – madness became widespread among the most susceptible. The wounded were carried around on makeshift stretchers, with nowhere to go. Hordes invaded the sanctuaries to save the precious images of the gods. Thousands of women followed the impassive figures of the tutelary spirits in anguished supplication, making vows of painful sacrifices in stentorian voices. Pious men lifted maimed or merely wounded children from the vortex of the unruly mob. The entire zone of access to the Via Appia toward Alba Longa was blocked by hurried and disillusioned people beating a retreat. Hundreds of mothers screamed for their missing children, and measures were often hurriedly taken to help the ones who had gone mad. The whole population wanted to leave the city at the same time. The situation had become extremely violent and the insurgent mob attacked the litters of the patricians. Only fearless horsemen succeeded in breaking through the human bulk, provoking more blasphemies and lamentations.

The fire had almost completely devoured the noble and priceless smaller palaces of the Via ad Carinas⁴⁵, and continued destroying the Roman neighborhoods between the densely populated valleys and hills. For one week the destructive fire spread desolation and ruin day and night. Of the fourteen districts into which the imperial city was divided, only four remained undamaged. Three were reduced to smoky debris and the other seven retained only a few vestiges of their more precious buildings.

The Emperor was in Antium when the fire broke out. The truth of the matter is that, eager to build a brand new city with the immense financial resources deriving from provincial taxes, he himself had planned the famous fire in order to overcome the opposition of the people, who did not want the sanctuaries to be moved.

Besides this “urbanization plan,” the son of Agrippina was characterized in everything by his satanic originality. Believing himself to be a brilliant artist, he was actually no more than a monstrous buffoon, marking his passage through public life with indelible and hateful crimes. Wouldn't it be interesting to show the world a Rome in flames? To his way of thinking, no spectacle would be as unforgettable as this one. After the dead ashes he would rebuild the destroyed districts. He would be generous toward the victims of the huge catastrophe. He would go down in the history of the Empire as a magnanimous administrator and friend of his suffering subjects.

Nourishing such plans, he arranged the evil act with his most trustworthy henchmen and departed the city so as not to raise any suspicion in the minds of the more honest politicians.

However, he himself could not have anticipated the extent of the dreadful calamity. The fire had taken on unbelievable proportions. His unworthy advisers could not have foreseen the extent of the disaster. Snatched in a hurry from his sinful pleasures, the Emperor arrived in time to see the last day of the fire and to observe the character of the repulsive event. Going to one of the highest points of the city to contemplate the heap of ruins, he looked out over the burned districts and grasped the gravity of the situation. The destruction of private property had reached almost unlimited proportions. He could not have foreseen such dolorous consequences. Nero recognized the justified anger of the people and sought to speak in public, bearing traces of tears in his great ability to put on an act. He promised to help restore the private houses, stated that he himself shared in everyone's suffering and declared that Rome would rise again upon the smoldering ashes, more imposing and beautiful than ever. A large crowd listened to his words, attentive to his least gesture. The Emperor portrayed sentimental concern in his theatrical mime. Dissolved in tears, he referred to the lost sanctuaries and invoked the protection of the gods, increasing his emphasis with each new sentence. It had a major impact on the crowd. Caesar had never showed himself so paternalistically moved. It was not reasonable to question his promises and remarks. At one point his words rang out more pathetically and expressively. He solemnly promised the people that he would relentlessly punish those who were responsible; he would search for the arsonists; he would avenge this Roman disgrace without mercy. He even asked all the inhabitants of the city to cooperate with him in finding and exposing the guilty.

Meanwhile, as the imperial oratory became more expressive, the mob became strangely agitated. The crushing majority was now united in a terrible outcry: “Christians to the lions! To the lions!”

Nero had found the solution he was looking for. In his overexcited mind he had searched in vain for new victims for his atrociously evil schemes, someone to whom he could impute the blame for the lamentable event. This threatening outcry was the answer to his sinister ponderings. Nero knew the hatred that the common folk felt toward the humble followers of the Nazarene. The disciples of the Gospel remained distant and above the dissolute and brutal customs of the time. They did not attend the circuses, they avoided the pagan temples, they did not bow before idols nor did they applaud the political traditions of the Empire. Moreover, they preached strange teachings and seemed to be awaiting a new kingdom. The great buffoon of Palatinus felt a wave of bliss invading his myopic and congested eyes. The choice of the Roman people could not have been better. Indeed, the Christians must have been the criminals. The sword of vengeance should fall on them. He exchanged a knowing look with Tigellinus as if to say that they had chanced upon an unforeseen solution, and he immediately affirmed to the enraged mob that he would take immediate steps to repress the abuses and to punish those guilty for the catastrophe. Furthermore, the fire would be considered a crime of lese-majesty and sacrilege so that the punishment would be exceptional.

The people applauded frantically, anticipating the atmosphere at the arena with spectacles of wild beasts and songs of martyrdom.

The loathsome accusation fell heavily upon the disciples of Jesus like a heinous burden.

The first arrests were carried out like a cursed scourge. In fear of the implacable persecutors, numerous families took refuge in the cemeteries and outskirts of the half-destroyed city. All sorts of abuses were committed. Young, defenseless girls were jailed and submitted to the brutal instincts of merciless soldiers. Respectable elderly people were hauled off to prison under shackles and blows. Children were snatched from their mothers’ laps amid tears and heartrending pleas. A storm of evil had fallen upon the Crucified One’s followers, who surrendered to the unjust punishment with eyes fixed on Heaven.

The advice of prominent patricians who still cultivated the tradition of prudence and honesty was of no value to Nero. Those who approached the imperial authority with praiseworthy and just recommendations were labeled as suspects, thereby worsening the situation.

Toward the beginning of August 64, the son of Agrippina and his immediate henchmen decided to offer the people the first spectacle as a positive demonstration of the official measures being taken against the supposed authors of the nefarious crime. The rest of the victims, that is, all the prisoners who would be thrown into prison after the initial festival, would serve as ornaments for future entertainment as the city underwent reconstruction. To that end, the immediate rebuilding of the Circus Maximus was ordered. Before attending to the needs of the Imperial Court, the Emperor wished to gain the sympathy of the ignorant and suffering people by feeding them whatever might satisfy their strange caprices.

The first carnage for the people's amusement took place in immense gardens in areas that had been unscathed by the destruction. It occurred amid shameful orgies with the participation of plebeians and most of the patrician class that had surrendered to licentiousness and immorality. The festivities lasted for several nights under the light of splendid lighting and to the harmonious rhythm of numerous music ensembles filling the air with soft music. Gracious, artistically lit boats glided on the manmade lakes. Amid the scenery, protected by the darkness of the night, which the powerful torches could not banish completely, outright debauchery ran wild. The martyrdom of the Christians was lined up alongside these festive expressions. They were handed over to the people for the punishment they deemed most suitable. Thus, at regular intervals the gardens were furnished with crosses, stakes, whips and numerous other instruments of torture. There were imperial guards to help with the punitive activities. There was boiling water and oil on readymade fires, as well as white-hot pokers for whoever wished to use them.

The groans and sobs of the victims melded ironically with the harmonious notes of the lutes. Some died amid tears and prayers, to the mockery of the people; others surrendered stoically to martyrdom, gazing up at the starry sky.

The most graphic language would be insufficient to express the enormous pain of the Christian flock during that great tribulation. In spite of the unbearable torment, the faithful followers of Jesus revealed the power of faith to that perverse and decadent society as they faced the tortures falling

upon them. When questioned in the tribunals during those tragic days, they openly declared their trust in Christ Jesus and humbly accepted suffering for love of His name. Such heroism seemed to goad the animalistic tendencies of the crowd even further. New types of torture were invented. Every day, perversity presented new outlets for its venomous eloquence. The Christians, however, seemed to possess a strength unlike the kind known on bloody battlefields. Their invincible resignation, their powerful faith and their moral capacity for endurance amazed even the most audacious. Not a few went to their deaths while singing. Often, in the face of such courage, the executioners feared the mysterious, triumphant power of death.

With the August massacre finished to the tune of great popular enthusiasm, the persecution continued without respite so that the supply of victims would not be lacking for the periodic spectacles offered to the people as they rejoiced while the city was being rebuilt.

In light of the torture and carnage, Paul's heart bled with grief. The torment caused confusion in every sector. Most of the Christians from the East were deserting the battlefield, forced by imperious circumstances of a private nature. The aging Apostle, however, joined with Peter in disapproving this attitude. With the exception of Luke, every direct coworker known since their days in Asia had gone back. The former weaver, however, formed a common bond with the unfortunates and made a point to help them during the unprecedented crisis. The house churches were silent and the large halls rented in Subura for the preaching of the doctrine were closed. Only one way remained for the Master's followers to meet with one another and to find comfort in the prayers and tears they shared: the gatherings in the abandoned catacombs. And the truth is that they did not avoid any sacrifice to go to such sad and isolated places. It was in these forgotten burial grounds that they found fraternal comfort for the tragic time that was being visited upon them. There they prayed, commented on the enlightening lessons of the Master and absorbed new strength for their impending witness.

Leaning on Luke, Paul confronted the cold of the night, the thick darkness and the rut-filled roads. While Simon Peter attended to other sectors, the former rabbi headed for the old sepulchers to bring the afflicted brethren the inspiration of the Divine Master boiling in his ardent soul. The preaching often took place in the middle of the night when greatest silence dominated nature. Hundreds of disciples listened to the enlightening sermons of the aging Apostle to the Gentiles and experienced the powerful influx of his faith.

In these sacred places the Damascus convert joined in the hymns mixed with tears of sorrow. The sanctified spirit of Jesus at such moments seemed to hover over the heads of those anonymous sufferers, flooding them with divine hope.

Two months had passed since the hideous festival, and the movement in the prisons increased day by day. Great commemorations were expected. A number of stately buildings on Palatinus had been rebuilt in a somber and elegant style, demanding homage from the public powers. The work of rebuilding the Circus Maximus had progressed remarkably also. It was vital to plan worthwhile festivities, and the prisons were filled to that end. There would be no lack of prisoners for the tragic spectacle. Picturesque mock naval battles were planned, as well as the hunting of humans at the Circus, in whose arena famous plays of a mythological nature would also be presented.

The Christians prayed, suffered and waited.

One certain night, Paul preached an endearing sermon to the brethren, commenting on the Gospel of Jesus. His ideas seemed more divinely inspired than ever. The breezes of the night penetrated the burial cavern, lit by a few flickering torches. The place was full of women and children alongside several cloaked men.

After his moving sermon – listened to by all with teary eyes – the former weaver from Tarsus said eloquently: “Yes, friends, God is more beautiful on days of tragedy. When darkness threatens the way, the light is most precious and pure. During these days of suffering and death, when falsehood has dethroned the truth and virtue has been replaced by crime, let us remember Jesus on the infamous cross, which holds a divine message for us. Let us not disdain bearing sacred witness, when despite His purity, the Master Himself met with nothing but silent battles and indefinable sufferings while in this world. Let us strengthen ourselves with the idea that His Kingdom is not of this world. Let us lift our spirit to the realm of his immortal love. The city of Christians is not on this earth; it could not be Jerusalem, which crucified the Divine Messenger, nor Rome, which takes pleasure in spilling the blood of martyrs. In this world we are on the front lines of bloodless combat, working for the eternal triumph of the Lord’s peace. Therefore, let us not expect any rest in places of work and living witness. From the indestructible city of our faith, Jesus watches over us and soothes our souls. Let us walk to meet Him through suffering and painful perplexity. He ascended to the Father from the

top of Calvary. We shall follow His footsteps, accepting with humility the suffering reserved for us out of love for Him.”

The congregation seemed ecstatic listening to the Apostle’s prophetic words. Among the cold and impassive tombs the brethren in faith felt more united with each other. The certainty of spiritual victory gleamed in every eye. In those expressions of pain and hope there was a tacit commitment to follow the Crucified One to His Kingdom of Light.

The preacher made a pause, feeling overcome by strange emotions.

At that unforgettable moment a group of guards brazenly broke into the place. The centurion Volumnius, heading up the armed escort, made threats in a loud voice while the peaceable believers were stricken by surprise.

“In the name of Caesar!” bellowed the imperial centurion exultantly. And ordering the soldiers to close the circle around the defenseless Christians, he continued shouting dramatically: “Do not even think of escaping. Whoever tries will die like a dog.”

Supporting himself on a strong staff (since that night he had not been accompanied by Luke) Paul stood upright in a display of moral strength and stated firmly: “And who said that we would escape? Are you perchance unaware of the fact that Christians heed the Master whom they serve? You are the emissary of a prince of the world, for whom these sepulchers wait; but we are workers of the magnanimous and immortal Savior!”

Volumnius looked at him in wonder. Who might this aging man, so full of energy and combativeness, be? In spite of the admiration Paul inspired in him, the centurion showed his displeasure with an ironic smile. Looking the former rabbi up and down with deep contempt, he added: “Mind what you say and do here.”

And after laughing, he addressed Paul insolently: “How dare you affront the authority of Caesar! In fact, there are striking differences between the Emperor and the man crucified in Jerusalem. I see no evidence for his saving power. He leaves his victims abandoned in the bottom of prisons or on stakes of torture.”

These words were pointed with sharp sarcasm, but the Apostle answered with his usual noble conviction: “You are wrong, Centurion! The differences are considerable! You obey an unhappy and hateful persecutor, while we work for a Savior who loves and forgives. Thoughtless Roman administrators

can invent all sorts of cruelties, but Jesus will never cease to provide a fountain of blessing!”

The answer produced a notable response in his listeners. The Christians seemed more composed and confident, whereas the soldiers could not hide the enormous impact the answer had on them. Although he recognized the fearlessness of that courageous spirit, the centurion did not want to appear weak to his subordinates and exclaimed angrily: “Lucilius, three blows for this insolent old man.”

Lucilius stepped toward the impassive Apostle. Before the silent admiration of those present, the stick whistled through the air and struck the Apostle square on the side of the face. Paul, however, remained unaffected. The three blows were quick, but a stream of blood ran down the wounded face.

Even though his staff had been taken away, the former rabbi stayed on his feet with some difficulty, but without betraying the strength that characterized his energetic soul. He gazed firmly at his persecutors and said: “You can wound only my body. You can bind my feet and hands and crack my skull, but my convictions are untouchable, inaccessible to your processes of persecution.”

In the face of such composure Volumnius almost retreated in fear. He could not comprehend that moral energy confronting his amazed eyes. He began to believe that these unprotected and nameless Christians held a power that his mind could not grasp. Impressed by such resistance, he hurriedly organized lines of victims, who humbly obeyed without hesitation. The aging Tarsian Apostle took his place among the prisoners without betraying the slightest gesture of ire or rebelliousness. Attentively observing the conduct of the guards, when the group of victims and torturers left the catacomb and made its first contact with the cold dew of early dawn, Paul exclaimed: “We demand the utmost respect for the women and children!”

No one dared respond to this remark spoken in a grave tone of warning. Volumnius himself seemed to unconsciously obey the admonition of that man of powerful and invincible faith.

The group marched in silence, passing down deserted roads before arriving at the Mamertina Prison just as the first light of daybreak broke over the horizon.

Thrown first into a dark courtyard until being settled individually in barred and filthy cells, the disciples of the Lord took advantage of those few moments to mutually comfort one another and to exchange thoughts and edifying counsel.

Paul of Tarsus, however, did not rest. He asked for a hearing with the warden, a prerogative granted by rights of his Roman citizenship, and he was immediately satisfied. He expounded his doctrine openly, and impressing the warden with his fluent and convincing speech, he brought up the measures pertinent to his case and requested the appearance of several friends such as Acacius Domicius and others to testify to his conduct and honest antecedents. The warden was hesitant. He had strict orders to imprison all members of gatherings who had anything to do with the persecuted and detested creed. However, orders from higher up contained a certain leeway, in the sense of offering a way out for the “humiliores”⁴⁶, to whom the court offered the possibility of regaining their freedom if they swore by Jupiter and denied Christ Jesus. In examining Paul’s rights and determining through oral information the prestigious relationships at his disposal in Roman circles, the warden of Mamertina Prison decided to consult Acacius Domicius about what he should do.

Called to examine the issue, the Apostle’s friend kindly consented and went to speak with the prisoner after a long conversation with the warden.

Domicius explained to his benefactor that the situation was very serious; that the Prefect of the Praetorians was invested with full power to head the campaign as he deemed best; that due prudence was needed and that, as a last resort, only an appeal to the magnanimity of the Emperor remained. The Apostle would have to appear in person to defend himself in case his appeal to Caesar was granted on that same day.

As he listened to these explanations the former rabbi remembered that, one night in the middle of a storm between Greece and the island of Malta, he had heard the prophetic voice of a messenger of Jesus, who announced his appearance before Caesar, but without explaining the reason. Could this be the moment? Thousands of brethren were imprisoned or were in extreme affliction. Accused of arson, they had not found a firm and resolute voice to defend their cause with the fearlessness needed. He could see that Acacius was concerned about his freedom; but behind the subtle insinuations there was a discreet invitation for him to conceal his faith from the Emperor if he were admitted for a royal hearing. He understood his friend’s fear, but deep

down he wished to obtain the audience with Nero in order to explain the sublime principles of Christianity. He would be the advocate of his persecuted and unfortunate brethren in faith. He would confront the triumphant tyranny and request rectification of its unjust act. If he were imprisoned again he would go back to jail with his conscience clear for having fulfilled a sacred duty.

After a short meditation on the appropriateness of this seemingly providential recourse, Paul insisted that Domicius support him with all the means at his disposal.

The Apostle's friend did all he could to accomplish the desired ends. Taking advantage of the influence of all who were in a subordinate position around the Emperor, he obtained the hearing so that Paul could defend himself as he saw fit in a direct appeal to Caesar.

On the appointed day he was led by guards into the presence of Nero, who received him with curiosity in a huge hall where he normally gathered the idle favorites of his criminal and eccentric court. He was interested in the personality of this former rabbi and he wanted to meet the man who had mobilized such a large number of his courtiers to support his appeal. The Apostle's appearance was highly disappointing. What value could this old, insignificant and weak man have? With Tigellinus and other perverse counselors at his side, he looked ironically at the figure of Paul. It was incredible that such a plain individual could raise so much interest. As he was getting ready send him back to prison without hearing his appeal, one of his henchmen remarked that it might be appropriate to hear him in order to gauge his mental deficiency. Not one to miss out on an opportunity to display his artistic vanity, Nero considered the suggestion to be timely and ordered the prisoner to speak at will.

Flanked by two guards, the inspired preacher of the Gospel raised his noble head, gazed at Caesar and the cohorts of his frivolous entourage and began resolutely: "Emperor of the Romans, I understand the greatness of this hour in which I am speaking to you and I appeal to your sentiments of generosity and justice. I am not merely addressing a fallible man, a human person, but an administrator who must be conscientious and just, the greatest of the princes of the world, and who, before taking the scepter and crown of a great Empire, should consider himself the magnanimous father of millions!"

The aging Apostle's words echoed in the hall with the character of a profound revelation. The Emperor stared at him, startled and moved. His capricious temperament was sensitive to personal references imbued with bright images. Perceiving that he was gaining rapport with the small audience, the Damascus convert continued more courageously: "Trusting in your magnanimity, I have asked for this unforgettable hour in order to appeal to your heart, not only for myself but for thousands of men, women and children who suffer in prison or perish in the arenas of martyrdom. I speak here in the name of that countless multitude of sufferers, persecuted with refined cruelty by favorites of your court, which should be comprised of honest and humanitarian men. Perchance, has the lament of grieving of widows, of old people and orphans not reached your ears? Oh! August emperor on the throne of Claudius, you must know that a wave of perversity and hateful crimes is sweeping the districts of the imperial city, evoking tears of pain from your miserable wards. Alongside your governmental activity crawl venomous vipers that must be rooted out so that your people can work honestly and in peace. These wicked agents deflect your efforts from the right path, spread terror among the classes disfavored by fate, and threaten the most unfortunate! They are the accusers of the converts of a doctrine of love and redemption. Do not believe in the falsehood of their exceedingly cruel advice. Perhaps none labored as much as the Christians to aid the victims of the voracious fire. While distinguished patricians fled the desolation of Rome, and while the meekest huddled together in places out of danger, the disciples of Jesus searched the blazing quarters to alleviate the suffering of the unfortunate victims. Some sacrificed their lives in this honorable altruism. And now you see these sincere workers of Christ being repaid with the blemish of the authors of the heinous crime and of heartless slanderers. Did it not wound your conscience to endorse such infamous allegations without having made an impartial and thorough investigation? In the swarm of slanders I have not heard one voice that would enlighten you. I acknowledge that you most certainly share in such tragic misconceptions, because I do not believe in the disrepute of your authority, called to make the best decisions possible on behalf of the Empire. It is for this reason, O Emperor of the Romans, in recognizing the greatness of the power entrusted into your hands, that I dare to raise my voice to enlighten you. Consider the glorious extent of your duties. Do not give in to the fury of unconscionable and cruel politicians. Remember that in a life higher than this one, you will be asked to give an account of your public acts. Do not nourish the delusion that your scepter is

eternal. You are the mandatary of a powerful Lord who lives in Heaven. To convince yourself of the singularity of such a situation, you need only look to the hazy past. Where are your predecessors? Triumphant warriors, makeshift kings and heirs proud of their traditions once roamed your opulent palaces. Where are they now? History tells us that they came to the throne amid the delirious applause of the multitudes. They arrived haughtily, displaying magnificence in chariots of triumph, decreeing the death of their enemies and adorning themselves with the bloody remains of their victims. However, one instant was enough for them to fall from the splendor of the throne into the darkness of the sepulcher. Some departed due to the fatal consequences of their own destructive excesses; others were assassinated by the offspring of rebelliousness and rage. In recalling such situations I do not wish to transform the worship of life into the worship of death, but to show that the supreme wealth of man is peace of conscience for a duty fulfilled. For all these reasons I appeal to your magnanimity, not only for myself but for my fellow believers who groan in the darkness of prison, awaiting the sword of death.”

During the lengthy pause that followed Paul’s eloquent speech, one could perceive the remarkable impact of his words. Nero was pale. Tigellinus, enraged, was searching for a way to insinuate himself with some undignified remark about the petitioner. The few courtesans present could not hide the unspeakable turmoil that shook their nervous systems. The friends of the Prefect of the Praetorians were indignant, flushed with rage. After listening to a courtier, the Emperor ordered the petitioner to keep silent while he deliberated.

Everybody was amazed. One would not expect such power of persuasion from an aging, frail and ill man – a fearlessness bordering on madness, according to the concepts of the patricians. For much less, old and honest counselors of the court had been exiled or sentenced to death.

The son of Agrippina seemed unnerved. He no longer held the emerald to his eye like a monocle. He had the impression of having heard sinister forebodings. He surrendered automatically to his characteristic gestures when impressed and nervous. The Apostle’s admonitions had pierced his soul; his words seemed as though they would resound in his ears forever. Tigellinus realized how delicate the situation was and approached him.

“Divine,” exclaimed the Praetorian Prefect servilely, his voice almost imperceptible, “if you wish, this insolent man shall die right here this very day!”

“No, no,” Nero retorted. “This is one of the most dangerous men I have ever encountered. No one like him has dared comment on the present situation in such terms. Behind his words I see many people, perhaps prominent ones. If they were to join forces they could do me a great deal of harm.”

“I agree,” said the other hesitantly in a very low voice.

“Therefore,” continued the Emperor prudently, “we must come across as magnanimous and judicious. I will grant him a pardon for now, ordering that he not leave the city until the whole situation of the Christians is clarified.”

Tigellinus listened with an uneasy smile while the Emperor ended in a low voice: “But you will monitor his slightest movements without his knowing it, and when the time comes for the festivities for the reconstruction of the Circus Maximus, we will take the opportunity to send him off to a ‘distant place’ where he will disappear forever.”

The hateful Prefect smiled and emphasized: “No one could have resolved this intricate problem any better!”

Having finished their brief conversation out of the hearing of others, and to the enormous surprise of the courtiers, Nero declared that he was granting the petitioner the freedom he had pleaded in his initial defense, but would hold off granting a full pardon until the Christians’ responsibility had been definitively assessed. Therefore, the defender of Christianity could remain in Rome as he pleased but was not to leave the capital of the Empire until his personal case had been sufficiently clarified. The Praetorian Prefect put the sentence to parchment. Paul of Tarsus was relieved and radiant. The deceitful monarch seemed less evil, even worthy of friendship and recognition. Paul felt possessed of great joy; the results of his initial defense would give new hope to his brethren in the faith.

Paul returned to prison; the warden was notified of the final orders, and only then was he given his freedom.

In high hopes Paul looked for his friends, but everywhere he was met with only disconsolate news. Most of his closer and more helpful coworkers had disappeared, been imprisoned or were dead. Many had left in fear of the ultimate sacrifice. At last, he was happy to find Luke. The pious physician informed him of the grievous and tragic events being repeated every day. Unaware that a guard had followed him at a distance to ascertain his new residence, Paul accompanied his friend to a humble house near Porta Capena.

Needing to rest and strengthen his frail body, the aging preacher was welcomed by two kind friends with immense joy. They were Linus and Claudia, dedicated servants of Jesus.

The Apostle settled in at the humble house, under the obligation to go to Mamertina Prison every three days until his case was finally decided.

Despite feeling comforted, the venerable friend of the Gentiles experienced strange forebodings. He would catch himself thinking about the crowning of his apostolic career as if there was nothing left except to die for Jesus. He fought against such thoughts in order to continue the struggle for the spread of the evangelical teachings. Due to his physical debility, he could no longer preach in the catacombs but he counted on Luke's loving and devoted help for the epistles he deemed necessary. Among them was the last letter he wrote to Timothy, taking advantage of two friends who were leaving for Asia. Paul wrote this final document to his much beloved disciple, overcome with a singular emotion filling his eyes with abundant tears. His generous soul wished to entrust to Eunice's son his last dispositions, but he struggled with himself in order not to give in to defeat. While writing these affectionate concepts, the former rabbi felt like a disciple called to higher realms, unable, however, to escape his condition as a man who does not want to surrender the fight. At the same time that he confided in Timothy his conviction of having finished his career, he asked him to send the heavy leather cloak he had left in Troas at Carpus's house, since he needed to keep his weakened body warm. As he sent his last thoughts full of wisdom and love, he asked his kind cooperation in requesting John Mark to come to the capital of the Empire to help him in the apostolic endeavor. When his trembling and wrinkled hand sadly wrote: "Only Luke is with me,"⁴⁷ Paul stopped writing to weep over the parchment. At that moment, however, he felt a caress on his brow as if coming from a pair of softly fluttering wings. Soothing comfort came over his loving and intrepid soul. At this point of the letter he gained new courage and demonstrated again his decision to fight, finishing with recommendations concerning the needs of material life and evangelical labor.

Paul gave the letter to Luke to send it, but could not hide his gloomy presentiments. In vain the loving physician and dedicated friend tried to dismiss his apprehensions. In vain Linus and Claudia tried to distract him.

Although the aging Apostle did not abandon the work befitting his new situation, he immersed himself in deep meditation, from which he emerged

only to attend to trivial needs.

A few weeks after his letter to Timothy, an armed group arrived at Linus's residence after midnight on the eve of the great festivities with which the public administration wished to mark the rebuilding of the Circus Maximus. Linus, his wife and Paul were arrested; Luke escaped because he was spending the night elsewhere. The three victims were taken to the prison on Esquilinus, displaying their powerful faith in the face of impending martyrdom.

The Apostle was thrown into a dark cell incommunicado. The soldiers were intimidated by his courage. On bidding farewell to Linus and his wife, while she was dissolved in tears, the valorous preacher embraced them, saying: "Let us have courage. This shall be the last time we greet each other with physical eyes; but we shall see each other again in the Kingdom of Christ. The tyrannical power of Caesar reaches only our miserable body."

According to express orders from Tigellinus, the prisoner was isolated from all his friends.

In the darkness of the cell, which looked more like a damp grave, he made a retrospective summary of all the activities of his life, giving himself to Jesus and trusting fully in His divine mercy. He sincerely wished to remain with Linus and Claudia, who were certainly destined for the heinous spectacle on the following day. He hoped to share with them in the sacrifice of martyrdom when the final hour arrived.

He could not sleep as he calculated the hours that had elapsed since his imprisonment, and concluded that the day of sacrifice was imminent. Not a ray of light penetrated the infected and narrow cubicle. He perceived only vague, faraway sounds, which gave him the notion of people gathering in the streets. The hours passed by in seemingly interminable expectation. He was worn out and he managed to get a few hours' sleep. He awoke sometime later, unable to guess how much time had passed. He was thirsty and hungry, but prayed fervently, feeling that soft consolations were flowing toward his soul from the fount of unseen providence. In reality, he was worried about the situation of his companions. A guard had told him that a large contingent of Christians would be taken to the Circus, and he was suffering because he had not been called to die with his brothers and sisters in the arena of martyrdom for the love of Jesus. Immersed in such thoughts, he heard someone carefully opening the cell door. Led outside, the former rabbi saw six armed men

waiting for him by a normal-sized wagon. Far off on the star-dotted horizon the marvelous tones of the upcoming dawn appeared.

Silently, the Apostle obeyed the escort. They tied his calloused hands brutally with heavy ropes. A night watchman, visibly drunk, approached and spat in his face. The former rabbi remembered how Jesus had suffered, and accepted the insult without displaying the slightest gesture of offense.

Another order and he took his place in the wagon together with the six armed men, who were observing him in surprise at his composure and courage.

The horses trotted quickly as if wanting to lessen the damp cold of the morning.

As they approached the burial grounds beside the Via Appia, the darkness of the night was almost completely gone, promising a day of radiant sunshine.

The soldier heading the escort ordered the wagon to stop, and telling the prisoner to get out, said hesitantly: "By sentence of Caesar, the Prefect of the Praetorians has ordered that you be put to death on the day immediately after the death of the Christians chosen for the celebrations of the Circus, which took place yesterday. Be advised, therefore, that you are living your final minutes."

Calm, eyes shining, hands bound, and silent until now, Paul of Tarsus, surprising his executioners with his majestic serenity, exclaimed: "Aware of the criminal task you have been entrusted to carry out ... the disciples of Jesus do not fear the executioners who can kill only their body. Do not think that your sword can end my life, since living these fleeting minutes in a carnal body means that I shall enter without delay into the tabernacles of life eternal with my Lord Jesus Christ, the same to whom you, as well as Nero and Tigellinus, shall have to account!"

The sinister patrol was stricken with fear. That moral strength at the ultimate moment was such that it would unnerve the strongest. Noticing everyone's astonishment, and aware of his duty, the escort leader took the initiative to complete the sacrifice. The others seemed confused, nervous, shaken. Tigellinus's unbending agent, however, ordered the prisoner to take twenty steps forward. Paul of Tarsus walked calmly, though inwardly commending himself to Jesus, understanding his need of spiritual help for this ultimate witness.

When he reached the spot, Tigellinus's agent drew his sword; but at that moment, gazing at his victim, his hand trembled and he spoke almost imperceptibly: "I regret having been appointed to do this, and deep down I grieve for you."

Holding his head as high as he could, Paul answered without hesitation: "I am not worthy of grief. Feel sorry for yourself instead, because I die having fulfilled my sacred duties in light of eternal life, whereas you cannot yet escape the crude obligations of transitory life. Yes, weep for yourself, because I shall depart seeking the Lord of Peace and Truth, who gives life to the world; while you, having finished your bloody task, will have to return to your heinous life with the instigators of the terrible crimes of your time!"

The executioner continued to look at him dumbfounded. Seeing his hand shaking on drawing the sword, Paul roused him resolutely: "Do not tremble!... Finish the job!"

A forceful blow slashed his throat, almost completely severing the old head that had been whitened by the sufferings of the world.

Paul of Tarsus tumbled over without making a sound. The spent body rolled on the ground as a horrible and useless corpse. The blood gushed out in spurts in the last convulsions of quick death, while the expedition returned painfully in silence under the triumphant morning light.

The valorous disciple of the Gospel felt the anguish of the last physical repercussions; little by little, however, he began to feel a soft sensation of reparative relief. Loving and friendly hands seemed to be touching him lightly as if through this divine contact alone they were lifting away the terrible impressions of his bitter sufferings. Overcome with wonder, he noticed he was being taken to a distant place, and he perceived that kind friends wished to assist him in a more suitable place so that he would have the sweet consolation of a peaceful death. After a few minutes the pain had disappeared completely. Having the impression of being in the shade of some leafy friendly tree, he felt the caress of the morning breeze blowing by in refreshing gusts. He tried to get up, to open his eyes, to identify the landscape. Impossible! He felt weak, as if recovering from a long and grave illness. He gathered his mental energy as best he could and prayed, asking Jesus to enable his soul to be enlightened in this new situation. Above all, he could not see, which left him immersed in anguishing expectation. He recalled the time in Damascus when blindness had invaded his sinner's eyes, dazzled by the

glorious light of the Master. He recalled Ananias's fraternal love and he wept at the influx of those singular memories. After a great effort he managed to stand up, believing that a man ought to serve God even if he fumbled in dense darkness.

It was then that he heard the footsteps of someone approaching him lightly. He suddenly remembered the unforgettable day when he had been visited by Christ's emissary at Judas's inn.

"Who are you?" he asked, as he had done in the past at that unforgettable moment.

"Brother Paul..." started the newly-arrived.

But the Apostle to the Gentiles, identifying that much-loved voice, interrupted him with inexpressible joy: "Ananias!... Ananias!"

And he fell to his knees, weeping convulsively.

"Yes, it is I," said the venerable spirit, laying a luminous hand on Paul's brow. "One day Jesus asked me to restore your sight so that you could know the bitter way of His disciples, and today, Paul, he has granted me the blessing of opening your eyes for the contemplation of life eternal. Stand up! You have vanquished the final enemy, you have attained the crown of life, you have reached new realms of redemption!"

The Apostle stood up, immersed in tears of joyful gratitude, while Ananias placed his hand on his unseeing eyes and exclaimed lovingly: "In the name of Jesus, receive your sight!... Ever since the revelation at Damascus you have dedicated your eyes to the service of Christ! Behold now the beauty of life eternal so that we may go meet the beloved Master!"

Then, the devoted laborer for the Gospel beheld the marvels God reserves for his coworkers in the darkness-filled world. Overcome with wonder, he identified the landscape around him. Not far away were the catacombs of the Via Appia. A mysterious power had taken him away from the sad scene where his bloody remains were decomposing. He felt young and happy. He now understood the grandeur of the spirit body in surroundings unknown to the organisms of earth. His hands had no wrinkles, his skin no scars. He felt as if he had drunk a mysterious elixir of youth. A robe of resplendent and bright whiteness enveloped him in graceful folds. He had barely awoken from his enchantment, when someone tapped him lightly on the shoulder. It was Gamaliel, who had come to bring fraternal greetings. Paul

of Tarsus felt himself the happiest of men. Embracing the old master and Ananias in a single gesture of tenderness, he exclaimed in tears: “Only Jesus could have granted me a joy like this!”

He had scarcely spoken, when former companions of earthly struggles, friends from the past, and devoted brothers and sisters began arriving to welcome him at the threshold of eternity. The Apostle’s wonderment continued without interruption. As if they had remained in Rome to wait for him, all the martyrs of the festivities of the day before arrived singing in the proximity of the catacombs. They all wanted to embrace the generous disciple and kiss his hands. At this point, giving the impression of originating from marvelous sources from far away, a soft melody arising from angelic voices was heard. Surprised by the beauty of the composition – inexpressible in human language – Paul listened to his beloved friend of Damascus, who explained kindly: “The hymn of prisoners set free!”

Observing Paul’s intense emotion, Ananias asked him what his first wish in the realm of the redeemed might be. Paul remembered Abigail and the sacred dreams of his heart – as would any human being – but fully aware of the divine ministry that teaches one to forget the simplest whims, and without betraying his gratitude for Christ’s mercy, he answered movingly: “My first wish would be to see Jerusalem again, where I committed so many evils, and there pray to Jesus to offer Him my gratitude.”

As soon as he uttered this, the luminous gathering set off. Surprised by his power of volition, Paul saw that distance now meant nothing to his abilities as a spirit.

Melodies of sublime beauty continued flowing down from On High. They were hymns exalting the fortune of the triumphant workers and the merciful blessings of the Almighty.

Paul wished to imprint the flavor of his memories on this divine journey. To this end, the group made their way along the Via Appia to Aricia, from whence it headed toward Puteoli, where he stopped in the church for a few minutes to offer a prayer of unexcelled gratitude. From there the spirit caravan went to the Isle of Malta, then to Peloponnesia, where Paul became ecstatic as he gazed upon Corinth, giving rise to loving and sweet memories. Afire with fraternal enthusiasm, the components of the ensemble accompanied the valorous disciple on the path of the sacred remembrances vibrating in his heart. The Apostle stopped at length in Athens, Thessalonica,

Philippi, Neapolis, Troas and Ephesus, praying with tears of gratitude to the Most High. Crossing the regions of Pamphylia and Cilicia, they entered Palestine, overcome with joy and sacred respect. Along the way emissaries and workers for Christ joined the caravan. Paul could not express his joy upon their arrival in Jerusalem under the remarkable deep blue of the sunset.

Heeding Ananias's suggestion, they gathered on top of Calvary and there they sang hymns of hope and light.

Recalling the wrongs of his bitter past, Paul of Tarsus knelt and lifted up a fervent prayer to Jesus. His redeemed companions gathered in rapture while he, transfigured in tears, sought to express a message of gratitude to the Divine Master. It was then that a scene of singular beauty was drawn on the screen of the Infinite. As if the immensurable blue canopy had been rent asunder, a luminous pathway appeared in the vastness of space and three radiant figures approached. The Master was in the middle with Stephen on his right and Abigail on his left. Astonished, enraptured, the Apostle could only reach out his arms, for his voice deserted him at the peak of his emotion. Abundant tears rolled like pearls down his transfigured face. Abigail and Stephen approached him. She took his hands delicately in a display of tenderness while Stephen embraced him fervently.

Paul wanted to throw himself into the arms of the brother and sister from Corinth, but like a tender child who owed everything to the dedicated and good Master, he sought Jesus' eyes for approval.

The Master smiled, indulgent and loving, and spoke: "Yes, Paul, rejoice! Come now to my arms, for it is the will of my Father that persecutors and martyrs alike be united forever in my kingdom!"

And so, blissfully united, the faithful workers of the Gospel of Redemption followed the footsteps of Christ toward the realms of Truth and Light...

Far below, Jerusalem gazed in rapture at the evening twilight, awaiting the moon that would soon shine its first beams of brightness...

⁴¹ An ancient region of Western Europe, south and west of the Rhine River, west of the Alps, and north of the Pyrenees, corresponding roughly to modern-day France and Belgium; conquered by Julius Caesar in the Gallic Wars (58-51 B.C.) (American Heritage College Dictionary) – Tr.

⁴² One of the seven hills of Rome. The other six were Palatinus, Quirinalis, Capitolinus, Caelius, Aventinus and Viminalis, several of which are mentioned in this chapter. – Tr.

⁴³ Luke 16:9. – Emmanuel

44 The low valley in the city of Rome that connects Capitolinus and Palatinus Hills. – Tr.

45 A busy access road to the Forum from the north. – Tr.

46 Humiliores were persons of humble status who had no titles of social standing. – Emmanuel

47 II Timothy 4:11. – Emmanuel

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