



SONS OF

The
SCRIBE

a novella

ENCOURAGEMENT



FRANCINE RIVERS



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*To men of faith who serve
in the shadow of others.*

✦ ✦ ✦

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DEAR READER,

This is the last of five novellas on biblical men of faith who served in the shadows of others. These were Eastern men who lived in ancient times, and yet their stories apply to our lives and the difficult issues we face in our world today. They were on the edge. They had courage. They took risks. They did the unexpected. They lived daring lives, and sometimes they made mistakes—big mistakes. These men were not perfect, and yet God in His infinite mercy used them in His perfect plan to reveal Himself to the world.

We live in desperate, troubled times when millions seek answers. These men point the way. The lessons we can learn from them are as applicable today as when they lived thousands of years ago.

These are historical men who actually lived. Their stories, as I have told them, are based on biblical accounts. For the facts we know about the life of Silas, see Acts 15:22–19:10; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; and 1 Peter 5:12.

This book is also a work of historical fiction. The outline of the story is provided by the Bible, and I have started with the information provided for us there. Building on that foundation, I have created action, dialogue, internal motivations, and in some cases, additional characters that I feel are consistent with the biblical record. I have attempted to remain true to the scriptural message in all points, adding only what is necessary to aid in our understanding of that message.

At the end of each novella, we have included a brief study section. The ultimate authority on people of the Bible is the Bible itself. I encourage you to read it for greater understanding. And I pray that as you read the Bible, you will become aware of the continuity, the consistency, and the confirmation of God's plan for the ages—a plan that includes you.

Francine Rivers

SILAS walked to the house where Peter and his wife were hidden, aggrieved by the weight of the news he bore.

Tapping three times, lightly, he entered the room where they had often met with brothers and sisters in Christ or prayed long hours when alone. He found Peter and his wife in prayer now. Peter's wife raised her head, and her smile vanished.

Silas helped her up. "We must go," he said softly, and turned to assist Peter. "Paul has been captured. Soliders are searching the city for you. You must leave tonight."

As they headed out, Silas explained further. "Apelles is with me. He will show you the way."

"What about you?" Peter spoke with grave concern. "You must come with us, Silas. You've served as Paul's secretary as well as mine. They will be looking for you too."

"I'll follow shortly. I was working on a scroll when Apelles brought me the news. I must return and make certain the ink is dry before I pack it with the others."

Peter nodded gravely, and Silas ducked into the house where he had been staying. All the papyrus scrolls, except the one on which he had been working, were already rolled and stored carefully in leather cases. Silas had known the day would come when he would have to grab the pack and run. Lifting the weights that held open the newest scroll, he rolled the papyrus, and tucked it carefully into its case. As he slung the pack over his shoulder, he felt the full weight of responsibility to safeguard the letters.

As he stepped out into the street again, he saw Peter and

his wife and Apelles waiting. Silas ran to them. "Why are you still here?"

Apelles looked frantic. "They wouldn't go farther without you!"

Torn between gratitude for his friends' loyalty and fear for their safety, Silas urged them on. "We must hurry!"

Apelles was clearly relieved to be moving again. He gave further instructions in an urgent whisper. "We have a carriage waiting outside the city gates. We thought it best to wait until nightfall, when the ban on wagons lifted. It will be easier to slip out now."

Peter was well-known in Rome, and would be easily recognized. They would have a better chance of escape in the confusing influx of goods into the city and the cover of darkness beyond the walls.

Peter walked with difficulty, his arm protectively around his wife. "When did the guard come for Paul?"

"They took him to the dungeon this morning." Apelles raised his hand as they came to the end of the street. He peered around the corner and then beckoned them on. The young man made an effort to appear calm, but Silas felt his fear. His own heart beat with foreboding. If captured, Peter would be imprisoned and executed, most likely in some foul spectacle designed by Nero to entertain the Roman mob.

"Silas!" Peter's wife whispered urgently.

Silas glanced back and saw Peter struggling for breath. He caught up to Apelles and grasped his shoulder. "More slowly, my friend, or we'll lose the one we're trying to save."

Peter drew his wife closer and whispered something to her. She held tightly to him and wept into his shoulder.

Peter smiled at Silas. "Right now would be a good time for God to give me wings like an eagle."

Apelles led them more slowly through the dark alleys and narrow streets. Rats fed on refuse as they passed by. The sounds of wagon wheels grew louder. While the city slept, a tide of humanity poured through the gates, bringing with it goods for the insatiable Roman markets. Some drove overladen wagons; others pushed carts. Still others carried heavy packs on their bent backs.

So close to freedom, Silas thought, seeing the open gates just ahead. Could they get through without being recognized?

Apelles drew them close. "Wait here while I make certain it's safe." He disappeared among the wagons and carts.

Silas's heart pounded harder. Sweat trickled down his back. Every minute they stood on the public street added to Peter's danger. He spotted Apelles, his face pale and strained with fear as he struggled through the crowd.

The young man pointed. "That side. Go now! Quickly!"

Silas led the way. His heart lurched when one of the Roman guards turned and looked at him. A Christian brother. Thank God! The Roman nodded once and turned away.

"Now!" Silas made a path for Peter and his wife to pass through the flow. People bumped into them. Someone cursed. A wagon wheel almost crushed Silas's foot.

Once outside the gates and away from the walls, he let Peter set the pace.

An hour down the road, two more friends ran to meet them. "We've been waiting for hours! We thought you'd been arrested!"

Silas took one of them aside. "Peter and his wife are exhausted. Have the coach meet us on the road."

One remained to escort them while the other ran ahead.

When the coach arrived, Silas helped Peter and his wife up and then climbed in with them. Shoulders aching, he shrugged off the heavy pack and leaned back, bracing himself as they set off. The sound of galloping horses soothed his frayed nerves. Peter and his wife were safe—for the moment. The Romans would search the city first, leaving them time to reach Ostia, where the three of them would board the first ship leaving port. Only God knew where they would go next.

Peter looked troubled. His wife took his hand. "What is it, Peter?"

"I don't feel right."

Silas leaned forward, concerned. "Are you ill?" Had the rush through the night been too much for the venerable apostle?

"No, but I must stop."

His wife voiced an objection before Silas could do so.

"But, my husband . . ."

Peter looked at Silas.

"As you say." Silas leaned out to signal the coachman.

Peter's wife grabbed him. "Don't, Silas! Please! If they capture Peter, you know what they'll do."

Peter drew her back and put his arm around her. "God has not given us a spirit of fear, my dear, and that's what has sent us racing into darkness."

Silas struck the side of the coach. Leaning out, he called up to the driver to stop. The coach jerked and bounced as it drew to the side of the road. While his wife wept, Peter climbed down. Silas followed. The horses snorted and moved restlessly. Silas shrugged at the driver's questioning look and watched Peter walk off the road.

Peter's wife stepped down. "Go with him, Silas. Reason with him! Please. The church needs him."

Silas walked to the edge of the field and watched over his friend. Why did Peter tarry here?

The old apostle stood in the middle of a moonlit field, praying. Or so Silas thought until Peter paused and tipped his head slightly. How many times over the years had Silas seen Peter do that when someone spoke to him? Silas went closer, and for the barest second something shimmered faintly in the moonlight. Every nerve in his body tingled, aware. Peter was not alone. The Lord was with him.

Peter bowed his head and spoke. Silas heard the words as clearly as if he stood beside the old fisherman. "Yes, Lord."

When Peter turned, Silas went out to him, trembling. "What are we to do?"

"I must go back to Rome."

Silas saw all the plans that had been made to protect Peter crumble. "If you do, you'll die there." *Lord, surely not this man.*

"Yes. I will die in Rome. As will Paul."

Tears welled in Silas's eyes. *Both of them, Lord?* "We need your voice, Peter."

"My voice?" He shook his head.

Silas knew better than to attempt to dissuade Peter from doing whatever the Lord willed. "As God wills, Peter. We will return to Rome together."

"No. *I* will return. You will remain behind."

Silas felt the blood leave his face. "I will not run for my life when my closest friends face death!" His voice broke.

Peter put a hand on his arm. "Is your life your own, Silas? We belong to the Lord. God has called *me* back to Rome. He will tell *you* what to do when the time comes."

"I can't let you go back alone!"

"I am not alone. The Lord is with me. Whatever happens, my friend, we are one in Christ Jesus. God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose."

"And if they crucify you?"

Peter shook his head. "I am not worthy to die in the same way the Lord did."

"They will do everything they can to break you, Peter. You know they will!"

"I know, Silas. Jesus told me years ago how I would die. You must pray for me, my friend. Pray I stand firm to the end." When Silas opened his mouth to argue further, Peter raised his hand. "No more, Silas. It is not for us to question the Lord's plan, my friend, but to follow it. I *must* go where God leads."

"I will not abandon you, Peter." Silas fought to keep his voice firm. "Before God, I swear it."

"I swore the same thing once." Peter's eyes shone with tears. "I didn't keep my vow."

Peter ordered the driver to turn the coach around. His wife insisted upon going back with him. "Wherever you go, I will go." Peter helped her into the coach and stepped up to sit beside her.

Determined not to be left behind, Silas climbed up. Peter shoved the pack of scrolls into his arms. The unbalanced weight made Silas step down. Scroll cases tumbled. As Silas scrambled for them, Peter closed and locked the coach door. He hit the side of the coach. The driver tapped the horses' flanks.

"Wait!"

Peter looked out at him. "May the Lord bless you and

protect you. May the Lord show you his favor and give you his peace.”

Silas frantically retrieved scrolls, shoving them into the pack. “*Wait!*”

Slinging the pack over his shoulder, Silas ran to catch up. As he reached for the back of the coach, the driver gave a harsh cry and cracked his whip. The horses broke into a full gallop, leaving Silas choking in the dust.

SILAS sat at his writing table. His mind screamed *why?* as his dreams collapsed in grief and defeat. Clenching his hands, he tried to still the shaking. He dared not mix the ink or attempt to write now, for he would only ruin a section of new papyrus. He breathed in slowly, but could not calm his raging emotions.

“Lord, why does it always come to this?” Resting his elbows on the table, he covered his face with his hands. He could not blot out the horrific images.

Peter’s wife screaming.

Peter calling out to her in anguish from where he was bound. *“Remember the Lord! Remember the Lord!”*

The Roman throng mocking the big fisherman from Galilee.

Silas groaned. *Oh, Lord. Even had I been blind, I would have heard the wrath of Satan against mankind in that arena, the lustful rejoicing at bloodshed. He murders men, and they help him do it!*

Silas felt pierced anew by the memory of seeing Christ crucified. At the time, Silas had questioned whether Jesus was the Messiah, but nonetheless he had been appalled by the cruelty of the Jews celebrating the death of a fellow Jew, that they could hate one of their own so much they would stand and mock him as he hung on the cross, beaten past recognition. They had stood sneering, calling out in contempt, “He saved others, but He can’t save himself!”

Now, Silas tried to see past this world into the next, as Stephen had when members of the high council had stoned him outside the gates of Jerusalem. But all Silas saw was

the darkness of men, the triumph of evil. *I am tired, Lord. I am sick of this life. All Your apostles, save John, are martyred. Is anyone else left who saw Your face?*

Lord, please take me home, I beg of You. Don't leave me here among these wretched people. I want to come home to You.

His eyes grew hot as he put shaking hands over his ears. "Forgive me, Lord. Forgive me. I'm afraid. I admit it. I'm terrified. Not of death, but of *dying*." Even now, Silas could hear the echoes on Vatican Hill, where Nero's circus stood.

When his wife lay dead, Peter had bowed his head and wept.

The crowd had cheered when a cross was brought forth. "Yes! Crucify him! *Crucify him!*"

Peter's voice boomed above the noise. "*I am not worthy to die as my Lord did! I am not worthy!*"

"Coward!" Romans screamed. "He pleads for his life!"

Romans—so quick to worship courage—failed to recognize it in the man before them. They shrieked curses and cried out for further torture.

"Impale him!"

"Burn him alive!"

"Feed him to the lions!"

The big fisherman had left the shores of Galilee to throw the net of God's love to save masses drowning in sin. But the people swam in Satan's current. Peter had not asked for an *easier* death, only one *different* from the one his precious Lord had suffered.

Peter had never forgotten, had often recounted his failure to Silas. "The Lord said I would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed, and that's exactly what I did."

When the Romans nailed Peter to the cross, Silas had bowed his head. He couldn't watch.

Did I betray him the way he betrayed You, Lord? Did I fail him in his hour of need? When he looked again, he saw the centurion leaning down over Peter, listening. The Roman straightened, then stood for a moment before summoning two others. They levered up the cross and added ropes. Peter's body writhed in agony, but he made no sound.

The crew of soldiers strained at the task of turning the cross upside down.

The mob went quiet, and in that single moment Peter called out, his deep voice carrying up through the rows of spectators. "Forgive them, Father; they don't know what they are doing."

The Master's words.

Tears had welled in Silas's eyes.

It had taken all his will to stand in the arch in the upper corridor and keep his eyes fixed upon Peter in his suffering. "Pray when I face my death, Silas," Peter had requested weeks before his capture. "Pray that I will remain faithful to the end."

And so Silas had prayed, fiercely, determined, in anguish, in fear. *Lord, if it ever comes to this for me, let me in faith endure to the end as Peter did. Do not let me recant what I know! You are the way, the truth, and the life. Lord, give my friend comfort in his agony. Lord, give Your beloved servant Peter strength to cling tightly to his faith in You. Lord, let him see You as Stephen did! Fill him with the joy of homecoming. Speak to him now, Lord. Please say those words we all long to hear: "Well done, my good and faithful servant."*

He was, Lord. Your servant Peter was faithful.

God, I beg of You, let this be the last execution I witness!

Last night Silas had awakened, certain he heard Paul's voice dictating another letter. Relieved, joyous, he had

jumped up. "Paul!" The dream was so vivid it took a moment for the truth to strike him. When it did, it felt like a physical blow. *Paul's dead.*

Silas put his hands flat on the writing table. "You are the resurrection and the life." He must remind himself. "The resurrection." What were the words John had said when they last met in Ephesus? "Anyone who believes in Jesus will have . . ." *No. That isn't right.* "Anyone who believes in God's Son *has* eternal life." Paul's words echoed in his mind. "While we were utterly helpless, Christ died for us sinners." John's conviction cried out to him. "Love each other . . ."

A shout from outside made Silas stiffen. Were they coming for him now? Would he face another imprisonment, another flogging, more torture? *If I try to escape suffering by telling them I'm a Roman citizen, will that make me a coward? It's true, but I despise everything about this empire. I hate that even in the smallest way I'm part of it. Lord, I was strong once. I was. Not anymore . . .*

Paul's voice echoed again. "When I am weak, then I am strong. . . ."

Silas gripped his head. "You, my friend, not I . . ."

He could not think clearly here in the confines of Rome with the cacophony of voices, trampling feet, vendors' cries. The mob, the ever insatiable mob on his heels. *I have to get out of here! I have to get away from this place!*

He scrambled to gather his writing materials and few possessions. The scrolls! He must safeguard the scrolls!

Heart pounding, Silas left the small, stifling room.

The proprietor spotted him the moment he came out the door, as though the man had been watching for him. "You there!" He crossed the narrow street. "You're leaving?"

"My business here is finished."

“You don’t look well. Perhaps you should stay a few more days.”

Silas glanced at him. The man cared nothing about his health. Money was all the man wanted—more money.

The noise of humanity seemed to grow louder around Silas. Wolf faces everywhere. Romulus and Remus’s offspring filled the street. Silas looked at the people milling about, talking, shouting, laughing, arguing. The poor lived here—huddled, hungry masses that needed so much more than food. They reeked of discontent, cursing one another over the least provocation. These were the people Rome appeased with blood sport. It kept their minds from dwelling on the lack of grain.

Silas looked into the proprietor’s eyes. Paul would have spoken the words of life to him. Peter would have spoken of Jesus.

“What?” The proprietor frowned.

Let him die, Silas thought. *Why should I cast pearls before this pig?* “Perhaps I’ve got the fever,” he said. “It swept through the village where I stayed a few weeks ago.” True enough. Better than saying, “I went to the games three days ago, and watched two of my closest friends executed. All I want now is to get as far away from this wretched city as I can. And if the whole population of Rome is sucked down to hell, I will stand and shout praises to God for their destruction!”

As Silas expected, the proprietor drew back in alarm. “Fever? Yes, you must go.”

“Yes, I must.” Silas smiled tightly. “Plagues spread quickly in narrow streets, don’t they?” *Especially the plague of sin.* “I paid for a week, didn’t I?”

The man blanched. “I don’t remember.”

"I didn't think you would." Silas shouldered his pack and walked away.

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After several days of walking, Silas reached Puteoli. He did not have the stamina he once had, nor the heart.

He made his way to the harbor and wandered in the marketplace. *Where do I go from here, Lord?* Semaphores flashed, signaling the arrival of grain ships, probably from Egypt. Workers hurried past him, hastening to unload sacks of grain, carry them to the *mensores* for weighing. Other vessels anchored farther out, *lenuncularii* operating tenders between ship and shore. Merchandise came from all over the empire to satisfy the Roman markets: corn, cattle, wine, and wool from Sicily; horses from Spain; slaves from Britannia and Germania; marble from Greece; multicolored rugs from Asshur. The port was a good place to lose himself and still find what he most needed.

The scents made Silas's head swim: salt-sea air, animal dung, spices, wine, and human sweat. Seagulls screeched overhead as fish were piled on a cart. Criers shouted goods for sale. Sheep bleated from holding pens. Wild dogs from Britannia snarled from crates. Foreign slaves stood naked on platforms, sweating in the sun as they were auctioned. One fought against his bonds while a woman and child were pulled away. Though he shouted in a strange language, his anguish was well understood. The woman's weeping turned to hysterical screams as her child was wrenched from her. She tried to reach him, but was dragged in another direction. The child wailed in terror, arms outstretched toward his mother.

Throat tight, Silas turned away. He couldn't escape

injustice and misery. It was all around him, threatening to suffocate him. The seed of sin planted centuries ago in the Garden of Eden had taken root and spread its shoots of wickedness everywhere. And all feasted on this poisonous fruit that would bring them nothing but death.

It was late afternoon when he saw a familiar symbol carved into a post of a booth filled with barrels of olives and baskets of pomegranates, dates, figs, and nuts. His stomach growled. His mouth watered. He hadn't eaten anything since leaving The Three Taverns two days ago.

He listened to the proprietor bargain with a woman. "You know these are the best dates in all the empire."

"And you know I cannot pay such a high price."

Neither shouted nor grew vitriolic, a common occurrence in marketplaces. She made an offer; he countered. She shook her head and made another offer. He laughed and made yet another. When they reached agreement, the proprietor grabbed a handful of dried dates and put them on his scale. He wrapped them in a cloth the woman handed him and received payment. As she walked away, he turned his attention to Silas. "Olives? Dates?"

Silas shook his head. He had spent his last coin on bread. He looked at the symbol carved into the pole. Had this grinning pirate put it there? Before he could find a way to ask, the man cocked his head and frowned. "I know you. Don't I?"

"We've never met."

"You look familiar."

Silas's heart pounded. He thought of turning away, but where would he go? "I am a friend of Theophilus."

The man's eyes cleared. "Ah!" He grinned. "How is he these days?"

“Not well.” Silas took a step back, thinking he might have made a mistake in saying anything to this man.

The merchant glanced one way and then the other and beckoned Silas closer. “Silas. Is that not your name?”

Silas blanched.

“Do not look distressed, my friend,” the man said quickly. He dropped his voice. “I heard you preach once, in Corinth. Years ago—five, maybe six. You look tired. Are you hungry?”

Silas couldn’t answer.

The man grabbed some dates and figs and pressed them into Silas’s hand. “Go to the end of the street; turn left. Follow that street to the end. It will wind like a serpent before you reach your destination. Pass two fountains. Take the first street on the right just after. Knock on the door of the third house. Ask for Epanetus.”

Could he remember all that, or would he find himself wandering Puteoli all night? “Whom shall I say sent me?”

“My apologies. In my excitement at meeting you, I forgot to introduce myself.” He laughed. “I’m Urbanus.” He leaned forward and said gruffly, “You are an answer to many prayers.”

Silas felt the weight of the man’s expectations. “Peter is dead.”

Urbanus gave a solemn nod. “We heard.”

So soon? “How?”

“Bad news travels fast. Our brother Patrobas arrived day before yesterday. He could not find you in the catacombs.”

Patrobas. Silas knew him well. “I feared someone might follow and others be taken.”

“We feared you had been arrested.” Urbanus grasped Silas’s arms. “God has answered our prayers. You are well.

We did not expect the added blessing of your presence here.”

Blessing? This man remembered his face from one encounter. What if others, enemies, also recognized him as Peter’s scribe? His presence might endanger these brothers and sisters.

Lord, will all we’ve worked for be destroyed in a bloodbath?

Urbanus leaned closer. “Do not look so troubled, my friend. Puteoli is a busy city. Everyone has an eye to business and little else. People come; people go.” He repeated the directions, slowly this time. “I would show you the way myself, but I cannot entrust my booth to others. They’re all thieves . . . just as I once was.” He laughed again and slapped Silas on the shoulder. “Go. I will see you later.” He called to a group of women passing by. “Come! See what good olives I have! The best in the empire!”

Urbanus did not lie. Two dates and a fig took the sharp edge of hunger away, and they did taste better than anything Silas had eaten in Rome. He kept the rest in the pouch tied to his belt.

The day was hot, and Silas felt sweat trickle down his back as he walked. Merchants’ booths gave way to streets lined with tenements. Shoulders aching, he shifted his pack. Over the years, he had carried far heavier loads than this, but the weight of the scrolls seemed to increase with every step.

A servant opened the door when he knocked. The Ethiopian’s inscrutable gaze took Silas in from dusty head to sandaled feet.

“I am looking for the house of Epanetus.”

“This is the house of Epanetus. Who may I tell my master is come?”

"A friend of Theophilus."

The servant opened the door wider. "I am Macombo. Come. Enter in." He closed the door firmly behind Silas. "Wait here." He strode away.

It was the house of a rich man. Pillared corridors and frescoed walls. An open court with a white marble statue of a woman pouring water from an urn. The sound of the water made Silas realize his thirst. He swallowed hard and longed to shrug the pack from his shoulders and sit.

Footsteps approached—the hurried slap of sandals. A tall, broad-shouldered man strode across the courtyard. His short-cropped hair was gray, his features strongly carved. "I am Epanetus."

"Urbanus sent me."

"Which Urbanus would that be?"

Caution was to be expected. "From the agora." Silas opened his pouch and took out a handful of plump dates.

Epanetus laughed. "Ah, yes. 'The best dates and figs in all the empire.'" He extended his hands. "You are welcome here."

Silas received the greeting, knowing his own response was somewhat less enthusiastic.

"Come." Epanetus gave a quiet order to Macombo and then led Silas across the court, through an archway, and into another area of the house. Several people sat in a large room. Silas recognized one of them.

Patrobas came swiftly to his feet. "Silas!" Grinning broadly, he came to embrace him. "We feared you were lost to us." He drew back and kept one hand firmly on Silas's arm as he addressed the others. "God has answered our prayers."

They surrounded him. The heartfelt greetings broke

down Silas's last defenses. Shoulders sagging, he bowed his head and wept.

No one spoke for a moment, and then they all spoke at once.

"Pour him a little wine."

"You're exhausted."

"Sit. Have something to eat."

"Macombo, set the tray here."

Patrobas frowned and guided Silas. "Rest here."

When someone took hold of his pack, Silas instinctively gripped it tighter. "No!"

"You are safe here," Epanetus said. "Consider my home yours."

Silas felt ashamed. "I must safeguard these scrolls."

"Put the pack here beside you," Patrobas said. "No one will touch it unless you give permission."

Exhausted, Silas sat. He saw nothing but love and compassion in the faces surrounding him. A woman looked up at him, eyes welling with tears. Her concern pierced him. "Letters." He managed to shrug the pack from his shoulders and set it down beside him. "Copies of those Paul sent to the Corinthians. And Peter's." His voice broke. Covering his face, he tried to regain control and couldn't. His shoulders shook with his sobs.

Someone squeezed his shoulder. They wept with him, their love leaving no room for embarrassment.

"Our friend is with the Lord." Patrobas's voice was thick with grief.

"Yes. No one can harm him or his wife now."

"They stand in the Lord's presence as we speak."

As I long to be, Silas wanted to cry out. Oh, to see Jesus' face again! To have an end of trials, an end to fear, an end

to the attack of doubt when he least expected it. *I am losing the battle inside myself, Lord.*

"We must hold firm to that which we know is true."

Paul's words, spoken so long ago. They had been sitting in a dungeon, darkness surrounding them, their bodies laced with pain from a brutal whipping. "Hold fast," he had said.

"I'm trying," Silas moaned.

"What is he saying?"

Silas mumbled into his hands. "Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the grave on the third day. . . ." But all he could see was the Lord on the cross, Paul beheaded, Peter crucified. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"He's ill."

"Shhhh . . ."

"Silas." A firm hand this time, a Roman hand. A tray laden with food was set before him. Epanetus and Patrobas encouraged him to eat. Silas took bread in trembling hands and tore it. *This is My body.* . . . He held the two halves, shaking. "Do I dare eat of it?"

Whispers of concern.

Epanetus poured wine into a cup and held it out to him. "Drink." Silas stared at the red fluid. *This is My blood.* . . . He remembered Jesus on the cross, blood and water pouring from the spear wound in His side. He remembered Peter hanging upside down.

Pain gripped his chest. His heart raced faster and faster. The room grew dark.

"Silas!"

He heard the roaring of the Roman mob. Hands grabbed hold of him. *So be it, Lord. If I die, there will be an end of suffering. And rest. Please, Lord. Let me rest.*

“Silas . . .” A woman’s voice this time. Close. He felt her breath on his face. “Don’t leave us. . . .”

Voices above and around him, and then no sound at all.

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Silas roused, confused. A clay lamp burned on a stand. Someone came close. A cool hand rested on his brow. Silas groaned and closed his eyes. His throat squeezed tight and hot.

A strong arm slid beneath him and raised him. “Drink.” Macombo held a cup to Silas’s lips.

Something warm and sweetened with honey.

“A little more. It will help you sleep.”

Silas remembered and struggled to rise. “Where are they? Where . . . ? The letters!”

“Here.” Macombo lifted the pack.

Silas took it and clutched it close, sighing as he lay back on the bed.

“No one will take anything from you, Silas.”

Voices came and went, along with dreams. Paul spoke to him across a campfire. Luke dressed his wounds. They sang as they followed the Roman road. He awakened to footsteps and fell asleep again. Paul paced, agitated, and Silas shook his head. “If you will but rest, my friend, and pray, the words will come.”

Voices again, familiar now. Macombo and Epanetus.

“To whom does he speak?”

“I don’t know.”

“Silas . . .”

He opened his eyes. A woman stood with the sunlight at her back. When she came close, he frowned. “I don’t know you.”

“I’m Diana. You’ve been sleeping a long time.”

"Diana . . ." He tried to remember. He had seen her face, but where?

She put her hand on his shoulder. "I'll just sit with you awhile."

"How is he?" Epanetus spoke from somewhere close.

"He has no fever."

"Pain?"

"His dreams trouble him."

Time passed; how much, Silas didn't know or care. He awakened again to voices in the corridor outside the room.

"It's not just exhaustion that makes him sleep so long. It's grief."

"Give him time. He will find his strength in the Lord."

Murmuring and then Macombo's voice. "He seems little interested in food or drink."

"I heard him speak in Corinth," said Urbanus, the pirate merchant who sold the best dates in the empire. "He was magnificent. Think of the honor the Lord has bestowed on us by sending him here. Silas saw Jesus in the flesh."

"And saw Him crucified." Patrobas spoke with quiet firmness.

"And risen! We've only heard about the Lord. We never saw Him face-to-face. We never ate with Him or walked with Him. . . ."

Silas put his arm over his eyes.

"Let him rest a little longer before you try to wake him. It's only been three days, and he's endured more than any of us. . . ."

Three days! No matter how much Silas might long to escape the sorrow of this world, he could not will himself to heaven. He reached down. The pack of precious scrolls lay beside him. His body ached as he sat up. He rubbed his

face. His joints and muscles screamed as he stood. He rolled his shoulders and stretched slowly. Raising his hands in habitual praise, he prayed. "This is a day that You have made, Lord, and I will rejoice in it." He might not feel like it, but he would do so in obedience. Grudging obedience.

Dogged, determined, he picked up the pack and followed the sound of retreating voices. He stood in the archway of a large room. Men and women of all ages sat together, enjoying a meal. Silas stayed in the shadowed corridor, studying them. He saw meat on a fine pottery platter, and fruit being passed in a simple, woven basket. Everyone had brought something to share.

A love feast.

Silas remembered the gatherings in Jerusalem, the first year after Jesus ascended, the excitement, the joy, the openhanded charity between brothers and sisters.

Jerusalem! How he longed to go home to those halcyon days.

But even if he could go back to Judea, he knew nothing would be the same. Persecution had driven the followers of Jesus to other cities and provinces, leaving behind Jewish factions that constantly warred with one another. One day, Rome would make peace for them, with the army, the way Rome always made peace. If only they would listen!

Jesus had warned of Jerusalem's destruction. John had told Luke what Jesus said, and Luke had written it all down in the history he was collecting. The good doctor had been hard at work on it during the years Silas had known him, when they both traveled with Paul. A kind man, educated, inquisitive. A gifted physician. Paul would have died several times if not for Luke's ministrations. *And I along with him.*

Had Luke escaped from Rome? Had he gone back to Corinth or Ephesus?

Timothy's most recent letter said John was living in Ephesus. Mary, Jesus' mother, lived with him. Her sons, James and Jude, who became believers when they saw the risen Christ, had joined the apostles on the council in Jerusalem.

"Silas!"

Startled from his reverie, Silas saw Epanetus cross the room. "Come. Join us." Patrobas rose, as did several others.

Epanetus led Silas to a place of honor. Diana rose and prepared a plate of food for him. She smiled into his eyes when he thanked her. A young man sitting beside her whispered in her ear. "Not now, Curiatus," she replied.

Everyone talked at once, until Epanetus laughed and raised his hands. "Quiet, everyone! Give Silas time to eat before we attack him with questions."

They talked among themselves again, but Silas felt their glances. He gave silent thanks to God for what was placed before him. Pork, and judging by the quality, from a pig fattened in oak forests. A Roman delicacy, and unclean by Mosaic law. He took some fruit instead. Even now, after years of being freed from the Mosaic law, he had difficulty eating pork.

Others arrived—a family with several children, a young couple, two older men . . . The room filled. And each wanted to meet him, to clasp his hand.

Silas felt alone in the midst of them, trapped inside himself, captive to thoughts that buzzed like angry bees. He longed for solitude, and knew how ungrateful it would be to rise and leave them now. And where could he go other than that silent room with its rich surroundings that reminded him of things he had worked so hard to forget?

Everyone had finished eating, and he lost his appetite. He saw their expectation, felt their hunger to hear him speak.

The boy spoke first. "You knew the Lord Jesus, didn't you?" He ignored his mother's hand on his arm. "Would you tell us about Him?"

And then the others began. "Tell us everything, Silas."

"What was He like?"

"How did He look?"

"What did you feel when you were in His presence?"

"And the apostles? You knew them all, didn't you? What were they like?" The boy again, all eyes and pleading.

"Will you teach us as you've taught others?"

Hadn't he preached hundreds of times in dozens of towns from Jerusalem to Antioch to Thessalonica? Hadn't he told the story of Jesus crucified and risen to small crowds and large, some praising God, others mocking and hostile? Hadn't he worked with Timothy in teaching the Corinthians? He had traveled thousands of miles alongside Paul, establishing churches in city after city.

Yet, here among these friendly, hospitable brothers and sisters, he could think of nothing to say.

Silas looked from one face to another, trying to sort his thoughts, trying to think where to start, when all he could see in his mind's eye was Peter hanging upside down, his blood forming a growing pool beneath him.

Everyone was looking at him, waiting, eager.

"I fear . . ." His voice broke. He felt as though someone had clamped strong hands around his throat. He swallowed convulsively and waited until the sensation passed. "I fear I endanger you." He spoke the truth, but doubted it commended him. "Paul is beheaded; Peter crucified. The

apostles are scattered, most martyred. No one can replace these great witnesses of God. No one can speak the message of Christ as effectively as they have."

"You spoke effectively in Corinth," Urbanus said. "Your every word pierced my heart."

"The Holy Spirit pierces you, not I. And that was a long time ago, when I was younger and stronger than I am today." Stronger in body; stronger in faith. His eyes blurred with tears. "A few days ago in Rome, I watched a dear friend die a horrible death because he carried the testimony of God. I don't think I can go on. . . ."

"You were Peter's secretary," Patrobas said.

Leading words. They wanted to draw him out into the open.

"Yes, and my presence brings danger to all of you."

"A danger we welcome, Silas." The others murmured agreement with Epanetus's firm declaration.

"Please. Teach us." The boy spoke again.

He was not much younger than Timothy had been the first time Silas met him. Diana looked at him with her beautiful dark eyes, so full of compassion. His heart squeezed at the sight. What could he say to make them understand what he didn't understand himself? *Oh, Lord, I can't talk about crucifixion. I can't talk about the cross . . . not Yours or Peter's.*

He shook his head, eyes downcast. "I regret, I cannot think clearly enough to teach." He fumbled with the pack beside him. "But I've brought letters." Exact copies he had made from originals. He looked at Epanetus, desperate, appealing to him as host. "Perhaps someone here can read the letters."

"Yes. Of course." Smiling, Epanetus rose.

Silas took one out and, with shaking hand, presented it to the Roman.

Epanetus read one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. When he finished, he held the scroll for a moment before carefully rolling it and giving it back to Silas. "We have yearned for such meat as this."

Silas carefully tucked the scroll away.

"Can we read another?" Curiatus had moved closer.

"Pick one."

Patrobas read one of Peter's letters. Silas had made many copies of it and sent them to many of the churches he had helped Paul start.

"Peter makes it clear you were a great help to him, Silas."

Silas was touched by Diana's praise, and wary because of his feelings. "The words are Peter's."

"Beautifully written in Greek," Patrobas pointed out. "Hardly Peter's native language."

What could he say without sounding boastful? Yes, he had helped Peter refine his thoughts and put them into proper Greek. Peter had been a fisherman, working to put food on his family's table. While Peter had toiled over his nets, Silas had sat in comfort, yoked to an exacting rabbi who demanded every word of the Torah be memorized. God had chosen Peter as one of His twelve companions. And Peter had chosen Silas to be his secretary. By God's grace and mercy, Silas had accompanied Peter and his wife on their journey to Rome. He would be forever humbled and thankful for the years he spent with them.

Though Aramaic was the common language of Judea, Silas could speak and write Hebrew and Greek as well as Latin. He spoke Egyptian enough to get by in conversation.

Every day, he thanked God that he had been allowed to use what gifts he had to serve the Lord's servants.

"What was it like to walk with Jesus?"

The boy again. Insatiable youth. So much like Timothy. "I did not travel with Him, nor was I among those He chose."

"But you knew Him."

"I knew of Him. Twice, I met Him and spoke with Him. I know Him now as Savior and Lord, just as you do. He abides in me, and I in Him through the Holy Spirit." He put his hand against his chest. *Lord, Lord, would I have the faith of Peter to endure if I were nailed to a cross?*

"Are you all right, Silas? Are you in pain again?"

He shook his head. He was in no physical danger. Not here. Not now.

"How many of the twelve disciples did you know?"

"What were they like?"

So many questions—the same ones he'd answered countless times before in casual gatherings from Antioch to Rome.

"He knew them all," Patrobas said into the silence. "He sat on the Jerusalem council."

Silas forced his mind to focus. "They were strangers to me during the years Jesus preached." Jesus' closest companions were not people with whom Silas would have wanted contact. Fishermen, a zealot, a tax collector. He would have avoided their company, for any commerce with them would have damaged his reputation. It was only later that they became his beloved brothers. "I heard Jesus speak once near the shores of Galilee and several times at the Temple."

Curiatius leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees

and his chin in his hands. "What was it like to be in His presence?"

"The first time I met Him, I thought He was a young rabbi wise beyond His years. But when He spoke and I looked into His eyes, I was afraid." He shook his head, thinking back. "Not afraid. Terrified."

"But He was kind and merciful. So we've been told."

"So He is."

"What did He look like?"

"I heard He glowed like gold and fire poured from His lips."

"On a mountain once, Peter, James, and John saw Him transfigured, but Jesus left His glory behind and came to us as a man. I saw Him several times. There was nothing in Jesus' physical appearance to attract people to Him. But when He spoke, He did so with the full authority of God." Silas's thoughts drifted to those days before He knew the Lord personally, days filled with rumors, whispered questions, while the priests gathered in tight circles, grumbling in Temple corridors. It had been their behavior most of all that sent Silas to Galilee to see for himself who this Jesus was. He had sensed their fear and later witnessed their ferocious jealousy.

Epanetus put his hand on Silas's shoulder. "Enough, my friends. Silas is tired. And it is late."

As the others rose, the boy pressed between two men and came to him. "Can I talk with you? Just for a little while."

Diana reached for him, cheeks flushed, eyes full of apology. "You heard Epanetus, my son. Come. The meeting is over for the evening. Give the man rest." She drew her son away.

“Could we come back tomorrow?”

“Later. Perhaps. After work . . .”

Curiatus glanced back. “You won’t leave, will you? You have words of truth to speak.”

“Curiatus!”

“He wrote all those scrolls, Mother. He could write all he’s seen and heard. . . .”

Diana put her arm around her son and spoke softly, but with more firmness this time, as she led him from the room.

Epanetus saw everyone safely away. When he returned, he smiled. “Curiatus is right. It would be a good thing if you would write a record.”

Silas had spent most of his life writing letters, putting down onto scrolls the encouragement and instructions of men inspired by God. The council in Jerusalem, James, Paul, Peter. “For the most part, I helped others sort and express their thoughts.”

“Would it not help you to sort your thoughts and feelings if you did? You suffer, Silas. We all can see that. You loved Peter and his wife. You loved Paul. It is never easy to lose a friend. And you’ve lost many.”

“My faith is weak.”

“Perhaps that is the best of all reasons for you to dwell on the past.” Epanetus spoke more seriously. “You have lived your life in service to others. Your ink-stained fingers are proof of it.”

The darkest part of night had come, a darkness that crushed Silas’s spirit. He looked down at his hands. They indicted him.

“Curiatus is named aptly.” Epanetus spoke gently. “But perhaps God brought you to us and put the idea in the boy’s head. Is that not possible?”

Silas closed his eyes. *Can I dwell on the past without being undone by it? I regret, Lord; I regret the wasted years. Is that a sin, too?*

Epanetus spread his hands. "Precious few are left who were in Judea when Jesus walked this earth."

"That's all too painfully true." Silas heard his bitterness.

Epanetus sat, hands clasped, expression intense. "I will not share my story until I know you better, but know this: you are not alone in your struggle with faith. Whatever sorrow you carry other than the death of your friends is not hidden from the Lord. You know and I know Jesus died for all our sins and rose from the dead. Through faith in Him we have the promise of everlasting life. We will live forever in the presence of the Lord. But like the boy, I crave to know more about Jesus. So much of what we hear drifts away. Those scrolls, for example. Patrobas and I read two tonight. But if you leave tomorrow, how much will we all remember by next week or next month? And what of our children?"

"Another has already set about the task of writing the history: Luke, the physician."

"I have heard of him. That's wonderful news, Silas, but where is he now? He left Rome after Paul was beheaded, didn't he? How long before we receive a copy of what he has written?"

"He was not the only one. Many have undertaken the task of compiling an account of things that happened and what's been accomplished."

"That may be so, Silas, but we have received nothing in the way of letters, other than the one written by Paul. You are here with us! We want to know what you learned from Peter and Paul. We want to see these men of faith as you

did. They endured to the end. As you endure now. Share your life with us."

"What you ask is a monumental task!" *And I'm so weary, Lord. Let someone else do what he asks.*

"The task is not beyond your abilities, Silas." Epanetus gripped his arm. "Whatever you need, you have only to ask. Scrolls, ink, a safe place to write without interruption. God has blessed me with abundance so that I might bless others. Give me the blessing and honor to serve you." The Roman stood. "May you be at peace with whatever God asks of you."

"Epanetus!" Silas called out before he left him alone in the room. "It is not easy to look back."

"I know." The Roman stood in the doorway, mouth tipped. "But sometimes we must look back before we can move forward."

DEAR READER,

You have just finished reading the story of Silas, scribe to the early church and traveling companion of Paul and Peter, as told by Francine Rivers. As always, it is Francine's desire for you, the reader, to delve into God's Word for yourself to find out the real story—to discover what God has to say to us today and to find applications that will change our lives to suit His purposes for eternity.

Though we are told little in Scripture about Silas's personal life, we do find evidence of a very committed man. He was a prominent church leader and a gifted prophet who chose to set aside what the world would view as a very promising career. He willingly became a scribe, or secretary, recording the letters of the apostles Paul and Peter.

It is interesting to note that while three of the Gospels record the story of the rich young ruler, only the Gospel of Luke refers to him as a rich religious leader. The account of the two followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus is also found only in the Gospel of Luke. Silas was a religious leader and a travel companion of Luke. So the conjectures in this story—equating Silas with both the rich young ruler and the companion of Cleopas on the road to Emmaus—certainly aren't impossible.

Whatever the specifics of his life, we do know that Silas shed his earthly trappings of position and power in order to walk with the Lord. His life echoes that of another writer, the Author and Finisher of our faith, the Living Word, Jesus. May God bless you and help you to discover

His call on your life. May you discover a heart of obedience beating within you.

Peggy Lynch

SEEK GOD'S WORD FOR TRUTH

Read the following passage:

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."

So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."

James stood and said, "My judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood."

Then the apostles and elders together with the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders—Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas.

The messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the believers and delivered the letter. And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.

Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith.

After some time Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing." Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. Paul chose Silas, and as he left, the believers entrusted him to the Lord's gracious care.

ACTS 15:4-9, 11, 13, 19-20, 22, 30-32, 36-40

What was the concern of the early church leaders that led to this general meeting?

Which noteworthy leaders were present?

Who was chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas to deliver the letter? How were these two men specifically gifted?

What was their mission? How were they received?

What events took place to part Barnabas and Paul?

Whom did Paul choose as a travel companion, and where did they go?

FIND GOD'S WAYS FOR YOU

Have you ever tried to impose restrictions on others? What happened?

Share a time when someone imposed restrictions on you. How did that work out?

Whom do you need to encourage and lift up? What stops you from doing so?

STOP AND PONDER

Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. Encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

HEBREWS 10:23-25