

# Faithful Journey



# Faithful Journey

A Novel

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To Barbara, my wife and best friend, for her loving support along the wonderful journey of our life together.



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# To the Reader

*Faithful Journey* is a novel based on the Acts of the Apostles, one of the Bible's most recognized adventure stories.

Christian tradition says that Luke, a Greek physician from Syrian Antioch, wrote Acts sometime before Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70 A.D. Acts is the second half of his two-part book, the first being the Gospel According to Luke.

In Acts, Luke the historian and theologian describes how the early Christian church developed in a time of bitter persecution. He sketches a vivid word picture primarily of Peter and Paul, the two most well-known apostles of the first century, and their mission to spread the Gospel throughout the known world.

*Faithful Journey* is a modern portrait of the lives and times of people who played roles in this New Testament odyssey, which spanned more than thirty years, over thousands of miles from Jerusalem to Rome. This portrayal is viewed through a series of fictional, first-person voices that mirror and embellish Luke's familiar and remarkable story. My hope is that this novel will encourage you to read the Bible and will enrich your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.



# Prologue

Tied to their backs were bundles of rugs from Persia, linens from Damascus, and pearls from India. Men with dark faces like cracked leather walked beside their humped beasts and jabbered to each other in a foreign tongue. They arrived after a long journey from the east, as far away as the Euphrates, ambling into the old city and past the window of my tenement. It was one of many caravans of traders and camels through Syrian Antioch, and I dreamed of leaving home and going with them someday to distant places.

Like other older families in Antioch, we traced our ancestry to the Macedonia of Alexander the Great. We were surrounded by Greek literature and art, and were taught to seek the truth where it could be found. My father said there were two kinds of people in the world: Greeks and everybody else.

My name is Lucanus. I remember one summer, when I was twelve years old, my father and I traveled by horse for seven hours to the great Mediterranean Sea. A paved Roman road of stones stretched out before us and, halfway to the sea, we passed through a valley with mountains on both sides. Near

the water we marveled at the sparkling harbor below, swarming that day with an armada of ships that displayed on their bows carved figures of half-naked women. At the basin we walked to the edge of a wide stonewall and spotted the island of Cyprus, resting serenely on the cloudless horizon.

Later we shared a loaf of *psomi* and sweet red wine with four Phoenician sailors, who talked with us about the Greek islands along the coast and the cities of Hellas. The seamen told of women in Tyre, who dyed linens crimson from shellfish and put the fiber on ships bound for Rome. They told of men on northern islands with painted faces, who bought hides to trade for fruit.

Heading back to the wharf, passing bulging straw baskets of apricots and figs, I wondered aloud if pirates had ever attacked those sailors. My father didn't think so, although raiders infested these waters and made trade dangerous in days gone by.

My father was one of the merchants who regularly sent money to Italy to pay for soldiers to keep civil order among the poor, the lucky, and the ruthless in Antioch. A number of people living there were Roman citizens, a privilege I also possessed, and I remember going to sporting events at the stadium with the sons of government officials. There were also many Jews in the city. My father became friends with them and learned about their God. Some of the Jews were open-minded and didn't hesitate to gather with Greeks, as I recall, and even relaxed their food laws when eating with us. My father came to admire the old Hebrew writers, and he taught me their ideas about helping others.

When I was eighteen years old he asked what would be my life's work. I liked to paint on canvas and write stories on parchment, but how could I earn a living doing that? I also thought about being a physician because there was much to be done to improve the lives of people in Antioch. I especially remember seeing boys my age living in tiny, miserable hovels. Many of them were sick and thin, with no hope. So, I began reading scrolls brought

## Prologue

to me from Alexandria about the human body and its diseases. I also studied the wondrous healing power of herbs, balsam, oils, and wine. Later, I was accepted as an intern at one of the temples of Asklepios, where I learned how to prescribe amulet and water cures, give massages, and lead gymnastics for patients.

It wasn't long, though, until words of compassion became acts of service for those living in need beyond my home in Antioch. The Roman governor, Marius, had marched his legions northward and, since they knew I was training to be a physician, the governor's men ordered me to patch up soldiers brought into camp after each battle. Men came staggering in, exhausted and wounded. I cared for them the best I could, but many died.

In those days superstition swept through the region the way desert storms blew through a tribe's circle of tents, scattering everything in their path across the sand. Peasants and scholars flocked to houses of worship, seeking answers to the meaning of life. They sought deliverance from demons. They celebrated Adonis the wheat spirit. They followed Dionysus and Orpheus. They held secret meetings and performed mysterious rituals. Anyone could hang out his sign and go into business as a priest of the supernatural. It seemed nonsense to me.

My Jewish friends taught about a faith in their Jehovah and a new kingdom. Then I met men calling themselves followers of the Way, who came to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene. These men told about amazing events in Jerusalem and a Nazarene named Jesus, and they claimed to be witnesses not of myth but of truth. They believed this Jesus was their true Messiah and called him the Anointed One.

Who were these people? As a diligent Greek boy I sought to understand what those of the Way told me about this Nazarene. But there was more to following him than just hearing or reading his words. My mind overflowed with knowledge, and my soul yearned for love beyond the human experience. Yet I couldn't quite reach out and touch it.

Once, in a dream, I searched a long time for a pouch of lost gold coins. I looked everywhere for the money but finally had to admit that it was gone forever. I did my best to find my life's treasure, but it wasn't good enough. Perhaps I was trying too hard.

One evening I walked briskly through the rain, returning home after visiting a patient. I reached my doorstep and went in, lit a candle on the table, and took off my wet cloak. Shivering, I grabbed a blanket and draped it over my shoulders. As light invaded the room I noticed how warm I felt despite it being the middle of winter. I didn't feel sick or weak—my forehead was cool. I picked up a letter from my good friend, Theophilus, and began reading. I couldn't focus on his words, and suddenly burst out laughing and crying at the same time. It was at that moment a remarkable presence—a comforting radiance—wrapped its arms around me, as if my father were holding me as a little boy again.

Putting on my cloak, I rushed outside and down the street to see an old Jew named Manaeon—one of my patients. Raindrops pelted my face as I ran toward his hillside stone house, which was perched in solitude like a white dove watching over Antioch. I went up the muddy path to his place, but slipped and fell. So I removed my sandals and climbed barefoot the rest of the way. I resembled an abandoned, wet dog by the time I reached the door, which unexpectedly opened to Manaeon and others of the Way.

With charity, my friends assisted me into the house and offered me a cup of wine. But I brushed aside the drink to tell them about my extraordinary encounter with what was surely God's Spirit. With patience, they listened to my long, rambling tale and then warmly welcomed me as a brother, thus beginning an unimaginable journey that finally ended in both tragedy and triumph.



# Peter

Flocks of sheep chewed scrub brush and farmers tilled small vineyards on rounded hills nearby, as I strained to see his fading image. Suddenly two strangers in garments like the shining sun appeared in our midst.

“Why are you staring at the sky?” one of them asked.

We all fell back instantly and tried to hide our faces, but found no means of escape from these amazing creatures.

“Who—who—are you?” I ventured to ask, stammering.

They didn’t respond. Instead, they quietly helped us to our feet, trying to comfort our concern.

“Where are you from?” Andrew asked, rubbing his bushy black beard, which he often did when trying to figure out something. Andrew was my brother—tall and solid like a cedar in the forest. Honest and hard working. And, I must admit, more patient when listening to people—especially children and those not known to us.

“We came from where he is going,” one of the visitors replied, pointing toward the heavens.

“Oh, you mean—?”

“Yes, but he’ll come back someday,” the other stranger said, and then vanished with his companion.

With our friends, Andrew and I searched around for the two visitors, but couldn’t find them. We finally gave up and walked down the hillside of olive groves and black tents before entering the valley. We turned south along an aqueduct carved in bedrock and came to the end of a wall. Heading west, I led my friends past merchant booths filled with hanging baskets and pots, and then took a road above the valley and soon reached the Holy City’s southern gate. It was about a Sabbath’s walk.

Once through the gate we entered a maze of streets saturated with people and animals. Sellers and buyers haggled over prices of clothing, food, and souvenirs. Pilgrims and servants and slaves wandered here and there. The crippled, diseased, blind, or insane drifted by or slept against stone walls. After almost getting lost, I spotted a large two-story house clustered around a busy courtyard on the Western Hill, south of the temple. By now it was late afternoon and women cooked supper while children played games nearby. The house was like the others, with whitewashed brick walls and a flat, hard-clay roof. In the courtyard there was a cistern for water, a chicken coop, and sheds to store firewood and supplies.

I knocked on the door, and it opened partway to reveal a servant girl’s oval, downy face framed by a scarf.

“Where is she?” I asked.

Before the girl could answer, the owner emerged from a dim hallway and led us upstairs to a meeting room.

“Everyone is here,” said Mary, a wealthy Jewish widow. She lived in the house with her teenage son, John Mark, since the death of her husband, a respected merchant and trader in the city.

In her own special, quiet-yet-confident manner, Mary escorted us to the same spacious room where everyone had gathered that special night before Passover. Small lamps burned oil

as I walked in and sensed the Messiah once again, reclining on a cushion at a low table. This time, though, we were welcomed by the Lord's mother, her other four sons from around the room, and the children. Set before us was an inviting supper of cheese and raisins, loaves of barley, and cups of wine.



I remember the day Andrew and I were washing our dragnets after a lousy night of *musht* fishing off the Galilee's coast near the village of Bethsaida. The Jordan River flowed from the north and carried silt with fish food, and the best catches came at the mouth of the river. But not that night—not even sardines. While washing our nets, we talked about the day when Andrew and the other disciples of John the Baptist were at Bethany on the east side of the Jordan. When John saw Jesus coming his way and announced, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” Andrew ran to tell me they had found the long-awaited Messiah. I'll never forget when I met Jesus and he changed my name to Cephas—it was as if he had known me all my life.

Almost a year later, he was again in our midst. I didn't hear him walk up—he just appeared. He asked to borrow my father's boat so he could talk to the people who were gathering on shore, which was strange that time of the morning. They could hear him better from the boat, he said. There was quite a crowd by now. Even my wife, Miriam, was there.

I told Andrew to remain behind. Jesus and I climbed into the boat and rowed out a short distance and stopped. He sat in the stern for a while and, when he finished speaking to the crowd, he told me to paddle into deeper water and to let down my nets. At first I wanted to argue with him, but then thought

it wouldn't do any good—he was so sure of what he wanted. My two business partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee and Salome from Capernaum, merely sat in their father's boat at the water's edge. James and John were ambitious and not shy about telling you what they thought—sometimes they could be like a wild storm on the Galilee. But this time they didn't move or say a word, as my boat floated away from shore out to where Jesus said to go. When we reached the right spot, I dropped my nets over the side and then just waited—but it wasn't long until they started filling with lots of fish. So I signaled my partners to come and help, and we pulled in so many of those little creatures that both boats almost sank. It was unbelievable!

Then I got scared. We all did. I begged Jesus to go away, but he gently put his hand on my shoulder and I wasn't afraid anymore. He said something really strange: "You will catch men instead of fish from now on." I had no idea what he meant. Why would I want to catch men? But the more I thought about it, the more I began to understand. So, we all pulled our boats up on the sand, tied them down, and left everything and followed him.



A week after arriving at Mary's in Jerusalem, I stood with James and John and the others on the balcony, above a courtyard crowded with people. "The scripture had to be fulfilled," I began, "which the Spirit spoke long ago through David about Judas."

Judas Iscariot had been chosen to hold our common money purse. He was zealous, fast-talking, and always pushing Jesus to declare himself the Messiah and get rid of our enemies forever. But we all trusted him—until the day he betrayed our master, and us. We thought he must have been possessed.

Many people in Jerusalem knew what he did. We all heard the story: The temple's chief priests paid Judas thirty pieces of

silver for handing Jesus over to them. But Judas was later seized with remorse. He threw the coins at the feet of priests and ran out. With this blood money the priests bought a field for burying foreigners. It was the same field where Judas hanged himself and fell to the ground, his body bursting open and his guts spilling out before he died. Today we call this place *Akeldama*, the Field of Blood.

“Do you remember what is written in the Psalms?” I asked all who had gathered at Mary’s. “‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it, and may another take his place of leadership.’ Someone must replace Judas. He needs to be a man who was with us when the Messiah was here.” I left the balcony and went inside the house to see whom the Lord would select. “Whom do you suggest?” I asked those sitting in Mary’s upper room.

My friend John, who also had left his father’s fishing business, broke the silence. “Joseph Barsabbas.”

Joseph—some of us called him Justus—had been one of the Lord’s disciples since the time of John the Baptist.

“Another man?” I asked.

“Matthias, who also is a faithful servant,” James said.

“That’s two. Is there anyone else?”

No other names were offered. So I prayed, “You know our hearts, Lord. Which of these men have you chosen?”

John handed me two small stones.

“We will cast lots to know God’s will,” I said, “in the same way temple officers are chosen. This green rock is for Joseph and the red for Matthais.”

I put the stones in a white jar and shook it until one fell out. “It’s Matthias,” I announced, holding the stone for all to see.



The grain harvest was in and thousands of Jews flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate nature's annual abundance, renew the old covenant and take a holiday from work. This was a feast of food, flowing wine, and streets filled with people. It was Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, celebrated exactly fifty days after the Sabbath of Passover. We had gathered at Mary's to observe Shavuot, and everyone sat on cushions in the upper room.

"It's been ten days since the Lord left us," I began.

"What's that?" John cried, and almost passed out.

No one moved. A rushing wind took possession of the house and everything in it, changing into intense light that glowed like fire before washing over us.

"It's his Spirit!" I shouted, and we began speaking a different tongue.

I went to the door and saw people running toward our house.

"It's a miracle!" someone shouted.

"Those men inside are drunk!" another claimed.

"Listen, all of you," I said, standing with my companions by the courtyard gate.

"Who are you?" asked a man in the crowd.

"I'm Peter. The others are friends of the Anointed One, and they are *not* drunk—it's only nine in the morning."

People kept talking, and some walked away. I raised my hands to get their attention. "What you saw was predicted centuries ago by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below.'

"God blessed Jesus the Nazarene," I continued, "and after he was murdered God brought him back to life. Remember what

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David wrote in the Psalms: 'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.'

“He wasn't talking about himself—David died and was buried—his tomb is still here. He was saying that one of his descendants would be the Messiah and was predicting that he would live again. God gave Jesus authority to send his Spirit of holiness, which has come today. Return to God and be baptized. Receive him and save yourselves from the evils of this nation!”