

## The Church in Rome

Antonius sat alone in a deteriorating second-story apartment located in a slum on the slope of Esquiline hill in Rome. As rain pelted the age-worn wall outside, a plate of bread and vegetables and a cup of sour wine rested on the makeshift table. The room had turned dark with the coming of this storm, and Antonius lit a small oil lamp against the gloom. With the light, hungry roaches materialized, scampering to the dark safety of cracks in the wall. In the apartment next door a baby cried, and the infant's father screamed obscenities at the infant's mother. An urgent conversation rose and then faded as an unseen pair of business partners walked down the stairs. Somewhere in the muddy street below a unit of Roman soldiers marched past, driven under sharp orders from its commander. Antonius sat alone, thinking.

That morning his employer, a rough, burly fellow named Brutus, once again turned from the task of pricing fruits and vegetables to ridicule this young Christian. The verbal jabs had become as annoying as gnats darting to and fro in the shop's pungent air. Brutus was big, obnoxious, and cruel. Antonius cringed against the man's emotional blows, wishing he could strike back out of his hurt and embarrassment. Each time he "turned the other cheek" it received a slap in kind. Yet, he bit his lip, nursed his wounded pride, and again asked the Lord's forgiveness for his thoughts.

Persecution of the church in Rome had yet to result in martyrdom, but since the expulsion of Jews under the Emperor Claudius, Christians had continued to be harassed to various degrees by both Jews and pagans. Upon the expulsion some had suffered imprisonment, beatings, and the seizure of their properties. That was almost fifteen years ago now. Antonius had not been part of the Christian church at that time but had heard about the conflict. In fact his own grandfather, ruler of the Synagogue of the Augustenses, had been one of the most outspoken opponents of the Christians. When at seventeen Antonius converted to Christianity the old man almost died, declaring Antonius dead in a shouting match that ended in tears and a tattered relationship.

In recent months abuse of the church had escalated with the amused approval of the emperor himself, and now emotional fatigue was taking its toll. Footsteps in the hail, a scream in the night, meaningless events that, nevertheless, set Antonius' heart racing. He had been told the cost of following the Messiah, but somehow his experience was different than he expected. In the beginning he thought his joy would never be broken, that he would always feel the presence of God. He had been taught that the Lord, the righteous Judge, would vindicate his new covenant people. Did not the Scriptures, speaking of the Messiah, say that God had put "all things in subjection under his feet"? But the church had taken a great beating lately, and members of its various house-groups had become discouraged and were questioning whether Christ was really in control. In their hearts they wondered if God had closed his ears against their cries for relief. Some, in their disillusionment, doubted and left the church altogether.

Antonius BarDavid remembered the traditions of the synagogue and the support of the Jewish community the joy of the festivals, and the solemn

celebrations of the Jewish calendar. He appreciated the fellowship of Christ's community, but genuinely missed the traditions of his ancestors—and he missed members of his family. He watched them from a distance as they walked together to market by the Tiber River. Some of them still would not speak to him and passed him on the street as they would a Gentile. That was difficult, and today his loneliness closed in around him like a dark, damp blanket.

To make matters worse he was one of the poorer members of the church. When Antonius became a Christian, he lost his job as a tailor's apprentice in the Jewish quarter. He now spent his days sorting rotting produce, sweeping the floor, swatting flies, and receiving orders from obnoxious Roman slaves shopping for rich mistresses. He stooped so low as to take pieces of rotten fruit home to supplement his meager food supply. Even rich men's slaves fared better. Earlier in the week, Gaius, the kitchen slave of an equestrian who lived in the area, tossed him a handful of over-ripe figs saying, "Here, Christian! Change your cannibalistic diet by taking a bit of good fruit." Laughter hung with the gnats in the air. To be poor and a Christian invited double portions of ridicule.

Antonius had missed the weekly meal and worship for the past two weeks, and his heart had cooled somewhat toward the little house-group. A spiritual itch in the back of his spirit warned him, cautioning him concerning his loss of perspective; yet, in recent days he had begun to snuff such thoughts from his mind as quickly as they came. Antonius' bitterness over his current circumstances was growing and slowly obscuring the Truth.

That night the believers were to meet for worship and encouragement. Rumor had it the leaders had received a document from back east somewhere. Although discouraged and tempted to skip the meeting again, Antonius' curiosity was aroused, and he decided to travel the short distance to the neighborhood house at which the fellowship was to meet. Entering the gathering room, he spoke greetings to several friends, who also looked tired from the day's work. The hostess offered something to drink and friendly banter, but dejection hung like a cloud over the room. When the meal was finished, the group's leader, a good and godly man of almost seventy years, finally arrived. Joseph was a bit out of breath, having come from a meeting with the other leaders half way across the city. He was visibly moved as he stood smiling before the group of about twenty, his hands shaking slightly from advancing age. After a few words of introduction Joseph took a deep breath and explained he had talked the other leaders into allowing his group the first reading of the scroll. With a twinkle in his eye the elder said, "I believe you will find this quite relevant." He unrolled the first part of the parchment and began reading with vigor: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus... To all in Rome, who are loved by god and called to be his saints..." Adapted from George

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