

Chapter One

At Death's Door

Footsteps.

On the other side of the door.

Footsteps made by bare feet, quiet, as if the owner of the feet was trying to sneak up on someone.

Ethan pushed farther back between the sacks of grain and watched the crack at the bottom of the wooden door. Only a small sliver of moonlight from the shuttered window behind him pierced the darkness—not enough to illuminate the crack.

Inside, his stomach felt full of worms and his heart ran a race all its own. Outside, his hand reached slowly for the butchering knife he always kept nearby. The storeroom wasn't large, but it wasn't small either. It smelled of his mother's baking. Besides the bags of grain, salt, and sugar, the walls were lined with large pottery urns of oil, molasses, wine, and vinegar.

The footsteps stopped.

Ethan couldn't see under the door, but he knew the feet were there.

He had just celebrated his thirteenth birthday two days before, and he knew the priests and teachers would this very day test him to see if he should be declared to be a man. He knew they expected him to be brave, and strong, and fearless, with a head full of knowledge of God's laws and wisdom. But the only thing filling his head at this moment was terror.

The latch on the door started to lift.

Ethan held his breath.

Slowly, the wooden peg of the latch raised above the wooden catch on the doorframe. With a soft squeak, the door began pushing inward toward him.

Ethan let out a little yelp, like a puppy whose tail had been stepped on.

The door swooshed open, and the feet stepped into the shaft of moonlight. Ethan's eyes traced a path from the feet, up two bulky and hairy legs, past a body covered in a loose tunic, and up to the face of . . .

His father.

Ethan sank back into the bags of grain and started breathing again.

“Ethan!” his father whispered. “What are you doing in here? I was worried.”

His father, Amon, lit and pulled in a small oil lamp from a table in the hallway outside the door. In the darkness of the closet, the tiny flame seemed as bright as the sun. Amon wasn’t as big as some men, but in the eyes of most other Jews he was a giant.

Ethan twisted uncomfortably on his bed of bags. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Amon nodded. “Nervous?”

Ethan’s lips pinched tight and shook his head. “No, it’s just that—someone—was snoring.”

Ethan and his whole family—his father Amon, mother Tamar, sister Eliana, younger by three years, and brother Enoch, younger by eight years—all slept on the second floor of the house, in a room separate from his grandparents. Often it sounded like a choir of coughing, gurgling, slurping, and choking as Ethan lie awake in the middle of the night.

Amon lowered himself to the dirt floor and Ethan could tell from his groans and grunts that his father’s back was hurting him again. Once settled, Amon put his hand on his son’s ankle. The hand wasn’t wrinkled like the hands of *really* old men, but it still looked like it had been hard used for his twenty-nine years.

“Ethan,” his father said, looking straight into his eyes, “remember, I am the one you cannot lie to. I know the fear in your heart and the thoughts in your head because I have had those same fears and those same thoughts.”

Ethan looked away from his father’s eyes. “Yes, Father.” He was silent for a long moment, then looked at him again. “But you did many brave and amazing things by the time you were my age. You built inventions, you saved the life of your father.” He sat up a bit straighter and leaned forward. “You saw Jesus himself rise into heaven.” He slumped back into the grain bags. “I-I have done nothing. And am afraid of my own name.”

Amon leaned back against the doorframe. “Ethan, you are not me and I am not you. You must not judge yourself by what I may or may not have done. Like many families, you are much more like your grandfather than you are me.”

“Which grandfather?”

“Grandfather Jotham. And believe me, I was terrified during all those things you say I did so bravely. As was Grandfather Jotham himself when he was separated from his family at ten years of age. But circumstances pushed him into doing brave things, and he pushed *me* to do brave things. So now tell me, what thing must *I* push *you* to do? What thing is it you are so frightened of?”

Ethan shrugged. “The examination.”

Amon nodded as if he’d known the answer all along. “And I was terrified of my own examination when I was your age.”

“No you weren’t! Grandmother Tabitha said you answered every question and recited every Scripture without even thinking about it, and with no fear at all.”

Amon smiled. “And how would Grandmother Tabitha know what was in my head? In fact, my insides were shaking, and I was embarrassed to be singing and reciting in front of all those people.”

Ethan looked up, surprised. “You were?”

Amon nodded. “Terrified. I was absolutely terrified. As you will be this afternoon when the rabbis ask you the questions that have been asked of every boy for hundreds of years.” Both were quiet for a few moments, then Amon asked, “And what is it you will do once you’re officially a man?”

Ethan squirmed. He really did not want to give the answer to that question just yet, so said simply, “I want to go to some Roman comedies. I often hear the laughter coming from the theater.”

Amon smiled. “As do most young people. But I’m telling you, you’ll be disappointed. The only way the Romans know how to make people laugh is to be lewd and disgusting.” He paused, then added, “On the other hand, you could watch your mother chase a runaway lamb—now *that’s* hilarious!”

As if he hadn’t even heard his father, Ethan rolled over on his side and curled up like a baby. “Couldn’t you just bring the rabbis here, and have them ask me questions through the door?”

Amon laughed loudly and patted his son on the back. “Oh Ethan. You see how different you are from me? I have never had your sense of humor.”

As Amon continued laughing, Ethan mumbled, “I wasn’t joking.”



A few hours later, the new sun was just lighting up the breakfast table in their small brick-and-plaster house, filtered through a slight haze from the cook fire. Ethan’s younger brother and sister concentrated only on the bread in their hands while his parents sat and seemed nervous. They kept glancing at him. Finally, he faced his mother and said, “What?”

Tamar looked surprised. “Oh, uh, nothing.”

“Why do you keep staring at me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Ethan. This is just a very special day, and I want it to go well for you.” Tamar stood and took the pitcher of water from the table to fill it, even though it was already full.

Eliana was chewing on a piece of bread when her face brightened. “Hey, I just realized something.”

Everyone looked at her, but she looked at Ethan. “If you don’t pass today, when you’re sixteen or nineteen or twenty-five I can still call you a boy!” Ethan was normally very kind to his siblings, but now his fear that she might be right took over and he flashed his mother a terrified look.

Tamar gave her daughter the evil eye—that look a mother gives a child when they want them to know just how much trouble they’re in.

Ethan yelled a yell that sounded like a donkey scream. “I don’t understand why I even have to do this thing!” He threw down his bread and buried his head in his arms. “We’re not even Jewish anymore,” his muffled voice bounced off the rough wood of the table. “We follow Jesus. So why do I have to do this?”

A moment later, Ethan heard his father’s voice whispering in his ear. “You know the answer to that as well as I. Because we *are* Jewish. God himself appointed us Jews to write down his laws, and follow his word, and live in righteousness, until he sent the Messiah to save us. And now we must carry *that* message to the world. Besides”—Amon sat back up and spoke in a normal voice—“Jesus himself was a Jew and went through the same examinations from the rabbis as you will today. If it was important for him, it must be important for you.”

Ethan rolled his head over on its side and looked up at his father. “Jesus *taught* the rabbis. When he was only twelve.”

“Well, uh, yes, of course. But I’m sure you understand what I’m— Just don’t, um, you know, mention the name of, um, you know, Jesus, to the rabbis today. They might not like that too much.”

“Aaaaagh!” Ethan covered his head with his arms. “This is so stupid. Why do I have to prove myself to old men who don’t even believe in Jesus?”

He felt his father’s hand on his shoulder. “Because,” his father’s voice was again a whisper, “the rabbis are testing you on your knowledge of our *past*. Jesus is our *present* and our future. All are important.”

After breakfast, Ethan’s mother sent him to buy some cheese from the cheese seller, Josiah, down by the Sheep’s Gate. *She just wants to keep me busy*, he thought as he left the only house he’d ever lived in. It was the same house his grandfather Jotham had bought many years before, and the same house his father Amon had added to when he married Ethan’s mother. He walked out the back door, under that new addition, and through the pens full of the sheep that provided the whole family with an income.

He stopped and looked around, checking every shadow and corner where a thief or murderer might hide, then, deep in thought, sucked in a breath and headed up the muddy street. The street was muddy because the patchy clouds in the sky had been dropping rain off and on all night. But it was sunny now,

and he turned toward the Upper City, still checking behind every barrel and under every wagon. He turned onto another street but screamed and jumped back. Was that an evil spirit passing overhead? When he realized it was just a blanket drying in the wind, he got angry with himself for screaming and jumping, looked around to make sure no one had seen him, then continued on his way. But now he was really confused and turned back, went a different way, got confused again and turned back, then continued on in his original direction.

Ethan passed the home of his best friend Micah, son of Benjamin, his father's best friend. Micah looked up from the board he was sawing. His father was a carpenter, which meant that Micah was a carpenter in training just as Ethan was a shepherd in training. "E-man!" Micah yelled, using his nickname for Ethan. He ran up to the street and fell into step with his friend. Micah was the taller of the two and walked with a slight limp from a broken leg when he was seven. He seemed to always have a piece of straw or twig in his mouth. "Where are you going?"

Ethan sighed. "My mother is trying to help me keep my mind off the terrible tragedy that awaits me, so she sent me for some cheese."

Micah laughed. "It's not such a tragedy, you know, and not as terrible as you think. I went through it just last month and survived."

Ethan scowled at his friend as they walked. "You were not the son of the most famous Jew in Jerusalem. You're not the son of the one who stood up to Pontius Pilate to free his father from the Romans. I *know* the rabbis will be much harder on me than they were on you."

"Maybe," Micah answered with a shrug, "but you'll do great, just like your father."

Ethan glared at his friend. "If I hear that one more time I'm going to move to Egypt and never come back!"

Micah threw his hands up in defense. "Okay, okay. But at least after you pass your exams we'll be equals again. In the sight of the Jewish traditions, I mean."

Ethan gave Micah a sideways smirk. "You and I can never be equal because Jesus loves me much more than he does you."

Micah laughed. "I don't think so. The girls around here may like you better because of your dimples, but I don't think Jesus cares about that."

Ethan gave him a wide grin, which he knew made his dimples stand out. "Not even Jesus could resist a face like this."

Micah laughed even harder. "Maybe. But I still don't think the rabbis are going to be impressed by how cute you are."

"Aha! So you admit it. I *am* cute."

“Only in your own mind.”

Micah was silent for several moments as they walked, then quietly asked, “Are you still planning to leave in three days, assuming you survive today?”

They passed a vendor of dyed cloth, and Ethan waved at her before he answered. “Yes. I am almost all packed.” He checked a shadow behind a camel. No bandits.

“What do you have to pack? Once you get there you must give up your own clothes and wear only the frocks they provide.”

Ethan shrugged. “I’m still taking my favorite cloak, and my writing supplies, and a few other things.”

“Like the toy dog your father made you from scraps of cloth when you were three but that you still sleep with?”

Ethan pursed his lips and didn’t answer.

“Where are you keeping all this?” Micah asked.

“In a bag under my bed.”

Micah shook his head. “Good thing you have one. It’s still hard to believe that your parents slept on a mat on the floor when they were growing up.”

“That’s easy for the son of a carpenter to say—your family has built beds for generations.”

“But doesn’t it seem strange?”

Ethan nodded. “Yes, and I tease my parents about it all the time—about how old they are because they lived in a time when there were no beds.”

“And what do they say?”

“They remind me that my Grandpa Jotham and Grandma Tabitha grew up sleeping on mats on the *ground*, in a tent, that was in a different field every night.”

Micah snickered. “No wonder you’re always wandering around in circles.”

“I do not wander in circles! I-I merely want to make sure all the girls on all the streets have a chance to see my dimples.” He flashed Micah a dimple smile. “It’s what makes me cuter than you.”

Micah scoffed. “Keep this up and I may ask you the first question myself this afternoon.”

Ethan skidded to a stop and faced his friend. His dimples disappeared as he gawked. “That’s it! You just found the solution to my fears. *You* can ask me the first question this afternoon, and make it an easy one!”

A look of terror crossed Micah’s face. “Are you joking again? I cannot ask a question. I haven’t even been a man for a month yet, and the chief priest himself will be there.”

Ethan grabbed the front of Micah’s tunic and pulled him close. “Yes, you *can*. It’s not my fault that I come from a famous family. It’s not my fault that the chief priest thinks he has to preside over my

examinations. But *you* are already a man, and any man in the temple can ask a question, so *you* could make it easier on me by asking a simple one!”

Micah pulled Ethan’s hands from his tunic and pushed himself away. “I-I cannot do that. Not in front of the chief priest! That is not— They would never— No. I won’t do that.” He turned and ran back up the street toward his home.

“Then you’re no friend of mine!” Ethan yelled after him. He turned away and started back down the hill, back toward the Sheep Gate and the seller of cheese, and back toward a future that he knew would end in his total humiliation and probably death that very afternoon.

He was halfway there before he realized he was all alone in the middle of Jerusalem with a thousand dangers hiding in the shadows.



Ethan was sure there were ten times more people at the temple than had ever been there before. They were standing in the hot sun, shoulder to shoulder, inside the walls of the Court of Women. Clouds drifted over the Mount of Olives to the east, and he wished some would float their way and give them some shade.

Beyond them, up some stairs and through an iron gate, was the Court of Israel where only men could go, and where priests made daily sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people. Ethan could even now smell the fires. But his own bloody sacrifice—which is how he thought of his exams—would be held here, in the Court of Women, so that even the women and children of Jerusalem could witness his humiliation. The priests would remove his arms and legs, he was sure, and rip out his heart, and then declare before all the people that he, Ethan, would never, ever, be a man.

Ethan felt his father’s hand in the middle of his back push him forward through the crowd. He smelled the sweat from hundreds of bodies. A priest standing high on the wall blew a loud blast from the ceremonial *shofar*—a long, curled ram’s horn used as a trumpet. Ethan looked back at his father. Even though he knew better, he said, “I thought they only blew that to announce sacrifices and such.”

His father smiled, then Ethan heard his father’s voice behind calling out, “Make way, please! Make way for the sacrificial lamb.”

Ethan looked back and gave his smiling father the evil eye, then continued pushing forward. But deep inside he really did feel like a sacrificial lamb on his way to the slaughter.

They were followed through the crowd by Ethan’s mother and siblings, and then two of his three

living grandparents—Jotham and Tabitha—since Grandpa Bartholomew was on a mission trip. After that came his uncle Uri, then Uncle Jadon and his wife and their three young children.

The crowd parted, and Ethan reached the base of the steps up to the Court of Israel. “Go on now,” his father whispered in his ear. “Jehovah be with you, and the Spirit of Jesus.”

Ethan gulped, shivered just a bit, then put his foot on the first step up to the temple.



The first step.

It’s almost always a scary one. The first day at a new school or job, the first time we drive a car by ourselves, the first time we speak or sing in front of others.

Scary.

But here’s a secret that maybe you’ve never thought about: Our God is the God of our scary firsts.

He was there the day you were born.

He was there when you took your first step.

He was there when you fell down.

He was there each time you tried something for the first time.

He was there at the beginning, he will be there at the end, and he’ll be there every moment in between.

Every time—*every time*—you have to face a “first” in your life, he is there, ready to help you through it. All *you* have to do is accept his help.

And by the way, he’s there for the seconds, thirds, fourths, and everything that follows too.

Ethan has taken his first step toward a brand-new world—a whole new way of living. It doesn’t matter that millions of people have had to take that same step before him, he’s still scared.

But what he and we can count on is that the God who created the universe is the same God who is with us when we take our first step into something new.

Every. Single. Time.

Chapter Two

Judgment

Ethan gulped, then forced his trembling right foot to step up onto the stairway, followed a moment later by his left. He reached the top step and turned slowly around, eyes open wide like owl eyes. Before him, the Court of Women was filled from side to side and front to back with every Jew in Jerusalem, it seemed. *Why me?* he kept asking inside his head. He had watched many of his older friends and many older strangers go through their exams, and it was never like this. They were always held in homes or small synagogues or even in the street in front of a house. Never here, at the temple itself, and never in front of the high priest. *It's all my stupid father's fault,* he complained to himself. *Just because he was the only Jew in Jerusalem to ever stand up to a Roman governor and live, and just because Grandfather Jotham stopped an evil man from terrorizing Jews, and just because Grandfather Bartholomew escaped from Roman slavery, and just because Great-grandfather Asa . . .*

Ethan stopped himself from thinking. Clearly, he really was part of a famous family, both for the Christians in the city and for the Jews who didn't believe in Jesus. His fate had been sealed long before he was born.

A gasp swept across the crowd, and everyone looked to a point behind Ethan. Ethan turned and sucked in his breath: The high priest, Ananias, strode through the gate. White robes were covered by a shorter blue robe trimmed in gold and fringed with golden pomegranates. Over that was an apron the color of a sunset, and on top of that a breastplate holding twelve jewels representing the twelve tribes of Israel. On top of his head, the high priest wore a crown of gold, held in place with two blue ribbons and bearing the Hebrew words that mean "Holiness to the Lord."

Behind the high priest, streaming in through the gate from the Court of Israel, were dozens of lesser priests and rabbis. This was going to be a very long and difficult exam, Ethan could tell.

When they were assembled, and when the crowd had hushed, the chief priest spoke in his deep and booming voice. "We gather today to examine a boy who wishes to be declared a man."

I don't wish that, Ethan thought. I wish everyone would just leave me alone and let me live in a cellar!

“And, so, you are witnesses to this examination, and all men of God may participate.”

The priest looked directly at Ethan for the first time. *Dimples!* Ethan thought. *Maybe the dimples will work.* He flashed his biggest grin at the high priest.

The priest looked shocked, then snarled quietly like a mad dog. “This is a serious ceremony, boy. Your dimples will do you no good here.”

Ethan sucked in a breath and his dimples dissolved in terror.

The high priest opened his mouth to speak again, but the next words Ethan heard were yelled from far to his left, from a voice much higher in pitch. “Son of Amon,” the words said, “tell us your family line. From whom do you descend?”

It was a simple question, an easy question, and Ethan grinned despite himself because the question had come from his best friend, Micah, standing halfway up at the end of the steps. The high priest looked annoyed, but there was nothing he could do: It was a legitimate question, if easy, and came from one of the Jewish men. He nodded at Ethan to answer.

Ethan felt every eye in the temple staring at him. He opened his mouth and spoke in the loudest voice he could push out of his mouth. “I come from the line of David. My father is Amon, son of Jotham, and is a follower of J . . .” Ethan stopped himself and caught the rest of the word before it passed his teeth. He had almost said, “a follower of Jesus,” but knew that could get his father killed by the very priests standing before him. Instead, he continued by saying, “A follower of Jewish law and student of the great rabbi Gamaliel.”

He continued listing out his ancestors for five generations back, each, it seemed, more impressive and elite than the one before. When he had finished, the high priest nodded. “An impressive lineage, a lineage of wise men and women. But I ask you, young Ethan, are you as great as your ancestors? How can we know if *you* have such wisdom, if *you* are worthy of being accepted into the Court of Israel?”

Ethan nodded slowly, trying to look wise even though he trembled inside. “It is written by our father Job,” he said in a loud, clear voice, “‘Where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? No mortal comprehends its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living. The deep says, ‘It is not in me’; the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’ It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed out in silver. . . . Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies.’ The answer to your question, oh mighty and wise Ananias, is that I am not, nor ever can be called, worthy. I am not wise, nor ever can be said to possess wisdom. For as the Proverbs tell us, there is more hope for a fool than for a person who is wise in their own eyes.”

Ethan thought he saw the slightest hint of a smile on some of the priestly faces before him. He had no time to explore that thought, as another priest asked a question about the law, and he had to quickly search his memory for an answer that would satisfy the holy men of the temple.

And so it went, for almost an hour, until the high priest again asked a question. “Tell us, young Ethan, when, in the future, do the Holy Scriptures say that the Messiah will appear and save us from our earthly toil?”

All the warning gongs in Ethan’s head instantly started to ring. He recognized that this was a trick question, a question designed to trick followers of Jesus into confessing their beliefs. Ethan held his lips tightly together for a moment as he thought: If he answered that the Messiah had *already* come, in the person of Jesus, he risked the lives of himself and his family. But if he *didn’t* admit that Jesus was the true Messiah, he risked turning his back on the sacrifice Jesus made. Then he remembered some words that might save him, words from the Scriptures. He stood a bit straighter and raised his chin to look out over the people. “Ecclesiastes tells us, ‘Since no one knows the future, who can tell someone else what is to come?’ Therefore, we must each keep watch, because we do not know on what day the Messiah will appear,” and in his head he silently added *a second time*. “We must always be ready, because the Son of Man Daniel wrote of will come at an hour when we do not expect him.”

The high priest nodded slowly. “A wise and educated answer,” he said loudly, “and an answer worthy of a true man of God.” He looked back at the other priests behind him, and Ethan saw each of them nod his head. Ananias turned back to Ethan. “Come now, and bring to the people the reading of the Torah.”

Part of Ethan gave a huge sigh of relief: The questioning was over. But another part took on a new terror: He would now have to chant passages from the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Bible, as selected for that day. Ethan’s insides squirmed like worms as the Torah scroll was brought out and set on the *bimah*, a special stand. A priest unrolled the scroll to the proper place, then motioned for Ethan to step up on a wooden box that had also been brought out, since he was not yet as tall as most men.

Ethan gulped. He stood on the box, picked up a special pointer called a *yad*, and pointed it at the first word of the passage to be read. Special marks above the words, like musical notes, told Ethan how to sing and chant each word or passage. He gulped again, took a deep breath, then began to sing. “And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’” Many of the people in the courtyard raised their hands in praise, or rocked forward and backward as they heard the words from the book of Genesis, as written down by Moses. “‘Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds,’” Ethan continued singing

the words of God, “I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

A rumble of gasps and whispers swept across the crowd, and people pointed. Ethan glanced up and saw that they were pointing to a rainbow that had appeared in the sky over the Mount of Olives. He kept chanting.

Ethan sang the words of God for longer than it would take a boy to walk all the way across Jerusalem and back again, he figured. When he finished, the chief priest declared that he was a man, and the people cheered.

At last the ceremony was over, and everyone started to disperse. The high priest leaned in close to Ethan and whispered. “Those dimples of yours are going to drive the girls mad. Be careful that you choose a bride who likes who you are, not just how you look.”

Ethan nodded, then was immediately surrounded by his family and friends. Tamar, his mother, was weeping for joy. She tried several times to say something, but only cried louder. Amon, his father, took him by both shoulders and pulled him close. His sister, Eliana, held his hand and congratulated him, but his little brother, Enoch, was too young to understand.

All of Ethan’s many friends slapped him on the back and congratulated him, and he challenged every one of them to games of King’s Ransom in the coming days. And everyone, it seemed, commented on the “fact” that God had sent his special blessing on Ethan with a rainbow.

But there was one friend Ethan was particularly looking for. He found him, in the shade, leaning against one of the columns of Solomon’s Porch, grinning at Ethan like he was holding in the greatest joke ever told. “You did it,” Micah cheered. “You passed your exams, and now we are equals again.”

Ethan looked down at the ground. “And I thank you for asking the question you did.” He looked up at his friend. “It gave me the courage to make my mouth start speaking and filled me with confidence.”

Micah just kept grinning. “You’re welcome. And now I have another task.”

Ethan looked confused. “What task is that?”

“Your mother has warned me that if I don’t get you to our church meeting this afternoon, I will spend the rest of my life with her cooking pot upside down on my head.”

Ethan laughed. “That sounds exactly like my mother. So I guess we had better get there on time. I don’t think any girl will marry you if you have a pot on your head.”

The two friends laughed some more and headed out of the temple area and into the crooked streets of Jerusalem. Ethan started to turn the wrong direction, but Micah pulled him back.

As he did every day, Ethan looked across the city walls until he found six strips of black and red cloth drying in the sun. This was the signal his father had invented before Ethan was born. The

arrangement of the strips was a code that told the Christians in the city where and when to gather for their secret church meetings. He quickly read the signal and confirmed that his church group would be meeting at the fifth hour, in the cistern of Hirma. He looked at Micah, who silently nodded, having also read the sign.

Ethan was always more relaxed when he was with Micah, but he still scanned the crowds and rooftops carefully, watching for any danger. As they pushed their way through the busy streets, Ethan asked, “Do you know why my mother threatened you to get me to church? I *always* go to church.”

Micah shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe she thinks that since you’re now a man, you might decide you no longer need church.”

Ethan snorted. “I think if I missed church my ears would fall off and my heart would stop beating. Most days, thoughts of Jesus are the only thing that keep all my fears in their place.”

“More likely,” Micah added, “she’s afraid your thoughts are in the clouds and you’ll get lost. Again. For the thousandth time.”

Ethan elbowed him in the side. “I’m not *that* bad.” He started to turn a corner and Micah pulled him back.

“Wrong way, oh wise and learned man. Why is it that you always get lost?”

Ethan shrugged. “I guess because I’m always thinking about fifty different things at once.”

It being near the fifth hour, they turned up a side street, followed a crooked maze of alleys, and came out at a small courtyard with a well. Ethan peeked in the well as they passed to make sure it held no kidnappers. There were none, and no other people around. They checked the windows and roofs of the buildings surrounding the courtyard. Satisfied that no one was watching, they casually stepped through a doorway, silently greeted their church leader, Yosef, and descended down some stairs into a large, underground cistern.

The empty cistern—an underground chamber in the rock used to hold water—was big enough to fit two of Ethan’s houses. Inside, there were already a dozen people waiting. Torches on the walls gave the entire chamber a warm, flickering glow. “Greetings, Ethan,” many of them whispered, “and congratulations.” This was his church family, and he loved them all with all his love.

Others arrived, one or two or three at a time, including his parents and his father’s parents, and soon the large chamber was filled with people sitting on the hard rock floor, whispering news and speculations. Finally, they heard the door above close, then Yosef came down the stairs.

“Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” he said, and the people responded with *Selah*. He gave some news of the church—things such as the comings and goings of the apostles, how many people had been baptized since their last meeting, and plans for the coming food and clothing

collection for the poor. With a grin filling his face, he next turned to Ethan. “But of course, our big news today is of our friend, and now a young man, Ethan.”

The entire group looked at Ethan and quietly applauded. Ethan felt himself turning red at the attention, and he almost didn’t notice the flash of light as the door at the top of the stairs opened then closed again. People were still patting Ethan on the back and saying how proud they were of him, as the feet of a newcomer came down the stairs. When his face appeared, they saw that the man was Barnabas—slightly plump, a bald spot in the middle of his head, always with a smile, and a friend to all.

Ethan was the first to call out the name of his old friend. “Barnabas!” he yelled more loudly than he should have, but others picked up the cry until Yosef had to shush them. Barnabas looked at Ethan and whispered, “You didn’t think I’d miss this day, of all days, did you?”

Ethan was laughing and started to answer, but then he saw a second pair of feet coming down the stairway—a pair of feet shod in a worn pair of sandals and covered with dirt from a long and muddy road. At first Ethan was simply curious about who the second guest was. Then his heart seized up and his teeth clamped tightly shut as fear rose from the soles of his feet to the hairs on his head. When the whole creature was visible and confirmed his fears, Ethan almost wet himself.

It was the Beast.



The first Christian churches lived in difficult and dangerous times—difficult and dangerous for anyone who believed that Jesus was the Son of God. It was dangerous to meet together, dangerous to talk about Jesus, dangerous to pray in Jesus's name.

Doing any of those could get you killed.

So the first Christian churches had to be careful. They used secret symbols to communicate with each other and met in places where they could talk about Jesus without being overheard.

Of course, in some places in the world today, that hasn't changed.

Why is that? Why doesn't God simply place a knowledge of and love for Jesus inside of every human being? Then there would be no danger in following him.

Because that would make puppets out of people. We each would only be responding to the strings God pulls to make us do what he wants us to do. That's not the kind of relationship God wants with us. He wants us to love and follow him because we *choose* to, not because we're forced to. Of course, that means that people can also choose *not* to believe in God or love Jesus. They can, in fact, choose to believe in and follow false gods.

Since you're reading this book, chances are you live in a place where celebrating and worshipping Jesus is a perfectly safe thing to do. You might get teased a bit by friends, schoolmates, and coworkers who don't believe, but you won't be beaten with sticks and stones, and the names they might call you can never really hurt you.

Ethan and his family, and his church family, are taking a risk just by meeting together to learn about and worship the one true God. Some of us still face that kind of persecution today. But even if the greatest danger we face is that someone might ridicule us for our beliefs, the prize of eternal life with Jesus is worth it.