

A Star-studded Night In Jerusalem

James looked in the Egyptian glass of the inn-room and noticed how rapidly the gray had spread from his temples and beard to cover all of his hair. "It's a good thing I still wear the head-skirt of Bethsaida," he mused. "It allows me to carry a facade of youth in a time when the younger generation yearns to take over leadership of the cause."

Suddenly there was a tapping on the heavy door and the old fisherman called out, "Yes, please come in!"

The door swung widely open and James saw his younger brother, John, still with that youthful visage and the keen eyes of a man who has a lot of life left in him. "My brother," John called out, "you look well. Yes, well indeed."

"Ho, you son of the lake! You are a terrible liar if I ever heard one," James responded. "Come in, come in! Let me see how you fare!" The elder brother approached his young sibling and reached out, each hand embracing the forearm of his brother. "Do you know what I think? I feel that I must have gotten all of the wisdom of the family for if Heaven is fair at all it must be that way for you certainly still have the looks of the fiery son of Zebedee!" James laughed and then questioned, "And how is it with you. Are you ready for the big event?"

"Oh, I look forward to it, but not because I feel that I will be a finalist."

"And why not, my younger brother? Who do you think is more worthy of the title of *Apostle of the Year* than you?"

"Well, there are many choices," John replied. "Any of the other men could easily fit into that category."

"Oh," said James, "I don't agree with that at all. Come, sit down and tell me what claim that any of them would have above you."

John crossed the wooden floor and settled upon an Arabian divan, casually resting his head in his hand and draping his feet from the edge of the fabric. He looked intently upon his older brother and shared his deepest feelings. "I admit, my brother, that I've given it some thought and, quite frankly, I just don't think that I will be in the running at all.

"First of all, there's Peter. You know him. He's never changed since we were children. He's always been the first to speak, the first to step forward, the first to be noticed wherever we went."

"Yes," James laughed, "you have spoken truth in that, my brother. I don't remember many times when he faded into the background," then the old apostle leaned back upon his own divan and drifted to a time nearly a score of years before. "Yes, the only time I remember him accepting a lesser position or avoiding notice was that incredible weekend so long ago.

"I've never seen him so reticent and sheepish as he was that weekend when the Lord was in the tomb and it continued even on that morning by the lake when he was called for a separate audience." James paused and then continued, "Yes, in those days the wind certainly was out of his sails."

"But," John interjected, "it didn't last long at all and we both know it." They both shook their heads as the young man continued, "When the feast came about he was the first to stand up to speak again." He shook his head and concluded, "I love him. I always have. But sometimes I get tired of him always stepping forward as though he should be given preeminence in any discussion. "

"Well, my brother, that's Peter. And his dogged determination to be in the forefront doesn't necessarily qualify him for the award, does it? After all, he's won it three times in the last eight years and you've been nominated every time but have always walked away empty handed.'

James put his elbows on his knees and shared intently, "I just know that this is the year when they will call out, 'John, son of Zebedee.'

John shook his head slowly, "No, my good brother, I do not think that this will be. After all, Peter isn't the only competition. There's Thomas and all that he's been doing recently and Matthew has really been lobbying for the recognition for more than three seasons. Paul has just returned from another trip in the west and he's stirred up a great deal of sympathy for a non-Galilean to win for a change. I know that goes against precedent but you know as well as I do that the day will come that it will happen. The stranglehold that Galilee has had on this from the beginning will eventually be challenged and the day will come, we both know it."

"Perhaps," James agreed, "but not this year. This is the year for Zebedee's youngest son."

"No, I know that just won't happen and I'm determined not to get my hopes up at all," John replied. "After all, if you don't get your hopes up then you can't be disappointed. Besides, if any son of Zebedee wins it will be you, my brother."

"Oh, no!," James laughed loudly. "My day is past. I am an old man and even though there might be a sentimental vote here and there for me I know that the two times I was so honored are the only James I will ever mount the podium and receive the silver chalice and golden laurel."

"I doubt that!", John disagreed quickly. "You still have a very sizable following and it's for more than just sentimental reasons." Then he

leaned forward and whispered coyly, "And besides, my good brother, I know as well as you do that in recent weeks you've made some contacts. You're not as sly as you let on!"

"Ah, I confess that I might have thought of trying to rally support for a while but looking at how rapidly my years are showing on me I recognize that it's only a dream and the only times I'll experience that moment of glory I've already known," James concluded.

"Well," James replied, "I don't know that you're completely out of the running as you say, but I do hope that if it can't be one of us then I'll be pulling for Thomas. We've got to keep this thing among the fishermen, you know?"

"Ho," James responded. "I agree with you on that, good brother."

Across town, up from temple mount Thomas was muttering to himself about the poor choice of accommodations that he'd made for the ceremonies. His inn-room, after all, was poorly furnished and the mirror was obviously Roman and not from the artisans of Egypt. "How can I ever prepare for this night with such a poor-quality basin and mirror such as this?" he grumbled to himself.

If he'd only left his evangelistic work on the coastline sooner he could have found room before the city filled up. Instead, though he was able to finish his newly developed series on how to adapt the money-parables of Jesus into business principles for success, he never would have guessed that it would have cost him the chance at a decent room nearer the banquet hall. And he should have known better for he'd been on the planning committee for this 13th annual presentation.

He'd fully agreed that obtaining the old Upper Room for the banquet was a nice, sentimental touch but he did have reservations because it was obvious that the event had outgrown those familiar old surroundings and it was only a strong amount of lobbying on the part of some of the old guard that placed it back there one last time.

Thomas wasn't stupid. He well understood the agenda of those who pushed for using the Upper Room. There were many who felt it was inevitable that one day Paul would win the award and they wanted to forestall it as long as possible.

Those who wanted to return to the Upper Room probably believed that the location would puncture the growing support for the newcomer as he wasn't there, you know. He didn't have any ties to the familiar events that were so equated with that room from years before. They reasoned that it would be a bit uncomfortable and inappropriate for someone to win "Apostle of the Year" if he was not someone with some history in that room.

It just wouldn't seem fitting to have an outsider win the honor, not in the Upper Room.

Paul was every bit as intelligent as was rumored, and he wasn't at all naive either. As soon as the courier came to Antioch and shared the results of the preparations done by the planning committee he understood that it was a decision that was basically targeted at him. That was of no consequence to him for Paul was as shrewd as he was intelligent, so he immediately dispatched Barnabas to Jerusalem to begin to lay the groundwork for a campaign that would diminish the fact that he was not there for the last supper so many years before.

"It's going to be delicate, my friend," Paul warned his compatriot. "You'll have to give proper deference to the old guard.."

"And how do I go about that?", Barnabas queried.

"Well," Paul continued, "you must first affirm that we think it's a wonderful decision and we support the choice of that banquet hall wholeheartedly." Paul laughed to himself, "That will have them absolutely concerned immediately. They'll expect us to challenge the choice and we'll take the poison from their arrows before they get to fire them off."

"Yes, I see," Barnabas nodded agreement. "That, my good friend, is a stroke of genius!"

"Oh, maybe so," Paul responded, "but that's only the first part of the plan. It won't be enough to just take the sting out of their attempt to alienate me from consideration. We must actually turn this disadvantage into our own advantage."

"And how, might I ask, am I to do that?"

"Oh, it's very simple," Paul said slyly, "we'll just take up another collection among the believers here in Antioch and then you make quite a scene of being particularly generous to the widows and orphans of the church in Jerusalem, especially the Jewish ones. We have to remember the sensitivity of the old guard to the fact that our success among the Gentiles is beginning to put them to shame. Now go, there's much to do!"

Paul turned to find a young servant to begin gathering materials for Barnabas' journey and called back over his shoulder, "Oh, and Barnabas, if we really want to steal the thunder from their choice of the Upper Room I need you to offer to pay for the complete bill for the rental of the facility."

"But Paul," Barnabas implored, "that will just about bankrupt the church here in Antioch!"

'They'll understand.' Paul reasoned, "After all, our victory will be theirs, won't it?"

Andrew went about his responsibilities as chair of the preparations committee. On the outside he was magnanimous and thankful for the honor of leading out in the planning but inside he was perturbed for as soon as he heard that he'd been asked to fulfill the task it was obvious that he wasn't going to be either a nominee, let alone the winner of the coveted chalice and laurel.

It wasn't fair. For four long years he'd toiled on the committee and kept his feelings to himself and what did it get him? Chairmanship of the group, that's all.

He wondered if he wouldn't have done just as well by respectfully declining the appointment. But, if had done that it would have been the death knell for him ever hoping to win the award. Everyone would know the true purpose for his not accepting and he would have forever been a marked man. "Well, you know Andrew," they would have whispered. "He wants that nomination so badly that he won't bide his time and pay the price necessary to be seriously considered." He could hear them all talking behind his back if he had said, "No" to their plot.

There just was no way to win. If he declined the appointment he would be doomed to being forever passed over. On the other hand, if he accepted the leadership of the committee it would be inappropriate for him to be the winner- that would look too convenient and manipulated.

Even if he could be nominated and win while serving as the committee chair many would forever wonder if it wasn't an arranged victory.

Andrew knew that he was caught in a no win situation and he wasn't getting any younger.

Matthew stepped into the room. The decorations and lighting were perfect. Those who had already arrived were appropriately impressed, he could easily see that. That did bode well for how he would be viewed when the next year's nominations were advanced and another *Apostle of the Year* was to be awarded.

"Oh, you sly old publican, you," he thought to himself. "This time you've outdone yourself!"

He knew it was true. By the end of this night he would easily be the favorite for the 14th presentation of the chalice and laurel. Matthew was well pleased, he could bide his time. After all, he wasn't getting up in years like James and Andrew.

Young Crispus went about his responsibilities quietly. After all, he counted it a special privilege to be among the men who were the leadership of the church. These men were the ones of whom he'd been told. They were the ones who had been specifically called by the Lord Himself.

He could see each of them in their best finery and each with his own entourage. There was James, looking venerable and distinguished. His younger brother, John, was moving about the room with an easy grace, embracing old acquaintances and giving special deference to the men who were his competition in the nomination for the chalice and laurel.

Peter was, as usual, dominating the room. He was gregarious and loud and a bit bombastic. Crispus overheard Peter remark about what a wonderful job his brother, Andrew, had done in putting together such a

wonderful occasion. The young servant felt that all he'd heard about the old fisherman appeared to be true, and more.

When he approached the head table with the pitcher of wine Crispus noticed that several honored guests were commenting to Matthew on how beautiful the decor was in the hall. He observed how the apostle acted appropriately modest and thankful for their kind expressions. The young servant also noticed how that when the compliments stopped Matthew seemed to ask just the right question to get the desired response, "Tell me, Bartholomew, do you think that we might have had a few more lamps in that corner?... Oh, no?... Just right, you say?... Well, I'd certainly trust your judgment over mine in that... Yes, thank you so much."

Crispus knew it was an incredible privilege to be there that night for that magic event. He felt that he was one lucky lad.

"Who knows," he mused to himself as he stepped up to the higher-level seating where the dominant apostles had (early in the evening) marked their location, "someday I may attain the chalice and laurel!"

The church certainly had progressed in less than two decades, hadn't it? It's too bad the Lord hadn't foreseen this glorious night. He might have given them clearer rules for such an event.

"Crispus, Crispus, come over here!", a second meal steward called to his compatriot.

"No, not now," Crispus whispered loudly, "I believe that Andrew is about to unseal the scroll to make the announcement."

"Please, come here," the young lad pleaded. "I found something back behind this table."

"Behind the table?", Crispus wondered. "What are you doing behind that table?"

"I was folding the toweling that I used for washing the feet of the guests and one of them fell behind into the crack by the wall. I pulled the table forward," he said as he gestured downward, "and I found this scroll near the floor."

"And so?," Crispus asked with irritation. He knew was going to miss the moment of the presentation of the chalice and laurel. "What is it that you feel you've found that's so important?"

"It's a parchment and it's unrolled. I see that there is writing on it, writing in the script of Galileans." The young boy held the small skin in his hand. "I wonder if we should give it to one of the apostles, after all, most of them are from that region. It may be that one of them dropped it?"

"Well," Crispus responded, determined to resolve the dilemma quickly, "let's just read it and see if we can determine the owner and return it to him personally. I don't know what else to do."

The two servants took the small scroll near one of Matthew's lamps and held the writing toward the flickering light. The apostles were completely oblivious of the two young lads who held a note to a lamp and silently mouthed the words as they scanned the writing...

Jesus, your elder brother, to my little children...

Tonight as we leave this place I ask that you remember my words. I fear that the events that you are soon to experience will be so overwhelming that what I have told you will be forgotten. I leave this message in the hopes that as you wait through the long, dark hours to come that this may be discovered and you may hear my voice again.

Love one another. Prefer one another. And remember how I washed your feet that you might also know the order of my kingdom. In this you will honor your Father in Heaven.

I love you, and will until the end of the age.

Crispus and Marcus trembled, stared at the aged parchment and then at each other. The import of the message that they held was much more than their young minds could comprehend.

What should they do? As they looked at the men who each waited in expectation for the momentous announcement and the unveiling of the silver chalice and golden laurel they didn't know who to give the note to at all.

"I guess we were all wrong," Crispus slowly said. "I guess the Lord did leave directions for a night like this."

For everyone who exalts himself will
be humbled; and he who humbles
himself will be exalted.

- Luke 14:11 (NIV)