

From *A Rope for Judas* — Chapter 7, “Confrontations”

Robert S. Turner

We finally got our audience with Yeshua. We moved some thirty yards away from the fire and, I hoped, out of earshot of the others. After introducing Marius as “a fellow disciple”—I didn’t say of what or whom—I prompted the rabbi to elaborate on what he had said to me that morning about having second thoughts regarding his role as the Son of David.

“Well,” Yeshua said with a sigh, “I don’t know that there’s much to say. I just feel that I’m running up against the limits of what can be accomplished without violence.” We waited for more, but he fell silent.

“Did something happen to change your thinking?” I prompted. “I mean, something specific?”

“No,” he said slowly after another pause. “Just the buildup of events and circumstances over the months. To be honest, I’ve been ambivalent about my calling as the Servant for some time now. Some part of me has wanted to be the Son of David all along, I think.”

“That’s great news,” Marius said excitedly, but I quieted him with a hand on his knee.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Yeshua said, and even in the dark I could tell he was studying Marius, sizing him up. “What if my Abba does want me to forgo retribution and offer myself for the salvation of our people ‘like a sheep led to the slaughter’? What if choosing to be the Son of David turns out to be a betrayal?”

I could sense Marius bristling next to me in the dark, and before I could stop him he blurted out, “How could it be a betrayal? The Messiah is the Son of David! There’s no debate!”

“Well,” I said hastily, feeling the need to step in before Marius’s hotheadedness pushed Yeshua too far in the wrong direction, “there are other schools of thought on that, Marius. The Essenes, for instance, expect a priestly Messiah. Others think Elias or Moshe will return to lead us. It’s not as cut-and-dried as you make it out to be.”

“Right,” Yeshua said. “And some believe that the Messiah has the capacity to act in freedom and not be bound by these expectations at all.”

“Who believes that?” Marius asked suspiciously.

“I do,” Yeshua said with a note of finality. Marius shifted uncomfortably, and I couldn’t help smiling. He was getting a taste of the rabbi’s enigmatic side that the rest of us had puzzled over for months. Yeshua believed in the freedom of the will and accepted no excuses when we made poor choices and tried to justify ourselves by talking about fate or the will of the Almighty. He had no patience for that kind of equivocation. I knew that if he was indeed wrestling with his identity and chose either the path of kingship or the way of suffering, he would own his choice. He had too much integrity to do otherwise.

“So what would happen, do you think,” I pondered aloud, “if you chose one or the other course? For instance, what if you chose to act as the Son of David?”

A long pause ensued, and I suspected Marius longed to answer for Yeshua, but to his credit he kept silent. Finally, the rabbi spoke. “I suppose,” he said and paused again before continuing, “that I would declare myself publicly on the day of the Passover. In the temple. And I would rally those that I assume you two have prepared ahead of time”—I felt my ears burning at this, and was glad for the dark—“to beat back the forces of the Kittim and claim Yerushalem before they had time to regroup. After that, who knows? I’m no military strategist, but I suppose I could count on others I know for help on what to do next. It seems to me that the key is holding Yerushalem, anyway.”

“Yes,” Marius said, his excitement building again. “Once we secure the holy city and word gets out that the Messiah has come, the people will stream here from all over the land, perhaps even from the Dispersion, and we will be able to launch an offensive to rid the land of these heathen overlords!”

My eyes had adjusted to the dim light, and I could make out Yeshua examining Marius. I couldn’t tell for sure, but he seemed to shake his head before saying, “You speak of offensives and securing the holy city, and I think that’s probably correct from a military standpoint, but it all seems so foreign to me. Something in me rebels at that kind of talk. I am, after all, just a small-town preacher. A healer and exorcist. What do I know of such things?”

“But don’t you remember, Rabbi,” I said, calling to mind an event whose true significance had escaped me until this moment, “that time in—oh, where was it—in the Gadarenes, I think? When you cast out the demons from the man who lived among the tombs? Do you remember what the spirits said when you asked their name?”

“Legion,” Yeshua answered. “They said their name was Legion, for they were many.”

“Yes,” I said, “Legion. And you cast them shrieking from the man into the swine, who then rushed into the lake and drowned. You cleansed the man by ridding him of the unclean spirits and you cleansed the land by ridding it of those unclean herds. Do you remember that?”

“Yes, but I—”

I cut him off. “So maybe,” I suggested, my own excitement growing, “your vocation as an exorcist is not as irrelevant as you think. Maybe the Heavenly One is calling you to be the Exorcist Messiah. Just as you cleansed the land of that legion of devils, you will cast out the spirits that bedevil our people and cleanse the land of the Kittim’s legions as well!”

“Are you finished?” Yeshua asked.

I found myself out of breath and strangely aroused. My pulse was racing, my palms sweating. “Yes, I think so,” I gasped.

“Do you think that I have not made that same connection myself? Legion, indeed. The soldiers occupying our land are surely an unclean spirit, and I would drive them out if I could.” I started to speak, but he stopped me. “I know what you are going to say, Youdias—that I do have the power to drive them out, that it’s my calling to cast out that particular spirit—and that’s what I’ve been agonizing over the last few weeks.”

Marius chimed in, “Why agonize, Rabbi? Why not simply embrace your role and do what you ought to do? The people are ready for a Messiah; they will answer your call. The question is, do you have the courage to do the right thing?”

I felt a coldness go through me. Marius may have just crossed the line, and I suddenly regretted inviting him here. Yeshua stared at him, and even in the dark it was enough to make Marius shrink back. “Do not talk to me of courage,” Yeshua said in a stony voice, “you who have never paused even for a minute to ponder the righteousness of your cause. You who would send countless souls to their deaths to serve your own interests. You whose so-called ideals take precedence over lives and even over the laws of your God. Do not speak to me of courage until you have wrestled with your calling through a month of sleepless nights in the hills where Beelzeboul and the goat demons hound your every move. For you this may be easy, but that is only because your own courage is ankle-deep. Do not speak to me of courage!”

It took a moment, but Marius recovered from this withering onslaught enough to say, “How dare you? What do you think you know about me that you would presume to question my motives and courage?”

“I know your type,” Yeshua said, somewhat guardedly, but then he apparently decided to throw caution to the wind and said, “And I know that you led those two unsuspecting comrades of yours into harm’s way, telling them lies and pumping them full of false bravado, and then stepping out of the way when the heat came down. That’s why they will end up on a cross, but you are here spouting off to me, free and unconcerned, about courage.”

Marius turned to me and said indignantly, “You told him! What were you thinking?”

I could only shake my head slowly, incredulous. “No,” I said when I again found my voice. “I have told him nothing.” I glanced over at the rabbi, then back to Marius. “He just knows.”

Marius stared at me, his mouth hanging open stupidly. Then he turned toward Yeshua but with a very different demeanor and posture than before. He knelt before him and said, “You are indeed the Messiah! What Youdias has told me is true. How did you know about me?”

Yeshua waved it off. “Sometimes my Abba gives me insights, that’s all. Usually into someone’s character and sometimes more detailed than others. This time I saw in my heart what happened today.”

Marius leaned forward and placed his forehead on the ground. “Good rabbi, Messiah, Lord! Forgive my impertinence.”

Yeshua reached down, grasped Marius’s shoulder, and pulled him up. “Don’t call me good,” he said. “No one is good but Abba.”

When Marius had taken his seat again, Yeshua continued, “And that is why I must be very careful in making this choice. I cannot trust my own instincts, which tell me to fight and exorcise the Kittim from our land, as friend Youdias has said. My instincts tell me that I am not named Yeshua by accident, but that I will save my people by leading them, like my namesake Yoshua, into battle to cleanse the land and restore the promise. This is what I want deep down. But I must not trust that voice until I hear it confirmed by my Abba. And Abba has not yet spoken, at least not so I can hear.”

“If I may ask,” Marius said deferentially, “why would the Holy One not confirm that voice? Is it not he who has appointed you Messiah? Why would he change his mind?”

Yeshua sighed. “Now we have crossed into well-trodden ground. Youdias and I have circled and recircled this question many times, have we not?” He placed his hand gently on my knee and smiled.

I smiled back, even as I remembered with pain the dispute that had led to our separation. I could not disguise the catch in my throat as I answered, “Yes, we have.”

The rabbi let out another sigh and said, “The question is not why Abba would change his mind but rather what is the true mind of Abba? The tradition that Messiah will be a king like David has come down from our ancestors, but did it come from Abba first, or is it only the wishful thinking of an oppressed people? Is the liberation Messiah will bring literal liberation from bondage to the empire or a spiritual liberation from bondage to sin? Is it necessary to throw off the yoke with violence in order to live in freedom and dignity? And what about the other voice I hear sometimes, deeper and more disturbing than these other voices—the one that tells me to love my enemies, to do good to those who oppress my people? Can you honestly say the voices calling for violent overthrow are the voice of Abba, and this other voice comes from the Adversary? Is it not more likely the other way around?”

“But why should it be?” Marius asked. “Why would it not be more likely that the Almighty wants to punish our enemies and restore the fortunes of his covenant people? After all, is not the Lord a God of wrath?”

“My Abba makes the sun to shine on both the righteous and the wicked; he makes the rain to fall on good and bad alike. What we call in our ignorance the wrath of God is usually nothing more than the consequences of our own choices and actions.”

“But what about—”

“What about Moshe? What about Yoshua? What about David and Elias and the Maccabees? Is that what you were going to say? Trust me, I have wrestled with these questions long before you came here tonight.” He paused for a long moment, and even in the dim light, I could see him frowning in thought. “It is because of these examples that I have started to entertain the possibility that I am to be the Son of David. Heaven knows I have little love for the Kittim; I have seen what they are capable of in too grisly detail not to want to rid the earth of them. But then I remember. . .”

He paused again, and when the silence became uncomfortable, I said gently, “You remember?”

Yeshua started as though I had shaken him from deep contemplation and said, “I remember that which I do not wish to acknowledge—that even the Kittim are Abba’s children, and they are caught in the webs of the Adversary as much as or even more than we are.”

I was taken aback by this. Marius was too, apparently, because he drew in his breath and said with a curious mix of indignation and deference, “How can you say that, Rabbi? They are the oppressor! They are like Pharaoh with his hardened heart, demanding that we make bricks with no straw. We are the enslaved ones who need liberation, not them!”

Yeshua said calmly, “Do they not need liberation? Are they not caught in the same trap of sin as we are? It may be, as the prophets have said, that we are paying for our sins by being oppressed, but it may also be that they are paying for theirs by being our oppressors. Don’t you understand that the real enemy is sin? The sin of self-centeredness that leads to idolatry, that leads to a skewed view of reality, that leads to the diminishing and dehumanizing of those not like us, that leads to oppression and violence and war and death? Ask yourself this: do you think you are made of different material than the Herods and Pilatuses and Tiberiuses of the world? Are you confident that you are righteous and they are wicked and that a great gulf separates you from them? Are you sure that if the positions were reversed, you would not do exactly as they have done?”

Marius was silent. I could tell from the tension of his body next to me that he wanted to respond but was holding himself back with great effort.

Yeshua continued, “You see, my friends, when you look beyond the visible agents of our oppression, you see a spirit of oppression and violence that animates them and props them up. Killing the agents does nothing to exorcise that spirit; in fact, it only makes it stronger because it has trussed another sacrifice and placed it on its altar. You say I am the Messiah. I feel in my spirit that it is true, although I have fought against that admission with all my strength. But if I

am Messiah, and I defeat and drive out the Kittim and punish the collaborators and establish justice in the land—even if I do all these things, what is to stop me from setting myself up in their place? If I use the weapons of war to defeat tyranny, what would prevent my becoming a tyrant myself?”

“Because you are different,” I said with more fervor than I had intended. “You have demonstrated your character again and again. You do not seek power for yourself; you never have!”

“Ah, yes,” Yeshua said, “but don’t you realize, friend Youdias, that power changes the one who wields it? It is a corrupting influence with few equals. Remember Moshe striking the rock in arrogance. Remember Abimelech, who killed the seventy sons of Jerubbaal. Remember David and the wife of Uriah. Who is to say that I would not become corrupted just as they did, were I to possess such power?”

“But you do possess power, Rabbi!” I said. “You have the power to heal, to drive out unclean spirits, to make the blind to see and the deaf to hear. You teach with authority. You have power over wind and waves, for mercy’s sake! I have seen you wield this power countless times, and it has not corrupted you.”

At that moment the moon emerged from behind its veil of cloud, and I could see Yeshua shaking his head. “You do not understand me, Youdias, if that is what you think. That power is not mine. It is the power of my Abba; I am merely the vessel through which it flows. If I had that kind of power in and of myself, how long do you think I would hold out before I succumbed to its temptations? And what of those who would come after me? Within two generations our people would have another tyrannical government to deal with. Think of Solomon. Think of Alexander Jannaeus. Nothing will have changed except the names and the faces. That is what will happen if we treat the symptoms and ignore the real disease.”

“The Kittim being the symptoms,” I said wearily, “and the real disease this spirit of tyranny. Right?”

“Right,” Yeshua answered. “I know this is hard for you to accept, but I believe it to be true. Sin is the real disease. The spirit of domination is the real disease. The lust for power, the greed that accompanies that lust. These are all the root causes that produce the symptoms we see — Antipas, Pilatus, Caiaphas. And behind them all stands the Adversary, the Tempter, the Satan himself.”

I glanced over at Marius. He had his head bowed, and when he raised it I saw his mouth twisted in an ugly grimace. He looked at Yeshua for several moments before saying, “Yes, Rabbi, what you say is probably true. You have obviously thought about these things longer and deeper than I have. But even if the physician cannot cure the disease, should he not treat the symptoms he can see? Don’t we have an obligation to struggle against injustice wherever we may find it?” He paused for effect, then said significantly, “Especially if one of us is called to be Messiah? If we have the wherewithal and the opportunity to cast down a tyrant and we refuse to do so, aren’t we being disobedient to the call of the Blessed One?”

To my surprise, Yeshua laughed. It was no mere chuckle, either, but a belly laugh that had our compatriots away on the other side of the grove turning to see what was going on. Marius's face wore a dumbfounded, half-angry expression. All I could do was stare. Finally Yeshua got control of himself. He said, "I'm sorry, friend Marius. I shouldn't have laughed, but I couldn't help it." He stifled another guffaw. "You are indeed a philosopher. I would call you a politician if I didn't think you would be offended. An orator, perhaps; would that be better?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Marius said, a little sullenly, I thought.

Yeshua turned serious again, but he was still smiling. "You, my friend, have found my tender spot. You put your finger directly on the bruise and pressed hard. Yes, I want to deal with the symptoms. Of course I do. That's why I am wavering. The question I need answered is how?"