

The Household of Caesar

Aquila: A short time after my nineteenth birthday, three years after the resurrection of our Lord, Peter's first letter arrived. I had believed the day might never come. My father and I had spoken to the group of believers many times of Peter's promise to send one of the Twelve to Rome, but since our numbers were growing, even though very slowly, and our faith in Jesus had in no way waned, we no longer felt adrift.

The delivery of the letter, miraculous in itself, closely followed two events that we all believed to be important ones...

The group of believers had swelled to thirty-seven, but the number of men continued to far exceed the women; in fact, there remained no unmarried women under the age of fifty, a circumstance that plagued Aquila. He desperately wanted to find a woman with whom he could share not only his faith, but also his life. Furthermore, he had found that he adored children, and many of the seventeen little ones who accompanied their parents to Sunday services flocked to him when they arrived at Andronicus' home.

One thing that had become evident was the need for another meeting place, and God had provided for their needs. Nicolaus, who continued to live in the Transtiberinum, needed shoes, so he went to the shop of a man named Laban, who had only recently come to Rome with his wife Joanna and their two young sons. When Nicolaus returned to pick up the new shoes, he found Laban reading a poem from the Psalms of David.

When he heard Nicolaus enter the shop, Laban looked up and asked, "Do you know the Psalms?"

"Almost certainly no better than you," Nicolaus said. "Why do you ask?"

"I have been puzzling over a passage in this Psalm." He pointed to the scroll.

Nicolaus peered over his shoulder and read aloud the words Laban indicated: ***For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.***

Nicolaus smiled.

"If David writes of himself in the first part," Laban asked, "who does he write of in the second—who is the 'Holy One'?"

"The Holy One is the Messiah, the Son of God," Nicolaus said with confidence. "And the prophecy of David was fulfilled in Christ Jesus."

"Fulfilled in Christ Jesus?" Laban repeated. "The Messiah has come?"

Nicolaus spent most of that afternoon telling Laban and Joanna, who soon joined them, about Jesus, and they responded enthusiastically. He told them of the group of believers that met on the first day of each week and invited them to come.

Nicolaus was excited when he saw them approaching Andronicus' house the next Sunday; and he ran out to greet them. They fell in love with the group, but more importantly, they fell in love with Jesus and were baptized together the next week.

The next week, when the group was discussing the problem of meeting space during the meal they had begun to share at the end of each service, Laban spoke immediately, "We have a home the same size as this—Joanna inherited a considerable sum from her father, who was a wealthy merchant."

"If it is the same size," Andronicus said, "this group would spill out of your windows just as it does here. We require a larger meeting place. We could rent a hall, perhaps, but then our meetings could only occur as long as the landlord agreed. As soon as he learned we are disciples of Jesus, he might cancel the lease."

Aquila had been considering the issue for some time and offered his opinion. "I do not believe we should seek a larger meeting place," he said quietly and everyone turned to him. "The problem is not only space, but also the opportunity to speak. Already many of us cannot do so on account of our numbers, which God has increased."

"Do you have a suggestion?" a man asked.

"Yes, I do; but it is in two parts, so I ask you to hear and consider both before you respond. The first part involves some pain, for I know how much I long to see all of you; but it is this: that we form more groups meeting at different homes. The second part eases the pain of not all being together, that being that we all meet together, perhaps once or twice each month. For that we will indeed require a meeting place, but if the weather is good, we could meet under the sky."

There was a large amount of discussion that followed Aquila's words, but eventually everyone accepted the wisdom of the plan. It was decided that groups of no more than sixteen were ideal for each to have the opportunity to speak, and they began discussing who might act as hosts, for there were several families with homes large enough to accommodate groups of that size with the accompanying little ones.

The group made final plans during the following Sunday's meal, and one week later they met in three different homes—that of Andronicus and Junia, Laban and Joanna, and Aquila and Enoch. A few people, particularly those without families, rotated between the homes for a few weeks, but soon everyone felt content with the new arrangement.

What then followed served to reinforce the formation of groups in many households, for their numbers grew even more rapidly in the subsequent few years. The most significant convert during that time, in terms of his potential impact in the world was Urbanus; but when he first met the believers, he scarcely seemed a likely convert.

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Urbanus had spent a long evening at one of the many grimy taverns that could be found on almost any street in Rome. He served as one of the stable workers in the imperial palace and was allowed several evenings a month to pursue his vices, and he was an enthusiastic partaker of all services offered. On this particular evening, he had gone to his favorite tavern, which was innocuously called “Waters Edge” because of its location on the western shore of the Tiber.

The innkeeper was a grotesquely fat freedman aptly named Porcius, and he catered primarily to slaves and poor freedmen. He ran the tavern alone except for an almost equally large woman he called Mastosa. She serviced the customers, and a young boy named Porcillius scurried back and forth, delivering jugs of wine and bowls of the heavily seasoned meat concoction that was the only food offered. That the stew cost two copper coins, while Mastosa cost only one was an early demonstration of the principle of supply and demand. It was also said, although Urbanus was never inclined to confirm it, that Porcillius was also available, but for a charge of three coins since Porcius would have to wait on the tables himself in the boy’s absence.

Urbanus spent most of the evening drinking wine and talking with the assorted slaves, sailors, and fishermen that frequented Waters Edge, their conversation generally centering unashamedly on their crude sensual appetites and practices. Just as Urbanus was beginning to consider leaving, Mastosa emerged with a breathless old man from the small side room that housed her portion of the business.

Seeing her, Urbanus was reminded that he had only satisfied one vice this evening, and with a shrug, he tossed a coin to Porcius and dragged the woman back into the room as she laughed boisterously. Some time later, he returned to the main room and, after several indelicate remarks about his encounter, bid a loud farewell to his fellow customers.

“Wait, Urbanus,” Porcius shouted as he drew wine from the barrel. “You owe me another coin.”

“Another coin?” he hollered back. “What for?”

“You spent double time with the woman.”

“But she made me wash first,” Urbanus protested.

Mastosa, who was now leaning against the doorway to her room, laughed with a loud grunt and shouted, “You had the stink of a donkey!”

“What other smell would I have when I spend the day with the emperor’s animals? I thought that was the reason you closed your eyes—so you could imagine your partner a horse or a donkey rather than a man.”

The entire room burst into laughter, several men adding their own sarcastic remarks; but while Porcius himself laughed, he was not swayed. “Be that as it may, you still owe me a coin. There were two other men waiting for you to be finished.”

“I will not pay even another quadran for that grotesque slab of flesh,” Urbanus said as he headed for the door. For Porcius, it was one thing to poke a little fun at his woman, but it was quite another to issue a direct insult, and he charged after Urbanus.

Urbanus had no chance in the ensuing battle, even if he had been sober, for Porcius outweighed him by more than double and had considerable experience in beating men who attempted to cheat him. In no time, Urbanus lay bleeding and unconscious on the tavern floor, and Porcius dug into his purse. Removing two of the small copper coins, Porcius held one up and displayed it for the amused audience.

“That’s one coin for Mastosa’s time in the bed,” he shouted. He held the other coin up and added, “And one more for my time to thrash him.” Then he turned and picked up Urbanus’ limp body by the collar and waist of his robe, hurling him roughly into the street.

“Come back soon,” he shouted as Urbanus thumped against the wall of the building across the narrow street and lay in a heap. When Porcius turned back to the men, they again broke into laughter and returned to their wine and talk.

Some time later, Urbanus awoke and rolled to a sitting position. He rubbed one hand across his face, searching for damage. “Broken jaw,” he thought as his hand touched a tender spot and he winced in pain. Then he attempted to rise, but the sharp pain in one ankle drove him back to his knees. He cursed quietly under his breath, realizing he was in serious trouble if his injuries prevented carrying out his duties; but in any case he had to return to the palace for he feared dawn was not far away.

He struggled up, keeping his weight on his good leg and began limping and hopping toward the Cestius Bridge. A short distance from the bridge he made the error of putting too much weight on his damaged ankle and, crying out, he pitched forward, crashing into a door which flew open on impact. He lay dazed in the doorway, uttering a long string of curses, as his shoulder, having taken the brunt of his fall, now joined his jaw and ankle in sending pain signals to his foggy brain. Even as he prepared to make another attempt at progress toward the palace, a man spoke from behind him.

“Who is there?”

Urbanus rolled over and looked up at a young man, a woman’s face peering tentatively over his shoulder. The motion, however, caused his head to swirl, and he sunk back to the floor.

“Laban, he is hurt,” the woman said.

“No, he is drunk,” the man said, and he started forward, intending to push the intruder into the street and close the door.

“No, Laban,” the woman said. “Look at his face—there is blood on his chin and his cheek is swollen and bruised.”

Urbanus opened his eyes and looked at the pretty young woman. Slurring his words, he said with an ironic laugh, “My face is of little consequence, but my leg is broken, as I believe is my arm since your door attacked it.”

Hearing the drunkenness in the words, the woman revised her observation. “Yes, husband,” she said. “He is indeed drunk, but he is also hurt, and we must help him.”

Laban started to object, but he knew her mind was set and that she was correct. “Very well, Joanna. Help me bring him into the house.”

After they had dragged Urbanus into the front room and laid him on a straw-stuffed mattress Joanna had retrieved from another room, Laban exchanged cursory introductions with Urbanus and gingerly tested the man’s leg. He concluded that it might indeed be broken at the ankle, but admitted that he did not know the proper treatment.

Joanna suggested that he remain with Urbanus while she ran to get Nicolaus, who because of his knowledge of anatomy was rapidly becoming the unofficial doctor for the community of believers. Even though it was very early in her pregnancy, Laban did not care for the thought of his wife running through the darkened streets; but he inwardly admitted that he liked the idea of her staying alone with a drunken stranger even less, so he sent her off with a stern warning to walk the short distance.

Urbanus told Laban of his profession and his residence, as well as some of the facts leading to his unceremonious arrival at their door. Laban had never met anyone from Caesar’s household before, so he was intrigued, but he was prevented from further inquiries by Nicolaus’ arrival with Joanna.

Nicolaus made a quick examination and announced that he was certain Urbanus had not broken a bone, but only twisted his ankle. He determined that his jaw was probably broken, but not seriously so and if Urbanus avoided rigorous chewing it should heal quickly. At Nicolaus’ suggestion, Laban fetched a large piece of leather, a length of leather thong, and several pieces of scrap wood remaining from the recent construction of his workshop.

Together they fashioned a stiff splint and a makeshift crutch. Meanwhile, Joanna tended to Urbanus’ face, gently cleaning away the dried blood and wiping the small cuts and abrasions with vinegar, which caused Urbanus to flinch involuntarily, and he nearly cursed. But seeing the look of concern and compassion in the woman’s eyes, he held his tongue and motioned for her to continue her ministrations.

When the trio had completed its various tasks, Urbanus saw the soft glow of the approaching dawn in the eastern sky, and he told them he must hurry to reach the palace before the slave-master found him missing. Nicolaus said it would be better for him to remain where he was for at least a day to let his ankle begin to heal. Laban offered to carry a message to the palace,

explaining the circumstances, but Urbanus told them he would be in trouble enough for the injury itself, but would surely be whipped if he did not return immediately.

Recognizing Urbanus' resolve, Laban and Nicolaus helped him to his feet and gave him the crutch. Nicolaus warned that though the leather splint was strong, so he should avoid putting weight on the twisted ankle. Urbanus agreed to be careful and, mumbling an embarrassed "thank you," hobbled to the door.

He paused, however, in the doorway and turned around, looking silently at the three people. He brought his free hand to his face, running his thumb softly across his lips and furrowed his brow.

"Is there anything else you require?" Joanna asked. "You must be thirsty—wait, I will bring you water."

"No," Urbanus said as he lowered his hand, "I just...I just wanted to ask you one thing."

"What is it, Urbanus?" Nicolaus asked.

"Why..." Urbanus asked, his voice choking slightly, "Why did you help me?"

"Our Lord commands us to help others," Laban said.

"You are slaves?" Urbanus asked incredulously. "Who is this master that commands service to strangers?"

"No, Urbanus," Laban said. "We are not the slaves of men. We are Jews who serve the One True God through the grace of his Son."

"I was born a Jew," Urbanus said. "But I...I have...uh...strayed from the path of my ancestors. But why do you speak of the sun?" Urbanus had spent his entire life as a slave in Rome. He knew more of the Roman gods than Jehovah, and consequently he assumed Laban meant the sun in the sky, for in their gods the Romans worshipped the elemental things of the world.

"God sent his begotten Son into the world in recent days," Laban said. "He was crucified in Jerusalem by those who could not accept him; but he defeated death itself and rose again to offer salvation to all those who believe."

"I do not understand all of your words, Laban," Urbanus said. "Does this salvation come from the good works you do for strangers?"

Nicolaus shook his head and said, "No, Urbanus. Christ Jesus, who was and is the Son of God, came to show us a better way. In his death and resurrection, he served all men. We who confess him are compelled, not by external commands but by our love for Him, to serve others just as he served us."

"These are confusing things," Urbanus said. "I think...I think I would like to hear more of this Son, but I must hurry to the palace."

“One group of believers meets here in our home,” Laban said. “We gather on the morning of the first day of each week to praise God and encourage one another. You are welcome at any time, Urbanus.”

Urbanus turned and quickly made his way into the street. As he turned toward the bridge, Nicolaus called out, “Be careful of that leg!” Without turning, Urbanus waved his free hand and continued on his way. As the three believers watched him, they could not know the effect of their words and deeds on the imperial slave.

He had been born in the reign of Augustus, ten years before the emperor’s death and deification. In his twenty-nine years, Urbanus had never experienced the kind of compassion Nicolaus, Laban, and Joanna had shown him. In fact, he had never even heard of such deeds, except perhaps in a few vague Jewish stories his grandfather had told him when he was only a boy.

His life had been filled with hard labor, frequent cruelties, and his regular encounters with a wide variety of women. His father had died before he was born, and his mother had not survived his birth. His grandfather had been the only relative he knew, and he had died when Urbanus was ten. He knew that he came from a people who believed in a single, all-powerful God, but Urbanus had never known Him.

Now he knew he had seen this God in the faces of three strangers, people who showed him kindness in the middle of the night when he had burst through their door, drunk and profane. They ought to have merely thrown him back out onto the street, yet they tended to his wounds and, most incredible of all, had invited him back to their home. As he limped around the stables the next day, his memory of their smiles and tender ministrations spread warmth throughout his being.

At first, he could not identify the meaning of this new feeling, but as the week passed, he came to realize that it was love. He loved these peculiar people, not for their deeds, although he was certainly grateful, but rather for their unaccountable acceptance of him. Part of his mind argued that their invitation had been insincere—that they were willing to help him, but they were happy when he left. But his love for them overcame this doubt, and he suddenly wanted nothing more in life than to be in their midst.

On the evening before the first day of the next week, therefore, he went to the slave-master and asked if he could have leave for the morning to visit some friends. The slave-master was full of questions, which Urbanus answered vaguely. Urbanus was certain he was about to deny his request when his face brightened very slightly.

“With the emperor hiding in Capri, there is little that requires attention in the morning,” the slave-master said. “I would have to spend time inventing chores for you. See to the donkeys and horses at dawn, then visit your friends; but return no later than the fifth hour.”

Urbanus was overjoyed and slept only a few hours that night, arising with the dawn and racing to the stables as best he could with his tender ankle. He rushed through the morning chores, shoveling out the dung, spreading a fresh batch of hay, and filling the feedbags. Within an hour, he was crossing the Tiber and approaching Laban’s home, which comprised half of the first floor of a large apartment building.

As he neared, he heard singing inside the home. Not wanting to interrupt them, he waited near the doorway listening. The voices of the men and women inside merged in a beautiful chorus that filled the cool morning air:

*We can never fall beyond His loving hands,
Even though we keep imperfect all of His commands.
He shows His mercy when we fail to be all that we can be;
He sent His Son to die to show His love for you and me.*

They repeated the chorus, emphasizing the final line as a lovely female voice rose above the rest in a haunting descant. The song ended and Urbanus heard soft talking followed by gentle laughter. The voice of doubt returned.

“These are not your people,” it said. “Go back to your horses and donkeys, to your wine and women—your impurity will spoil them!” Urbanus sighed and a tear rolled down his face as he turned to walk away. But he felt another presence—there were no words, but something hung in the air, drawing him in. He reached out for the door he had stumbled through just five days before and gently pushed it open.