

The  
**fire** and the  
**trial**





A TORCH IN THE EMPIRE SERIES BOOK ONE

The  
**fire** and the  
**trial**

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# **Dedicated**

to the two Abigails in my family:

my niece Abigail Grace Linza

and my cousin Abigail Suzanne Davis



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The Roman Empire was a very dark place.  
Thousands died in the Games held in their arenas.  
Human life was completely disregarded. All kinds of  
terrible sins were commonplace.

But in the midst of that darkness, came the light of  
Christ. The Christian faith was like a torch that began  
to burn brightly in the darkness of the Roman Empire.  
The Christians faced the worst of persecutions, but  
through it all, the faith continued to spread and  
illuminate the dark,

***a torch in the empire.***

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.”

1 Peter 1:6-9

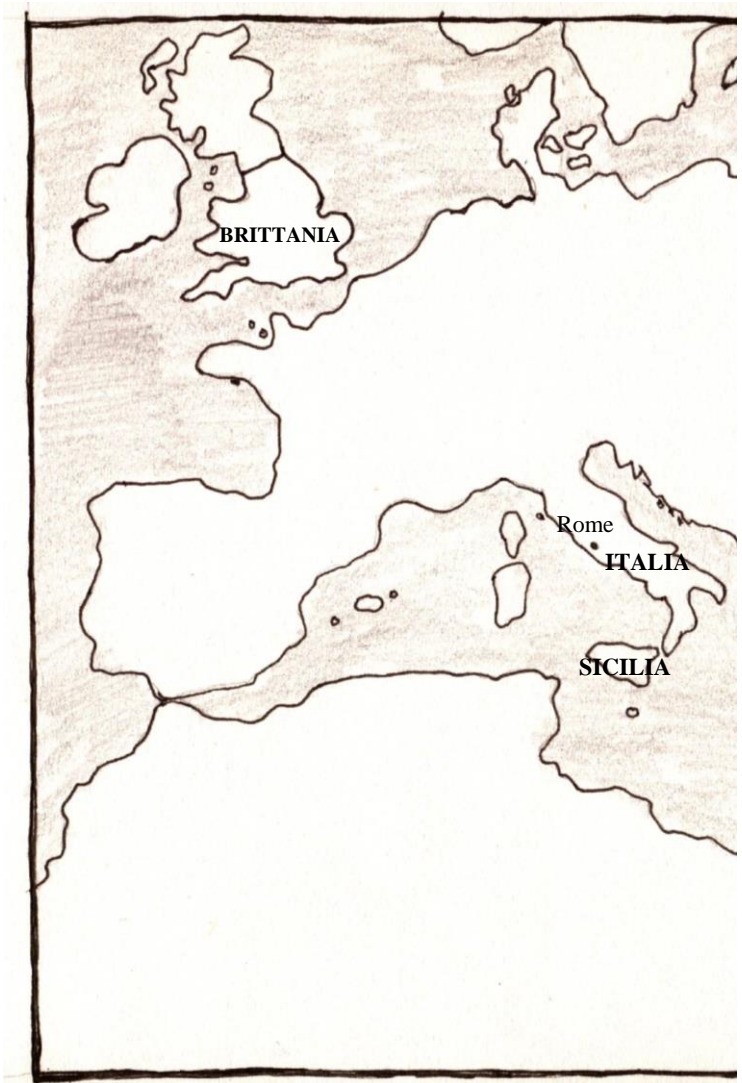
# Introduction

There is a saying in the Chinese underground church that “real gold fears no fire.” In ancient times, gold was refined by fire. The gold was melted down and skimmed to remove impurities and dross. The real gold came out of the fire purified and valuable, while all that was not real gold was removed.

This is what God is doing in our lives when we go through trials. Our faith is like gold. The hard things we face in life are like fire that is purifying our faith. And through every fire and every trial, we have a Savior who will never leave us.

So, take courage, my friend. When you face trials, God is with you, He is refining your faith, and He will never forsake you.

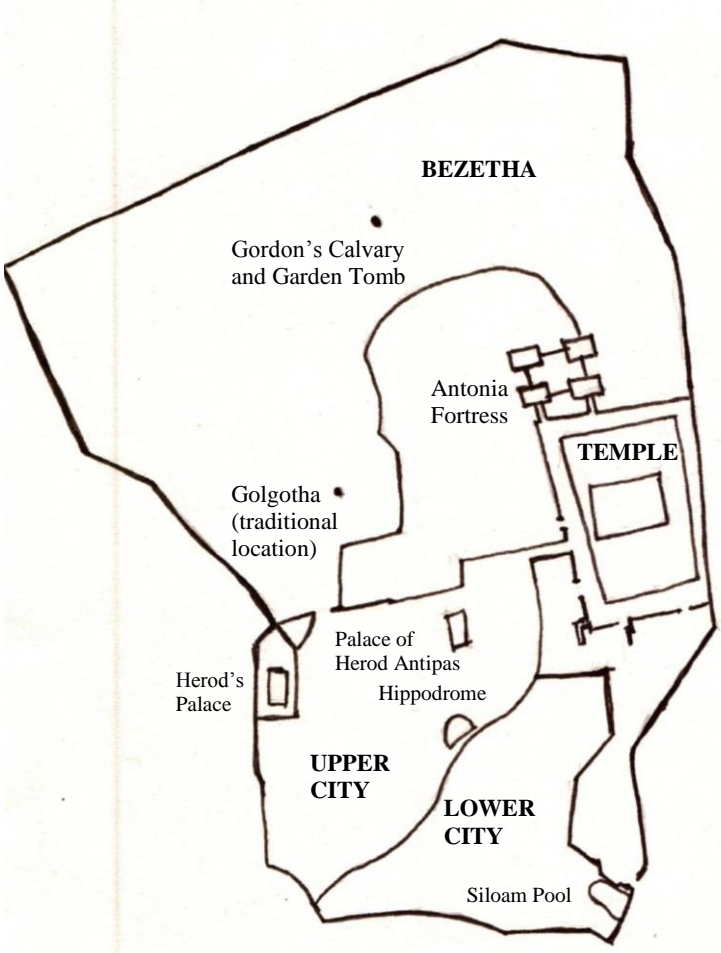
# Map of the



# Roman Empire



# Map of Jerusalem in the First Century



## CHAPTER ONE:

### The Fire and What Followed

A. D. 65

Jerusalem

“**O**ur brothers and sisters in Rome are being fed to the lions.”

Jesse nabbed a piece of flatbread and took a bite while he listened to his uncle’s words.

Across the room, Uncle Aaron, Aunt Moriah, Jesse’s father and mother, and Jesse’s sister, Abigail, sat on woven mats in a circle on the floor. The faint glow of oil lamps illuminated their faces in the otherwise dark house.

Jesse’s family’s home in Jerusalem was small, consisting of just one room. It had a dirt floor, stone walls, and two windows covered with parchment.

One end of the room was slightly lower than the rest of the house, and that was where the goat was kept. The goat, which they used for milk, was the

only animal Jesse's family owned.

In one corner of the room, there was a chair pulled up to a small wooden table. Stacked neatly on the table were a number of scrolls. The room also had two beds, a stack of blankets, and a large loom. In the kitchen area of the house, there was a clay oven, a hand mill, a sack of grain, and pottery dishes.

"We'll be facing more hostility here in Jerusalem, too, I'm sure," Uncle Aaron continued.

Jesse finished the flatbread, and then walked over and sat down next to Abigail. She smiled at him. At fourteen, Jesse's sister was two years younger than him. Like the rest of the family, she had dark hair and eyes.

"But why?" Jesse asked. "Why is there so much more persecution now?" He didn't like the thought of more persecution from the Romans.

Jerusalem was once the capital city of the great kingdom of Israel. Now Israel was no more. Jerusalem was merely a city in the Roman province of Judea.

Were it up to Jesse, all the Jews would band together and drive every one of the cursed Romans from Judea. But he was sensible enough to know how foolhardy that would be.

Besides, Father said the Jewish people were under God's judgement. Jesse wasn't sure if he believed that or not. But one thing he did know: without divine help, the Jews would never win against the Romans. The highly disciplined Roman army was the strongest



military force on earth. With their campaigns, they had conquered nearly all the known world.

“You’ll remember we heard the news of the Great Fire some months ago,” Uncle Aaron said, “After Rome burned, the Emperor Nero began having an extravagant palace built for himself. People began to say he started the fire on purpose so he would have a good reason to build a new palace.”

“Did he?” Jesse asked. It sounded like something a Roman Emperor would do.

Uncle Aaron shrugged. “I don’t know. It seems likely, but I can’t say for sure. However, when people accused Nero of starting the fire, he placed the blame on the Christians. So now our fellow believers are being killed by the hundreds. Their neighbors are turning them in, soldiers are rounding them up. They’re killed in Nero’s Circus as entertainment for the Romans. He’s opened his personal gardens for the Games.”

Jesse had never seen a Roman Circus, but he knew what it was. Held in a Roman amphitheater or hippodrome, the Circus, also called the Games, could include criminals being thrown to the lions or other wild animals, gladiators fighting in hand-to-hand combat, chariot races, or even full-fledged mock battles. Jesse had even heard of the arena (the part of the amphitheater where the combat was held) being flooded with water for a mock sea battle.

“Those Roman scoundrels,” Jesse’s mother said. “Who do the Romans think they are?” Father, Uncle

Aaron, and Aunt Moriah all laughed. Mama could say that because she was Roman by birth.

This meant Jesse and Abigail were half Roman, half Jew, but Jesse did not think of his mother as a Roman. After all, she'd been raised by Jews and had a Jewish name: Deborah.

“Christ said we would be persecuted,” Father said.

“So He did,” Mama agreed. “And He said He would never abandon us.” Father squeezed her hand, and they looked lovingly at each other.

“I have a letter,” Uncle Aaron said, “written by the Apostle Peter. I will read it at our meeting tonight. It was written to encourage the believers who are suffering persecution.”

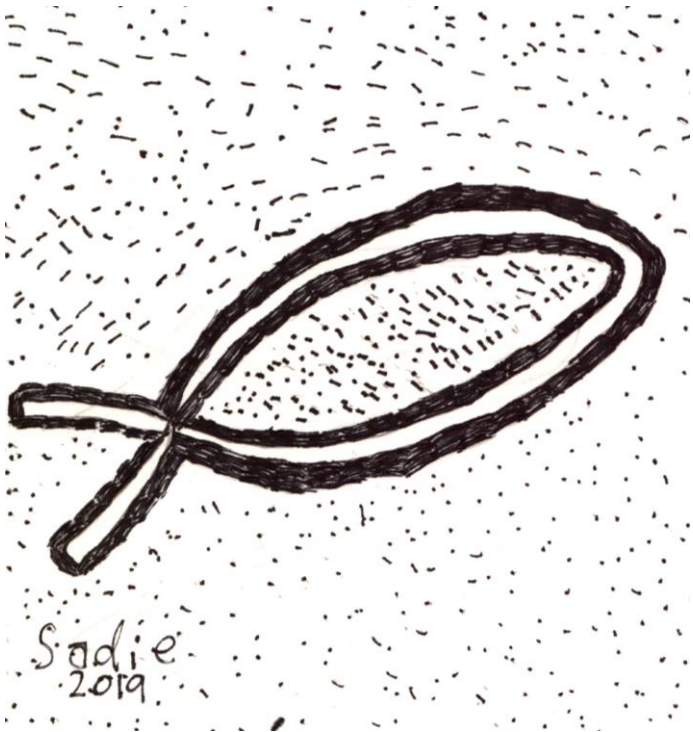
Jesse thought about what he knew about the Apostle Peter. A fisherman who had come from the region of Galilee in the north, he had left all to follow Jesus.

Jesse turned his attention back to Uncle Aaron. He was saying, “In Rome, some of the Christians are hiding in the catacombs.”

Abigail made a face. Jesse knew what his sister must be thinking about hiding in catacombs. The catacombs were tunnels where the dead were buried. Not the most pleasant place to be.

“They have a secret symbol they use,” Uncle Aaron said. “It is an *ichthus*, a fish. Sometimes one person draws an arc like this.” With his index finger, Uncle Aaron drew a curved line, or arc, in the hard dirt of the floor.

“Then if the other person is a Christian and knows



the symbol, he will draw the rest of it. It's how they identify each other."

He drew another arc intersecting with the first one, the ends extending to form the tail of the fish. Jesse and Abigail both leaned forward to get a closer look at it.

"Nero is a madman," Uncle Aaron continued, "Everyone, not just the Christians, has to be careful what they say. Some of the Jewish Christians are using Babylon as a code name for Rome."

Jesse could understand why. Hundreds of years

earlier, the Jewish people had been taken captive and exiled in Babylon. To the Jews, Babylon, like Rome, was an evil place.

Silence reigned for a moment as everyone thought about Uncle Aaron's words. Then the silence was broken by the sound of a knock at the door.

"And there are our friends," said Aunt Moriah.

Everyone stood up. Father walked over to the door and opened it. In the dusk outside, Jesse could see the eager faces of a young man and a young woman holding a baby.

"Come in, come in," Father said. They came in, and there were greetings all around.

"There are more soldiers about tonight than usual," the man said, "but that didn't stop us from coming." Enthusiasm was all over his face. Jesse knew that this young man had a real passion for the Lord and loved learning from the Scriptures.

When the man mentioned the soldiers, Jesse noticed his parents glance at each other, but they said nothing, for there was another knock at the door. This time it was an elderly couple. A few moments later, another family arrived. A bit later, another. Soon everyone was gathered, and it was time for the meeting to begin.

Everyone sat down except for Father who started the meeting with prayer. Then Father sat down, and Uncle Aaron stood up and began to read the Apostle Peter's letter.

*"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims*

*of the Dispersion... ”*

As Uncle Aaron read on, Jesse’s mind began to wander. But then some words caught his attention.

Uncle Aaron was reading, *“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ...”*

Jesse thought about the words. He could see the picture in his mind of gold being melted down, the impurities removed from it, then it being formed into something beautiful. Gold that had been melted down and shaped was far more valuable than a mere chunk of gold. The Apostle Peter was comparing the Christians’ faith to gold that was purified by fire, the fire being the trials they were going through.

Jesse wasn’t sure what he thought of that. *God’s people thrown to the lions, crucified, their blood spilt as entertainment for the Romans. God is allowing it on purpose? To purify their faith?*

Once Uncle Aaron was finished reading, requests for prayer were made. After they had finished praying, Mama and Abigail passed out flatbread, goat cheese, and honey cakes to everyone.

Jesse gratefully accepted the food Abigail gave him. *The best part of the evening*, he thought as he sunk his teeth into the delicious honey cake. His mother was a good cook. Abigail was, too. She had made the

flatbread.

Around him, people were engaged in conversation. Abigail was happily holding and talking to a baby.

But Jesse could not think of anything to say. All he could think of was the Romans and how much he wanted to be rid of them. He did not understand how his family and everyone else could act like everything was just fine after what Uncle Aaron had told them about the persecution in Rome.

*Rome is far away*, he tried to comfort himself, *Surely we'll be fine here in Jerusalem*. The thought did not do much to comfort him. He remembered stories he'd heard of Jews who were not Christians turning against the Jews who were Christians and stoning them. And the Romans needed little excuse to crucify the Jews, Christian or not.

Finally, people began to leave Jesse's family's home. They did not all leave together, but like they had come, they left one family or couple at a time. Jesse knew this was so they would not attract as much attention.

Last of all, Uncle Aaron and Aunt Moriah left. Before leaving, there were hugs all around. Jesse forced a smile as he bid his aunt and uncle good night.

Once everyone was gone, the family tidied up the room. Jesse stacked up the mats people had been sitting on as Father, Mama, and Abigail bustled about doing other tasks.

"'tis time we were in bed," Mama said once they

were finished.

But no sooner had she gotten the words out than there was a knock on the door. It was not a gentle knock like that used by their family and friends, but a loud banging.

