

— 12 —

A SUFFERING ETHIC

*Nympha's Trial*

It has turned out to be quite the day; the summons I feared has finally come. I, Nympha, follower of Jesus, leader of a house church in Laodicea, successful business-woman, have finally been called to meet with the city magistrates to explain the conduct of my community. I've been expecting the summons, and I'm not overawed by these magistrates. Most of them were still wet behind the ears when I became a prominent benefactor, and few of them have been able to contribute to the upbuilding of this city as much as I did in my day. To this day I walk past archways and courtyards built by my workers that contain statues of the emperor paid for by my wealth. And some of the imperial games that I sponsored are still spoken of for their opulence and lavish ceremony. I can easily hold my head up in front of these magistrates.

What surprised me is the way I was summoned. No protocol, no proper deference shown to a woman of my stature. Just a short command from a slave that I had better present myself as soon as possible. Or else.

So what could I do? I summoned my foreman and outlined which of my workshops and farms needed to be visited today. I also asked him to make arrangements for the evening meal for those of our community who were currently assisting with the fieldwork. Then, donning my plainest robes, I made haste to the place of the magistrates, beside the marketplace.

As I walked I pondered what might have prompted the summons. Ever since we Christians in Laodicea had begun meeting, we were viewed with suspicion. At first we were viewed as a potentially subversive political group just for meeting together and sharing a meal at which everyone was equal. But then some of our other actions began to get attention. It became known that we did not attend the festivals and imperial games staged by the empire. Our attitudes toward marriage were unpopular, especially since the emperor had decreed that marriage was mandatory for everyone.

Business leaders were incensed when some members of our community began to free their slaves. A number of our members have been tried and even found guilty for treason and subversion. Some have been sent to Rome; more have become fodder for the gladiatorial games here in Laodicea or in neighboring Colossae.

But today was different. Up until now the magistrates had tended to pick on those in the community who had no civic connections. Say what you will, it is easier to throw some poor peasant to the lions than a prominent member of the business community who might have family willing to fight for them. And today's summons felt different. It was a summons to me to come and speak for my *ekklēsia*, my church. What could that mean?

When I arrived at the marketplace, I saw that everyone there knew about me. Conversations abruptly ceased or became muted as I went by. And as I reached the portico of the magistrates' offices, I could sense an expectant hush behind me. Suddenly I was struck by the absurdity of the situation. Was this not the sort of summons to be expected by a follower of Jesus? I felt a lightening of my mood, and on a whim, I turned around and waved at the crowd. They were taken aback; I could hear the collective gasp. But far at the back I noticed a few hands waving back. I would not be alone.

As I entered the magistrates' atrium, the same slave who had summoned me led me through to the largest room. They were all there, all seven of the magistrates who administered the laws of the emperor to the people of Laodicea. I knew them all; some of them had been my friends when I walked in the way of darkness; some of them still were business cronies of my husband. I looked around the table: Rufus, Felix, Cassius, Aquila, Eutychus, Trolius, Lucius. Cassius indicated where I should stand.

Trolius, who was *pontifex magnus*, began without preamble. "A document has come to our attention, Nympha, which indicates that the followers of Christus who meet in your house are part of a larger movement of subversion against the emperor. We have only a fragment of the document, so we do not know what kind of revolutionary activities it outlines, but the portion that we have obtained indicates treason of the highest order. How do you answer this charge?"

Well, even though I was a woman, I knew something about judicial procedure. "What is this document, Trolius, and how did you obtain it? How do you know it is a fragment of a document from followers of Christus? I cannot defend myself if I don't even know the evidence on which I am being accused."

Trolius looked at the others. Some were shaking their heads, others nodded. Clearly there had been some disagreement about how the trial should proceed. And I could see why. As a woman I had no legal standing; they could easily have imprisoned me without this trial. It said something about my own—and my husband's—status in the community that they had summoned me at all. Trolius thought for a moment; then he picked up a fragment of parchment, unrolled it and began to read.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in

heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

As he read, the silence in the room deepened. And no wonder, for the magistrates had got their hands on one of the most widely circulated poems about Jesus. It had first appeared in Paul's letter to the assembly in Colossae but had spread quickly throughout the communities in Asia Minor as a word of hope for weary Christians. And I couldn't imagine a more damning document to have to defend. If treason was the charge, then this document surely supported it.

Of course I didn't say that to them. I knew that in the end the charges could be sustained. But that air of absurd lightheartedness was still with me. First I would have some fun. I would make them explain the whole document to me, and in so doing I might have a chance to show them a little more about Jesus than they could ask or imagine. Bearing witness happens in the most unlikely places; this would be mine. But for the moment I kept silence.

"Well, Nympha." Trolius spoke sharply, "What have you to say? Is this or is this not the Christus whom you worship?"

"Yes," I answered. "Yes, this is a description of Jesus the Christ, the One whom I worship."

"Then would you be so kind as to explain this document to us?" Trolius asked.

"Certainly," I replied. "It would be a pleasure." I saw Rufus raise his head sharply. He had caught the note of laughter in my voice and looked puzzled.

"You see," I began, "this is a hymn to Jesus modeled on the poetry of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. More specifically, it is a creation story that moves from the first creation, when humanity was created in the image of God, to the new creation, where humanity is reconciled to God. The language used is that of the wisdom writings, where Sophia, Wisdom, is the firstborn of the creation and assists the Maker of the Universe in bringing all things into being."

"Enough!" The word cut me off sharply. "Enough of this rubbish!" It was Lucius, one of the youngest magistrates. "This may look like an ancient Hebrew poem, but it is a direct attack on the emperor. Jesus is the image of God, indeed! If we want to see the image of the one who represents the gods to us, we look to Caesar, no one else. That is why his image is everywhere we look: in the marketplace, on the city gates, at the entrance to the temple, even above our heads here in the chambers of the magistrates. In our homes, on our coins, everywhere we acknowledge that it is the image of Caesar to whom we owe thanksgiving, honor and devotion. Do you tell us that you

deny the rule of Caesar, Nympha? You see how this poem continues; don't you dare tell me that any more of it is ancient Israelite Scripture," he sneered.

"Actually," I replied, "that's exactly what it is. This hymn asserts what every Jew has confessed throughout Israelite history: that God is the One who has created all things, that all things hold together in God. But unlike the ancient Israelite Scripture, this hymn proclaims that Jesus is the One through whom God did all these things, he is the One who created all rulers and authorities and throne and powers . . ."

"Can't someone stop this woman?" Lucius cried out. "Not only does she claim that Jesus, not Caesar, is the image we should worship, she also claims that this Jesus has ultimate authority over all other rulers and powers! She denies the lordship of Caesar, she puts another ruler over him!"

"Surely you don't believe this, Nympha." It was Aquila who spoke. He had known me for many years. "You may say that you believe this poem, but surely you don't *live* as if this Jesus is lord. You can't tell me that you no longer have images of Caesar in your household. Surely your murals, the images over your lintels, those exquisite goblets you had made in Rome, those things are still central to your life. You haven't given everything over for this Jesus, have you?" He ended on a pleading note, and I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to give me a way out, a chance to redeem myself before the council.

But before I could answer, someone answered for me. "But of course she has," came a deep, slow voice. It was Eutyclus, an old friend of my father who had come to see me about some of my recent business practices that had puzzled him. "Of course she has," he continued. "I myself have been to her house. Nothing remains to remind her of the empire and its rulers and its glorious history. No murals, no statues, no goblets with the vines of prosperity. Not so much as a hairbrush with the symbols of peace or a lamp with the symbols of victory. All is gone."

"And there is more. Her business has become tainted by this Jesus as well. She has released all of her slaves. She has given many of her farms away to the poor in surrounding villages, and the remainder she works with hired laborers who are fed and clothed. She has refused to provide the purple cloth for the dignitaries of the emperor, as you well know, and has reduced the fortune of her father dramatically. It is beginning to have an adverse affect in the villages. Now the peasants are asking other merchants why they are not returning the farms that the farmers lost in the famine, and the slaves of our households are working themselves up to revolt with dreams of freedom. This teaching is not only treasonous to the empire, it is fundamentally bad for business, and with all due respect, the latter is of as much importance to me as any sacrifice. If we lose our entitlement to the cheap labor of slaves and the amassing of property, where will the basis be for our growth?" Eutyclus stopped, amid nods from the other magistrates.

"You see that you are accused of undermining the social fabric," said Trolius. "Your actions are eating away at the foundations of our society."

Before he could continue, I took a deep breath and plunged in. "Me, undermining the social fabric?" I said mildly. "Me? Look at your business practices! You think that working slaves to death for your own profit makes for healthy community and a solid society? You want to keep collecting farms, but in order to do so you need to prey on those who cannot pay their taxes to the emperor, those who are impoverished because they work only to keep food on your tables. You can't claim to be weaving a solid social fabric yourself when you drive people into poverty so that your profit margin can keep rising. You can say that business is more important to you than sacrifice to the emperor, but you know, Eutychus, that the two go hand in hand. You know that with an emperor as the head of this body politic, you will always have tax laws that favor the rich, you will always be able to seize the land of the poor, you will always be able to eat your sumptuous feasts during the festivals while your neighbors get the smallest oatcakes and a sip of wine.

"Lucius is right. This text about Jesus is fundamentally opposed to the lordship of Caesar. But I am right too: this text is just like an ancient Hebrew prophetic text which stands as a challenge to the empire."

Since they were all staring at me in stunned silence, I continued. "But the body that Jesus heads is fundamentally different. That's why we call Jesus the head of the body, not the body politic of the empire but the body of something new, the *ekklēsia*, the assembly. We know that you call your political organizations the *ekklēsia*, and we know they are places where the grossest inequality rules, where some are fed twice as much food as others and some are relegated to the fringes of every banquet even if they have paid their dues. Well, our *ekklēsia* is in direct challenge to all of this. Do you wonder why people are flocking to our meetings? It is because we offer hope for a better kingdom, where all meet together as equals, where all are fed at the table of our Lord, where the poor are cared for and none go hungry, where forgiveness and love are practiced. This is a kingdom where peace rules. And that peace is rooted so firmly in the hope of Hebrew prophecy that everyone who hears the promise of peace that Jesus offers knows that a new world has come, where the Creator God is partisan on behalf of all those the empire excludes."

"But surely, Nympha," said Trolius, "you must acknowledge that Caesar is the one who truly brought peace. Look at the empire; it encompasses the whole of the world. There has never been such a ruler."

I confess that what I said then surprised even myself. "Caesar has brought peace? Let's look at the peace brought by your Caesar. Let's take as an example Galilee, the homeland of Jesus. All the Jewish people want to do is live in peace in their own land, free to follow their ancestral laws, with a king from their own people and a high priest from the priestly line. And the Romans continually beat them down, imposing rulers who oppress them and impoverish them. When they rebel they are ruthlessly cut down, their cities burned and their children enslaved. This is how Rome keeps peace,

by military might and violent force. They make a desolation and call it peace.

"Their favorite symbol for peace is the cross, on which they condemn those who resist their rule to an excruciating death. This is the peace they bring. This is the peace that killed Jesus."

There was a shocked silence. "You don't mean to tell me," said Trolius, "that this Jesus you worship was killed as a political rebel!"

"Yes, I do," I said. "And through that death, by taking the evil of Rome and the evil of the universe upon himself, he exhausted it and brought a peace and a reconciliation deeper than any peace Caesar can even dream of. By emptying himself in love, he reconciled all things, in heaven, on earth, everything in the Roman empire and beyond, between all of creation and all of you and God. That is the kind of peace Jesus brought through the blood of a Roman cross."

"Enough!" It was Lucius again. "I say that not only have we heard enough from this woman's own mouth to condemn her; we have also seen how the actions of her household and community fundamentally challenge the empire and all it stands for. There is now no doubt in my mind that she stands guilty as charged, and all those who confess this Jesus with her.

"Let us now keep her in custody and begin immediately to gather those who meet in her house, before word gets out that we are doing so. These people are a threat to the security of the empire, the security of our society and the security of our wealth. We must not let them continue to meet to spread these seditious teachings."

"Nympha," said Aquila, "you realize that your situation is very grave. Do you wish to change anything you have said?"

"Nothing," I answered, "except to say that Jesus is my Lord, not Caesar, and in my flesh I am happy to complete what is lacking in his afflictions for the sake of his body, the church."

"That's enough!" said Trolius, sharply. "We will send immediately to have her followers rounded up. Who will go to the guards?"

"I will." It was Rufus, who had up until now said nothing. "I will send a slave immediately to notify the guards."

"Good," said Trolius. "Do not delay; they have ears everywhere. The guards will know a few of her followers and by applying torture will discover the rest."

I watched Rufus go with elation in my heart. For a few months now he had been coming secretly to our meetings. I knew that before sending a slave to the guards, Rufus would send another slave, a Christian named Malchus, to go and warn the saints.

Whose Story Is This?

This is, of course, a fictional story. We do not know whether any such trial ever occurred or whether the Nympha we meet in the New Testament ever saw through the implications of her faith in this way. We do know, however, that a poem such as that