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## Darkness at Noonday

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## *Darkness at Noonday*

RALPH BEEBE

Peter heaved a deep sigh and sat against a rock. The cave was cold and foreboding but a welcome refuge from the hostile world outside.

"It has been a difficult week, but victorious," he remarked. "A lot of new believers have been won." As he talked he idly inspected a long sword, one of several hundred weapons the believers had accumulated.

"Yes," Philip agreed. "And I think we have the Hellenist problem solved. The Lord has really been blessing our work."

"Stephen is certainly God's choice for the job of food distribution. He has deep spiritual insights and a real sense of justice," James added. "His zeal may get him in trouble, though."

"Yes—and all of us," noted Barnabas. "The authorities are cracking down. It is getting more and more dangerous to be a believer."

"The more the church grows, the more hostile the Pharisees get," Peter observed. "Everything we have worked for is in danger. If it hadn't been for Gamaliel they might have killed John and me. Now Stephen may be in real danger."

"I agree! We may have to fight soon," said Simon the Zealot. "I knew my revolutionary experience would be useful someday."

"But wouldn't fighting be terribly dangerous?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, of course. But against Christ's enemies we have to take risks. Besides, we really don't have a choice. Remember, they want to take away our right to worship God as we please. We have to show force or they will think that we are weak. Anyway, we'll move so fast they won't even know what hit them. How many of us are there?"

"Over five thousand, and even more women and children," Matthew estimated.

“Great! What an army! When the time comes, most of us will fight with swords or daggers. The rest will carry rocks. I figure that if we kill a few hundred they won’t cause us any more trouble.”

“But what if they do?” Thomas doubted.

“Then we’ll hit them again—over and over—and keep coming back to the caves. They’ll never catch us. We can hold out forever. We’ll teach them that aggression doesn’t pay!”

Just then John came running up, out of breath. “The Pharisees are arguing with Stephen!” he panted. “I think they are going to kill him.”

“Now is the time to act! Let’s go!” Simon exclaimed.

As quickly as possible the weapons were distributed among some of the believers. After a brief prayer for God’s blessing they left the caves and advanced toward the mob surrounding the pit. One hundred yards away they broke into a run toward the astonished Pharisees. A roar of defiance, a clash of swords, and the battle was joined!

Meanwhile, Stephen lay in the pit, already near death. He looked up into the hate-filled faces of the Pharisees. Then, contrasted beyond, he saw the tender face of Christ the Lord. Stephen’s own face shone with compassion as he prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them,” and went to be with Jesus.

The believers quickly won the battle. Suffering only a few casualties themselves, they killed hundreds of the enemy. Although they failed to save Stephen, they proved that they would not submit meekly, like lambs. Peter, the Rock, fought valiantly, killing a dozen or more. Then he directed his rage against a young man who had been guarding the coats.

Saul of Tarsus was standing transfixed, nearly oblivious to the battle around him, his gaze on the radiant face of the man in the pit. Stephen’s compassion moved him mightily, touching him like nothing in his experience. Then, suddenly, he saw an armed man lunging toward him. With a cry of fear, he grabbed a dagger and thrust it hilt-deep into Peter’s belly. Instantly, Barnabas killed Saul with a great rock to the back of the head.

The believers carried Peter to the caves, where they mourned their losses but celebrated the victory. They vowed to fight whenever necessary to protect the church of Christ.

It was only noon when the battle ended, yet a deep darkness seemed to settle over the land. Peter, now near death, shivered in the cold darkness, mumbling that he heard a cock crowing in the twilight.

The strange gloom was so intense that observers many miles away said that there was no light at all on the road to Damascus.