

Gloria:

the Real Story of Happily Ever After

This book was written by a follower of Jesus with the help of some of his brothers and sisters.

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Introduction

I wrote this story as a response or alternative to many popular children's stories which present a false hope of life "happily ever after." Often beauty, wealth or marriage are featured in these stories as the secret to happiness. However, in the realm of reality, everyone will eventually figure out the horrible mistake it is to look to these things as the source of happiness. Some people discover this quickly as beauty fades, wealth is lost or marriages do not turn out the way everyone hoped they would. Other people will only discover the foolishness of looking for happiness in selfishness when it is too late to do anything about it.

I have subtitled this story "the Real Story of Happily Ever After", not because the story of Gloria is a true story but because it is written to illustrate the true path to happily ever after.

Chapter 1

Once upon a time, in a large town in medieval Europe, there lived a poor widow and her three daughters. Her daughters names were Mary, Judith and Gloria. Ever since her husband had died, this widow was forced to work to feed her family. She had no special skills and so she took whatever odd jobs she could find. During the planting and harvest seasons there was usually work. Even then there was often only just enough money to buy the food they needed. During the winter time, life was much harder. Some times several days would go by when the widow and her family would have no food to eat.

Although the widow was dutiful and provided for her children, she was not a loving woman. Ever since her husband had died she had resented the hard life she had been given. Many times, as she lay awake at night hungry, she wondered why she worked so hard to feed her daughters when she had so little for herself. She especially resented her youngest daughter, Gloria. Every time the widow looked at Gloria it reminded her of her husband's death, which had happened shortly before Gloria was born.

Because the widow spent most of her day looking for work, her three daughters were given the task of minding the house. Even from a young age, they had to prepare meals, collect the water, search for wood to burn, wash the clothing and other household chores. From as young as she could remember, Gloria had spent many hours every day imagining what life would be like if she had been born into one of the wealthy merchant families or, even better, the family of one of the nobility. Whenever a carriage would go by their house, she would rush to the window to see if she could catch a glimpse of the people inside. Long after the carriage had gone out of sight, she would sit by the window and imagine what it would be like to ride in such style. When she did catch sight of one of the wealthy ladies riding by in a carriage, she would imagine what it would be like to live like them: to have servants to do all the work instead of constantly having hard work to do; to have as much fine food as she could eat instead of having only a little plain food; to wear one of the magnificent dresses that she saw the women wearing instead of her own plain and tattered dress. Often her mother would return home at night to find her sitting by the window day-dreaming. If Gloria's chores were not done, her mother would fly into a rage and beat her. This made Gloria long all the more to leave her life of poverty.

In many ways Gloria was like other children but in one way she was unique. Ever since she was born, Gloria's eyes had been the largest, bluest eyes anyone around could ever remember seeing. This combined with her fair skin gave her a striking appearance. Even strangers commented that she was one of the most strangely beautiful children they had ever seen. Her older sisters, jealous of the attention Gloria received, called her "owl eyes." When they were feeling especially mean, her sisters would dance around her and chant "owl eyes, owl eyes" until Gloria would run from the house crying. Many days she wished she could just look like the other children.

The winter that Gloria turned 16 was especially hard. The harvest that year had been poor and there were few people with enough extra food to afford to hire Gloria's mother. One day when work was especially hard to find, Gloria was given the job of cooking their last bit of flour for supper that night. Because they had no other food in the house, Gloria's mother had gone out again into the town in the evening to try to find some work. Gloria's sisters had been sent to gather wood to keep the fire burning through the night. As the fire burned, Gloria watched the flames dancing in the fireplace and imagined herself dancing in a shining dress in a great banquet hall with a large crowd of people dancing around her. When her mother returned, she found Gloria lost in thought and the small loaf of bread burnt beyond recognition. Her mother was so angry at the thought of losing their last bit of food that she threw Gloria out of the house and told her never to return.

Gloria stumbled though the town streets in a daze. Many times she had longed to leave her home but her hope had always been to leave for something better. She had never imagined being homeless. When she finally looked around, Gloria found herself in the local street market. The booths were all quiet as the vendors had all gone home for the day. The sight of the market made Gloria realize that she had no way to buy food. Being very hungry already, this thought was more than she could handle and Gloria sat down and wept.

She would have stayed in that spot weeping until morning but after an hour her shivering distracted her from her

crying. The cold wind was blowing through the open market area and Gloria realized she was as cold as she could ever remember being. Suddenly fear of dying from the cold became a much more urgent concern than finding food to eat. She started to wander again through the town but this time with the purpose of finding a warm place to sleep. She walked by many houses with light shining through cracks in the shutters or under the door. She imagined the warmth inside these homes but had no hope that she would be given a place to stay in any of them if she asked.

As she passed though an alley she passed behind the large house that must have belonged to one of the wealthier merchants in the town. At the back of the house stood the stables. These were closed for the night and Gloria thought that she might find some warm straw inside to sleep in. She snuck in through the stable door, half expecting to be chased away. The stable was dark and she could just barely make out the shapes of a few horses. Some stood still and slept, while others quietly munched on a pile of hay. In the back corner she found a large pile of clean straw. Gloria dug out a hole in the pile and then wrapped herself in straw. She fell asleep to the sound of horses breathing and the munching of hay. Her last thought before she fell asleep was that even the horses in this household never lacked food.

Gloria woke in the morning to the sound of one of the horses being saddled and led out of the stable. Sun was shining into the stable through the windows which were now wide open. As she heard the horse that had been saddled riding off into the distance, she crept out of the stable into the alley. Gloria's stomach quickly reminded her of her hunger and her thoughts turned back to the hopelessness of her situation. She realized that if she was going to survive she would have to rely on the generosity of others. She had no experience with begging since her mother had always been too proud to beg. Gloria thought she would start by knocking at the doors of some of the homes of the wealthier merchants. Going around to the front of the house where she had slept during the night, she made her way to the front door. She knocked on the door and soon it was opened by one of the servants.

"Please, do you have some food to spare," asked Gloria.

"Begone beggar! We don't have time for the likes of you," replied the servant who quickly slammed the door in her face.

The next few homes she tried gave similar results. At one large home the servant who answered the door took pity on her and went inside to ask the owner of the house if she could give Gloria some food. After a moment, Gloria could hear yelling coming from inside the house and the servant came hurrying back to the door.

"I'm sorry dear," she said, "but I can't help you."

Gloria wandered on from there and again decided to try her luck begging in the market. When she got there, the booths were being set up with produce of various kinds. She sat down at one of the busier entrances to the market and held out her hands indicating she wanted something from the passers-by.

Many of the people who passed by acted as though they didn't even see Gloria. Some people looked at her with pity but few people stopped to offer help. On occasion someone would stop and offer her a small bit of food. By the end of the day, she was far from full but at least she was no longer so hungry.

The following days were much the same. At night she would slip unnoticed into the stable where she had slept the first night. Early in the morning she would go to the market and beg. Some evenings she would return to the stable having had enough to eat. Other times she would return hungry. At times Gloria would go back to her mother's house and peak in the windows. As bad as her life had been there, she longed to return, especially when she saw her mother and sisters sitting down to dinner together. However, she never dared to face her mother and ask to return. She still vividly recalled the look of hatred and anger that had been on her mother's face that day she had burned their last loaf of bread. Her sense of rejection was so strong that she could not bear to take the chance that she would be treated that way again.

Chapter 2

One day while Gloria sat in the market begging, she noticed an older woman staring at her. The woman was dressed in the typical clothes of a peasant and had a look of surprise on her face. When the woman noticed that Gloria was staring back at her, she came up to Gloria.

"I am sorry to stare at you like that," said the old woman, "but just last night I saw you in a dream."

"Do I know you?" asked Gloria.

"No. I have never seen you except in a dream," replied the woman.

"Please, tell me your dream," said Gloria.

"In my dream, I saw a great crowd of people and in the centre of that crowd there stood a young woman. I do not recall the faces of those in the crowd but I am certain the young woman was you. I distinctly remember the large blue eyes staring back at me. I do not know how I knew this but I was aware that you were at a large wedding banquet. Your dress was so white and was shining so brightly that it was hard to even look at you without squinting but somehow your face was burnt on my mind. Then I came to the market this morning and saw you sitting here."

"That sounds like a wonderful dream but I am afraid it is not very likely to ever happen. Not many people go from being a poor wretch like me to a life like that," Gloria said with a bitter laugh.

"Tell me," said the old woman, "where do you live and why do you beg here? Do you have no family to help you?"

"I had a family but they want nothing to do with me anymore. My home is a stable and I beg just to get enough food to survive."

"You may come and live with me," said the old woman. "I already have many people living with me and we do not have much food but what we have we will gladly share with you."

Gloria was surprised by the kindness of this woman and was still trying to decide how to respond when a commotion on the other side of the market caught her attention. She heard the sound of galloping horses and then saw a number of riders enter the marketplace. One of the riders was wearing the fine clothing of nobility. The rest of the riders appeared to be the king's soldiers.

At the sight of the horsemen, the old woman hastily collected her belongings and whispered to Gloria "come quickly if you will." When Gloria hesitated, the old woman hurried from the marketplace. As she left, she called back softly to Gloria, "I'll return tomorrow."

Gloria, surprised at the old woman's haste, watched her disappear into an alley not far away. She sat there wondering why the old woman had seemed so frightened by the horsemen but her attention was soon drawn back to the other side of the market where the finely dressed rider had stood in his saddle and was addressing the crowded marketplace.

"Hear me, townsfolk. I am Celsus, the king's chief adviser. The king's eldest son, Crown Prince Leviculus, has now come of age to marry. He has requested his father to find the most beautiful young woman in the country to be his bride. The king has entrusted me to search the whole town and the surrounding countryside to find a bride for his son. We have spent the last few days searching the town for potential brides and will spend today in this market searching for even more beautiful young women than we have found so far."

As the riders dismounted and started to move throughout the marketplace, the place exploded in a flurry of activity. Men and women rushed to bring their daughters to the market in the hopes that they would have a chance of marrying the prince. As the news spread, some of the wealthy merchants brought their daughters dressed in fancy gowns and paraded them through the marketplace, making sure to pass in front of the king's adviser. Celsus, who had already visited all the daughters of the surrounding nobility and had seen many young women in the last few

days was not easily impressed and only occasionally gave a second look to one of the many young women now packing the marketplace.

In all this business and distraction, Gloria was entirely forgotten. Throughout the day Gloria's thoughts went back repeatedly to the old woman. She could tell from her tattered clothes that the old woman was poor. Why had she been so quick to offer Gloria a place to live? Certainly the woman could not easily afford another person to feed. Gloria also pondered the dream and what it might mean. She looked forward to seeing the woman the next day. As the end of the day drew near, not one person had stopped to give her food. Gloria was wondering if she should move elsewhere to beg when she noticed one of the soldiers staring at her with an odd expression on his face. She kept her eyes down, trying not to attract any attention. It was well known that the king was not fond of beggars in his kingdom, especially so close to the castle. Everyone in the town had heard stories of beggars being mistreated at the hands of the king's soldiers and Gloria hoped very much not to experience this herself. When she looked up again, the soldier was gone and Gloria thought it best to slip away before any unwanted attention came her way. As she stood up to leave, the soldier reappeared with Celsus and another man she had not seen before. The soldier pointed in Gloria's direction. Not knowing how to respond, Gloria tried her best to appear as though she belonged. As she watched the two men out of the corner of her eye, she could see them talking intently with each other. Suddenly, Celsus called out, "Come here young woman." Gloria could see that Celsus was looking straight at her. Looking around and seeing that there were no other young women near her, she slowly walked towards the two men and the soldier. She was not sure what to make of this but she feared the worst. She stopped in front of the men and stood quietly, sure that the men could see her shaking. Celsus stood for a while and looked at Gloria without saying anything. Finally, he said, "I have seen many women today, some dressed more richly than I, but I have seen none so beautiful as you. Come with us to the castle and we will see if Prince Leviculus agrees with me."

Gloria was placed on one of the king's horses and rode with Celsus and the others back to the castle. She was taken to a wing of the castle which was already occupied by a few other young women. Each of them had their own room and servants to attend to their needs. Celsus introduced Gloria to a large, old woman named Gallina. Gallina, who was Prince Leviculus's former nursemaid, had been put in charge of preparing and taking care of the prospective brides for the prince.

Gallina took Gloria to an empty bedroom and told her to wait there until she returned. Gloria looked around, scarcely able to believe her eyes. In the centre of the room was a large bed covered with finely coloured linen bed sheets and blankets unlike anything Gloria had ever seen. Around the outside of the room were a variety of beautifully carved pieces of furniture, including several wooden chairs inlaid with gold. Gloria sat down carefully in one of these chairs, afraid that she might break it. In a few minutes Gallina returned with another young woman dressed in the simple dress of a servant.

"This is Ancilla," said Gallina. "She will be your servant. For the next few weeks she will help me prepare you to go before the prince and see if he will choose you for his bride. I can see from your clothes that you do not come from a family of much wealth as do the other young women under my care and so I think we will have much to do to prepare you to meet the prince."

Gallina stared silently at Gloria for a while, seeming to be deep in thought. After a while she spoke quietly, as though to herself, "... and yet, I can see why Celsus brought you here. Perhaps" She turned and left, still speaking to herself.

After Gallina left, Gloria was not sure what to say. Everything was new for her. Although she had dreamed about having servants, she had never thought of them as real people. Now she was not sure how to relate to Ancilla. Ancilla, seeming to sense her uneasiness, smiled kindly and asked Gloria if she needed anything. Everything that had been happening seemed so unreal that Gloria had completely forgotten how hungry she was until Ancilla's question reminded her. "I'm very hungry," she told Ancilla. "Is there any chance I could get some food?"

"Yes," said Ancilla, "There is always more food than is needed in the castle here. I will get some for you right away."

Ancilla left and came back a short while later with a large bowl of soup and a small loaf of bread. Gloria could not remember when the last time was that she had had so much to eat at one time but she was so hungry that she quickly finished all the food.

Ancilla sat there silently while Gloria ate. When she had finished the food, Ancilla asked her if she wanted any more. Gloria had to think for a moment. She had never been in a situation before where she could have as much food as she liked just by asking. After considering her options she decided she was full enough not to ask for any more. Ancilla took the bowl and spoon and left the room. When she returned, Gloria was sleeping in her chair, completely exhausted by the days unbelievable events. Ancilla gently woke her and helped her into the large bed in the centre of the room. When Gallina came later that evening to call Gloria for the evening meal, she found her fast asleep. After a moments thought she decided not to wake her and Gloria slept as soundly as she could remember ever sleeping until the light and noise of the morning woke her.

Chapter 3

The next several weeks passed like a dream. Much of the day was spent in preparing to meet the prince. Gloria had much to learn about what was expected of a woman of nobility living in the palace. Her days were spent with the tailor having dresses made, learning how to speak and behave as a lady of the court and even how to walk and move in a dignified fashion. Everything was new to Gloria and she felt that she was having to work twice as hard as the other young women. Gallina saw this too and gave extra attention to Gloria. One thing that concerned Gallina about Gloria was how thin she was compared to the other young women. After her old clothes had been thrown away and the dirt scrubbed off her body, her thinness still gave her away as someone who had not come from a life of abundance. In those days being fat was considered more beautiful than being thin. Gallina often encouraged Gloria to eat more at meal times and before long she started to look more like the other young women. Gloria's evenings were spent learning how to dance, something that the other young women already did with ease. With all of this training, Gloria rarely had time to herself.

When Gloria did have time, she would stay in her room, trying to take in everything that was happening. Even in her childhood dreams, she had never imagined so luxurious a life as she now lived. Her soft mattress and luxurious sheets were much more comfortable than the straw mat and rough blanket she had been used to at home. Each meal was like a banquet to her with wonderful new foods to try. She had always dreamed of the fancy clothes and life of ease that wealth brings but she had never imagined having someone to dress her in the morning and undress her at night. It seemed that Ancilla was always there when Gloria wanted something or needed help. Usually Gloria was caught up in the excitement of the experience but at times she would feel lonely. At these times she took much comfort in having Ancilla around. Ancilla always had a kind word or a smile. In the busy pace of life and the newness of the experience, Ancilla was the one thing that was always the same. She was always ready to listen when Gloria need to express her feelings. A few times Ancilla would sit with Gloria and ask her questions about her life before living in the castle. Once when they were sitting talking, Gallina came into the room and sent Ancilla out.

"Gloria, you must learn to live like a princess," she scolded Gloria harshly. "If you marry the prince, you will have many friends in the court. Your servants will be there to do your bidding but not to be your friends. You are above that now."

From that time on, Gloria kept to herself and did not speak any more to Ancilla than she had to. Even still, Ancilla was always ready with a happy smile. Gloria longed to have Ancilla as a friend but was too afraid of Gallina to go against her wishes. As the weeks went on she found some friendship with the other young women who were also in her situation. There was always an unspoken tension between them because they knew that the prince would only choose one of them to be his bride. However, they still had much in common and they became better friends as time went on. With this, Gloria soon lost interest in her friendship with Ancilla and learned to just call on her when she wanted something.

Finally, after much preparation, the day came when the prince would choose his new bride from the young women. Each of them was dressed in the finest dress that had been prepared for them and their hair was carefully arranged. They each were scented with expensive perfume and each wore beautiful jewellery.

This was a busy day in the palace. Prince Leviculus was the king and queen's only son and wealthy and powerful people had come from around the kingdom to see the prince choose his bride. Normally the wife of a prince was chosen by his father from among the nobility or from among the royal family of a nearby kingdom. The idea of the prince choosing his own bride and especially choosing based only on beauty was strange to the people in the kingdom and many of them came to see what would happen and who would be chosen. The displaying of the young women was to be done in the throne room to accommodate all of the visitors who had come to see the event. The king and queen were seated on their thrones with Prince Leviculus seated beside them. The visitors and members of the court lined the main isle. The young women who were to be presented to the prince were instructed to walk down the main isle up to the thrones and then turn to the side and leave by a side exit.

Each of the young women (there were 6 in total), walked in turn down the isle. They were all very nervous since they knew what was at stake. However, they had all spent many hours training for this moment and it paid off. Each of them walked in a stately and dignified manner down the isle. There were nods of approval throughout the crowd as each young woman passed by. Almost everyone agreed that they were all beautiful women. Finally the time came for Gloria to walk into the throne room. Gallina had specifically chosen her to be the last to walk before the prince. As Gloria stood, about to enter the throne room, she felt like she was in a dream. In all of her dreaming as a child, she had never imagined anything like this. Finally, after what seemed like hours, Gallina motioned her to step through the doors to the throne room. As Gloria stepped into the throne room, she caught her breath. She had become used to luxury over the weeks that she had lived in the palace but she had not yet seen a room so beautifully decorated as this room. She had also not expected to walk in before so many people. For a moment she paused but then her training took hold and she continued down the isle in as stately a fashion as those before her. Shortly after she entered the room a murmur could be heard among the crowd. People whispered, "Surely she is the most beautiful woman I have seen.", "Do you think the prince will choose her?", "Certainly he must!".

Up to this point, Prince Leviculus had been somewhat disappointed by the young women. Certainly they were all beautiful but no more beautiful than many other women he had seen in courts he had visited. As Gloria approached his throne, he stood to get a better look. Partly this was a response to the murmuring of the crowd, which had not gone unnoticed by the prince but in part this was out of surprise. The prince was certain that he had never seen anyone so beautiful. As Leviculus rose, Gloria stopped in surprise. For a second she lost her composure and looked up at the prince. Momentarily their gaze met and she noticed two things: first, she noticed that the prince was a handsome young man. Second, she noticed that he looked mesmerized. She quickly caught herself and lowered her gaze and started walking again. As she left the throne room, she noticed herself starting to shake.

As Gloria kept walking she joined up with the other young women who had just walked before the prince. They all looked as nervous as she felt. As they stood there they heard loud cheering from the audience in the throne room. What they did not know was that the prince had just announced that Gloria would be his new wife. The crowd gathered in the throne room were enjoying the whole process and most of them agreed that Gloria was the most beautiful of the young women. When the prince announced his intentions, the onlookers gave cheers of approval. As the cheers were still dying down, Gallina hurried into the room. She stopped in front of the group of young women and announced, "Gloria has been chosen as the prince's new bride." She ushered Gloria into the throne room, leaving a stunned and sad group behind. As Gloria entered, the crowd again started to cheer and yell, "Long live the new princess!" Gallina led Gloria up to the thrones. The king stood and motioned the crowd to be quiet.

The king asked, "Young woman, what is your name?"

Gloria told the king her name.

“I would like to announce the marriage of my son, Prince Leviculus and Gloria in one week’s time,” the king told the crowd.

As Gloria left the throne room to the sound of cheering, she was stunned. Since she had been brought to the castle, she had not allowed herself to give much thought to what life as a princess would be like since she had feared she would not be chosen. Now she could not help but wonder what it would be like to live happily ever after in the castle with the prince.

That evening as Gloria was in her room thinking, a messenger came to tell her that the prince wished to know what she would like as a wedding gift. Gloria, who was already overwhelmed by the luxury of her new life in the castle, could not think of what to ask for from the Prince. For a long time Gloria sat and thought about her request. After a while her mind turned to what her new life in the castle would be like. She realized that she did not yet know anyone that she would spend the rest of her life with. This gave her the idea to ask for her servant, Ancilla to remain in her service and for the other young women who had also been brought to the castle as potential brides to become her ladies in waiting. She sent the messenger back with this request. He returned a while later saying that the prince would be happy to grant her request if the young women who he had not chosen would consent to this.

Chapter 4

The next week was one of the busiest that there had been in the castle for some time. Merchants hurried in and out of the castle bringing food, decorations and many other items needed to host the many people who would be staying at the castle for the wedding. The kitchen bustled with activity as the servants prepared for the largest feast there had been at the castle in years.

Finally the day for the wedding came. Gloria, who had hardly slept that night, was woken before sunrise by her servant Ancilla. It took hours for a group of servants, under the direction of Gallina, to dress Gloria in her wedding dress, arrange her hair and adorn her in jewels. The wedding was held in the castle chapel and attended by as many of the surrounding nobility as could be fit into the small chapel room. The castle priest performed the marriage ceremony along with a mass. When the ceremony came to a close Gloria was whisked away in a daze to prepare for the evening feast. The tailor who had made the wedding dress which had been admired by all, had put his greatest effort into the dress that Gloria would wear to the feast and dance that evening. The wedding dress had been made of a pure white fabric with beautiful white embroidery on it. For the dress for the feast, the tailor and his assistants had spent many hours stitching jewels into the fabric so that no matter what angle the dress was viewed from it seemed to sparkle and shimmer.

The wedding ceremony had been dutifully attended by those who were invited but what everyone was really looking forward to was the feast. The dullness of the ceremony was tolerated out of respect for tradition but the wedding feast was where the fun would be. When the time came for the feast to begin, all the guests were assembled in the great hall which had been lined with tables. The king and the queen entered and took their seats at the head table. The king stood and spoke to the crowd: “Lords and Ladies, I am overjoyed to present to you my son, Crown Prince Leviculus and his bride Gloria!” Gloria, who had been waiting in the wings with Leviculus then was led by him into the hall. There was much cheering at the announcement but as Gloria stepped into the room, many people stopped cheering and gasped at her beauty. The light from the great fire and the many torches on the walls made her dress shine like a thousand tiny lights. Gloria was overwhelmed by the large number of people gathered for the feast. She suddenly remembered the dream that the old lady in the market had told her. Gloria smiled, wondering where that old lady was now and wondering what she would say if she could see her right then like she had seen Gloria in her dream. It almost felt like this was a dream and she could hardly make herself believe that what was happening to her was real, as it was far beyond even her most fantastic dreams as a child.

Prince Leviculus led Gloria to the head table where they were seated next to the king and queen. The food and drink were now brought out by a large number of servants. Gloria was sure she had never seen so much food in

her life. There were roasted quail, chicken, goose and even peacock. There was venison and wild boar. There were many types of fruits, soups and tarts. As well, there was enough wine and ale to keep all of the guests quite happy. After the eating started, the entertainment began. A variety of musicians, singers, jugglers, along with the court jester, made their way around the hall entertaining the guests. Gloria, who was struggling to take everything in at the same time, felt happier than she had ever felt in her life. She wished this day would never end. The many guests did too as there was enough food and drink to satisfy even the greediest of the crowd and all of the guests left that night feeling as though they would burst.

The following months were a whirlwind of activity. When Gloria was not attending some social function in the castle, the prince was often taking her to feasts and dances held by the nobility of surrounding kingdoms. She would ride to these events in a beautiful carriage with gold trim and the king's flag flying from the top. They would ride surrounded by a number of the castle guards for protection. Even in her childhood daydreams, Gloria never imagined travelling in such grand style. At these events that Gloria and the prince attended, she was always popular. Her unusual beauty and her shimmering dress ensured that she was always getting attention wherever she went. A number of the women among the nobility and rich merchants of the surrounding areas paid large sums to have dresses like Gloria's made. However, none of them, even with a variety of jewellery and facial powders and paints, could compete with her unusual beauty.

When Gloria wasn't engaged in formal social activities, she always had her ladies in waiting to socialize with. All except for one of the original contestants for the marriage to the prince had agreed to live with Gloria in the castle. The five of them became better friends as time went on and always had some joke or gossip to talk about. Having grown up with the quiet but busy life of a peasant, Gloria found it hard at times to adjust to an idle life with so much social activity. At times, when she was able, she retreated into a corner of her room to stare out the window, lost in thought. She wondered at times that, if this were living happily ever after, why she did not feel more content. Certainly her life was more pleasant than it had ever been. The food and drink were always delicious, often with some new dish to try that she had never had before. There were constantly wonderful feasts with plenty of amusement and merrymaking. The prince doted on her and often gave her gifts of jewellery and fine perfumes. She really had nothing to worry about. The castle and knights protected her from dangers from without. Servants took care of all her daily needs and wants. When she felt alone, her ladies in waiting were always there to laugh and talk with her. Yet still she felt as though something was missing.

Chapter 5

About two years after their marriage, Prince Leviculus and Gloria were invited to the wedding of a nearby prince named Narcissus, who they knew from the extravagant feasts that his parents had thrown at their castle. This prince was always among the most extravagantly dressed at any event he attended. The wedding was rumoured to be an event not to miss as the prince was said to be marrying a beautiful Arab princess. This was unheard of in this part of the world. Interactions between these kingdoms and the Arab kingdoms were rare and usually not pleasant. What stories came back to these kingdoms told of the Arabs being savage men without the refinement of European society. This wedding was the focus of much talk in many of the surrounding courts for months before it happened. When the time for the wedding finally came, all the guests, including Prince Leviculus and Gloria crowded into the castle waiting to get a glimpse of this much discussed princess. When she was finally introduced, the crowd was amazed. This princess was unlike anything any of them had ever seen. She had dark black hair and light brown coloured skin. These things combined with her small, beautifully shaped dark eyes and her unusually dainty figure, made her quite unlike the European women. This society was not very open to foreigners and some of the guests muttered that such foreign "savages" should not be introduced into the ranks of nobility. However, this prince and his father the king were well liked and powerful, so these comments were only spoken of quietly among those few who agreed. The majority of the people, however, were impressed by the strange foreign beauty of this new princess.

In the months that followed this wedding, Prince Narcissus and his new bride were the focus of attention at every

social event they attended. Admiration for this prince and his beautiful new wife were so great that many of the wealthy women in the area started to use various paints and dyes to try to darken their complexion. Prince Leviculus, who was by this time used to being the centre of attention with Gloria at his side, fell into a deep depression. He stopped going to so many of the social events and when he did go he often would not take Gloria with him. Their previously happy relationship was now much more cold and impersonal. The prince spent much more of his time out hunting and involved in political affairs. Gloria at least had her ladies in waiting but she found it harder and harder as time went on to enjoy their laughter and company. At this time she found her servant Ancilla to be all the more comforting a companion. Although Ancilla rarely spoke without being first spoken to, her quiet but constant presence and her peaceful demeanour and helpful attitude were a welcome contrast to the loud, self-centred chatter of the other women.

With less time spent with the prince and her ladies in waiting, Gloria would often take walks on the castle grounds. She did not walk outside the castle walls since there was little protection offered for her out there. One day while out walking, she came across a procession of people being herded out of the dungeon by the castle guards. The group of people was an odd looking group. There were young and old, men and women and even some older children in the group. They all had tattered clothes and looked as though they had not eaten in some time. Cuts and bruises on many of them suggested their time in the dungeon had not been a pleasant one. At the front of the procession were Leviculus and the castle priest. Along with them was a richly dressed man that Gloria recognized as the bishop over their area. Behind the three of them walked a man dressed as an executioner, leaving Gloria little doubt what was happening. She knew that criminals were routinely executed on the castle grounds but had not yet witnessed this. She followed this group, wanting to know what would happen and wondering all the time what such a harmless looking group could possibly have done to deserve execution. Shortly they came to a spot where a large crowd was gathered. Many people from the surrounding town were there and she recognized some of them from various events at the castle. The king was already sitting on a makeshift throne that had been set up on the lawn and he was surrounded by heavily armed castle guards. Castle guards and servants were hurriedly building a number of wood piles around a row of large wooden posts.

When the group had been brought before the king, the bishop sat in the empty seat next to the king. He motioned to the crowd to be quiet and addressed them: "The criminals standing before you today are guilty of spreading dangerous heresies. They have rebelled against the authority of the king and the Church. We have shown great patience and given them many weeks to repent of their crimes but they have refused to do so. We gather here today so that an example can be made of what the king does with such wicked people."

The king turned to the ragged band of criminals and said, "I am a merciful king and I do not desire to have you burned today. If you will just recant your wicked heresies and swear allegiance to me and to the Pope, I will gladly pardon you."

As the group stood calmly in front of the king, an older man stepped out of the group and addressed the king: "King we respect you and pray for you daily as we know God has placed you in your position of power. However, when you ask us to choose between obeying you and obeying our true King, Jesus, we can make no other choice than what we have already made."

"Then you stand condemned by your own words," replied the King. "Proceed with the execution."

The guards began to lead the condemned people to the posts and tie them in place with ropes. Gloria, who had been watching in a bit of a daze up to that point, suddenly realized that she recognized one of the people about to be executed as the old woman who had offered to help her in the market place so long ago. She looked as though she had aged many years since then and was even thinner but there could be no doubt it was the same woman. Gloria, now awoken out of her complacency rushed over to Leviculus, who had up to this point not noticed that she was there. She grabbed his arm and whispered to him, "Leviculus, what have these people done to deserve such a death?"

Leviculus was not only surprised to see Gloria there but was somewhat taken aback by the urgency in her voice. After a moment's thought he replied, "You have heard their charges already and that they even now have refused

to swear allegiance to my father and to the Pope.”

“But do they deserve death for this?” asked Gloria.

“Should such rebels be allowed to spread in our kingdom? How long would it be before every peasant in the kingdom would throw off the authority of the king and the Church? It could lead to anarchy in the streets and a great exodus from the Church. Then how could the kingdom survive without anyone to guide it?”

“I can not believe that such simple people could really be so dangerous,” said Gloria.

“Do you think you know more about how to rule a kingdom than my father?” asked the prince with annoyance. “Or do you suppose you know more about the protection of the Church than the bishop himself? This is none of your business. Leave me be.”

At this, the prince walked away leaving Gloria stunned and confused. By this time, most of the people to be executed were tied to posts and were singing together a song of praise that Gloria had never heard before. The words of the song were these: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

On hearing this, the king ordered the piles of wood to be lit and the prisoners burned. Gloria stood there wondering how people could sing at such a time as this. As she was standing there she glanced at the old woman from the marketplace and their eyes meet. The old woman smiled at Gloria and then turned her eyes upward. At this point, Gloria decided she could no longer watch and started to hurry back to the castle. As the songs of those being burned followed after Gloria, she could hear the loud voice of the castle priest shouting, “This is what will happen to anyone who dares to rebel against the king and against those who God has appointed to guard his Holy Church!”

Chapter 6

The following weeks were difficult for Gloria. She was still unsettled by the burning of the heretics she had witnessed. She could not get the face of the old woman smiling at her out of her mind. The whole thing still made no sense to her. As well, her previously somewhat cold relationship with the prince was now strained almost to the breaking point. He no longer would even look her in the eye. Though they still sat at the same table together at meals in the castle, the prince would not talk with Gloria, except as was necessary. Gloria spent many hours in her room, lost in thought. During this time she noticed that her servant Ancilla seemed more sad and much thinner than she had before. Gloria wondered at why this was since there was always plenty for food in the castle, even for the servants. She started watching Ancilla more closely and noticed she would often disappear during the meals and acted very odd around these times as though someone might be watching her.

Gloria decided one day to follow Ancilla when she disappeared during a meal. When she saw Ancilla leave from the dining hall, she made an excuse about needing to leave for a moment and followed after Ancilla. She followed Ancilla to the kitchen where one of the servants there handed Ancilla a bowl of food. Ancilla then continued past the kitchen and out onto the castle grounds. Gloria, curious as to what this strange behaviour could be about, followed behind quietly. Ancilla tucked the bowl of food behind a fold in her dress and quickly ran to the point in the castle wall where the servants entrance was, where food and supplies were brought into the castle grounds. After a quick word with the guard there, she slipped outside. Gloria, not wanting to be seen following, decided to hide behind a nearby bush and wait to see what would happen. After a few moments, Ancilla came back in through the wall and hurried back toward the castle. Gloria followed her back and arrived at the kitchen just in time to see Ancilla returning her now empty bowl and hurrying off. Gloria, not wanting to be missed, quickly ran back to the great hall and took her place at the table.

When Gloria returned to her room that night she found Ancilla there waiting for her as usual. When she was sure they were alone she asked Ancilla, “what were you doing outside the gate tonight?”

Ancilla, quite surprised at the question, said nothing for a moment. Then she said, “I assure you I was doing nothing wrong, my lady.”

“I am not trying to bring trouble on you, Ancilla. I simply want to know what you were doing.”

Ancilla, with a worried expression on her face, thought for a while before finally answering. “I was giving food to some of my poor family outside the castle. The current situation has left them with little to eat and so they depend on me to help them.”

“Then you are stealing food from the castle?”

“No, I assure you I am not! I am only giving them some of the food allotted to me. I take nothing to them that is not given to me first.”

“Then what do you eat yourself?”

“I eat some of what I am given.”

“But look how thin you have become. Certainly you can not be getting enough.”

“Perhaps not, but how can I be full while I let my brothers and sisters go hungry. In one of his letters, the beloved disciple of Jesus asked if the love of God can be in such a person who has the world’s goods and does not help his brother in need.”¹

“Why do you not ask for help for them instead of starving yourself?”

“From whom, my lady? Who in this castle with the means to help them is not already aware of the great need in this town? If they do not help, even though they know the need, why would they act differently because a simple servant asks them to? If the words of our blessed Lord in scripture, that ‘whatever you have done to the least of these brothers of mine, you have done to me,’² are not sufficient, nothing I can say will compel them.”

Gloria felt somewhat ashamed that she had not once thought of the needs of the poor while living here in the castle. She felt even more so given the life from which she had come. After a moment of consideration she assured Ancilla that she would do what she could to help.

“Thank you, my lady,” Ancilla replied.

Gloria lay awake for a long while that night. Although she felt good that she had offered to help, the whole conversation disturbed her. She had grown used to thinking of Ancilla as nothing more than a simple servant. To hear her speak so confidently and boldly and display knowledge of the scriptures seemed out of place for a person of such a low position. What bothered her the most was her feelings that she had neglected something important. She had always thought of herself as a good Christian. From her childhood, she had been faithful in attending mass regularly at the cathedral in the town. Since she came to live in the castle, she had gone almost daily for mass in the castle chapel. She prayed as often as she thought to. She had usually listened with interest to the priest on occasions when he taught from scripture but had never heard anything like what Ancilla had said. Gloria wondered why, if such strong words were in scripture, she had never heard them spoken of.

The next day Gloria resolved to keep her word and seek to help Ancilla’s family. Even though her relationship with the prince was very strained, she worked up the nerve to speak with him about the need. While they were sitting together at the evening meal, Gloria whispered to Leviculus, “I would like to request your help with providing for some needy people in the town.”

The prince, who was not at all a generous person, looked with disgust at Gloria and said, “If people are needy, they should work to provide for their own needs.”

¹1 John 3:17

²Matthew 25

Gloria had not considered the possible objections Leviculus might make to her request as she naively assumed that so rich a person would have no problem giving a little bit to the poor. After a moments thought and remembering her life before coming to the castle, she replied, "I'm sure they are trying to provide as best they can."

Leviculus, now getting somewhat irritated by the conversation, snapped back, "Are you saying that my father has not provided a kingdom in which people can provide for themselves?"

Gloria, feeling somewhat trapped by the question, stammered back, "I...I don't know."

"You shouldn't speak about things you don't understand," Leviculus replied with a tone of finality. He then turned away from Gloria and made it clear the conversation was over.

Gloria was not sure what to say to Ancilla. When she had offered to help, she had not considered the possibility that she would not be able to do so. When she got back to her room, she could not even look Ancilla in the eyes. Gloria, not wanting to talk, went to bed immediately. She lay awake for a long time with her mind full of a mixture of confusion, sadness and embarrassment. For the first time since she had come to live in the castle, Gloria started to feel like she was a prisoner in the castle. Ever since her relationship with Leviculus had started to be so strained Gloria had stopped feeling like she was going to live happily ever after. However, now the reality of her situation started to become more clear to her: not only could she not leave the castle but now she realized that she did not even have the freedom to give food to a needy person. At times she had considerable freedom in how she used her time. However, her place in the royal family made for a lot of constraints on what she could and could not do. "How strange," she thought, "that I am married to the man who will one day be the wealthiest and most powerful in the kingdom and I can not even leave the castle or give some food to a hungry person. Even my poor mother could give a bowl of food to a hungry person." At first after marrying Leviculus she had been amazed at the thought that she would one day be queen of the whole kingdom. Now she felt like a caged animal. The thought of her inability to do even something as simple as giving food to the hungry reminded Gloria of the sacrifice that Ancilla was making to give away even her own meals. Something in Gloria's conscience bothered her greatly but she tried to put it out of her mind. Gloria did not feel ready for the level of selflessness she saw in Ancilla but she could not deny it was a noble thing that Ancilla was doing. Eventually sleep overtook Gloria but the rest of the night was full of troubled dreams.

Chapter 7

The following day was Sunday and after breakfast Gloria prepared herself to attend mass in the palace chapel. The castle priest held mass every day in the chapel but Sunday was a special day. Generally the whole court attended on Sundays and in addition to the familiar pattern of the mass which was held every day, the priest would prepare a talk on a topic from the scriptures at the Sunday mass. Gloria usually listened to these talks attentively. This week her mind was distracted by all the thoughts and emotions she had had in the night. She went through the various parts of the mass just by force of habit but her mind was elsewhere. However, when the priest started to share thoughts from the scriptures, Gloria pushed her thoughts aside and tried her best to pay careful attention.

The priest spoke from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The text he spoke from was this:

"For you see your calling, brothers, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, and not many noble; but God chose the foolish things of the world that he might put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world that he might put to shame the things that are strong. God chose the lowly things of the world, and the things that are despised, and the things that don't exist, that he might bring to nothing the things that exist, that no flesh should boast before God."³

As usual, the priest spoke very eloquently. Those in attendance, at least the ones who were not sleeping during his talk, nodded approvingly as he forcefully made each of his points. Gloria could not deny that the priest's

³1 Corinthians 1:26-29

points were well thought out and well stated. However, something troubled her about his talk and the text he was reading from. As Gloria looked around the room the thought came to her that “here are all these fashionable and cultivated people, the wealthy and powerful. Was it not strange to read this passage to such a group of people?” The more Gloria thought about it, the more comical the whole thing seemed to her. Suddenly, without any warning, a laugh sprang up out of Gloria.⁴ It surprised Gloria but it surprised some of the others even more. The priest, who normally spoke with great confidence, stopped and looked up with a troubled expression on his face. A number of others turned in surprise to see where the laugh had come from. Leviculus, who was sitting next to Gloria turned to her with a scowl that made it very clear that Gloria’s behaviour was not appreciated. It was not that Leviculus was opposed to laughing. In fact, merry-making and amusement was about all Leviculus did seem interested in. However, in the chapel everyone was expected to be serious and Leviculus’s sense of duty was strong enough to keep his desire for amusement under check in such situations.

Gloria hung her head in shame at the stir she had caused. The priest, after a moment of awkward silence, continued with his talk. Nothing was said afterword about the unusual outburst. However, Gloria could not shake the feeling that something was very wrong. Was it really true that Paul himself had taught that God had chosen those who were lowly and despised? What did that mean for those who were looked up to by everyone? Did not everyone know that the wealthy and powerful were the ones who had God’s favour? Gloria was not sure what to think. She knew the priest was a well educated and intelligent man. Surely he knew what the scriptures meant. And yet, the meaning of Paul’s words seemed so plain and clear.

These thoughts troubled Gloria throughout the rest of the day. That evening Ancilla noticed her troubled look and asked her if anything was the matter. Gloria was not sure if this was something she should discuss with a servant. However, she did not know anyone else that she could discuss it with. Her relationship with Leviculus was strained to the point that any conversation was awkward and even at the best of times religious conversation was not something that seemed to interest Leviculus. Her ladies in waiting were always there to talk but something made Gloria nervous about bringing up such a topic with them. Their conversations were rarely serious and topics of a religious nature were especially rare. Maybe even a greater deterrent to Gloria mentioning her questions to them is that she had already observed that any expression of uncertainty or weakness was immediately seized on by the others and ridiculed in what seemed like a merciless competition to feel superior that they were all engaged in. Ancilla at least never seemed to act that way towards others.

In desperation at the thought of having no one to turn to, Gloria decided to share her thoughts and questions from the day with Ancilla. Ancilla listened quietly and attentively as Gloria shared what had happened that day at mass and her struggle to know what to think about it all.

After she was done, Ancilla asked her, “When God chose a family to raise his son, did he choose a wealthy family or one of the nobility?”

Gloria had never really considered that before and, after a moment of thought, she said she did not know.

Ancilla told her, “When Joseph and Mary went to the temple to offer the required sacrifice after Jesus was born, Luke recorded that they offered a pair of birds.” Gloria wondered what the significance of that was to the topic at hand. Ancilla continued, “Moses gave the instruction in the law that every family of the Jews was required to offer a sacrifice after the birth of a child. This sacrifice was to be a lamb and a bird. However, if the family was too poor to afford a lamb they could offer two birds instead.” As Gloria thought about that, Ancilla asked her another question: “When Jesus came to earth, did he come as a wealthy man?”

Gloria had to admit she had never considered that before either.

⁴The inspiration for this incident comes from the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, where he said the following in criticism of the Danish state church of his day: “In the splendid palace chapel a stately court preacher, the cultivated public’s elite, advances before an elite circle of fashionable and cultivated people and preaches emotionally on the text of the Apostle, ‘God chose the lowly and despised’ – and nobody laughs!” See *Provocations*, edited by Charles E. Moore, published by Plough Publishing House, page xviii. This book is freely available in electronic form at <http://www.plough.com/>.

Ancilla told her about the man who wanted to follow Jesus, to whom Jesus had replied, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”⁵

“Consider,” said Ancilla, “what is it that the world most admires? Is it not the one who is the most wealthy, is the most powerful or is the most beautiful? Yet, the prophet Isaiah said this about the Christ: ‘He has no good looks or majesty. When we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering and acquainted with disease. He was despised as one from whom men hide their face; and we did not respect him.’”⁶

As Gloria considered what Ancilla had been saying, she could not help but ask aloud the questions that were on her mind, “Was the castle priest not aware of these things? Was he not an expert in the scriptures? Why would he not mention them when speaking on Paul’s words about the lowly?”

The questions were not really intended for Ancilla to answer but she took the opportunity to answer with a question: “What do you think would happen to the castle priest if he were to preach to the king and other nobility that God’s chosen people are mostly made up of the lowly and that those who the world looks up to are rarely included?”

Gloria had to admit, at least in her own thoughts, that what Ancilla was saying made sense. However, she was too afraid of the consequences of what she was saying to keep talking about it and so Gloria ended the conversation by making an excuse about needing to go to bed. As she lay there in bed, she could not stop these questions from running through her mind. What if Ancilla was right? What if the priest was not giving a correct picture of Christianity? Was he not the approved representative of the Church? Surely the whole Church was not wrong about Christianity! Gloria had always thought of herself as a good Christian. She attended mass regularly; she never stole, lied or cheated anyone; she certainly had never murdered anyone. Everyone around her seemed to think she was a good Christian. The priest had certainly never warned her that she might not be a good Christian. However, now all these thoughts were starting to bring doubts into her mind.

Gloria’s sleep that night was disturbed by these thoughts and the emotions surrounding them. She could hardly bear to even think about what some of these thoughts could cost her. At one point in the night she suddenly awoke from a disturbing dream. She sat up in bed with her heart pounding. The picture of her dream was still as clear on her mind as if it had actually happened. In her dream, Gloria was standing watching the band of people she had seen executed on the palace grounds not long before. Everything about the dream was the same as she remembered it except for one thing: when Gloria looked around at the people tied to the stakes, she looked over to where the old woman was who had smiled at her but instead of seeing the old woman’s face, she saw her own face staring back at her with the same kind smile that the old woman had given her. That is when she had been startled awake.

The thought of being burned alive horrified Gloria. Even though her life in the palace was not very happy at that moment, she could not imagine the suffering of being burned to death. It still bothered her to think about the old woman who had smiled at her. She could not understand how someone could smile while facing such a horrible death.

Chapter 8

The next day, Gloria could not stop thinking about her dream and the old woman she had seen being executed. What made her able to smile and sing in such a situation? What did she have that Gloria did not? Even the thought of such a death made Gloria shudder. Could this band of criminals who were executed have known something about Christianity that the priest did not know or did not want to talk about? She was not sure how

⁵Matthew 8:20 & Luke 9:58

⁶Isaiah 53:2-3

she could ever figure that out. She was not a priest and had no chance of getting a religious education like he had and the people she saw executed were all dead, so there was no way she could ask them.

At times when Gloria had been especially troubled or worried by something, she would go to the chapel to pray. Other than at times when mass was being held there, it was always quiet. Sometimes there would be one or two other people in the chapel in silent prayer or thought. Now with all that was troubling Gloria, she decided to go again to the chapel to pray in hopes that peace would come back to her. As she knelt in front of the altar in the chapel she prayed a simple but sincere prayer, “God in heaven, if there is anything you want me to know or want me to change, will you show it to me?”

Prayer had never been a regular thing for Gloria. However, as far back as she could remember she would pray when she did not know what else to do. As a girl her prayers were often requests for help because of the poverty of her family or difficulties she had with her mother or sisters. In the castle she prayed at times for help with conflicts with Leviculus. Now for the first time in her life, she was praying for what God wanted, rather than what she wanted. For a long time she knelt there in silence. While she knelt there a question came into her mind: “How much are you willing to suffer?” The question startled her and she wondered where it had come from. Was that from her own mind or had God asked her that question?

Gloria could not recall ever hearing the priest talk about hearing from God directly. The priest did often emphasize that if people listened to him they were hearing from God. Gloria wondered how she would even know if she had heard from God. After a while longer of kneeling there in silence, Gloria decided to return to her room. As she rose and started walking out of the room she noticed the large Bible on the stand in the corner where the priest had left it. Suddenly a thought occurred to her: the priest said that the scriptures were the words of God. Why could she not read them for herself and see if they could answer her questions.

Since Gloria had been living at the castle, reading lessons had been something offered to her. The castle priest had been assigned the job of teaching her, as he was the most educated person in the castle. Gloria had had little motivation to learn to read as there was not anything that she could think of that she had wanted to read. Because of this, she often put off the lessons or made excuses to get out of them. However, over time she had made some progress, although not enough to be able to read independently. Sometimes the priest had Gloria try to read a passage from the Bible. More often they practised reading the catechism or the writings of a poet or philosopher.

Now Gloria was motivated to learn to read. The priest was surprised by her new enthusiasm to learn but he dutifully taught her the lessons. He knew it would be a strange thing to have a queen who could not read and he supposed it was better that Gloria was a little over-enthusiastic than that she never learned to read at all.

Gloria still longed to know if the question she had heard in her mind was from God or not and she was troubled that she did not know if she could expect to hear from God. Eventually this question bothered her enough that she got the courage to ask the priest a question during one of their reading lessons. She ask him, “If God approves of us, will he ever speak to us?” She tried to ask it in a way that did not reveal the great anguish she had because of this question.

The priest was a perceptive man and sensed doubts behind Gloria’s question. He was very aware of the political situation in the castle and he knew a queen who had doubts, especially if they extended to the state church, could make problems for him. He thought for a moment about how to answer Gloria and opened the Bible to the letter to the Hebrews. He read Gloria the following:

Having then a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold tightly to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who can not be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace for help in time of need.⁷.

⁷Hebrews 4:14-16

The priest explained to Gloria that each Christian needed to hold tightly to the confession of the faith that they were taught by the Church, which was the guardian of the faith. He also explained that each person who did so could confidently come before the altar at mass and receive the body and blood of Christ. On earth, he explained, the altar is God's throne of grace and when a Christian receives the body and blood of Christ, this is how one can receive mercy and help in time of need. After this explanation, which the priest was sure was a convincing one, he excused himself to attend to other duties.

Gloria sat in thought for a while. She was not sure what to make of the priest's explanation but it still did not answer her question of how to know if she had heard God or not. While she was sitting there, her eyes settled on some words on the open Bible in front of her: "hodie si vocem eius audieritis nolite obdurare corda vestra."⁸ She slowly read the words: today ... if ... you hear ... his voice ... do not ... harden ... your hearts. She read the words over again and sat thinking about them for a while. Finally she decided that whether she knew for sure or not if the question she had heard was from God, she was going to ensure that her heart was ready to accept whatever God would say. She did not want to ignore this warning and have a hard heart.

Chapter 9

After this, life started to change quickly for Gloria. She spent much more time in prayer than she had ever done before. The lighthearted conversations she used to enjoy with her ladies in waiting now seemed so meaningless to her that she lost all interest in visiting with them. Leviculus had already lost interest in Gloria some time ago. They still sat together for meals and attended official events together in the castle but other than that Gloria rarely saw Leviculus. This left her with a lot of time for prayer and contemplation.

Gloria convinced the priest to give her reading lessons every day and her reading ability progressed rapidly. One day for the reading lesson, the priest turned to a passage in Paul's first letter to Timothy and had Gloria read the following:

I exhort therefore, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and givings of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high places, that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and come to full knowledge of the truth. ⁹

Gloria's reading ability had gotten to the point now where she was able to read the whole passage without assistance, although still somewhat slowly. After she was done reading, the priest explained the passage to her.

"It is the job of the king," he said, "to wield the sword and put down any threat that might get in the way of the people living peaceful lives and of the Church being able to bring all people to salvation. The people must pray to God for the king and all those who rule so that God will aid them in their task. It will be your place, when Leviculus becomes king, to support him in this important task of suppressing all the various threats to the Church that could prevent her from continuing to bring the people of this kingdom to salvation. Not only heathen nations from without but heretics from within need to be dealt with to prevent the church from losing control of the people."

This passage had not been randomly chosen. The priest was still concerned that Gloria may have doubts that could undermine her allegiance to the state church. He thought these reading lessons were a good opportunity to help reinforce the importance of the state church in her mind.

After the priest had left the chapel, Gloria decided to continue reading where they had left off. The next sentence she read was this:

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

⁸Hebrews 4:7 from the Latin Vulgate translation, which was the main Bible translation used in Europe in the middle ages.

⁹1 Timothy 2:1-4

This sentence seemed strange to her. She had always been taught that she should pray to Mary and the other saints who would then intercede to God on her behalf and she had never had any reason to question that. Now she wondered how Paul could say that there is only one mediator between God and man? Were Mary and the saints not mediators? She thought about it for a while and then decided she would ask the priest at their next reading lesson. She decided to keep reading and several sentences later she read this:

I desire therefore that the men in every place pray, lifting up holy hands without anger and doubting. In the same way, that women also adorn themselves in decent clothing, with modesty and propriety, not with braided hair, gold, pearls, or expensive clothing, but with good works, which is appropriate for women professing godliness.¹⁰

Gloria could hardly believe what she was reading. She was sure she had never heard anyone mention this before. She, like all the other ladies of the nobility, went to mass every week with elaborately braided hair, gold, pearls and expensive clothing. Why would the priest never mention this passage? Gloria, feeling quite offended, felt like she wanted to ask Paul why he thought that braided hair, gold, pearls and expensive clothing was not dressing decently, modestly or with propriety. As all this was going through her mind, a short sentence interrupted her thoughts: “today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

Gloria decided that the best thing to do was to pray about all of this. She knelt for an hour in the chapel pouring out her heart to God and pleading for wisdom and strength to do what pleased God. By the time she was done praying, she knew what she needed to do and she had decided she was ready to suffer whatever consequences would come from it.

Gloria walked slowly back to her room, wondering what would happen next and who would understand her decision. She knew her ladies in waiting would just laugh at the thought of not trying to make herself look beautiful. After all, is that not exactly how she was chosen to be the future queen! As she thought about it, the only person she could think of who would at least listen to her without ridicule was her servant Ancilla. She remembered also the surprising knowledge of scripture that Ancilla had shown in the past and wondered what she would say about this.

When she got back to her room, Ancilla was there and Gloria shared what she had read that day and everything that was on her mind as she had been considering it. As Gloria had expected, Ancilla listened politely. When Gloria finished sharing what was on her mind, she asked Ancilla, “Did you know that there were such instructions in the scriptures?”

“Yes, my lady,” Ancilla replied, “and I seek to obey them.”

Of course it was no surprise to Gloria that Ancilla did not wear gold and pearls and expensive clothing as it would have been hard to imagine she could have afforded such things as a poor servant. Ancilla wore the wimple¹¹ commonly worn by the peasant women of that day, so Gloria could not even have told if Ancilla was decorating her hair but she realized that would be a silly thing to do if your hair was covered all the time. Since Ancilla’s clothing was similar to the clothing of other poor women of the day, it had never occurred to Gloria that she had been intentionally dressing in any particular way. However, now that she thought about it, many of the other female servants, even though they lacked the money to have costly decorations, often found some inexpensive way to decorate themselves or their clothing. Although it had never stood out to Gloria before, Ancilla’s clothing was always plain and simple.

Gloria shared with Ancilla her decision to start obeying this instruction from scripture and no longer try to attract attention to herself through decorating her body.

“Have you considered what that may cost you?” asked Ancilla.

“Yes,” said Gloria, “and I hope with God’s help I am ready to do what God wants no matter what happens.”

¹⁰1 Timothy 2:8-10

¹¹This was a two part head covering, common in medieval Europe. The under layer was fairly tight fitting and covered the whole head and neck except for the face. The outer layer was a loose hanging veil, although at times it was stiffened and shaped.

“Where will you get clothing?” asked Ancilla.

Gloria had not considered that yet. She thought for a moment and decided to go right away to ask the palace tailor to make her some new, simple dresses. Other than the fact that all her dresses were made with expensive material, Gloria also considered that all of them had also been tailored to attract attention to the shape of her body. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed to her that probably Paul did not mean clothing like that when he said he wanted all women to dress with modesty and propriety.

Gloria decided to take Ancilla along with her to give the tailor an idea of what type of clothing she wanted. When Gloria explained to the tailor that she wanted some simple, plain and modest dresses made from inexpensive material, the tailor laughed at her.

“My lady, you are a princess and I am a palace tailor,” he said rather indigently. “I do not make such clothing and why would you want to wear such clothing?”

When Gloria explained why she wanted to make such a dramatic change, the tailor reassured her that she could trust the castle priest to tell her if she was doing anything that God would not want. “God has given us the Church,” he said, “to guide us into all truth.”

When Gloria could see that the tailor would not change his mind, she returned to her room with Ancilla. Gloria thought it was strange that she would be happy to have back the clothing she came to the castle with, which she had been so happy to be rid of at the time. However, that clothing had been disposed of long ago. On the way back to the room, Ancilla said, “I have one other dress and one other wimple than these ones that I am wearing. You are welcome to have those. When John was preparing the way for the Christ, he taught that whoever had two tunics should give to the one who has none.”

Gloria felt strange about accepting clothes from a poor servant. However, she did not know what else she could do if she wanted to quickly stop using the clothing that seemed so out of keeping with how God must want a woman to dress. She told Ancilla she would very gratefully accept the clothing and assured her she would try to get other clothing soon so that she could return Ancilla’s to her. As it was late, Ancilla said she would bring the clothing early in the morning and Gloria went to bed.

As Gloria lay in bed that night thinking about all of the things that had happened that day, she thought more about the last passage she had read from the Bible: “In the same way, that women also adorn themselves in decent clothing, with modesty and propriety, not with braided hair, gold, pearls, or expensive clothing, but with good works, which is appropriate for women professing godliness.”

Gloria had a plan how to adorn herself in decent clothing, with modesty and propriety, but what about adorning herself with good works? She was ashamed to admit, even to herself, that her time living in the castle had been mostly about making herself happy. She had tried to be a faithful wife to Leviculus, even in recent times when he had made that much more difficult. However, she had been so wrapped up in the same selfishness that everyone else in the nobility was that she had really given very little thought to doing good works. To make things more complicated to figure out, the one time she had tried to do an act of charity, she had been unable because Leviculus had refused to let her. She wondered now what good works she could do trapped in the castle with nothing of her own other than her clothing, jewellery and other similar personal items. As she thought about her situation she considered that she could sell some of these things to give the money to the poor. However, she did not know how she could do that without being able to leave the castle grounds. As she fell asleep that night she prayed to God that he would give her a chance to adorn herself with good works.

Chapter 10

The next morning Ancilla was there early with the clothes she had offered to bring. Gloria was thankful to exchange her fancy clothes for the simple ones from Ancilla. However, she knew that her decision may not be well

received by others in the castle, especially Leviculus whose appreciation for fancy clothing made even some of the other nobility look plain in comparison.

Gloria decided that rather than surprising Leviculus when he saw her at the noon meal, she would go to speak to him privately first. She found him in his study staring out the window. When he saw her he looked shocked.

“Gloria, why are you dressed like a peasant?” he asked.

Gloria explained what she had read in the scriptures and her desire to do whatever God asked of her.

Leviculus, now visibly angry, replied, “Who gave you the authority to interpret scripture? That is the responsibility of the clergy.”

“But Leviculus, are the words that I read not clear enough?” asked Gloria.

“If everyone starts to interpret the scriptures privately, it will lead to anarchy!” Leviculus snapped back. “Plus, what training do you have to understand scripture properly?”

Gloria was not sure what to say in response. She did not want to go against her husband’s wishes but she did not want to go against God’s wishes either. It seemed like in this situation she would have to choose. She thought quietly for a while about what to say. After a while an idea came to her and she asked, “Leviculus, will you pray about this and ask God to show you if I am right or wrong in this?”

“Enough!” Leviculus shouted back. “I will get the priest and we will come to talk with you about this.”

Gloria returned to her room, discouraged but still committed to do what was right no matter what the cost. She spent time in prayer as she waited for what she anticipated would be an uncomfortable meeting. She did not have long to wait before Leviculus and the priest arrived at her room.

The priest started right away to lecture Gloria on the importance of proper training to be able to understand the scriptures. “Just because you can read the scriptures, does not mean that you can understand them properly,” he said. “Many things in the scriptures are complicated and take years of study to understand. That is why the Church is the guardian of truth, so that people are not deceived by wrong ideas.”

“Can you explain to me then what this passage means?” asked Gloria, still unable to see what was complicated about this passage.

The priest, obviously annoyed by this lack of trust, made several attempts to explain Gloria’s concern away. First he told her that the people of Israel used golden jewellery, a fact we know because they used that golden jewellery to make the golden calf in the wilderness. “Since they were God’s people,” he argued, “it shows that God was not against the use of jewellery.” After this argument, he told her that David and Solomon and other godly kings used to dress in fine clothing and if they could then certainly men and women of high standing today could not be condemned for doing so. “Do not forget,” he said, “that all this fine clothing provides work for tailors and cloth-makers who might otherwise be unemployed.” After several other arguments, each more creative than the last, the priest stopped his presentation, content that he had set the matter to rest.

“You still have not explained to me what Paul meant in that passage,” Gloria said.

“He was simply saying that a woman’s good works and not her appearance is what should make her stand out,” the priest replied.

“Why would I want to wear gold, pearls or expensive clothing or to decorate my hair if it was not to stand out?” Gloria asked.

The priest, not used to being questioned like this, sharply replied, “My lady, it is not your responsibility to understand everything in the scriptures. Leave that to the experts in the Church.”

“I can not claim to understand everything in the scriptures but these words seem plain and I fear the results if I hear the word of God and harden my heart against it,” Gloria gently replied. “Perhaps the reason that Paul said

not many Christians were wise according to the flesh is that those who seem wise to the world are not content with a plain and simple understanding of scripture.”

Leviculus, who up to this point had remained silent, now angrily pounded his fist on the arm of his chair. “Gloria, I will not permit my wife to be dressed like a peasant! What would people say if they saw such a thing?”

“I do not know what people would say,” answered Gloria, “but I am concerned about what God will say if I do not do as he wants.”

“Then I banish you from the castle and from my kingdom,” shouted Leviculus. “Get out of here or I will have the castle guards remove you!”

Gloria could hardly believe her ears. She pled with him to reconsider but the more she spoke the more angry he became. Finally Leviculus picked up a vase to throw at Gloria and she quickly ran from the room and down the hall. Gloria could barely see where she was going through her tears but she knew the halls well and was able to make her way outside into the castle yard. She did not stop running until she was well outside the castle gates.

Chapter 11

After Gloria had run to where she could no longer see the castle walls, she stopped to catch her breath. She wondered now what she would do with no place to go, no food and no money. She started to walk, although she had no idea where she was going or even where she should go. After a while of walking she was startled by a lot of noise around her. She had not been paying attention to where she was but as she looked around now she recognized that she was in the market that Celsus had found her in. While living in the castle, she had been too concerned for her safety to leave the castle grounds without Leviculus and an escort of soldiers. Now no one around her even paid any attention to her. She realized that with her current clothing she just appeared to be one of the common people.

Gloria decided to sit down in the market and pray for help and guidance. She sat there for several hours, at times in prayer and at times lost in thought, all the time fighting against worry about what would happen to her. She considered begging for food, something she would not have imagined doing just a day before. However, she decided rather than begging she would just pray and wait for God’s help. After all, she felt that she was in this difficult situation because she was trying to do what God wanted. Should she not expect him to provide help in such a situation rather than begging?

Towards evening, Gloria suddenly heard someone calling her name. She turned and saw Ancilla running towards her. When Ancilla reached her she said, “Thanks to God that I finally found you. I heard shouting in your room this morning but by the time I got there you were gone and only Leviculus and the priest were there. I could not bring myself to ask Leviculus what had happened but one of the other servants said she saw you running away crying so I knew something bad must have happened. When you did not come back I knew I had to find you.”

Gloria explained what had happened and that she was now banished from the castle and the kingdom.

“You can come and live with me and my sisters,” said Ancilla. “We do not have much but what we have we will gladly share with you.”

Gloria gratefully accepted the offer and followed Ancilla back to her house. After they had walked for a while they arrived at a very small house and went inside. Gloria was surprised to be greeted by 5 other women and she wondered if they all lived in such a small place.

“These are my sisters,” said Ancilla, and she introduced each of them to Gloria by name.

“These are all your sisters?” asked Gloria.

“Yes, we were all adopted into the same family when we gave up the world to follow Jesus,” Ancilla answered.

“We have been praying that you will do the same,” said one of Ancilla’s sisters.

“Perhaps God has been helping to answer your prayer by bringing me to this point in my life,” said Gloria. “I do not have much left to give up. My husband has rejected me and I have no home or any possessions.”

“We all have to give up pride, selfishness, a desire for the praise of man, and many things more than just our relationships and possessions,” said another of Ancilla’s sisters, “but you may still be right that God is helping you by taking from you what you may have struggled to give up yourself.”

“I have already decided that I want to be ready to obey whatever God says to me and I feel ready to suffer whatever I have to suffer as a result,” said Gloria.

“If you chose to follow Jesus wherever he leads, you will quickly find yourself at odds with the state church,” said Ancilla. “You may have to suffer imprisonment, torture and death at their hands. The men who rule the state church do not take kindly to people who do not submit unquestioningly to their authority. They will even burn to death those who refuse to submit to them. Have you considered if you are ready for that?”

“I know in the past that I was not ready to suffer like that but as I have thought about it I see that it is better to burn for a short time then to burn forever,” replied Gloria in a quiet and sober tone.

“If you are ready to obey whatever Jesus commands and suffer whatever may come as a result,” said Ancilla, “then the next step is to seal your commitment in baptism.”

“But I was baptized already as an infant.”

“When Jesus left his disciples he taught them to go and make disciples by baptizing them and teaching them to observe all of his commands. An infant can not be baptized any more than she can be taught to observe all of Jesus’s commands. Plus, all the examples of baptism that we see in the scriptures are of those who have chosen it for themselves. Peter says in his first letter that the baptism that now saves us, through the resurrection of Jesus, is the answer of a good conscience towards God. How can an infant give an answer of a good conscience towards God?”

Gloria had never heard anything like this before and she had not read enough scripture to know for herself what examples of baptism there were. All she had ever known was children being baptized shortly after they were born. “I wish I had had time to read more of the scriptures before I had to leave the castle,” said Gloria. “I have no reason to doubt you but I would like to study the scriptures for myself. It is so confusing when different people say opposite things and both say they are following the same scriptures. I feel like I know so little.”

One of the sisters went to the door and made sure it was tightly shut. Another lifted a bed mat in the corner and scooped some dirt out of the way until she uncovered a wooden box. She lifted the lid and brought out a tattered book. She carried it over to the group and laid it on the table. “We can show you,” she replied, “what the scriptures say.”

Gloria was as surprised as she was joyful to see a Bible there. “Can you read it?” she asked.

“Yes, we can all read it,” Ancilla replied.

“Where did you learn to read?” Gloria asked in surprise. She had never heard of any common people reading before.

“An older sister taught some of us and we, in turn, have taught others,” said Ancilla.

They all sat down together, lit a candle and the women took turns finding passages related to baptism. They read the passages together and discussed them for many hours. When they finally finished it was late in the night.

Gloria sat silently for a while considering what they had just read. She did not recall ever having heard or read any of the passages that they had just read, so there was a lot of new information to take in. She had to agree

that the normal pattern in what they read was for baptism to be connected to repentance and that there were no examples of people being baptized who had no idea of what was being done to them.

Finally Gloria said to the other women, “If what I had as an infant was not baptism and my past sins have not yet been washed away¹², then why should I not be baptized now?”

The other women agreed they did not see anything preventing her from being baptized. “I will go summon the others,” one of the women said. She quickly put on her shawl and left. After a while she returned with two older men.

The oldest of the two men introduced himself as Sapiens and the other as Curatus. He explained that the two of them were both elders in the local assembly of Christians. The two men sat down with Gloria and discussed her desire for baptism. After a while when they could see that Gloria was serious about her desire and understood the cost of such a decision, Sapiens asked her if she was ready to be baptized immediately. When she emphatically said that she was, the two men left and said they would meet her shortly at a suitable place.

A short time latter, Ancilla took Gloria and left. It was still dark and Ancilla seemed concerned not to attract attention. They walked quickly and quietly for a ways until they came to a forest. Ancilla, who seemed to know the way well, guided Gloria rapidly along a trail for several minutes and then, leaving the trail, took them through the trees for a short way until they arrived at the edge of a small river. There were already a small group of people gathered at the edge of the river. They were very quietly singing a song together, so quietly that Gloria could not hear them until she was almost next to them. She recognized Sapiens and the other elder already there. Shortly after they arrived the other women who lived with Gloria showed up in two separate groups. Everyone seemed to know each other there and they exchanged kisses of greeting when they saw each other.

Sapiens seemed to know who to expect there and shortly after another small group of people showed up, he gathered the crowd around and started speaking quietly to them all. He introduced Gloria and said that he and Curatus agreed with the assessment of the single sisters that Gloria should be baptized. The others, who seemed to Gloria to have already known about her, seemed happy and excited at the news.

Without much further talk, Sapiens and Curatus brought Gloria down into the river and baptized her there. When Gloria got out of the water, Ancilla greeted her with tears of gladness in her eyes. She wrapped Gloria in a blanket before the cold night air made her too cold. The others came in turn and welcomed Gloria as a new sister in their family. When this was done, they quietly sang a few songs together and then quickly left the river in small groups as they had come. Ancilla took Gloria to a house near the forest where one of the families in the assembly lived. There Gloria changed out of her wet clothes and into another pair provided for her. Ancilla was concerned that if Gloria returned to the house wet she would draw too much attention. After Gloria was warm and dry, they returned to the house Ancilla lived in.

Chapter 12

The following months were the most difficult and the most joyful that Gloria had ever experienced. She struggled at first with the change from always having more food available than she could eat to now often being hungry. None of the brothers and sisters had much in the way of possessions but what they had was shared freely among themselves. As well, they were quick to help needy people outside the assembly, even if it meant there was not enough for those inside. Because of this there was often not enough food to go around.

Gloria lived in the house with Ancilla and the other sisters. She discovered that this was all the single sisters in the assembly and that they intentionally lived together for fellowship and to reduce their expenses. Ancilla was the only one who had any regular income and this income that she made from being a servant at the castle was shared freely with the others. The other single sisters found odd jobs when they could but they spent more of their

¹²See Acts 22:16

time caring for the sick, visiting the needy, helping women in the assembly who had new babies or who otherwise had need of help.

The others in the assembly felt it would be too dangerous for Gloria to go out much or look for odd jobs because, if she was recognized, her life would be in danger. She spent much of her time visiting with and helping other women in the assembly. This was a blessing for Gloria as she had time every day to visit with sisters and many of them were able to teach her more about how to live as a Christian. One day, early on in her time there, Gloria was telling one of the married sisters the story of her life. When she got to the part of the story where she met the old woman in the market who had told her the dream she had had, the other sister said excitedly, "That was Vidua, one of our dear sisters. I remember her telling us about that dream and about meeting you. She went back to that market every day for a long time looking for you."

Gloria told the other sister about being taken that day from the market to the castle and also told her about seeing Vidua among a group of people being burned to death at the castle and how Vidua's smile had made such an impression on her. Gloria cried as she thought about the concern for her that Vidua had shown and how such a woman could be killed as though she was a criminal.

"Yes," said the sister that Gloria was visiting, "Vidua was an old widow who lived such a godly life that she attracted the attention of the state church authorities who became suspicious of her when they heard of her zeal for good works. Eventually they caught her with some others at a secret meeting. Vidua would have dreams from time to time which she shared with the assembly and it seems they always came true."

"I remember thinking of her dream at my wedding and wondering what she would think if she could see me there," said Gloria. "I do wonder now, though, what the point of the dream was. Why would God reveal that to her?"

"Perhaps the full meaning of the dream is not yet obvious," said the other sister thoughtfully.

Evenings for Gloria and the other sisters were spent either in secret meetings with others in the assembly or gathered together in their home reading and discussing the scriptures together or quietly singing songs together. There were challenges to living with so many people in a very small house but Gloria was happy to be surrounded by people who really cared for her. Her ladies in waiting in the castle had always been around to visit but Gloria had never felt care and concern from them as she did now from her new sisters. They had conflicts at times that they had to work out but through it all Gloria grew so close to the others that she could not imagine living without them.

Gloria wondered at times what would happen if Leviculus wanted her back. She knew it would be difficult to leave her new family but, unless Leviculus would want to follow Jesus, Gloria knew reconciliation with him would make living with her new family impossible. She wished she had the freedom that Ancilla and the others single sisters had to not have to think about such things. The sisters encouraged Gloria not to give up praying for Leviculus. They also encouraged her to remember that she was preparing herself to be the bride of Jesus and that even if she could not fulfill her obligations to be a good wife for Leviculus, she had a husband waiting that she could always serve. Gloria wished she had been aware of these things before agreeing to marry Leviculus. However, the more she thought about it, the more thankful she was that when Leviculus had no longer wanted her as a wife that he had sent her out rather than keeping her a prisoner in the castle. Gloria wondered what she should do about her marriage situation. She knew that if Leviculus wanted her to return to the castle that she would need to keep her marriage commitment to him as best she could. However, if she continued to keep her location secret, then Leviculus would have no chance of reconciling with her if he had a change of heart. On the other hand, if she revealed her location to him, she feared what he might do to her since he had banished her from the kingdom. She talked about this with the brothers and sisters in the assembly. They were not sure what to advise her and so they all committed the issue to prayer to seek God's help on the issue. Although her difficult marriage situation troubled her, at the present she had all her time available to serve Jesus, just as the single sisters did. She decided to take full advantage of that time while she had it.

At times one of the brothers or sisters in the assembly would hear about someone in the town with some great

need and the assembly would make efforts to help them. One day one of the sisters had heard at the market of an old widow who had become very ill and had no family to take care of her. While the sisters discussed the situation that evening the name of the widow was mentioned and Gloria realized, to her great surprise, that it was her mother. Feelings rose up in her that she did not realize had been there, feelings of bitterness and anger over her rejection by her mother. The sisters spent much time in prayer that evening both for Gloria to have victory over these feelings and for them all to have wisdom how best to help this widow. They finally decided together that it would be best for Gloria to go early the next morning and see what help she could be to her mother. Gloria spent much of that night awake in prayer, seeking to have nothing but love in her heart for her mother when she went to see her in the morning.

Early the next morning Gloria found her mother's house. She knocked at the door and a weak voice inside welcomed her to come in. Gloria found her mother on a mat in the corner of the room. She was surprised to see how old and frail she now looked, even though it had not been many years since she had last seen her. However, she was not nearly as surprised by this as her mother was to see Gloria.

The years since Gloria left had been hard years for her mother. The two older daughters had married and when it became harder to find work and food in the town, both of their husbands had moved their families far away to find a way to provide for them. Gloria's mother had not wanted to travel with them and so stayed where she had lived since her marriage. The increasing loneliness and hardship of her life had not made her any more kind or loving a woman than she had been. Although she still attended mass at the local church, she grew bitter towards God for giving her such a hard lot in life. When she fell ill, there was no one around willing to care for her and she had already spent several days in bed with little to eat or drink when Gloria got there. Gloria could tell that her mother had a very high fever and wondered if she would survive this illness.

Gloria quickly got more water from the closest well and gave her mother some food to eat that she had brought. Her mother was grateful for the kindness that Gloria showed her but it did not seem to break her hard heart. Gloria spoke with her mother that day about some of the things she had learned from the scriptures but it was obvious to Gloria that her mother was not open to thinking about the things she needed to change. As Gloria continued to speak to her and warn her of the dangers she faced if she did not choose to follow Jesus, Gloria's mother became angry and started cursing Gloria. Gloria was thankful for the time she had had to prepare for this day as she felt now ready to return such cursing with blessing as Jesus had commanded¹³

Gloria decided she would stay there and care for her mother as long as she was needed. The other sisters offered to take turns caring for Gloria's mother but Gloria refused. She felt that this was something she needed to face in order to grow in her love for others. As well, Gloria thought that the fewer people who stayed there, the fewer people might get this same illness.

That night Gloria's mother's fever got worse and she became delirious. Gloria was up many times in the night trying to do what she could to help. In the morning her mother slept more peacefully and Gloria was able to get some rest. From that point on, the illness seemed to get worse and her mother was unable to get up from her bed even for short periods of time. Most of the time she slept and when she was awake she was often confused, especially at night. Gloria did her best and spent many hours in prayer for her mother but after a few more days her mother died.

Gloria and her sisters wept bitterly after her mother's death as it was obvious to them that she had not prepared herself for the judgment that was coming. They found a place to bury her and gave her a simple burial. Because Gloria was the only family member around, they were able to avoid involving the local priest in the burial.

¹³Luke 6:28

Chapter 13

Several days after her mother's burial, Gloria became sick with a fever and was too weak to get out of bed. Ancilla arranged for someone else to attend to her duties at the castle and stayed by Gloria's side to care for her. After several days Gloria's fever broke but she remained too weak to get out of bed.

Two days after Gloria's fever had broken, Ancilla was sitting next to her reading from the Bible when suddenly one of the other sisters ran into the room and said, "I just saw some of the king's soldiers coming this way. Perhaps someone has told them about us."

"Gloria is too sick to go so quickly and I will not leave her alone to face such a trial. You go quickly and warn the others," said Ancilla. As the other sister left the house, Ancilla said, "Whatever happens to me, do not forget that this affliction we have now is light and only for a moment and is creating for us a great glory."¹⁴

Shortly after this, the door opened and several soldiers walked in. They demanded to know where the others were. It was obvious to Gloria and Ancilla that they knew to target this house but did not know who lived there or how many people. When Gloria and Ancilla refused to tell them anything about the other sisters, the guards treated them roughly until it was obvious that they were not going to tell. At that point the soldiers hauled the two women out the door and put them on horses that were waiting outside. Two of the soldiers waited behind to catch any others who came and the rest escorted Gloria and Ancilla to the castle. When they reached the castle they were placed in the castle dungeon.

The following day the castle priest came to see them. "You have been put here for involvement in heresy. However, if you will simply swear allegiance to the king and to the Pope and publicly renounce your heresies, you will be released." At this point he turned to Gloria and sternly said to her directly, "Gloria, this is what happens to people who will not listen to instruction."

Gloria, who was still so weak that she could barely sit up, replied, "We want to listen to instruction from Jesus, our king, and whenever we hear his voice to obey it."

"The Church is the voice of Jesus," the priest snapped back.

"If so," said Ancilla, "then why does it fail to speak so many of the warnings and instructions that it has been given in the scriptures?"

The priest, who suddenly recognized Ancilla as one of the palace servants, said in reply, "It is best if servants learn to keep their place."

"My place right now it seems is to follow my master in the path of suffering and I am ready to faithfully keep my place there," she replied.

"We will see what you say after you have spent some time here," said the priest as he left their cell.

Gloria wondered if Leviculus would come to see her in the dungeon but he did not. The priest came often to try to convince them to change their minds. In spite of the harsh conditions of the dungeon, Gloria slowly recovered her strength. However, after several days in prison, Ancilla fell ill with the same sickness. In spite of her sickness, she was at times tortured by the palace guards in an attempt to get her to recant. Gloria however, for reasons they were never told, was not subjected to the same torture. This grieved Gloria more than if she had been tortured herself. During the times that Ancilla was being tortured, Gloria remained in prayer. Afterwards Gloria attended to her wounds as best she could and encouraged her to remain faithful to the end. Together they spent many hours in prayer for their captors and torturers. Although they both found their time in the prison very physically difficult, they felt God's presence more strongly than they ever had before and were able to remain joyful in spite of their circumstances.

¹⁴See 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Gloria did what she could to help Ancilla but the combination of illness and harsh treatment proved too much for Ancilla and after two weeks in the prison, she died. The prison guards burned her body and scattered the remains in the castle moat. Gloria was much more lonely now but she gave thanks that she had been able to witness Ancilla remain faithful under such hardship and she was joyful at the thought of Ancilla finally escaping this wretched world in a state of readiness for the next. This gave Gloria great encouragement to persevere.

For many days after Ancilla's death, the priest did not come and Gloria started to wonder if she had been forgotten. This time was the hardest Gloria had faced so far in the prison. The combination of loneliness with Ancilla gone and uncertainty about how long she was going to be left there in the prison, significantly challenged Gloria's certainty that she was making the right choices. She even wondered at times if the priest could be right that she should stop trying to understand scripture herself and just submit to the interpretations of the state church.

One of these times when she was greatly struggling with doubt, she recalled something she had read in the Good Message according to Matthew shortly before being brought to prison: when John had been arrested by Herod and was being kept in prison, he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was really the one they were waiting for. Gloria remembered thinking at the time that she had read that account that John must have been having some doubts after so long in prison. However, what really stood out in Gloria's mind was the final sentence of Jesus's reply to John:

Blessed is he who finds no occasion for stumbling in me.¹⁵

Gloria took great encouragement and warning from that sentence and it helped her to overcome her doubts about her situation. After all, it was her decision to follow Jesus in the path of suffering that got her into this situation in the first place. Why should she doubt now when she was just experiencing what other people had long experienced for their faith and what Jesus said his disciple would experience?

Gloria was surprised one day when the king, the bishop over that area and the castle priest arrived to speak with her. The king explained that he did not wish any harm to come to Gloria but that the charge of heresy was a serious one that he could not overlook. "If you will return to the Church," he said, "we will be merciful to you and release you. You can return to the castle and live as you did before as long as you cease your rebellious ways."

"What is my rebellion? To wear simple, humble and modest clothing?"

"Each person has a place in God's order. Those who are servants and common people should take their place as servants and common people but someone in the nobility needs to dress the part and not endanger the order that God has created."

"I am trying to take my place in the order God has created by obeying the instructions in scripture about how a Christian woman should adorn herself."

The bishop, who up to this point had been silent, sternly said, "The interpretation of scripture is given to the Church and to her chosen representatives."

"It is hard for me to trust the interpretation of people who speak so much about scripture and seem to never mention many of the serious warnings it contains. The more I read the scriptures for myself, the more I wonder if the priests even read most of what is in there."

The bishop, now visibly angry, slapped Gloria in the face and almost yelled at her, "You are an uneducated woman and you want to lecture us on the scriptures?"

At this point the king said, "I will give you another day to think about this." He then left with the bishop and priest.

Gloria was left by herself to rejoice that she had been found worthy to suffer, not for some crime or bad behaviour, but for the desire to obey God.

¹⁵Matthew 11:6

The following day the king came again and repeated his plea to Gloria. He warned her that she would face death if she would not change her mind. It was obvious to Gloria that he was uncomfortable with the situation but it seemed to her that he felt forced by his position to act as he was. Gloria felt pity for him. When it was clear to the king that Gloria was not going to change her mind, he went away sad.

The next morning Gloria awoke and found a small piece of paper that had obviously been slipped under the door. She picked it up, quite curious to see what it was and why it might be there. When she unfolded it she found the following written on it:

Dear Sister, Greetings in the name of Jesus, our master,

We thought of many things we could write to encourage you but we decided to choose some words of our master to do so:

- Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.
- Blessed are you who are poor, for God's Kingdom is yours.
- Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled.
- Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
- Blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it.
- Blessed are those servants whom the lord will find watching when he comes. Most certainly I tell you that he will dress himself, make them recline, and will come and serve them. They will be blessed if he comes in the second or third watch and finds them so.
- Blessed is he who finds no occasion for stumbling in me.
- Do not be afraid of the things which you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested; and you will have oppression for ten days. Be faithful to death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies. He who overcomes will not be harmed by the second death.

Your brothers and sisters

Gloria wondered how they had managed to get this letter to her and what risks someone must have had to take to do so. She was encouraged by their kindness and concern for her and wished she had some way to send a letter back to them. She was especially encouraged that they had included the quote from Jesus that had been so much help to her just a few days before. The following week whenever Gloria was feeling lonely or was tempted to be discouraged, she would pull out the letter and read it over again and find great comfort from it.

Soon after, the day came that had been planned for Gloria's execution. She was not told what day that would be, however, news of it had spread outside the castle. The king had tried to keep it secret who was being executed but rumour had gotten out that the princess was going to be executed for heresy. On the day of the execution a large crowd had gathered on the castle grounds. Several of the brothers and sisters had also come to the castle grounds in hopes that they could see Gloria one last time and give her a final sign of encouragement.

The king and the bishop were both present for the event. The king looked weary and older than he really was. He had not slept well for many nights and was dreading this event. The night before the execution the king had not slept at all but had laid awake all night with worry and feelings of guilt. It was only his strong sense of duty to the state church and what was expected of him as a king that made him proceed with the execution. Leviculus was not present for the execution. He was relieved to be free of a troublesome wife. After he had sent Gloria away, he had despaired of ever getting married again but, after her death, the state church would permit his remarriage. However, in spite of his relief at this new freedom, he could not bring himself to come to watch Gloria be executed.

Like the king, Gloria had also not slept the night before the execution. She had spent the night in prayer. Although she was physically exhausted from lack of sleep and the weeks of harsh conditions in the prison, she felt peace and even a sense of excitement that her sufferings might soon be over and that she would find a final rest. When she was led out from the prison she marched with a sense of confidence that surprised the guards who were escorting

her. Those who watched her being led to the place of the execution, did not see a weak and defeated woman but a strong and confident one, who looked like a soldier excitedly marching to battle.

The king, on the other hand, sat on his throne with his face downcast, looking like a king who had just been defeated in battle. He barely looked up while the bishop announced the charge of heresy against Gloria and described their unsuccessful attempts to return her to submission to the state church. He described this in quite a bit more detail than he usually did, knowing that many would have questions how a princess could be executed by the king. The bishop questioned Gloria if she was ready to reject her heresy and return to the state church.

“I am a disciple and servant of Jesus, and must remain faithful to him to obey whatever he tells me, either through the scriptures or otherwise,” Gloria confidently replied.

The bishop was taken aback by her boldness and decided not to ask any more questions for fear of the effect it would have on the large crowd that was gathered there.

While the bishop was talking, the king rarely looked up. However, when his time came to pronounce the sentence, he dutifully did his part and stood and announced the sentence. His voice was quiet and unsteady as he spoke and, when he sat down, many in the crowd wondered if he was well.

Gloria was led to the stake to be burned. As the soldiers tied her to the stake, the brothers and sisters who had gathered to encourage Gloria made gestures to her of encouragement. When Gloria noticed them, she made a sign indicating victory and, smiling, directed her gaze upward.

As the fire was lit, the onlookers were mystified why Gloria appeared so calm and happy. Some of them wondered, if Gloria was rebelling against God, what could give her such peace. However, others in the crowd said that Gloria had lost her mind and her appearance was just the result of her insanity.

As the smoke of the fire rose up around her, the crowd lost site of Gloria, still looking upward. However, the brothers and sisters who had come to encourage Gloria saw something entirely different. Through the smoke they saw a light so bright that they could barely look at it. In the centre of the light they saw Gloria dressed in a shining white dress and veil, like a bride at a wedding. They left rejoicing that God had allowed them to see this vision of Gloria as one last encouragement that Gloria had not run her race in vain.

The End of the Story, but the Beginning of Happily Ever After

I heard something like the voice of a great multitude, and like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of mighty thunders, saying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns! Let us rejoice and be exceedingly glad, and let us give the glory to him. For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his wife has made herself ready.” It was given to her that she would clothe herself in bright, pure, fine linen, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. He said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.’” He said to me, “These are true words of God.” — John’s Revelation 19:6-9

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been killed for the Word of God, and for the testimony of the Lamb which they had. They cried with a loud voice, saying, “How long, Master, the holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” A long white robe was given to each of them. They were told that they should rest yet for a while, until their fellow servants and their brothers, who would also be killed even as they were, should complete their course. — John’s Revelation 6:9-11

Omnis caro ut faenum et omnis **gloria** eius tamquam flos faeni exaruit faenum et flos decedit verbum autem Domini manet in aeternum. — 1 Peter 1:24-25a (in the Latin Vulgate translation)