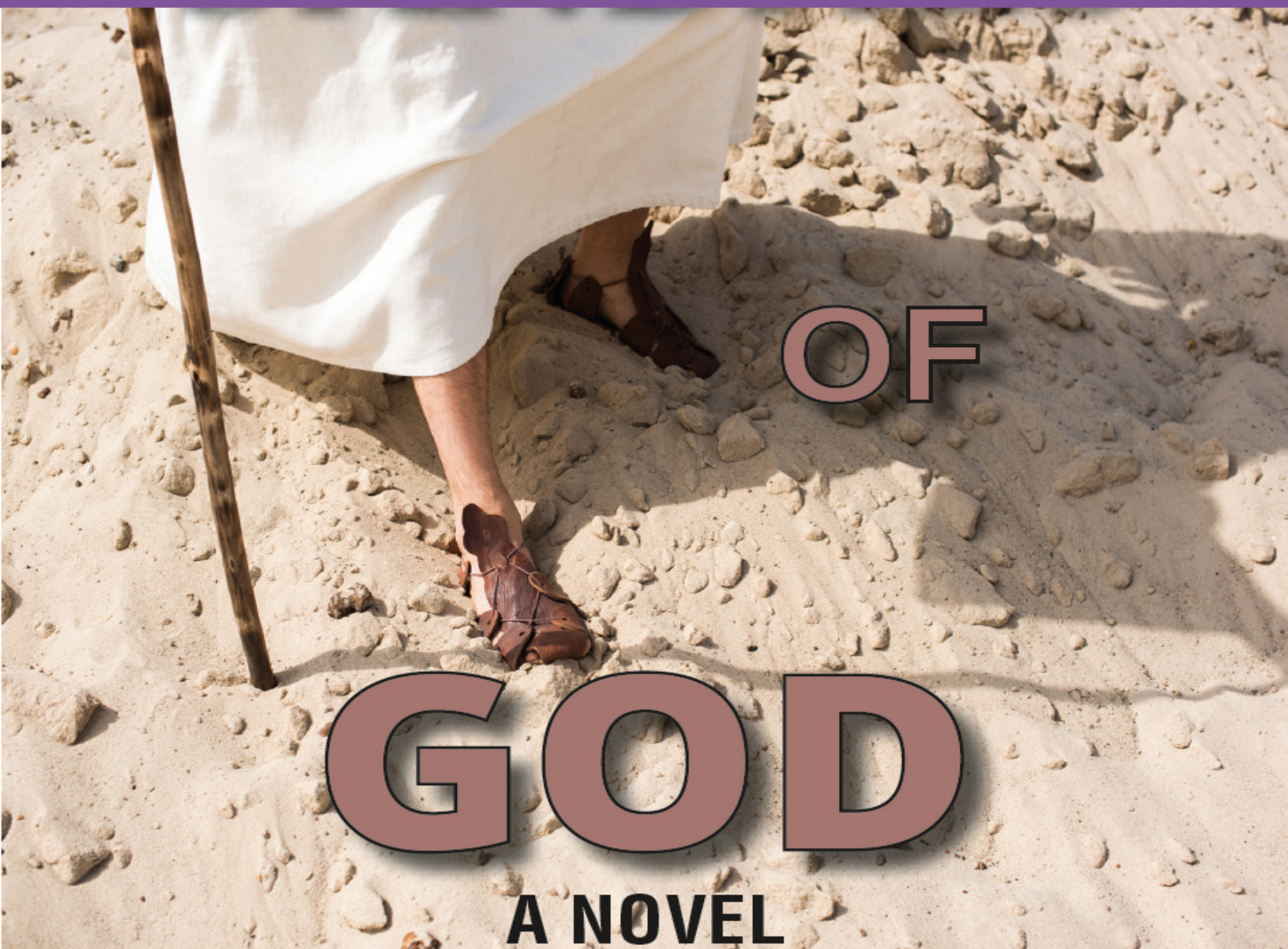


THE
SANDALS



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The Sandals of God is a fictional story woven around people in the Holy Bible - Jesus (Yeshua), Simon of Cyrene, Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. The Crucifixion of Christ, Simon carrying the cross of Christ to the crucifixion and the raising of Lazarus from the dead are biblical events. Some characters and events in this story were created by the author.

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CHAPTER 1

With the oppressive heat and glaring sun, Simon was so exhausted from his long trip across the desert he could hardly think straight. His throat was parched and his eyes were gritty. All he wanted to do was go to the well and pour a bucket of cold water over his head to wash away some of the grit and sand that was in his eyes, mouth, and hair. He did not want to imagine what he looked like. He had travel-stained clothes, bloodshot eyes, scraggly hair, and an overgrown beard. He was sure he looked well beyond his twenty-five years. After yet another sweltering day, he was relieved to be arriving at his destination, bringing in the caravan safely, and he felt a surge of elation. It had been a grueling trip across the desert. He gave a long sigh of relief knowing he was only about a half mile from his Uncle Jacob's property. Knowing that gave him a little burst of energy.

Thoughts of walking into the cool water of the Jordan River until it covered his head rushed into his mind. He would have to walk a couple of miles to get to it, but he could think of nothing more invigorating. Those thoughts were swiftly crowded out when he thought about how comforting it would be to lie down in his own dwelling to give his aching legs some relief, even if it would only be on a pallet on a hard floor. He let his mind wander as to how nice it would be to relax and think of nothing! No animals to take care of, no questions to answer, no robbers to watch for—just to let his mind go blank! It would be difficult to make a choice as to what would come first, sleep or the cool river, but there was no decision to be made at this time. He was still responsible for this caravan and had to get to his destination. And he knew that there would still be hours of work to do once he reached it.

He had to shake those thoughts off and keep his mind on finishing these final few steps and the tasks that awaited him. Once he got to his destination, there would be many chores to do before his day of work was over. He had to get as many done as he could while it was still daylight. He

was looking forward to a few leisurely days of rest. Surely his Uncle Jacob would not have any trips for him to make for a few days, even a short trip.

The caravan trip had taken almost three months, and they had traveled over nine hundred miles. Being in the company of camels and donkeys for that period of time, along with the responsibility of overseeing the caravan, had worn him down, mentally as well as physically. With the long hours of travel and taking care of the animals, there had been little time left for rest along the way. As his mind wandered over the events that had taken place, he was pleased with the way he had dealt with the problems that had arisen. He would have a lot to tell his uncle and hoped that the men on the caravan had gained respect for him as a caravan leader.

For the first time since Simon had come to live with his Uncle Jacob, he entrusted Simon with his camels, in addition to giving him the full responsibility of being the caravan leader on this long trip across the desert and back again. Simon had been somewhat nervous when they first started out, but now that it was over, he felt he had handled the responsibilities as well as anyone with more experience. He was sure his Uncle Jacob would be proud of him, as would his father. He had hoped to see his family on this trip, but his destination was not close enough to his family's home.

As he thought back over the trip, he marveled at the fact that they had made their destination and the return trip as quickly as they had. They encountered sandstorms that were blinding and had slowed them down for a couple of days. Simon felt sorry for the two donkeys during the sandstorms and tried to protect them as much as he could. He covered their eyes with a piece of cloth to keep the sand out. Donkeys do not fare as well in sandstorms as the camels. Camels have long eyelashes to protect their eyes and the ability to close their nostrils. With their capacity to store water and tolerate the desert heat and their ability to bite off and digest thorny plants, camels were the perfect animal for the many caravans that were constantly on the move. He decided he would never take a donkey on a long caravan trip again. If anyone knew his thoughts, he would probably be called softhearted, but he did not care.

If his calculations were correct, they had traveled about two to three miles per hour. When they started each morning, they were never sure how many hours would pass until their day ended. Some days were shorter ones, traveling only eight or nine hours, and others were as long as twelve to fifteen hours when they had to make up for lost time. Those long days were grueling.

Toward the end of the trip, Simon discovered that one of the donkeys was pregnant, so he took special care of her during the rest of the trip. During the last sandstorm, after the tents were put up for the night, he led the pregnant female into his tent for the night. They became such good friends, he named her Josephine. Josephine seemed to sense that Simon was her special friend and caretaker. After spending the night in the tent, if she was not tied up, she followed Simon everywhere. He had taken quite a lot of ribbing from the other men on the caravan about taking Josephine into his tent. Simon did not pay much attention to them. He had a soft spot in his heart for all animals, particularly one that was hurt. He knew that both of the donkeys had suffered on this long trip, and he was particularly protective of Josephine since she was pregnant. He did not want Uncle Jacob to think that Josephine would be a burden when they arrived back at his uncle's property, which was a little bit south of Jericho. Simon was sure that if he took responsibility for Josephine, his uncle would let her stay with him at his dwelling rather than in the compound with the other animals. At least, that was what he was hoping for.

Not only did Simon have to deal with the sandstorms on the trip, but also he had learned it was necessary to be on the lookout for robbers. There were dishonest individuals who did not make their living the honorable way but rather by stealing from caravans. As the leader of the caravan, he was responsible for the safety of the merchandise, the men, and the animals.

Simon was not particularly happy when he first learned that they would have Roman soldiers accompanying the caravan. He had been on a couple of other caravans, but this was the first time he had seen Roman soldiers accompanying a caravan. The thought ran through his mind that it was just his luck that on his first caravan as the leader, he had to put up with

Roman soldiers! The soldiers did not act like they were particularly happy about their assignment, which only added to Simon's apprehension about having them as part of the caravan.

These soldiers had been sent on the caravan to protect merchandise being brought back for Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Judea. On the positive side, Simon thought that no robbers would dare approach the caravan once a Roman soldier was spotted, but that was not the case. Once they were attacked, Simon was thankful that the soldiers were with the caravan. There was quite a clash with the robbers, but the soldiers and caravan were able to drive them away. Simon, who had no armor as the soldiers did, fought as courageously as they did. Before this skirmish with the robbers, Simon had little interaction with the soldiers other than what was necessary. During what little free time they had, the soldiers kept to themselves and acted aloof. Once the soldiers saw that Simon fought alongside of them and was not a coward, their attitude changed dramatically.

At least when they returned back to Uncle Jacob's property, Simon was sure that the Roman soldiers would be responsible for delivering the governor's merchandise into Jerusalem. Simon was hoping they would help unload the merchandise being delivered to Pontius Pilate and not just sit and watch while he unloaded it. If he had to, though, he would unload it, but he certainly did not want the job of delivering it. He had plenty of other merchandise to unload and would be responsible for delivering all of it to the various merchants that his uncle did business with.

The "caravan life" was now a part of Simon's life that would never change. His father and his Uncle Jacob had learned the trade from their father, as did their father from his father. That was the tradition in their society. As the cities throughout the region grew, the transportation of goods became even more important. Simon had started at an early age working with his father in Cyrene. He had grown taller than his father and his brother. With all of the hard work he had done growing up, he had developed a muscular physique and had large, strong hands. Loading and strapping crates of merchandise onto the side of a camel required a lot of strength.

When Simon was cleaned up, he was quite a handsome man, with his curly black hair and piercing, dark brown eyes. With his stature and good looks, he was quite an imposing figure. Simon had not yet married, although it was most certain that many young ladies liked his attention. He never seemed to take notice of any one of them in particular—he just liked them all. Most of his friends in his hometown had married at an early age and some even had children. Simon had never given marriage much thought. He was happy that at this time in his life he did not have the responsibility of a wife or children. When he had free evenings, he quite often met up with some of the other single young men in the area, and they went into the cities. Many times he did not get home until the early hours of the morning after a night of drinking and carousing. Simon's father had never approved of his behavior, and he knew that his Uncle Jacob did not approve either, but he never said anything to Simon. No matter how bad his head hurt or his stomach rumbled the next day, Simon always carried his work load.

Simon had not seen his family for quite some time. He missed his mother's gentle smile and the time he spent with his brother. None of the fellows he met in the area could take the place of his brother. Sometimes he was distracted and saddened by the memories of his life with his family in Cyrene, but he tried not to dwell on them. It served no purpose, as he had to make a new life for himself working for his Uncle Jacob.

Simon had moved from Cyrene, a city about nine hundred miles away, to the outskirts of Jericho, which was a few miles outside of Jerusalem. Cyrene was the capital of the Roman district of Cyrenaica. There was still a large population of Greek-speaking Jewish people in the district. At one time there had been more, but over the years, many returned to their native Israel.

Simon's Uncle Jacob had moved a couple of miles southeast of the community of Jericho many years earlier, leaving all of his extended family in Cyrene. He had purchased a small plot of land and gradually added more land as his business grew and he needed space for animal pens and a very large warehouse. He was very close to the main road. Dwellings dotted the landscape so he did not feel the least bit isolated. He was not far

from Jerusalem either, where many of the merchants that he did business with were. When Jacob became ill and needed someone to help him with his caravan business, he turned to his brother in Cyrene for that help. Simon's father sent Simon, while Simon's brother, who was eighteen months older, stayed in Cyrene to work with their father. When Simon's father told him that he was being sent to another country to help his Uncle Jacob, Simon was infuriated. He did not want to leave his home country, his family, and the lifestyle he was living. He was furious at his father. Simon could not understand why his father did not send his brother rather than him, since he was the younger son. Simon stewed about the decision for days. After many conversations with his father, he realized he had no choice but to accept the decision his father had made. He remembered his sullen attitude the day he left. Looking back on it now, he felt a sense of shame at the way he had acted.

Simon knew that the despair he felt the first few weeks with his uncle was mostly his own fault. He went with a negative attitude expecting to be miserable, and during those first few weeks he was. He longed to go back to Cyrene and made little effort to adjust. Simon's uncle knew that the uprooting from his family and moving to another country had been difficult for Simon and gave him time to adjust to his new life. It did not take Simon long to realize that his uncle was a kind, generous man who was treating him like a son, not like a nephew that was coming just to help with the business.

Simon had adapted so well that Jericho was now home to him. Even though he called him Uncle Jacob, Simon realized that his uncle was beginning to be like a second father to him. Of course, he missed his parents and longed for the relationship he had with his brother, but he was making a life for himself. He came to love his Uncle Jacob and enjoyed working with him in his business.

One dark cloud that hung over his head was that he would not be able to go back to Cyrene for his brother's marriage. Weddings were such joyful celebrations, and they were a time to see all of their extended family members. Since he had only one sibling, it was even more disheartening

that he would not be there for his wedding. They were a close family, and it made him sad to think that he would miss this important family event.

CHAPTER 2

Jacob headed out of his dwelling and down the road as soon as a neighbor ran to tell him that the caravan was returning. Even though he was not as spry as he once was, he ran as fast as he could. Gasping for breath, he ran up to Simon and threw his arms around him, slapping him on his shoulders.

With his hands firmly holding Simon's shoulders, Uncle Jacob stepped back and said, "Welcome back, Simon. You have returned safely! And it looks like you are loaded with all of the merchandise. I have been watching for you the past couple of days. You are a good man, Simon, and I am very proud of you. I am anxious to hear about your trip."

"Thank you, Uncle Jacob. I was hoping you would be home when we returned, but you need to keep your distance. We are dirty and don't smell very good! It is good to see you, and I am very glad to be home. And yes, we have returned safely with all of the merchandise. It was a long and somewhat grueling trip with sandstorms and a bout with robbers, but we made it. We will have much to talk about. I am happy to see that your health is good. You ran like a young man!

"These animals are as tired as I am, so I want to get them unloaded and into their pens. Then we will have time to talk. I am anxious to tell you about the trip. I know these soldiers want to unload their merchandise also and be on their way. They still have a few miles to travel to get to Jerusalem. I am not sure if I will finish unloading and taking care of the animals before you retire for the day. If I do not, I will see you tomorrow when we will have plenty of time to talk."

Even though he was reluctant to wait until tomorrow to hear about the trip, Jacob did not press Simon to engage in any conversation. He nodded in agreement, giving Simon another pat on his back. Animals were very

important to the caravan business. Jacob was proud of Simon for being concerned about the animals and putting his responsibility of unloading the merchandise before his own comfort. Jacob remembered the many caravans he had been on and how grueling they were. He knew how it felt to be bringing a caravan back safely. Jacob had come to love his young nephew and had missed him while he was gone.

Jacob greeted the Roman soldiers. He spoke to the other men he had hired to accompany Simon on the caravan and sent them on their way. They were exhausted also and anxious to go to their homes. Most of them were young men from the surrounding area that Jacob hired when he needed extra workers for a caravan going a long distance. Jacob paid them well, so they were always willing to accompany one of Jacob's caravans and were loyal to him.

Jacob's health had improved greatly over the past year, but Simon knew that all of the unloading of the merchandise would fall on his shoulders. His uncle was not yet strong enough to help unload this much cargo. He thought about asking his uncle if a couple of the men could stay and help unload, but he knew they were anxious to leave. It was his responsibility.

The merchandise would have to be unloaded, sorted, and stored for the night and then delivered to various merchants throughout the area. The delivering would take place over the next few days. Right now Simon needed to help the Roman soldiers unload the governor's cargo and load it on the carts, which they would take into the city. Simon would pick up the carts in a few days. The soldiers knew which animals were loaded with the governor's merchandise and did not look too happy to have to take part in the unloading, but Simon knew they were anxious to be on their way. If they helped unload, they would be able to get on their way that much quicker. Even though the soldiers had become much friendlier, Simon was anxious for them to be gone. He was worn out mentally and physically, and the sooner he could get the merchandise unloaded and the animals taken care of, the happier he would be. He was looking forward to being by himself: no animals to care for, no men to look after—and no soldiers!

Simon looked at the string of camels standing sedately as though they knew they were back on home territory. He sensed they knew that as soon

as they were unloaded they would be back in their familiar pens. He would be glad to get them settled down so he could get away from their “aroma,” which was none too pleasant. He knew he probably smelled just as bad as they did! He wondered how Uncle Jacob could get so close to him.

Once the soldiers were gone and before the weariness totally enveloped him, Simon knew he could not sit down to rest or he might not get up again. He began unloading the cargo, one camel at a time, until all of the merchandise was on the ground. Simon continued working until there was hardly a bare spot to set another crate or basket. Next, the merchandise had to be hauled to and stacked in Uncle Jacob’s enormous storehouse, where it would be safe until it would be delivered. He tried to sort it for the various merchants as he stacked it. He could always sort things out a little better in a day or two.

Simon’s shoulders and back muscles ached from the lifting and bending, and perspiration beaded up on his face and arms. He could feel it trickling down his back. His fingers and hands were getting cramps from untying the ropes and grabbing the basket handles. He was hot, thirsty, and overwhelmingly tired, but there was no putting off what he had to do, so he kept at it.

Once all of the merchandise was in the storehouse, Simon decided to take a short break. He needed to rest his back and his twitching muscles. He looked at the cloudless, brilliant blue sky and guessed that it was nearing late afternoon. It would have been more comfortable if there were some clouds to block the sun, even if for just a few minutes. The sun was a few hours from setting, though, so there would be plenty of daylight left for him to get the animals into the retaining area. Many days he looked forward to the sun setting and darkness enveloping the landscape so it would be a little cooler. He always welcomed a reprieve from the glaring sun.

Simon strolled to the nearby well and pulled up a bucket of water, listening to the rope creak as the bucket rose to the top. It was a welcome sound, knowing that the water would be refreshingly cool. Maybe he would just pour it over his head to get cooled off.

He closed his eyes as he leaned against the rock wall, resting his weary body, and savored the taste of the cool water as it went down his throat. He did not want to doze off, so he opened his eyes and surveyed his Uncle Jacob's land. There was the large holding pen for the camels, which was divided into several separate sections. A smaller area had been set aside for the donkeys and another one for the goats. A very big structure used for storage took up a large portion of the land to the north of the animal pen. All of this was on one side of the lane, and his uncle's house was on the opposite side.

His uncle had left Cyrene many years ago, before Simon was born, and had done well financially after he had made his home southeast of Jericho. He had started a caravan business as soon as he was able to save enough money, and it grew to be one of the most successful ones in the area. The merchants knew that his uncle was trustworthy and that they could depend on him. Simon hoped to be as well respected some day as was his Uncle Jacob. He knew that his uncle depended a great deal on him now, and he did not want to do anything that would disappoint him or tarnish his reputation in any way.

After a few minutes of rest and enjoying the big, cool drink, Simon felt like he had the stamina to get back to work. He knew he could not rest long or his muscles would stiffen up and then he would really suffer. He sauntered over to the camels, took hold of the harness on the lead camel, and gave a little tug to get the animal to follow him. Once the first one moved, the others in line would follow docilely. It did not take a lot of effort to get them to move. They probably would have found their way into the pen by themselves, but Simon led them in. He was sure that Uncle Jacob would have scattered dates around on the ground for them. This would be a tasty treat after making the trip across the desert. Uncle Jacob never missed an opportunity to show kindness, even to animals.

The camels Simon had taken on this caravan were not the only ones that his Uncle Jacob owned. He had a large number of camels, donkeys, and goats, rotating the use of them. When Simon first came to work with his uncle, he was astounded at the number of animals his uncle owned and the scope of his business. It was not uncommon for his uncle to rent out some

