

# The Life of Jesus

Filmed  
in Israel

## FOUNDATIONS

12-Part Video Series and Study Guide



CENTER FOR  
HOLY LANDS STUDIES

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# The Life of Jesus

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# Before You Begin

Welcome to *Foundations: The Life of Jesus*. Through this twelve-session video and study guide series, we will dive into the New Testament time period to understand more about the world, life, and teachings of Jesus. We will study His birth, His family, His beliefs and teachings, as well as His journey to the Cross and Resurrection.

Jesus was born into and lived in a specific time and place. By unpacking the many aspects, we will uncover even further the life and teachings of Jesus. The impact it will have on your study will be tremendous. It will be life giving for your education, devotion, and faith.

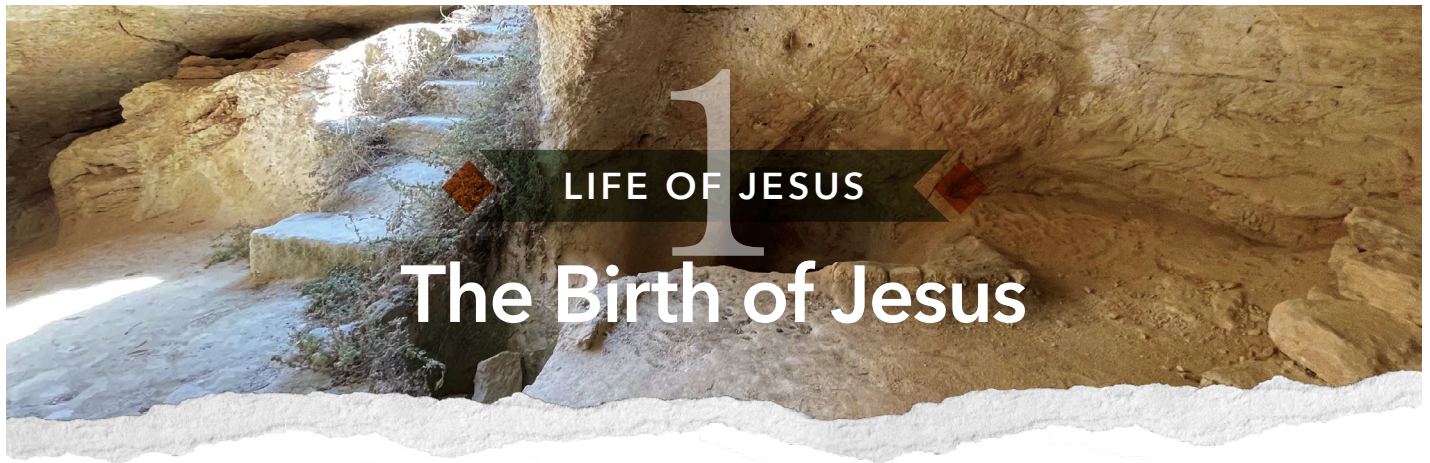
The Center for Holy Lands Studies wants all believers to understand the Bible and grow in their faith and love for God. Our hope is that through this series you will continue to discover a deeper understanding of what is said in the Bible, what the authors meant, and how to apply it to your life today. The Center for Holy Lands Studies specifically incorporates the following method to uncover the stories and lessons in the pages of the Bible:

**CULTURE** Discover, in original context, how the culture and language of the biblical story are interwoven in ancient society and daily life.

**HISTORY** Find out what was said and done, and what was meant by it, in the biblical and historical context.

**LAND** See geographic landscapes come to life, allowing the land to have its own narrative in Scripture and the biblical story. It is as much a character itself as any person in the text.

**SPIRIT** Explore the common beliefs of the biblical time period, and how the spiritual climate impacts our understanding of the story.



Not long after Jesus' ascension, the Book of Acts records Peter boldly preaching:  
*"There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."* (4:12)

**A**s believers, we wholeheartedly accept this claim that salvation comes through Jesus alone. But do we know why we believe it? Are we simply following Jesus blindly? Or are we growing in our walk with Him? When we seek to better understand Jesus' earthly life and ministry, we become more like Him and are able to participate in His ongoing work in this world.

More than two thousand years have passed since Jesus physically walked the earth. Daily life has changed in countless ways, and our understanding of the New Testament world has continued to develop and evolve over the centuries. Inevitably, our traditions and assumptions about Jesus have influenced the way we view people and events in Scripture. Only by unpacking the biblical narratives in their context can we begin to grasp the **culture, history, landscape, and spiritual climate** in which Jesus lived.

Let's begin our journey through the life of Jesus at its natural starting point: His birth. The Nativity is one of the most revered events in human history and is still celebrated by billions of people around the world. Recorded primarily in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus' arrival fulfilled thousands of years of messianic prophecy and set in motion God's plan for the redemption of humanity.

Jesus was born at a strategic time in human history. The Roman Empire had risen to power about twenty years earlier and its first emperor, Caesar Augustus (also known as Octavian), ushered in a new era of peace and prosperity throughout the

Mediterranean world. However, the empire encountered resistance in the small strip of land known at that time as the nation of Israel. The Jews in Israel had seen their hundred-year monarchy fall to Roman general Pompey in 63 BC, landing them under Roman occupation and birthing a movement of messianic idealism. The political and religious environment in Israel certainly made daily life difficult and dangerous, but it also set the stage for the Messiah's arrival—in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4).

The story of Jesus' birth as recorded in Luke's Gospel begins at the temple in Jerusalem. An elderly priest serving there named Zechariah was the first to hear about God's redemptive plan that was about to unfold. When Zechariah entered the temple sanctuary to burn incense during the daily sacrifices, he encountered Gabriel, an angel of the Lord. By saying the name *Zechariah* (Luke 1:13), Gabriel was doing more than addressing the priest by name; he was signifying the fulfillment of prophecy, since the name means "*the Lord remembers.*" As far back as Genesis 3:15, God had promised to send One who would redeem humanity. Isaiah later prophesied a forerunner for the Messiah, one who would "*clear a way through the wilderness for the LORD*" (Isaiah 40:3). Seven hundred years later, Gabriel declared that Zechariah and his elderly wife, Elizabeth, would conceive a son who would fulfill that role. This man, eventually known as John the Baptist, would prepare people's hearts for Jesus' ministry.

Six months after visiting Zechariah, the same angel visited a young girl from Nazareth named Mary, who was related to Elizabeth. Once again, Gabriel proclaimed the miraculous birth of a Son, although His birth would be even more miraculous than John's. Likely about thirteen years old, Mary was a virgin who was betrothed to a virtuous man named Joseph. When Mary revealed the news of her immaculate conception to Joseph, he "*did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly*" (Matthew 1:19). Joseph's desire to show compassion and mercy speaks volumes about his character. It is no wonder God chose Joseph as Jesus' earthly father—the one who would have been primarily responsible for instructing Jesus in Torah and righteous living.

Before Joseph could follow through with his plan to break his engagement with Mary, he was visited in a dream by the angel of the Lord, who verified Mary's account. The Child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew 1:22–23; see Isaiah 7:14). He was to be named Jesus, "*for he*



*will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). Joseph woke up from his dream and immediately obeyed the angel’s directions. He took Mary as his wife and cared for Jesus as his own son.

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

The shepherds may have been the first people to worship the newborn Messiah, but they were not the only ones. Matthew describes a second group seeking Jesus: the Magi. As priests in the Persian and Parthian empires east of Israel, the Magi were known to be dream interpreters and astronomers. They occupied one of the highest tiers of society in Eastern pagan cultures and commanded significant power and respect.

According to the Roman historian Suetonius, “a ruler of the world” was expected to come from Judea, and many believed his arrival would be signified through the cosmos. After actively searching the skies for signs and seeing an unusual “star,” an unspecified number of Magi prepared to travel to the region of Judea to seek out the newborn King. Their journey across the vast spans of desert in the region would have been long and difficult, likely forcing them to greatly extend their travel time by taking a northern route. It is estimated they traveled from Babylon, the seat of the Magi’s power, on a nine hundred-mile journey to Judea. Traveling roughly six miles a day—the typical range of a caravan—their journey would have taken at least 150 days.



When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, likely over a year after Jesus’ birth, the city was sent into a stir. These prominent men, along with their entourage of attendants and assistants, were an unusual sight in the city. Their eminence gave them direct access to the Roman client king of Judea, Herod the Great, who was an Idumean. They unabashedly asked him, “*Where is the newborn king of the Jews?*” (Matthew 2:2).

Herod asked the chief priests and their scribes for an answer to the visitors' question. Quoting the prophet Micah, the religious leaders directed them to Bethlehem (verse 6). Herod was notorious for coveting power to the point of paranoid delusion, and he instructed the Magi to return to him once they found the Child so he could also worship Him. But after they found Jesus in Bethlehem, presented their gifts, and worshipped Him, the Magi were warned by God in a dream not to return to Jerusalem. Instead, they returned home by another route, thereby protecting Jesus from Herod's fury.

When he learned the Magi had avoided returning to Jerusalem, Herod called for his soldiers to march on Bethlehem and slaughter all the boys aged two and under in and around the town. According to the Magi's report of the star's appearance, Herod estimated that Jesus would have been about two years old, and he wanted to make sure the Child did not survive. However, an angel of the Lord again appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructing him to take his family roughly four hundred miles away to Egypt, most likely to Alexandria, the largest Jewish center outside Israel. Their time in Egypt would have been brief, since Herod died a short time later.

When Joseph and his family returned to Israel—after yet another angelic dream—they relocated to Mary's hometown of Nazareth, since Herod's dangerously aggressive son Archelaus still reigned over Judea, the territory encompassing Bethlehem. Nazareth, on the other hand, was under the control of Herod's more passive son, Antipas. This meant the town was not only familiar, but also relatively safe.

In Nazareth, located about twenty-five miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus' character was formed under the guidance of His earthly parents and influenced by a culture that could not have been found in Jerusalem. The region of Galilee served as the home of some of Judaism's most pious leaders, also known as sages. Rather than being elected, appointed, or chosen by birth like the Jerusalem temple leaders, the sages were elevated by the common people. Their holy lifestyles, insightful teachings, and God-given miracles drew many followers who desired to know the Father and His will. Growing up in Nazareth, Jesus walked in their footsteps. He would have known the sages' teachings and witnessed their ministry until His own ministry began.



## DIG DEEPER

When we slow down and contemplate the many details surrounding Jesus' birth, we begin to see the miraculous story unfolding in new ways.

- **Has placing yourself inside the narrative—by way of the culture, history, landscape, and spiritual climate—led to any fresh insights about Jesus' birth?**

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**T**he New Testament clearly establishes Jesus’ nature as both fully God and fully Man. Jesus is the eternally preexisting “*Word*” who “*was God*” (John 1:1) and “*became human*” (verse 14). As a human, Jesus “*grew in wisdom and in stature*” (Luke 2:52), “*faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin*” (Hebrews 4:15).

The Gospels indicate that God chose Jesus’ earthly parents because of their character and devotion to Him. Mary and Joseph were not selected randomly; instead, they were ordained by God to raise their son—His son. The Father knew the role they would fulfill in Jesus’ development and the plan of salvation.

So who were Mary and Joseph? What set them apart? Why were they chosen to be the earthly parents of God’s own Son?

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

The people we spend time with as we’re growing up—especially our parents or guardians—imprint their identity on us. Mary and Joseph’s commitment to God must have created a home environment that nourished Jesus’ mind and spirit and encouraged complete devotion to His Heavenly Father. Their leadership and instruction laid the foundation for how He would teach and interact with people throughout His ministry.

Transmitting God’s Law to the next generation was an essential aspect of family life in first-century Jewish culture. No collection of oral tradition from the time of the New Testament is more famous than *Mishnah Avot*, or “The Sayings of the Fathers.” It begins by establishing that Moses received God’s Law and passed it on to Joshua, who passed it on to the next generation, who passed it on to the next

generation, and so on. Though a Jewish boy like Jesus would likely have attended a house of learning, or *Beit Midrash*, the one primarily responsible for teaching God's Law to Him would have been Joseph.

In addition to religious training, fathers were also responsible for passing on a trade. These two tracks of learning naturally dovetailed: As fathers and sons worked together at the family trade, they also recited and discussed God's Law. Although most English translations of the New Testament indicate that Joseph trained Jesus to be a "*carpenter*" (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3), the Greek word describes craftsmen who work with stone and metal in addition to wood.

Scripture tells us Joseph was a righteous person, so we can presume he carefully fulfilled his fatherly responsibilities to instruct Jesus. Later, the Gospels record Jesus passing instruction on to His followers, continuing the pattern of oral tradition even as He turned man-made religious tradition on its head. Like a Jewish father, Jesus guided His disciples through discussions of the Law, even using imagery from His own family trade to illustrate kingdom principles. When He compared following His teachings to building a house on solid rock in Matthew 7:24–27, Jesus knew exactly what He was talking about. It's likely that His teaching style—and even some of the content—was rooted in the faithful instruction of Joseph.

Joseph probably died before Jesus' ministry began, since he last appears in Scripture when Jesus was twelve years old (Luke 2:41–51). Yet the Gospels describe Mary's influence continuing throughout Jesus' ministry and beyond. In fact, Jesus performed His first recorded miracle at His mother's request.

In John 2:1–12, we read about a wedding in Cana where Mary, Jesus, and His disciples were among the invited guests. When the supply of wine ran out, Mary told Jesus about the problem, implying that He should intervene. Jesus explained that His time had "*not yet come*," but Mary told the servants, "*Do whatever he tells you*" (2:4–5). Respectfully, Jesus honored His mother's wishes and changed water into wine. This was "*the first time Jesus revealed his glory*." The result? "*His disciples believed in him*" (verse 11).

Mary's request for Jesus' miraculous help was one of the early steps along the path toward His ultimate purpose. Obeying His Father day by day eventually led Jesus to a violent, humiliating, undeserved death for our sake.



Consider all Mary witnessed. She had been there at the beginning of Jesus' earthly life—when Gabriel brought her the news of His upcoming birth. And she was there at what appeared to be the end of His earthly life—standing nearby as her firstborn son died on a Roman cross, sacrificing himself to save us (John 19:25). Some think she saw the empty tomb, and it's likely she saw Jesus himself after His resurrection.

The Book of Acts even records that Mary was part of the Early Church, praying and meeting together with Jesus' other followers (Acts 1:14). These were the ones who were baptized in the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost



and began spreading the good news of Jesus. The fact that God allowed Mary to play an integral role in all these events speaks to her character and the importance of her support in Jesus' life.

Mary and Joseph's impact was also felt through the ministry of Jesus' younger brother, James, who led the church in Jerusalem. Often referred to as "James the Just," he authored the Book of James and was an influential leader as the Church continued to grow. In fact, he was the spokesperson for the Jerusalem church at the Jerusalem Council, which established how Gentile converts were to be integrated into the Church (Acts 15:1–21). His reputation was such that even Josephus—a Jewish historian who did not believe Jesus was Messiah—recorded James' death sympathetically. When a Roman procurator died in office, the high priest Ananus took advantage of the temporary vacuum in leadership and had James stoned. According to Josephus, James's death was an unjustifiable perversion of justice, and it led to the high priest being deposed and replaced.

Like Jesus, His brother James's character would have been largely formed by his parents. Through their teaching and example, they were instrumental in preparing him to fulfill God's purpose—serving as a just and righteous leader in the Church.



## DIG DEEPER

Sometimes we limit our view of Jesus to the Man in His early thirties we see throughout most of the Gospels. But it's essential to remember that His parents, family, and mentors modeled righteousness and gave Him both spiritual and practical instruction. Because of their investment and His own relationship with His Heavenly Father, Jesus was willing and ready to follow God's plan for His life.

- **Who are the people God has used to mentor and instruct you? In what ways can you see the effects of their influence in your life?**

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Although none of us can understand the weight of responsibility Mary and Joseph carried as they raised God's Son, we each have people in our lives who are looking to us for guidance. When interacting with our children, grandchildren, or anyone else under our influence, we can follow Mary and Joseph's example. We can help prepare people for God's purpose by intentionally training others in godly living and practical skills. And we can offer encouragement along the way, helping them press on toward their God-given goals.

- **Who are the people God has trusted you to mentor and instruct?**
- **What intentional steps are you taking to raise up the next generation of believers?**

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Surprisingly, little is known about the details of Jesus' life on earth. Even His three years of public ministry are covered in only the most general terms in the Gospels. Consider all the events, conversations, and daily routines that could not be recorded because of time and space constraints. Only Matthew and Luke include any information about His early life at all.

Matthew records the Annunciation of Jesus, the visit of the Magi, and the family's escape to Egypt. Luke provides a different angle, describing events like the annunciation of John the Baptist, the angels' visit to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, and Jesus' presentation at the temple when He was eight days old.

After Jesus' birth and infancy, the biblical narrative skips ahead to the start of His public ministry when He was about thirty years old, documenting just one event that occurred in the intervening years: twelve-year-old Jesus discussing the Law with the teachers at the temple.

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

Although the language of the Gospels was Greek, their context was primarily Hebrew. Jesus lived as a Jew among Jewish people in a Jewish place. Even Luke, a Gentile who was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, consulted Jewish sources when writing his Gospel. That means the account of twelve-year-old Jesus visiting the temple in Luke 2:41–52 can only be fully understood when considered from a Jewish perspective.

Luke begins by telling us Jesus' parents made the pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem every year for Passover. That means Jesus would have been familiar with the temple and its daily routine. But the year He turned twelve was very different. According to Jewish custom, Jesus entered the city that year as a man.

Unlike modern Jewish teenagers, Jesus would not have celebrated a rite of passage called a bar mitzvah, which means “*son of the commandments.*” Instead, it was simply assumed that before a boy turned thirteen, he became a man. (Thirteen was considered the end of the age range during which boys became men, meaning the actual age of manhood was twelve. The Orthodox Jewish community still holds that view.)

Becoming a man meant more than a title change for Jewish males. It also meant they bore personal responsibility for keeping the God’s Law, or Torah. During this time, Jewish men began worshipping publicly on their own, no longer under their family’s covering. Although bar mitzvahs are not legally binding today, as they were two thousand years ago, they still carry reminders of the deep spiritual significance of becoming a man in Jewish culture. Individuals publicly read Hebrew Scripture on their own, demonstrating they are capable of interacting with the Word of God and understanding the Law.

On the journey home from Jerusalem, Jesus’ parents lost track of Him among their fellow travelers. Three days later, they found Him “*in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions*” (verse 46). This kind of conversation is known as *Sh’eilot*, a Hebrew term that means





*“questioning.”* Rather than describing a one-sided lecture, it carries the idea of inquiring by way of dialogue. It is an action that demands a response, allowing for the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and understanding about scriptural text, religious tradition, and God’s Law.

*Sh’eilot* facilitates a higher level of understanding as students and teachers work through the Law together. It also allows them to explore interpretation options before arriving at the best possible conclusions. This is the technique Jesus was using with the temple teachers when He was only twelve years old. Rather than correcting the religious authorities, as is customarily thought, Jesus was engaging in a form of learning that was common in that time and place.

The teachers were amazed again and again by Jesus’ perceptive questions and answers. In the rest of his Gospel, Luke typically uses this same Greek word for “being amazed” to describe people’s reaction to a miracle. In other words, the

religious experts could tell that this Student was different from all the others. He was *“filled with wisdom, and God’s favor was on him”* (verse 40).

Although Jesus’ parents had been worried when they could not find Him, there is no indication in Scripture that Jesus had done anything wrong. After all, Mary and Joseph had raised their Son to be ready for moments like this. Jesus’ response to His parents’ concern showed profound maturity and understanding of His purpose: *“Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?”* (verse 49). With these words, Jesus established His claim that God



was His Father. It was an assertion that would later be used against Him (John 5:18), and it displayed Jesus' total awareness—even at the age of twelve—that His life was devoted to the will of the One who sent Him.

Though we might classify the events of Luke 2:41–52 as part of Jesus' "childhood," the account more accurately marks the beginning of Jesus' manhood. From this point on, Jesus spoke for himself and asserted His identity with authority. Jesus' adult decision-making was appropriate considering His age and context. Most biblical scholars would agree that Mary herself was probably not much older than twelve when she gave birth to Jesus. It may seem unusual to us that twelve-year-olds could legally marry, lead Torah readings in the synagogue, or be taken to court and tried as adults. But think how dramatically life has changed just in the last 150 years. Now back up even farther and try to imagine the shifts that have happened over two thousand years. Too much has changed for us to truly align with first-century norms.

Luke wraps up the account with, "*They didn't understand what he meant*" (verse 50). Mary and Joseph probably were not as confused as they may appear. After all, Gabriel had told them both about Jesus' nature and purpose. They knew better than anyone who His true Father was. They had consecrated Him at the temple when He was eight days old and received prophecies from Simeon and Anna that further explained how Jesus' life would unfold and what their role would be (Luke 2:21–38). Luke's statement that they didn't understand does not necessarily mean they were confused by Jesus' words; it more likely means they could not yet grasp His full meaning.

In fact, how could Luke have even known "*they didn't understand*" unless Mary herself told him? She likely described the entire event when he was researching and writing his Gospel (see Luke 1:1–4). Looking back on her Son's life, death, burial, and resurrection, she could recognize new shades of meaning in His words. His mission had always been the same: "*I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me*" (John 6:38).



## DIG DEEPER

Mary and Joseph’s reaction to Jesus’ disappearance was not surprising. One generation often cannot comprehend the next generation’s potential when they wholeheartedly follow God’s call. Like Mary and Joseph, we may dedicate our children (whether biological or spiritual) to God’s will and God’s call without fully releasing them to follow Him.

- **Who in your sphere of influence may be ready to leave your covering and protection to pursue God’s call?**
- **What steps can you take to conquer your fear, overcome your worry, or relinquish your control so you can release them to follow where He leads?**

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The Holy Spirit can use any man, woman, or child who will listen and submit to Him. This truth alone defies any perceived limits as to what God can do through His people. Every generation of believers is responsible for empowering and encouraging the next generation to do even greater things for God as they pursue Him.

- **What specific steps can you take to encourage and empower the next generation to answer the call of God?**
- **How will you implement these ideas in the next few days and weeks?**

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# The Baptism of Jesus

**T**o understand Jesus' life in context, we must take a closer look at the people who surrounded Him. God used these individuals to shape the world in which His Son lived. God does not need people to bring about His will; however, He blesses us with the opportunity to participate in His plans. Some aspects of a person's role in the Kingdom may be fulfilled quickly while others prove to be lifelong tasks. John the Baptist's mission—preparing the way for the Messiah—certainly consumed his life, and eventually brought about its end.

Jesus said, *“I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist”* (Matthew 11:11). What was it about John's ministry that caused Jesus to make such a powerful statement about him?

## [WATCH THE VIDEO]

John the Baptist was one of the most influential men in the Bible. In fact, the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus wrote more on the character of John than anyone else connected to Jesus' ministry. John's purpose was linked directly to the coming of the Messiah, and he took his calling seriously. Not only did John prepare the way for the Messiah, but he also set an example for Jesus' disciples to follow. After the Resurrection, these disciples fully dedicated themselves to spreading the news of the Messiah, as John the Baptist had. According to church tradition, ten of the twelve disciples joined him in dying a martyr's death.

John must have known the beginning of the Messiah's ministry would signal the end of his own, and he prepared his followers to transfer their allegiance when the time came. However, his work was not over the moment Jesus' public ministry began. The Gospel writers tell us John continued to call people to repentance and righteous living.





Eventually, his zeal for righteousness led to intense conflict with the government authorities. Matthew’s Gospel describes how John’s bold message was received by the Roman-appointed puppet ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great (11:1–19; 14:1–12). After publicly rebuking Antipas’s sinful lifestyle—including his adulterous affair with his brother’s wife—John was imprisoned.

From his cell, John *“heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, ‘Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?’ ”* (Matthew 11:2–3). Why would John ask this question? After all, he was the one who had baptized Jesus (3:13–15). He had seen the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove (verse 16). He had heard God say, *“This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy”* (verse 17). He had declared about Jesus, *“Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29). It can be easy to forget that biblical heroes like John had moments of human weakness or even doubt—just like we do.

John did not have our vantage point. He did not fully understand the significance of his role. He understood Jesus was God’s Son, but not how His messiahship would play out. Most first-century Jews believed the Messiah would be an aggressive military leader who would revolt against the Roman authorities, freeing



Israel from their occupation. From the dungeon, John appears to be saying, “Jesus, I know You’re the Messiah, but can You hurry up and overthrow Rome? I’m running out of time.”

After hearing John’s question, Jesus told John’s followers to take a report back to the dungeon confirming all the miracles Jesus was performing and the message He was preaching (Matthew 11:4–5). When John heard their report, he would have his answer. As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus talked to the crowds about John, illustrating the nature of His own ministry and John’s part in preparing the way for Him:

*“I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist. Yet even the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is! And from the time John the Baptist began preaching until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people are attacking it. For before John came, all the prophets and the law of Moses looked forward to this present time. And if you are willing to accept what I say, he is Elijah, the one the prophets said would come. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!”* (verses 11–15)

Perhaps John did not fully understand how Jesus would fulfill His role as Messiah, but his lack of awareness did not diminish his impact. His question did not reflect a lack of character. Instead, his question shows the complexity of prophecy being fulfilled. As Isaiah wrote, “*‘my thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,’ says the LORD. ‘And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine’*” (55:8). No one around Jesus had the capacity to understand the events that were about to unfold—including John the Baptist.

Eventually, Herod’s family conspired to have John beheaded in prison (Matthew 14:1–12). But John’s influence lasted beyond his death as his disciples continued preaching repentance and pointing people toward the Messiah. Twenty years after John’s death, his disciples were still carrying on his work as far away as Ephesus (Acts 19:1–4). John’s disciples in that region eagerly received the gospel message and the baptism of the Holy Spirit when Paul preached to them, leading to the establishment of one of the most influential churches of the first century.

## DIG DEEPER

After commending John the Baptist, Jesus pointed to the ongoing work of the Kingdom, saying, *“Even the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is!”* (Matthew 11:11). As we follow Jesus, our main goal is to advance the Kingdom, not make a name for ourself.

- **What steps can you take to avoid comparison or pride as you fulfill your call?**
- **How can you keep your focus on the Kingdom instead?**

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Your call may be as visible as that of Moses who marched into Pharaoh's court to demand the children of Israel be freed. Or it may be as humble as that of Ruth who quietly obeyed God and honored her family, thereby bringing forth a line of kings who would rule God's people. Thankfully, God determines each person's call, and He reveals it as we live in an obedient and loving relationship with Him.

- **Have you established a pattern of obedience and love for God?**
- **How has the nature of your relationship with God impacted your decisions?**
- **In what direction is God leading you right now?**

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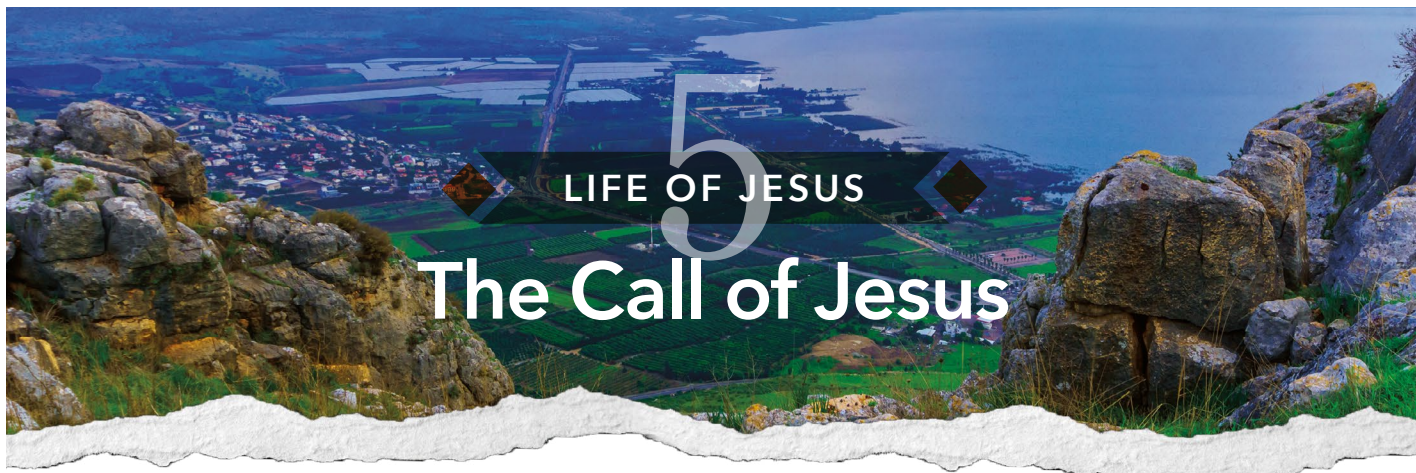
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People often wonder whether Jesus was born with the full capabilities of God or grew and learned as we humans do. The Scripture makes it clear that although Jesus was fully God—a member of the Trinity along with the Father and the Holy Spirit—He was also fully human. As such, He faced the same kinds of temptations that still tempt us today (Hebrews 4:15). By living a sinless life, Jesus showed us that sin can be overcome.

Because Jesus was human, He had to mature and grow in wisdom and knowledge until He was prepared to enact the Father’s will. Between Jesus’ conversation with the temple teachers at age twelve and the beginning of His public ministry at age thirty, the Father was forming His Son into the person we see in the Gospels.

To best understand how Jesus developed into the Savior we know from Scripture, we should take a look at His transition from the quiet, humble life of an unknown carpenter in Nazareth to the radical Teacher whose words would turn the world upside down. By obeying the Father one step at a time, Jesus would accomplish what no one else could. He would bear the sin of all humanity, making a way for our communion with God to be restored.

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

Although the Gospel writers are silent about Jesus’ teens and twenties, we can connect the dots well enough to make an educated guess about how He spent those years. Knowing that Jesus worked alongside Joseph, for example, tells us Joseph likely trained Him in two vitally important areas: in Torah (God’s Law) and in carpentry, the family trade. Jesus demonstrated expertise in both areas as He stepped into His God-given mission at the age of thirty; in fact, His teachings include numerous statements that combine the two.



- *“Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock.”* (Matthew 7:24)
- *“‘The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.’ ”* (Matthew 21:42)
- *“Who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it?”* (Luke 14:28)

As far as evidence of His training in the Law, Jesus’ words and actions fulfilled hundreds of Messianic prophecies, demonstrating His thorough knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. In Jesus’ own words, *“I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose”* (Matthew 5:17). While He showed a supernatural understanding of the Law during His public ministry, it was during His childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood that He would have pursued scriptural knowledge and developed wisdom through study and time spent with the Father.

The truth is, Jesus’ call predates His earthly life and can be traced back to the very beginning of the biblical narrative. When Adam and Eve sinned, humans could no longer be in God’s presence. He is perfectly holy, and we are not. But God’s plan was always to restore fellowship with His image-bearers. So He promised to



send One who would crush the serpent and conquer sin (Genesis 3:15). From that moment on, God would work through the course of human history to prepare the world for the Messiah, sending Jesus at the perfect time to fulfill His plan (Galatians 4:4).

God prepared the world for Jesus just as He prepared Jesus to save the world. Jesus' call to rescue us from sin echoes through the lives of kings, pagans, and prophets and through victories, defeats, and the rise and fall of empires. The call of Jesus did not start in a Bethlehem stable or at a Jordan baptism. It began before time began. In fact, the Book of Revelation describes Jesus as *“the Lamb who was slaughtered before the world was made”* (13:8).

The Fall was no surprise to God, and the call of Jesus was no afterthought. In the opening verses of his Gospel, John describes the call of Jesus as existing from the beginning, referring to Him as *“the Word.”*

*In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.* (John 1:1–5)

God's call for Jesus to redeem and save humanity is one of the most amazing and beautiful miracles we could imagine. How unfathomable that the omniscient Creator established perfect communion with humans in the Garden, knowing their sin would bring separation and require a sacrifice! How amazing that He called His one and only Son to become that sacrifice and orchestrated human history to prepare the way for Him! By looking again at the call of Jesus, we can understand anew the love of the Father.

## DIG DEEPER

God told the prophet Jeremiah, *“I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations”* (Jeremiah 1:5). In His omniscience, God knew the Israelites would divide into two kingdoms, their sin would drive them from the Promised Land, and they would once again need to hear a message of repentance. Therefore, He intentionally created Jeremiah and called him to fulfill a purpose far greater than he could imagine. Just as God’s plan was conceived before Jeremiah was, so God has long-standing plans for each of us. Your existence is not a mistake or a coincidence.

- **What unique gifts or passions has God created you to carry?**
- **How might He be calling you to use those gifts to fulfill His will?**

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# The Teachings of Jesus

**T**hroughout His ministry, Jesus' followers addressed Him using various titles to signify their relationship to Him. The most common title for Jesus in the New Testament is "Lord" or "Master" which appears over seven hundred times. However, when we narrow our focus to the Gospels, we notice another equally important title being used: "Rabbi" or "Great Teacher" (Mark 10:17; John 3:2).

What made Jesus' followers identify Him this way? Were His teachings really so radically different from what people were used to hearing? Jesus has often been described as countercultural, but the truth is, He engaged in first-century Jewish culture, using familiar imagery and relatable stories. So what made His teachings stand out? We can only understand this by taking a closer look at the cultural context.

## [WATCH THE VIDEO]

A king hired two workers to work his land, the first worked all day and received one denarius (a day's wage). The second worked only one hour, yet he also received a denarius. Which did the King love more? . . . Moses worked for the Lord for 120 years, but Samuel served the Lord for only 52 years [the entirety of both of their lives, according to tradition] nevertheless both are equal in the eyes of the Omniscient. (Semahot of Rabbi Hiyya 3.2)

Although the quote above may seem familiar to readers of the Gospels, it comes from a parable that was common in Israel a generation or two before Jesus' birth. Jesus tells a similar parable in Matthew 20:1–15, adding a conversation between the landowner and the workers who were upset that everyone was paid the same



amount, regardless of how long they had worked. The landowner's words and actions tell us a great deal about Jesus' view of His role, and the parable's lesson becomes that much more meaningful knowing it came from the Messiah himself.

Farther along in Matthew 20, Jesus privately told His disciples about His impending death on the Cross, as He had done multiple times before. The knowledge of what lay before Him makes Jesus' earlier modification to the well-known parable even more significant. Rather than focusing on the Old Testament heroes Moses and Samuel, Jesus' version of the parable personalizes God's call for His listeners. Jesus speaks with authority as God's Son, saying, "Whether you answer the call to follow Me early in life or at the very end, you will receive the reward laid up for those who are Mine."

Jesus lived out this principle only days later when He was dying on the Cross. Hours before his death, the criminal being crucified next to Jesus admitted his sin. "*Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.' And Jesus replied, 'I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise' "*" (Luke 23:42–43). The thief received the same wages for believing in Jesus as any of the disciples who had been following Him faithfully since His ministry began.

Perhaps it is disconcerting to hear that some of Jesus' teachings were adaptations of preexisting parables. However, this humanizes Jesus, reminding us that He was a product of His environment, His parents' influence, and His education in Galilee synagogues and the temple in Jerusalem. His teachings cannot be separated from their source in the world of ancient Judaism, which prioritized understanding God's Word, teaching God's Word, and applying God's Word to daily life.

Jesus was a Great Teacher not just because of what He taught, but because He lived out His teaching. As people saw Jesus' compassion and authority in action, they could tell He was different from other teachers, and many began to follow Him. Jesus emphasized the importance of religious leaders' actions validating their words when He criticized the Pharisees, saying, *“Practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach”* (Matthew 23:3).

Jesus clarifies that the Pharisees' teachings were correct and His listeners should *“practice and obey”* them. However, His followers should not act like the Pharisees acted. Their lives did not line up with their teachings, parables, and sermons. Even though Jesus was using the example of the Pharisees, His words reflect a universal human problem. We all struggle at times to align our actions with our words. It is possible to preach the gospel with power and eloquence while living in a way that keeps people from listening to us or following Jesus. Our kingdom influence is much greater when, like Jesus, our lifestyle mirrors what we are teaching from God's Word.

In Acts 5:33–49, we see the effects of such integrity when Gamaliel, the leader of the Pharisaic class, came to the defense of the Church in the presence of the Sanhedrin. His words have traditionally been viewed as more than a passive suggestion to wait and see what happened, and evidence suggests the Pharisees were more sympathetic to the Christians than some of the other Jewish leaders. Gamaliel saw something different in the followers of Jesus and persuaded the leaders in the Sanhedrin to let the disciples go. To oppose them would be to oppose God himself.



## DIG DEEPER

The integrity between Jesus' teachings and His lifestyle is what gave Him such unique authority as a rabbi. Later in the New Testament, Jesus' half-brother James wrote, "*Faith is dead without good works*" (2:26). The world won't even be able to identify Jesus' followers if our actions don't line up with our message.

- **To what degree does your lifestyle line up with your claim to be a follower of Jesus?**

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Read Matthew 7:24–29 and compare it with the following rabbinic parable from Hebrew oral tradition:

One whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are numerous but whose roots are few, so that when the wind comes, it uproots it and overturns it, as it is said, "He shall be like a bush in the desert, which does not sense the coming of good. It is set in the scorched places of the wilderness, in a barren land without inhabitant" (Jeremiah 17:6). But one whose deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are few but roots are many, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow



upon it, they cannot move it out of its place, as it is said, “He shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream. It does not sense the coming of heat, its leaves are ever fresh. It has no care in a year of drought; it does not cease to yield fruit” (Jeremiah 17:8). (Avot 3:17)

- **What similarities and differences do you see between the two versions of the parable?**
- **How did Jesus adapt the parable to fit His context, experience, and intended outcome?**
- **What does this tell you about Jesus’ abilities as a teacher?**

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**T**he week leading up to Easter Sunday often fills believers with mixed emotions. It is easier than ever to find books, devotional series, and podcasts that break down the events of the week leading up to Jesus' death and Resurrection—also known as Holy Week. We are indescribably thankful for Jesus' sacrifice, and we rejoice that He triumphed over the grave. But we grieve as we march alongside Him to the Cross.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, which marks Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. But Scripture makes it clear that Palm Sunday was not the beginning of Jesus' journey to Calvary; it was merely the beginning of the end. Jesus' entire life was pointed toward the Cross—and had been since Genesis 3:15.

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

As His journey to Jerusalem ended, Jesus reached Bethphage and Bethany, two towns near the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem. This raises several questions.

- Jesus had walked more than eighty miles in the past several days. Why did He now wait for a donkey to ride when the city was within view?
- Was Jesus tired? If so, why? John's Gospel tells us He had arrived at Lazarus's house in Bethany the day before the Sabbath, apparently resting there from Friday to Sunday (12:1–11).
- We know from the Gospels that Jesus and His followers camped on the Mount of Olives during Passover. (Jewish pilgrims often did so during festivals when the city was overrun with visitors.) So if Jesus had been too tired to walk the remaining distance to the city, why didn't He ask the disciples to set up camp so He could rest before going into Jerusalem to worship at the temple the next day? After all, it was still a few days before Passover.

It must have seemed odd to the disciples when Jesus requested a donkey to ride into Jerusalem. In fact, John writes, *“His disciples didn’t understand at the time that this was a fulfillment of prophecy”* (12:16). However, they obediently did as Jesus commanded. They went into Bethphage (Matthew 21:1–2) to find a young donkey that had never been ridden and bring it to Him.

As the disciples carried out Jesus’ command, the donkey’s owners asked, *“Why are you untying that colt?”* (Luke 19:33). Jesus had prepared the disciples for this moment, commanding them to respond, *“The Lord needs it”* (verse 31). That was reason enough for the owners, and they let the disciples take the donkey to Jesus (verses 34–35).

The disciples placed their coats on the donkey’s back, and Jesus rode into Jerusalem, intending to worship at the Temple. He was fulfilling the messianic prophecy spoken by Zechariah roughly five hundred years earlier: *“Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey’s colt”* (Zechariah 9:9). The disciples did not yet understand the deeper meaning of Jesus’ actions. As John explains, *“After Jesus entered into his glory, they remembered what had happened and realized that these things had been written about him”* (John 12:16).

We often assume that the events of Palm Sunday happened inside Jerusalem. Yet the text provides a wider picture. The distance from Bethany to Jerusalem is 15 stadia or 1.7 miles (John 11:18). Luke’s Gospel tells us the crowds began celebrating Jesus’ arrival well outside the city, *“where the road started down the Mount of Olives”* (19:37). Jerusalem was already abuzz, knowing Jesus was coming to celebrate Passover there (John 12:12–13), and the people ran out of the city to meet Him.

The people in the crowd placed their garments and palm branches on the road, and began singing, praising God, and shouting messianic prophecies from the Psalms.

- **Prophecies from the Psalms**

- Please, LORD, please save us. Please, LORD, give us success. Bless the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. (118:25–26)



- Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens! Praise him from the skies! (148:1)
- **Quoted in the Gospels**
  - “Praise God for the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Praise God in highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:9)
  - “Praise God! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Blessings on the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David! Praise God in highest heaven!” (Mark 11:9–10)
  - “Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the LORD! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!” (Luke 19:38)
  - “Praise God! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Hail to the King of Israel!” (John 12:13)

The term *hosanna*, translated “Praise God,” is a Hebrew word of worship, also related to the verb “to save.” The crowd’s use of this word implies they had some level of understanding that Jesus was the Messiah. Their proclamation identifying Jesus as the “Son of David” speaks even more strongly. Although we might think the crowd’s use of the word *son* indicates a loose ancestral connection (as it does







elsewhere in the Bible), it's far more likely the people saw a direct connection between Jesus and the promises God had made regarding King Solomon centuries earlier.

God's promise of an eternal ancestral throne had been given to David by the prophet Nathan, but it was directly aimed at the king's son, Solomon. *"When you die and are buried with your ancestors, I will raise up one of your descendants, your own offspring, and I will make his kingdom strong. He is the one who will build a house—a temple—for my name. And I will secure his royal throne forever"* (2 Samuel 7:12–13). Addressing David, the Lord then said, *"Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever"* (verse 16). It was Solomon who went on to build the temple where God's people would gather to worship Him; David was denied that privilege due to the violent life he had led.

Years later, when Solomon became king of Israel, he rode to his coronation ceremony on his father's mule (1 Kings 1:33–40), foreshadowing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as King of kings more than nine hundred years later. When the crowds declared Jesus to be the "Son of David," they were connecting Him to David's biological son, Solomon. By recounting the promises God had fulfilled for their ancestors, the Jews were reminding themselves that God's promises would continue to be fulfilled. He would send Messiah to crush the power of sin and death and fix what had been broken in the Garden. He would send the Redeemer and eternal King. Hosanna!

## DIG DEEPER

When God established the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:1–16), David had other sons who were in line for the throne before Solomon. In fact, David had not yet had his adulterous affair with Solomon’s mother, Bathsheba. But in His omniscience, God knew the events that would unfold. He had chosen Solomon as the king whose lineage would eventually lead to Jesus through both of His earthly parents.

- **Besides David and Solomon, name some other surprisingly flawed characters in Jesus’ ancestry. How does God’s sovereignty at work in Jesus’ family line affect your view of His sovereignty at work in your own life?**
- **What are some ways God has used your mistakes to bring about His will?**

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**E**very action has consequences. Those reactions ripple through time and space, often having an impact that few people could have predicted. Although many moments in Jesus' earthly life affected the course of human history, His arrest was among the most pivotal.

Long before Holy Week, Jesus' words and actions had caused conflict with the Jewish religious leaders. After He healed a man with a deformed hand on the Sabbath, "*the Pharisees called a meeting to plot how to kill Jesus*" (Matthew 12:14). All through the Gospels, they accused Him of blaspheming, breaking the Sabbath, and associating with the wrong kinds of people. On the day after His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus' authoritative decision to clear the temple of money changers proved to be the final straw for the priests and religious teachers. The effects of their decision that day have rippled throughout history.

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

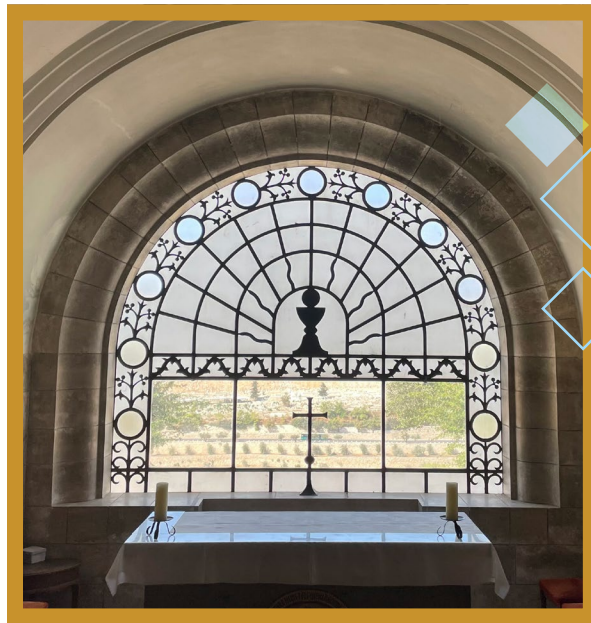
When reading the Gospels, it's possible to draw a straight line from Jesus' arrest to His death on the Cross. Jesus had control of His destiny, yet He submitted to His Father's will every step of the way (Matthew 26:52–54). When Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem on Sunday for what would be His final Passover, a crowd rejoiced to see Him coming. How did so much change in only a few days? The answer lies in the events that directly led to His arrest.

Jesus' primary purpose for entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was to worship at the temple. But He was outraged when He saw the temple filled with "*people buying and selling animals for sacrifice. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves*" (Matthew 21:12). Why were the money changers there? We might think it was because Jews who were visiting the city from all over the Mediterranean world needed access to the local currency.



However, this was not the case. A closer look at the biblical text in its context leads us to discover two practices by which the chief priests and Sadducees were exploiting worshippers and lining their own pockets.

The first exploitative practice concerned the required form of payment for the annual temple tax. From the beginning of unified worship at a single location in the Old Testament, each adult Jewish male was required to make an annual payment of a half-shekel to support the temple's operational costs (see Exodus 30:13). However, by the first century, the men controlling the priesthood viewed the temple tax as more than a means for God's provision. Instead, they increased their wealth by requiring the temple tax be paid with a specific coin, the Tyrian shekel (or shekel of Tyre). This coin was known in the ancient world to have the highest percentage of silver of any coin at that time, making it more valuable than any other silver shekel. This posed a problem for the average Jew.



Since the Tyrian shekel was minted outside Israel, it was not commonly found in the pockets of everyday people. As a result, they had to go to the temple to exchange their native currency for Tyrian shekels at an unfair rate. The money changers were robbing worshippers of their income, but the people had no choice but to make the exchange if they wanted to follow the Law and obey God. Just imagine if the IRS required all taxes to be paid in British pounds, and the only way to get British pounds was by traveling to Great Britain or using the IRS's exchange service—which charged a 25 percent fee. You would likely be outraged. However, this Tyrian shekel scheme was not a result of government fraud; it was being carried out by the people's so-called spiritual leaders. The priests were abusing their power to extort money, and no one outside the priesthood was exempt.





What made this system even more insulting was the Tyrian shekel's appearance. First-century Jews had been intent on making sure that their coins had no graven images, unlike the coins of the Romans and Greeks. Jewish coins were imprinted mainly with images of plants, geometric shapes, and tools of daily life like anchors—never with animals or human faces. Tyrian shekels, however, depicted the Roman eagle on one side and the face of the Phoenician god Melqart on the other. (Melqart was the patron deity of Tyre. He was related to the god Ba'al and identified by the Greeks to be a version of Hercules.) Even worse, the words on the coin proclaimed that Tyre was “the holy city,” a title used by the Jews to refer to Jerusalem (see Joel 3:17).

The chief priests and Sadducees' second exploitative practice concerned the sacrificial requirement of a Passover lamb. As part of the Passover celebration, each family was required to slaughter a year-old male lamb “*with no defects*” (Exodus 12:5). Individuals and families from outlying places like Galilee could be making a journey to Jerusalem lasting up to seven days. Bringing an unblemished lamb such a distance over rough terrain would be nearly impossible; by the time they arrived, the lamb would no longer meet the requirements. As a result, most pilgrims waited until they arrived in Jerusalem to buy their lambs, which had been raised

just outside the city in places like Bethlehem. The people selling the lambs took advantage of the market demand and charged exorbitant prices for these lambs, creating yet another financial burden and barrier to worship.

These exploitive practices allowed the chief priests and Sadducees to amass incredible wealth. Some of their mansions covered more than 6,500 square feet—within the crowded city of Jerusalem where real estate was at a premium. These homes were filled with some of the most luxurious amenities available in the Mediterranean world, including imported glass dining ware and sleek stone furniture.

It is not surprising that Jesus reacted to such profiteering with fierce, righteous anger. *“The Scriptures declare, ‘My Temple will be called a house of prayer,’ but you have turned it into a den of thieves!”* (Matthew 21:13). It wasn’t long before the religious leaders answered with their own brand of anger. *“When the leading priests and teachers of religious law heard what Jesus had done, they began planning how to kill him”* (Mark 11:18). Jesus’ just, righteous rebuke had taken place publicly—in full view of everyone at the temple. The religious leaders could not let this provocation go unpunished and determined that Jesus must die.

The truth is, the religious leaders’ greed directly clashed with the righteousness God requires—resulting in the brutal murder of the sinless Messiah. They could not have known that their evil plot would lead to Jesus’ triumph and their own demise.

## DIG DEEPER

- Jesus was quoting two Scriptures in His rebuke against the money changers.
  - “My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” (Isaiah 56:7)
  - “Don’t you yourselves admit that this Temple, which bears my name, has become a den of thieves? Surely I see all the evil going on there. I, the LORD, have spoken!” (Jeremiah 7:11)

The religious leaders in the temple that day would have immediately recognized Jesus’ words to be a scathing rebuke—just as they had been in Jeremiah’s day. In fact, Jeremiah’s prophecy foretold the events of 586 BC when God sent the Babylonian army to destroy Jerusalem and the temple, stripping the priests of their power and authority. Jesus’ statement was a stunning rebuke, insinuating that the priesthood would again be removed from its place of authority. This prophecy came to pass only forty years later, when Rome sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple again.

- **How does a greater understanding of the context of Jesus’ words increase their meaning?**

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**O**f the entire life and ministry of Jesus, no segment of time is described in more detail by the Gospel writers than the final eighteen hours of His life. Many other well-known moments are recorded by only some of the authors—like His birth, His teaching in the temple at twelve years old, and the Sermon on the Mount. However, all four Gospels similarly record Jesus’ betrayal, trial, and death.

In our familiarity with the narrative, we may fail to catch some of its most important elements. But the details help us more fully understand what was taking place in these critical moments of human history. One aspect of Holy Week that is often overlooked is Jesus’ trial. Why? Because the term *trial* is not the best descriptor for the travesty that unfolded that night. *Trial* implies a search for evidence, truth, and justice—but that was not the religious leaders’ objective on the night Jesus was betrayed.

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

The reality of the situation is simple. Under both Jewish and Roman law, Jesus did not receive a trial.

In the Jewish world, the authoritative body that ruled on matters of the Law was known as the Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin was comprised of seventy-one elders from the sects of Judaism: Pharisees and Sadducees. The members were to act as a united body in matters regarding God’s Law. The Sanhedrin was the authority on not only the Prophets and Writings (the entire Old Testament except the Torah, which includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), but also the Oral Law (the traditional Jewish code of conduct passed down from generation to generation).

The Pharisees and Sadducees' theological differences sometimes resulted in long, drawn-out trials ending in stalemate. For example, Acts 23:1–11 describes Paul intentionally dividing the Sanhedrin at his own trial, causing a debate over the issue of resurrection that became so heated it led to a mistrial. However, Jesus' case was handled very differently.

The *Babylonian Talmud*, a complex commentary on Jewish law, was compiled in written form about four hundred years after the New Testament. However, the principles in it had been in place for centuries, including during Jesus' life on earth. In a discourse (or tractate) on the rules and operations of the Great Sanhedrin, the *Talmud* states:

In cases of monetary law, the court may conclude the deliberations and issue the ruling even on that same day, whether to exempt the accused or to find him liable. In cases of capital law, the court may conclude the deliberations and issue the ruling even on that same day to acquit the accused, but must wait until the following day to find him liable. Therefore, since capital cases might continue for two days, the court does not judge cases of capital law on certain days, neither on the eve of Shabbat nor the eve of a Festival. (Sanhedrin 32a:8)



Matthew's description of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin indicates it could not have been a formal meeting. Although there were representatives present from each of the groups that comprised the Sanhedrin, not all the members of the council were in attendance. The religious leaders' questioning of Jesus was illegal for several reasons:

- The trial took place under the cloak of darkness rather than in the daytime.
- The trial was not held in the Sanhedrin's halls in the temple, but in the high priest's house.
- Jesus' trial and crucifixion took place during the festival of Passover and carried over into the eve of Shabbat (John 19:31).

The Sanhedrin rarely considered the death penalty, let alone carried it out. The Mishnah, a record of the Oral Law that was in effect during New Testament times, says,

A Sanhedrin that executes a transgressor once in seven years is characterized as a destructive tribunal. Since the Sanhedrin would subject the testimony to exacting scrutiny, it was extremely rare for a defendant to be executed. [Some say] this categorization applies to a Sanhedrin that executes a transgressor once in seventy years. [Still others] say: If we had been members of the Sanhedrin, we would have conducted trials in a manner whereby no person would have ever been executed. (Makkot 1:10)

After the questioning of Jesus, the chief priests had already made up their mind to have Jesus executed (Mark 14:62–64). However, now the men of the ruling body who had gathered that night faced an even greater obstacle: Roman law. Only Roman prefects and procurators could mete out capital punishment. Any executions that took place after someone was convicted in the Sanhedrin were illegal—usually carried out by mobs via the traditional Jewish method of stoning. (This appears to be the case when Stephen was stoned in Acts 7:54 through 8:1.)

If the religious leaders executed Jesus illegally, they could have been charged with sedition for usurping Roman authority. In addition, the populace would have considered them to be Jesus' murderers, a reality they apparently wanted to hide





(Acts 5:26–28). So they found a way to avoid due process and manipulate someone else to carry out their illegal judgment.

As the Roman prefect over Judea, Pontius Pilate was the leading authority in the land, but he still had to make careful decisions that benefited his Roman superiors and his own political interests. When Jesus was brought before him, Pilate faced a conflict of interests.

- On the one hand, it was not uncommon for local Roman leaders to act without trial, and anyone who claimed to be a king would have been a traitor in the eyes of Rome. Jesus did not hold Roman citizenship like the apostle Paul later did (see Acts 16:22–39), so Jesus did not have the privilege of Rome’s protection. And although executions without trials were illegal under Roman law—even for noncitizens—that statute was commonly overlooked. In fact, first-century sources not only attest to these frequent unjust executions but even name Pilate as being one of the worst perpetrators. Specifically, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria described Pilate’s “briberies, insults, robberies, outrages and wanton injuries, executions without trial, constantly repeated, ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty.” Unjust executions were apparently part of Pilate’s normal way of ruling Judea.



- But on the other hand, Pilate believed Jesus was innocent. Despite the claims of the chief priests and the Sadducees, Pilate proclaimed, “*I find nothing wrong with this man! . . . Nothing this man has done calls for the death penalty*” (Luke 23:4, 15).

As Roman prefect, Pilate had the authority to release a prisoner at any time. Nevertheless, Pilate chose to “*pacify the crowd*” (Mark 15:15). He bypassed the proper proceedings and ordered that Jesus be tortured despite His innocence—first by scourging and then by crucifixion.

Pilate’s actions qualify as one of the most significant miscarriages of justice the world has ever known. He condemned to death a Man who was not only innocent of the crime for which He was on trial, but was also innocent of any crime. Jesus alone has walked the earth as a human without committing sin. As a result, He should never have felt the sting of death (Romans 6:23).

In our discussion of the injustice of Jesus’ trial and execution, we should also note the lack of justice being carried out for us. “*Everyone has sinned*” (Romans 3:23), which means we were hopelessly separated from God’s presence for eternity. He is holy and cannot tolerate wickedness. The eternity of suffering for which we were destined would have been true justice—the fitting punishment for our choice to rebel against our Creator.

So the most scandalous miscarriage of justice in history was twofold. The just punishment that awaited us was unjustly placed upon Jesus. He willingly accepted it out of love for each person His Father created. We should have paid the price for our sin instead of Jesus. We deserved execution, but Jesus willingly chose to undergo a baseless trial on our behalf, knowing full well it would lead to the Cross (Matthew 26:39).

Although this wicked plot to convict Jesus constituted history’s greatest miscarriage of justice, it also led to history’s most miraculous outpouring of mercy and grace. Jesus’ sacrifice was the key to the Father’s plan of redemption, offering undeserved forgiveness and restoring our communion with Him for all eternity.

## DIG DEEPER

- Even during His trial, Jesus was fulfilling messianic prophecies.
  - Isaiah wrote, *“He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth”* (53:7).
  - David wrote, *“The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies, making them a footstool under your feet’ ”* (Psalm 110:1).
  - Daniel wrote, *“As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed”* (7:13–14).

- **Read the account of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin in Matthew 26:57-68.**
- **How did Jesus’ silence and His words attest to His identity as Messiah?**
- **Why do you think the Sanhedrin reacted as they did?**

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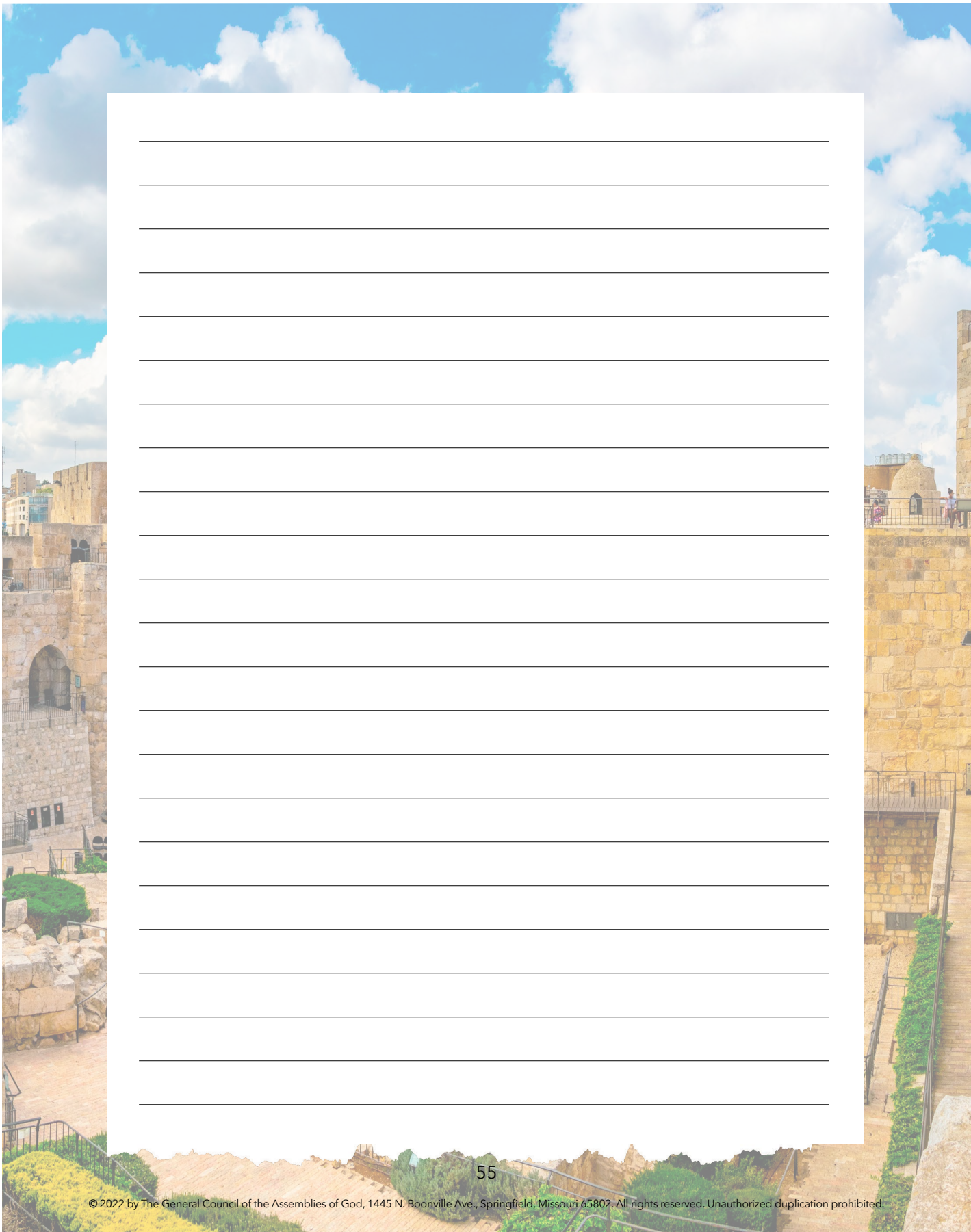
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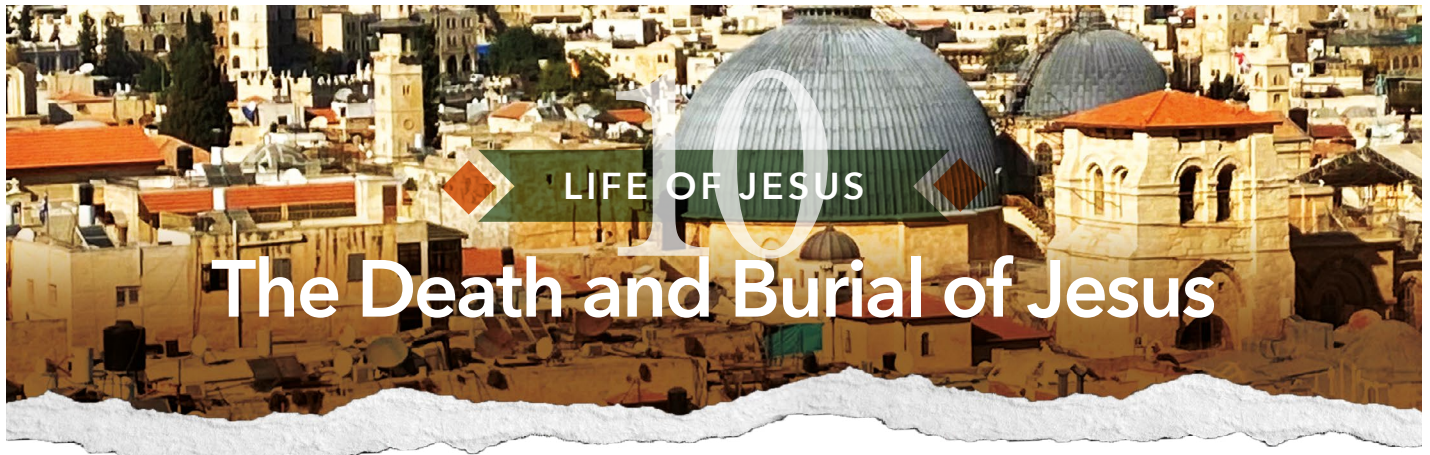
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**T**he hours connecting Good Friday and Easter are some of the most somber on our annual calendar. We reflect on the horrors inflicted upon Jesus and His death on the Cross, yet as modern-day believers, we know the end of the story. We can't help but anticipate the excitement and joy of the Resurrection. We know Christ is already risen! As a result, we often remove ourselves from the emotions and firsthand experiences of Jesus' followers that day.

So how did the disciples react in the hours after Jesus' lifeless body was removed from the Cross? Although He had warned them multiple times of what was about to happen, they did not understand. Instead of being prepared, they were consumed with fear and doubt (Luke 24:36–38). What can we learn from their example? Where did they succeed, and where did they fail? And how can we keep our faith when all hope seems lost?

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

As Good Friday ended and Jesus' body was placed in a tomb, His followers were likely consumed with one question: What's next?

Surely, when crowds from Jerusalem came out to meet Jesus, shouting "Hosanna!" as He passed over the Mount of Olives, His followers could never have imagined that everything would change in just one week. After all, they had come to the city to celebrate! They had journeyed from Galilee for weeks to observe Passover as God required. Together, they would remember how the Lord had passed over the houses of the Israelites during the final plague against Egypt, sparing their lives and ensuring their freedom.

For the Jews gathered in Jerusalem that day, Rome must have felt like another Egypt—a pagan oppressor of God's people. But Passover rekindled their hope.

One day God would bring about another Deliverer like Moses, who would remove the yoke of their enemies. Many first-century Jews believed overthrowing Roman rule would be the Messiah's primary role.

But now, the disciples' celebration and hope had turned into fear and confusion. Jesus was dead. And instead of worshipping in the Temple and visiting with friends and loved ones, the disciples "*were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders*" (John 20:19).

Despite their fear, the disciples' actions display a level of piety and dedication to God that we might easily overlook. In what way? They stayed in Jerusalem in observation of Sabbath laws (Luke 23:56). This is somewhat surprising for people

who had been so terrified that they abandoned Jesus and ran away just before His sham trial (Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50). That same night, even Peter—one of Jesus' three closest disciples—denied three times that he knew Jesus, even going so far as to take an oath (Matthew 26:72). Why such a reaction from the apparent leader of the Twelve, the one Jesus called "rock" (16:18)?



Earlier in Gethsemane, Peter had been wielding a sword, ready to fight the men who came to arrest Jesus (John 18:10). But as he witnessed the night's events unfolding

and understood more with each passing minute, fear gripped him. Yet, Peter and the other disciples did not flee the city that night. They could have retreated to the security of Galilee in the north, where they would have been safer from the religious leaders' threats, but instead they stayed in Jerusalem. They watched from a distance as Jesus was crucified. And they remained in the city that evening and the next day, likely both to follow the Sabbath laws and to go into hiding. Little



did they know that they were about to bear witness to the single most significant event in history: the resurrection of Jesus.

Interestingly, it appears the disciples' obedience may have included more than just Sabbath observance. Luke's account reveals that even after the reports of the women and the travelers to Emmaus, the disciples were still in Jerusalem (Luke 24:33). Rather than leaving immediately that Sunday morning after Jesus' body would have been anointed, the disciples stayed. It's possible that remaining in Jerusalem could be connected to obediently honoring the requirements of the ongoing Passover festival—the event that brought them there in the first place—which required a weeklong stay in the city.

What would have happened if Peter and the others fled from Jerusalem as they had fled from the Garden of Gethsemane? The news of Jesus' resurrection would certainly still have spread. To believe otherwise would be to believe God needs people to carry out His plan. But because they stayed, the disciples were rewarded by being some of the earliest witnesses to the Resurrection. They were among the first to know that Jesus had risen from the grave and that the curse of eternal death had been broken!



## DIG DEEPER

- It is astounding to consider what can happen when we simply obey God during life's most difficult moments.
  - Paul followed God obediently during his second missionary journey, listening when the Holy Spirit prevented him from visiting the provinces of Asia and Bithynia. Having been redirected, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help. He *“decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there”* (Acts 16:10). As a result, the gospel spread to Greece and churches were established in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth.
  - Philip, also known as “Philip the Evangelist,” was one of the early elders of the Jerusalem church. An angel of the Lord told Philip to walk down a certain road where he would encounter a high-ranking eunuch from Ethiopia. Philip shared the gospel with him, and as a result, the good news of Jesus spread to Africa (Acts 8:26–40).

The disciples could have interpreted Jesus' teachings on the Sabbath to allow for fleeing Jerusalem, rather than resting, if their lives were in danger. After all, Jesus had said, *“The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath”* (Mark 2:27). However, their decision to obey Sabbath laws is part of the reason they stayed in Jerusalem and were able to visit the empty tomb and see the risen Jesus.


- **Have there been any times in your life when simple obedience led to an answered prayer or an encounter with God?**
- **In what areas can you recommit to obey God wholeheartedly and believe for a miracle?**

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Imagine you're a teenager or young adult who has spent the last three years following a Teacher you believed to be the Messiah, the One God had promised would usher in His kingdom. You travel with your Teacher to Jerusalem, God's holy city, anxiously looking forward to celebrating Passover, one of the biggest feasts of the year. In Jerusalem, you watch your Teacher perform miracles and wonders. The people of the city welcome Him, proclaiming that He is the One sent from God—a truth you already know.

Then on the most important night of Passover, you share a meal with the Teacher and His other students. After spending a beautiful evening remembering how God rescued His people from Egypt, you go to the camp to pray and fall asleep. You are awakened by armed soldiers from the temple. They storm the camp, draw their weapons, and take your Teacher into the darkness of the night. Few knew where the guards had taken Him, and even fewer have access to the place.

Hours pass, and as the sun rises higher in the sky, you see that the Romans are preparing to carry out executions as they do every Passover to remind the Jewish people who is in charge. This year, they are crucifying three men. You hear someone in the crowd say that they thought one of them was going to kick the Romans out of the land. As you look on, you notice that one of the men is beaten beyond the point of what you thought any human being could take. As you watch this Man in pity, you freeze in disbelief. He is your Teacher—the One who taught people to love their enemies and help the destitute and needy. How did this happen? Why is He being marched outside the city to die on a Roman cross? The last you knew, He had been taken by the high priest's guards, not the Romans.

You watch as Roman soldiers nail Him to the wooden beams, and over the next six hours, you see the life slowly drain from His body. Finally, a Roman soldier



pierces His side with a spear to make sure He is dead. As you watch His body being lowered from the Cross, you ask yourself an impossible question: Now what?

The scene we've imagined was all too real for Jesus' followers. They had spent years devoted to Him and all He taught, and suddenly, He was dead. What should they do with Jesus' body? Where should they go? Would they be next?

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

Reading through the Gospels, especially Jesus' own words, it's easy for us to see how often He foretold His death and resurrection. Jesus' death is so ingrained in our theology that we can't imagine God's plan being carried out any other way. However, first-century Jews commonly believed the Messiah would never die in such a manner—if at all. The Old Testament Scriptures include two pious men who never experienced death: Enoch and Elijah.

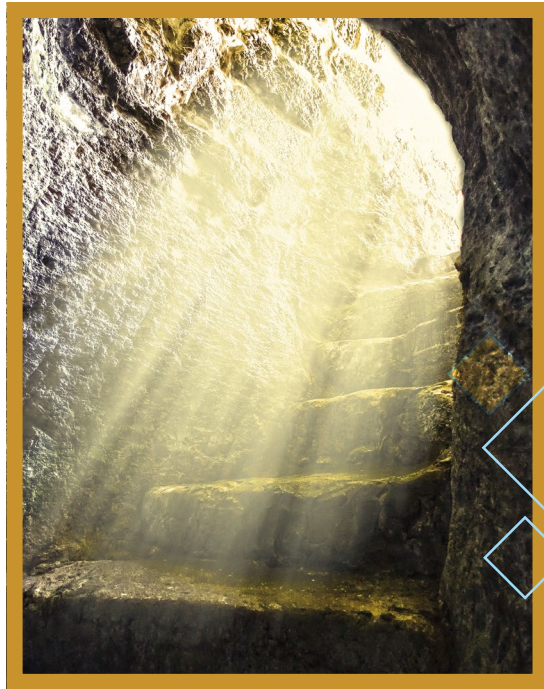
- Enoch walked *“in close fellowship with God. Then one day he disappeared, because God took him”* (Genesis 5:24).
- Elijah was walking with his successor, Elisha, when *“suddenly a chariot of fire appeared, drawn by horses of fire. It drove between the two men, separating them, and Elijah was carried by a whirlwind into heaven”* (2 Kings 2:11).

During His ministry, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain where an event we know as the Transfiguration took place and Moses and Elijah appeared to them (Matthew 17:1–13). Though Jesus warned them not to share this experience with the others until after His resurrection, the Transfiguration might have led the three disciples to believe that Jesus would not die. After all, He was God's *“dearly loved Son”* (verse 5).

### **Yet the Messiah died on a cross.**

Seeing Jesus die must have been both an emotional shock and a theological shock. Those who believed He would overthrow Roman rule saw Him crucified by Roman soldiers. Those who believed He was a great Teacher whose wisdom would usher in the kingdom of heaven saw Him die as a criminal.

Amid all the distraction and distress of those hours and days surrounding the Crucifixion, it is somewhat understandable that Jesus' followers lost focus on what He had told them many times about His imminent death. They had also repeatedly missed the message when Jesus taught about the Law and the kingdom of God, often coming to different conclusions after hearing the same teaching. For example, Judas (not Judas Iscariot) seemed to mirror Jesus' Great Commission view of the world when he asked, "*Lord, why are you going to reveal yourself only to us and not to the world at large?*" (John 14:22).



On the other hand, James and John seemed to completely forget about Jesus' compassion when they asked of an unwelcoming Samaritan village, "*Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?*" (Luke 9:54). All three of these disciples had heard Jesus describe the Father's compassion multiple times, yet their circumstances caused them to draw vastly different conclusions about how to put it into practice.

Could it be that the crisis of faith the disciples faced after Jesus' death was less about their lack of belief and more about the human condition?

- All the way back in Genesis 3, God had promised to send a Redeemer who would right the wrongs caused by sin. But even with this promise in place, not all of Adam's children served God.
- In Exodus, God promised the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would be freed from Egypt. He would give them the Promised Land and deliver their enemies into their hands. Yet, even after His miraculous deliverance, they continued to question the legitimacy of God's promise. As a result, they spent forty years wandering in the wilderness.

- In the days of Judah’s great kings, God’s power and might were on full display. But even after God delivered the people of Jerusalem from an Assyrian attack during King Hezekiah’s reign, his son, Manasseh, ended up being one of Judah’s most wicked rulers.

Each of us is capable of faithlessness—even if we have witnessed God’s greatness and power.

The traditional negative assessment of the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ death is understandable, considering all He taught them about the Resurrection. However, the point of the story is not how they responded on Friday and Saturday. It’s all about how they responded on Sunday. What did they do when they heard Jesus was alive and realized the truth of what He had been saying all along (John 2:22)?

The news of the Resurrection apparently spread quickly, leading the Jewish religious leaders and Roman soldiers to conspire to spread a false version of events. However, those who knew the truth kept telling it. Consider the two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus that Sunday afternoon. They showed no fear or hesitation when recounting the events to a fellow traveler—not yet realizing who He was (Luke 24:13–31)!

What a beautiful testament to the nature of divine grace! Though the disciples lacked faith in a moment of crisis, they were defined not by their mistakes, but by their faithfulness when it mattered most. Sometimes we’re tempted to let our weakness and sin define us, but we should meditate on these words of Paul: *“Three different times I begged the Lord to take [the thorn in my flesh] away. Each time he said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’ So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses so that the power of Christ can work through me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12:8–10).







**I**n military terms, a commission is a standing order that confers authority and requires total commitment. What is God’s call—His standing order—on your life? What is the purpose or driving force that motivates you? What is your commission?

Our responses to these questions will vary widely depending on our circumstances—especially for those outside the community of believers. If we remove God from the question and simply ask, “What is your purpose in life?” we might hear responses like “Making millions of dollars,” “Leaving a legacy for my children and grandchildren,” “Putting food on the table,” or maybe “Just surviving.” Although these answers are not inherently bad—even for believers—they do not reflect the commission God has given us.

Let’s add this truth to the many others we have learned in this study:

- Jesus was probably not born in a barn.
- Jesus’ parents were active participants in His spiritual and practical training.
- Jesus was well-educated and His teaching reflected that.
- Pontius Pilate was not a nice guy.
- The entrance of Jesus’ tomb was probably not blocked with a round stone.
- Your commission may be different than you think.

If you are thinking the last one hits more personally—and maybe even conflicts with your life goals—you are in good company. Jesus’ most faithful followers have always had to choose between their own plans and God’s higher calling.



After His resurrection, Jesus *“appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive”* (Acts 1:3). Those who had thought Jesus’ death meant it was time to return to their old jobs and ways of life realized that God had more work for them to do. And He has work for us to do as well.

Through Jesus, we are given our purpose and direction—our Great Commission: *“Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:19–20).

Let’s investigate the events following Jesus’ resurrection to better understand this Great Commission.

### [WATCH THE VIDEO]

As followers of Jesus, we are called to a purpose higher than ourselves. His redemptive work on the Cross has always been the antidote to humanity’s sin problem. All the way back in Genesis 3:15, God said to the serpent, *“He will strike*



*your head, and you will strike his heel.*” Jesus fulfilled that promise by defeating death and breaking the curse of sin, but the world must hear the gospel in order to believe it! As Paul wrote, *“How can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent?”* (Romans 10:14–15).

God draws people to faith in Jesus (John 6:44). Though He does not need people to get the job done, He offers us the blessing of sharing the gospel message with a lost world. And the Great Commission is our primary motivation.

Participating in this commission does not negate who we are as individuals; instead, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God uses our dreams, our goals, and our callings to uniquely fulfill the Great Commission. Maybe your goal has been to work hard at your job, move up the ladder, and make a lot of money. When you’re following Jesus, those personal objectives become secondary to God’s objective. Each of us must ask ourself, “Are my goals in line with the teachings of Jesus? Are they expanding His kingdom on earth?”

Barnabas was an Early Church member who, as a landowner, may have been wealthy to some extent. As the church grew, Barnabas was among the believers who sold land or houses and donated the proceeds to support the work of the church (Acts 4:36–37). So many people joined in this generosity that *“there were no needy people among them”* (verse 34). When the Church took the Great Commission seriously, their actions became contagious.

Our driving purpose affects every aspect of our life, including how we spend our time and energy and how we raise our family. Joshua, who was chosen by God to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, recognized that his commitment to God must be passed to the next generation. *“As for me and my family, we will serve the LORD”* (Joshua 24:15). His mind was made up. He would follow God no matter what, and he wanted his family to do the same.

When we orient ourselves to God’s call, we no longer focus only on success or family pride when raising our children—whether they’re biological or spiritual. Instead, we understand that we are contributing to a multiplying and ever-expanding web of gospel witnesses who will continue to reach the world. This is part of the Great Commission.





No other goal can compare to the importance of Jesus’ commission to each believer. The Early Church had personally received this command from Jesus, and they sacrificially obeyed it in the years that followed. It wasn’t long before the followers of Christ were being hunted down and persecuted for following Jesus and spreading the gospel. According to church tradition, all but one of Jesus’ remaining eleven disciples died for their faith in Him.

Persecution persists today around the world. Despite overwhelming opposition, these believers are willing to sacrifice their lives to make Jesus known. They have taken His words to heart—and so should we: *“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it”* (Matthew 16:24–25).









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