

# Following Jesus

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## Beginning in Bethlehem

At the centre of Christian faith is the fact that in Jesus Christ the eternal God became a human being. Once we grasp this miracle, we shall not be surprised that the way it came about also involved a miracle – the supernatural work of God in the body of the virgin Mary, so that the child born to her, though having no human father, was fully human.<sup>1</sup>

Mary and her husband Joseph came from Nazareth in Galilee, the northern part of Palestine, but because of a census requirement, they had to move temporarily to their ancestral town of Bethlehem, which was in Judea, the southern part of Palestine. But the town was so over-crowded that the only accommodation Joseph and Mary could find was the stable of an inn. There, in a dirty, smelly animal shelter, Jesus was born.<sup>2</sup>

No matter how disheartened Mary and Joseph may have felt about their circumstances, they were no doubt cheered when some shepherds arrived to greet the birth of the baby. They had received a revelation that this new-born child was the promised Saviour, Christ the Lord.<sup>3</sup> As for the people nearby – the guests sleeping, eating or revelling in the comfort of the inn – none seemed to realize what had happened. The eternal God had just arrived on the planet and they had not the slightest idea.

In spite of having Scriptures that spoke of the Saviour's coming, people had no way of foreseeing exactly how it would happen; and when it did happen, few recognized it.<sup>4</sup> But that is not surprising. God has often worked through the humblest of people and the most unlikely of circumstances. He still does. Followers of Jesus may at times share his obscurity, but they also share his sense of fulfilment of God's purposes. God chooses what appears as nothing special to shame what the world sees as something great.<sup>5</sup>

1. Matt 1:18-25

2. Luke 2:1-7. For map see page 38.

3. Luke 2:8-18

4. Also among the few were Simeon and Anna; Luke 2:22-38

5. 1 Cor 1:27-29



*Street near Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem*

## South to Egypt, north to Nazareth

It seems that Joseph and Mary stayed with their baby in Judea for some time. Within six weeks of Jesus' birth, they carried out several ceremonies required by the law of Moses, and for some of these they made the 10 km journey to the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Back in Bethlehem, travellers who came for the census began to leave, and the family of Jesus was able to live in a building referred to as 'the house'.<sup>2</sup>

There the baby Jesus was visited by men from the east known as magi (people who studied the stars). These men worked out that a new king had been born in Judea, and they eventually found him in Bethlehem. But the governor of Judea, Herod the Great, a part-Jew whom Rome had appointed 'king', was disturbed at the prospect of a rival king emerging. Herod learnt from the magi the time of this king's birth, and from the Jewish scholars the town of his birth. Pretending he would go and pay homage, he asked the magi for more precise details, but when they were told not to report their findings, they kept clear of him and escaped home.<sup>3</sup>

Herod then planned to kill all Jewish boys in the Bethlehem area who were under two years of age, thinking this would get rid of the potential rival. God therefore directed Joseph and Mary to take the baby Jesus to Egypt for safety.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus, like his ancestors back in the time of Moses, ran around as a toddler on the soil of Africa. But when Herod died, Joseph and Mary decided to return to Palestine. It was not safe, however, to stay in Judea, because Herod's son Archelaus was now king, and he was as cruel and unjust as his father. The family therefore went north to settle once more in their home town of Nazareth. As the years passed, Jesus developed in mind, body and spirit. For the first time, a child was growing up in the way God intended.<sup>5</sup>

1. Luke 2:21-24; Lev 12:1-8
2. Matt 2:11
3. Matt 2:1-12
4. Matt 2:13-16
5. Matt 2:19-23; Luke 2:39-40



*Nazareth*

## Twelve years old

The family of Joseph and Mary grew steadily, and by the time Jesus was twelve years old he no doubt had several younger brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup> It must have taken some effort for the family to travel to Jerusalem each year for the Passover festival, but, as God-fearing believers, the parents accepted this as one of their responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> Inconvenience is no excuse for failure to do what God requires.

By twelve years of age, Jewish boys were being prepared for adult religious life, so while his family was in Jerusalem, Jesus took the opportunity to learn all he could. In the Jewish system, teacher and pupil took turns asking and answering questions. These usually concerned details of the law, but Jesus' teachers noticed that he was different. His questions and answers showed that he was more concerned with knowing God's mind than with discussing trivial procedures. He showed intelligence and perception, but without any trace of arrogance or conceit. The teachers were impressed.

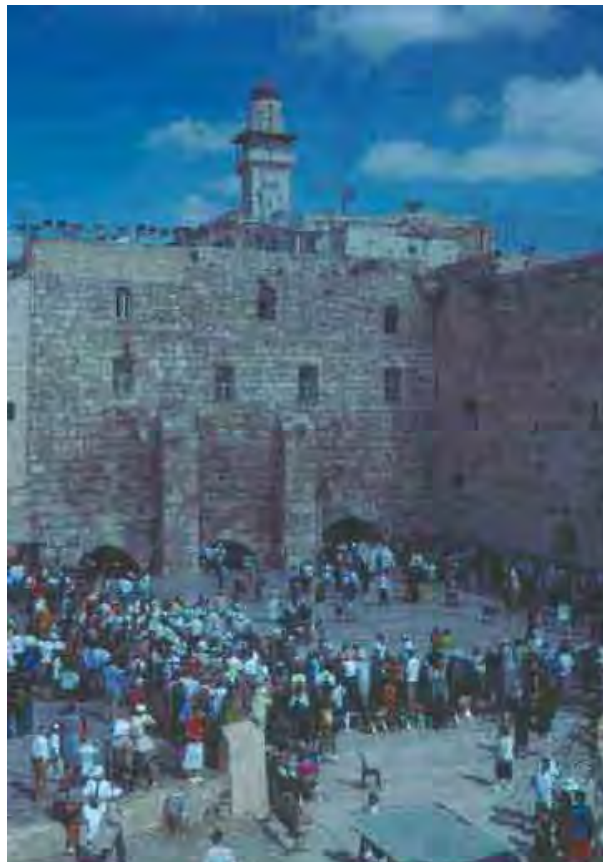
Jesus' parents, however, were not in the mood to feel impressed. His time with the teachers had caused them trouble in looking for him. Even at this age, Jesus knew that he existed in a unique relationship with his heavenly Father, and his earthly parents had to be aware of this. As an obedient son he submitted to them, but his words gave them a lot to think about as they returned home.

Not only did Jesus study the law, but back in Nazareth he learnt a practical trade, carpentry. His divinity did not exempt him from the processes of learning and growing. He '*increased in wisdom and stature*'. At each stage of life, whether child, teenager or full-grown adult, he was the sort of person one might expect at that stage – but always perfect. The perfect child grew into the perfect teenager, and in due course into the perfect adult. He developed maturity through experience, and obedience through self-denial. And all the time he '*grew in favour*'. He earned the respect and affection of the local villagers, and the approval and pleasure of his heavenly Father.<sup>3</sup>

1. Matt 13:55-56

2. Luke 2:41-51

3. Luke 2:52



*Ceremonies at the Western Wall of Herod's temple*

## Jordan River – baptism and temptation

John the Baptist knew Jesus, probably from childhood, for their mothers were related.<sup>1</sup> John preached a message of repentance to prepare people to accept the coming Messiah, but he did not at first realize that the Messiah was Jesus. He knew Jesus had a personal goodness that exempted him from the need for baptism, but when Jesus insisted that John baptize him, John did so. Only then, as Jesus came out of the water and the Spirit descended visibly upon him, was John assured that this one was the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

The reason Jesus was baptized was not that he had sins to repent of, but that he wanted to declare, in an act of solidarity with all the faithful, that he was on the side of God and his righteousness. People were baptized to declare their obedience, and Jesus wanted to declare his readiness to carry out all God's purposes. In response, the Father demonstrated his full satisfaction, giving Jesus specific spiritual power for the work that lay ahead of him.

No sooner had Jesus been equipped for his messianic work than Satan tempted him to use his messianic powers in the wrong way.<sup>3</sup> For example, he could work a miracle to satisfy his hunger; but Jesus knew that, although food is necessary to maintain life, obedience to God is more important. Behaviour should be determined by God's will, not by human expediency.

Another suggestion was that Jesus could convince people he was the Son of God by jumping from the top of the temple and calling upon God to save him. But Jesus would not rely upon spectacular miracles, whether to save himself or convince others. His path would lead not to self-acclaim or popularity, but to a cross.

Finally, Jesus could be assured of worldwide power if he accepted Satan's methods of conquest. But Jesus did not come into the world so that people might be forced into his kingdom. He wants them to come because they choose to. He wants them to submit willingly to him, the one who willingly laid down his life for them.

1. Luke 1:36

2. Matt 3:1-6,11-17; John 1:29-34

3. Matt 4:1-10



*Region near the Jordan's entrance to the Dead Sea*

## Sea of Galilee – first disciples

The first disciples of the Lord Jesus were previously disciples of John the Baptist. Once John was assured that Jesus was the one for whom he had prepared the way, he unhesitatingly pointed his followers towards Jesus. Some of John's followers wanted to remain loyal to him, but John himself knew that his work had achieved its goal. He wanted only to fade from the scene so that all attention might now be focused on Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

One of the first two disciples John the Baptist directed to Jesus was Andrew. The other, though not named in the story, was most likely John the Gospel writer, since John never mentions his own name in the book where this incident is recorded. When Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, Jesus immediately saw characteristics in Simon that caused him to give him the name 'Rock' (in Aramaic, 'Cephas'; in Greek, 'Peter').<sup>2</sup> This incident apparently took place in the Jordan Valley, where John the Baptist was preaching,

The party then moved north to Galilee and came to the region around the lake where the three disciples came from. The group soon grew in number, possibly with the addition of John's brother James, and certainly with the addition of Philip and Nathanael.<sup>3</sup>

A great moment in history had arrived. The disciples realized that, after many centuries of expectation, the Messiah promised in the Scriptures and announced by John the Baptist was actually among them. He had lived in the region for thirty years but only now did he embark upon the public ministry for which he had prepared himself. If those few early disciples had any doubts about the uniqueness of this person to whom they had attached themselves, those doubts vanished when they saw his miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding feast. This one was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God and the king of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

1. John 1:32-36; cf. 3:25-30

2. John 1:40-42

3. John 1:43-45. Nathanael apparently had another name, Bartholemew.

4. John 2:11; cf. 1:41,49



*Jordan River near its entrance to the Sea of Galilee*

## Early work in Judea

Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, the northern part of Palestine, and the lakeside town of Capernaum soon became his base.<sup>1</sup> But now that the Feast of Passover was approaching, Jesus decided to travel south to Jerusalem, where people from all over the country were gathering for the festival.

When Jesus visited the temple, it looked more like a market than a house of prayer. The courtyard was crowded with all kinds of traders, so that people could buy animals or change money for use in the temple festivities. The commercial activity so angered Jesus that, regardless of the risks to his own safety, he vigorously drove out the traders. The disciples had not expected such an explosion from their new-found master, and saw with some apprehension that such zeal would inevitably land him in severe trouble.<sup>2</sup>

The Jewish leaders were caught unawares, and challenged Jesus to produce some authority for acting as he did. They suggested he perform a miracle, but Jesus refused. He would give all the evidence they wanted in due course, particularly through the miracle of the resurrection, but he would not perform miracles on demand.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Jesus did perform miracles while in Jerusalem, and some people said they believed. But Jesus did not trust people to be loyal followers if their 'faith' was simply enthusiasm for miracles.<sup>4</sup> One man, however, seemed to seek the truth. This was Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, reputable teacher and member of the Sanhedrin, or Jewish Council. He had special status in the Jewish community, but not in the sight of God. He, like anyone else, could only enter God's kingdom if he was 'born again'. He needed inner cleansing and renewal – that complete change of heart that comes only as the Spirit of God brings spiritual rebirth within.<sup>5</sup>

1. Matt 4:13; 9:1; Mark 2:1; 9:33; John 2:12; 6:24. Another lakeside town, Bethsaida, was close by; Mark 6:43-45; John 6:13,17.

2. John 2:13-17

3. John 2:18-22

4. John 2:23-25

5. John 3:1-15



*Bar Mitzvah ceremony, Western Wall*



## Through Samaria to Galilee

Jesus' activity in Jerusalem had stirred people up and crowds began to follow him. So many were being baptized as his disciples that the religious leaders became concerned. They did not like this person among them and were jealous of the enthusiasm he was generating – and jealousy can produce unpredictable, even violent, behaviour. Though Jesus had recently shown he was not afraid of danger, he now decided it was better to leave Jerusalem and return north.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the traditional hostility between Jews and Samaritans, many Jews, when travelling between Judea and Galilee, avoided the direct route through Samaria and detoured along the east bank of the Jordan. But Jesus took the route through Samaria, and on the way saw many Samaritans respond to him. The opening came through a conversation with a woman near Shechem. She became convinced that here was a unique person, one who had divine knowledge and who could satisfy a human being's deepest spiritual needs. With much excitement, she told the villagers of her discovery, and soon it seemed they all wanted to meet Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

As he saw the villagers hurrying across the fields towards him, Jesus used the incident to teach his disciples the important lesson that one sows, but another reaps. The disciples were about to reap a harvest of fresh believers, even though they themselves had not sown the seed. This was a foretaste of a greater harvest they would reap, much of it from the seed sown by others, whether Old Testament preachers, John the Baptist, or Jesus himself.<sup>3</sup>

Only God, however, can create the produce that his workers reap, and he does this in response to faith in the hearers. The disciples saw this in the case of the Samaritans, and they saw it again a few days later when Jesus arrived back in Galilee. There, in response to the faith of a distressed government official, he healed the man's son.<sup>4</sup>

1. John 4:1-3

2. John 4:4-30

3. John 4:35-38; cf. 1 Cor 3:6

4. John 4:42,46-54



*Road up to Shechem (modern Nablus) and Samaria*

## The synagogue at Nazareth

As long as human societies have existed, people of note have often received recognition everywhere except in the localities where they are best known. Or as the proverb says, a prophet is honoured everywhere except in his own town. Jesus experienced this when he returned to his home town of Nazareth and preached in the synagogue. The people could not believe that this one, who they knew only as the carpenter's son, could preach so well.<sup>1</sup>

But Jesus was not concerned with impressing people. On the contrary, he challenged people by reading Scriptures that he boldly applied to himself as the Saviour-Messiah.<sup>2</sup> He knew the people would demand that he perform miracles to support his claim, but he refused to do so. Rejection by his hometown people was but a foretaste of the wider rejection he would suffer from the nation as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

The professed worshippers of God are not always as open-hearted as they should be. Instead of being glad when God's mercy is extended to those who do not share their religious heritage, social status, or racial origins, they become resentful, jealous, and at times violent. Jesus gave two illustrations to show how, in Israel's history, God's messengers were sometimes more appreciated by foreigners than by Israelites. In the first illustration, Elijah was unpopular in Israel but welcomed in Lebanon. In the second, Elisha was rejected by Israelites but sought by a Syrian.<sup>4</sup>

Though brief and simple, the two illustrations were enough to stir up that nationalistic prejudice that inhabits most human beings. The congregation of normally well-behaved worshippers now tried to kill him. People would not tolerate such unorthodoxy, especially if Jesus was suggesting that God would accept Lebanese and Syrians ahead of them.<sup>5</sup>

1. Luke 4:16,22,24
2. Luke 4:17-21
3. Luke 4:23; cf. John 1:9-11
4. Luke 4:25-27
5. Luke 4:28-30



*Interior of a synagogue*

## Early work in Galilee

From the hills of Nazareth, Jesus moved to the fishing villages along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen from two families had already accepted him as the Messiah, but Jesus now called them to go further. He wanted them to leave their usual occupations and move around with him as part of a select group of helpers he was assembling. The fishermen were Andrew and Peter from one family, and James and John from the other.<sup>1</sup>

This was a period of much public activity, and crowds followed Jesus wherever he went. His healing ministry dealt not only with common ailments, but also with incurable diseases like leprosy, uncontrollable disorders like paralysis and epilepsy, and oppressions inflicted by evil spirits.<sup>2</sup> These healings were indications that in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God had come. That kingdom was neither political nor territorial, but spiritual. It represented the rule or dominion of God, and its power was at work.<sup>3</sup>

All this activity made heavy demands on Jesus, and therefore he made sure not to allow it to overwhelm him. For many people, work becomes a god because they do not know how to cease from it. But Jesus arose early in the morning, before the crowds began pressing him, so that he could get away from his lodgings and find a quiet place to pray alone. Peter thought he was losing opportunities for ministry, but Jesus knew that in the midst of much work, it was important to have daily times of prayer and quietness.<sup>4</sup>

Such times, free from distraction, are essential for the exercise and nurture of those higher functions of the human spirit. They help maintain a healthy spiritual life through communion with God, and this results in more useful service to others. Amid the turmoil and activity of life, they strengthen that inner peace, tranquillity and stability that Jesus wants all his followers to have.<sup>5</sup>

1. Mark 1:16-20

2. Matt 4:24-25; Mark 1:21-34,40-45; Luke 5:17-26

3. Matt 4:23; 6:10; 12:28

4. Mark 1:35-37; cf. Matt 14:13,23

5. John 14:27; Phil 4:7; Col 3:15



*He went away to a quiet place and prayed*

## Choosing the twelve

The demands upon Jesus increased heavily as he moved around Galilee. In one town after another, crowds came to hear him preach and to ask his help in all kinds of ways. The work was more than one person could physically handle, and although he alone was the Saviour-Messiah, there was much work he could delegate to trusted helpers. The Jewish religious leaders had neglected the people's needs, but Jesus felt a compassion that drove him to help people wherever he could. He likened Galilee to a vast field ready for harvest, but he needed workers to help him reap.<sup>1</sup>

To this end, Jesus asked his group of close followers to pray for workers. He was about to appoint a special group of twelve to whom he could pass on some of his messianic authority, and no doubt some of these friends were likely candidates. Nevertheless, the night before the appointment, he spent the entire night in prayer, so that he might be assured of doing his Father's will. Because he was going to send these twelve men out in service, he called them 'sent ones' (or, in the Greek of the New Testament, 'apostles').<sup>2</sup>

Before sending the twelve out, however, Jesus wanted them to spend further time with him, so that they might be spiritually equipped for the task ahead. Like Jesus, they were to preach the good news of the kingdom and urge people to enter that kingdom through repentance and faith. Also, because of the authority Jesus passed on to them, they were to heal those whom Satan had afflicted with diseases and unclean spirits.<sup>3</sup>

The era of the Messiah had arrived. It may not have been in the form that the Jews expected, but that is not surprising. The fulfilment of God's promises is rarely in the form people expect. Twelve tribes had formed the basis of the old people of God, but twelve apostles would form the basis of the new.

1. Matt 9:35-38

2. Matt 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-15; Luke 6:12-13

3. Matt 10:1; Mark 3:14-15



*Galilee, looking towards the Golan Heights*

## Sermon on the Mount

When people accept Jesus as the promised Saviour, they enter his kingdom and come under his rule. But his kingdom is not governed by a system of laws such as those that formerly operated in Israel. In Christ's kingdom, behaviour is modelled on the character of the king himself, Jesus Christ. He wants his character to be reproduced in his followers.

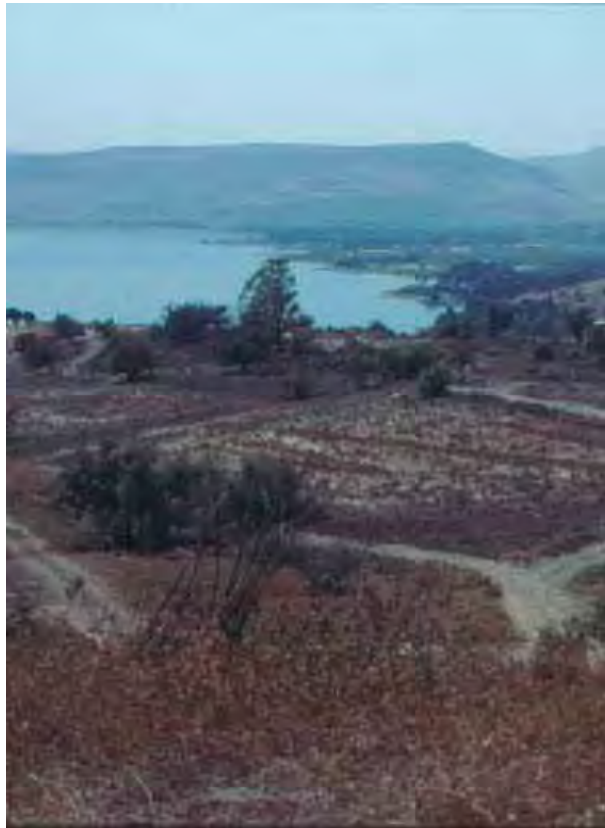
The collection of Jesus' teachings called the Sermon on the Mount deals with the attitudes and behaviour of those who have placed themselves under the lordship of Christ. It is not a plan to reform society by rewriting a nation's legislation, but a set of teachings to show the followers of Jesus the sort of life he requires of them.

Critics might complain that the Sermon on the Mount has not changed the world, but the reason is that the world has not accepted it. It cannot be judged a failure if it has not even been accepted. On the other hand, where it has been accepted, namely, in the lives of Jesus' followers, it has transformed those lives. Once people come into union with Jesus Christ, they become 'new people'. Jesus begins to transform them, and they find that his teachings are practical and his purposes attainable.<sup>1</sup>

Laws can control outward actions, but Jesus wants to control the heart. Laws might discourage wrong behaviour, but Jesus wants to remove wrong attitudes. When he controls the heart, right behaviour follows.<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that Jesus was opposed to the law of Moses. The law was given for a purpose, but that purpose was not to provide a way of acceptance with God. The righteousness God demands cannot be achieved by keeping rules and regulations. It comes from God's grace in response to repentance and faith, and is developed through submission to Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

1. Matt 5:48; 6:33; 7:24; cf. 2 Cor 5:17
2. Matt 5:21-22,27-28,33-37,38-39,43-48
3. Matt 5:20; Rom 1:17; 3:21-22,28



*Sea of Galilee from Mount of the Beatitudes*

## In Jerusalem again

When Jesus made a brief trip to Jerusalem for a religious festival, one place he visited was the Pool of Bethesda, where many blind and crippled people hoped for miraculous healing. One man wanted Jesus to help him, not for healing (for he did not know who Jesus was), but for assistance into the pool.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus must have known that this man's troubles were in some way connected with his own wrongdoing, so he not only healed the man but also urged him to repent of his sin. The man, however, showed neither gratitude nor repentance. On the contrary, he reported Jesus to hostile Jewish leaders who were looking for him.<sup>2</sup>

These Jewish leaders argued that Jesus, in healing people on the Sabbath, was doing work and therefore breaking the Jewish law. Jesus replied that his Father also worked on the Sabbath – for example, in providing constant care for all his creatures – but this angered the Jews even more.<sup>3</sup>

This incident and the teaching that flowed from it remind us of important issues relating to life and death. Jesus showed his followers that they should always have loving care for those who suffer. But they might also have opportunity to speak of those deeper issues of life that people fail to see when personal circumstances cloud their vision.

Yet even in the face of death, people can have certainty. Those who receive Jesus as the God-sent Saviour find that they have passed from death to life. Consequently, the prospect of physical death holds no terror, because it cannot extinguish the eternal life God has put within them. Although they will stand before Christ in the final judgment, there will be no condemnation for those who have received the eternal life he made available.<sup>4</sup>

1. John 5:1-7,13

2. John 5:8-15

3. John 5:16-18

4. John 5:19-24



*Pool of Bethesda*

## Back in Galilee

Upon returning north, Jesus was again in Capernaum when he met an officer of the Roman army who asked him to heal a critically ill servant. The man knew that if he, an army officer, could exercise imperial authority to command his soldiers, Jesus could surely exercise divine authority to heal the servant. He merely needed to issue a command and the servant would be healed.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was impressed with the simple confidence of the Roman officer. A foreigner had more faith than the Jews.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Jews of Capernaum (and Bethsaida and Chorazin, other Jewish towns in the part of Galilee where Jesus did much of his work) were heading for a terrible judgment. Predominantly non-Jewish towns such as Tyre, Sidon and Sodom may have been morally worse than the predominantly Jewish towns, but the judgment on them would not be as severe, because they had not been blessed with the extensive ministry of Jesus among them.<sup>3</sup>

The lesson is that people in a position of privilege will be judged more severely if they reject the opportunities given them. Whether in mercy or judgment, God often acts in ways that complacently religious people do not expect.

Even those who were in many ways closest to Jesus, such as his mother, brothers and sisters, were at times slow to understand what he was doing and saying. He did not conform to their ideas of the Messiah, and they thought he was suffering from some form of religious extremism. Conservatively religious people today would be equally surprised if they realized the sort of radical life Jesus has called them to. It is a life that puts his interests before personal well-being, family relationships, community prosperity and national self-interest, but it is the only life of true discipleship.<sup>4</sup>

1. Luke 7:1-8

2. Luke 7:9-10

3. Matt 11:20-24

4. Mark 3:20-21,31-35; cf. Luke 14:26-27



*Synagogue ruins, Capernaum*

## Outreach in the north

About this time there was a marked increase in Jesus' use of parables. Not all parables were as easy to interpret as we sometimes imagine, and Jesus used them to make people think. He confronted people with the claims of his kingdom, and forced them to decide one way or the other whether they would enter it. His parables helped separate those who genuinely believed from those who were merely curious.<sup>1</sup>

Along with this element of confrontation came an element of urgency. Jesus believed that the twelve had been with him long enough and the time had now come to send them out by themselves, so that the message of the kingdom could spread more rapidly. He passed on to them some of his special messianic powers so that, besides preaching the good news of the kingdom, they could perform acts of merciful healing as he did.<sup>2</sup>

There would not be time to reach the whole world during Jesus' lifetime, so the twelve were to concentrate on Israel. After Jesus' death and resurrection, they could use Israel as a base from which to evangelize the countries beyond.<sup>3</sup>

For the present, however, the twelve were to move swiftly and cover as much territory as possible. They were to take with them only the bare essentials and were not to waste time with people who refused to listen. Above all, they were to proclaim fearlessly whatever Jesus had taught them.. This could land them in trouble, but they were to trust the Spirit of God to guide them, no matter what circumstances they faced.<sup>4</sup>

Although Jesus left his disciples in no doubt concerning the dangers ahead, he assured them help would come from unexpected sources. And God would reward those who cared for his messengers.<sup>5</sup>

1. Matt 13:10-16. See separate book in this series, *Parables and Pictures*.
2. Luke 9:1-2; see page 12
3. Matt 10:5-8; 28:18-19; Acts 1:8
4. Matt 10:9-33
- 5 Matt 10:40-42



*Modern Safed, in the northern hills*



## Around the Sea of Galilee

When the twelve returned from their first period of work around Galilee, Jesus tried to have some time alone with them. They had found that working for the Messiah's kingdom placed such demands on them that they barely had time to eat. Jesus also needed a break, but the sight of people in need always moved him to pity. And the crowds who wanted his help were numbered in thousands.<sup>1</sup>

Although the needs of these people were mainly spiritual, Jesus did not ignore their physical needs. When he miraculously fed a huge crowd with five loaves and two fish, many wanted to make him king immediately. This might have pleased some of Jesus' followers, but for him it was a possible temptation. He therefore went up into the hills behind the lake to be alone and pray, while his disciples got into a boat and began rowing across to Bethsaida.<sup>2</sup>

Before the disciples could reach Bethsaida, a storm blew up that might have sunk their boat had not Jesus suddenly intervened. They did not think to call for his help, in spite of the power they had seen when he fed the great crowd. Others, by contrast, expected Jesus to supply them with whatever they wanted. They followed him not because they felt a spiritual need, but because they believed he had magical powers that could keep them well fed.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus did not persevere indefinitely with those whose interests were entirely selfish. He urged them to think about spiritual and eternal issues, not just things that were physical and temporal. His words, 'I am the bread of life', are as necessary for us as they were for the people of his day.<sup>4</sup> Unless people eat of this 'bread' they cannot be saved, cannot be in Christ's kingdom, and cannot have eternal life.

Many, when they heard Jesus say this, turned back from following him. But not the true followers. Such people know that life is more than bread, and it is found in Jesus Christ alone.<sup>5</sup>

1. Mark 6:30-34,44

2. Mark 6:45-46; John 6:15-17

3. Mark 6:47-52; John 6:18-26

4. John 6:35-51

5. John 6:66-68; cf. Matt 4:4



*Sea of Galilee, Capernaum*

## Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis

From the region around the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his disciples moved north-west, out of Palestine and into the region of Lebanon. They were hoping to get some peace and quiet away from the crowds of Galilee, but this was not to be. Jesus' fame had spread beyond the borders of Palestine, and soon the local people were coming to him for healing. Jesus was impressed with the attitude of one local woman in particular, whose faith was in marked contrast to the unbelief of many Israelites.<sup>1</sup>

After the time in Lebanon, Jesus and his disciples returned to the region around the Sea of Galilee, and from there moved south into the Decapolis. This also was a largely Gentile area, and it seems that for a time Jesus' ministry was mainly among Gentiles. Crowds came to him and he ministered to them as he had to Israelites. Many Gentiles became believers in the God of Israel, whereas Israelites were increasingly rejecting the one their God had sent to them.<sup>2</sup>

Once more Jesus showed concern for the crowds of people around him when he saw they had barely eaten for three days. On a previous occasion he miraculously fed a crowd that was largely Jewish, but here in the Decapolis the crowd was largely Gentile.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps that was why the disciples doubted whether he would use his messianic power to feed them. Jesus made no distinction, and by his generosity of spirit gave his disciples a valuable lesson.

But the disciples were slow to learn. In spite of seeing his two miraculous provisions of food for others, they became worried when they themselves had no food. Jesus corrected their unbelief, and then used the occasion to point out something they had not yet grasped, namely, that the threat to the Messiah's kingdom was not from the Gentile powers but from the Jewish nation itself. Unbelief, hypocrisy and wrong teaching were leading the nation to disaster.<sup>4</sup>

1. Mark 7:24; Matt 15:21-28

2. Mark 7:31; Matt 15:29-31

3. Matt 15:32-39; cf. John 6:1-15

4. Matt 16:5-12; Luke 12:1



*Ruins of Bethshean, a city of the Decapolis*

## On a northern mountain

The Mount of Transfiguration is believed to be Mount Hermon, in Israel's far north. This identification is possibly correct, because just before his transfiguration, Jesus was nearby in Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost Israelite town of his recorded travels. This was the place where he asked his disciples who they believed him to be, and Peter, speaking no doubt on behalf of the group, replied that he was the promised Messiah, the Son of God.<sup>1</sup>

A few days later, Jesus and his disciples went up 'a high mountain', which again suggests Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in all Israel. The remarkable event known as the Transfiguration<sup>2</sup> was seen by only three disciples, and seems to have been a revelation of the glory that Jesus laid aside when he came into the world. It now reappeared briefly through a human body and gave a glimpse of the glory he would have after he finished the work he came to do.

That work could not be completed, however, till Jesus had given his life in sacrifice on the cross. This confirmed what he had told his disciples only a few days earlier – the Messiah had to die before he could enter his glory.<sup>3</sup> In spite of Peter's well-meaning but misguided attempt to prevent such a death, Jesus knew there was no way he could avoid the cross.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Jesus made it clear, both to the twelve and to all believers since, that any who want to be his followers must be prepared for a similar end. Those who want to keep their lives for themselves will lose life in the only sense that matters; those who choose the way of self-denial for the sake of Christ will find life in its fullest sense.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus would enter his eternal glory only by way of death – and so it is with us. The only things of eternal worth are those we sacrifice for the sake of Jesus Christ. Those we keep for ourselves will perish with us.

1. Matt 16:13-20. Caesarea Philippi later became known as Banyas.
2. Matt 17:1-13
3. Luke 9:30-31; cf. Matt 16:21
4. Matt 16:21-23
5. Matt 16:24-26



*Cave at Banyas, where a spring is one source of the Jordan River*

## Outreach southwards

After further work in Galilee, Jesus headed south. He knew that his mission would finish in Jerusalem, but first he had much work to do in Samaria and in regions east of Jordan and elsewhere. Among the twelve, some were not yet ready for this. For example, they resented the Samaritans' animosity to Jews and would rather see them killed than converted. Jesus' rebuke shows that such bigotry should never be found among his followers.<sup>1</sup>

This was not the only attitude that needed to change if people were to be true followers of Jesus. Jesus gave lessons to three would-be disciples to show that following him means putting up with hardship, placing his interests before all others, and sticking with him to the end, even if the journey becomes difficult.<sup>2</sup>

With each passing day, the time available to Jesus to complete his ministry diminished. There was still much to do, because he wanted to spread the message of his kingdom as widely as possible across the region. Therefore, just as he had sent the twelve into the northern areas, so now he sent a much larger number, seventy, into the southern areas.<sup>3</sup> His instructions to the seventy were similar to those he gave the twelve.

Some time later, probably several months, the seventy returned. They were excited at the success they saw in exercising the powers Jesus entrusted to them. Jesus saw this as the triumph of his kingdom over Satan's – 'I saw Satan falling like lightning from heaven'<sup>4</sup> – and therefore as an assurance of ultimate victory.

Amid the excitement, however, Jesus issued a caution. Those who serve him must remember that their greatest cause for praise is not what they have done for God, but what he has done for them.<sup>5</sup> They know their weaknesses, and are humbly grateful that a gracious God has given them his salvation.

1. Luke 9:51-56
2. Luke 9:57-62
3. Luke 10:1-16
4. Luke 10:17-19
5. Luke 17:20



*Roman ruins, Samaria*

## Hospitality in Bethany

Apart from the constant stress of his work and the unceasing demands of the pressing crowds, Jesus had to put up with repeated dullness and pettiness among those closest to him. At various times they showed misunderstanding of plain statements, inability at straightforward tasks, competition among themselves and jealousy of other preachers.<sup>1</sup> And now, to add to all that, tension must have been building within Jesus' heart as he saw the violent climax to his work approaching.

To get away for a while for some quiet refreshment of spirit, Jesus visited the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who lived in the village of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Martha, wanting to provide the best possible hospitality, busied herself preparing a large meal, but she became annoyed when Mary, instead of helping, sat and listened to Jesus talk.

Jesus, however, had not come because he wanted a lavish meal. All he wanted was some fellowship with his friends, and Mary understood this. People are still making the same mistake as Martha, and in doing so are missing out on the blessings of giving and receiving hospitality. What people want is friendship, not a banquet.

Being in each other's homes means that we get to know each other, and though this can be uplifting, it exposes us as we really are. Jesus did not have his own home, but for more than three years he lived closely with a group of men (and women<sup>3</sup>) who observed him constantly, day and night. They saw him when he was popular and when he was hated. Whether he was tired, hungry, frustrated, abused, disappointed or distressed, they saw it all. These were the people who knew Jesus best, and their unqualified testimony was that, in both behaviour and character, he was without fault. 'He did no sin . . . In him there was no sin.'<sup>4</sup>

1. Mark 8:31-32; 9:18-19,33-34,38-40

2. Luke 10:38-42

3. Luke 8:1-3

4. 1 Peter 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5



*Church at Bethany*

## To Jerusalem for a festival

At some stage during Jesus' ministry he spent time in Jerusalem for certain Jewish feasts (or festivals). One of these was the week-long Feast of Tabernacles, sometimes called the Festival of Shelters.<sup>1</sup> The name came from the temporary shelters Jews lived in during the festival, in memory of their ancestors' years in the wilderness.

Jesus was with his brothers in Galilee at the time, and was no doubt disappointed at their continued refusal to believe in him. He would not go to the feast to promote himself (which was what his brothers suggested), though later in the week he made a quiet and unannounced entry. It was difficult, however, for him to remain unnoticed, because he was a controversial figure. Some thought he was a good man, but others wanted to kill him.<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus began to teach in the temple, the controversy increased. As often happened, Jewish legalists criticized him for doing his healing works on the Sabbath, and Jesus responded by accusing them of hypocrisy. Far from trying to appease them, he stirred them up further by asserting that he had come from heaven, and one day would return. Not only would his opponents then be rid of him, but they could be assured of never seeing him again, because there was no way that unbelievers like them could ever reach heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Eternal life was available, however, to all who recognized their spiritual need and came to Jesus in true faith.<sup>4</sup> The response to this was mixed. Some believed, some were confused, and some were opposed. Even the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, was divided. The leaders tried unsuccessfully to arrest him, but one member, Nicodemus, knew Jesus better and asked that at least he be given a fair hearing.<sup>5</sup> Nicodemus' pleading failed. It was now clear that the Jewish leaders were not interested in finding out the truth about Jesus. They just wanted him out of the way, preferably dead.

1. John 7:2; Lev 23:33-43; Deut 16:13-15

2. John 7:1-13

3. John 7:19-23,28-30,33-34

4. John 7:37-39

5. John 7:40-51



*Temporary shelter, Feast of Tabernacles*

## In the Jerusalem temple

Now that Jesus had, with the help of the twelve and the seventy, covered most of the provincial regions, he concentrated his work in Jerusalem and nearby regions. He had always met his fiercest opposition in Jerusalem, and he knew the final months of his work would be tough.

This was a time of constant argument with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, especially when Jesus went and taught in their stronghold, the temple.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus said he was the light of the world, the Jews accused him of bearing witness to himself and therefore of breaking the law. When he offered them eternal life, they accused him of claiming to be greater than Abraham. When he said he existed before Abraham, they accused him of blasphemy. When he healed a blind man, they accused him of breaking Sabbath rules.<sup>2</sup>

Two months had now passed since the Feast of Tabernacles, and people were becoming agitated. Another festival had come round and, as Jesus was walking in the temple, people confronted him. His teaching had been forthright, and though many were upset, others believed. A clear division emerged as people decided whether to follow Jesus or oppose him.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus had given plenty of evidence, through his activity of the past three years, that he was the God-sent Messiah, but he had not yet said the words many wanted to hear, 'I am the Messiah'. Some wanted to hear these words so that they could be 'safe' in believing, but others wanted to hear them so that they could be safe in making accusations. Jesus still refused to satisfy them. They had all the evidence they needed, and those who accepted it in faith were his true people. Their eternal security was guaranteed by Jesus and his heavenly Father, because the two were inseparably united. As usual, some believed and others just got angry.<sup>4</sup>

1. John 8:20; 10:21; 11:56

2. John 8:12-13,51-53,56-59; 9:13-16

3. John 9:16,38; 10:19-22

4. John 10:22-31,37-39



*Jerusalem today – from theological debate to tourism*

## Back to the Jordan Valley

The recent dispute in the temple had threatened such violence that Jesus decided to leave Jerusalem for a while. He went across the Jordan into Perea, where John the Baptist had preached.<sup>1</sup> The welcome Jesus received there was in marked contrast to the hostility of Jerusalem.

Jesus did not remain in Perea. He seems to have moved around the Jordan Valley, bringing his message of life and hope to people on both sides of the river. These were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, but to all he made it clear that they should believe in him without delay, because they would not have the opportunity to hear from him again. Soon he would return to Jerusalem for the last time. People should stop debating theoretical questions about who would or would not be saved, and instead make sure of their own salvation. For on the judgment day, many who assume they are in God's kingdom will find themselves left outside.<sup>2</sup>

One reason why crowds continued to follow Jesus was that many still misunderstood the kingdom he proclaimed. They thought of a political structure, even though Jesus had promised no such thing. What he saw ahead was the sacrifice of his own life, and he warned his followers that they were to be prepared for the same end.<sup>3</sup> To follow Jesus means to love him more than anything else. It means to be loyal even to death.

On the other hand, the kingdom of God is not something threatening or grim. It is open even to children. In fact, people must, in a sense, enter it as children.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that they are to be childish or naïve, but that they are to come in a spirit of complete dependence. Christ's kingdom has no place for those who hold high opinions of themselves, or who think they can gain eternal life through their own wisdom, effort or good works.

1. John 10:40-42
2. Luke 13:22-30
3. Luke 14:25-27
4. Luke 18:15-17



*'Let the children come to me'*



## Through Jericho

As Jesus prepared to leave the Jordan Valley and begin the ascent to Jerusalem, he told his disciples that this would lead to the climax of his life's work. He would be arrested and condemned by the Jewish leaders and handed over to the Romans for execution. But on the third day he would rise victoriously from death.<sup>1</sup>

Incredibly, the disciples seem not to have understood what Jesus said. They were too concerned about a dispute that arose when two of the group tried to secure the top positions in the kingdom. In spite of the years spent with Jesus, they still did not understand the sort of kingdom he brought. Nor did they understand the severe tests of loyalty they would face when persecution came. Jesus' kingdom is not like the political structures of this world where ambitious people compete for power. It is a kingdom based on the example of the King himself, who served others and gave himself for them.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus must have been deeply disappointed with the disciples as he came to Jericho, the last Jordan Valley town before the road begins its climb to Jerusalem. He healed several beggars as he passed through,<sup>3</sup> though only after he made the men declare their faith openly. Plenty of people were ready to call Jesus by his messianic title Son of David if they thought it would help extract his blessing. The men's open confession also strengthened their faith.

Another person in Jericho who became a believer was Zacchaeus, a Jew who was despised by other Jews because he collected taxes for the Roman government that ruled them.<sup>4</sup> Onlookers were surprised when Jesus went to his house, but Jesus had the satisfaction of seeing Zacchaeus repent of his wrongdoing. Zacchaeus promised not only to make full restitution to those he had cheated, but also to give generously to those he had not cheated. Respectable citizens disapproved of Jesus' associating with such a disreputable person, but that was the sort of person Jesus came to save.

1. Matt 20:17-19

2. Matt 20:20-28

3. Matt 20:29-34; Mk 10:46-52; Lk 18:35-43

4. Luke 19:1-10



*From old Jericho towards the Mount of Temptation*

## In Bethany again

During his time in the Jordan Valley, Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus of Bethany was seriously ill. Jesus knew that Lazarus was in fact dead, and therefore he did not hurry to Bethany immediately. He would go in due course, in spite of the efforts of his disciples to stop him because of the trouble they saw ahead. Jesus would raise Lazarus to life, and thereby strengthen the faith of the disciples and of Lazarus' sisters.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus saw death as an enemy, a weapon of Satan. He was grieved at the sorrow it brought his friends, and he showed his power over it by raising Lazarus to life. His power over death, however, goes much further. All who are spiritually dead because of sin can have eternal life through him, so that the life of the kingdom of God is theirs for ever.<sup>2</sup> In the normal course of events, physical death comes to all, but it cannot destroy the eternal life that Jesus gives.

The miracle of Lazarus' resurrection set in motion the sequence of events that led to Jesus' crucifixion. As Jesus' fame spread, the Sanhedrin feared the people might accept him as leader of a messianic uprising, and bring upon the nation a crushing Roman intervention. The simple solution was to kill Jesus and save the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Passover was approaching, and as people arrived in Jerusalem for the festival, the atmosphere grew tense. Jesus and the disciples escaped attention for a while by retreating to a quiet village, but when they returned to the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, news spread and a crowd gathered.<sup>4</sup>

Some of these people were merely curious, but others were genuine believers. The Jewish leaders were right in thinking that the raising of Lazarus would attract a following for Jesus.<sup>5</sup> They therefore became more determined to kill him – and to kill Lazarus as well.

1. John 11:1-44

2. John 11:25-26

3. John 11:45-53

4. John 11:54-57; 12:1,9

5. John 12:10-11; cf. 11:47-48



*Token of life and hope*

## Triumphal entry

According to various psalms and prophecies, the Jewish people expected their messianic king, the Son of David, to enter the royal city of Zion in a triumphal procession. Jesus saw that the time had now come to make such an entry.<sup>1</sup> It was a bold challenge to the Jewish people, especially his opponents, and therefore he made secret arrangements with just a few trusted people, so that no one could find out beforehand and try to stop it from happening.

When Jesus made his triumphal entry, he came not as a conquering warlord, but as a king of peace. He was humble and riding on a donkey. The people in Jerusalem, both local residents and visitors who came for the Passover, welcomed him enthusiastically as the Messiah, though many had little understanding of his messiahship.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish leaders, however, were furious. The thing they most feared was happening before their eyes. News of the raising of Lazarus had swelled the crowd, and now it seemed half the world was following Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The Jewish leaders seemed powerless.

Human nature inclines most people to be swept away by the praise they receive. Not so the Lord Jesus. He was not deceived by the excitement of the crowd. He knew that, when people understood properly the sort of Messiah he was, they would turn against him. Indeed, the nation as a whole would turn against him, and in the judgment that resulted, Jerusalem would be destroyed. He wept at the city's refusal to accept its Saviour.<sup>4</sup>

Once Jesus entered Jerusalem, he headed not for the palace but for the temple. This again showed that his messiahship was concerned not with political issues but with spiritual. What he saw in the temple displeased him, but it was too late in the day to do much, so he went back to Bethany for the night. The next day he returned to the temple to cleanse it of its ungodly practices.<sup>5</sup>

1. Matt 21:1-5; Ps 24:7-10; 110:1-7; 118:25-27; Zech 9:9
2. Luke 19:35-38; John 12:12-16
3. Luke 19:39-40; John 12:17-19
4. Luke 19:41-44; cf. Matt 23:37-39
5. Mark 11:11-19; cf. John 2:13-22



*From Bethphage down the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem*

## Final teaching in Jerusalem

Jesus' triumphal entry took place on the Sunday before Passover, and his cleansing of the temple the next day.<sup>1</sup> After cleansing the temple, he spent time there healing and teaching, and then went back to Bethany for the night.<sup>2</sup>

On the Tuesday morning Jesus returned to Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> where he spent much time in lively interaction with the people – arguments, debates, teachings, warnings. The religious leaders in particular challenged him with tough questions, and he replied with equally tough questions. Many of these were supplemented with parables and stories that forced the hearers to think hard about themselves and where they were heading.<sup>4</sup> Although Jesus saw his death approaching, he still engaged daily in this intense disputation, which must have made the nights at Bethany a welcome respite.

Jesus' chief teaching venue in Jerusalem was the temple.<sup>5</sup> On one occasion, perhaps on the Wednesday, he had finished teaching and was heading in the direction of Bethany when, in response to questions from his disciples, he stopped on the Mount of Olives to talk to them about some of the crises ahead.<sup>6</sup>

The disciples seem to have thought that the predicted destruction of Jerusalem was linked to the return of the Messiah and the end of the age. Jesus pointed out that the two events were not necessarily connected. Certainly, people of his generation would live to witness the horror of Jerusalem's destruction, but they were not to believe every prediction of his soon return. Nor were they to think that every war, famine or earthquake was a sure sign that the end was near. What they *were* to be concerned with was that the good news of the kingdom be spread throughout the world, and that they themselves be ready always for his return. For he will return at a time that no one expects.

1. John 12: 12 cf. v. 1; Mark 11:11-12,15

2. Matt 21:12-17

3. Matt 21:18

4. Matt 21:23ff, 28ff, 33ff, 45ff, 22:1ff, 15ff, 23ff, 34ff, 41ff

5. Matt 21:14,23; 24:1; 26:55; Mark 12:35,41; Luke 21:37-38

6. Matt 24:1-44



Jerusalem

## Preparing for Passover

On the Thursday, Jesus began preparation for Passover, scheduled for the next day. This feast commemorated Israel's escape from bondage in Egypt, when each Israelite family sacrificed a lamb in place of its firstborn and thereby ensured that God would 'pass over' its house. The occupants, having been spared, then escaped from bondage, eating bread made in haste as they fled.<sup>1</sup>

The time for a greater deliverance had now arrived. Jesus would die as the true Passover lamb, to bear sin's penalty and release sinners from its bondage. Normally, the Jews killed the lamb on the afternoon of Passover day and ate it in a meal that night. But Jesus planned to eat the meal with his disciples the night before. And they probably ate it without a lamb, because the next day Jesus himself was to be the lamb.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders were plotting how to arrest Jesus, but they preferred not to do it during the festival. Excitement was high and they did not want a riot. Their task was made easier when one of the twelve, Judas, struck a deal with them to betray Jesus. He could tell them of Jesus' movements, so that they could arrest him without the public knowing.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus, however, knew what Judas was plotting. Therefore, he made careful arrangements for the feast, so that the only people who knew where it would be held were various unnamed people to whom he gave secret instructions.<sup>4</sup> We know the place simply as 'the upper room'.

The treachery of Judas was in sharp contrast to the affection of a woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.<sup>5</sup> Judas saw her action as a waste of money; the woman saw it as an act of devotion; Jesus saw it as symbolic of his anointing for burial.

1. Exod 12:1-20,39

2. Exod 12:6,8; 1 Cor 5:7

3. Matt 26:3-5,14-16

4. Mark 14:12-16

5. Mary of Bethany, if Matt 26:6-13 and Jn 12:1-8 refer to the same incident



*Middle Eastern perfumes*

## The last night together

During the meal with the twelve that night, Jesus took some water and a towel and began to wash their feet.<sup>1</sup> They were embarrassed at this, but Jesus was giving them important matters to think about. First, he was God's perfect servant, the only one who could cleanse sinners, and he was about to do this by offering his life as a sacrifice. Second, if he, the disciples' Lord, humbled himself by washing their feet, how much more should they, his servants, humble themselves by serving each other.

Jesus gave another graphic demonstration of the sacrifice he was about to make by taking bread and wine, part of the Passover meal, and using them as symbols of his own body and blood. His sacrifice would seal God's promise of forgiveness and life to all who receive Jesus Christ. To this day, cleansed sinners relive all that Christ's sacrifice means to them when they eat bread and wine together in an act of communion known as the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup>

On the occasion of the meal in the upper room, Jesus had much more to say to his disciples. This is represented in the teaching of John 14-16, to which is added the prayer of Jesus in John 17. The minds of the disciples, however, were in a state of confusion. Since the triumphal entry only a few days earlier, more had happened than the disciples could clearly grasp. Jesus knew they could not take in all he was saying, but he said it nevertheless, confident that after his resurrection and their reception of the Holy Spirit, they would recall his words and understand their significance.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier that night, the disciples learnt that one of the twelve was a traitor. The response of the others to this news was a mixture of disbelief, anxiety and confusion. It even led to an argument among them – not about who was the worst, but about who was the best!<sup>4</sup> To be impressed with Jesus' example of self-sacrificial service is one thing; to follow it, quite another.

1. John 13:1-16

2. Matt 26:26-30; 1 Cor 10:16; 11:23-26

3. John 14:1,25-27; 16:4-13

4. Luke 22:22-24; John 13:21-22,37



*An 'upper room' in Jerusalem*

## Gethsemane

The hour must have been approaching midnight, or even later, when Jesus and his disciples left the upper room. They headed across the Kidron valley to Gethsemane, a garden on the slopes of the Mount of Olives where Jesus often took his disciples to pray.<sup>1</sup>

This was a time of great testing for Jesus, because Satan's attacks were nearing their climax. As at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and throughout it, Satan wanted him to please himself rather than do the work his Father had sent him to do. The completion of that work would require the sinless Son of God not only to die a brutal death at the hands of cruel enemies, but also, on behalf of his fellow human beings, to bear God's wrath against sin.

Jesus fought Satan's attacks through prayer. He found a spot in the garden where he could be alone, though he asked his three closest disciples to stay nearby. They could do little except stay awake in sympathy with him, because the battle he faced was one he had to fight and win alone.

For the next hour the battle raged. Was there an alternative to the suffering ahead? After all, were not all things possible with God? Was there some way other than the cross? In the end, Jesus committed himself to the only course of action available to the person fully submissive to God – 'not my will, but yours.'<sup>2</sup> Once he won that victory, he could face anything that lay ahead.

The disciples, who had fallen asleep, were suddenly stirred to action when Judas arrived with a group of temple guards and Roman soldiers. At first the disciples wanted to fight, but Jesus needed no force to defend him, and Judas needed no force to arrest him. In the strength of his victory in the garden, Jesus surrendered himself to his enemies. His only request was that they should not harm his friends.<sup>3</sup> But his friends did not give the enemy a chance. They abandoned Jesus and fled for their lives.

1. Mark 14:26,32; John 18:1-2

2. Mark 14:32-36; cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 5:7-9; 1 Peter 2:24

3. Matt 26:47-56; John 18:2-11



*Ancient olive trees, Garden of Gethsemane*

## Before the Jewish leaders

The Jewish leaders, because of the deal they had made with Judas, knew what was happening. They therefore assembled the Sanhedrin to try Jesus promptly, even though a meeting at night was illegal if its purpose was to judge an offence carrying the death penalty.

From Gethsemane back up to the city was a long hard climb, but Jesus' captors eventually delivered him to the house of the high priest, Caiaphas. Annas, the former high priest and the father-in-law of Caiaphas, lived in the same house and was the first to question the prisoner. The answers Jesus gave were simple but challenging, and left the Jews with nothing to say. Their only response was to punch him.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was then taken before the Sanhedrin, which met under the leadership of Caiaphas. The purpose of the meeting was to get Jesus to make a statement they could use to accuse him of blasphemy. Then they could pass the death sentence upon him. Although Jesus had refused to satisfy similar demands on earlier occasions, he now made an outright statement. He was the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of man and the heir to God's glorious kingdom. His accusers at last had what they wanted.<sup>2</sup>

While Jesus was before the Sanhedrin, Peter and another disciple, probably John, waited in the courtyard. As the hours passed, Peter's loyalty to Jesus was repeatedly tested, and it repeatedly failed. The crowing of a cock was a terrible reminder to Peter of the danger of over-confidence.<sup>3</sup> It also indicated that daybreak was approaching.

Once a new day had dawned, the Sanhedrin could pass sentence legally. So, after a brief repetition of the previous proceedings, Jesus was formally sentenced to death. The Jewish authorities could now take the matter to Pilate, the Roman governor, for the sentence to be carried out.<sup>4</sup>

1. John 18:12-14,19-23

2. Matt 26:57-66; cf. Mark 14:61-62

3. Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18,25-27

4. Matt 27:1



*According to Armenian tradition, site of the house of Caiaphas*



## Before Pilate and the people

It was now Friday, Passover day. The Jewish leaders, wanting to have Jesus out of the way before their festivities began, went to Pilate as early in the morning as possible. Hoping to win Pilate's support, they accused Jesus not of a religious offence, but of the political offence of leading a messianic uprising against Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Pilate, believing the Jews were jealous of Jesus' following, was not interested and tried to dismiss the case. When he himself questioned Jesus, he did not comprehend Jesus' answers, but understood enough to be convinced that this man was not a political rebel. Then, upon learning that Jesus was from Galilee, he tried to avoid judgment by sending him to the governor of Galilee, Herod, who was in Jerusalem for the festival. But that achieved nothing.<sup>2</sup>

By the time Jesus arrived back from Herod, a crowd had gathered and Pilate was becoming apprehensive. He offered to flog Jesus and consider the matter finished,<sup>3</sup> but his offer was refused. He therefore made another offer. He would accept the Jews' accusation of Jesus' guilt, but give him the special pardon available at the festival season. Jewish priests, however, moved among the crowd and persuaded the people to accept nothing other than Jesus' crucifixion. In the end, Pilate gave in and condemned to death a man he knew was innocent.<sup>4</sup>

Being now a condemned man, Jesus was taken and flogged. To add to their violence, the soldiers put an old cloak over his shoulders, a crown of thorns on his head and a reed in his hand; then, in mock homage, they pretended to offer a kiss but actually spat in his face. Pilate showed this pitiful figure to the crowd in the hope they might be ashamed and change their minds. But their hatred only increased.<sup>5</sup> Once people reject the truth to pursue their own goals at all costs, neither reason nor pity will move them.

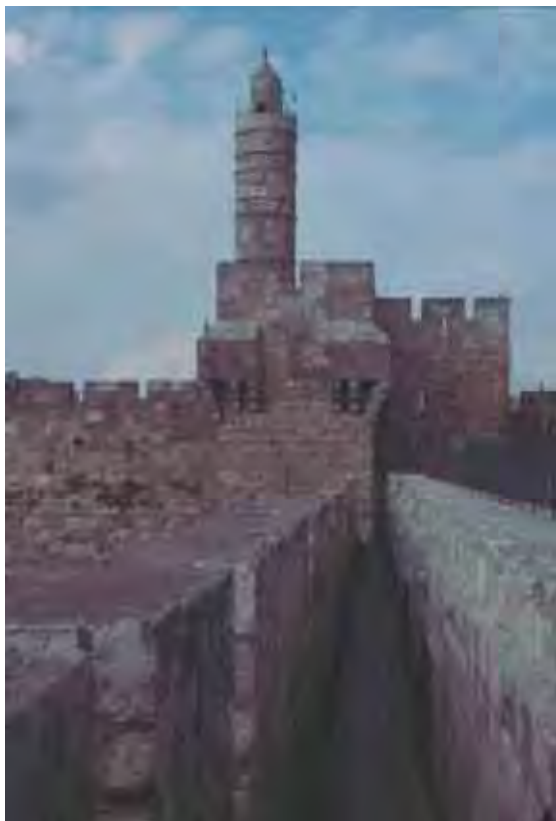
1. Luke 23:1-2; John 18:28-32

2. John 18:33-38; cf. Matt 27:18; see Luke 23:6-12

3. Luke 23:13-16

4. Matt 27:15-26; John 18:39-40

5. Matt 27:27-30; John 19:1-16



*The Citadel, built on the site of Herod's palace*

## Golgotha

Jesus was forced to carry his cross to the crucifixion site on Golgotha hill. But by now he was physically exhausted. He had not had a night's sleep since Wednesday, and possibly not sat down since leaving the upper room. When it seemed he might collapse under the cross's weight, a passer-by was made to carry it for him.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was crucified at 9 a.m. and hung alive on the cross for the next six hours. In bearing sin's penalty, he was determined to face death at its worst, fully conscious of what it meant. He therefore refused the drugged wine intended to deaden the pain and dull the mind. He heard the insults of the crowd, the Jewish leaders and the criminals beside him – all with the theme, 'he claimed to save others but cannot save himself' – yet he said nothing to defend himself. In a sense the statements were true; for only by sacrificing himself could he save guilty sinners. In the end, one of the criminals realized this and, upon repenting, experienced Christ's saving power that day.<sup>2</sup>

During Jesus' last three hours on the cross, a strange darkness came over the land, perhaps symbolizing that God's wrath was falling on sin. Sin separates from God, and as Jesus bore its penalty he had a sense of desolation never experienced before. Yet he knew he was in harmony with his Father's will. Wanting to express this publicly, he asked for something to moisten his dry mouth so that his final words would be loud enough for all to hear. 'It is finished' confirmed that even in death he was still in control. No one took his life from him. In a voluntary, unique act, he placed it in his Father's hands. He had finished the work he came to do.<sup>3</sup>

When soldiers came to brutalize the bodies, they were surprised that Jesus was dead already. This confirmed to the centurion that Jesus was no ordinary person. He was all he claimed to be. Two friends of Jesus felt the same, and boldly gained permission to take his body from the cross before sundown and give him a decent burial.<sup>4</sup>

1. Mark 15:21-22,25

2. Matt 27:34,39-44; Luke 23:32-43; 1 Peter 2:22-24

3. Matt 27:45-50; Luke 23:46; John 19:28-30; cf. 10:18

4. Luke 23:47,50-56; John 19:31-34,38-42



*Church of the Flagellation, Jerusalem*

## Victory – and a new kind of life

On ‘the third day’, Sunday, Jesus rose from death. The record of events that day reflects not only what different people saw, but also the mixture of excitement, joy, fear, wonder and confusion as they rushed around telling others. Whatever variation there may be in their reports, they were all agreed on one thing: Jesus had risen.

Among the people who visited the tomb that morning were women who came to anoint the body and two disciples who responded to the women’s reports. The stone door to the tomb was rolled away, the burial-cloths were neatly folded, and angels were in attendance. Everything indicated a supernatural intervention. But the rest of the disciples did not believe, even when the women told them they had personally met the risen Lord Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

All these events probably occurred within an hour or so of daybreak. Some time that day Jesus appeared to Peter, and that afternoon to two unnamed disciples on the road to a nearby village.<sup>2</sup> That night he suddenly appeared in a closed room where the disciples were meeting, and the next Sunday appeared among them again.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ resurrection appearances were confirmation of the victory he won at the cross. Throughout history other people have died horrible deaths, and some have done so heroically. They have, as it were, conquered ‘the act of dying’. Jesus was concerned with more than the act of dying; he conquered death itself. His resurrection likewise was more than the resuscitation of a corpse. Other corpses have been resuscitated, only to die again. Jesus rose to life of a new kind, breaking the power of death and bringing life and immortality to light.<sup>4</sup> His resurrection body, no longer subject to the limitations of time and space, was transformed into a body suited to the life of the age to come. It represents a new form of existence, the ‘spiritual body’. It is the pattern for the ultimate existence of all who partake of the eternal life he has made available.



*A tomb in a garden*

1. Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18
2. Luke 24:13-35; 1 Cor 15:5
3. John 20:19-29
4. 2 Tim 1:10; cf. 1 Cor 15:20-23,42-49

## Visit to Galilee

Jesus had told the apostles that he wanted to see them in Galilee, but when they arrived they were not sure what to do. So, reverting to what some of them once did for a living, they went fishing.<sup>1</sup> This was an occasion for Jesus to appear to them again and to show, by directing them to a large haul of fish, that he still cared for them and they still needed to depend upon him.

Peter once boasted that he loved Jesus more than other disciples did, yet he disowned Jesus publicly three times. Jesus therefore tested him publicly three times, asking questions about his devotion. The exercise reminded Peter of the danger of over-confidence, and showed the other disciples that Jesus had forgiven him and entrusted him with special responsibility to care for the young church in the difficult days ahead. For Peter, to follow Jesus would mean to leave his life of independence behind and face opposition that would one day cost him his life.<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus took the disciples up a Galilean mountain, they began to see the extent of the task he was entrusting to them. From there, as they looked out towards the Gentile nations beyond, they could see the next stage of Jesus' plan for the spread of his kingdom. For three and a half years they had concentrated on Israel, but now they were to reach out to all nations without distinction. As he had done earlier, Jesus sent them out by delegating to them the sort of power he had exercised when he was with them.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of Jesus' power, however, was not a promise to be taken for granted. If people went out in his name, they had to be committed and hard-working. They had to make disciples of Jesus by preaching the gospel fearlessly, baptizing those who believed and teaching them to understand and follow Jesus' teachings. In this way, Jesus would establish his church, and nothing would be able to destroy it.

1. John 21:1-8; cf. Matt 26:32; 28:10
2. John 21:15-19; cf. Matt 16:18
3. Matt 28:16-20; cf. 10:5-8; Mark 16:15-18; Acts 3:12,16



*Tiberias, Sea of Galilee*

## Back to Judea – then home

During the six weeks after his resurrection, the Lord Jesus appeared to the eleven apostles in a variety of places and circumstances, but few of these are recorded. He appeared also to others, including on one occasion a crowd of more than five hundred, and on another his brother James.<sup>1</sup>

After the eleven met with Jesus on the Galilean mountain, they returned to Jerusalem, most likely to the upper room, which seems to have become their base after the Last Supper.<sup>2</sup> It was here that Jesus began his final words of instruction and encouragement.

Some of the apostles still had hopes for an independent Israelite kingdom, so once more Jesus had to correct their misunderstanding. The essence of his teaching during the past six weeks had been that his ministry on earth – life, death, resurrection – marked the climax of the former era and the introduction to the new. The apostles would lead the way in an era of worldwide expansion, and would be equipped for this task through their first-hand knowledge of Jesus and the help of his indwelling Spirit. He had promised earlier that, once he returned to the Father, he would send the Holy Spirit, and now that time was almost upon them. He urged them to wait and be ready.<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus was taken from the disciples a few weeks earlier, they fled in panic and distress. Now he was to be taken from them again, but this time they were confident and optimistic.

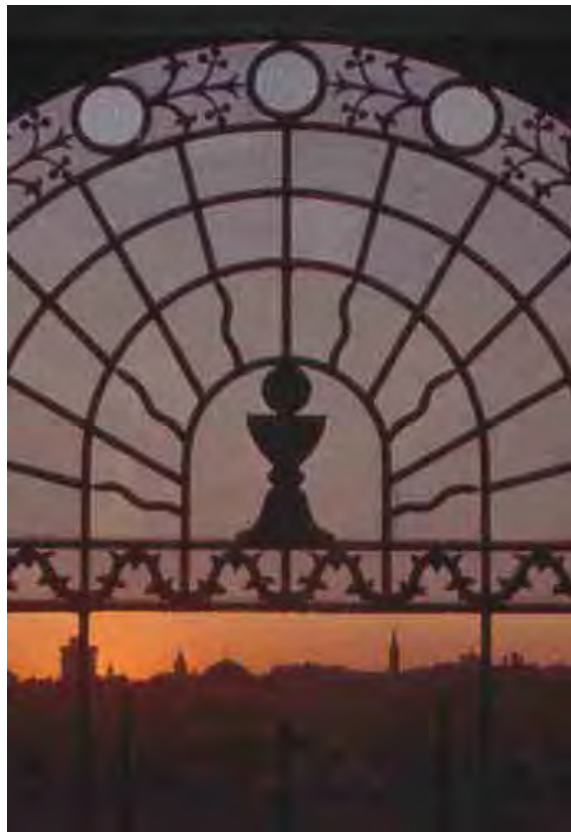
From a spot near Bethany, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, Jesus was taken up heavenwards till he disappeared from sight.<sup>4</sup> The disciples returned to Jerusalem full of joy and praise as they awaited the coming of the promised Spirit. They rejoiced in the knowledge that this same Jesus would return one day; but for the present, he had entrusted the work of the kingdom to them.

1. Acts 1:3; 1 Cor 15:6-7

2. Acts 1:4,13; cf. John 20:19,26

3. Luke 24:44-49; John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7; Acts 1:4-8

4. Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-14



*From the Mount of Olives, outside Jerusalem*

