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Introduction

Do you have a Résumé? “A *résumé* is a document used and created by a person to present their background, skills, and accomplishments. Résumés can be used for a variety of reasons, but most often they are used to secure new employment. A typical résumé contains a “summary” of relevant job experience and education. The résumé is usually one of the first items, along with a cover letter and sent as an application for employment. The potential employer use the information to screen applicants, and it is often followed by an interview.”¹

We have all, no doubt, had an experience where it was necessary to verify that we were qualified for a job, or met the expectation for joining a particular organization. Some of us have surely had to create a formal résumé following a particular business form required by the prospective employer, so that the employer would see that we have the education and experience required for the job. The higher up the ladder of the position for which we are applying, the more detailed is the inquiry into our experience.

Over my 35 years of Pastoral Ministry I was expected to complete a document for our denominational Personnel Services called, “A Pastoral Profile”. It included levels of educational achievement, and a rating of personal ‘gifts’ in my tool box that I brought to pastoral ministry. It also had a component which requested a select group of others who knew me well, who were sent a form to rate a variety of attitudes and abilities. This form was then sent directly to Personnel Services. This file was then available for local churches who were searching for pastoral leadership.

When we view God’s story of salvation, through our present day lens we have reason to be surprised. Those God identified as being qualified for a particular job often seemed the most unlikely to be successful. Moses is an Old Testament example, as well as fishermen and tax collectors in the Gospels. Although there were no résumés, folks did have expectations and that is seen in Acts 4:13 “*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and had perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they were amazed.*” Folks were greatly surprised because the quality of what they were hearing came from men whom they would have never thought had the ability to communicate so well.

I remember being called to a pastoral position at age 24. I have always looked younger than my actual age, so I was not surprised when I discovered that there had been much discussion about my age. Before voting to call me, persons asked, if “such a young man can get the job done.” Folks were pleased with what they read about my educational achievements and prior references but they questioned the “age factor,” and my youthful appearance. Towards the end of my first year after conducting a funeral for an elderly member I was told by several of the deceased friends, “*We thought you were too young to be our pastor, but we’ve changed our minds.*”

In God’s story of salvation Jesus is chosen for the role of Messiah, and unlike our modern expectations, he bursts upon the scene without any résumé. We today, however, are privileged to look back through the shadow of a cross and an empty tomb showing the end of the story, and we easily conclude he was highly qualified.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Résumé>

We know the stories of his birth. *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”* (John 1:1 & 14)

We know Luke 1:30-33 *“The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

We know Matthew 1:18 *“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”*

We know what Paul would have included in the Messiah’s résumé. Galatians 4:4-5 *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law,...”*

We know all of this but the folks who saw the man from Nazareth and heard him speak didn’t know what we know. Jesus was not accountable to a Human Services Department, nor did he have to fill out forms for a Personnel Service, but as a matter of record, John 1:46 reports Jesus did have an unwritten résumé; persons then as today often judge a person by cultural standards. A sticking point for Nathanael was, Jesus was from the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ so to speak. He challenged his qualifications with the question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” It’s the same kind of question persons ask when looking over a Pastoral Personnel form and see the seminary from which he/she received their degree.

The purpose of this material is to examine how the Messiah’s résumé evolves by reviewing five major stories. The stories reflect the vetting process by those who would have been reliable references for the Messiah’s résumé.

Reflective Question

In the introduction I tell about persons who thought I was too young to be their pastor. Have you had any experience where persons misjudged you and your abilities?

CHAPTER ONE
Confirmation/Baptism
 John 1:19-34

Confirmation defined:

*“To establish the truth, accuracy, validity,
 or genuineness of; corroborate; verify.”²*

John 1:19-34

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22 Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23 He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26 John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. 29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” 32 And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

The Scripture in Context

It’s impossible to examine Jesus’ Baptism without understanding the role John the baptizer played coming out of the wilderness and baptizing persons in the Jordan River. It is this event that sets the stage for understanding the mindset and beliefs of the Jewish people at that specific time.

N.T. Wright describes his importance in this way. *“Anybody offering water-baptism for the forgiveness of sins was saying: you can have, here and now, what you would normally get through the Temple cult. Anybody inviting those who wished to do so to pass through an initiatory rite of this kind was symbolically saying: here is the true Israel that is to be vindicated by YHWH.... What John was doing must be seen, and can only be seen, as a prophetic renewal*

²<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/confirm>

movement within Judaism - a renewal, however, that aimed not at renewing the existing structures, but at replacing them."³

John's role in some way is like that of the Transitional Pastor who leads a congregation through a process of preparation where a new vision for the church is formulated. We might think of John's role as laying out a revitalization/renewal plan for Judaism. The new Pastor, who is called accepts the vision for the renewal plan and provides leadership to fulfill it. John's role was to prepare people to accept the one God had appointed, and introduce him. John was to Jesus what Ed McMann was to Johnny Carson. His job was to say, "*Here's..... the Messiah!*"

Reflective Questions

Who were the folks who asked John challenging questions? What information were they seeking, and for whom?

Anytime a reference is listed on a résumé the interested organization is invited to contact that person and question them about their relationship and knowledge of the person. They want to hear from someone who has personal knowledge, experience, and interaction with them, so they can make a more informed decision about his/her qualifications.

The organization that was so interested in questioning John was Judaism, and their headquarters was located in the city of Jerusalem. Included among their staff were Priests and Levites whose job descriptions included maintaining the purity of all Jewish teachings and customs. "*Priests occupied an important and mostly well-regarded position in ancient Jewish society: they were trained not only in religious matters but also in Jewish law, literature, and tradition. Levites were similar to priests in that they worked in the temple...they are often described as a lower-level priesthood. They manned the temple gates, cleaned the temple, slaughtered some of the sacrificial animals, and performed the music during temple worship.*"⁴

A committee of Priests and Levites was assigned to seek out John and do the job of vetting him and his message. The Jewish hierarchy revealed just how important it was for them to confront John by the questions they asked him. They were questions that were first focused on having John reveal his own résumé. Those questions emerged out of the teachings and traditions of Judaism. They wanted to know what qualified him to be announcing, "*Repent the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.*" (Matthew 3:2). John's answers were straightforward in denying any of the assumptions they were making about him being the Messiah or Elijah, or The Prophet. He pointed to the Jewish scriptures and the prophet Isaiah as his reliable reference. "*A voice cries out In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*" (Isaiah 40:3)

John's answer didn't satisfy the committee so they proceeded with a different line of questioning that their oversight committee of Pharisees wanted them to ask. Since John quickly confessed he was not the Messiah, Elijah, or The Prophet the committee wanted to know then why he was preaching repentance and baptizing; the assumption being, he was not qualified to be doing that. It was a drastic change in the teaching and tradition of Judaism and it was their re-

³ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 160

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<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/priests-and-levites-in-the-first-century-ce>

sponsibility to confront him regarding his actions. This was a major change being initiated and it needed to be investigated.

Imagine if an announcement were posted on facebook and letters sent to all church members, unbeknown to the church staff, that Sunday worship had been changed from 9:30 to 11:00. The first thing the Pastoral staff and persons elected to positions of leadership would be asking would be “Who made this change?”

We think we have a problem with a change in our tradition, imagine how drastic John’s message was. It was a major paradigm shift⁵ for Judaism and the leadership who were in charge of maintaining a purity code that followed the Torah, as well as keeping peace in Jerusalem.

This interchange between John and the committee from Jerusalem indicates an awareness of a coming Messiah on the part of the Jewish leaders. Given their history of others making that claim in hopes of a political revolution, the leaders were doing their job of screening anything that might disrupt the status quo relationship between the Jews and the Romans.

Reflective Question

Did the Jewish leaders have a legitimate concern to question John? Have you ever been on either side of a change that was made without permission given? How was it handled?

It’s interesting to note the segue, according to John’s gospel, that the day ends without the Jewish entourage having their last question answered, “*Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?*” That answer would not come until the next day. One can only imagine the conversations they had that night. They would have continued their interest in having their question answered.

The next day the stage was set for God to draw back the curtain and have John introduce Jesus, not only to his disciples, and those who had come for baptism, but also to those who were sent to check out John’s credentials.

We have lived in a culture where the unveiling of something brand new has been given great fanfare. Months of promotion and build up are planned to promote the actual date when an announcement, a person or a product will be unveiled. The introduction of the iPhone and its many upgrades is a sufficient illustration. The introduction of Israel’s long awaited Messiah had none of that. It happened by a river just outside a wilderness, not in The Temple before an altar surrounded by colorfully robed dignitaries. We may wonder if the backwoods location heightened the fears of the religious establishment that another revolution movement might be underway.

“Since the festival of Hanukkah was enthusiastically observed in Jesus’ day, a far wider circle than simply the literate few would have known the story; the connection of revolt against the pagans, action in the Temple, and the establishment of a royal house was firmly impressed on the popular mind.”⁶

⁵ See the book on paradigm shifts in scripture, *The Changing Church: Looking for God’s New Thing*, Daniel Cash & William Griffith, authors, Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA, 2019

⁶ Wright, N.T., *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1996 p.492

Closer to the time of Jesus there was another revolt against the Roman government. “*Judas of Galilee, or Judas of Gamala, was a Jewish leader who led resistance to the census imposed for Roman tax purposes by Quirinius in Judea Province around 6 AD. He encouraged Jews not to register and those that did had their houses burnt and their cattle stolen by his followers.*”⁷

It’s understandable why the Jewish leaders would have wanted to investigate a man talking about a “Kingdom,” and preaching “Repentance,” using baptism as the initiate rite for belonging. But they must have been surprised when John told them that he wasn’t the man they were looking for, but he would be happy to introduce them to him, and that was the very reason he was baptizing. “*I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel. Among you stands one whom you do not know, The one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.*” If their curiosity wasn’t already peaked, John surely got their attention when he informed them that he was standing among them, but they didn’t know him. We are not surprised that those leaders were there the next day when folks lined up to repent and be baptized.

Reflective Question

What do you imagine they talked about over night? Have you ever spent a sleepless night waiting for an important encounter or event? Were you anxious?

Create in your own mind a powerpoint slide of John standing with two of his disciples on the bank of the Jordan River, with the line of baptismal candidates beginning to form. Suddenly John sees Jesus coming toward him and what he sees and says provides a personal reference to be included on Jesus’ résumé. John does not include in his gospel details of his baptism of Jesus as Matthew does (3:16-17), but he confirms the divine moment of confirmation. “*I saw the Spirit like a dove descending and it remained on him.*” John received and shared the personal confirmation he witnessed. “*The one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.*” (John 1:33-34)

Most résumés have more than one reference so that the opinions given may be vetted by numerous persons. Jesus’ résumé shows a variety of names from persons of different walks of life who have verified that he was the messiah.

When he was born his parents took him to the temple as the law required that every first born male was to be dedicated to the Lord. It was there Simeon was on duty that day. Simeon had been promised he would not die until he witnessed the coming of the Messiah. When Jesus is presented Simeon confirmed his long wait had ended saying, “*My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*” (Luke 2:30-32)

Simon Peter, a fisherman from Galilee had reason to confirm for Jesus’ résumé that he the Rabbi from Nazareth was indeed the Messiah, and he along with others committed their lives to

⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judas_of_Galilee

following him. As the spokesman for this group he confirmed, “*We have come to believe that you are “the holy one from God.”*” (John 6:68)

The reference list on a résumé should not only include comments from those associated with the applicant, but those who may hold a different opinion of him/her. As Jesus moved among the people and exercised his authority as the Messiah in healing persons and confronting the demons that held persons hostage, the demons themselves confirmed by “*falling down before him and shouting, “You are the Son of God.”*” (Mark 3:11)

One of the references on a résumé that always gets the most attention is when a name appears that has a history of being an opponent of the applicant. (Imagine Donald Trump providing a reference for Barack Obama.). Jesus had such a reference in a man named Saul who campaigned against all of those who were following Jesus’ teachings. He wanted them locked up and even killed. His references of a change of heart mentioned several times in his writings, as well as in the writings of Luke the historian. Luke’s record notarizes Saul’s change of heart. “Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus. in the synagogues, saying, ‘*He is the Son of God.*’” (Acts 9:20)

I don’t know that the results of public polls have ever been used on a résumé, but the “*politz, a body of citizens*”⁸ living in Jerusalem had some reasons to speak out and have their opinion that even their religious leaders were considering Jesus to be the Messiah. “*Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?*” (John 7:26)

The confirmation of these references established the legitimacy that Jesus was the Messiah. Their acceptance was so widespread that in their writings they combined his name with his title and spoke and wrote about “Jesus Christ,” as if it were his last name. “*The reality is that Christ is a title, not a name. The word Christ is transliterated from a Greek word meaning “Anointed One” or “Chosen One.” The Hebrew equivalent is the source of the word Messiah*”⁹.

Just as today we always identify the title before the name, (Pastor, President, Governor, Mayor) it is more appropriate to speak of “Messiah Jesus.” This places the focus on his divine confirmation.

Sharing our Thoughts

1. What do we learn about the mind-set of the Jews toward John and his baptisms? (John 1:19-23) What was their main question? How does John respond?
2. What is the concern expressed by the committee from Jewish headquarters?
3. Why is John’s introduction of Jesus an affront to Jewish teachings?
4. Why did Jesus have to be baptized, if John’s baptism was for the “forgiveness of sins?”
5. How is Isaiah 11:1-2 and 42:1 relevant to this chapter?

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polis>

⁹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-last-name.html>

CHAPTER TWO
Confrontation/Temptation
 Matthew 4:1-11¹⁰

Confrontation Defined:

“The clashing of forces or ideas”¹¹

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4 But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The Scripture In Context

Embedded in Israel’s history was the experience of exile along with God providing someone to lead an exodus into freedom. Because Israel believed they were God’s chosen people they had celebrations that looked back at how God had provided, and with the promise from their prophets that God would always make a way out of their exile. Living under Roman domination they were exiled in their own country. (Think ‘house arrest’)

For some of those living during those days there was a longing for a prophet who would tell them a deliverer was coming who would be their Messiah. It was John the Baptizer who made that announcement, and Jesus who was identified as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Imagine being hired to fill a high profile job where the search committee took years before they vetted you and selected you, and there was no written job description. You would want some time to do some serious soul searching, reflect on your strengths and weaknesses, and wrestle with the major decisions that would shape your plan on how to proceed.

¹⁰ See also Mark 1:9-15; Luke 4:1-13

¹¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/confrontation>

When Matthew chapter three ends, the next chapter begins with the word “*Then,*” which is the segue into what happened next following Jesus being confirmed as the Messiah. He is led by the Spirit into the wilderness.¹² He has no surprise reaction to this, so we are led to assume he is comfortable with the relationship he experienced with the Spirit’s leading him into the wilderness. He is well aware of the stories of God calling prophets, judges, and kings for a specific purpose, and also providing time for them to be prepared.

We might wonder what did he wrestle with mentally during those 40 days. Did he decide to stay 40 days in the wilderness to symbolically identify with Moses’ 40 years in the wilderness? Did he know the story of the wisemen who identified him as a child who was to be “King of the Jews?” Did he know and remember the family story of his parents fleeing to Egypt to spare his life? Did he recall that experience where he once told his parents, “*I must be about my father’s business.*”? I think we may assume that he reviewed and processed all that he learned in his synagogue up-bring about Israel; about exile; about himself, and the way God always provided.

We have all surely known and appreciated a time of solitude prior to making a big decision. The wilderness is where Jesus spent that time of solitude and it would be in the mix of all his thinking that he was confronted with options and decisions that he had to make to fulfill the role of Messiah.

After a person has been confirmed and qualified for the job a date is set to begin. All prior discussion leading up to confirmation moves from the realm of possibilities to the experience of performance. In pastoral ministry this period has sometimes been referred to as the “Honeymoon” period, and there are some similarities.

Newlyweds have spent a great deal of time together and have concluded that their ready to “tie the knot” and “set up housekeeping” together. It’s then that a new level of discovery is made. She doesn’t squeeze the toothpaste tube from the bottom as he does, and he doesn’t pick up his dirty clothes and put them in the laundry like she does. Many little irritants build up until there is a confrontation which tests the bonds and promises made at the altar.

Having had the experience of being confirmed to a pastoral position five times I know how the “honeymoon” period plays out, so I assume it is similar for other pastors as well. One of the lessons I quickly learned was, “Be aware of the early lunch invitations.” I should have learned from the old adage, “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” On one occasion the invitation came on the first Sunday on the job as a man was going through the handshaking ritual following the sermon. He wanted to know if I’d be interested in being picked up for lunch on Thursday at noon. I quickly agreed, as my mind immediately was suspicious wondering what agenda he wanted to promote.

On Thursday he came to the office and picked me up in a new Cadillac and drove to a very nice restaurant. On the ride to the restaurant my mind was already processing the symbols of wealth evident in this man’s life. It didn’t take him long to share that he was the owner and CEO of a major local business.

After ordering our food we shared small talk, followed by an extended silence. He broke the silence by saying there was a concern in the church that the young associate youth minister

¹²Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13

on staff should be fired. He went on to illustrate the associate's inexperience and lack of professionalism. I listened without interruption or comment until he was finished, and then I responded.

I informed that I had met with the associate and had a very good discussion with him and we discussed his frustration and inexperience due to a lack of mentoring from the former pastor. The young associate had only graduated from seminary the year before. I shared with the layman that I had experience in prior pastoral settings with young seminarians on my staff as "Ministers in training," and I assured the associate that I would mentor him and evaluate his progress for a year. My comments were not well received as the host warned me that my decision was not a wise decision. He implied that it would be a poor way to start my ministry. I tried to assure him that I appreciated his concern and that my style of ministry included working with the elected officers of the church on the Pastoral Relations Committee so they would be kept updated on the mentoring status. With that he picked up the bill for the meals, and we stood and departed.

I tell this story to illustrate the testing that often takes place when anyone begins a new job. When we enter a new position there is already in place official positions of authority and power, and there are persons who display an entitlement attitude assuming power that is not theirs. The result is the newly hired person must deal with a confrontation that opposes his/her own goals that have been formed from prior experience. A pastor knows this is only the first test that he/she will be confronted with as issues surface within the congregation.

Reflective Question

Have you had a similar experience of having your leadership/decisions questioned?

Return to The Scripture in Context

Following Jesus' Messiah confirmation he is directed to the wilderness where he is confronted with options as to how he might proceed. His wilderness experience is identified as a time of temptation or testing by Satan, who represents the power and authority of an evil empire. The reluctance to name him and speak of his power may be a result of how we in our society have only identified him in our cartoons and humor. "*The Devil made me do it,*" is said more in jest, than in believing that there is a power in the world that seeks to control us.

*"Sin is not so much a collection of individual misdeeds as it is an active, malevolent agency bent upon despoiling, imprisonment, and death - the undoing of God's purposes. Misdeeds are signs of that agency at work; they are not the thing itself. It is 'the thing itself' that is our cosmic Enemy."*¹³ *"Although it is true that in a certain sense the devil is a symbol, the symbol encompasses a reality...reality is about evil, and suffering..."*¹⁴

As important as it is to examine the context in which the account is told, we need a view from the balcony that sees even a bigger picture. For example, when statutes were being taken

¹³Rutledge, Fleming, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI 175

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 389

down in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, at a white supremacist Neo-Nazi rally, the story was about more than that night of demonstration. The view from the balcony provided a long view back in American history to the Civil war, and the attitudes prejudices that have shaped America as a nation.

The same is true in understanding the Messiah's goal of establishing "The Kingdom of God" which he was entrusted with at his confirmation. His kingdom that had "come near" (Mark 1:15) entered a world composed of a different kingdom which created a confrontation. The language we use today when kingdoms and political ideologies collide is "Regime Change." The wilderness was the testing site where authorities and powers of two different regimes were challenged.

It is important that we don't read this as a biblical incident only, and fail to recognize how this is also woven into the fabric of our own humanness. There is an underlying drive in human nature between those who have power and those who want it. We can spot it in small children playing on the church nursery floor, each claiming their rights to a toy, and also in the press where bullying is reported about those who perceive they have control and power treating others in offensive and demeaning ways.

Reflective Question

Identify other areas of life which illustrate how conflict confrontation is a virus that threatens us all.

The testing of Jesus in the wilderness, simply understood was a spiritual conflict of "Good verses Evil." It is in the wilderness that Messiah Jesus "draws a line in the sand" defining how he will conduct himself in bringing in the Kingdom of God.

For us to appreciate and understand this we must go again to the balcony view of God's story of salvation. The long view back includes an understanding of the important role of Satan opposing God's efforts of saving people. Jesus, who grew in "wisdom and stature," (Luke 2:52) was well aware of his ancestral stories and history that documented the beginning of the battle between good and evil in a garden called Eden.

It was that same battle that he faced in the wilderness. The wilderness was a testing ground for his battle plan which would threaten the power structure of evil. We might compare it to the Los Alamos desert testing ground in New Mexico that made possible the regime change in Japan in WWII. It was a testing ground for how a powerful a bomb would affect its surroundings. Jesus in his desert experience was confronted with a powerful force and his responses would test his resolve.

It was necessary for Jesus to confront the Evil One and define his strategy for dealing with the opposing ideas. In our world of political divisions we have often witnessed opposing nations establishing "talks" where both parties place on the table their expectations if there is going to be any safe coexisting in the same world. When such talks fail, future adversarial relationships increase between the parties. We see evidence that this in how Jesus soon referred to that evil power. "*Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.*" (John 12:31)

Reflective Question

From your balcony view of scripture what are the Old Testament stories that we might point to that would relate to this story?

The clashing of forces in this wilderness confrontation were about power and authority, and, *“The devil was in the details.”*

The definition of that phrase is interesting. *“Details are important; problems or difficulties are often in the details. This expression is a derivation of God is in the details. This earlier version most likely originated in the 1800s and is attributed to German-born architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohebut. Interestingly, the original phrase God is in the Details had a slightly different connotation than the modern phrase the devil is in the details. The idea was that whatever one does should be done thoroughly and the truth, if it exists, is in the details.”*¹⁵

The first offer Satan made to Jesus illustrates the importance of paying attention to the details. *“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* (Matthew 4:3)

We cannot begin to understand how we could get through forty days without food, but we do not question that Jesus was able to manage. Given the absence of eating, Satan’s request appears to be a common sense effort to have Jesus do something simple to prove he was the Son of God. On the surface it may appear that Satan was beginning his own vetting process to validate the identity of the one he was dealing with. The request focused on Jesus simply meeting a human need. He was no doubt hungry after forty days of fasting, and bread would gratify his hunger. One may wonder if there were smooth round rocks in the wilderness, looking like loaves of bread his mother Mary baked for him as a boy. Satan’s details appear simple, harmless, and reasonable.

Messiah Jesus, however, knew the confirmation given to him was from God, therefore, God had to be in the details. He knew that the decisions he made had to reflect the truth of the one who confirmed him. He knew the source of that truth had been established in God’s instructions to the people of Israel, and that truth also applied to him. *“He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”* (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Just as Israel had to learn that lesson about humility to be convinced that God was in charge, so Jesus was confronted at the very beginning of his ministry with the detail of choosing the source of truth that would guide his decisions. He was not going to confuse gratification with Satisfaction.¹⁶ He was going to be satisfied doing God’s will, and so he said, “No!” It’s not that he couldn’t do it, but that he wouldn’t do it. He later changed water into wine, and multiplied

¹⁵ <https://writingexplained.org/idiom-dictionary/the-devil-is-in-the-details>

¹⁶ “Gratification: Pleasure, especially when gained from the satisfaction of a desire” (<https://search.yahoo.com/search?ei=utf-8&fr=aaplw&p=define+gratification>)
 “Satisfaction: confident acceptance of something as satisfactory, dependable, true.” (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/satisfaction>)

loaves and fishes to feed a hungry crowd, but those focused on the needs of others and not on his own. Jesus gave his attention to the importance of the starting point.

The starting point demands attention to details. Aristotle says, *“A good start is more than half the race, I think, our starting-point or principle, once found, clears up a number of our difficulties.”*¹⁷

The NASA space program demands details at the very beginning when launching a space craft. *“If your mission is to launch a spacecraft to another planet, then the positions of both the Earth and the target planet determine the launch window: the idea here is to launch the spacecraft into an elliptical orbit around the Sun, with this orbit intersecting the orbit of your target. But you will have to ensure that the target is actually at this intersection when your spacecraft arrives there, and the timing of this determines the launch window in this case.”*¹⁸

Jesus had a mission, and not unlike a space mission, he had to pay attention to the starting point details, because they would shape the trajectory of his entire mission.

Reflective Question

Are you able to think a time when you started something without carefully considering of the starting details? How did that work out?

My hobby for the past 38 years has been woodworking, and I have at times been so eager to start a project that I have not thought through how my starting point was going to effect the project in its final stages.

Most recently I positioned a log on my lathe eager to get it rounded and prepared to turn a vase. Once I had it positioned to begin turning the interior, I began. It wasn't until I got near the bottom that I suddenly realized I did not drill the pilot hole that determined the depth. The pilot hole tells me when I'm at the lowest point of the vase. I had to guess as to how close I was to the bottom. I didn't guess right. The chisel bore through the bottom and the vase flew off the lathe.

The details of starting points are important both in projects as well as in faith practices. The seriousness of how we form our faith disciplines determine the level of our discipleship. Discipline and disciple are from the same greek word meaning, *“the mental effort needed to think something through.”*¹⁹ Prayer and bible reading are spiritual disciplines that are often started but soon disbanded because the motivational starting point was not carefully considered. If the motivation was an external influence such as an all church program, or a friend you admired who suggested you “try it,” then failure is most likely. The motivation that focuses on the detail of knowing the inner desire to live each day following Jesus, is more likely to create the closeness with Jesus, that you don't want to miss. It is that closeness that will then shape daily decisions and create a life discipline.

¹⁷ <https://calvinistinternational.com/2014/07/24/importance-getting-beginning-right/>

¹⁸ <https://www.quora.com/What-determines-a-rocket-launch-window>

¹⁹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/3101.htm>

Return to the Scriptural Context

Satan wasn't going to give up so easily, so he challenged Jesus to consider another offer. The offer was for Jesus to display his trust in the God who confirmed him to be the Messiah. Satan staged the offer by taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and saying, "*If you are the Son of God throw yourself down; for it is written 'He will command his angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'*" (Matthew 4:5-6) Satan showed that he also knew scripture and he chose to use it to appear to be on the same page with the reasoning of Jesus.

The test confronting Jesus was to confuse trusting with testing, and he said no to the offer. "*As it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*" It's a lesson that is very important to learn. When you test someone's trust you immediately are not trusting them. Let's say you aren't sure if the cleaning person is stealing money from you. You leave a five dollar bill on the bathroom counter to see if it will be there when you get back. The participation in the test is a confession that you don't trust.

Satan's quote of Psalm 91 leaves out a very important statement regarding the angels who were, "to keep you in all your ways." The emphasis being, when you are in the will of God you don't have to be afraid, you can trust the Lord. Jesus demonstrated his trust in God by refusing to accept the offered test.

Reflective Question

In what circumstances might we confuse our trust of God and our testing God?

The sequence of these testings is important to notice. Changing a stone to bread is a private entry test which advances to a more sensational public arena of the Temple. Satan's confrontation and testing of Jesus revealed he was aware that his power and authority was being threatened by the arrival of Israel's Messiah. His effort to reach a peace agreement, on his terms, so as not to lose that power, had reached a desperate final offer. The third test finally revealed what was at the heart of the confrontation which was control of the kingdoms of the world. Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for Jesus worshipping him.

Jesus said no, and challenged Satan, "*Away with you Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord God and serve only him.'*" (Matthew 4:8-10) Jesus was calling an end to the confrontation, and refusing all offers. He would not confuse compromise with sacrifice. He knew God's story of salvation was one of service and sacrifice, and as the Messiah, he was going to follow that plan.

The wilderness testing site is shut down with a "to be continued" statement. "*When the Devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*" (Luke 4:13)

During the next three years moments of opportunity were sized by Satan to weaken the Messiah's resolve. When Jesus revealed to his followers the divine plan he was following, he was confronted with an objection. "*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to*

rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “**Get behind me, Satan!** You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Matthew 16:20-23) It was one of those “opportune times” Satan used a close friend to do his bidding.

Another opportune time was when Jesus was dying on the cross; Satan wasn’t about to lose one more opportunity to test Jesus. Those who stood by deriding Jesus addressed Jesus saying, “*You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.*” (Matthew 27:40) The same vocabulary used that echoed Satan’s testing in the wilderness. Jesus was prepared for this testing and tried to prepare his disciples for it also. Upon leaving Gethsemane he said, “53 *Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?*” (Matthew 26:53)

Jesus set the tone of his plan in facing Satan’s confrontation testings. He resisted the wilderness temptations and faithfully executed his Father’s plan throughout his mission, all the way to the cross.

Only then could he cry out, “It is Finished.”

Sharing our Thoughts

1. What does Deuteronomy 8:3 teach Jesus, and how do we apply that to our own lives?
2. How does Jesus apply what he learned in the first test, when teaching the multitude that he fed? (John 6:26-27)
3. Do you agree that testing another to verify they are trustworthy, invalidates any trust you may have had in that person? Have you ever done that?
4. In what circumstances might we confuse our trust of God and our testing God?
5. Does Satan’s temptation for Jesus to come down from the cross indicate he was also aware of what the scriptures said?
6. What other examples, beside the two in this chapter, would you suggest Satan appeared at an opportune time?

CHAPTER THREE Selection/Disciples

Selection defined:

“The act of choosing someone or something”²⁰

Matthew 4:18-22²¹

“18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”

How important is selection? The answer to that depends on the source to which we have directed the question. If it is being addressed to a Fortune 500 company you would likely hear, *“Employee selection is a process of matching organization’s requirements with the skills and the qualifications of individuals.”²²* That’s a generic definition for hiring that most organizations would agree to when searching to fill a vacancy. The church does that through a search committee when they are looking for a staff person. Specific qualifications are listed that address the need for the candidate to have the abilities and experiences to provide the leadership necessary. It’s very obvious why that is important. If the organizational job is for an electrician, they would not be too impressed with an applicant with a plumber’s *résumé*. If the church is looking for a Senior Adult Pastor to develop a ministry to retirement age members, they would not expect twenty-year old Youth Ministers to apply.

The smaller the company the more important it is to hire a more competent employee. *“Employee selection in human resource management is critical to a company's success. This is particularly true in small businesses, where employee contributions have a higher level of impact on the company's fortunes”²³*

Because we have culturally been conditioned to think this way, it should get our attention when it comes to the way Jesus selected the 12 men (a small business) to carry out the needed vision for overseeing the Kingdom of God. (A large enterprise) And yet, if we know the long history of God’s story of salvation, we should not be surprised at all.

²⁰ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/selection>

²¹ Mark 1:16–20 and Luke 5:1–11 on the Sea of Galilee. John 1:35–51 reports the first encounter with two of the **disciples** a little earlier in the presence of John the Baptist.

²²https://www.tutorialspoint.com/recruitment_and_selection/what_is_selection.htm

²³ <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/human-resource-selection-process-important-14399.html>

Some of the major persons chosen by God to be instrumental in leading and writing the salvation story either felt inadequate, or by their actions showed characteristics unbecoming to a spiritual leader of such a worthy cause.

Remember Joseph, the youngest son in a large family, whose brothers felt he was the ‘runt of the litter’. They had him exiled from the family. Abraham who earned the title of, “Father of our faith” wasn’t always faithful in following the promises of God. And then there’s Moses who had excuses for not being qualified and stated it saying, “*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*” (Exodus 3:11) And of course we don’t want to leave David out. He was the “little brother” who was assigned to take care of the sheep, but eventually became Israel’s King; committed adultery, and had the husband of the woman killed.

Knowing these characteristics of some of the people God chose, shows an entirely different set of standards for selection and that’s why we shouldn’t be surprised at the persons Jesus chose to be his disciples. If there is one verse that may provide us insight as to the secret of what made them qualified, it would be when Jesus told them, “*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, **because apart from me you can do nothing.***” (John 15:5)

When we read this verse, or hear it preached in a sermon, we appreciate and understand the focus made regarding the important connection of the branches to the vine. However, we may easily overlook the importance of the word, “Because.” Because is a very important word that every parent uses from time to time. A child asks, “But why mommy can’t I go?” Mommy responds, “*Because I said so.*”

The “because” in this verse points to the source responsible and authority for providing all that they would accomplish as his disciples. What they would be able to do would have little if anything to do with what might have appeared on their *résumé*. Today we hear it expressed, “I’ve got your back.” It’s meant to be a reassuring word that someone is looking out for your wellbeing, and they won’t let you fail.

As we look at these twelve men and marvel at what they were able to accomplish we must not overlook the fact that God sees us in the same way. Jesus invites us to follow him and serve him not because we have some extraordinary abilities, but because he knows “*we can do nothing without him.*” He’s got our back.

Reflective Question

What experience have you had accepting a task and feeling totally inadequate, fearing you might fail?

I remember the time I received an invitation from a nearby seminary to consider entering their newly established Doctor of Ministry program. I didn’t jump at the chance to fill out an application. My grades have always ranged around a B- in high school, and I graduated at the top of the lower half of the class. A doctor’s degree was never on my educational horizon. But

because, of what I believed were God-guided circumstances, I enrolled and graduated with the D.Min. The next big surprise was my thesis was seen by someone at Judson Press and I was invited to consider writing a book based on the thesis material. To say I was stunned is putting it mildly; but I did write the book. (*Confronting Death*). I was not a writer, and almost proved it to myself, until I retired from pastoral ministry and have now written five more books.

I tell this story to identify with the stories of persons in the Bible who also felt they were not qualified to accomplish a task presented to them.

The selection process Jesus used for choosing the disciples was consistent with the selection process God used to call Abraham, Moses, Joseph, as well as many other Old Testament leaders.

The Cultural Context

When Jesus left the wilderness and began his public ministry there were different rabbinical schools within his Jewish culture.

*“Within his culture of early first-century Israel, there were seven primary rabbinic ‘schools’ of thought, ... At the poles of thought within these schools, the most lenient (or liberal, though not in a modern sense) of the rabbinical schools was the School of Hillel....At the other end of the spectrum, the School of Shammai was the most strict in its interpretations. The remaining five schools of rabbinic thought ranged between these two, Hillel and Shammai, with key nuances – emphases or de-emphases – from the other schools. When Jesus began his ministry near the age of 30, he entered into this context, and as one might expect, he was asked to weigh in on the great debates of the day.”*²⁴

Today theological schools, as well as denominations and local churches, have the same reputations of being liberal or being conservative, (or somewhere in between) and their followers adhere to the same interpretations of scripture just as the Jews did with the Torah. When persons move into a new community and they go “church shopping,” they have a list of personal beliefs. I tell this story to identify with the stories of persons in the Bible who also felt they were not qualified to accomplish a task presented to them.

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The Scripture in Context

When Jesus began his ministry it would have been natural for him to know the importance of gaining a following from those within his Jewish tradition. He attracted persons who liked what he said, seekers who were eager to listen, as well as those who challenged his teachings. Persons would have been able to distinguish and question the differences in his teachings compared to the other rabbinical schools. He identified 12 men and selected them to follow him. They were fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots and we cannot assume they would all have agreed on the teachings of the same rabbinical school. What they had in common was they were

²⁴ <http://www.fishingtheabyss.com/archives/203>

impressed, sufficiently (no doubt for different reasons) with the teachings of the Rabbi from Nazareth, and possibly felt a bit of pride in having been selected.

The twelve Jewish men selected were once boys who grew up being influenced by their Jewish educational training. *“Boys usually began formal schooling at the ‘house of the book’ at age five. He would spend at least a half day, six days a week for about five years, studying at the synagogue....If a boy wanted training beyond that given in a synagogue, he would go to a scholarly scribe. Saul of Tarsus received such advanced theological training ‘at the feet of Gamaliel’ in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3).”*²⁵

*“As part of the selection process, a rabbi would intensively test, examine, grill, and interrogate any may-I-become-your-disciple applicant in his understanding of the Tanach...Thus, the rabbi was most interested in choosing disciples who exhibited the mettle, intelligence, commitment, and persistence to become an interpreter of God’s Word just like him...If a rabbi judged a potential disciple to have the capability to become just like him, i.e., to emulate him, then the rabbi would utter those cherished words of acceptance every potential disciple longed to hear: ‘Follow me’.”*²⁶

Hearing the words, “Follow me” was equivalent to knowing the disciple-to-be had passed the rabbi’s “pass-fail” admission standard. When those words were uttered he knew he had made the cut and he was now on the varsity team.

Understanding this Jewish pathway to rabbinical higher education and the selection process, illustrates a drastic contrast with the selection process Jesus used. *“18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea ...19 And he said to them, ‘Follow me’” ...As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”*

His selection of Matthew followed the same pattern. *“9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” And he got up and followed him.”* (Matthew 9:9)

Jesus’ selection process was not interested in any kind of S.A.T. scores on their knowledge of the Torah or of Jewish traditions. He was only interested in knowing if they were willing to “Follow” him. Implied in the rabbinical candidate’s acceptance to follow his rabbi, was that all past learning needed to be put on the shelf. Selection implied submission. A present day illustration would be a student would have to delete everything on his hard drive that he had been told was truth, and upload everything the rabbi taught as being the truth. This is how we understand Jesus words, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Following Jesus demanded total submission. We will look at some of Peter’s experiences as a disciple-in-training and see how the disciple’s learning was a work in progress.

Peter was a fisherman and would have had the experience of spending many days and nights on the sea of Galilee. As a disciple he often sailed across the water as a means of trans-

²⁵ <https://www.studyight.org/dictionaries/hbd/e/education-in-bible-times.html>

²⁶ <https://preservingbibletimes.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Reflection.Follow-Me.pdf>

portation to another city. On one occasion a storm created great fear among the disciples. Jesus was sleeping and they woke him up with a desperate SOS call.

“Lord, save us! We are perishing!” 26 *And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?”* Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. 27 *They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him? Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm.”* Matthew 8:25-26)

Their fear was based on their assumption that their survival depend on themselves. Fear had canceled out faith. Jesus tells them that their faith had been greatly reduced when they woke him with the words, “Do you not care...” (Mark 4:38). The disciples were then amazed that the winds and the sea obeyed Jesus. At that time there was the belief that, “...*demons worked under the cover of darkness, lived in cemeteries, inhabited unclean animals, and used the sea as their lair.*”²⁷ His power over the sea made them ask, “*What sort of man is this?*” Their question implies their thinking was moving beyond the idea that he was just another rabbi. What they had witnessed was equal to the power that only God possessed.

The second encounter of facing a life-threatening storm on the sea that Matthew documents is different.

“24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” 28 Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:24-31)

Jesus was not in the boat with them, he had gone up the mountain to pray. The context follows the feeding of the multitude when Jesus sent the crowd away and he insisted the disciple’s get into a boat and go somewhere. Jesus needed to be alone.

That night the disciples found themselves in the middle of another violent storm and Jesus wasn’t in the boat this time. We don’t know how long they struggled to survive, but for some reason the time was documented, and when Jesus showed up it was the fourth watch of the night which would have been between 3 and 6.a.m. It was still dark so when they heard a voice they suspected they were seeing a ghost; they no doubt had been living in fear all night long. Once Jesus identified himself, Peter had the wild idea of how to confirm that it was Jesus.

Peter climbed overboard and started walking to Jesus. He suddenly realized what he was doing as he no doubt felt the wind and rain against his face and lost his faith in the one who was

²⁷ https://books.google.com/books?id=mTIUqGjYpeoC&pg=PA142&lpg=PA142&dq=the+sea+as+a+locus+of+evil&source=bl&ots=7-iINL6J9D&sig=ACfU3U1pX2zAJUCnteLVUr0CpRkDnX6Jog&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ah-UKEwi30NDAwc_oAhWWZM0KHWLYCplQ6AEwDXoECA0QNg#v=onepage&q=the%20sea%20as%20a%20locus%20of%20evil&f=false

saving him. Jesus reminded them once again their doubt had minimized their faith. Here we see again evidence of what Jesus had told them, *“Without me you can do nothing.”* Peter’s faith in Jesus enabled him to walk on water toward Jesus, until he began to focus on the impossibility of the circumstances he had gotten himself into.

Reflective Question

When have you had an experience like Peter’s, where you start out with great faith, and then take your eyes off of the source of your faith?

We get a glimpse here of Jesus’ self-revelation to his disciples that went beyond his classroom teachings. In his sermons, teachings, miracles, and healings the disciples had gained an intellectual understanding of how their rabbi was different from other rabbis, they had now had a personal experience which made a radical statement about who he was.

Their own religious training would have included the insights of Job where the power and authority of God was described. *“God alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea.”* (Job 9:8) They would also have had access to knowing the wisdom of the Psalmist. *“You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.”* (Psalm 89:9)

This sea voyage ends differently than the first one in that it answers the question raised by their prior experience. Then, they were asking who Jesus was, but after this experience they quickly concluded, *“Truly you are the Son of God.”* (Matthew 14:3)

Reflective Question

How can life-threatening tragedies instill a greater faith in God?

At some point after the disciples had been following Jesus, witnessing his miracles and healings and struggling with understanding his parables, Jesus begins a teaching moment by asking Peter (Think opinion polls) what folks were saying about him. *“Who do people say that I am?”* (Mark 8:27-29)²⁸ Peter gave him a report of the latest polls taken, and then Jesus asked Peter, *“Who do you say that I am?”* Peter as well as the other eleven had been with Jesus long enough that it was time for Jesus to check out how much of what they saw, heard and experienced, was sinking in. This was an unannounced quiz and no doubt the other disciples were happy Jesus hadn’t called on them. Peter was prepared and boldly said, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”* He hadn’t learned that from a text book or from reading the rabbi’s résumé. Jesus was pleased that Peter was processing what he had been seeing and learning, and was not influenced by what others were saying. Peter’s response showed that the men Jesus had selected had been paying attention, so he proceeded to the next phase of his mission agenda by telling them what to expect in the days ahead. *“21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* (Matthew 16:21)

²⁸ See also Matthew 16:13–16; Luke 9:18–20

That kind of breaking news didn't go over very well with Peter, and no doubt wasn't acceptable by the other disciples as well. No one challenged what their rabbi said but Peter couldn't let it pass. This wasn't a simple difference of opinion between Peter and his rabbi over some theological teaching, this was a matter that challenged what it was Peter had signed up for when he agreed to follow Jesus. Peter waited for an opportune time to personally address his concern to Jesus, and he didn't mince words, "*22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."* (Matthew 16:22) One can imagine Peter was drawing the logical conclusion; if that's what's going to happen to you, then what's going to happen to us?

Jesus didn't mince words either, in responding to Peter. "*23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* Peter hadn't completely deleted all of those human assumptions and former teachings, and made the necessary room on his internal hard drive for uploading this new information that challenged his submission. Jesus was quick to point out the flaw in Peter's statement; he was not only thinking like men thought, but he was accepting that thinking as truth.

If there was one major stumbling block in the human reasoning of that day it was on the issue that defined Israel's coming Messiah. Generations of people living in exile were looking and hoping for a Messiah whose *résumé* would be like Moses' and deliver them from Roman captivity. Peter and the disciples were not exempt from such reasoning.

Peter obviously accepted the rebuke, as he continued to follow Jesus, but he didn't necessarily accept or understand the information he had received. He wanted to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, because of what he witnessed and understood from Jesus' teachings, but the part about him dying didn't fit into the accepted Jewish Messiah *résumé*.

Reflective Question

Have you ever received information that you just couldn't understand or didn't want to accept?

During the three years Peter followed Jesus we have seen how his faith formation process at times struggled with total submission. Peter represents the struggles of all the twelve men Jesus selected. Their common struggle is evident when at the end, "*They all forsook him, and fled.*" (Mark 14:50)

It is at the end when Jesus is talking openly with them about his impending death that Peter, moved by his impulsive courage, made a confession to Jesus before the others saying, "*Lord,... I will lay down my life for you.*" (John 13:37)

Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter, he simply replies, "*Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.*(vs. 38)²⁹ We know the stories that follow of Peter warming himself at the courtyard fire denying he knew Jesus. He, as well as the others, were all on their own after Jesus was arrested. The rabbi in whom they invested three years of their lives was no longer with them. Here we see the importance of the

²⁹ See the progression of Peter's story in. John 18:15-27; 21:15-23

metaphor spoken early about vine and branches being the key to their discipleship, “*Without me you can do nothing.*”

Peter’s story is a testimony to the earlier church that Jesus called disciples who were flawed individuals. Jesus invited them to “follow him.” Peter’s failings are treated as symptoms of the sinfulness or weakness of the human condition, which can only be overcome through faith in Jesus. It is good to remember that it was to this flawed individual that Jesus promised, “*Upon this rock that I will build my church.*” (Matthew 16:18) That gives us all hope.

The power of God was clearly at work in selecting these men, but it is doubtful whether they knew the full extent of what they were signing up for when they began as Jesus’ disciples. They knew that they had to leave their current jobs and the security that those gave, but it was only as Jesus neared the end of His earthly life that He explained to them the real cost of discipleship.

Sharing our Thoughts

1. Given that rabbinical schools screened their students so as to select those who met their qualifications, does Jesus’ selection surprise you?
2. Are churches today more like the rabbinical schools in accepting “would-be-disciples”, then of Jesus’ method of selection?
3. Why is Peter a good model for Christian discipleship?

CHAPTER FOUR
Demonstration/Parade
 Matthew 21:1-11

Demonstration defined:

“A public display of group feelings toward a person or cause”³⁰

Matthew 21:1-11

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

The Cultural Context.

It is important to know the cultural context in which the story in our scripture took place. Here is the way it is introduced in the book, *The Last Week*.

“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year...One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class...On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God...Pilate’s proclaimed the power of the empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’ crucifixion...Pilate’s procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology,

³⁰ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demonstration>

the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God...Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology."³¹

Within our culture we have witnessed many different demonstrations as well as parades. "The *March on Washington* was a massive protest march that occurred in August 1963, when some 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Also known as the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, the event aimed to draw attention to continuing challenges and inequalities faced by African Americans a century after emancipation. It was also the occasion of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s now-iconic "I Have A Dream" speech."³²

This quote captures the essence of the above definition of a demonstration. It was a public display by a group to share their mutual feelings about a cause. By their presence they were affirming their support for the Civil Rights Movement in America, and also defining their dream for equality in America.

Reflective Question

Have you ever participated in a demonstration? A parade?

Our scripture for this chapter is also an illustration of a public display of a group of people, who shared a common feeling about a cause. The cause, however, was not an organized group that had a plan for promoting that cause. The cause was the result of the teachings of the Rabbi from Nazareth. Individuals who heard him speak always wanted to hear more, so they began to follow him.

The scripture for this chapter is about his followers, and what happened on their way to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. It is the event we celebrate on Palm Sunday.

It is possible to distinguish between a demonstration and a parade. A demonstration is a group of people that have a common purpose or vision and desire to make a public statement they want others to notice. It is an action that has a future goal of change regarding their issue. A parade is a group of people who are united by a common history where an event has happened that they want to celebrate and remember. It is an action that looks to the past.

When we compare the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial, with the crowd in our scripture, we will see how the intentions of both may be defined as a demonstration as well as a parade. Those present in Washington, D.C. shared a common past history and commitment to seeking ways to change America's future on racial inequality. The Jewish crowd going to Jerusalem also had a long history of waiting for the day when the Messiah would arrive and set them free from their captivity.

"6 Months earlier"

³¹ Borg, Marcus J., Grossan, John Dominic, *The Last Week*, Harper, San Francisco, 2006, 2-3

³² <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/march-on-washington>

The Scripture in Context

To put our scripture in context we need to do some prequel story telling. Prequel stories have become common in the television programs. The screen goes black and words like; “Six months earlier,” appear on the black screen. We then shift our thinking and viewing, to events that happened leading up to the present plot.

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. 25 And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (Matthew 4:23-25)

Unlike other rabbi’s who settled in a given community and expected students to come to him, Jesus was an “Itinerant Rabbi”. The “circuit riders” in early America did the same thing. *“Circuit riders were a religious and moral force along the frontier and in rural areas of the South, and they were largely responsible for the propagation of Methodism throughout the United States. The practice was soon adopted by other denominations, too.”³³*

Personal Reflection

Have you ever had an itinerate pastor who preached at several churches on a Sunday?

Jesus travelled from large cities, to towns and villages teaching the importance of the Kingdom of God, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. There were no Jerusalem Times, or Nazareth Post newspapers to report and promote his message, but his fame spread and every where he went people began to ask themselves, and one another, “*Who is he?*” (John 8:25)

The Pharisees were also asking that question. The setting is the Jerusalem temple, the most holy site in the holy land given to them by God. It’s where the Holy of Holies was located, the sacred place where God dwelt. It is a place familiar to Jesus. It’s where he was dedicated as a baby, and where at twelve years of age he amazed the elders with his understanding of the Torah. His rabbinical teachings for his disciples often took place in the temple, as well as the synagogues, and as he taught others gathered to listen. John chapter eight is one of those occasions. What he taught that day intensified the suspicions of the Scribes and Pharisees, who had been watching him since he was baptized by John. It was when they brought a woman caught in the act of adultery and wanted Jesus to agree that the law of Moses that said the punishment was to stone her to death. The lesson he taught them gave them reason to rethink their charges. It was the classroom setting where he made the claim to be the Light of the world, and challenged their charges because they had no idea who they were talking to.

Personal Reflection

³³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/circuit-rider>

Have you ever judged someone for what in your mind was wrong, and when they were punished felt, "They got what they deserved? Can you apply that attitude to this scripture?"

"23 He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. 24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." 25 They said to him, "Who are you?" (John 8:23-25)

The more Jesus answered their question the more heated the discussion got. When Jesus attempted to explain his relationship to his Father, the argument got more volatile. Their first response was a strange sounding statement. *"They said to him, "We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself."* Might we assume they are implying that they had reason to question Jesus' birth as illegitimate? This is beginning to sound more like two present day political candidates raising questions about their opponent's indiscretions.

When they brought up that Abraham was their father they sounded like children arguing, *"My daddy's bigger than your daddy."* That soon turned to name calling, *"You are a Samaritan and have a demon...who do you claim to be?"* (v. 48 & 53)

Jesus then returned to that sensitive issue of father Abraham. *"56 Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad." 57 Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"* Their confusion is an example of persons carrying on a conversation and not being on the same page. Nicodemus had the same problem with Jesus over being born again. The long day of debate and discussion reached its climax when Jesus got more to the point on telling them who he was. *"58 Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I AM."* This statement is basically the same thought that is expressed in verse 24, Jesus reduced all attempts at further explanations down to the words that enrage the Scribes and Pharisee. He used the most holy name the Jews had for Jehovah, "I AM". They knew he had used terms like "Son of Man" and "Son of God" as personal references to himself, but saying he was "I AM," and coequal with God, was the ultimate blasphemy. *"59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple."* They were tired of creative intellectual responses, so they reacted. They were so enraged they didn't even pronounce a sentence upon him to justify what they wanted to do to him. They picked up stones to throw at him.

Personal Reflection

Have you ever tired of reasoning with someone and chose to stop responding and just react?

Those prequel stories set the stage for understanding the emotional feelings of hope for those who were demonstrating in that palm waving march, as well as the attitudes of suspicion that were forming in the minds of some onlookers.

Because it was a Passover weekend the roads would have been crowded with Jewish pilgrims making their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. *"According to the Torah , God commanded the Israelites: "Three times a year shall all your men appear before the Lord your God in the place that God will choose [referring presumably to the Temple in Jerusalem], on the*

*festivals of Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks), and Sukkot (the Festival of Booths)."*³⁴

We can imagine the day started out like any other day, on any other year of the Passover weekend journey. There was no doubt of the excitement of scanning the horizon to see who would be first to see the city's walls. We have no record of any formal organized planning that went into the demonstration/parade except for the plans Jesus made to ride a donkey.³⁵ We know some of those in the crowd were there because of the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, so there was an excitement about just experiencing a Jesus sighting. What happened next to start the demonstration/parade, happened without any fanfare announcement. What happened was like a billboard being unveiled with a picture of Jesus riding a donkey with the announcement, "I am the Messiah." We might think of the, 'Flash Mob' that has become a popular demonstration. *"A group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, perform for a brief time, then quickly disperse, often for the purpose of entertainment, satire or artistic expression."*³⁶

We do know that there were Pharisees among the crowd because after Lazarus was raised from the dead the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting to answer the question about Jesus, *"What are we going to do?"* (John 11:47). It was then that Caiaphas the High Priest answered their question. *"...it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."* (v.50) His decision was based on the fear expressed earlier, *"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."* (v.48) The time had come that they had to confront the issue head on and address the fact that what he was doing was wrong. (Ironically, today we call such a meeting a "Come-to-Jesus meeting"³⁷). Throughout the past three years they had him under surveillance and you can be sure they were in the crowd hearing the shouts of Hosanna. You can also be sure they were not participating in laying down their garments or palm branches. *"19 The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"* (John 12:19)

They attempted to exert their authority. *"39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."* (Luke 19:39-40)

It is at the demonstration/parade that we hear the answer to the question many had been asking. They were no longer questioning could this be the Messiah. *"9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"* (Zachariah 9:9) The crowd had a sudden epiphany enabling them to connect the dots from the words of the prophet.

³⁴ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/pilgrimage-festivals/>

³⁵ Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-40; Matthew 21:1-11; John 12:14-19

³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_mob

³⁷ "When one has a *come-to-Jesus meeting* with another, this is an opportunity to point out where someone has taken the wrong path. A figurative *come-to-Jesus meeting* is never pleasant, it is often the last attempt to straighten someone out before dire consequences are enacted." <https://grammarist.com/idiom/come-to-jesus-moment-and-come-to-jesus-meeting/>

They also validated their shouts with a quote from the Psalms. “*26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.*” (Psalm 118:26) The

crowd was experiencing emotionally what Peter had spoken intellectually when he said, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of God.*”

The hope of all those who were in the crowds was at the core of their common cause, and they were finally fully convinced he was the Messiah. The Messiah had arrived in the person who was known as the “prophet from Nazareth.” (Matthew 21:11)

The *résumé* now documented the references of the prophets, and the confirmation by the crowd that they witnessed the fulfillment of the prophet’s words.

Often after investing a great deal of energy and time in a project, there is a feeling of satisfaction, often referred to as a “high.” It’s that feel good feeling that calls for celebration, but after the celebration a more depressing feeling often follows. The cheerleading crowd experienced a Hosanna high during the hours of the demonstration/parade, but then they entered the city and experienced a Hosanna hangover. “*10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’*”

They entered a city that was in “Turmoil.” The greek word has been translated, “*stirred, moved, shook, shaken, did quake, trembled.*”³⁸ The same word is used in Matthew 27:51 & 54 describing an earthquake. The effect Jesus was having on folks was no longer a specific crowd of people, but the “whole city.”

The first place he went upon entering the city was the Temple, where not long before the Jewish leaders picked up stones to kill him. The chief Priests and Pharisees were disturbed with his actions, as well as his teachings. Jesus confronted those who were selling Passover sacrificial lambs and doves. He turned over the tables of the money changers who converted the Pilgrim’s currency, to Jerusalem currency. “*This was not so much a matter of teaching as of symbolic action. Jesus...was as capable as any of his contemporaries of deliberately performing actions which had rich symbolic value. Within his own culture, his riding on a donkey over the Mount of Olives, across Kidron, and up to the Temple Mount spoke more powerfully than words could have done of a royal claim...The so called ‘triumphal entry’ was thus clearly messianic.*”³⁹

After two days of teaching in the Temple the watchdog committee of chief priests and elders agreed something had to be done, and done soon. “*3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, 4 and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.*” (Matthew 26:3-4) The decision they arrived at expressed the climax of all that they had been fearful of from the day they stood at the Jordon River bank and heard John the Baptizer introduce Jesus as, “*The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” (John 1:29)

They feared that the size of his following was growing, and they were claiming him to be the Messiah, and that was a threat to their positions of power. They knew the history of former would-be Messiahs, and how they suffered from it. They were comfortable with the authority

³⁸ <https://biblehub.com/greek/4579.htm>

³⁹ Wright, N.T., *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 490-491

given them to carry on their traditions and worship practices. They were personally satisfied with position of authority Rome granted to them to keep the peace among the Jews. A revolutionary uprising would destroy their status quo relationship with Rome. They would destroy their Temple and limit their freedoms. As Caiaphas previously said, *“It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”* (v.50)

Sharing our Thoughts

1. Who were the persons in the early crowds that followed Jesus? Why were they there?
2. What question were they asking, and why?
3. What is the difference in “the crowd FOLLOWING Jesus, and the disciples FOLLOWING him?
4. What initiated the demonstration/parade? How did it start?
5. Given our familiarity with this scripture, have you discovered anything new?
6. What conclusion did the religious authorities reach because of the demonstration/parade? Why?

CHAPTER FIVE
Prosecution/Crucifixion
 Matthew 27:11-26

Prosecution defined:

“The institution and continuance of a criminal suit involving the process of pursuing formal charges against an offender to final judgment.”⁴⁰

Matthew 27:11-26

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. 16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. 17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” 18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.” 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21 The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” 22 Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” All of them said, “Let him be crucified!” 23 Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

24 So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” 25 Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” 26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.”

The Scripture in Context

“Three years earlier”

⁴⁰ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prosecution>

The process of pursuing formal charges against Jesus began with the chief Priests and Pharisees suspicions that were triggered by John the Baptizer's introduction of Jesus three years earlier, "*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*"

The scribes and Pharisees then became part of the crowd who followed Jesus so they could observe what he did and what he taught. "*17 One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem)*" Representatives from each district were summoned to keep a watch on him. They quickly formed an opinion of him when he healed the man lowered down through the roof. Jesus said to the man, "*Son your sins are forgiven. Now some of the scribes were sitting there questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak this way, It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins alone but God.'*" (Mark 2:6-7)

A few verses later he invited Matthew to follow him and on a sabbath day the disciples and Jesus were walking through a grain field and the disciples plucked some grain off to eat. "*The Pharisees said to him, 'Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*" (Mark 2:24).

And since it was the sabbath he went to the synagogue, and there was man with a withered hand, "*And the they (Pharisees) watched him to see if he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.*" (Mark 3:2) After Jesus healed the man, "*The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*" (Mark 3:6)

They not only saw things he did that concerned them but they heard him teaching parables that they understood were aimed directly at them. "*When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away. Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said..*" (Mark 12:12-13)

These verses illustrate how the effort of the Jewish leaders from each Jewish district documented that the rabbi from Nazareth's teachings and actions were not according to the law. The three year fact-finding investigation process was going on while Jesus' was teaching about the Kingdom of God, and gaining in popularity.

The Cultural Context

"In 63 B.C.E. the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem, and in so doing put an end both to the independent Jewish state of Palestine and eight decades of rule by the Hasmonean dynasty of high priests. Rome began appointing the high priests that served the Temple in Jerusalem. High priests from then on juggled the religious interests of Jews and the political interests of Rome, at whose pleasure they served...Seven decades after Rome assumed control of Palestine, in 6 C.E., growing Jewish opposition to Roman laws relating to the census, taxation, and heathen traditions boiled over...

The riots of 6 C.E. and recurring outbreaks that followed caused Roman officials to see Jewish nationalism and religious fervor as threatening to law and order...

The first important movement to arise in Galilee was led by the apocalyptic visionary, John the Baptist. The Baptist called upon his followers to confess their sins, live an ascetic life-style, and prepare for the imminent coming of an avenging God. To the purification process of-

ferred in the Temple, he presented a radical new alternative: a ritual immersion in the waters of the Jordan River...

To understand the crime which likely led to the arrest of Jesus, it is first necessary to understand the role of the Temple in first-century Jewish life. The Temple in Jerusalem served dual purposes. It was both the revered center of religious life--a place for prayers and sacrifices--and a central bank, a place for taxes and tithes...At a time of high tension such as the Passover festival, it is likely that any subversive action in the Temple--even action of a symbolic nature--would provoke a strong response from high priests and Roman officials. It did.”⁴¹

The Temple leaders, as the above indicates, were under the authority of the Romans who appointed them. They knew that if the decision they made caused a rebellion, among the people, the Roman authorities would hold them responsible. The process they used to prosecute Jesus was to involve the Roman authorities. It is not an unfamiliar choice made by persons in positions of power to get what they want.

Today we hear politicians being charged with “Being in bed” with the NRA, Tobacco industry, Drug companies etc. The Temple leaders were in bed with the Roman authorities so they decided to include them in solving their problem. As easy as it is to quickly judge them for doing that, it a common choice made by those in power.

Personal Reflection

How have you been aware of authorities being “in bed” with power? Has it ever effected you directly?

Return to the Scripture in Context

When Jesus was arrested the group responsible for apprehending him was composed of Roman soldiers as well as temple security personnel. Judas, was the only one of the twelve disciples who was raised in the Judea area, the others were all from Galilee. He would, we may assume, have had more knowledge of the political/religious power structure that existed among the Jewish hierarchy.

3 So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.... 12 So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. 13 First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. 14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.” (John 18:3, 12-14)

Jesus had a preliminary hearing with Annas and was questioned about his teachings. And the answer he gave they obviously disagreed with because the temple police slapped him in the face. Annas appears to not want to deal with this so he gave instructions to take Jesus to his son-in-law Caiaphas, the high priest. There seems to be a “passing the buck” theme developing in the pre-trial hearings.

⁴¹ <http://www.famous-trials.com/jesustrial/1042-home>

We all know this temptation that is embedded in human nature. A son asks his father, “May I go over to Jimmy’s house?” The father looks up over his newspaper and replies, “Go ask your mother.” It’s not that the father doesn’t have the authority to make the decision, but his response is his way of avoiding a possible heated discussion with the other authority who lives in the house.

Personal Reflection

Can you think of other illustrations where a person might find it convenient to ‘pass the buck.’ Have you ever done that?

When Jesus arrived at Caiaphas’ house there was a crowd gathered. *“The hastily organized indictment of Jesus as described in Mark’s account—which would form the basis for all subsequent Gospels—was conducted under cloak of darkness, which suggests that Caiaphas was eager to dispense with Jesus as soon as possible, and to do so behind closed doors, without the full Sanhedrin present.”*⁴² And it was an illegal gathering of the council. *“The Jewish Mishna states, ‘Let a capital offense be tried during the day, but suspend at night.’”*⁴³

It was there that the scribes and elders had been called together in the hopes that they could find some witnesses to bring charges against Jesus. *“At last two came forward 61 and said, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’”* 62 *The high priest stood up and said, ‘Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?’* (Matthew 26:61-62) Jesus didn’t offer any explanation or attempt to clarify what he meant by the statement. This appeared to enrage Caiaphas and he put Jesus under oath before he asked him a more direct question. Once under oath he asked Jesus, *“Are you the Messiah, the Son of God.”* Jesus said to him, *“You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”* (v.64; quoting from Psalms 110:1; Daniel 7:13-14.)

Caiaphas had heard enough and demonstrated his anger by tearing his clothes and pronouncing his personal verdict upon Jesus, *“‘He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your verdict?’ They answered, ‘He deserves death.’ 67 Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, 68 saying, ‘Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?’”* (v.65-68)

Those who made this decision were members of the supreme court of the Jews known as the Sanhedrin. They agreed that Jesus deserved death, but they also knew they did not want a revolt among the crowds of persons who followed Jesus. And because it was late they suspended any verdict about what to do next.

There are a lot of details reported about the process of prosecution, and many are not reported. We know the name Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night, and had a conversation about being born anew. We also know from that scripture account that he was a member of the ruling

⁴² <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/people-in-the-bible/why-caiaphas-broke-jewish-law-indict-jesus/>

⁴³ <https://rcg.org/pillar/0902pp-trjtwi.html>

council, which would be the leaders deciding Jesus' fate. What we don't know was how he voted the next morning when they made their decision, but he did attempt to speak truth to power when he asked the council, "*Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?*" (John 7:50-51). The council's attempt to dismiss his concern wasn't even based on any of their major charges against Jesus. They seemed to try to embarrass him by assuming he didn't know the scriptures. They said, "*Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.*" (v.52) We are also informed after the crucifixion that, "*39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They⁴⁴ took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths according to the burial custom of the Jews.*" These two post-crucifixion accounts about his actions are most often interpreted that he became a believer in Jesus' teachings. That may very well be, but what is the possibility that he was either assigned the task of taking the body down from the cross because he spoke out against the council's process; or after the council's decision was made he made known his sympathy against the council's decision and chose to prepare the body for burial for a proper Jewish burial?

We have no answers to those questions but we do know, "*27 When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. 2 And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor.* (Matthew 27:1-2) The verdict no doubt didn't take much time to discuss. Once they decided they, as a council would not personally take any legal action to kill Jesus, they transferred him to the highest Roman authority in the city, Pontius Pilate, the Governor. More buck passing, which gives us reason to conclude that the real opposition to Jesus that led to his death was rooted less in religion than in the leaders' fear of losing power or status. Caiaphas knew that if Jesus was trouble for him, then he was trouble for Pilate.

*"As a Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate was granted the power of a supreme judge, which meant that he had the sole authority to order a criminal's execution. His duties as a prefect included such mundane tasks as tax collection and managing construction projects. But, perhaps his most crucial responsibility was that of maintaining law and order. Pontius Pilate attempted to do so by any means necessary."*⁴⁵

Personal Reflection

What has been your opinion of Pontius Pilate?

The four gospels each report the Sanhedrin council took Jesus to Pilate early in the morning. From each of their trial notes we discover all four included the accusation that Jesus claimed to be "The King of the Jews." Luke's record states, "*23 Then the assembly rose as a*

⁴⁴ The other person helping was Joseph of Arimathea. The Gospels attest that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, both members of the Sanhedrin, were in sympathy with Jesus' teachings (Mark 15:43; John 19:38).

⁴⁵ <https://www.biography.com/religious-figure/pontius-pilate>

body and brought Jesus before Pilate. 2 They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." (Luke 23:1-2) Luke's reputation as a historian documents the details of the charges brought by the council. Luke had a source for information that enabled him to fact-check the exchange Jesus had with the Jewish leaders over the issue of paying the tax and he included it in his gospel. "20 So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. 21 So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. 22 Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 23 But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 24 "Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?" They said, "The emperor's." 25 He said to them, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 26 And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent." (Luke 20:20-26)

The council was lying and they knew Pilate didn't have a source to fact-check them. The council illustrated the extent to which persons in power will go to get their way, and stay in power. It didn't matter that their effort to trick Jesus on the question of taxation failed, Pilate had no way of knowing that.

Jerusalem had once again become the center of injustice, corruption, and the betrayal of God's covenant. God's justice was replaced by human justice. The prophet Micah also cried out against it hundreds of years before with words that apply to the Sanhedrin council. "*Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Is it not for you to know justice?—2 you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones...9 Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity,10 who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong.*" (Micah 3:1-2; 9-10)

Isaiah also spoke a word of warning against the leaders of Jerusalem.

21 How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers... 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them." (Isaiah 1:21, 23)

Luke's writings are best seen through the lens of an historian wanting to get the facts and details right and simple, for any to understand. His trial documents in Luke 23:2 states most succinctly the charges the council submitted to Pilate.

1. "***We found this man subverting the nation***" The greek word *Diastrepho*⁴⁶ - "*to turn aside from the right path, to pervert, corrupt*". This would have been an attempt to broaden the scope of concern beyond the Jewish community.
2. "***Forbidding us to pay taxes to the Emperor.***" This is a trumped-up distortion. Jesus does not oppose paying taxes to Caesar, but he places one's obligation to God as primary (Luke 20:20-

⁴⁶ <http://classic.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=1294>

26). This they hoped would clinch in the minds of the Roman authorities they had to do something. They no doubt assumed that if Pilate didn't do something, Rome might remove Pilate from his position because he was responsible for overseeing the taxation of the people. It was on Pilate's *résumé*.

3. "***And saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.***" (The anointed one) The Jewish leaders knew that his claim, and the crowds, of the titles Son of David, Son of God, and Son of Man would not mean anything to the Roman authorities. The council assumed the charge of claiming to be KING would be subversive to the Roman Empire and Pilate would have to take action. Pilate did respond, but not the way the council had hoped.

"3 Then Pilate asked him, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" He answered, "You say so."

4 *Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." John's trial notes say that , "31 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." (John 18:31)*

Pilate put the ball back in their court by informing them that since the verdict was determined in the Jewish Sanhedrin jurisdiction, the sentencing should be done there as well. The council continued to press the issue informing Pilate that the Jewish law didn't permit them to carry out the appropriate sentence of death, but the Roman court could carry out the sentencing.

Luke's trial notes say the council added to their charges saying, "**5** *But they were insistent and said, he stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.*" (Luke 23:5). That got Pilate's attention and he asked for clarification.

"6 *When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.*" Finally Pilate saw an opening in the council's response as a way he could pass the buck. Herod happened to be in town that week to show his support for the Jewish festival. Since Jesus was a citizen of his province Pilate saw an opportunity. By sending him to Herod he would not only shifted the responsibility of decision making, but he would hope to show a courtesy to Herod which might help improve their relationship. We wonder if Pilate knew that Herod hoped to meet Jesus.

"8 *When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.*" (Luke 23:8)

It appears that Herod had heard reports of Jesus performing miracles, and he was interested in having him provide some personal entertainment. This is the interpretation heard in "King Herod's Song" in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

*"Prove to me that your divine, change my water into wine... Prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool."*⁴⁷

⁴⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Christ_Superstar, ***Jesus Christ Superstar*** is a 1970 rock opera with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Tim Rice.

Herod had his primary wish granted, he saw Jesus, but he was disappointed Jesus didn't perform for him. Herod asked Jesus some questions and Jesus remained silent. Herod had no more time for him, "*11 ...Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. 12 That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.*" (Luke 23:11-12). Herod doesn't make any effort to offer any judgment or sentencing, he sends the case back to the lower court for Pilate to decide, which must have disappointed Pilate. Pilate had to be satisfied that his gesture of including Herod had restored their friendship.

Back in Pilate's court he once again questioned Jesus. "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" (John 18:33) All Pilate wanted was for Jesus to respond with guilty or not guilty. Answering Pilate's question would have been as difficult as convincing a blind man that the grass was green and not red. Pilate indicates his inability to understand the Jewish mind, "*I am not a Jew, am I?*" (v.35) Jesus finally makes a statement in an attempt to clarify the difference between his kingdom and the other kingdoms. "*My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.*" (v.36).

Pilate takes the answer as admission of guilty saying, "*So you are a king? Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'*" (v.37) Pilate appears to be as confused as ever. In his history of trying cases brought to him he knew the importance of finding the truth, but in this case he wanted to know, "*What is truth?*" He seems to resolve that by his decision to return to the council and inform them, "*I find no case against him.*" He is willing to recognize Jesus as their king and willing to release him to them. He was hoping for a solution based on a Passover tradition of releasing one prisoner of their choice at the festival. The offer indicates Pilate was not hearing the intensity of their desire; they wanted Jesus dead.

"*19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.'*" Imagine the additional pressure put on Pilate, while in the midst of a final court decision. Pilate gets a text message from his wife about a dream she had that declared Jesus was innocent.

Pilate was between a rock and a hard place.

A charge of treason in his jurisdiction would be brought to Caesar's attention with a predictable outcome of death. A charge of blasphemy carried the same expectation in the Jewish court of law. Herod, with whom he was once again friends, was satisfied with a no guilty plea. His wife's opinion just added fuel to his anxiety of making a decision on the sentencing. The Passover tradition of allowing the Jewish people to select one prisoner to set free, sounded like a plea bargain that would solve his problem, and then the decision wouldn't be his, it would be the verdict of others who by tradition were given the choice to release a criminal.

The crowds in Jerusalem at the beginning of the week were in turmoil, and at the end of the week, "*20 ... the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21 The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?'*" And they said, "*Barabbas.*" 22 Pilate said to them, "*Then what should I do*

with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" (Matthew 27:20-22)

Pilate, instead of accepting their choice, agitated them more by saying, "Why what evil has he done? But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" (v.23). He realized the trial was over and wanted the record to show his own opinion that he disagreed with their verdict. "He took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." (v.24). Pilate also found it convenient to pass the buck to the crowd. Pilate carried out the sentencing, "After flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified."

If there would have been a Jerusalem Times newspaper, the following day the lead article may have reported something like this:

"Jesus Of Nazareth, Enemy Of The State, Executed For Treason

*Jesus of Nazareth was executed today on the orders of the Roman State. Method of execution: Crucifixion. The charge under Roman law was treason, and under Herodian law blasphemy against the Temple. The evidence against this anarchist was so strong that authorities of both the Roman State and the Kingdom of Herod concurred with the arrest and execution, and he was subjected to trial by both governments. And in a rare uprising of spontaneous collective justice, the mass of people who were gathered for Passover called for his execution as well. The mob affirmed their loyalty to the state, chanting, "We have no king but Caesar."*⁴⁸

The actions of the Sanhedrin and Roman leaders against Jesus during the prosecution became evidence to be included in Jesus' *résumé*. The way they treated Jesus was the way the prophets foretold how the Messiah would be treated. "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting." (Isaiah 50:6, Matthew 27:30)

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (Isaiah 57:3, Matthew 27:12-14)

These are two examples of numerous prophetic descriptions of how the Messiah would be treated, and how Jesus was treated.

If the trial, prosecution, and crucifixion were the end of the story of the Rabbi from Nazareth, there would be no Messiah's *résumé*; to rephrase the words of a famous radio broadcaster Paul Harvey, "And now, the rest of the story."⁴⁹

Sharing our Thoughts

1. What insights do you have regarding the relationship between the power structures that prosecuted and crucified Jesus?

⁴⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerrybowyer/2014/04/18/jesus-of-nazareth-enemy-of-the-state-executed-for-treason/#4c69ed2f2dc4>. Article written by Jerry Bowyer, written on Good Friday, April 18, 2014

⁴⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Harvey

2. How would you describe the motives of the Sanhedrin council?
3. What's your opinion of Nicodemus? Have you ever been in a similar position?
4. How do you explain Herod and Pilate's opinion of not seeing any fault in Jesus?
5. What new "take away" do you have from such a familiar story?

CHAPTER SIX

Affirmation - Resurrection

Matthew 28:1-20

Affirmation defined: *“The act or an instance of affirming; the assertion that something exists or is true.”*⁵⁰

Reflective Question

Which of the four gospel accounts of the resurrection do you like the most, and why?

Matthew 28:1-20⁵¹

1 *After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” 11 While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ 14 If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day. 16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

When we put a puzzle together it’s common for folks to start by looking for the border pieces that frame the puzzle. Piece by piece a picture begins to take shape that will define the

⁵⁰ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/affirmation>

⁵¹ resurrection accounts in the four gospels. Matthew 28: 1-14; Mark 16:1-14; Luke 23:1-44 The; John 20:1-29

central theme. I think we would agree it is much more difficult to start with the center and work toward the borders.

As you begin this chapter on the Resurrection of Messiah Jesus, think of a puzzle of black, white and red pieces as a metaphor for how his resurrection was understood as the central core teaching of the Christian faith. Think of the border on the left as the religious and political climate at the time of Jesus. Think of the border at the bottom as the biblical story told in scriptures beginning with Old Testament prophecies and the coming of the Messiah. Think of the border at the top as the Jewish belief in resurrection, and the border on the right as the church's teachings on resurrection. The pieces that connect each of the borders meet in the center at the resurrection of Jesus. Our five previous chapters have been key puzzle pieces moving us toward the central foundational event of resurrection. All of Jesus' healings, exorcisms, miracles and teachings are part of the one thousand piece puzzle that connect the borders to the central theme. Without the resurrection there would be no puzzle.

This central theme, resurrection, cannot be understood without the pieces that connect it with the past, as well as its influential teaching which has shaped the future faith of Christianity. A single chapter on this topic cannot do justice to the needed examination of that past and future, so we make a very big assumption that you, the reader, have a basic understanding of many of those puzzle pieces that support the theme.

Reflective Question

What are those connecting themes, stories, that you see as connecting puzzle pieces?

The experiences and teachings of the Messiah in the previous five chapters can now be added to his résumé. They document and verify his path way for claiming to be the Messiah. It is this résumé that becomes the source for persons to seriously consider following him. There was, however, one final experience Messiah Jesus needed to add to that résumé, and that was his resurrection from the dead following his crucifixion. It would be his resurrection that would be the act of affirming that his teachings were true.

The border on the left, the religious and political influences, that define the cultural climate in which Jesus lived include the Jewish people living in the land God promised them, but the political power of Rome held them in exile. It's important to know that the Jews had been living as exiled people in their homeland for many years. *“The Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes took over the Temple on December 25, 167 BC. Deliberately desecrating it so that Jews would no longer think of it as the place where they were reaffirmed as a unique people, he established worship of himself there instead... One strand of Jewish self-understanding, belief and hope coalesced into a single movement. Judas Maccabaeus and his companions accomplished the unthinkable, and organized a guerrilla revolt that drove out the tyrant. Three years to the day after the Temple's desecration (December 25, 164 BC) Judas cleansed and reconsecrated it. A new festival (Hanukkah) was added to the Jewish calendar.”*⁵²

⁵² Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 158,159

Hanukkah was being celebrated during the time of Jesus, and it influenced the mindset of those desiring freedom from Roman domination. Knowing this bit of political history makes the opposition toward Jesus and his teaching, “The Kingdom of God is near,” more understandable.

Understanding the teachings of Judaism regarding resurrection helps us fill in a large portion of that top puzzle border that reveals the mindset and beliefs of the Jews at the time of Jesus.

“Resurrection of the dead — t’chiyat hameitim in Hebrew — is a core doctrine of traditional Jewish theology. Traditional Jews believe that during the Messianic Age, the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem, the Jewish people ingathered from the far corners of the earth and the bodies of the dead will be brought back to life and reunited with their souls. It is not entirely clear whether only Jews, or all people, are expected to be resurrected at this time. This belief — distinct from, though connected to, the belief in the immortality of the soul — is mentioned explicitly only twice in the Hebrew Bible, in the books of Isaiah and Daniel, though hints of it are extrapolated from other biblical sources. The medieval philosopher Maimonides includes it as one of his 13 principles of the Jewish faith, and the Mishnah states that those who don’t believe in resurrection “have no share in the world to come.” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1) The Amidah prayer recited thrice daily by traditional Jews includes a blessing praising God as the resurrector of the dead.”⁵³

More puzzle pieces are added when we understand the mindset of those who followed Jesus. Except for the Sadducees,⁵⁴ the Jewish mindset regarding resurrection was focused on what would happen to the faithful at the end of the age. This is clearly stated at the time of Lazarus’ death and Jesus’ conversation with his sister Martha. “*Martha said to him, ‘know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’*” (John 11:24) It is to Martha that he responded with that great statement of affirmation. “*Jesus said to her, ‘25 I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’*” (John 11:25-26)

We hear the statement through two thousand years of sermons and songs and we rejoice, but Martha and those with her, heard it through the filter of grief. Lazarus’ coming back to the land of the living overshadowed the depth of truth in Jesus’ statement.

We have evidence of that in the story Luke tells of the Emmaus disciples and their emotional state of grieving Jesus’ death. “*But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*” Luke 24:21) In my book⁵⁵, *Tears in a Bottle: Learning How to Grieve Well*, I write, “*One of the major life experiences that tend to take a person hostage is the experience of losing something or someone who has been valued. We know this experience by the more familiar generic word grief.*” The Emmaus disciples, as well as all who followed Jesus, had suffered a great loss when their Messiah, in whom they had placed their hope, was crucified. It was a hope that he would be the one to free them from their Roman captors. Knowing that this state of sadness and loss his followers experienced, was soon transformed into joy and gladness, points to

⁵³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-resurrection-of-the-dead/>

⁵⁴Mark 12:18 “*Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question.*”

⁵⁵ Griffith, William H., *Tears in a Bottle: Learning How to Grieve Well*, Xulon Press, xxvii

something dramatic that must have happened. These stories are more pieces of the puzzle that enlarge our understanding of the pre-resurrection mindset, enabling us to better understand the way persons dealt with this major shift in their theological thinking.

Reflective Question

What experience(s) in life have you had (like the Emmaus disciples) where your expectations were shattered and you asked God the “Why” question?

The right side of our puzzle borders represent the eventual results of the resurrection and how it transformed individuals, challenged religious and political cultures, and created the Christian church. These are the themes that define the puzzle pieces moving back toward the center to the resurrection event. It was in the context of these themes being developed that the first writings were penned about the resurrection.

Paul wrote letters that included the important teaching of resurrection before the gospel writers wrote theirs. *“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

We would certainly include Paul in the Messiah’s résumé as a reference that affirmed his personal experience with the risen Messiah, as well as his knowledge of others to whom he appeared. If, out of all of his writings, he chose to include an attachment to his reference, the words written here would be most appropriate. These words may be Paul’s most succinctly crafted definition of what was at the core of the gospel he preached. In his letter to Timothy he did provide a much briefer summary when he wrote, *“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendent of David - that is my gospel.”* (2 Timothy 2:8). In both of these quotes Paul reaches across the puzzle to connect the Messiah’s credentials to the records of Judaism, reminding the Corinthians it was *“all in accordance with the scriptures,”* and to Timothy he notes the genealogy connection of Messiah Jesus with David.

Paul was so certain about this core teaching that he told the Corinthians, *“And if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”* (1 Corinthians 15:14-17)

When engineers blow up a building they place an explosive charge in a special place and that one explosion destroys the building. Paul, in so many words, is saying if you blow up the belief in resurrection you destroy the entire message of the Christian faith.

Paul's quotes here represent what was at the core of all the Apostle's preaching.⁵⁶ These also are the puzzle pieces filling in that post resurrection affirmation of Messiah Jesus and his teachings.

As our puzzle is nearly complete we realize the only pieces left are all red, and most of them connect with pre-resurrection events. They are the words of Messiah Jesus himself regarding his death and resurrection. They were words meant to prepare the disciples, but they were not understood or appreciated until after the his resurrection.

"Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31; see also Matthew 17:22)

"Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (John 2:19; see also Make 14:58; Matthew 28:61)

"But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." ("Matthew 12:39; see also 16:4)

When working on a puzzle there is a special excitement when you get down to that last few pieces. In our case there are four red pieces left that pertain to Jesus' final words of instruction that are in the following verses.

SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT

18 *"And Jesus came and said to them, "All (a) authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 (b) Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to (c) obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am (d) with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20)

These pieces of the puzzle are important, not because they define a manifesto on evangelism, for which it is most often used, but because of the authority that was given to the risen Messiah. *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."* It is this authority that is linked to the word in the next sentence, "therefore."

I had a professor of theology who often reminded us as students, "When you see a 'therefore,' see what it's there for." In this case it is there because Matthew has been consistently connecting Jesus's teaching to the Jewish scriptures providing images and teachings that point to Jesus having authority. He connects Jesus with Moses in the setting of going up a mountain and providing a list of beatitudes, not unlike Moses receiving the ten commandments. Matthew establishes the authority of Jesus in comparison to the law in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew established the importance of the authority Jesus had when he drew a line in the sand resisting the testing of Satan in the wilderness. Matthew is making it clear that, although Jesus was crucified by the religious authority of Jewish leaders and the political authority of Roman rulers, a regime change has begun because of his resurrection, validating God's victory.

⁵⁶The Apostles preaching that affirms personal witness as well as Old Testament fulfillment. Acts 2:22-32; 3:13-15; 4:10-11; (see also Psalm 16:8 and 118:22).

¹ Peter 2:21-25 (see Isaiah 53:9)

The second of the final four puzzle pieces is a command to “Go.” Because he has the authority he is able to command others to go on a mission that fulfills the ancient promise given to Abraham. *“No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.”* (Genesis 17:5)

This piece not only connects the left borders to the center, but it connects with the right border also showing how it was accomplished.. *“Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* (Acts 10:34-35)

So it is here that he, by nature of his authority, commissioned others to “Go” with the responsibility of seeking out new citizens for the Kingdom. He established the process for advancing God’s story of salvation connecting both the left border of Judaism with the right border of the future church.

The next to the last final piece was for all who would choose to follow Messiah Jesus. They were to obey all that he taught. *“Obey everything that I have commanded you”*. This piece, like many others throughout the puzzle, emphasized the importance of God’s people obeying God’s laws and the teaching of his prophets. Beginning with the prophet Moses who said, *“If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; 2 all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God:”* (Deuteronomy 28:1-2). He then continued to announce a litany of blessings which would be theirs if they obeyed. He also warned them as to what would happen if they didn’t obey.

Obedience is at the heart of Jesus’ farewell to his disciples. *“If you love me, keep my commands...whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me...Anyone who loves me will keep my teaching...”* (John 14:25-31)

The problem we all must deal with is convincing ourselves that, “obey” is not a bad four-letter word. *“Obedience is a form of social influence that involves performing an action under the orders of an authority figure. It differs from compliance (which involves changing your behavior at the request of another person) and conformity (which involves altering your behavior in order to go along with the rest of the group). Instead, obedience involves altering your behavior because a figure of authority has told you to.”*⁵⁷

We all have memories of our childhood and the resistance we demonstrated when we were told to obey a certain instruction. Parents and teachers exercised their authority, and oft-times creative ways to bribe us into compliance. It’s difficult to totally erase that ingrained desire to be our own boss instead of submitting to someone else’s wishes. When it comes to obeying the teachings in the scriptures we discover that the same inner desire we felt with a parent and teacher, may affect our obeying God.

We live in a world that knows the importance of gathering information and data before making decisions. This was very evident during those early months of the Corona virus when scientists and medical experts repeatedly told us they were following the data; their action recommendations were based on the data.

⁵⁷ <https://www.ihsglobal.org/founders-blog/view/984/obedience-before-understanding>

Being conditioned by this cultural pathway for decision-making is just the opposite of what is taught in the scriptures. The prophet Isaiah reminds us, *“Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?”* (Isaiah 50:10) Obedience for following God begins in the dark. It begins without the data of proof that provides the understanding before making a decision. It’s when we don’t understand what is going on, when we are in the dark, that we find it hard to obey, but it is exactly at that time that our actions must precede our knowledge. The Good News is that God promises us understanding. *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding his praise endures forever.”* (Psalm 111:10) We have all surely known the experience of looking back on a difficult time when our obedience was tested until the day we finally accepted and understood how God did provide.

The departing words of Jesus to the disciples were highlighted by the important emphasis on obeying his commandments. Jesus knew they would face circumstances where they would be in the dark and not understand. It’s at that moment that obedience is necessary and faith is demonstrated.

Reflective Question

What life experience have you faced in the dark circumstances of not understanding, only to look back and see how God had provided?

Putting the final piece in any puzzle provides a great deal of satisfaction. Who among us has not hid a piece so that when we came to the end we would be the one to celebrate placing that one piece that completed the entire puzzle.

The last red piece of our puzzle is the last words Messiah Jesus spoke to his disciples on the mountain before departing from them. A person’s last words have always been something persons have valued and remembered. John Newton, an evangelical Anglican cleric who wrote hymns, including “Amazing Grace” and “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken” spoke these last words, *“I’m still in the land of the dying; I shall be in the land of the living soon”*⁵⁸

Jesus’ last words were, *“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:18-20) More important than the Messiah puzzle being completed is that his life mission was completed. Before his birth he was given a name that defined his life and his mission, *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”* which means, *“God is with us.”*

His final word of promise to them and to us as we live out our faith, often in the dark, is also a word of affirmation, “Emmanuel”.

Final Words

It has not been my intent to attempt to identify all the puzzle pieces representing the various resurrection appearances. As interesting as it would be to detail the differences in the gospel accounts, they are not key puzzle pieces. It doesn’t matter if Mary Magdalene went to the tomb by herself or with other women, or to know if they went to anoint his body. It certainly doesn’t

⁵⁸ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/last-words>

matter if his body was wrapped in a large linen shroud or strips of linen. It doesn't matter what the sequence was for how and from whom the disciples first heard. That was about as important as knowing if a gift sent to you from Amazon arrived by USPS, FedEx, or UPS.

The Christian faith at its very center is the belief in the resurrection. The reports of the gospel stories are different in a variety of ways, just as reports from multiple witnesses of a two car collision. The different details do not deny there had been a car wreck. From the witnesses a set of common insights are verified, which is true of the resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus died on a cross and was buried in a tomb. His followers were not prepared for that to happen; they grieved their great loss. Three days later the tomb in which he was buried was empty, which in and of itself did not inspire hope. Mary thought the body had been stolen. The disciples encountered appearances they had with Jesus, and began to connect the dots regarding his teachings that he would rise from the dead. From their personal experiences they affirmed that truth, and publicly proclaimed it, "...in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

We would include in our Messiah's résumé the last paragraph as a summary reference from those who were witnesses. It is the information in the résumé that continues to be the Good News of God's salvation story.

Sharing our Thoughts

1. What are the key words in Paul's "First Importance," which he wrote about in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, which you would highlight?
2. What other illustrations can you think of (beside the building explosion) that provide a visual of how important the point was that Paul was making?
3. What is different about the way the conversation Jesus had with Martha ends, compared to other conversations at other times with other people? (See examples, Mark 8:30 and Matthew 16:20)
4. What are your thoughts about the chapter's Final Words which compare what does and does not matter?
5. What is your major "take away" from having read this book?

Afterwords

*“But there are also many other things that Jesus did;
if every one of them were written down, I suppose that
the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”
John 21:25*

We get the point of what John’s hyperbole intended to convey. All that Jesus accomplished in only three years is truly mind-boggling. Trying to choose only six events that defined the greatest influence upon shaping his Messianic identity, and format it in a limited number of pages to be attractive to the average reader, has also been a challenge. Many, many volumes of books have been written about the topics of each of the chapter themes. Many are scholarly studies comparing the different ideas about the meaning of his particular words and actions. As helpful as they are, they are not the books that a person chooses for a devotional reading, or for a small group study. It is my hope that this material will provide a helpful option.

As I developed the chapters there was a common theme that kept recurring to me, and it is the words Jesus told the disciples, “*You can do nothing without me.*” It appears that Jesus learned this theme himself, from his Father, God. He speaks of his relationship with God saying, “*The Father and I are one.*” (John 10:30) When we are in total harmony with another we might say, “We’re on the same page.” His regular retreating to a quiet place to speak with his Father models that relationship. It is what he wanted to teach his disciples, and we have seen that was not an easy lesson to teach in three years, but they finally got it.

I hope that lesson will be of help in your ongoing faith formation.