

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



BASED ON THE NBC TELEVISION EVENT

THE CRUCIFIXION WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

— THE —  
**REVOLUTION**  
THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

**A.D.**  
**THE BIBLE CONTINUES**



*A narrative exploration of the characters,  
culture, and conflict that fueled the rise of the early church*

A.D.

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INTRODUCTION

BEFORE THERE WAS AN A.D.



The Backstory to a  
World-Changing Revolution

Today we live in the era of A.D., Latin for *anno Domini*, or “in the year of our Lord.” The term was coined in the sixth century when a Scythian monk named Dionysius Exiguus introduced a system for numbering years using the birth of Christ as the beginning point of year one. He labeled the years prior to Christ’s birth as B.C., meaning “before Christ.” This method of reckoning time caught on and has been used ever since. Thus the birth of Christ is recognized by our calendar as the centerpiece of world history.

The alternate designations for marking time, such as C.E., meaning “common era,” and B.C.E., “before the common era,” are exactly parallel to A.D. and B.C. Though the terms are different, the numbering system is the same, so the year C.E. 2015 is also the year A.D. 2015. But even if the references to “our Lord” and “Christ” are removed, this doesn’t change the fact that the coming of Christ was a watershed event. It rightly stands at the center of our reckoning of time, with the years radiating out from it both backward and forward, receding into the past and advancing into the future. Clearly the coming of Christ is, and always will be, the

most meaningful, astounding, and transformational event in the history of planet Earth.

This transformation that Christ brought about was revolutionary in the truest sense of the word. He raised a banner of resistance against the tyranny of evil that had invaded the earth in Eden and called all of humanity to join him in a march toward certain victory. It was a movement that turned the world upside down.

Most people in the Western world know at least the broad brushstrokes of who Jesus was. His birth is celebrated every Christmas, his parables are well known, and some of his sayings are part of our vernacular. But the most revolutionary part of his life is revealed in his crucifixion and resurrection. This was why he came, and this is what sparked the revolution. These events removed the barrier of sin between people and God. After his resurrection, Christ instructed his disciples to spread the news about the salvation he offers throughout all nations.

This book tells the story of his disciples' diligence, dedication, and difficulties in accomplishing this mission to call people to turn their backs on sin and follow Christ. In short, it's the story of the world's greatest resistance movement, the Christian church. It explores the church's founding, its reason for existence, its rocky beginnings, and the deep roots it put down to become what it is today. In other words, these pages will show why the centuries since the birth of Christ are called A.D.—*anno Domini*—the years when the world was completely revolutionized by the coming of our Lord.

The original story of the beginnings of the church is found in the first eleven chapters of the New Testament book of Acts. (Acts is short for "The Acts of the Apostles.") The book you are now holding retells that story in dramatic form. Every incident is related with great care for biblical accuracy, but the accounts have been expanded to bring to life the drama that was certainly present in the actual events. This retelling includes certain assumptions about what the characters might have done or thought in various

situations based on the biblical facts and historical context that illuminate some of the spaces between those facts.

In addition to recounting the church's story, each chapter offers a look at what these historical events mean to us today. The revolution that shaped the church wasn't isolated to the first century; it provides inspiration and information that can benefit us in the here and now.

### THE B.C. MIND-SET

The events, setting, and attitudes depicted in the book of Acts were shaped by centuries of Jewish beliefs, mind-sets, traditions, tensions, and conflicts. We can best understand the story if we know something of its historical context. These three key points offer a brief overview of Israel's history, providing the background needed to grasp the events portrayed in this book.

#### *A Special Nation with a Special Purpose*

The story of the nation of Israel began in the twentieth century B.C., when God called a man named Abraham (initially Abram) and guided him out of Mesopotamia to the land of Palestine, on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. God promised Abraham that he would make his descendants into a great nation and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-7). As the first step in fulfillment of that promise, Abraham became the founder of the nation of Israel.

This growing nation endured four centuries of slavery in Egypt until the great leader Moses led them to freedom. He gave them a set of laws written by God himself, governing diet, hygiene, relationships, property, and rituals. Then Moses brought the Israelites to the land God had promised to Abraham. Many years later, Israel became a shining star among Middle Eastern nations under the rule of their great king David and his son Solomon. But immediately after King Solomon's death, the nation began a downward slide.

A primary cause of the decline was Solomon's tendency toward excess. He began his reign in humility and wisdom, dedicating himself to building the Temple, which was one of the wonders of the ancient world. But as the nation grew in prosperity, he spent lavishly on palaces, horses, chariots, servants, feasts, and many other extravagances. He kept a harem of one thousand women, mostly to build alliances with other nations, and allowed these women to set up worship centers to their foreign gods.

### *Decline and Fall*

After Solomon died, the nation of Israel split in two when the ten northern tribes rebelled against heavy taxation. These tribes retained the name Israel while the two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, took the name of the dominant tribe, Judah. The idol worship brought into the country by Solomon's wives took root and began to plunge both nations into a spiral of decadence and decline. The northern tribes plummeted quickly, and in 722 B.C. they were conquered and deported by the Assyrians. They never again existed as a nation. Judah lasted almost a century and a half longer, but in 586 B.C. the Babylonians conquered and deported them to Babylon, a city located in what is now Iraq.

The Jews reacted to the disastrous fall of their nation by rebounding spiritually. They repented of their sin, and in the humiliation of captivity, they began a serious attempt to obey God's laws. They took comfort in their prophets' predictions that a Messiah would come and deliver them from their enemies and into a glorious age far surpassing that of David and Solomon.

### *The Prophesied Deliverer*

The Jewish Tanakh (which Christians call the Old Testament) contained more than 350 prophecies concerning the promised Messiah. Isaiah, who prophesied during the years of Israel's and

Judah's decline, foresaw many details about this coming deliverer, including his virgin birth, lineage, ministry, rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection.

One recurring prophecy in particular gave the Jews their sense of specialness that so often infuriated those around them. The prophets foretold that this great Messiah would not only liberate and rule Israel, he would also extend Israel's rule over all the world. The prophet Daniel wrote, "During the reigns of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed or conquered. It will crush all these kingdoms into nothingness, and it will stand forever" (Daniel 2:44). Based on this and similar prophecies, the Jews believed that under their coming Messiah, they were destined to rule the entire world.

The Medo-Persians conquered Babylon and allowed the captive Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem. But the time was not yet right for the nation to fulfill its glorious prophetic future or even rise to the glory of its golden age under David and Solomon. The Jewish nation continued to be overrun by one nation after another. They were conquered next by the Greeks in 332 B.C. and then by the Romans in 63 B.C.

## WHAT DOES THE TITLE *MESSIAH* MEAN?

*Messiah* is the English translation of the Hebrew word *mashiach*, which refers to a high priest or king whose reign was initiated by the ceremonial anointing of oil. More simply, it means "the anointed one." The word soon came to mean a deliverer or a savior of a nation or group of people. In the Old Testament, the term is often applied to the coming deliverer of Israel, who would rescue the Jews from bondage and oppression.

The Romans divided the Jewish territory into three provinces: Judea (the Greek name for Judah) to the south, Galilee to the north, and Samaria in between. Galilee was ruled by puppet kings in the line of Herod the Great, and Judea was ruled by a Roman-appointed governor.

This was the state of the Jewish nation in A.D. 33 when the revolution described in this book began. It was the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and the nation of Israel—the nation God had raised up to bring Jesus the Messiah to the world.

The Messiah was about to turn the known world upside down. Who would be ready?

CHAPTER I

# THE DAY GOD DIED

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## How God's Chosen Nation Murdered Its Own King

*Matthew 26–27; Mark 14–15; Luke 22–23; John 18–19*

PONTIUS PILATE HAD A DILEMMA ON HIS HANDS. It was the Jewish holy week of Passover, and Jerusalem, a city of about 50,000 people, was packed with some 150,000 celebrants from Middle Eastern and Mediterranean nations. As the Roman governor of Judea, Pilate had good reason for concern. Since the Romans had conquered the fiercely independent nation of Israel in 63 B.C., insurrections were a constant threat as groups of nationalist zealots smarting under Roman occupation frequently rose up to defy their conquerors.

The volatility in the atmosphere was palpable. Such an influx of people was difficult to manage under the best of conditions, but on this particular Passover in A.D. 33, the tension was ratcheted up several notches by rumors that the miracle-working rabbi named Jesus would be present. Many Jews thought this man was the long-awaited Messiah. The last thing Pilate wanted was a report to

Caesar that he had allowed a revolt against Roman authority in this already explosive region. As Roman procurators did at every Jewish feast, Pilate brought hundreds of Roman soldiers into Jerusalem to enforce order.

The elite Jewish ruling council, known as the Sanhedrin, believed in a coming Messiah, and they were on the lookout for him. They thought the one who would release them from their oppressors would be a powerful ruler, a man of religious and political clout. This Jesus did not fit their expectations. He was born in obscurity to poor parents, he had no formal education, he appeared to be nothing more than an itinerant street preacher, and he mixed with the rabble—not only with common fishermen, tradesmen, and turncoat tax collectors, but also with known sinners, such as prostitutes, and ceremonially unclean people, including lepers.

The members of the Sanhedrin were frustrated by Jesus, who seemed to have no respect for the religious leaders' traditions and,

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## THE PASSOVER

Passover is an annual feast that draws its name from an event that occurred in the thirteenth century B.C. when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Moses had warned the stubborn Pharaoh that if he did not set the Israelites free, God would inflict death on every firstborn child in Egypt. To ensure that the Israelites were saved, God instructed them to cover their doorways with lamb's blood. The death angel would then "pass over" every marked house, sparing the firstborn within. On the night of Passover, the firstborn of those living under the blood of the lamb were spared while the Egyptian firstborns perished. In the wake of such loss, Pharaoh finally relented and allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt. For the first time in more than four hundred years, they were a free people.



## THE SANHEDRIN

The Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling council composed of seventy men chosen from the chief priests, scribes (men highly educated in Jewish law), and elders of Judea. The high priest served as the group's leader. The Sanhedrin arbitrated criminal, civil, and religious law. It had its own police force and could inflict punishments such as imprisonment, fines, and scourging. But the Jewish council was forbidden from imposing the death penalty, which was only to be administered by the Roman governor.

in their eyes, no respect for the Law of Moses. They were particularly outraged by his seeming violations of the Sabbath rules. One of the Ten Commandments is "Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8). This meant that no work was to be done on the seventh day of the week. The Jewish leaders had encrusted that simple law with a mountain of restrictions that buried the Sabbath in legalism. Then along came Jesus, flagrantly violating their rules by healing sick people and plucking handfuls of grain for his disciples to eat on that day.

Worst of all, these Jewish leaders saw Jesus as a blasphemer. When he made claims that indicated he saw himself as God, the Jewish leaders needed no more evidence against him. Such apparent contempt and irreverence fit the very definition of blasphemy. The heretic must die.

But there were obstacles. Jesus had become immensely popular with the people. He had won them over with his miracles and healings, along with his vivid teachings, which delivered deeper insights than they had ever heard. The people were flocking to this polarizing figure and slipping out from under the Sanhedrin's control.

It was becoming evident that he was a threat to their power and influence. Popular or not, Jesus had to go.

### *The Sanhedrin's Murderous Plot*

In the tradition of Jewish rabbis, Jesus had surrounded himself with a small group of men who followed him and listened to his teachings. Like the teachers of his day, he was training them to carry on the work he had begun. In the Gospels these men are called *disciples*, a word meaning “follower, student, or adherent.” Like others who thought Jesus was the Messiah, these disciples expected him to raise an army and drive the Romans from their land.

Just when the Sanhedrin's anger with Jesus was escalating into a plan to kill him, they had a timely visit from one of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot. As it turned out, it didn't take much for Judas to turn his back on his teacher. “How much will you pay me to betray Jesus to you?” he asked them. They offered thirty silver coins, and he placed Jesus into their hands.

## JUDAS ISCARIOT

Judas Iscariot was one of Jesus' twelve closest followers. As the one who delivered Jesus into the hands of his enemies, his name has become synonymous with “betrayer.” So why would one of Jesus' closest friends become a traitor? The Gospel of John indicates that Judas was motivated by greed. He was the disciples' treasurer and stole funds from the money bag (John 12:6). Luke 22:3 offers an additional insight about his motivation: “Satan entered into Judas Iscariot.” After Jesus was condemned, however, Judas is wracked with guilt and hangs himself (Matthew 27:1-10). The book of Acts adds detail to Matthew's account of Judas's suicide. It tells us that when Judas fell headlong into a field, “his body split open, spilling out all his intestines” (Acts 1:18).

Judas timed his betrayal to occur when Jesus returned from praying in the garden of Gethsemane after celebrating Passover with his disciples. He approached his master and greeted him with a traditional Middle Eastern kiss on both cheeks. This act identified Jesus for the throng of police officers and officials who were lurking in the shadows. As they surged forward to make the arrest, Jesus' companion Peter assumed that the rebellion had begun. He drew his sword and slashed at the arresting official, slicing off his ear (John 18:10).

But to Peter's surprise, Jesus stopped him. "Put away your sword," Jesus told him. "Those who use the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). Jesus picked up the severed ear and, with a miraculous touch, reattached it to the man's head (Luke 22:51).

Peter was shocked. Was there to be no revolt? Just what was Jesus about? Only an hour or so earlier, Peter had vowed to stand by his Master through thick and thin, saying, "Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you, and even to die with you" (Luke 22:33). But Jesus, knowing that Peter had misunderstood the nature of his mission, said, "Peter, let me tell you something. Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me" (Luke 22:34).

At the moment of Jesus' arrest, all but two of his disciples fled for their lives, fulfilling one of many Old Testament prophecies: "Strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (Zechariah 13:7). Peter, however, was not among those who scattered. Though reeling from Jesus' unexpected arrest, he was determined to stick by his beloved master in spite of the danger to his own life. He followed at a distance as the Temple police led Jesus to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, for a trial.

Peter watched from the courtyard, warming his hands by a fire, when a servant girl recognized him.

"You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean," she said (Matthew 26:69).

Peter emphatically denied it.

But others around the fire recognized him and asked the question twice more. With increasing vehemence, Peter claimed each time that he didn't even know Jesus. Immediately after Peter's third denial, a rooster crowed in the distance. Peter remembered Jesus' prediction that he would slip into disloyalty. Shamed and guilt ridden, Peter fled the scene and went into hiding with the other disciples.

Inside the house of Caiaphas, Jesus faced the first of five trials he was to endure. Caiaphas questioned him harshly, but Jesus offered no response until the high priest said, "Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus answered, "You have said it" (Matthew 26:63-64).

That was all Caiaphas needed. In a rage, he ripped his robe and accused Jesus of speaking blasphemy, which according to Jewish law was punishable by death. Caiaphas had Jesus beaten, and then he sent him to the Sanhedrin for an official trial.

This second trial was so riddled with illegal and unjust maneuvers

## PETER

Peter and his brother Andrew were the first two people Jesus called to be his disciples (Matthew 4:18). Both men were fishermen on the freshwater Sea of Galilee. They had their own boats and by all indications were reasonably successful. Peter's actual name was Simon, a word meaning "God has heard." Jesus renamed him Peter, which means "rock." This new name indicated the change that this man would make from a fisherman to one of Christianity's first great catalysts. Peter was bold and brave but often impulsive, as we see in his rash act of slashing off the ear of Jesus' arresting officer. Yet he was strong and stalwart in his love for his master. As we will see in future chapters, Peter eventually more than lived up to his new name.

that no one familiar with Jewish customs would think it was legitimate. They tried Jesus at night, which was against the Jewish law. They presumed he was guilty at the outset, which was also against the Jewish law. They hired false witnesses to testify against him—a blatantly illegal act in any courtroom. They mistreated Jesus as a prisoner, scourging and beating him, and they provided him with no legal defense. The entire trial from beginning to end was a travesty of justice.

The Jewish council, having condemned Jesus to death but lacking the legal power to execute him, sent him to Governor Pilate for his third trial. Pilate, no doubt irritated at being bothered so early in the morning with what he considered a Jewish affair, began to question Jesus. He soon realized that the Jewish leaders were seeking his death out of sheer jealousy, and he told them he could find no fault in Jesus. But the Jews insisted that his teaching had stirred up trouble in both Judea and Galilee.

When Pilate discovered that Jesus was a Galilean, he thought he

## JOSEPH CAIAPHAS

The high priest of the Jews in A.D. 33 was Joseph Caiaphas. According to Jewish law the office of high priest was hereditary, but the Romans had usurped the right to make the appointment in order to ensure Israel's cooperation with Rome. As high priest, Caiaphas presided over the Sanhedrin and performed ritual religious duties, which included entering the sacred Temple chamber called the Holy of Holies to offer the annual atoning sacrifice for the Jewish people. Caiaphas was more pragmatic than religious. He was willing to employ any means necessary—ethical or not—to accomplish his purposes. This pragmatism led him to scold his council for their vacillation over what to do with Jesus, and he advised them to kill Jesus rather than risk a possible uprising that would bring the wrath of Rome.

would rid himself of the problem by passing him off to Herod, the puppet king over Galilee, who was in Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus faced Herod in his fourth trial. But like Pilate, Herod could find nothing in the man that was worthy of death. So he sent Jesus back to Pilate for his fifth and final trial.

The shrewd Jewish leaders, knowing that Pilate's standing before Caesar was precarious, assembled a crowd of Jews to wait at the steps of the Antonia Fortress, the military garrison where Pilate resided when in Jerusalem. The restless mob presented the thinly veiled threat of an uprising if the governor did not accede to the Sanhedrin's wishes. Pilate, already fearing a Passover riot, felt every ounce of the pressure the Jews were applying.

Yet Pilate resisted. Though he was a jaded politician accustomed to bending justice at will, his conscience was not completely dead. He did not want to condemn this man who clearly did not deserve the death penalty. Adding to his uneasiness was his wife's urging that he spare Jesus, for she'd had a troubling dream indicating that he was innocent. Pilate sought desperately for a middle course that would both save Jesus and appease the unbending Jews.

Pilate had Jesus brutally scourged, thinking such harsh punishment would satisfy the Jews' appetite for blood. When that failed to move them, he tried to release Jesus in accordance with a long-standing Roman custom to free a condemned Jewish prisoner, usually an insurrectionist, as a favor to the Jews during their holy week. But the mob, stirred to a frenzy by the Jewish leaders, would have none of it. They shouted over and over, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21).

Pilate now feared a full-fledged riot if he did not concede to their demand. He gave in and handed Jesus over to the Roman soldiers for crucifixion. In a futile attempt to evade responsibility for his cowardly act, he ordered a basin of water and washed his hands before the mob, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. The responsibility is yours!" (Matthew 27:24).

## PONTIUS PILATE

Pilate was a Roman politician who was appointed governor of Judea by the emperor Tiberius in A.D. 26. He hated the Jews, and they hated him for his inflexibility, brutality, and lack of mercy. In his classic book *The Life of Christ*, James Stalker describes this mutual hatred: “[Pilate] hated the Jews whom he ruled, and, in times of irritation, freely shed their blood. They returned his hatred with cordiality, and accused him of every crime—maladministration, cruelty, and robbery. He visited Jerusalem as seldom as possible; for indeed, to one accustomed to the pleasures of Rome, with its theaters, baths, games, and licentious society, Jerusalem, with its religiousness and ever-smoldering revolt, was a dreary residence.”<sup>1</sup> Pilate was in the precarious position of governing a people who weren’t his own, and when it came time for Jesus’ verdict, he chose his reputation over his conscience.

After seeing Jesus condemned, a deep wave of remorse overwhelmed Judas Iscariot. The bag of silver coins he had coveted now stood as an accusation against him. He could keep them no longer. He took them to the chief priests and confessed his sin, saying, “I have betrayed an innocent man.” The officials callously retorted, “What do we care? . . . That’s your problem” (Matthew 27:4).

That was the final blow for Judas; he could no longer bear the weight of his guilt. He hurled the blood money across the Temple floor, ran out, and hanged himself.

### *The King Is Killed*

Crucifixion, a Roman invention, was possibly the most brutal, painful, and inhumane mode of execution ever devised. It consisted of

nailing the victim through the hands and feet to an upright wooden cross. The pain was excruciating, and there was no way for the person on the cross to find relief. When someone hangs this way with outstretched arms, the lungs are compressed, making it impossible to draw a deep breath. Death usually came by asphyxiation.

While Jesus hung on the cross, the Roman soldiers gambled for his clothing, fulfilling this prophecy from Psalm 22:18: “They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing.” At this point all of Jesus’ disciples had abandoned him except John, who stood beneath the cross comforting Jesus’ grieving mother, Mary.

As Jesus gasped for his final breaths, the very earth and sky reflected the outrage of the event—that humankind had murdered the Son of God. Luke describes the scene:

By this time it was about noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o’clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle. Then Jesus shouted, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” And with those words he breathed his last. LUKE 23:44-46

Victims often hung alive on their crosses for days. Jesus, however, succumbed after only six hours, no doubt due to the ordeal he had endured prior to his crucifixion. He had been up all night and forced to walk two or three miles to the sites of his five trials. He had suffered two beatings, one ordered by Caiaphas and the other a scourging with Roman whips. The second beating would have left his back in shreds, causing profuse bleeding and exposing layers of muscle and bone. A circlet of thorny briars had been forced onto his head, causing unrelenting pain, not to mention additional bleeding. He was already so weakened that he couldn’t carry the horizontal



beam of his cross to the site of his execution, as condemned prisoners were customarily forced to do.

As the day neared its end, the Jewish leaders, assuming Jesus to be alive, asked Pilate to break his leg bones so he would die before sundown. The Sabbath would begin at six o'clock that evening, and it was against Jewish law to leave a dead body unburied on the Sabbath day. Breaking the legs of crucifixion victims made it impossible for them to push themselves upward to take pressure off their lungs, thus hastening the process of suffocation.

Pilate gave the order, and Roman soldiers were assigned to this grim task. But when they approached Jesus, he appeared to be dead already. To be certain, a soldier thrust a spear deep into his side. Blood and water poured from the wound, indicating that the blood serum had already begun to separate into its components—a sure sign that the heart was no longer beating.

With these two acts—leaving Jesus' legs intact and piercing his side—the Roman soldiers unwittingly fulfilled two more prophecies concerning Jesus: “The LORD protects the bones of the righteous; not one of them is broken!” (Psalm 34:20) and “They will look on me whom they have pierced” (Zechariah 12:10).

Among the members of the Sanhedrin was a wealthy man named Joseph, who came from the Judean town of Arimathea. Joseph was a follower of Jesus and had opposed the council's decision to seek his death. He went to Pilate secretly (to hide his action from his colleagues) and requested that he be given charge of Jesus' body.

Joseph, aided by Nicodemus, another member of the Sanhedrin who secretly followed Jesus, took the body, treated it with seventy-five pounds of spices, and wrapped it tightly in several layers of traditional grave cloths. They laid the body on a stone slab in Joseph's newly hewn tomb, thus fulfilling another prophecy: “He was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave” (Isaiah 53:9). Then

the two men, no doubt aided by friends or hired help, rolled a huge, disk-shaped stone over the opening.

### *The Night at the Tomb*

The members of the Sanhedrin were well aware that Jesus had predicted he would rise again on the third day after his death. To prevent his disciples from stealing the body and claiming he had been resurrected, the leaders requested that Pilate seal the tomb and station Roman soldiers to guard it until three days had passed. Pilate granted their request. The stone that covered the tomb was secured with a Roman seal, and a Roman guard of four to sixteen soldiers was posted to prevent anyone from approaching the tomb.

If the biblical account of Jesus' arrest, trials, and crucifixion ended here, it would be a grim story indeed—in fact, a tragedy like the human race has never seen. But here is what happened next:

Suddenly there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint. MATTHEW 28:2-4

The resurrection of Jesus had begun.

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## WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

This chapter describes the first of two critical events in the life of Jesus that show why he came to earth. He came first to die, and second to be resurrected to new life. These two events cannot be separated, for one is contingent upon the other. Yet it is important to note just what the death of Jesus did for humankind even before the Resurrection occurred.

We can see the importance God places on Jesus' death by the fact that nearly one-fifth of the Gospel of Luke, one-fourth of Matthew, and about one-third of John and Mark are devoted to his final hours. This is appropriate when we consider that to die was his very purpose in coming to earth. In that sense, he was more important to us in death than in life. To understand why Jesus' death is so important for us, we must go back to the beginning.

*It All Started in Eden*

The Bible tells us that in the beginning God created man and woman in his image and in perfect relationship with him. But God also gave them freedom to choose whether to live under his best plan for their lives or to live on their own terms. Tragically, when they listened to Satan, who appeared in the form of a serpent, and ate the fruit of the infamous forbidden tree, they chose to reject their creator and become their own masters. Instead of obtaining independence, however, they now lived under the tyranny of Satan.

With this decision came Adam's and Eve's inevitable deaths. God is the source of life, and by rejecting him, the first couple doomed

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## JEWISH BURIAL CUSTOMS

A tomb such as the one belonging to Joseph of Arimathea was only a temporary place for a body to lie while it went through the natural stages of decomposition. After a year or so, the skeletal remains would be collected and placed in an ossuary, or bone box, for permanent burial, usually within the wall of the tomb. Joseph of Arimathea's role in the burial of Jesus is recounted in all four Gospels, but after that he is never mentioned again. Legend says he carried the gospel to Britain and established the first Christian church there. He appears in Arthurian legends as the keeper of the Holy Grail.

themselves to die. It is a fixed law of the universe that “the person who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:20). Our problem is the same as theirs, for we inherited their nature and the result of their sinful choice, and we have lived out the life they passed on to us—a life of pride and rebellion against God.

But God loved this first man and woman, and he was not willing to leave them—or us, their descendants—in the clutches of death. In his wisdom and grace, God promised the condemned couple that he would send a deliverer who would crush the power of sin and Satan and free people from the clutches of death (Genesis 3:15).

This solution came at great cost to God, for it meant that he would provide a ransom to free humankind from Satan. That ransom would be none other than God’s own Son, whom we know as Jesus. He would allow himself to be put to death in place of the people he loved. Jesus explicitly confirmed this to his followers when he said that he had come to earth “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

In C. S. Lewis’s book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we see this ransom principle portrayed in vivid narrative. The great lion Aslan, the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea, is the Christ figure in these stories. He offers himself to the wicked queen, who has enslaved Narnia, and allows her to execute him in the place of a boy who has condemned himself by eating her deadly confection. In the same way, Jesus, who is the Son of God, came to earth to offer himself as the ransom for our sins, thus freeing us from eternal condemnation.

History says that the Romans crucified Jesus. The prophet Isaiah says that God did it (Isaiah 53:4). Peter accused the Jews of crucifying him (Acts 2:23). But the truth is, *we* crucified him. He died for us.

Ultimately, we are the ones to blame for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The Romans and the Jews were merely the instruments that brought about his death. He took the punishment we deserve and carried the awful weight of our guilt to the grave. God picked the

best that heaven could offer, his own Son, and sent him here to die in order to pay the penalty for our sins.

*The Five Responses to Jesus' Death*

In spite of how crucial Jesus' death is, not everyone reacts to it in a positive way. Some people are indifferent, some are antagonistic, and some are grateful. All of these attitudes were reflected by people who witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus—and they are precisely the same attitudes people hold toward Jesus today.

THE RESPECTING MASSES

Luke 23:33, 35 says that when Jesus and his executioners “came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. . . . The crowd watched.” Masses of people stood by on that day, watching the King of kings die. They were mere onlookers, unaffected and uninvolved. They saw the scene as a mere curiosity. Many of them had no doubt witnessed Jesus preaching and healing; they may have even respected him as a great teacher and miracle worker. But to them, his death was just that of a good man who had, unfortunately, run afoul of the authorities.

Perhaps the vast majority of people today are like the respecting masses. They simply look on without getting involved. They respect Jesus as a great man who put his life on the line, but his death has no effect on them. They see Good Friday as another day on the calendar and never stop to consider its crucial meaning to their lives now and their eternal futures.

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The scribes, Pharisees, and members of the Sanhedrin—the ones the Jews looked to for guidance—mocked Jesus as he died on the cross, saying, “He saved others, let him save himself if he is really God's Messiah” (Luke 23:35). Matthew shows us the full extent of

their ridicule by reporting their insulting body language. They were “shaking their heads in mockery. ‘Look at you now!’ they yelled at him. ‘You said you were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, if you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!’” (Matthew 27:39-40).

Attempting to mock the Lord with his own words, the religious leaders failed to understand two crucial points. The first was that the temple he was referring to was his own body, not the Temple in Jerusalem. These religious leaders would destroy his body, but it would be raised back to life in three days. Second, they did not understand that Jesus possessed all the power needed to descend from the cross. But it was for their sakes—for all of our sakes—that he harnessed his power. If he had come down and saved himself, the entire population of the world—past, present, and future—would have been condemned eternally.

The chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, and elders, not to mention the entire Sanhedrin, should have been the ones to lead the people to belief in their Messiah. Instead, they mocked the Savior of the world. Sadly, the same thing happens today, too. Some people go out of their way to make fun of Jesus and those who follow him. What they don’t realize is that God’s silence in the face of mockery is not because he’s powerless but rather because he’s patient, waiting for the right time for his full glory to be revealed.

#### THE ROMAN SOLDIERS

These men were trained in the art of brutality, and the argument can be made that the soldiers were just doing their jobs. But they actually went further than that. They paid Jesus no respect. They mocked him mercilessly. They even gambled for his clothes at the foot of the cross. These were hardened men who looked upon the death of Jesus as just another part of their military duty, and for the sake of diversion, they ridiculed what they didn’t understand.

## THE DAY GOD DIED

Although we live in an era that prides itself on religious tolerance, there are still the “Roman soldiers” of today—those who actively reject Christ and seek to persecute his followers. This may happen in physical ways, but it can also take subtler forms, such as rejection and discrimination.

### THE REJECTING THIEF

Three men were crucified that day: Jesus and two thieves. Both thieves were executed for their behavior with just cause. One of them, a depraved man, heaped abuse on Jesus as they all hung dying on their crosses. “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!” (Luke 23:39). Though the dark door of death was gaping open, ready to swallow him, the thief refused to repent of his sin or turn to the one who was able to forgive him.

Some people still reject Jesus, even in their last hour. They know that only he can shut the door of death and open the door to eternal life, but they are held back by their own pride.

### THE REPENTANT THIEF

The other thief, knowing that he was being crucified next to an innocent man, rebuked his partner for his mockery: “‘Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom’” (Luke 23:40-42).

The repentant thief serves as a reminder that as long as we still have breath, it is not too late to turn to Christ. Even after living a life of sin, people can see themselves for what they are and turn to Jesus for salvation.

### *Which Group Are You In?*

Consider your own response to Jesus’ death. Every person on earth is represented at the cross by one of the groups present at his crucifixion.

That includes you and me. The question you must ask yourself is, “Which group am I in?” Do you mock Jesus as the Jewish leaders, Roman soldiers, and unrepentant thief did? Do you simply disregard him as the respecting masses did? Or do you follow the life-saving lead of the repentant thief?

Our sins are deep stains that can be removed from our souls only by placing them on the cross with Jesus. If you have not relinquished your sins to him, know that this is a matter of life and death. God invites you to ask for forgiveness, accept what Jesus did for you, and let him take your sins to the Cross.

If you are already a Christian, your call is to regularly examine your life in light of the Cross. Turn often to the Cross to see the costly price that was paid for your redemption. As the boy in Narnia was redeemed by Aslan’s death, you have been redeemed by Jesus’ death. “You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct . . . but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19, NKJV). This was the whole point of Jesus’ coming to earth. He came to take the death we deserved, thus freeing us from the grip of Satan.

The process of redeeming humankind from death, however, would not be complete until after Jesus was resurrected—an event we will explore in the next chapter.



# AFTERWORD

The book of Acts chronicles many beginnings—the beginning of the church and the beginning of the A.D. era, as well as the launching of the gospel into all the world.

These first eleven chapters of Acts tell the story of how our redemption from sin began at the Cross, spread beyond the Jews, and began its relentless march to bless all nations of the world. It's the story of how the gospel was taken to the three major groups Jesus identified in his great commission: the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles.

This book ends the first phase of the book of Acts. It marks the completion of the start of the church. From this point forward, the emphasis of Acts changes. After a brief interlude in chapter 12, it becomes primarily the story of the apostle Paul's missionary travels throughout Asia Minor and parts of Europe.

Although our journey ends here for now, I encourage you to keep reading the book of Acts. It is one of the most gripping narratives in the Bible, filled with action, suspense, and danger. It is also a biographical portrait of the most dedicated Christian you're ever likely

to find. Paul's career inspires us and models for us what a Christian should be in this world.

As you continue following the steps of Jesus and the apostles and the believers in the early church, I pray that you will be inspired to emulate their submission and dedication. After all, their story is our story too.