

## Lesson 4

# Follow Jesus (1)

## Introduction

“I am the Way...”

John 14.6

Through our studies so far we have examined several problems we face on the journey of life... at the root of all of the wrong turns and dead ends we've faced is one problem—the problem of suffering, sin and death. We suffer in this life. We long for something we just can't seem to find, and we are always left wanting. We sin and we fall short. We contribute to the brokenness of the world in one way or another every day. We all face the impending and inescapable promise of the end of our lives. These are the obstacles that lay before us in the path stretched before us called life. We are often left to wander—is there any way out?

Jesus Christ claimed that he knew the way and even that he was the way out. The man Jesus was a real living historical figure. His ministry defied all the odds and norms of the day. Rather than portray himself as a holy man, adorned with expensive robes and holding himself higher than the rest he held himself as a carpenter and a simple messenger. He recruited a rag-tag band of nobodies and traveled the region. He lived perfectly according to the Jewish law, and died on a cross for his message of redemption and hope. His ministry rippled through history and changed everything.

He claimed to be the way... and he invited us to follow him. How will we respond to the call of Jesus?

### For discussion:

1. What are some of the ways people today look at Jesus?
2. Who is Jesus to you?

## Jesus in History

For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him

...

But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53.2, 5

Being therefore this kind of person [i.e., a heartless Sadducee], Ananus, thinking that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus had died and Albinus was still on his way, called a meeting [literally, “sanhedrin”] of judges and brought into it the brother of Jesus-who-is-called-Messiah ... James by name, and some others. He made the accusation that they had transgressed the law, and he handed them over to be stoned<sup>1</sup>

Josephus' Antiquities

Jesus was born to a carpenter and a young woman named Mary in Bethlehem, just outside Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> He was born into a Jewish family. At the time of his birth, the Jewish people were well under the thumb of the Roman Empire at the height of Roman imperial power. The Jews had long been yearning for the Messiah that the scriptures had spoken of in over three hundred separate prophesies.

As an adult, Jesus launched a ministry that was unlike any other, proclaiming to be the Messiah or the “Chosen One” who came to redeem the sins of men. He lived and walked in real places, interacted with real people and left behind very real impacts that we can observe. Jesus' existence in history is affirmed not only by the manuscripts and eyewitness testimony of the gospels, but also by several Jewish and Roman historical sources.

1. The gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are all eye-witness sourced documents based on the testimony of individuals who knew and followed Jesus personally.
2. Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian who noted Christian's devotion nature and the person of Jesus in his antiquities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish Antiquities, XX.9.1 in Whiston's translation (§200 in scholarly editions), as translated by Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 57. Meier's original passage includes the phrases in square brackets [ ]. The omitted words indicated by the ellipsis (...) are in Greek, to let scholars know what words are translated into English.

<sup>2</sup> see Matthew 2.1

<sup>3</sup> Maier, Paul L. (1995). *Josephus, the Essential Writings: A Condensation of Jewish Antiquities and the Jewish War*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications. p. 12.

3. Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian who detailed Jesus' ministry and execution as well as the existence of the first churches in Rome.<sup>4</sup>
4. In the effects of his ministry we see the results of his movement and the followers that died testifying to his life, death and resurrection.

### **For discussion:**

1. Are the gospels history? Why/why not?
2. What is the value of citing non-Christian historians regarding Jesus?
3. What does the behavior of Jesus' early followers say about his message?

## **Jesus' Ministry and Purpose**

Jesus made his life about God—despite characterizations that he was a rebel, he was fiercely devoted to the Jewish faith. Jesus dealt with two groups within the religious schools of thought of Judaism during the era of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman reign ... Pharisees and Sadducees. He also ministered to what many of the religious elites would consider “unrighteous sinners” or commoners. Jesus became wildly popular during his ministry because of four things;

### ***Opposition to Established Religious Authorities***

His correction of the religious elite of the day... Jesus spoke with authority against the religious leaders of the time and dealt with the two major prevailing issues of his day. These issues that we continue to see in the religious world today. Jesus did not settle in to the established order, he broke the rank and file and led differently than all of the other “religious elite.”

- Traditionalism — Jesus opposed the idea that traditions or religious works by themselves were the path to God. Jesus gave stark rebukes to the Pharisees, who were known as traditionalists that upheld their own traditions over the will of God. Jesus excoriated them for lifting their traditions up into the realm of doctrine and believing themselves to be somehow more righteous or pure than others. As Jesus points out in Matthew 23, in the Pharisee's pursuit of religious conservatism, they had subverted the spirit and commands of God.<sup>5</sup>
- Liberalism — Jesus also spared no correction in dealings with the Sadducees who were sacrificing the law of God for cultural appropriateness. They rejected God in favor of compromise with the world. Case in point—the Sadducees had embraced the commonplace Greco Roman idea that there was no spiritual realm to speak of in place of

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<sup>4</sup>P.E. Easterling, E. J. Kenney (general editors), *The Cambridge History of Latin Literature*, page 892 (Cambridge University Press, 1982, reprinted 1996).

<sup>5</sup> see Matthew 23.1-8

a scriptural understanding of angelic beings and heavenly realms. Jesus rebuked them for being soft and going with the cultural grain on multiple occasions as well.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Mercy Toward the Unrighteous***

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Mark 2.17

Jesus’ entire ministry was strange for his time, in that his disciples were not holy men or “cut from the right mold.” Jesus called people out of zealotry, government employment, fishing, prostitution and all sorts of varying backgrounds. Jesus did not look at the surface, but at the heart of these individuals. The resounding message of Jesus entire mission was to bring mercy to those who were in need of salvation, bring a cure for the sick and show the way to the wayward.

### ***Signs, Wonders and Miracles***

And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.

Mark 16.20

Jesus was recorded by disciples as having performed many miracles. This is attributed as a major reason for why people followed him. After having cast out a demon, an individual exclaimed, noting Jesus’ authority over the spiritual realm—unlike any other current religious leader. In the Old Testament scriptures, similar signs and wonders accompanied prophets that were sent from God for the purpose of confirming the message that they bore as being undeniably authoritative.

### ***His claims regarding himself***

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

John 14.6

As part of his ministry, Jesus made claims that causes individuals to perk up and pay attention. He claimed himself to be the way Heaven, thus testifying to his own divinity. He referred to himself as the Messiah in many of the prophecies he made about himself, and even invoked the name of God (“I AM”) when asked if he was the King of the Jews. Jesus’ radical claims regarding his own identity shook the world.

Do his claims stand to scrutiny? Many were convinced of them. His disciples lived and died confessing that Jesus really had shown the way and that in fact he was the way back to God for the lost and weary travelers. They believed this so fervently that they even sacrificed their lives for the message.

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<sup>6</sup> see Acts 23.8, Matthew 22.23-33

**For discussion:**

1. What stands out to you about Jesus' ministry?
2. Would you consider Jesus conservative or liberal?
3. What was Jesus attitude toward others in his ministry?
4. Why would Jesus perform signs, wonders and miracles?
5. Who did Jesus claim to be?