

## Lesson 1

# The Importance of this Study

## Introduction

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was created through him, and yet the world did not recognize him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him, John 1.9-11.

*Why couldn't they see?*

It has always been hard to understand how the people of Judea saw Jesus and the incredible works and miracles He did, but yet not *really see Him*. He was in the world for 33 years . . . the Creator present in His creation. 30 years in Nazareth. 3 years in Israel. Ministering. Banishing illness and demons. Demonstrating His power over nature. Raising people from the dead. The invisible God made visible. Displaying His creative power. How could they see everything He was and not know who He is? It's a good question.

Yes, hindsight is always perfect, 20/20, they say. Having the completed word, it is easy for us to look back at the hundreds of Old Testament Prophecies and see how Jesus fulfilled them completely. We browse through the gospels, taking in with amazement the miracles He worked, and marvel at His authoritative preaching. Each of the four gospels make it clear that Jesus was the Messiah. Matthew is full of quotations from the Old Testament that point to Jesus. These were teachings that many Jews would have already been very familiar with. Mark shows us how in the beginning of His ministry, Jesus tried to keep this fact a secret so that the purpose of His ministry is not misunderstood, Mark 1.43-44. Luke showcases a great number of Jesus' miracles leaving absolutely no question in the mind of the humble and open heart as to Jesus is. And John succinctly lays out the purpose statement of his gospel when he says:

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name, John 20.31.

And yet, Jesus was steadfastly and unapologetically rejected by the vast majority of the Jews of His day. And even now, with the vast array of biblical evidence preserved for us in the completed revelation, the testimony of extrabiblical sources who validate the historicity of Jesus, and the decisive impact of His teachings on the entire world for the last two thousand years people still reject Him.

## There was no good reason to reject Jesus

There are many, many factors that played a role in the Jewish people rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. Yes, some people did get it. We know they believed even if they didn't quite understand it completely. Simon Peter confessed it in Matthew 16.16. Speaking for the apostles in John 6.68-69, he said: *Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.* Martha believed, John 11.27. The centurion at the foot of the cross got it even though he had no

Jewish background or understanding of the Law and Prophets, Mark 15:38. Even the evil spirits of Mark 3:11 knew who Jesus was and confessed Him as the Son of God.

Yet the Jewish nation and its leaders rejected Jesus as the Messiah. When the Jewish leaders brought Jesus before the Roman authorities at the beginning of his trial, they accused Him *of many things*, Mark 15:3. They looked down on Him for associating with the unclean and unworthy. They hated Jesus because He claimed to be *from* God and make Himself *equal* to God. There are many factors that caused it to happen, but most could be simply summed up as *they did not want to believe*. This has been the same reason most people who have lived since Jesus have rejected Him. It is not that they could not believe, it is that they would not believe. It is not that they need additional evidence, it is that they do not act on the evidence they have received.

## What Stopped Them from Believing?

**They changed the focus of God's religious system.** Reading through the Pentateuch, we see how God designed the Jewish religion to point the nation toward Jesus. There is constant foreshadowing seen in the laws of atonement, the miracle of the Hebrew people being spared when the death angel passed through Egypt, the deliverance at the Red Sea, and the healing that took place when the people looked at the serpent hung on a pole.<sup>1</sup> By the time of Jesus, the Jewish religious system had degenerated into empty rituals. The ruling Sadducean class was more interested in political prestige than reverence to God. The Pharisees, while originally having the best of intentions, became willing participants in this counterfeit religious system as well. They too were corrupted by power and prestige.

**Rabbinical law became equal with Scripture.** The oral law consisted of a great collection of the opinions of the Rabbis. Some elevated these *traditions of the elders* to such a sacred status that they could not be written down. As time progressed the rabbinical opinions, especially those regarding the Sabbath were given equal or even greater authority than Scripture itself.

**Jesus spoke out against these traditions.** In fact, He denounced them strongly.

He answered them, "Why do you break God's commandment because of your tradition? For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death. But you say, 'Whoever tells his father or mother, "Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple," he does not have to honor his father.' In this way, you have nullified the word of God because of your tradition. Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands," Matthew 15:3-9.

Here Jesus points out how they had invented ways to get around God's laws. The 5<sup>th</sup> commandment (Exodus 20:12) required God's people to honor their parents. This would have included taking care of them as they aged and were no longer able to provide for themselves. The Pharisees reneged on this commitment by claiming their money and resources had been set aside later for God's use, rather than using it in the present to help the needs of their parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 16; Exodus 12:1-32; 14:1-31; Numbers 21:1-10.

Going back a few chapters, it was Jesus' violation of their Sabbath requirements that drove the religious establishment to determine to kill him, Matthew 12.1-14. The religious leaders of Jesus' time were corrupt and ungodly. A nation is only as good as its leaders, so while the people went through all the ceremonies and rituals required by Jewish law, their hearts were far away.

**Theirs had become a religion of works.** As the human requirements rose in their importance, forgiveness of sin began to be seen as being contingent upon one's ability to keep all the commandments. Instead of living God's way becoming a source of joy and peace in one's life, things had become burdensome and oppressive. Salvation had morphed into a system of merit, where repentance and humility went out the window. The emphasis was on what a person did or did not do, rather than a humble and contrite heart before the Lord. When Jesus interacted with and ate with sinners, prostitutes, and other social outcasts, he went far beyond the constricted boundaries they erected. In their mind, the Messiah would *never* be around the lowly and those of zero influence and status. Most of the Jews came to trust in themselves and their works and looked down on those who didn't match up.

**They hardened their hearts.** The religious leaders of Israel were not interested in truth. In John 11 Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Everyone in the region understood Lazarus had been dead for around four days. What Jesus did was undeniable. Jesus' power was obvious. Instead of melting their hearts into repentance, John 11.53 reveals their intention to put Jesus to death. They knew the truth could not be denied. They had to get rid of Jesus ... and Lazarus too, John 12.10-11. Lazarus was living proof of the power of Jesus. They simply did not want to believe.

The nation did not possess the kind of faith to believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. As the gospels point their readers to the cross, Jesus is not charged with going over the top in welcoming and eating with rejected social outcasts, but with being a false king, prophet, and Messiah, Matthew 26.57-58; Mark 14.53-65; Luke 22.66-71; John 18.9-24. They killed Jesus because their hardened hearts told them He was a blasphemer.

## What About Us?

A poor attitude. An improper aim or focus. Pure arrogance. Stubbornness. Insolence. All of these could accurately describe the Jews of Jesus' day. They are the condition of the unredeemed human of the first century *and the twenty-first* century. Today we can hold back in our commitment because we fear all the ramifications of what His authority means in our lives. There are times where we simply do not want to acknowledge the fact He is the Son of God who demands lordship over our lives.

We need to grow our faith the point where our faith in Jesus and who He is and the resulting demands He places on our lives will overwhelm any selfish desires that threaten to reduce His lordship in our lives.

Like the people of His time, we stand without excuse. Many of us have grown up and now remain with all the evidence right in front of us. Sometimes we fail to recognize or appreciate the people and things we are most familiar with.

## Conclusion

It was Paul who said,

So, whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall, 1 Corinthians 10.12.

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test, 2 Corinthians 13.5.

We may not be that much different from the Jews if we look close enough. Do we have the courage to examine ourselves? Will we find:

- A heart that is poor in spirit? (Matthew 5.3)
- Our focus on Jesus, who perfectly manifested the way God designed humans to live. (Matthew 11.28-30)
- A humble and contrite spirit that mourns for sin and recognizes Jesus is the Lord of our life? (Romans 10.9-10)
- A life disposition that operates from the perspective of dependence on God? (John 6.66-68)