

Series: **Christmas 2023**
Today's Title: **"The Reception of Jesus"**
December 24, 2023 – *Selected Passages*

Objective: To encourage everyone to receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

Opening Prayer

'Reception' – one of those words that makes English such a difficult language for people to learn.

'Reception' – has many different meanings.

When I hear the word 'reception' – I think of a wedding reception – and when I think of wedding receptions, I go back 34 years to when Kim and I got married...

- Then I go to Jessica and Ben's reception – 2 years ago!! – and how much fun it was.
- Those memories are intertwined with Brian and Gianna's wedding reception – almost 2 years ago – and memories of another fun night.

As a sports fan, 'Reception' also brings to mind the late Franco Harris – and the 'Immaculate Reception' in 1972 – when the Pittsburgh Steelers beat the Oakland Raiders in the playoffs.

'Reception' can refer to how clearly I can hear the radio station – or the TV channel – in the days before cable or streaming – when we used 'rabbit ear' antennas to improve the TV's reception.

‘Reception’ can also refer to how someone is received / greeted / welcomed.

When you go into some businesses – or into the office here at church – there is a reception area.

Today is the final Christmas message for 2023.

This Christmas we’ve considered **The Hope of Christmas**.

We’ve looked to see what the Bible tells us about **‘The Parents of Jesus’** – and on Christmas Eve we studied **‘The Birth of Jesus’**.

Today, as we close the book on Christmas 2023, and as we begin a New Year tomorrow – I want us to see what the Bible says about **‘The Reception of Jesus’**.

How was Jesus received when He became a man?

How was Jesus received as He took on flesh?

How was He received as He lived and ministered?

Short answer: Not very well.

It was a mixed bag.

There were some who received him well – with open arms and open hearts.

But many rejected Him.

Many did not receive Him – but sought to kill Him – deny Him – ignore Him.

Before we look at how Jesus was received, the first point I want to make is a reminder for all of us.

Rejecting or embracing Jesus is a spiritual battle.

We need to remember, and the Bible's teaching is clear on this, that everything we see is the result of spiritual forces which are battling for the souls and minds of people.

Whether people receive Christ or reject Him in violent ways, there is a spiritual battle between good and evil happening in the background.

Paul made this very clear.

Ephesians 6:12

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

These spiritual forces of darkness have been at work for all of human history, and they continue to work in any and every way they can to keep people from realizing their spiritual need and putting their faith in Christ.

This doesn't excuse a person's rejection of Christ.

This doesn't remove the guilt of their sin and the judgment of God if they reject or ignore Jesus.

But it is important for us to remember that what is going on when a person rejects Christ is even bigger than that person.

With that caveat, let's look at how people have received Jesus.

I'll give 4 reasons why people reject Jesus – and then we'll look at an example from the Gospels that demonstrate this rejection.

Four reasons why people reject Jesus.

1. Some reject Jesus because He threatens the status quo.

Fear.

Fearful of the changes to the status quo Jesus will bring.
Fearful that Jesus would take away what they have.

King Herod was in this group.

King Herod – Herod the Great. A different Herod – Herod Antipas – was in power at the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

Herod the Great was in power when Jesus was born – and he was an evil man.

He was called “Great” because he was a great builder – planner.

Some of his construction projects in Israel are still standing today.

But Herod was an evil man – and his jealousy, distrust, and paranoia were off the charts.

He had 10 wives – killed 2 of them.

He also murdered 3 of his own sons.

We read in Matthew's birth narrative about Herod's reception of Jesus.

The wise men's arrival and search for a new king who had been born was what sparked Herod's jealousy and paranoia.

Matthew 2:1-3

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him."
When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...

This is the first Herod has heard of this newborn king.

This was Herod's greatest fear – that his power and position would be threatened.

He had killed many people – including some in his own family – to protect his throne.

"he was troubled" – the Greek has the idea of '*disturbed, angered, agitated*'.

Matthew tells us "all of Jerusalem with him" – the whole city was troubled – because they knew when Herod was "troubled" – blood was shed.

For Herod, the mere idea – thought of another king – even if this king was a young infant or child – was unacceptable.

Nothing – nobody must threaten what he has in place.

Herod's advisors recall the prophecy in Micah of a king being born in Bethlehem.

Herod send the Magi to Bethlehem – and then instructs them to let him know when they find this baby king – so he can come and worship him too.

God warns the Magi in a dream not to tell Herod and to return home on another route – not through Jerusalem.

Joseph is told in a dream to “...take the child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy Him.” (2:13)

Joseph obeys and leaves immediately for Egypt.

Matthew tells us what happened next.

Matthew 2:16

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.”

Spiritual forces of evil – working through Herod – to kill the Messiah – Jesus.

But Herod wasn't the only one who wanted Jesus dead.

Jewish religious leaders.

They were the long-time – tenured leaders who gave spiritual direction to the Jewish people.

They were established – not because of faithful leading – but because of family power and political connections.

They were more concerned about their position and power – than God’s commands or the spiritual health of the people.

Jesus called them into question countless times during His ministry.

He challenged their practices and their precepts.

He indicted them often of wrong-doing, hypocrisy, and of placing unfair and ungodly burdens on the people.

There were many times these leaders wanted to get rid of Jesus, but this rose to a final crescendo when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and there were dozens – maybe hundreds of witnesses to this miracle.

John records the result of this miracle.

John 11:45

“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what He did, believed in Him...”

Then, John records the response of the religious establishment.

John 11:47b-48

“What are we to do? For this man (Jesus) performs many signs. “If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

11:53

“So, from that day on they made plans to put Him to death.”

2. Some reject Jesus because they're simply fearful of the unknown.

Spiritual power is real.

There is spiritual power that is evil – and spiritual power that is good.

Some people are afraid of the spiritual, transforming power of Jesus – because they know it's real.

To them, Jesus means a change from what they have always known – even if what they've known has been painful and dysfunctional.

Sometimes, when evil is all you know, at least it's what you know.

To let go of evil – and embrace good – sounds like a simple problem to solve when you're already embracing good – but when all you've every embraced is evil, good can be frightening.

We see this played out in **Mark 5**, after Jesus heals a man who had been possessed with many demons, this reality was more frightening to people than the demon possessed man was!

Mark 5:15, 17

“And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. (phobeo)

And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region.”

A few chapters earlier in Mark, we even see Jesus' own family – His brothers and sisters (see Mark 6:3) reject Him – primarily because they didn't understand Him.

He was their brother – how could He be the Messiah?

How could He do these miracles?

Mark 3:20-21

Then He went home (Nazareth), and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat.

And when His family heard it, they went out to seize Him, for they were saying, “He is out of His mind.”

And then – in the next verse – Mark records the religious leaders from Jerusalem – who came to Nazareth – and their rejection of Jesus.

Mark 3:22

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons He casts out the demons.”

They totally misread and misunderstood Jesus.

They attributed His power to perform miracles with the power of evil – with “Beelzebul”, but Jesus destroys their thought process in the following verses.

Let's pause for a moment.

First, we've looked at the big picture and we realize there is a spiritual battle between the forces of evil and the forces of good – waging a constant war throughout history.

The forces of evil are busy and focused on keeping people from understanding their spiritual need for Jesus – and to deter them from any interest or curiosity in Jesus. This is happening today – right now – in this very room – and all around the world.

Second, we've seen how people reject Jesus because He threatens the status quo.

Third, we've seen how people reject Jesus because they're fearful of the unknown. They don't know what their life will be like if they say 'yes' to Jesus.

They know it will change – and they're fearful of those changes.

They realize the power He brings into life, and they're comfortable with what they have / know.

Do you struggle with any of these?

- Are you rejecting Jesus because of the sin and evil in your life?
- Do you reject Jesus and what He commands because it will upset your status quo?
- Are you rejecting Jesus – or part of Jesus – because you're more comfortable with the familiar – even if the familiar is not good?

3. People reject Jesus for what He does and teaches.

People in His hometown of Nazareth rejected Jesus because they didn't like what He said when He was teaching.

Their reaction was a clear rejection of Him – even if He was one of them – a Nazarene.

At first, they were amazed at His teaching and were speaking well of Him (Luke 4:22).

But when He said something they didn't like, Luke tells us what happened next...

Luke 4:29-30

“And they rose up and drove Him out of the town and brought Him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw Him down the cliff.

But passing through their midst, He went away.”

His hometown rejected Him, but so did the religious leaders, as we've already seen.

Here, we see they also rejected Jesus because Jesus didn't follow their rules.

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, the religious establishment hated it, as we read in **Mark 3**.

Mark 3:2, 6

“And they watched Jesus, to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.”

After Jesus healed the man...

The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against Him, how to destroy Him.”

They couldn't understand how a religious teacher could defy Sabbath customs the way Jesus did.

Or, in **Mark 2** when before He healed the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof, Jesus told the man his sins were forgiven.

The response of the religious leaders...

Mark 2:7

“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

As Jesus was eating dinner at a tax collector's house...

2:16

“Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Everything Jesus did and taught, they rejected and did their best to argue against Him.

2:18

“Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?”

On the Sabbath, when they saw Jesus' disciples picking on the heads of grain for some food, they pointed at His disciples, and asked Him...

2:24

“Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

No matter what Jesus did – no matter what He taught, the religious leaders opposed Him and rejected Him.

4. Some reject Jesus because they're too busy and too fixed to notice.

Too busy to notice.

Too fixed in their ways to care.

We're all familiar with the line in Luke's Christmas narrative where he writes "there was no place for them in the inn."

Luke 2:7

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

That can probably be explained away due to the impact of the census on the small town of Bethlehem.

They weren't set-up for all those tourists – so Joseph and Mary probably weren't the only ones who couldn't find a room.

In the prologue to his gospel, John makes a shocking statement.

John 1:11-12

He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God..."

It's one thing to be rejected by the Gentile world, but the Jewish people had been looking for the Messiah for a few thousand years!

The Messiah was what every child of Abraham longed for – and prayed for!

Yet, when the Messiah came – they "did not receive Him." Jesus addressed this head-on – how they didn't receive Him.

John 5:43

“I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him.”

Jesus spoke words of judgement toward those who reject Him.

John 12:48

“The one who rejects Me and does not receive My words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.”

Later, after Jesus ascended to Heaven, the Apostle Peter tells the religious leaders of Judaism...

Acts 4:11 (See also Mark 12:10; quoted from Psalm 118:22)

“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.”

Most people in the 1st century rejected Jesus.

The Jewish people did not give a great, lavish reception for the Messiah's arrival.

Instead, they argued with Him, criticized Him, accused Him falsely, misread His motives, credited His work and power to the Devil – and murdered Him!

Examples for us to follow...

Fortunately, we also see some people in the 1st century who received Jesus well.

There were many throughout His ministry.

Nicodemus

Joseph of Arimathea

The 12 disciples – and the larger groups of disciples beyond the 12.

Those who flocked to hear Him teach.

Those who came to seek His healing.

Zacchaeus

But for today, let's stick to the Christmas story – and see who gave Jesus a wonderful reception.

1. The Magi – came to worship Jesus.

They traveled a long distance to come and worship the newborn King.

They honored Jesus – and God used them to fund the families exile in Egypt until it was safe for them to return home to Nazareth.

2. The Shepherds – came to celebrate His birth.

The lowly shepherds – who society held in low esteem – were blessed to receive the angelic announcement about the baby's birth.

They immediately went to see this baby.

Afterward, Luke tells us they “...spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed.” (Luke 2:17-18)

3. Simeon and Anna's praise

These two elderly saints were looking for the Messiah – hopeful for the Messiah.

God blessed their faithfulness by revealing to them that this baby was the long-promised Messiah. Simeon gave a prayer of blessing and prophesied, and Anna praised God and Luke tells us she spoke... “...about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:25-38)

4. Mary – treasured everything in her heart.

Mary was willing and faithful to God’s call on her life to this special, honoring task / mission of raising God’s Son – the Messiah.

So many doubts and unanswered questions, but she remained strong and never wavered.

Luke tells us “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)

5. Joseph – obeyed what God told him to do.

Brave – trusting God – He obeyed and took Mary as his wife.

He was there when Mary gave birth to Jesus.

He led his family each year to the Passover celebration in Jerusalem – no small endeavor!

He and Mary had other children and raised them – no doubt according to God’s Word.

He had the job of being Jesus’ earthly father – which I’m sure was not an easy task – knowing that your toddler – your 10-year-old – your 15-year-old

is smarter and wiser than you and created the universe – and this kid is looking to you for guidance and to learn?

Apply it...

Which category do you fit into?

Are you in the descriptions of those who rejected Jesus for various reasons?

Do you find yourself pushing back against Him – against His teaching – in favor of what you think is best?

Or...

Have you embraced Jesus – received Him into your life and do your best to follow Him and obey Him each day?

Are you striving to be more like Him each day?

Are you telling others about Him?

Do you treasure up things about life in your heart – even when they don't make sense – you know God is at work?

May each of us receive Him and give Him the reception He alone deserves – may we give Him our life – our faith. Will you make Him the priority in your life?

Close in prayer