

Theophilus: Nobody knows my true identity; everyone must only speculate about me.

One reasonable way to think of me is as a rather wealthy, mid-level Roman official who lives in Philippi, Macedonia about forty years after Jesus died.

My name is Theophilus, and Luke wrote his book to me.

Think of me as a non-Jewish God-fearer who loves to hang around the synagogues and hear about the God of the Hebrews. When I heard the Gospel, and found that I could have eternal life... without having to follow the Mosaic Laws? You can only imagine my joy. Especially to avert suffering through the disfiguring act of circumcision- (he gasps) so horrific to us— Romans and Greeks. But after hearing more and more about the Christian faith, I had more and more questions. I wanted answers. I asked Luke for them.

One of the things that you might notice in Luke's writings is that he did not spend much time putting events into historical, political, or even geographical context. I already knew those things, there was no need for Luke to talk about them. Unfortunately, you are probably not as familiar with those things as I am. Let me give you an example of context that I am talking about.

Jesus lived his childhood during the time of Emperor Caesar Augustus, and his adulthood under the successor to Augustus, Tiberius. This was during Rome's Golden Age. Rome controlled all of the areas around the Mediterranean Sea, and most of Europe. The purpose of the empire was to support the city of Rome and grow its powers.

Israel, or Judea, was a tiny dot on Rome's radar. It comprised less than 1% of Rome's population and land mass. Roman's thought of Israel about as often as New Yorker's think of Tulsa. It's in Oklahoma, by the way. Fly over country, I believe is the term? If it hadn't been for Israel's relatively new seaport at Caesarea, the Romans would not have cared if Israel had fallen into the ocean and disappeared. It was through that seaport that many of Rome's luxury goods were transported.

Rome sent second-rate officials to rule over Judea, because none of the first-rate ones would go. The weather was awful, the Jews were extremely troublesome, and there wasn't much to steal to enrich oneself. If you were climbing the political or military ladder, you avoided Israel if at all possible. Instead, Rome gave immense power to local people like King Herod the Great. As

long as they kept the peace and tax revenue flowing to Rome, those local rulers could do as they pleased.

Because the Bible is written to Christians and Jews, and its stories are primarily located in Israel, you could easily get the idea that Israel was the center of attention of the world. It was quite the opposite in my life. Rome was the center of the world, and Israel barely existed. When Jesus was born in Nazareth, it was the equivalent of him being born in Bugtussle. Again, in Oklahoma, and tiny even by tiny town standards. He certainly would not have been considered a threat to Rome, and Herod would have been expected to deal with Jesus and his followers in any way Herod deemed fit.

In your time, when someone wants to write a biography about the most famous person in the world, they have mountains of digital information at their fingertips. An author's task is to sort through the vast amount of information and decide what is worthy to include in a person's life story. It is up to the reader to decide whether the information is credible and if the story really lines up with reality. I'm sure it has gotten more difficult for today's readers to discern such things, many of your current writers have their own agendas, often outweighing the supposed true story.

In my time, things were a little different. Virtually all of the biographies, and many of the history books, were written at the paid request of rich people or powerful politicians. It was expected that the author would slant the story line to favor whomever was paying for the book. Sometimes the slant would be so severe as to make the story unrecognizable to those familiar with the situation. However, that didn't matter to most readers as long as the story was good.

My situation was quite different. I was only interested in hearing the truth. In fact, one of the reasons I chose to listen to Luke was because of his esteemed reputation for gathering relevant facts and coming to accurate conclusions. His training as a doctor taught him how to do exactly that. He insisted that his final scroll should be irrefutably accurate. I knew that would be a challenge because he would be describing miracles and the actions of God.

Since Luke wrote his story many decades after the death of Jesus, you may wonder what information sources Luke used. I *insisted* on knowing his sources. There were many people who knew Jesus well who were still alive, and could tell their stories directly. Many people who had already died had told their stories to others, and Luke gathered as many of those as possible. He was personal friends with many of Jesus' apostles and family members. He questioned them at every opportunity.

Mark's written account of the life of Jesus was an especially valuable source since one of Mark's primary sources was the Apostle Peter. There were other accounts about the life of Jesus that had been written. Many of these later disappear from history, so future scholars will be puzzled about the source of some of Luke's information. As a point of interest, my friend, Matthew, also consulted some of the sources Luke used. That partially explains why some of their passages are so similar, but there are two other factors coming into play.

In my world, it was quite acceptable to copy, or partially copy, the writings of other people without giving them credit. So, if a passage looks exactly the same in Luke's account and Matthew's, you don't know whether the original source was Luke, Matthew or someone else. Second, and related to the previous point, all of the New Testament writers wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He may very well be the reason why some of the passages are written word-for-word.

In many of the myths of the Roman and Greek gods, the gods have children in rather interesting ways, and those gods and children have curious super powers. Here is the first challenge that I had for Luke. I wanted him to convince me why those Roman and Greek gods were myths, but Jesus and his birth wasn't a myth.

Luke:

When I first met him, Theophilus had already been taught many things about Jesus. But, he had also previously been taught many things about the Greek and Roman gods. I believed he was on the verge of becoming a Christian, but he wanted to know beyond any doubt that Jesus Christ was a true god, not just another mythical being. I wanted him to know for certain, the things he had been taught about Jesus.<sup>1</sup> I wrote my book knowing that it might not only sway him to a decision, but might sway many others who would read it.

See the dilemma? I was writing about miracles and healings. I was not a witness to the miracles and healings of Jesus, but I was a witness to many of the healings and miracles of Paul and other apostles. With my training, you can assume that I would not be easily fooled by fake healings and miracles. You can also assume I did not write about them if I did not fully believe they were true.

I desperately did NOT want to start my account with the miracle births of John and Jesus. Both would sound like Greek myths to Theophilus. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit inspired me to tell those stories in such a way that they would lead the reader to understand the divinity of Jesus.

Which brings me to a topic I need to address before you hear Mary's story. From the point of view of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is almost impossible for you to understand a certain topic fully, or understand its theological significance. As an extraordinarily insightful doctor, I feel like I can do a good job of explaining it to you. This subject is crucial to understanding the life of Jesus. It will take a few minutes, so be patient. (catches himself being a doctor about it all, so adds,) Please.

One reason you will have a hard time understanding this next topic is because of modern birth control methods, birth control pills, and DNA testing. Today, most women want to keep from

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:4

getting pregnant until they are ready to have a child, and they have the means to do so. If there is ever a question of paternity, a simple DNA test will settle the matter.

Another reason birth control methods obscure your understanding is that young women no longer feel as compelled to remain virgins. They often perceive that the main reason to stay a virgin is to keep from getting pregnant. A precious few still believe it is God's will for them to remain chaste until marriage, "I don't believe virginity is as common as it used to be..." as one of your country songs goes. Suffice it all to say the number of virgins is dwindling.,

In my time, there were three crucial reasons for a young Jewish woman to remain a virgin until marriage. First, if she wasn't a virgin, that meant she had committed the sin of fornication, and was subject to harsh punishments, including death by stoning, by the community... and her family. If she was even suspected of this, it was highly unlikely she would ever marry an honorable man.

The second and third reasons are related. Inheritance laws were based on the rule of "primogeniture," meaning the firstborn legitimate son inherited much more than the other sons or daughters. Sometimes the firstborn legitimate son inherited everything. Also, some of the Jewish religious rites required an identification of the firstborn legitimate son. So, it was absolutely crucial that Jewish parents could identify the firstborn legitimate son beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The only way a father could know beyond any doubt that a son was both firstborn and legitimate was for his bride to be a virgin the first time they had intercourse, and for her not to be allowed to be around other men until after she became pregnant. That is why so many wedding customs and community rituals were centered on the bride proving she was a virgin on her wedding night, and then keeping her away from other men.

Now, the medical part of the discussion. The only way for a woman to prove she was a virgin was for her membrane to still be intact on the night of the marriage. This was assumed to be the case if she bled upon the first act of intercourse, but it could also be proven by a physical examination by a midwife or a doctor.

Have you ever wondered how Joseph, and Mary's community, fully believed that she was a virgin, but was impregnated by the Holy Spirit? Two possible reasons: All of us could have been convinced by the Holy Spirit that that was how it happened. You might remember they relied on the Holy Spirit for many things. Or, Mary might have been able to prove her story by being examined by a doctor or trained women in midwifery. The Bible doesn't say if Mary was examined or not, but you can bet that the thought would have crossed her mind. After all, she was pledged to be married,<sup>2</sup> she could had been convicted of fornication and adultery, and the social penalties would have been severe...maybe even death, but most surely the end of her

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:27

engagement to Joseph. Somehow, she and the Holy Spirit convinced her community, that she was both pregnant and a virgin.

To you, a pregnant virgin is an impossibility. To many Jews who believed the prophet Isaiah, a pregnant virgin was a certain sign. Isaiah wrote, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, everyone knew that Mary was of the house of David, so they would have been surprised, but not shocked that she was a pregnant virgin. Far from stoning her, they would have thrown her a giant party!

Matthew and I listed the genealogies of Jesus. Today, children memorize their ABC’s at an early age. But those who were descendants of David learned their genealogies at an early age. Both Joseph and Mary were descendants of David,<sup>4</sup> Jesus was, too. Which meant he was a legitimate candidate to be the Messiah.

I’ve set the stage and introduced you to the main character of my book, Jesus. At his birth, he was the firstborn legitimate Son of God, and was qualified to be the Messiah. As you hear the stories that helped me write my book, I believe you will also be convinced that Jesus was, and still is, the Christ, the Messiah.

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 7:14

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:27

When Luke came to my house to convince me to tell my story, I didn't say anything, for a long time. It triggered so many flash backs: the time Gabriel spoke to me, the first time I held my husband Joseph, the first time I saw Jesus' face, his first miracle... and then...

(her voice trails, eyes close, we know what she's thinking. So difficult)

the death of my firstborn son. I, teenager, young mother, widow, and then, the mature woman you see me now. In a flash. So I smiled, and turned him down. Nobody would believe my story, so what's the use to tell it.

Luke showed me some of his early writings about the miracles of Jesus. And he convinced me that he might be able to comprehend an incomprehensible story. So, for the very first time, I told him things that nobody had ever heard, except my husband, Joseph. Things that I had treasured in my heart for many decades. I'm pleased that he was able to choose some of my story to complete his book. You may have noticed that only Luke wrote many of the events surrounding the birth stories of John and Jesus.

Luke started his story with my cousin, Elizabeth, because that's how I started my story. Elizabeth...my most favorite cousin. She was older than I, much older, so I thought of her like an older sister and best friend all wrapped into one. She had been married and childless for many years, but she and her husband were certain they would have a child to bless their marriage. My earliest memories of Elizabeth are listening to her talk about the son she would have.

Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah... they were both descendants of Aaron, so their son would qualify to be a priest at the Temple in Jerusalem, just as Zechariah was. But the years went by, and they had no children. I prayed for them, every day. My heart just broke for her.

Then, Elizabeth came running to my house. I had never seen her run before, so I was scared to hear her news. She finally caught her breath, and she said, "He can no longer talk! Zechariah has been struck dumb." I said, "That is horrible news." She smiled, "No! That is wonderful news."

She went on to explain that Zechariah had gone to Jerusalem and had his one life-long opportunity to burn incense at the altar. While doing so, the angel Gabriel had come to tell him that he, Zechariah, would soon have a son. When he didn't believe the angel, he was struck dumb. Now Elizabeth believed the angel. She remembered the story of Sarah, and was not

going to laugh in unbelief about getting pregnant at an old age.<sup>1</sup> And they started trying that very afternoon. Even though she was quite old, they were going to have a son.

Sure enough, Elizabeth soon got pregnant. She went into seclusion, and I'll talk about that a little later, but she took care of herself in every way she could. In the course of time, she had a healthy, happy baby boy. Her lifelong dream had been fulfilled. We were all ecstatic. And, when her husband acted in faith, his voice was returned.

Even though Zechariah groomed their son, John, to be a priest, it soon became obvious that he was destined for a different life. He loved to learn the Scriptures, but he dwelt on the need for Israel to repent and turn back to God. Where most people saw the Jewish leaders as righteous, John saw them as sinful and corrupt. He wanted everyone, everywhere to change their ways. Sometimes he would go into the wilderness for days at a time to fast and pray about it. The last time I saw John, he was wearing camel skin clothes and had that dreamy-eyed prophet look...which is what he turned out to be.

Okay, so back to the seclusion. Well, it was six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy that both of our lives changed. And again, it was the angel Gabriel who announced the news.

I lived in Nazareth, a small village, less than 150 people. I was down at the town water well late one morning drawing water and praying about Elizabeth's baby and my upcoming marriage. See I was engaged to be married to a fine man. I couldn't wait to start a family of my own. All of a sudden, Gabriel appeared beside me. It seems funny now, but my first thought was that I was causing a scandal by being alone with a man, or at least someone who looked like a man. Little did I know that scandal would be mild compared to the one that was about to happen.

So in a most calming voice, Gabriel said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Now, I don't care how calming his voice was, I was terrified that an angel would just appear and start talking to me. You will be terrified if it ever happens to you. I promise. Then, he said the craziest thing. Gabriel told me not to be afraid. Is that an inside angel joke since they often say it while looking at terrified people? Gabriel told me that I was to have a son who will reign on the throne of David. I got terribly excited thinking that I will get pregnant and have a son and I was going to be so faithful to God. Then, I realized he wasn't talking about a future time when I will be married to Joseph, he was talking about now! So, I had to politely let him know that he had made a small miscalculation. But from Zechariah's experience, I knew not to argue with Gabriel.

In my most respectful voice, I asked, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" I was pretty sure that announcement might be a deal breaker. But he didn't bat one of his huge eyelashes. He said something so crazy that I, I still can't believe it is true. He told me that the Holy Spirit would come on me and the power of the Most High would overshadow me, and so my son would be called the Son of God. Again, I knew from the examples of Sarah and Zechariah not to laugh, so

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:12-15

I just bowed and said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” And when I looked up, he was gone.

Now, you may think that I was completely caught by surprise by the whole Gabriel incident, but you would be wrong. I was of the house of David, and knew that I qualified to be the mother of the Messiah. Like all young women of the house of David, I knew the prophecy of Isaiah that said a virgin would have a child.<sup>2</sup> So I knew that I possessed at least two of the characteristics of the mother of the Messiah.

Some weeks after Gabriel came to me, I hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth in her seclusion. As soon as Elizabeth heard my greeting, her baby jumped in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. For the next three months, Elizabeth and I blessed each other and the Lord. Then, I returned home and Elizabeth soon had her baby.

Upon my arrival in Nazareth, it was apparent I was pregnant. That is when the scandal broke in a fury. My family and friends accused me of fornication while I was away with Elizabeth, and begged Joseph to break our engagement. There was even some talk of stoning me. In order to calm everybody, Joseph sought to find a way to quietly end the engagement. He loved me enough to give up his marriage to me if the people would not stone me. However, he was also too honorable to lie and say the baby was his. Then my beloved Joseph got a big surprise.

Joseph went to sleep and had a very powerful dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to him. He was told to take me as his wife because the baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not from a man. He was told to name the baby “Jesus.” Then, Joseph did what he would always do. He obeyed the Lord completely and without hesitation.

I was looking forward to a long period of quiet, comfortable seclusion like the one Elizabeth had. That illusion was soon shattered. Caesar Augustus declared that a census was to be taken of the entire Empire, and that meant Joseph and I had to go to Bethlehem to register, since we were pledged to be married<sup>3</sup>, and because Bethlehem was the town of his ancestor, David. It took many weeks of preparation because we had to travel almost 100 miles. Now I don’t suspect you’ve ever walked or ridden a donkey while you are eight months pregnant, but it was neither a comfortable nor quick way to travel. It took us more than two weeks, and most nights we slept on the ground near the road.

I was thrilled as we bypassed Jerusalem and went straight to Bethlehem because I knew my baby was ready. I was imagining a nice, comfortable bed... only to find that there were not any available rooms in the town. One person was kind enough to let us sleep in his stable, which was really just a shallow cave. However, the soft straw was as pleasant to me as any feather mattress could be. It was a good thing we hadn’t dawdled because...it was time.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 7:14

<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:5



Jesus was born in the middle of the night soon after we arrived. We wrapped him in the few clothes we had for him and laid him in a feeding trough. And then, his true father provided us an unbelievable sight. Joseph and I looked out of the cave entrance and saw millions of angels in the sky rejoicing at the birth of Jesus. When Joseph looked at them, he knew that Jesus was the son of God...any of his lingering doubts vanished. He gave me a look of love that any wife would die to have.

We laughed together because besides us, only a few shepherds would have seen the angels since it was the middle of the night. We laughed even harder a few hours later when the shepherds arrived at our door to worship our son. We all praised and worshiped God until they had to return to their flocks. They kept calling my son the "little lamb of God" without understanding what they were saying.

Eight days later the local priest circumcised our son, as required by the laws of Moses. Then sometime after that, we took Jesus to Jerusalem to go through the purification rites. Since we were poor people, we were only required to sacrifice a pair of doves or pigeons. Even so, the moneychangers and bird sellers took advantage of us since we had no choice but to use them. I don't think Jesus ever forgot them when we later told him the story.

As we entered the Temple, an old man came straight to us. Simeon was his name. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that our son was to be the salvation of all nations. After he finished talking to us, an old prophetess came up and gave thanks to God for our son and talked about how he would be the redemption of Jerusalem. Oh, Anna. We marveled at the unexpected reception, but did not tell anybody about it.

I hope you will take the time to read about the entire birth narrative as told by Luke. One of the things you should notice is the stress he puts on God being glorified throughout the process. Luke understood that the entire life of Jesus was centered on glorifying God, and it started even before his birth.

However, as much as I adore Dr. Luke and appreciate his writing, he was not able to capture as many details as I would have liked. So, I hope you will also take time to read the birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, where you will learn about such things as the wise men coming to visit us, and the two years we lived in Egypt to avoid the evil King Herod's wrath.

I don't want to bore you with a long rendition of his childhood, but I will share one last story.

When Jesus was twelve, we took him to the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Many of your modern scholars believe this was the age when our children became adults. We were traveling with a large group of family and friends, and the children played with their friends and moved around in the group as they wished. When we got to Jerusalem, all went well even though there were tens of thousands of visitors in the town. After a few days, our group left to return to Nazareth. I wasn't too concerned about Jesus since I thought he was with the men. But it was

dinner time after we had been gone a full day, and Jesus did not show up for his meal. When we didn't find him anywhere in the group, Joseph and I were frantic. We rushed back to Jerusalem.

For three days, we searched the entire city. The chaos in the crowded city, and all of the possible places where he could have been. Overwhelming. On the third day, we went back up to the gigantic Temple grounds to ask Simeon and Anna if they had seen him. They just pointed to one of the courts. We found Jesus sitting with the teachers, trading questions and answers with them. Everyone was astonished at his understanding and his answers. I chided him for making us so anxious, but he just gave me a little sad smile and asked, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

Jesus' question may seem mysterious to you, but it thrilled Joseph and me. Like all parents whose heritage was from the house of David, we had drilled our firstborn about his ancestors since he was tiny. He could recite their names on both my side and Joseph's side, just as I recited them to both Dr. Luke and Matthew when they wrote their books. He knew exactly whose son he was. He was the son of God, and we had taught him so.<sup>4</sup>

Many people don't believe some parts of my story, and many others don't believe any of it. But, through the ages there have been countless millions who have believed my entire story and used it to bolster their faith. So that's my story... and I'm sticking to it. I hope and pray you will too.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:38

Ha! No camel's hair outfit (he gives an "I caught you" look)<sup>1</sup> And no long, stringy hair. I gave up that look when Hollywood started copying it for their Tarzan movies. Hey, my clothes were cheap, and easy to dry, I baptized a few hundred people a day. Truthfully, camel hair doesn't smell so good when it is wet. And...scratchy! Don't wear it if you don't have to.

Probably you're also expecting me to show up as an angry, arm-waving, screaming Old Testament Prophet. You've maybe never thought about me being a pleasant, quiet, persuasive person. Do you really think so many people would have come to see me if I had been unpleasant to be around? Just the opposite. In fact, Dr. Luke described me as exhorting people and preaching the good news to them.<sup>2</sup> Does that describe a raving maniac, or somebody pleasant to be around?

Consider this: Much of what you know about me is only found in the *Gospel of John*. John was very sensitive to the fact that I was doing the best I could to be a harbinger of the Good News. What kind of person would God have chosen to precede the Prince of Peace?

But I didn't come here today to talk about my fashion preferences and personality traits, I'm here to talk about my cousin and good friend, Jesus. You might remember that he and I became acquainted while I was still in Elizabeth's womb, and he in Mary's. I jumped for joy whenever Mary walked in the room. My mother got tired of that after a while, so she tried to stay in the same room with Mary as much as possible.

Jesus and I were not only cousins, we were good friends growing up, even though we lived in different villages. Our older relatives often remarked that I was more like his ancestor David, while he was more like my ancestor, Aaron. I loved to be in the wilderness and outdoors, while Jesus preferred to study the Scriptures. I communed with God in nature, while he preferred to be with God in the synagogue or in his father's workshop. I would challenge him to come with me to hunt for wild bees and honey, and he would challenge me to come with him to spend time in his father's house. When he said that, I was never sure whether he meant Joseph's house or the synagogue.

Although I was born into the priestly line of Aaron on both of my parents' sides, it was pretty clear from a young age that I was not going to be a traditional Jewish priest. My father and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:4

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:18

other community leaders made sure that I got training in the traditional Jewish teachings, but that did not exactly excite me because it didn't appear to me that the Jewish leaders were practicing what they were preaching. They did follow the letter of the laws, but did they really love God? or follow the *intent* of the laws? They were much more intent on following the hundreds of rules they had invented to build guardrails around the laws. Those guardrails turned out to be prison bars.

Who did excite me were the Essenes who lived near the Dead Sea and in other small communities. The Essenes were a Jewish sect who lived very strict lives of following both the letter and intent of the laws of Moses. They typically lived in desert communities and had very stringent rules on living. Above all, they practiced repentance in a way that God had commanded. They lived lives of poverty and practiced baptism by immersion, and shared some interesting messianic beliefs. Though the Bible doesn't refer to them, they were the third most numerous Jewish sect after the Pharisees and Sadducees. Qumran was a community of Essenes, and was the place where the Dead Sea scrolls would be found in the 1940's.

Unlike Jesus, I didn't make a conscious decision about entering the ministry. I simply lived in the wilderness or near the Jordan River, and talked to people who happened to come by. I noticed that most of the people who came by knew that they were living by rules, not by love. Many had what would later be called "guilt complexes."

One day, I was visiting with a Pharisee who was on his way to Jericho from Jerusalem. A real basket case, if you know what I mean. The Holy Spirit urged me to offer him a better life. So, I said, "If you are willing to change your life and start living with love for God and your fellow Jews, I will help you do so." He begged me to help him, so I led him to a nearby pool of water and baptized him for repentance. When he came out of the water, he was crying with happiness and relief. He knew his life had changed forever.

Now that guy was a real loudmouth. He started telling everybody what had happened to him. It turns out that a lot of people were just like him. Pretty soon there was a steady stream of people from all directions who wanted to repent and be baptized. Pretty simple job for me, actually. Tell them to do what they already knew to do, tell them to be nice and love each other and God, and repent of their sins. Rather than fulfill the rules of the religious leaders, I wanted them to exceed those rules by acting in love.

After people agreed to do what I exhorted them to do, I would immerse them in the water. It was a great gig, and there were only two people who ever caused me a problem.

The first of those was Jesus. Both of us knew that he didn't need to repent, since he had always loved God and followed his commandments. Nonetheless, when he asked to be baptized by me, I relented and baptized him. When he came out of the water, the craziest thing happened. The Holy Spirit appeared like a dove and descended upon him. Out of the sky came a thunderous voice that said, "This is my Son, whom I love, and with him I am well pleased." I

didn't think it possible that Jesus could be more holy, but from that day forward, he was overtly filled with the Holy Spirit.

It was at that very moment that the Holy Spirit also enlightened me about my future role. He told me that my whole life had been designed to prepare the way for Jesus. That he would become more and more, while I would become less and less. He pointed out that I was like the long looked-for messenger that our beloved prophet Malachi had pointed out.<sup>3</sup> I was to finish preparing the way for the Lord, and then my job was finished.

With your elected politicians and your interstate highways and paved roads, you have no way to comprehend what the Spirit meant when he said "prepare the way." In my day, kings had the power of life and death over all of their subjects. Any subject that displeased or inconvenienced him was subject to death. So, when a king traveled, it was common for the roads upon which he would travel to be prepared. The roads would be leveled, straightened, and decorated to make the trip easier, faster, and more pleasant.

That was my job. To prepare the hearts of the people to hear the message of Jesus and be ready to follow him. I did such a good job that many of my own followers left me to go be his disciples, which I encouraged them to do.

Before I tell you about the only other person I had difficulty with, I must tell you a little history that people of my time would have known intimately. Herod the Great was the king of Israel from about 37 BC to the time of Christ. He built the Temple Mount and Caesarea, and was fabulously wealthy. He was also the Herod that killed the babies of Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born. Unfortunately, Herod the Great became more and more insane as he grew older. He died a few years after the birth of Jesus.

Upon Herod the Great's death, the Romans split his kingdom among four of his descendants. Herod Archelaus became ethnarch of the tetrarchy of Judea, Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and Philip became tetrarch of territories east of the Jordan. A daughter, Salome the First, was given other territories.

Philip and Salome the First do not really figure into the story of Jesus very much, except that Philip had an ex-wife named Herodias. Herod Archelaus only lived until 18 AD, and then his territory was turned into the Roman province of Judaea, which included both Jerusalem and Caesarea.

Which brings me back to Herod Antipas, the man who hated me. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee, the area west of the Sea of Galilee. He married Herodias, the ex-wife of his brother, Philip. I was very critical of that and demanded that he repent of such a sin, and his many other sins. Herod Antipas put me in prison, and so added to his sins. Dr. Luke is the only gospel writer

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<sup>3</sup> Malachi 3:1

who explains why I was in prison.<sup>4</sup> You can imagine that my criticisms stung Herodias, Philip's ex-wife, Philip the brother of Herod Antipas, it's a total soap opera. Anyway, Herodias could barely wait for her revenge.

While in prison, I became despondent because I didn't know what would happen to me or to my disciples. I was hoping all of them would go to Jesus, but I kept hearing reports about him that were mystifying. So, I sent some of my disciples to ask him. They came back with the strangest report, which was strangely reassuring. When they arrived, Jesus barely paid any attention to them. Then, he turned to them and just said, "Go tell John what you have seen. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised. And, the good news is proclaimed to the poor."<sup>5</sup> I knew from this cryptic message that my work was complete. I had prepared the way for the Messiah, and he had come.

Soon thereafter, Herod Antipas had a big party where he had too much to drink. He rashly promised his daughter anything she wanted. Her mother, none other than Herodias, asked for my head. Which Herod Antipas promptly gave her...on a platter. So, my career came to an abrupt halt. But that wasn't the end of Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee during the entire ministry of Jesus. He greatly feared the popularity of Jesus, even to the point of thinking Jesus might be a resurrected me. I think Jesus planned many of his travels so that his disciples would not be in danger from Antipas. In the end, it was Herod Antipas that Jesus was sent to by Pilate, since Jesus had come from the area of Galilee.

Now, I'm not saying that having my head served on a platter was a good thing, but it did smooth the transition for the disciples from my ministry to that of Jesus. Right? I prepared the way for him, then got out of the way. I completely fulfilled the purpose that God had for me. Maybe that is why Jesus gave me such a high compliment by saying, "Among those born of women there is no one greater than John."<sup>6</sup>

But, I envy you, because Jesus continued with, "yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." I got to see the kingdom of God as it first came near, in itchy camel-hair outfits no less, but you in your comfy clothes, you get to be a part of the kingdom as it is fully known.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:19-20

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:4-5 paraphrased

<sup>6</sup> Luke 7:28

Luke knew me to be as real as his fellow Christians. You probably don't. The rest of Luke's stories are from people he interviewed. Luke did not have to interview me. He was already...very familiar with my story. The apostles were warned about me, (he pauses) by Jesus. (he is expressionless as he pauses again.) He constantly tormented and evicted my demons from the lives of people.

In much of the modern world, mine is a pretty easy job. Only a small minority of people today believe I am real, so I can do almost anything I want with no backlash or response. But you know, I am still continually surprised how it is so easy to get people to accept evil as good, and good as evil.<sup>1</sup>

I shouldn't be that surprised though, it has actually been fairly easy to cause that to happen in most times and places throughout history. In fact, most of the time it is so easy for me that it doesn't even count as spiritual warfare. Throughout all of time and in all places, I have had my way in the lives of many people.

If you have read the Bible, however, you already know of the times it wasn't so easy for me. I didn't do so well in the Garden of Eden until Eve listened to me, and Adam listened to her. Job proved me wrong, causing me to lose a lot of influence in God's court. The first preacher, Noah, caused me a lot of problems until the whole drunk episode. Moses and David were pretty challenging. Just when I had them going my way, they would repent and turn to God. One time, the entire Jewish nation looked as if they were going to follow God, but that didn't last too long.

I rarely tell the truth, unless it is to deceive somebody, but here is a fact: my job has been so easy that I give in to the temptation to get lazy. Few people have been able to stay faithful to God if I put even mild temptation in their way. They refuse to stay under the protection of God by being obedient and faithful to him. And I can tell you from experience that even when God provides them a way out of temptation, not many choose to escape.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 1:32

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 10:13

You can probably see how I was lulled to sleep and missed the biggest threat to my work, and the event that sealed my eventual doom. I'm still so angry about it that I go into rages and try to destroy everything and everyone that I can.<sup>3</sup>

Time doesn't have a lot of meaning to me, but about two thousand years ago things were seemingly going my way. God and I had co-existed for countless eons. On earth, mankind was following a destructive path that I appreciated and encouraged. On every continent, people worshiped pagan gods or me. With the exception of the Jews, direct knowledge of God was non-existent. Even to those few Jews, it seemed as if God had forgotten mankind.

Frankly, it made sense to me that God would have given up on mankind. The world had gotten to where the intentions of most people were to do evil all the time.<sup>4</sup> They had either forgotten God, ignored God, or couldn't see him even in the nature of the magnificent world he had created. They had given up on God, and I thought he had given up on them. I was badly mistaken.

A young teen in a nowhere village in the nowhere country of Israel got pregnant out of wedlock. (Satan woo-hoos) Yet another sign that the Jews' God-focused culture was in decline! I didn't take notice when she didn't discard her baby on a trash heap, or get an abortion like so many of the Roman women did. I didn't even take notice when her village chose not to stone her, and her jilted fiancé chose to marry her anyway. Those were tiny details that seemed to make no difference. Many pregnant teens have expressed innocence and can't believe that they are pregnant! I figured she was lying like the rest.

The fact that the child grew up obeying his parents and loving God did not distinguish him terribly from the other Jewish boys. In fact, I was more worried about that child's cousin, John.

From the beginning, John called people to repent of their sins and change their lives. That was cause for concern by me because once people understand they are sinning, sometimes they choose to stop. Once they realize they are ignoring God, they choose to quit ignoring him. The very fact that John could so easily bring these people to their senses made him a threat. So, I put into motion a plan whereby the authorities would kill him. End of story. It was relatively simple to do so, because some people react so violently when they are brought to account for their sins. It was only a short time before Herod Antipas had John's head on a... on a platter. (chuckles wryly at his joke, then leans in and drops to a low volume.)

By the time John was executed, I realized the biggest mistake of my long life. I had been focusing on John, while I should have been focusing on Jesus. I watched John's disciples move over to Jesus, I saw Jesus become filled by the Holy Spirit, and I recalled how Jesus' mother

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 1:21-32



insisted that she had been miraculously impregnated by the Holy Spirit, and I felt a fleeting speck of doom. A feeling that was to quickly intensify.

Jesus was baptized, then he went into the vast, beige wilderness to prepare for his future by praying and fasting for forty days. I knew he would be getting supernatural powers by praying to God... by being indwelt by Holy Spirit, so I started harassing him, and did not stop.

At the end of forty days, he was in a famished state. I gave him two challenges: to change a stone into bread and to prove himself to be the Son of God. I knew he could easily change the stone to bread, and I knew he could resist that urge. I didn't think he could resist the prideful act of proving himself to be the Son of God. After all, his ancestor David was easily convinced by me to prove his independence from God by taking a census.<sup>5</sup>

By refusing to be prideful, (He restrains his emotion) he was going to be a tough nut to crack. I decided to up the ante and see how humble he was. I took him in a vision to a high place where he could see all of the kingdoms of the world. I literally offered him the kingship of all earthly kingdoms if he would worship me. That was not an empty offer, and he knew it. I could have given him all of those earthly kingdoms. But with one Scripture quotation he put me in my place, (he can hardly contain his emotion) "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

When Jesus refused to take up those two offers, I knew I had a worthy adversary on my hands. He was not to be as easily deceived as other humans. I saw his reliance on Scripture to avoid the temptation, so I tried using Scripture as a subterfuge.

I took him to the southwest tower on the Temple Mount, which was the highest point. I challenged him to throw himself down so the angels could rescue him before he hit the ground. Not only would that prove he was the Son of God, but it would be done in front of thousands of people who would immediately begin to worship him. Once again, he refused to thwart God's long-term plan, and quoted a Scripture back to me that was so final that I left him to work on a different game plan. He resisted me, and I had no choice but to flee, to wait for a more opportune time.<sup>6</sup>

I rule the earth through my deceptions and temptations. Even though you Americans refuse to recognize it, I am very powerful. But I am not nearly as powerful as God. I am not all-knowing, and I am not all-powerful. If I were, I would have known that the beginning of Jesus' ministry was the beginning of my end. The all-knowing God must have taken some satisfaction as he revealed my future to me over the next three years, a future that is still coming to pass.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:1

<sup>6</sup> James 4:7

My doom began to be revealed immediately. Jesus began to cast my demons out of people...demons who had ruled people's lives by tormenting them and lowering their resistance to temptation. Demons who had been able to get people to worship me, even to the point of killing their own babies.

When I lost control over my demons, I knew what was in store – my end. Jesus preached over the next three years, and I began to understand how complete my defeat and demise would be. Panicked, I struggled to find a survival plan, and came up with a brilliant one. I decided to use God's people to destroy God's son. When Jesus was dead, all would go back to normal.

It was simple to steer the religious leaders into hating Jesus. I fueled their self-righteousness, and they hardened their hearts. Even more damaging, I orchestrated opportunities for them to be embarrassed by Jesus, in public! Within a short period of time they made plans to kill him.

Once they intended to kill him, it was easy. One of Jesus' own apostles took the bait, and betrayed him. Days later, Jesus was dead, and my troubles were over. I had defeated the God of the Universe. I threw a party that no human could match.

I won't admit to a hangover but I was in a bit of a daze when one of my demons gave me the bad news. God raised Jesus from the dead! (he restrains himself, but he is boiling) I knew that I had actually aided God in his redemption plan for all mankind. I had fallen into his trap because of my pride (almost eerie in his lack of emotion, not unlike a serial killer).

(He begins to exhibit a slight nervous tick, blinking maybe)

That was a horrible time for me, but it was going to get worse. Much worse. Jesus was going to replace himself with the Holy Spirit, and his Spirit would enable his followers to have powers to resist me that I could not overcome.

I knew I could not withstand the power of Holy Spirit, but what I didn't foresee was how Holy Spirit would wield his power through the church. The church! God had this secret weapon all planned, and he sprung it on me. I was engulfed in a trap from which I could never escape. The church is a primary reason I am to be ultimately destroyed by Jesus.

Well, I know my ultimate fate. Cast into hell for an eternity. Along with my demons. That is going to happen, and I cannot deny it. But before I go, I will do as much damage as I can... to you and your family and your friends. I want as much company as I can get.

I want you to realize that threat is not empty. I have tremendous powers of persuasion and temptation. I am the ultimate adversary. However, even I cannot withstand God. And for some reason that I cannot fathom, God is patient and doesn't want any of his precious humans to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Peter 3:9

As one of my former victims, Peter, wrote, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."<sup>8</sup> My job is to keep you from living like that, not wanting to "speed the day of my destruction."

The good news, for me anyway, is that it is becoming easier and easier to keep people from leading holy and godly lives. No longer do I use stone and wooden idols. No longer do I rely on the use of desire for great riches. My new strategy...just eliminate the desire people have to be holy and godly, I don't need them to desire to be sinful and hateful. I just need them to be complacent and distracted. It's proving much easier than I expected.

I started with some simple... entertainments. Those proved so successful that I moved on to more powerful distractions, traps if you will. Internet, video on demand, smartphones, social networks. I just love it that now the average human spends hours a day just watching screens. Believe me, it's not the "screens" or "technology" any more than idols of the past were bad because they were wood or stone. It's the value placed on them. The devotion. The attention. The time, both quality and quantity. That's what makes an idol.

I'm making immense headway. Individuals are becoming isolated from each other. Families are being destroyed. Many people know they can be saved by calling on the name of the Lord, but fewer and fewer are even bothering because they are so distracted by unimportant things

I feel like I am back on a roll. I'm feeling... good. But, I can't shake this sense of impending doom.

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Peter 3:10-12

“Why can’t you boys be more like Jesus?” or how about, “Why can’t you know your Scriptures as well as Jesus?” He was more responsible than the rest of us, and he always set a good example.

When we were young, Jude and I would often get into trouble. More than once, he would take Jude and me aside, sit us on the ground. Then, he would write out in the dust what we had done wrong. After we had confessed and apologized, and said we wouldn’t do it again, Jesus would wipe it out, as if we had never done it. Two decades later, I heard he did that for a woman caught in her wrong... adultery.<sup>1</sup> I like to know he is in heaven right now erasing the sins of his followers.<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus was about thirty,<sup>3</sup> he decided to go away and be an itinerant rabbi. In itself, that wasn’t a terribly unusual decision, but it did put quite a hardship on the rest of us who stayed behind. Neither Jude nor I were that great at carpentry.

It didn’t surprise any of us when Jesus went to be near our cousin, John. They always had a special bond. Jesus wanted to see how John was able to get the attention of the Pharisees and other religious leaders in Jerusalem. Stories had started filtering back to Nazareth about John, his success mainly. But none of us had enough information to make any judgements about the matter.

After several months, stories started filtering back to Nazareth about Jesus, some of which we knew to be true. Although Dr. Luke doesn’t talk much about the very early days of Jesus’ ministry, you can read the *Gospel of John* to learn about the calling of Jesus’ first disciples,<sup>4</sup> Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding feast in the nearby village of Cana,<sup>5</sup> his interview with Nicodemus,<sup>6</sup> the Samaritan woman at the well and the conversion of the village of Sychar,<sup>7</sup> and the healing of the child in Capernaum while Jesus was in Cana.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 8:2-11

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 43:25, Acts 3:19

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:23

<sup>4</sup> John 1:29-51

<sup>5</sup> John 2:1-11

<sup>6</sup> John 3:1-21

<sup>7</sup> John 4:5-42

<sup>8</sup> John 4:46-54

Jesus came back to our region of Galilee and started teaching a perplexing message which seemed to resonate with the people who had lost all hope. It wasn't long before he showed up at our house. He explained how he had been baptized by John, and how the Holy Spirit had filled him. No matter how hard we tried to understand what he meant, it just sounded like crazy talk.

I remember the following Sabbath as if it happened yesterday. In Nazareth, there was excitement because of the reputation Jesus had started getting. Everyone wanted to see him and hear him teach. However, the brothers had a lot of trepidation. The things Jesus had been saying in our house that week seemed to border on heresy. We knew the conservative men at our tiny synagogue would not react well to some of his teachings.

The regular reading that week was from Isaiah. We didn't have verse numbers like you do, but we were all familiar with the passage that Jesus read. The passage was meaningful to many of us because it spoke of poor people getting good news, prisoners being freed, oppressed people being released. We all identified with those things and could not wait for the day of the Lord when things would change. When Jesus said that scripture was to be fulfilled that day, we were ecstatic. Surely, he meant that he would miraculously change our lives like he had reportedly done in other places.

If Jesus could turn more than a hundred gallons of water into wine...well think about it! He could certainly provide enough olive oil for our entire village to use for a year or two. Or enough wood for my brothers and me for a couple years so we wouldn't have to travel so far to get it. My mind reeled with the possibilities.

People were overjoyed. They turned and smiled to one another, and were so complimentary of Jesus as he spoke such gracious words. Everything was going great and we brothers were so relieved. But we were hasty in our response. Jesus went on to say that what they really wanted was to see healings and miracles here in his hometown like he had done in Capernaum. His voice turned accusatory, and a hush fell over our little synagogue.

When he started complimenting the Gentiles, while excluding the Jews, the mood in the room completely changed. The friendly crowd turned into a fierce mob, (he snaps) like that. They drove Jesus to the southern outskirts of town, where they planned to throw him over the cliff as a blasphemer. But Jesus turned and walked right through the crowd. How he did that, I will never understand.

I guessed that Jesus would head back to Capernaum, so he was easy to follow. I took the one path that led there, and caught up to him in a few hours. We passed under the cliffs of Mount Arbel, walked up the western side of the Sea of Galilee, and came to Capernaum late in the evening.

Early the next morning, I climbed a small hill and saw the beautiful Sea of Galilee from its northern edge. Nazareth was only thirty miles away, but I had not spent much time at the Sea. Capernaum was on the north shore, and I could see most of the thirteen miles over the water to the south. I could see all the way across the lake from east to west, about nine miles.

From the hill, I could see why Jesus chose Capernaum as his home base. The town was a good size, and it controlled an important spur of the trade route known as the Via Maris, or Way of the Sea. That ancient trade route went from Egypt to the north. This spur went from Caesarea to Damascus, and from there to the rest of the world. The topography of the land made Capernaum a natural choke point where it was easy to collect taxes. In addition, the hard volcanic rocks of the area were known world-wide as good grinding stones. The fishermen on the Sea could sell dried fish to the many traders coming through the town who would take them on to Rome. Yes, Capernaum was a good place for the crowds to meet Jesus.

In a few days, I followed Jesus to the rock-covered synagogue in town. Things started off well again. The people were all amazed at the insights and natural authority of his teachings. From somewhere on the side, we heard a man, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? He was screeching, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." I began envisioning another stoning in the making. Instead, Jesus sternly rebuked the demon, and cast it out of the man. It was such a powerful demonstration that the people were amazed. Jesus became the talk of the whole area.

After Jesus left the synagogue, he went to the home of Simon Peter whose mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever. Rather than call a respected doctor, like our esteemed Luke, Jesus just healed her on the spot. She got up at once and began to serve them lunch.

The rest of that day was crazy. People came from all over bringing their friends and relatives who were sick or demon possessed. Jesus healed all of them. It was quite a sight. The crowd kept him at it all night, even tried to keep him from leaving the next day. They could not get their head around the fact that his miracles were to demonstrate his extraordinary power and relationship to God.

While Jesus was healing people of their illnesses, I noticed something remarkable. Demon possessed people were being healed, too. How could I tell the difference between who was getting healed of illnesses and who was getting healed from demon possession?

When the demons came out of people they shouted at Jesus, "You are the Son of God." Jesus would immediately rebuke them and not allow them to speak further. Why? Because the demons knew that Jesus was the Messiah people were looking for, but Jesus was not ready to be revealed. The people were not properly prepared yet, to accept him as the Son of God.

Doesn't it strike you as curious that demons were the first to recognize Jesus as the Son of God? I don't have any room to say anything. I didn't even recognize him as the Son of God!

Jesus finally left Capernaum, because he knew the importance of preaching about the kingdom of God to the entire area. The crowd hated to see him go because they wanted physical healing, but he knew people of the region also needed spiritual healing.

When Jesus left, I went back to Nazareth. Mary was so happy to see me and to hear about the happenings in Capernaum. I continued to be mystified about the power, she didn't seem to be surprised at all. In fact, she brought up a family story about the time Jesus had been left behind in Jerusalem when he was just twelve. She said, "He has to be about his father's business." It was going to be three more years before I understood what she meant.

Pop quiz. Three questions. First question: Which one of Jesus' apostles was wealthy? (he waits a beat) Answer: Me. Second Question: How did I acquire my wealth? Answer: Tax collector! At Capernaum, one of the best spots in the Roman Empire for a tax collector to become wealthy. Tax collectors were despised by the Jews because they caused great hardship for the benefit of Rome. The term "tax collector" was about the same as saying...(catches himself) a curse word.

You know me best by my Roman name, Matthew, but you might also know me by my Jewish name, Levi. Which bring us to the... third question: Of the New Testament writers, who called me "Matthew, the Tax Collector" and who called me "Levi"? Answer: Mark and Luke called me Levi. Pah, details, schmetails, no?!

I called myself Matthew the Tax Collector because I never wanted to forget my sinful beginning or the forgiveness of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It's been more than thirty years since I held that job, but I continue to call myself by that name so I always remember what I was before I met Jesus.

You may know of me because I wrote the book of *Matthew*, the first book of the New Testament. If you have ever read the New Testament, you will be struck by the similarities of my book and the Gospel books of *Mark* and *Luke*. Some people attribute the similarities to the Holy Spirit inspiring Mark, Luke and me to write the same things. Others attribute them to the idea that we all used some of the same written resources and talked to many of the same people. It is well known that I was the only one of the three that lived with Jesus during the three years that he preached.

Rather than spoil the suspense, I will not give you the answer of why our writings have similarity. However, I do think it interesting that people today always want one single right answer, rather than considering that several answers could be true. Another point to keep in mind is that the three of us probably had different target audiences in mind. Mark was interested in having a middle-of-the-road version that would tell the basics of the story of Jesus. I targeted the Jews as my audience, so I used a lot of quotes from the Old Testament and leaned my commentary toward people familiar with the Scriptures. Luke specifically wrote his book to be non-Jewish, and angled his commentary and style toward non-Jews.

Bonus quiz! Question: What is the most famous quotation of my actual words in the New Testament? Answer: It's a trick question! Nothing I actually said is quoted in the New Testament. Isn't that interesting?! Too bad I wasn't living today, when the wealthy and all kinds

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10:3



of celebrities are often quoted only because riches and fame are deemed to make a person worth listening to. Drat, I missed that.

My tax station was in Capernaum which was located on one spur of the Via Maris trade route. The topography was such that none of the trade caravans could avoid my little tax station. I took tax on the goods coming from Egypt to Damascus, the expensive luxury goods coming in from Damascus, the fish from the Sea of Galilee, and the volcanic grinding rocks manufactured in Capernaum. Everyone detested the Jewish tax collectors who worked for the Romans, but I had a reputation for treating everyone as fairly as was possible under the system. And that means I was only slightly less detested than other tax collectors.

The first time I met Jesus was when he was traveling from Cana to Capernaum. Accompanied by some of my fishermen acquaintances from the northern part of the Sea of Galilee, I could tell by his clothing that Jesus was a poor man, and I knew the others with him didn't have any money either. They were carrying a few wineskins from Cana, but that region is known for poor wine, I didn't even bother tasting it, I just waved them on through. Little did I know the experience I missed by not at least sampling *that* wine.

Over the next few months, I got acquainted with Jesus better. Every time he traveled in the area he had to go through my tax station, and every time I just waved him on through. But here is the odd thing – he was the first person who stopped to visit with me. I could tell he didn't want anything from me except just to know me better.

Sometimes we would talk about religion, I was surprised to learn that he knew the Scriptures much better than I, and I had been the star pupil in our synagogue. From my name, Levi, you can infer I was from the tribe of Levi, and could have qualified to be a priest...if I hadn't have become a tax collector. Jesus not only knew the Scriptures better than I, but he had interpretations that showed he truly understood the heart of God.

One morning, I was at my tax station and noticed a commotion not far away. I left the table in charge of my most trusted assistant, and went to check it out. There was a crowd gathering around Jesus. It got so big he was getting pushed into the water of the lake. Nearby was a boat owned by Simon, and Jesus got in it. He asked Simon to push a little way out. Now, I knew Simon, and I could tell he had fished all night with little to show for it. I fully expected him to explode, he's got a temper. But he did as Jesus asked, and sat quietly while Jesus taught the crowd. Keeping Simon in check was the first miracle I saw Jesus do!

When Jesus finished speaking, he told Simon to push out into deeper water and let down his nets. Once again, Simon miraculously did as he was told without lashing out. He caught so many fish that his nets started breaking! He had to call his fishing partners to come help. They brought in so many fish that their boats started to sink.

Then, I saw a miracle to end all miracles. Simon went down on his knees and confessed to being a sinner. From all the way across the water, I heard Jesus say, "Don't be afraid; from now on

you will fish for people.” Simon and his partners went to shore, left everything with their helpers, and followed Jesus. When I saw Simon, Andrew, James, and John start a new life, I couldn’t help but be envious.

Over the next few weeks, I continued to see and hear about the many healings and miracles of Jesus. The healing of a leper, that was the first one that caught everybody’s attention. It wasn’t just that he healed him, that’s not what got everyone’s attention, but the fact that Jesus actually touched the man while he was still a leper. Talk about faith! As soon as Jesus touched him, he was healed. Not only was this a miracle that had never been seen, but Jesus showed himself to be willing to break man-made rules in order to be compassionate to others. However, he did command the man to follow the law of Moses by showing himself to a priest and offer a sacrifice.

News of this miracle spread through the region faster than a tax collector can grab a bribe. People came from all over to be healed of their sicknesses. Jesus often worked so hard that he was fatigued beyond any endurance. He would sometimes simply disappear so he could spend time with God and recharge his mental and physical well-being.

His reputation was spreading so widely that the religious leaders came from far away to watch him. They could not deny his miraculous powers, he healed people in front of everybody. But they were hoping to catch him in a blasphemous teaching. I’ve always wondered why they were not willing to accept him instead of wanting to disprove him. It would have been so much better for everyone.

One day, Jesus was teaching from the doorway of a house, I think it was the house of Simon’s mother-in-law, and the crowds were so thick that nobody could get through. There were these men, a group of them, who were carrying a paralyzed man on a mat in the hopes that Jesus would heal him. They had come from far away, and were not going to give up easily.

You know what struck me about the men carrying the paralytic? They didn’t appear to be his relatives. In my time, the paralytic’s relatives would have been responsible for him. These guys were definitely not relatives. It was obvious. Maybe he offended his relatives in such a way that they no longer took care of him or even allowed him to live with them? I had no idea how he might have enticed this group of men to bring him to Jesus.

Anyway, the men carried him around the back of the crowd, walked behind the house, quietly climbed up on top of the roof, removed some of the roof tiles, then, they gently lowered the man directly in front of Jesus. I bet some of the crowd thought the paralytic was descending from Heaven.

When Jesus saw them, he saw their faith, he said to the paralytic man, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” I bet the men were bewildered and at least mildly disappointed. They had come all this way hoping for a healing, and all they got was a blessing from Jesus. Jesus wasn’t through

though, he was just setting a trap for the jealous religious leaders who thought they had finally caught him blaspheming God by saying he could forgive sins.

Jesus said, "Which is easier, to forgive sins or heal a paralyzed man? But I want you to know I have authority to forgive sins." Turning to the paralyzed man, he said, "Get up, take your mat, and go home." The religious leaders must have been shocked the man got up... immediately, he took his mat and left. The people in the crowd rejoiced and praised God, but the leaders were furious.

Did you catch what Luke wrote about the paralytic? He went home! The miracle of the healing not only meant the man was healed physically, but that he was on his way to having healed relationships with his family. He went home!

Only a few days later, I was sitting at my tax booth waiting for the day to start. I saw Jesus walking toward me and I began looking forward to our conversation. The healings he had been doing fascinated me, and I wondered how his four fishermen were doing as disciples. I really had a hard time seeing Simon as a patient follower.

Jesus walked straight toward me, stopped and looked me in the eye with a seriousness I had never seen. "Follow me," he said and then turned and started walking. How envious I had been of the four fishermen who left everything to follow Jesus! I quickly decided to do the same! To the astonishment of my helpers, I got up, left everything and began following Jesus. As the saying goes, "It was the first day of the rest of my life."

I arranged to hold a giant banquet for Jesus in my house. No well-behaved Jews considered me *their* friend, so I invited *my* friends, tax collectors and other social outcasts. Jesus was the focal point of the party, but his disciples chose to stay outside where they visited with the Pharisees and other religious do-gooders. They were plainly embarrassed to be seen inside with obvious sinners, and they were also embarrassed that they couldn't explain why Jesus behaved that way.

At the next opportunity, his disciples asked Jesus why he didn't behave like the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus told them plainly that he had come to serve the sinners, not the people who appeared to be righteous. He went on to tell them that they should behave the same way as him, because their goal was different from that of the Jews. They were here to bring people into the kingdom of God, not keep them out. New game, new rules.

The disciples of Jesus had to adjust to an entirely new way of thinking. I suspect many of them thought of me just as an object lesson. I was the rich sinner who they had to put up with. I certainly wasn't blessed with a quick wit or snappy retorts. Other than my calling and the banquet, I am never mentioned again except as part of a listing of disciples.

It wasn't long after Jesus called me that he disappeared one night. He had been on the mountainside praying to his Father. He called twelve of his followers together and told us that

he was naming us as his apostles. We weren't exactly sure what he meant by that name, but nobody, even Simon, wanted to ask. We assumed that it meant we were special disciples who had extra responsibility and extra privileges. What those were to be, we were to learn over the next couple of years.

You can only imagine how excited I was to be part of the special group, and not just an object lesson. I realized that the reward of walking away from being a tax collector was getting an infinitely more valuable position. I was going to be spending additional time with Jesus as he trained me to be what he wanted me to be. I wasn't witty or charming, but I did have something unique that Jesus wanted, that he valued.

What the other apostles were to learn about me was that I had a nearly photographic memory. For the next three years, I watched and listened with the intention of never forgetting anything that Jesus said or did. Many years later, when I wrote a biography of Jesus, I knew details that all of them had long forgotten. So, when you read the *Gospel of Matthew* next time, don't think of the writer as a dull tax collector, but as a dedicated follower of Jesus who was uniquely gifted to serve his Lord.

I bring all this up not to toot my own horn, but to explain something about the *Gospel of Luke*. Both Luke and I wrote our Gospels at least three decades after the death of Jesus. Both of us had access to witnesses and written documents that could help us complete our writings accurately. Both of us had limited amounts of space in which to write about the things we thought most important. Both of us were inspired by the Holy Spirit to accomplish his eternal purpose.

But Luke and I had many differences. Final question of our Quiz! Name one of our differences. Answer: you know this already, I was an eye-witness to the three-year ministry of Jesus. I remembered details that only an eye-witness could know. Plus, my primary audience was the Jews...Why I quoted the Old Testament.

Luke, however, was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus. Further, his audience was Theophilus and the rest of the non-Jewish people of the world. In his Gospel, he does not try to give a travelogue with geographic details of an accurate time line. If you want to see him do that, you should read his other scroll called the *Book of Acts*, in which he was an eyewitness to many of his accounts. So, when you read our two writings, keep those important things in mind. And of all the things we were trying to do, making them match in tiny details was not a goal.

So, I got to have the last laugh. Nothing I say is recorded in any of the gospels, but I got to write the first gospel in the New Testament. That's a pretty good trade when you add it all up.

Hold up your right hand and look at it. Imagine it to be half its size, having no muscle, paralyzed. The tendon in your forearm pulls your hand toward you so that your elbow is bent, and paralyzed. For all practical purposes, your hand and arm are useless. You won't be able to find a wife or have a family...you cannot make a good living. Luke did not name me in his book. I am only known as the man with a shriveled right hand.

Every time someone meets you, they stare at your deformity. The little kids make fun of you, it seems as if nobody has ever wanted to be your friend. The nerves in your hand are in such excruciating pain, that you cannot sleep at night. Life is so hard...you want to die.

The one place I should have been able to find relief from my troubles was at the synagogue where you would think people would have treated me with compassion. Instead, many of the leaders there wanted to exclude me from all activities, my deformity violated the meeting requirements in the Pharisees' interpretations of the Law of Moses. Life was worse on the Sabbath, much more than on any other day of the week.

My life was miserable at best, and I didn't think it could get any worse. Then I met Jesus, and it got worse. Miserably worse.

I was hiding in a corner of the synagogue at Capernaum trying to overhear the teachers and rabbis as they questioned Jesus. I could tell they were enemies of his, but I couldn't tell why. His reputation among the people was favorable. If I could ever get through the crowds, I hoped someday to ask him to heal me. I could not bear the thought of them driving him away from Capernaum. I was almost lost in my thoughts when my world changed.

Jesus stood up, pointed to me, and said "Get up and stand in front of everyone." With that one command, he embarrassed me more than I thought possible. Everybody there knew who I was and what my deformity was. I thought he might angrily command me to leave the synagogue. If he had, I might have just kept on walking into the Sea of Galilee and killed myself. In a haze, I just...stood up... in front of them all.

Jesus looked with fury...but not at me!!! He looked at the Pharisees and teachers of the Law and asked, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" When they wouldn't respond because of their hard hearts, he got even angrier, and turning to me, he commanded, "Stretch out your hand."

I don't know how to describe what happened next so you can comprehend it. My right hand and arm seemed to rise in the air on its own, and as I reached out the tendons creaked like old springs. The muscles grew in size, and my hand was healed! The pain was gone, and I could stretch and grip the fingers as well as I could with my left hand. I was instantly and completely healed. I fell to my knees in worship and thankfulness. Not only was my hand healed, but my life was made whole, too.

But what was good for me, was not so good for Jesus. From that day on, the Pharisees and other religious leaders considered him Public Enemy Number One. Some of them even started talking of ways to kill him. Unlike me, they were not used to being embarrassed and powerless. They were not used to people questioning and disobeying their man-made rules, and they didn't like it.

For the next several weeks, I followed Jesus as best as I could. The crowds were usually so thick around him that I had to listen from a distance, but I had been healed, so I knew it was only fair that others get a chance to be healed, too. What I wasn't prepared to see was that Jesus not only healed people physically, he healed them spiritually, too.

One day, we walked across a large level spot. Jesus was in the lead, followed closely by the twelve apostles, then by his other disciples, and trailed by a huge crowd of people coming from hundreds of miles away. Everyone wanted to hear him teach, and many were hoping to be healed from their diseases or demon possession. Everyone wanted to touch him, he had such power coming from him.

I want to pause for a moment to help you understand something you have probably never thought about. Even with the good Roman roads, most country people in the world rarely traveled outside of the areas of their home villages. Making a living was a full-time job, and I don't mean a 40-hour workweek. And you didn't get time and a half. And most of us had no reason to travel. The Jews, however, were different from all other groups of people. In his wisdom, God had set up various festivals and religious rites that required his people to travel long distances and stay in houses of strangers. We were very used to that.

Our society was designed to feed and house travelers on an informal and regular basis. More importantly, we were used to being in crowds and behaving well in crowded situations. This was typical behavior in Israel, but not in the vast countrysides of the Roman Empire. When Jesus was in Galilee, he attracted crowds who could follow him. That would not have been possible in most societies.

What do you think it was like for a person like me to be in a crowd following Jesus? I had to count on the kindness of strangers to feed me... and find a place to stay. I had to find a way to wash my clothes, bathe, use the bathroom. I had to get used to the noise, smells, and shoving of the crowds. All of that was doable early in Jesus' ministry, but the size of the crowds soon began to overwhelm the informal systems in place.

Jesus stood on a rock overlooking the crowd and we came to an immediate halt and hush. Although he was looking at and talking to his close disciples, his voice carried so far that everyone in the crowd could hear him. He talked of things that none of us could make sense of. The crowd looked totally bewildered. We were like lost sheep.

Jesus said that those of us who are poor, hungry, dejected, rejected and excluded, are blessed. He said that we should rejoice if we are that way because our reward in heaven is great. Then he warned about being rich, well-fed, happy, or socially well off.

Honestly, it was crushing for him to say that because we didn't understand how that was possible. We had always been taught that good people were rewarded in life, so if we were disadvantaged, it meant we were bad people. Jesus was transforming everything about the way we should look at the world, and ourselves.

And he was just getting started.. He said we should love our enemies and do good for those who hate us. After having lived with so many enemies and people who hated me, I didn't see how I would ever get there. But that was just the start.

He wanted us to do to others as we would have them do to us. Now that was a terrifying twist on an old message. We had long been taught not to do to others what we didn't want them to do to us. That actually was a fairly easy thing to do. But Jesus wanted us to act in an entirely different way. We were stunned, and couldn't understand even if we'd had a lifetime to do it. But Jesus wasn't through.

He told us in matters of judging, condemning, or forgiving, and giving, that we will receive just what we give. He told us to be careful about trying to guide others when we don't even know how to go ourselves. And then he said that we can evaluate others by their actions, not by their words.

We weren't sure how to assimilate it all, but it did give us a new way to think about our religious leaders. They condemned us when we could not follow even the silliest of their little regulations, yet they went about in fine clothing while spouting all sorts of religious words that they didn't follow themselves. We finally had the right to judge them by their actions, while remaining faithful to the Scriptures ourselves. Jesus let us know that our long-held resentments against them were justified. Our worldview was rocked.

Jesus talked for a long time that afternoon, and I suspect nobody except Matthew can remember everything he said. But like a good preacher, Jesus would repeat the key parts of his message from time to time so different audiences could hear the important things he had to say. Some of us followers would get to hear his messages more than once.

As you know, I am not a scholar. But, I am not stupid. For the rest of my life, I remembered these two things from that day: a righteous life is not about following men's rules, but being obedient to God...and, being obedient to God is about loving God and loving people.

I want to end my story by repeating a story Jesus told that afternoon as he finished speaking. You may not be able to tell, but many times when Jesus told a story, the audience could tell exactly who and what he was using as an object lesson. When he started a story with, "There was a certain man who..." you could probably see him looking at one man in the audience, or could identify that certain man with someone everybody knew.

Everyone also knew that Jesus had been a builder. You might think of Jesus as just a carpenter, but that understates his skills. He was skilled in masonry and construction as well. It was important to have all types of construction skills because of the varied soils, building materials, and climates of Israel. As we had been listening to Jesus talk, we could see solid volcanic rocks around him that were perfect for building structures, much like the houses and synagogues in the surrounding towns.

As I remember, Jesus told his story this way: "There was a certain man who built a house. He began by digging a deep and expensive foundation that rested on solid rock. Then, he built a solid rock house. When a flood came, the torrent struck the house but could not dislodge it because it was well built. Another man built a solid rock house, but without any foundation at all. When the flood came, the torrent struck the house, and it collapsed and was completely destroyed."

When he had finished that part of the story, the entire crowd nodded in agreement. We completely understood what Jesus was saying. The second man was certainly foolish and everybody could see it. Building your house without a solid foundation was certainly a foolish thing to do. But nobody in the audience was prepared for the application Jesus had for his story, because we were still puzzled over much of what he had said in the previous hour.

Jesus paused and looked over the crowd so that each of us felt like that "certain man." And then he said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,'" and do not do what I say. The one who hears what I say and puts it into practice is like the first man. His thoughts are built on solid ground and they will withstand the test of life. The one who hears what I say and does not put them into practice is like the second man. His life will be destroyed."

The crowd was in shock. We were used to our teachers pretending like they knew what they were talking about, but we were not used to someone speaking with such authority. We sat there in stunned silence, we knew we had just heard a man of God speak. What we didn't know was that we had just heard the voice of God himself.

Have you ever wondered what happened to the many people who Jesus healed? What did the former blind men do? The lepers or the deaf? Few of us were qualified to do even humble jobs, and few of us had any family or friends to help us out. I don't know about most of them, but let me give you a possibility of what happened to me.



I knew that the fishing company owned by Peter, Andrew, James, and John was short-handed since the four of them had gone to follow Jesus. I desperately wanted to spend my time around people who could tell me more about Jesus. And now that my hand was healed, well, I applied for a job to Zebedee, the father of James and John. Catching a few tilapia from the Sea of Galilee would never be enough to satisfy them again! Zeb was kind enough to take me on. And I was thrilled to know that I would never have to give up the job. I had become a fisherman. But the four apostles, they had become fishers of men. And with some experience, I would soon become Zeb's right hand man.

Everyone in your time knows that a Roman centurion commanded one hundred men, right? Because in Latin, the “cent” in centurion means one hundred. You have one hundred cents in a dollar, one hundred years in a century, so centurion...one hundred men, right? Wrong.

Let me explain how the Roman armies were organized in the time of Jesus. At the head of the Roman Empire was the Emperor. At the time when Jesus preached, the Emperor was Tiberius, who ruled from 14-37 A.D. Below the Emperor were the legions which each had about 5,000 men. In the time of Tiberius, there were about 28 legions. Each legion had ten cohorts, with each cohort having six centuries. Each century had about eighty men. So, a centurion typically commanded about eighty men, not one hundred.

There were different levels of centurion, but in your terms, a centurion would be equivalent to a captain or major. Centurions typically attained their position by being competent soldiers. However, they usually led from the front in battle, so the life span of centurions could be short.

Centurions were highly respected, and were known for being tough. In the time of Jesus, it would have been common for a centurion and his century to be placed in charge of a city or area. It was their duty to keep the peace in their area of command, and they had the authority to do so. Although centurions were paid, professional soldiers, many of them were independently wealthy or found ways to supplement their incomes through taking advantage of the areas they administered.

I was the centurion in charge of the northern part of the Sea of Galilee. This was an important area for several reasons. The vital trade route, the Via Maris, came through this area, and I had to keep it safe at all times. It was an important source of tax revenue, and any slow-down in traffic was a cause for concern from Rome. That is one reason I was an acquaintance of Matthew and the other tax collectors in the area.

As part of keeping the area safe, I was in charge of keeping peace with the Jews in the area. This was actually a pretty simple chore except for one group. Nearby was a large faction of Zealots, Jews hoping to take their nation back from Rome. They were prone to violent actions, so I had to keep a tight rein on them. I partly accomplished that by working closely with the peaceful Jews, Pharisees, or other local leaders.

The Jewish leaders found that I was willing to support peace by building synagogues and respecting their customs, but they had to reciprocate by helping me keep the Zealots under

control, and by helping me collect a fair amount of taxes. We had a symbiotic relationship, and, unlike most Romans, I came to love the people of Galilee.

My region stayed so peaceful and we collected so much tax revenue that Rome let things stay intact for many years. I had a simple job, and my life was calm. Until Jesus showed up. At first, he was just a simple traveling preacher who preached a simple message... and healed people. I could not imagine what trouble he might be able to cause. (big sigh) Over time, he really upset the Jewish leaders by his teachings. However, since he wasn't any threat to the peace or to the trade route, I didn't have much to do with him.

One day, I was in a meeting outdoors with the religious leaders and tax collectors about some rather mundane matters. I could not hold these meetings in my house because I am a Gentile, and it would have been a big problem to them to enter my house. In fact, having a meeting with those two groups was a bit a problem in itself because tax collectors were considered unclean. As the meeting progressed, a messenger came rushing up to me.

He whispered in my ear that my most trusted servant had taken ill and appeared on the point of death. This man had been with me for twenty years, and I loved him like a brother. I dismissed the messenger and kept my Roman calm, but the men in the room could sense I was distressed. Finally, I told them the problem. They were distraught because they did not want me to be upset in any way. None of them had a solution. One younger man in the back asked to speak, I granted permission, and he suggested that we ask the new faith healer in town to try to heal my servant.

I laughed, and then I remembered that Matthew, the most logical man I had ever known, had left his tax collecting business to follow a healer named Jesus. I also remembered that Matthew had told me that this man had amazing powers to heal. "Jesus?" I asked. And then told the young man to quickly take some of the other leaders to him and plead my case, and I dismissed the meeting.

When I arrived at my house, I found that my servant really was at the point of death. I knew we had no time to lose, but I also realized that Jesus would not be able to enter my house without becoming unclean. Jesus would not have hesitated to come in if it meant doing more good than harm, but I didn't know it at the time. I was in a quandary that had no apparent solution.

That is when the gracious God of the Jews gave me the solution. One of my soldiers walked by, and I began to instruct him to go do something. I realized that my soldiers were under my authority and were required to do anything I told them to do. I didn't even have to tell them in person. I could do it from a distance by invoking my authority through my word or personal seal.

I rushed outside and found a few of my Jewish friends who were praying for my servant. I begged them to rush to Jesus and tell them what I knew to be true. He had the authority to heal, and to heal from a distance. He just needed to give the word. They rushed out the door to

find Jesus. Twenty minutes later, my servant was healed instantly and completely. I guess I so thoroughly believed in his authority that I wasn't even surprised.

Later, I learned that my friends had found Jesus about a mile away, and told him my message. He was astounded at my level of faith and gave the word that my servant should be healed. My friends were shocked when they heard Jesus say, "I have not found such great faith, even in Israel." I think it was their first inkling that Jesus had come for more than the Jews, for the Gentiles, too.

From that point on, I kept tabs on Jesus and tried to do him favors whenever I could. That usually took the form of deflecting any concerns that Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, had about him. Antipas was so paranoid about John the Baptist, that he worried about Jesus, as well.

I decided to hire one of my Jewish friends to follow Jesus and report back to me everything he learned. It wasn't long after he healed my servant that Jesus went on another of his long preaching walkabouts, and my friend followed him. Jesus went by Nain, which is about 35 miles from Capernaum, but only a few miles from his hometown of Nazareth.

As Jesus was going by the town gate of Nain, a large crowd was leaving the town. The crowd was accompanying a dead body to the cemetery outside of town. Jesus saw the body was accompanied by a distraught woman, and he surmised that this was the only child of a widow. And by the depth of her sorrow, most probably a son, so a very uncertain future waited at the end of her grief. I bet he thought of his own widowed mother, and how endangered she would be if she had only one son, and lost him. Jesus had pity.

Sure enough, she was a widow. He told her not to cry, then he went to the body. Jesus did not worry about becoming ceremonially unclean. He said, "Young man, I tell you to get up." Immediately the dead man sat up and began talking. Jesus gave him back to his mother and then went on his way. Absolute wildfire...the news of this incident spread throughout the entire region.

A couple of years later when Jesus was crucified. I was reminded of the incident in Nain. Centurions are a tight group, and I spoke with a soldier who was at the crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> He told me that just before Jesus died, he had called his apostle John and his mother over and said, "Woman, this is now your son." He gave the widowed mother back a son, just as he had done for the widow of Nain.

One last event. Most of you probably think that Jesus was always an enemy of the Pharisees. Not so. Early on, the Pharisees were just trying to figure out who Jesus was and whether he was worth dealing with. Jesus even had some friends and acquaintances among the Pharisees. One of those was a man named Simon.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 15:39

Simon decided to have a dinner and invite Jesus to it. I suspect he wanted show off a little that he was friends with the new faith healer in town. Simon invited all of his important friends to the dinner, and made sure all the Pharisee traditions were honored. I believe he had ulterior motives because he did not treat Jesus as a guest of honor.

During the course of the meal, a woman of ill repute slipped into the room and began to clean and anoint Jesus' feet with a costly perfume using her hair and tears. Simon and the guests were appalled; she was a woman, a woman of ill repute, and she was touching a man in public. All of this was abhorrent to the Pharisees. Believing Jesus would not have let her do such a thing if he knew about her, Simon concluded Jesus was not a prophet. He was not only wrong in thinking that, but he was incapable of understanding the significance of what she did.

Simon must have been shocked when Jesus answered out loud to what he was thinking. Jesus told a story about two men who owed a "certain" moneylender two different amounts of money. You can be sure that he winced when Jesus started his story, because Simon probably knew the two men Jesus was using as an example, and one of them may have been him! Jesus went on to say that the moneylender forgave the two men because they could not pay back their debts. Then he asked a question, "Which one of the two men loved the moneylender more because of the forgiveness?" I suspect Simon really flinched when he heard that question.

Simon answered, "I suppose the one who was forgiven of the bigger debt." When Jesus said that he had answered correctly, Simon almost collapsed with relief that he had appeared wise in front of his guests. If so, he was relieved far too soon.

Jesus described how the woman had treated him with such precious actions, and by doing so had showed her faith in Jesus. He said she had many sins, but her sins were forgiven. Jesus went on to say that Simon had not treated him as an honored guest because Simon felt so self-righteous. What Jesus pointedly did *not* do, was forgive the sins of Simon.

I'm pretty sure the dinner came to a screeching halt soon thereafter. This incident set the course for Jesus to be in opposition to the Pharisees and other self-righteous religious leaders. In retrospect, if they had just humbled themselves, the Jewish religious leaders would have saved themselves a lot of trouble. As one of Jesus' followers would write, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."<sup>2</sup>

As for me, I spent the rest of my military career going to the places where Rome most needed me. Unlike most of my fellow centurions who retired, I did not go back to Rome or Italy. I went back to Israel to raise olives and grapes.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:3

Rome had a huge problem dealing with the large number of soldiers who retired and expected a land grant as part of their retirement compensation. The world had been at peace so long that too many of us had survived instead of dying in battle. I was content to take my land grant in Israel, a place few soldiers wanted to be.

I never did get to see Jesus again, but I did stay in touch with my fellow centurions who told me about his death, burial, and resurrection...and about how his followers began spreading Christianity. I wasn't surprised. He told them to go make disciples, and he had more authority than anybody I ever knew.

Maybe you've seen the movie "Sybil?" It's from the 1970s, super scary. It's a true story about a woman who had dissociative identity disorder, or multiple personalities. Trust me on this, guys, ...even on their worst days, your wives or girlfriends are nothing like Sybil. I know, because I was like Sybil. I was possessed by seven evil spirits. The Bible doesn't say when I became demon possessed or how I behaved, but use your imagination.

Depending on which evil spirit took control, I could be passive or aggressive, quiet or violent, or behave like the most wanton woman in town. In fact, that particular demon was in control of my life one summer day. I sat on the outskirts of town to lure men into my evil life. Jesus and his disciples walked by as they were traveling from Cana to Capernaum, and I accosted them. Jesus rebuked the demon, and I fell to the ground, just fainted. When I awoke, he took my hand, and helped me stand, and told me to "Go, and sin no more." Jesus. From that day on, I began to follow Jesus from a distance, just to hear what he had to say, to serve him in any way I could.

This story may help you to imagine my life. The Bible only says three things about me before the crucifixion of Jesus, although commentators and painters have imagined much more. The Bible says that my name is Mary, called Magdalene; it says I was cured of seven demons; and it says I supported Jesus out of my own means.

My name has come to be Mary Magdalene. Many commentators believe that means I came from Magdala, a small fishing village on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. That village's synagogue was rediscovered in 2009, and the village is now archaeological wonder and an important tourist site. It is certain that Jesus traveled by Magdala when he traveled on the path from Capernaum to Nazareth or Tiberias.

Luke wrote that seven demons had come out of me, while Mark wrote that Jesus had driven them out.<sup>1</sup> You can be assured that the demons were fixed on my destruction.

I was one of the first woman to follow Jesus, but far from the last. Other women started joining me. Susanna, another woman Jesus had healed. She wasn't poor like me, though, so she could really help Jesus from a financial point of view. The woman who helped the most, both financially and politically, was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager. That was Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 16:9

I believe God intervened directly to add Joanna to our group. Her husband was very wealthy, and could also direct other resources our way. More importantly, he was always aware of what Herod Antipas was doing, and he influenced Herod by controlling the information that Herod had obtained. Chuza wasn't able to save John the Baptist, but he did deflect Herod's attention away from Jesus on many occasions, and gave Jesus news that might have encouraged him to take a few trips out of the region.

In the Jewish world, women were not considered property, like they were in the Roman world. But many of our women were not well educated.

Maybe that explains one reason why women were attracted to the teachings of Jesus. They could understand his teachings. Unlike the Jewish rabbis who spent most of their time with every dotted "i" and crossed "t" and nuance of the Jewish language, Jesus tried to teach important lessons in a simple way. He used parables that we could understand and apply to our lives.

The first parable I ever heard Jesus tell was to a large group of people who had gathered from many towns. He motioned to a man planting a field nearby and said, "A farmer went out to sow his seed." We all looked to the east and saw a man casting seed from a small sack. Jesus described exactly what the man was doing, but it was something we had all seen so many times, we didn't notice anymore. We knew that the man would have to cast seed on different types of ground, and that his results would be proportionate to the type of soil the seeds landed in. Yet, without further description, we all knew that Jesus was talking about something much more important than farming. But some of us weren't quite sure what those important things might be. For the rest of our lives, whenever we saw a farmer, we would reflect on that story and what it could mean.

Later, Jesus explained to the apostles and what he meant, and we women got to overhear the conversation. For once, women got to hear the intimate secrets of a wise rabbi. Jesus explained how his teachings and the Word of God were like the seeds, and people's hearts were the different types of soil. Each of us went to sleep that night hoping our hearts were the fertile soil that would return a hundredfold. None of us wanted to have the rocky or thorny hearts that would reject his teachings, but we understood it was a warning that some of us did have such hard hearts and would eventually be exposed.

One windy summer day, Jairus the synagogue leader came to Jesus and begged him to heal his only daughter. She was only twelve years-old, and you can imagine how distraught he was that his only daughter was dying. You can also imagine that Jairus knew that he and his wife would not likely have any more children. Jesus responded to Jairus' request immediately.

Jesus had to fight his way through the immense crowd to walk toward the house of Jairus. As he did, Jesus stopped and stared at the people around him. "Who touched me?" he asked. Jairus about had a fit because he was frantic about his daughter and wanted Jesus to run. Peter,



always the sarcastic one, said, "Master, everyone is crowding in and touching you." Jesus replied, "Power has gone out from me, so someone touched me in a very different way."

A woman, seeing that she would not go unnoticed, admitted she had touched Jesus, and that she had been healed. He just looked at her with compassion and said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace." Years later, Dr. Luke told me that she had been bleeding for twelve years. (She stops as the impact of this washes over her.) She had impoverished herself by seeking doctors to heal her, nothing had worked. It wasn't until then that I realized what a great miracle had happened that day. I missed it because of what happened next.

A servant from the household of Jairus arrived and announced that his daughter had died, and that he should not bother Jesus any more. Jairus almost collapsed with grief, but Jesus said to him "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." Looking back, I think that was the first time I ever heard Jesus command someone not to be afraid, but it certainly was not the last. When I later learned the story of how Jesus waited to come to Lazarus until he was dead, I wondered if he hadn't done the same thing with Jairus' daughter by paying attention to the woman who was healed from bleeding.

Anyway, Jairus must have believed, because Jesus kept walking to his house. When he arrived, he told the mourners to quit wailing because the girl was not dead. They laughed at him because they *knew* she was dead. Taking only Peter, James, John and the parents into the room, Jesus simply took the girl's hand and commanded her to get up. Her breath of life returned to her, and she got up. Like a good Jewish mother, her mother gave her something to eat as a first response. Jesus told everyone not to tell anyone what had happened, but I suspect they could not really keep it quiet.

I told you that Jesus healed me of seven demons, but that was just child's play for him. Across the lake from my hometown of Magdala was the region of the Gerasenes. This region was well known for having a man...demon possessed...a demoniac, ran around naked, lived in tombs, could not be held down even with chains.

Jesus decided to go to that region, so his apostles took him. Upon landing, the demon-possessed man appeared and, rather than attacking Jesus, he fell at Jesus' feet and began shouting, "What do you want with me? Don't torture me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God!" Jesus replied, "What is your name?" The man...demoniac replied, "Legion", because there are so many of us."

Maybe the man wasn't being literal, because a Roman legion had 5,000 men. But, the number of demons in him certainly dwarfed my measly seven. Even though Jesus had never eaten pork, and so didn't disdain its taste, he still ordered the demons to leave the man and enter a huge herd of nearby pigs. These pigs rushed over the steep bank and drowned in the Sea of Galilee. You can only imagine that the pig herders rushed back to town and told what had happened.

When the people from town arrived, they found the former demoniac, man, dressed and sitting peacefully at the feet of Jesus. The townspeople freaked out and asked Jesus to leave their region because they were so overcome with fear, so Jesus got in the boat and prepared to leave. However, a most curious thing happened next. The man asked to go with Jesus! But Jesus commanded him to return home and just tell people what God had done for him. He did, and all of the people were amazed.<sup>2</sup>

That's all we have to do... is be you willing to tell people what God has done for us. If a former demoniac can, who knows what the results will be if you do? The Bible seldom tells us about what happens to people who Jesus healed, but this is one case where I think it does. The next time Jesus arrived in the area, the people welcomed him. I think the former demoniac man may have been one of the most impressive evangelists of all time.

I was a faithful follower of Jesus until the end of his life, and I am not exaggerating. I watched at a distance with other followers while Jesus hung on the cross and died.<sup>3</sup> I watched Joseph of Arimathea place the body of Jesus in a tomb and roll the large stone over the entrance.<sup>4</sup> At dawn of the Sunday after Jesus was killed, Mary and I went to the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, and an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled away the enormous stone. Then, he sat on it, on the top of the stone, it was so scary that the guards of the tomb passed out, like dead men. He spoke to us...to women! "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" It was so...(she can't find the word) Then, "He's not here, he's risen." Oh my...(she can't finish her sentence) We ran, to tell the disciples of the Good News.<sup>5</sup> But before we had gone far, Jesus appeared to us. He told us not to be afraid, but to tell his disciples to meet him in Galilee.<sup>6</sup> I finally got to tell the disciples of all of my news. I started with the greatest piece of news in the history of mankind. "I have seen the Lord!"<sup>7</sup> I have seen the Lord.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 5:20

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 27:56

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 27:61

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:1-8

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:9-10

<sup>7</sup> John 20:18

I want to be clear up front, because many people today confuse me with either James the brother of Jesus who wrote the book of *James*, or James the apostle who was the son of Alphaeus. I'm James the son of Zebedee, who is first listed in the lineup of the Big Twelve...apostles. Little kids often learn the apostles by song, and I am the James of "Peter, Andrew, James and John." Peter and Andrew were brothers, and John and I were brothers. The four of us were fishing partners on the Sea of Galilee before Jesus called us to be fishers of men.

I'm making a big deal of making sure you know who I am, because so little is actually known about me. If you have studied the Bible, you know that Peter, John, and I were Jesus' closest companions. We were the three chosen to be with him at the resurrection of Jairus' daughter, the Mount of Transfiguration, and Gethsemane. You know a lot about Peter and you know a lot about John, but what do you know about me other than what I just told you?

If you were to search the Bible, you would find me mentioned less than ten times, other than the lists of apostles. Jesus nicknamed John and me, Boanerges, or "Sons of Thunder."<sup>1</sup> John and I once asked to sit at the Lord's sides in his kingdom, which really ticked off the other apostles.<sup>2</sup> I was with Peter, Andrew, and John when we asked about the time of the destruction of the Temple.<sup>3</sup> I was also with them on the Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>4</sup> One time John and I wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans because they rejected Jesus.<sup>5</sup> And, I was the first of the apostles to die when Herod had me killed by sword.<sup>6</sup>

Frankly, that doesn't seem like a bunch of information about someone who was in the inner circle of Jesus. No long stories, no personal details, no juicy quotes. Most people would be a little offended at that, but I can't really blame the Gospel writers, especially Luke. I was the quiet, reliable one who Jesus depended on. If that sounds like you, I hope you realize that Jesus loves you, and that you are in his inner circle just like me. We are gifted for His glory, not our own.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:35

<sup>3</sup> Mark 13:13

<sup>4</sup> Luke 9:28-36

<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:54

<sup>6</sup> Acts 12:2

I was at the raising of Jairus' daughter. We apostles were just getting used to watching Jesus do miracles and heal people when he called all Twelve of us together and did another amazing miracle. He gave us the authority and power to cure diseases, heal the sick, and cast out demons...and then sent us to go share the kingdom. I admit, I was pretty scared when he did that, because he added the commandment for us to take nothing with us – no money, no extra clothes, no toothbrush. We were to be totally reliant on God and on God's people. When we returned, it was a joyous celebration because God had blessed our journey beyond anything we could imagine. Now, you would think after that experience we would understand the power of Jesus and believe in him unconditionally. If you think that, you would be wrong.

Shortly after returning, Jesus took the Twelve to Bethsaida, which was a few miles east of our base at Capernaum. Bethsaida was the home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip.<sup>7</sup> Although Jesus wanted to teach the twelve of us in private, a large crowd of people gathered, and Jesus welcomed them. As usual, when Jesus began to teach, the time just seemed to slip away. When it got near dinner time, we apostles could see that an emergency was developing. The crowd had no food, and there were no nearby towns to get food. Even if there had been a town, it would have been overwhelmed with the demands of the thousands of people.

We went to Jesus and explained the situation. Jesus was so compassionate, we were positive he would be impressed with our compassion. Instead, he just looked at us with a grin and said, "You give them something to eat." After our recent trip where we did incredible miracles, you would think we would have just said, "OK," and done it. But we looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

With a disappointed sigh, he patiently had us place the thousands of people into smaller groups of fifty, blessed the five loaves and two fish that we had on hand, and had us start distributing food. After everyone had eaten, each of us gathered up exactly one basketful of excess. Then, he grinned again, and we knew we were supposed to learn an extra lesson, but we were not exactly sure what it was. From that point on, we understood Jesus had no limits, but we were again underestimating even that.

Physical miracles were relatively easy to understand. We could see them with our own eyes. What we couldn't understand was who Jesus was. In order to prepare us, he once asked the relatively benign question of who people said he was. He had heard people shouting names like John the Baptist, Elijah and Moses. We knew better, and Peter voiced our opinion that he was the Messiah. I say "opinion" because not all of us were firmly convicted that we were actually in the presence of someone who the Jews had been seeking for many centuries. Nonetheless, Jesus must have considered it a good start.

He began to teach us that the Messiah would be different than what people were expecting. He taught us about the suffering and servant savior that Isaiah had prophesied. However, what we continued to imagine was a victorious warrior Messiah who would toss the Romans out of

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<sup>7</sup> John 1:44

Israel. And, while he was at it, install we twelve apostles as his seconds-in-command. The more he taught suffering and serving, the more we thought the Romans would be the ones doing that. When Jesus began to talk about his impending death, we shut out those thoughts completely.

To further our lessons in messiahship, about a week after we began the discussion on who Jesus was, he took Peter, John and me up to the top of a mountain. Jesus began to pray, and things began to happen. Before our very eyes, Moses and Elijah appeared. Don't ask me how we knew that's who it was, but we knew for certain. Peter began mumbling some nonsensical thoughts because he was so stupefied, but mostly we just sat and watched and listened. When it came to a close, God's voice came to tell us that Jesus was his son and we should listen to him. It was so amazing that we decided not to tell anyone what had happened. We also agreed to listen to Jesus even more closely.

I have to admit that following Jesus for the first two years was a pretty good job. We got to watch him do miracles and heal people, and we even got to do them ourselves. We also got to watch Jesus rebuff the arrogant Pharisees whenever they questioned his teaching. The women who followed us took care of our food and clothing, and the weather in Israel was quite good enough to sleep outside most of the time. After all, most of us had led lives of poverty and hardship, so following Jesus was an upgrade to first class.

It all changed in the third year though, and that is partly what Jesus had been preparing us for. His lessons about a suffering Messiah were a good start, but then he began to really prepare us for the hardships of discipleship when he would be gone.

It all started innocently enough. Jesus, Peter, John, and I came down from our mountain experience to a start of a new reality. We found the other apostles and disciples gathered around a demon-possessed boy. His father frantically explained how the boy was his only son, and when an evil spirit seized him, he would scream, convulse, and foam at the mouth. He said that the spirit rarely left the child and would soon destroy him. We had heard such stories before, so the three of us weren't too worried. But the father continued with the fact that the other apostles had not been able to cast out the demon. That stopped us in our tracks.

Jesus just sighed and seemed so disappointed. He wondered aloud how much more he could take of people with little faith, and we took it for granted that he meant all of us apostles, too. I felt ashamed to be included in the group of people with little faith. But the event proved to be another learning lesson, because Jesus prayed and healed the boy, and the crowd praised God's greatness.

Looking back, I think Jesus wanted us to understand the words of the boy's father when he was urged by Jesus to believe. The father simply said, "I believe; help me overcome my unbelief."<sup>8</sup>

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I thought the incident was over, and expected the crowd to drift away. While the crowd was still cheering, Jesus motioned the disciples to the side and said in a quiet voice, "Listen very closely to what I am about to say!" At those words, the Twelve of us stepped in very closely so we would not miss a word. "The son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise."<sup>9</sup>

Stupified...we were... stupefied! Jesus had just finished a miraculous healing, and the crowd was cheering in the background. He should have been smiling, but he was talking nonsense. The Son of Man? Was he talking about himself? Was he really predicting that someone would murder him? Rise from the dead? We were at a total loss for words. Even Peter. We were so mystified we didn't even ask him what he meant.

To prove our total inability to understand our Master, it wasn't long before we started arguing among ourselves who would be greatest in the kingdom. Jesus knew what we were arguing about, so he said, "Whoever wants to be first, must be the last, and the servant of all."<sup>10</sup> He then called over a small child who was nearby and said, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name, welcomes me and the one who sent me. For the least among you all, he is the greatest."

When Jesus said those words, I looked at my brother, John, and gave him a look of exasperation. How come everything Jesus said so confounded me? Why did his take on reality so conflict with my own? His answers were always so completely different from mine. I should have noticed that my answers weren't working so well, and I should have been able to understand that I should welcome a different viewpoint. I was still too prideful.

I mentioned you can't read much about me in the Bible, and I've already told you about most of the places where you can... so I want to close by talking about another of those times.

We were walking through Samaria on our way to Jerusalem. You may recall that the Samaritans and the Jews were antagonistic to one another for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, Jesus sent some people ahead to a village to make preparations for us to eat and spend the night. There weren't any hotels or motels at that time, and taking care of a few dozen people was a major undertaking for a village.

Once the villagers understood that they were having to greatly inconvenience themselves for a bunch of Jews, they decided not to. This wasn't necessarily a theological disagreement, just a rude way to treat travelers. This is when my brother and I earned our nicknames from Jesus. We were furious and wanted to bring destruction down on the village. This wasn't an empty threat, because we had already proven that we could do such a thing. Jesus rebuked us and said, "You Sons of Thunder! We come to bring life to people, not death."

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 9:24

<sup>10</sup> Mark 9:35

That is when it struck me. All of Jesus' ministry could be summed up in that phrase – “We come to bring life to people, not death.” By saying “We,” I figured that it was no longer “What Would Jesus Do,” but “What Will We Do.” From now on, we, the apostles would be bringing life to people.

I also figured that if we were bringing life to people, the religious leaders had been giving death to many people, so they needed to be replaced. They were not going to go quietly. It became clear that we were on a collision course with the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders.

Most experts believe Stephen was the first Christian martyr. It is possible that I was the second one, when Herod had me killed by sword.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that I was the first apostle to die for the cause of Jesus. In fact, I am the only faithful apostle whose type of death is known with certainty. It seems a little ironic that you might know almost as much about my death as my life. But I finally beat out Peter and John in something. I certainly got to be with Jesus again before them!

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 12:2

The Apostle of Love. I got that nickname for two reasons. I did write the books known as the *Gospel of John*, and *First, Second, and Third John*. All have the themes of love in them. But I wasn't all sickly-sweet, because *Revelation*, a book hardly known for being lovey-dovey, I wrote that one, too. And I was referred to as the one Jesus loved.

Even though I am one of the more famous apostles, I am only credited with saying three things in the entire books of *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*. My brother James and I asked if the Lord wanted us to destroy the Samaritan village. Another time, James and I asked to sit at Jesus' side in his glory. Those were two pretty dumb things to say, and the third isn't much better.

The only time I am credited with solely speaking a sentence is when I told Jesus, "Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." If you remember, Jesus chastised me saying, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you."<sup>1</sup> So, even though it wasn't so complimentary, I do appreciate Luke remembering to tell that little story about me.

Don't think I am feeling sorry for myself. Everybody knew I was in the inner circle of the apostles, along with Peter, Andrew and James. Like I said, I was referred to as the one Jesus loved, so everybody knew I was the teacher's pet. What I didn't understand was that Jesus was training me for a purpose, three of them, actually. How about a preview of those purposes, so that you can better understand some of the other stories I will tell.

The first of my special purposes was to take care of Jesus' mother after he died. According to tradition, I took care of Mary for several decades. You probably would not be surprised if she gave me some special information for my own books that she didn't even share with our dear Dr. Luke.

The second was to live a very long time, and be a specific eye-witness and encouragement for the churches, especially as they suffered through persecutions by the Jews and later by the Romans. In fact, during the persecution by the emperor Domitian, I was exiled to the island of Patmos where I wrote *Revelation*. Some people believe that I lived to nearly 100 years-old, and was the only one of the apostles to die a natural death.

The third of my special purposes was to write the books I already mentioned. Matthew, Mark, and Luke did a wonderful job of telling the story of Jesus from a factual viewpoint, but the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:49-50



world needed to have a better understanding of how God, and Jesus, are loving, not just sovereign. I was uniquely gifted to tell the story from that viewpoint.

It was all pretty rosy in the early days of following Jesus. We hung around the lake where we had grown up, Jesus did miracles and healings, and he taught in a way that no one had ever heard. It was amazing...and fun.

At the beginning, Jesus treated us with the kid gloves we needed; spoon-fed us our teaching, explained it to us, protected us from the “mean kids on the block.” Then he kicked it into high gear.

We were walking along the road when three wannabe followers came to be with us. Up to this time, Jesus had gladly accepted people who wanted to be with him. This time, he asked for specific and immediate commitments from them. The first decided to leave when Jesus told him we were homeless. The second and third made excuses about needing to be with their families. We apostles looked at each other, and remembered that when Jesus called us, we left everything... immediately. We understood that Jesus’ comment about the three men was meant for us every bit as much as it was meant for them. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Then he kicked it into an even higher gear. Jesus took us, the apostles, and all the other committed disciples and sent us out in pairs to go ahead to where he would be teaching. That in itself wasn’t a big deal, but Jesus wanted to make sure we were going in his power and authority, not in our own. We were specifically instructed not to take any money or extra clothes with us. We were to go directly to our places of appointment without even talking to anyone on the way. And, when we got to those places, we were to find one house to stay in. We were to teach and heal the sick, and to prepare them to receive Jesus and his teachings. Those who accepted us were accepting him, and those who rejected us were rejecting him.

Needless to say, most of us were a little wary about the assignment. It’s one thing to say be healed, but it’s another thing entirely when they actually are. It’s one thing to hear a preacher preach, but another thing entirely to do it yourself. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, and he knew that we were prepared to act under his authority. When we returned, we could not have been more excited to continue our ministry with him.

Our common response to Jesus from the trip was, “Even the demons submit to us in your name.” Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. However, don’t rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” From that, we got a glimpse of how hard it was to keep focused on God and his kingdom, because pride was continually raising its ugly head.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:62

This was the time when Jesus began to reveal to us the magnitude of what we were involved with. He began to reveal to us how he really was the Messiah and the Son of God, and that what we were seeing was the fulfillment of everything we had ever been taught. Frankly, it was so crazy that we could only grasp a smidgen of what he was telling us. It wouldn't be until we had the Holy Spirit that we began to truly understand the whole picture.

We had so many simple pleasures during those early days. Imagine what fish and bread taste like when it's created out of nothing right in front of you? Imagine sleeping under the stars and listening to Jesus call some of them by their real names? Or for you fishermen in the crowd, can you imagine catching a net full of fish in one cast, when all of your previous casts had come up totally empty? Or the simplest of all pleasures, when Jesus looked you in the eye, and just smiled. My favorite?...hearing Jesus sing.

Once, a Jewish teacher was trying to test the Lord by asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." Any answer Jesus made was bound to get him in trouble with the Pharisees who were self-appointed guardians of eternal life, or the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection. Rather than give his opinion or ask for that of the teacher, Jesus asked him to say what was in the Law of Moses. To show off his knowledge, the man chose two Scriptures, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." In agreement, Jesus said, "You have answered correctly, do this and you will live."

Rather than leaving after a good experience, or even asking what Jesus meant about "You will live," the teacher sought to justify himself by asking, "And who is my neighbor." When he said that, we just looked at each other and smiled. We knew he was about to drink some eternal life water from a firehose.

Jesus began a story by setting it up in a familiar setting. He said, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and was attacked by robbers. They stripped him and beat him, and left him half dead." At that point the teacher looked at Jesus as if he was being treated as a school child. Everybody knew it was a dangerous road that should never be traveled alone; and everybody knew you were fortunate if robbers didn't kill you. So he was probably expecting Jesus to criticize the man for being stupid.

Jesus continued his story by saying that a Jewish priest saw the man, but he passed by on the other side. Likewise, a Levite did the same. At that point, the teacher was starting to smell a trap, but he couldn't tell what it was. Surely the priest and the Levite should have passed by, because they would have become unclean if they touched the man and wouldn't have been able to participate in worship services. Surely the worship of God was more important than helping a stupid man. At the least, if they had stopped the robbers might have attacked them. So, the teacher nodded for Jesus to continue. He wasn't expecting the next twist in the story.

A Samaritan came upon the man and took pity on him. He bandaged his wounds and gave him medicine. He put the man on his own donkey and took him to a nearby inn where he paid for

the man's care until he could recover. Then Jesus asked the teacher which of the three travelers was the man's neighbor.

The teacher was in a complete bind. It was obvious that the Samaritan was the hero of the story, but the teacher had been taught to hate Samaritans because of their ethnic background. He couldn't even bear to say the word "Samaritan," so he just replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Instead of justifying himself, he had opened up the possibility that eternal life came through mercy, not through being a Jew.

Jesus looked at him, and simply said, "Go and do likewise." The teacher most certainly heard something he didn't want to hear. Instead of being justified by following rules, he now found himself under the obligations of love.

That teacher got a taste of what we had been experiencing nearly every day. God was interested in loving us and having us love other people. He was not so much interested in our following rules as having us love people.

Some of Jesus' best friends were the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus who lived in the town of Bethany, only a few miles from Jerusalem. One time, we dropped by unexpectedly. You can only begin to imagine the whirlwind of activity that began as they extended the expected hospitality to us.

Jesus sat on a small bench, while the twelve of us sat in a circle around him. We heard the swoosh of a robe, and we saw Mary sit down at his feet to listen to him. I can still see her intense eyes looking up at his face in rapt attention and total love. I envied her ability to shut out the world around her and focus her love and attention on Jesus.

It wasn't long before we heard the swoosh of other robes, and Martha stood there. She broke into the conversation "Don't you care that my sister has me doing all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." Maybe you've felt like that before? Doing what you are supposed to do, feeling taken advantage of by those too lazy to do their part. Surely, Jesus was obliged to set things right.

Instead, Jesus tried to adjust Martha's values. "Martha, Martha. You are upset over unimportant things, while only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and I won't take it away from her." Martha needed to change, and her feelings of being taken advantage of would fall away.

Distracted by unimportant things...sound familiar? Oh, you may not have had the distractions we had, you've come up with distractions all your own. They seem important, I mean, you can't live without them. Martha was definitely focused on how the world functioned at the time. The trick is to see through it, all the distractions that ping and buzz and blast from a screen to vie for importance, to see what is valuable, and choose it instead. That's what love does. It focuses.

You want to kick it into high gear? I think you know exactly what to do. Take it from me, the one Jesus loved, choose love.

If the Pharisees had a theme song, it would have been ‘Trust and Obey.’ (he sings) We trusted that we would be punished if we did not fully obey. The God we knew was a harsh God, one we wanted to obey... completely. So, perhaps we have something in common with you? Obeying God fully and completely. But we Pharisees take a lot of heat from you; that we were hard-headed and hard-hearted...maybe you shouldn’t be so quick to be so critical.

Our solution to the problem of disobedience was to think through every way a commandment could possibly be violated, and then make commandments not to do any of those things. In our minds, those secondary commandments were just as important to obey as the primary commandments. With a harsh God, we didn’t want to take any chances, and we didn’t want any of our people to take chances either.

It sounded good in theory, but in practice, this didn’t work out so well. It turns out that people are very innovative in ways to disobey, and we just couldn’t make and enforce secondary laws fast enough. By the time of Jesus, we had identified 613 commandments in the Old Testament, and we had promulgated thousands of related laws.

By the time of Jesus, we were so focused on following laws that we forgot the basics of what God wanted from us. I find it hard to believe that some of you- haven’t done the exact same thing, and maybe continue to do the same thing.

One of the things the common people loved so much about Jesus was his simplicity. He said things that made sense to people without being burdensome. Through his sermons and stories, he basically said, “Be this way, don’t be that way.” Many of the Pharisees wanted to believe it was that simple, but we were not willing to risk disobeying God even in the slightest.

Things got even more complicated as politics began to get in the way. The Jewish leaders came mostly from two groups. Pharisees were well-meaning, but could easily get lost in theological details. The Sadducees were wealthier, but were more politically minded than sticklers for theological details. Between us, we ruled the Jewish people living in Israel. However, we Jewish leaders were under the direct authority of the Roman Empire. We were accountable to them to make sure taxes were collected and there was no civil disobedience. We were quite willing to sacrifice a few well-meaning revolutionaries to keep peace in the country. The fact that we kept our power as a consequence didn’t hurt either.

John the Baptist had taught us a valuable lesson. As long as John stayed in the wilderness and castigated sinners, all was well. But when his followers became too numerous, and when he criticized the Roman-backed king, John was put to death. Overnight, the threat to us and to Rome disappeared. When Jesus began to amass followers, many of whom had followed John, we Pharisees began to keep an eye on him. And we knew Herod was watching Jesus, too. Jesus did not do himself any favors by doing much of his preaching only a few miles from Herod's base in Tiberias.

At the first, Jesus seemed like a local folk hero. He had grown up in Galilee, and talked the language of the common people. There was nothing to fear because he was uneducated and did not seem to have any political aspirations. We completely misread the situation.

Jesus began to gather thousands of followers as news of his teachings and healings began to get around. He offered a simpler way of being religious, the crowds flocked to him, and quit coming to us. And whenever we had confrontations with him, it seemed like he always walked away the winner. Our authoritative position was fading fast, and none of us liked it.

I was one of the Pharisees who was caught in the middle. I wanted to obey God, but could see that our teachings were becoming too burdensome. I believed Jesus was a borderline blasphemer, but many of the things he said made a lot of sense. Jesus was putting me, and many others of my group, in a very precarious spot.

I decided to follow Jesus for a few days to see what I could personally observe. It was easy to get permission to go because the Jewish leaders wanted more information about this trouble maker. They wanted me to spy on Jesus, I just wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

It took me a little over a week to walk from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee, but once I got there it was surprisingly easy to find Jesus and listen to him teach. I reached the northwest edge of the Sea, and found a large group of people waiting near the shore. Someone said they were waiting for Jesus to finish praying so they could hear him teach. I looked up on the small hillside and there was a motionless figure. After about an hour, the figure started moving toward us. One of the men nearby joked that we were fortunate, Jesus had prayed for only a couple of hours.

I suppose I expected to see a teacher in fine robes come strutting down the hillside before arrogantly sitting in front of his disciples. Instead, I saw a rather ordinary young man in a poor man's robe come to sit with his friends and share some bread. One of his friends said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." I started to sit down myself, because I was expecting to hear a long, bombastic prayer that one of my colleagues might have taught. Instead, I heard this simple prayer: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." And then, he stopped. I was flabbergasted, reeling from Jesus starting his prayer by calling God... his father!

The man had said only a few sentences, and my mind was spinning! Then Jesus launched into a story about a man who wanted to borrow loaves of bread from a friend late at night. It was a rather odd story to answer a request to teach his disciples to pray. Made no sense to me. But he followed with some sayings that made me understand that he really did think of God as his father.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” I began to get a glimpse that not only was God a father, but could he be a good father? My worldview of rules upon rules upon rules was beginning to crumble. And it only got worse from there.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

My mind was in tatters. God is good. He wants good things for me. I don't have to act in fear. And the Holy Spirit is the best of all gifts...and I don't even know who or what the Holy Spirit is. I went from being a know-it-all Pharisee to a babbling fool in a matter of minutes. And Jesus hadn't even finished his breakfast.

When he cast out a demon, someone accused him of casting out demons through the power of Satan. It only took a second to demolish that line of thinking. And then Jesus talked about Jonah and how the Gentiles repented at Jonah's teaching, so how much more the people who rejected Jesus' teaching would be punished. Again, reeling from his comparing himself... to the prophet Jonah?! I heard a familiar voice come through the crowd.

“Master, come eat with me.” It was the voice of a Pharisee I had often heard teach at the Temple. The man tried to sound humble, but his smugness and pride are all that came through. Jesus accepted! I immediately sought to join the lunch, and my credentials from Jerusalem were enough to get me in, although I was not invited to recline at the main table.

Jesus hadn't even been given his amuse-bouche before he launched into a tirade against the Pharisees. Certainly not a polite thing for a guest to do to his host. Guess he knew his host was a slimeball, so Jesus probably didn't care. Ceremonial washing, careful tithing, seats in the synagogue, and other things we Pharisees highly valued were shredded by Jesus. He showed how we had taken important things and destroyed their value by our prideful intentions and actions. When one of the lawyers protested, Jesus gave the teachers of the law even more criticism.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were beside themselves with rage, damaged pride everywhere. They besieged Jesus with questions. He turned the tables on them every time! They were angry enough to begin making plans to kill him.

When Jesus finished talking with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, he turned to the crowd of thousands that wanted to hear him speak, and he continued to rail against the Pharisees and the damage they did to people who were truly seeking God. It was a train wreck, in slow motion. I wanted to turn away because my pride was hurt, too, but I couldn't! I could not quit listening to a man who made so much sense.

Then, I thought I got a break. Someone in the crowd yelled, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Even I was offended that such a greedy person would interrupt the Teacher. Jesus turned and said to the crowd, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

And, that was it for me. My mind was blown completely to smithereens, whatever those are. All kinds of greed? How many did I know I had? Life doesn't consist of an abundance of possessions? Then why am I chasing possessions and position and comfort and reputation?

I heard a bunch of phrases about not being anxious, and building treasures in heaven, and giving to the poor, and on and on and on. Jesus was giving me a graduate course and I couldn't even add two plus two any longer.

My lists of precious rules had lost their importance. My reasons for being a Pharisee... destroyed. All I had to do was love God and obey him through my love. What could I do? Was I willing to give up my family and fortune and core beliefs to follow this simple, country teacher?

I guess you are faced with those very same questions, aren't you? I wonder what you'll do?

I should probably end with that question, but like a good Pharisee, I want to prove my intellectual superiority by dispelling one of your beliefs. Because of some of Jesus' teachings, many people believe Jesus spent his entire life in Israel, and that he only taught Jews. Many people also believe that all of the Pharisees were always enemies of Jesus. None of those things are true.

While Jesus was in the middle of his ministry in Galilee, some Pharisees came to him to warn him about Herod Antipas. Herod had killed John the Baptist and would have little compunction about killing Jesus. These Pharisees sincerely wanted Jesus to leave Galilee, the area ruled by Herod.

I can't say that Jesus immediately left because of their warning, but it was during that time period that Jesus took his disciples out of Israel, to the area of Tyre and Sidon. There were other times when Jesus left Israel, and he clearly taught Samaritans and other non-Jews from time to time.

It should not have been a surprise to his followers that they would eventually make disciples of Gentiles all over the world. But in many ways, his followers were as captive to their emotional



beliefs as we Pharisees were. It was going to be almost two decades before the followers made a concerted effort to evangelize non-Jews, but you will have to read about that in Luke's other book, *Acts*.

As a Pharisee, I admit I had a difficult time learning from Jesus. My education, my rules, my striving, made it really hard. But here is one thing I did learn. I should not have a "cardio scalero", a term similar to your medical term, cardio sclerosis. It means that I should not have a hard heart. And neither should you!

Martha: The good doctor, Luke, does not write much about me, or my sister Mary, or my brother, Lazarus. In fact, you have to read the *Gospel of John* to learn the story of Jesus raising my brother from the dead. But Luke did see fit to tell one story about me.

The Bible doesn't give you a lot of details about our family, but here are some things you might infer. We had a home in Bethany. Not Bethlehem where Jesus was born, but the Bethany that was on the east side of the Mount of Olives. If you entered Jerusalem from the southeast, you probably came right by our house, climbed the Mount of Olives, and then descended by Gethsemane, down into Kidron Valley and then climbed up the steep ravine into Jerusalem. This is the path that Jesus took on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was about two miles from our house to the Temple.

We were a fairly wealthy family. We had a house big enough to entertain Jesus and his companions, and we were well known and loved in Jerusalem. Lazarus was the head of our house, and neither Mary nor I were married during the time we knew Jesus. Jesus knew the three of us, and loved the three of us.

One of the times Jesus was traveling through our village, he stopped at our house to rest. While he rested, Mary sat at his feet and listened to every word he said. In my own way, I welcomed the Lord by making all the preparations needed to host him and his apostles. It was no small task, and you can imagine that I quickly got irked at Mary for not helping me.

As I walked by them, I sent a little jab her way. "Lord, don't you care that my sister is sitting there like a lazy woman while I do all the work. Tell her to help me!" He looked up at me with those deep, dark eyes and smiled gently. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."

I was right, and everybody else was wrong. It's important to be a good hostess, and I wouldn't let anybody take my hard work away from me. I spun on my heels with indignation, and stomped out of the room. I was so angry and embarrassed that I was shaking. I wanted to throw all the ingredients ...for the fresh bread... I was about to make... for everyone else to eat on the floor and get out of the house. And then I broke down in tears.

All my life being the good, hard-working girl, trying to earn love... The harder I worked, the more compliments I got from my parents and friends, and the more it felt like they loved me. My worldview was clear: hard work equals love; more hard work equals more love.

It never occurred to me that all I had to do was let people love me for who I am. Jesus was offering to do that, and I wouldn't let him. I would...not...let him. I walked back into the room. Trembling from head to toe, and sat down by my sister. She took my hand, and we both sat at the feet of our Lord. She knew that my life had changed. Forever. Because I let Jesus love me.

We did not go hungry that night after all. One of our servants began bringing platters out of the kitchen, and it seemed there would be no end of food for our banquet. I knew I didn't make that bread, and I wasn't about to ask who did. Jesus just winked at me... when Mary wasn't looking.

#### MIRIAM, THE CRIPPLED WOMAN:

I'm not beautiful or rich or clothed well like Martha. She even smells good, I stink like the other poor people in my village. You see, Jesus chose to heal me from my physical problems, but he did not choose to remove me from my financial situation.

Many years ago, Jesus visited my village and was teaching in our synagogue. He saw me from a distance and called me to be with him at the front of the synagogue. I was reticent, for several reasons. Men and women stay separated in our synagogue, as in most synagogues. I was a poor person... I felt intimidated by the wealthy people there. Lastly, I was crippled, bent over for eighteen years. I was ashamed and embarrassed to be in front of those people.

Jesus said, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity," and he touched me. I straightened up...immediately! Praises to God came rushing out of my mouth.

Through my tears, I could see my women friends in the back of the room rejoicing with me. They had watched my life spiral out of control when my back condition got worse. Now they welcomed me to a healthy life. However, I was stunned to see the looks of anger and fury on the faces of the men in the room. My life was of no value to them, but they were furious with Jesus for doing "work" on the Sabbath.

This is when we all learned about righteous anger. Jesus, he...he was angry, and called them out for being hypocrites and not understanding the meaning of the laws of Moses. His opponents were immediately humiliated, but the people rejoiced at all the wonderful things he was doing. For the first time in our lives, we common people had a religious leader who was on our side.

More than that, Jesus showed that we women had equal value to men. We were worth healing, we were worth teaching, we had value in his eyes and in the eyes of God. The Pharisees were not mad at Jesus just because of religious arguments, but because he threatened to turn upside down the structure of their society! Jesus was one of the first women's rights activists.

The Gardener: Wondering why I am here with seemingly nothing in common with these two lovely women? Luke chose me to join them for that very reason. The crowds that followed Jesus seemingly had nothing in common. We were of all ages, occupations, and hometowns. The only thing we had in common was a desire to learn about a God who loved us even though we were sinners. That was the exact topic Jesus addressed the first time I heard him... and I remember it so well.

Some of the people there asked Jesus about a group of Galileans that Pilate had killed during a time of sacrifice. They implied that their deaths and suffering were due to some sins they must have committed. That was a very common assumption promulgated by the religious leaders who, not coincidentally, led very pleasant lives. Jesus pointed to another incident where others had died through no fault of their own, a tower fell on them. He said that their suffering was not caused because they were either more or less righteous than anybody else. His main point? All people need to repent and change their lives or they will spiritually perish. This was a major challenge to the worldview taught by our religious leaders.

Their teachings were often self-serving, and self-righteous. They led us to believe that righteous people received financial rewards. If you were rich, you were righteous. If you were poor, you were not righteous. They led us to believe that knowledge of the Law of Moses was righteousness. If you were a teacher, you were righteous. If you were ignorant of the Scriptures or of their rules, you were not righteous. They led us to believe that you were following God if you followed their man-made rules. They knew the rules and followed them...at least the ones they wanted to follow...so they appeared to be righteous, while we were not righteous...we were unclean.

Their rules were designed to keep them in power, and everyone else out of power. After all, how would an unrighteous person ever have the right, let alone the ability, to go against an establishment of God's appointed representatives? Jesus was showing us that the way to overcome our unrighteous leaders was simply to quit acknowledging them as righteous, and ourselves as unrighteous. A spiritual rebellion was in the making, and the Jewish religious leaders could sense it.

Then, as he often did, Jesus looked intently at one person in the crowd and began to tell a story. I remember it because I was that person!

"A rich man went to his vineyard to get figs from a tree, but could find none. The man called the gardener and said, "I've looked for figs on that tree for three years and never found any. Cut that useless tree down so it doesn't use up the soil." The gardener replied, "Give me one more year. If it doesn't bear figs then, I will gladly cut it down." I was stunned to hear the story, because that very thing had happened to me in the past.

I looked around, everybody else had the same look of bewilderment. What did a bad fig tree have to do with Pilate killing Galileans or towers falling on people? How was a simple man like me to understand something like that? And then it dawned on me, it was *only* simple people

like me who could understand his stories. The religious leaders were unable to hear what Jesus said.

God was the vineyard owner, and he had been watching John and Jesus preach for three years, but the people had not been responding. Jesus was asking his Father for just a little more time in the hope that more people would come to repentance. We didn't know it at the time, but the time was running short for Jesus' time on earth. Fortunately, many of us simple people repented that very day and began to follow Jesus. We didn't know enough to have complex religious arguments about the law of Moses. But we did know enough to repent when Jesus told us to.

Over the next few days, we got to hear more parables and stories that confounded the religious leaders, but made perfect sense to us common people. A tiny mustard seed growing into a tree. We had all seen it happen and could see how that related to the kingdom of God. Or, yeast in dough that works itself all through the dough. We couldn't argue theology with the Pharisees, but we certainly understood yeast in dough.

My favorite story was about the narrow door. Jesus warned that many people think they are behaving in such a way as to be saved, but in reality they are not saved. But there are many others who are doing what God truly wants, and they will be saved even though they are not following the rules of the religious hierarchy. Now that was good news to those of us who wanted to do what God really wanted, but were incapable of following the many nitpicking rules of the religious leaders. We were going to get to be with God, but they would be kept out.

Those of us who listened closely to that story believed that Jesus taught something else, too. Jesus said that many would come from the east and west and north and south to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Some of us interpreted that to mean that Gentiles would also be included in the kingdom. If Jesus had come out and said that, it would have driven the Jewish leaders absolutely crazy. However, some of us interpreted those words to mean that every Jew was invited, no matter where they came from, no matter what their occupation, no matter what their heritage. That was good news to those of us who were faithful to God, but not capable of meeting the standards of our religious leaders.

I am just a common gardener. I'm not schooled in the intricacies of the Laws of Moses. But maybe that was for the best. Without those distractions, I was capable of hearing what our Lord had to say. I listened, and I became a disciple of Jesus. You and I, we probably have nothing in common, the span of two thousand years... look at how things have changed. And despite all our differences, I still hope we at least have this one thing in common - the willingness to hear our Lord. Remember, the gardener only had a short period of time before he had to cut down the tree.

You know the end of my life story, most probably, but I ask your indulgence to hear another part. My story up to mid-way through Jesus' ministry. At that point, I was still his friend.

Mine was a common name during my lifetime. Think of two original twelve apostles, Jude Thomas or Jude Thaddaeus, or even Jude the brother of Jesus.

I was the outsider of the Twelve. From the beginning. I dressed differently, talked differently, and thought differently. Although the Gospel writers don't talk of my interactions in the group, you can guess that I didn't have any close friends among the apostles, and when I struggled, nobody to confide in.

I was very skilled with money and was chosen to be the treasurer of our group, even though Matthew was known to be extremely talented in that area. The Bible doesn't say when, where or how I became a disciple. You do know it was early in the ministry of Jesus because he believed I could be a fisher of men.

I was as dedicated as any of the other apostles those first couple of years. I wasn't outspoken, but neither were six of the other apostles that you know little about. I was sent out as a pair with the other twelve, and then as a pair with the seventy. I saw Jesus do miracles and healings, and heard all his teachings. I did miracles and healings. For the first couple of years, you would not have been able to distinguish my ministry from the other eleven. Jesus did not distinguish me from them either. He loved me as much as them.

I am Judas the son of Simon Iscariot. Scholars of your day have concluded that my father's name meant that we came from Keriath, a town about 10 miles south of Hebron, or about 30 miles south of Jerusalem. Those scholars have concluded that I was probably the only one of the twelve apostles who was not from Galilee.

One Sabbath, we apostles went with Jesus to eat at the home of a prominent Pharisee. We were relegated to the cheap seats at the back of the room, but Jesus was seated near the front. As often happened, the Pharisees were trying to find a way to disparage him. A man who was an obvious leper came to stand before Jesus. He had some abnormal swelling and it was apparent to everyone in the room he needed healing. Rather than being caught in a trap, Jesus set his own by asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

What a question! The Pharisees and experts of the law knew the spirit of the law encouraged such an action, but their man-made rules prohibited such a thing. They were caught in a trap of their own making and had no out. They could do nothing except remain silent, even after Jesus

healed the man. Oh, the uncomfortable silence, everyone hoped Jesus would change the subject. Until Jesus changed the subject.

He looked around the room and made the observation that everyone had been scrambling to get seats of honor. Imagine the red faces because they had been doing just that. Jesus pointed out that it was a smarter strategy to take a lower seat, and then receive a special honor if the host moved you to the front. Eliminated the risk of being embarrassed in case the host asked you to take a lower seat. I'm sure that was embarrassing to all the guests in the room, but it was more embarrassing when they later realized he wasn't talking about seating at a dinner, but being humble in relationship to God.

Jesus then looked at his host and told him that he was not righteous when he invited friends and family to a dinner, because they could just pay him back. But it was righteous to invite those who were not able to pay him back. Must have been a shock to the host and all of the guests. Looking around, the only poor people in the room were Jesus and us— his apostles! I doubt anybody in the room had ever purposely invited a poor person to a dinner, except for a few relatives. Maybe. It was in situations like those that I began to be uncomfortable. Jesus not only insulted his host twice, but also insulted all the guests in the room.

I wanted respect from the religious leaders, always did. But I also always hoped for some financial support from them, too. Jesus never seemed concerned about money. In retrospect, I guess if you already own the whole universe, there isn't much on earth that you need. Consider that in your own life. If you are truly the sons and daughters of God, what is there on earth that you don't already own?

Back to the dinner at the Pharisee's house. There I was in the cheap seats squirming in embarrassment when one of the people near Jesus tried to change the subject again. The man said, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." That comment probably doesn't mean much to you, but it did to us in the room.

We were all Jews. We had all been brought up with the notion that only Jews would be saved when the Messiah came. We did not have a well-developed notion of what Heaven was or how you got there, but we were all certain that the Jews had exclusive claim to the benefits that would occur when the Messiah came. We were all certain that was true, especially the religious leaders of the Jews. We were all certain, except Jesus.

Jesus wanted everyone to know that the kingdom wasn't coming on their terms, but on God's terms...and Jesus had been announcing those terms. Those who weren't willing to accept Jesus' terms were going to disinvite themselves from the feast, while those who were willing to accept the terms would enjoy it. The parable Jesus told clearly showed the religious leaders as disinviting themselves, while the obviously unclean people would get to enjoy the banquet. The man's comment had been right, the ones eating at the feast were blessed, but he misunderstood who those people would be.

Needless to say, the banquet ended on a sour note, and we were not given any gifts or support. As treasurer, I was quite disappointed that Jesus not only didn't raise any money that night, but he had antagonized people that could have made our lives much better. I should have known it was only going to get worse from there.

Not long after that, large crowds were following us everywhere we went. It would have been a simple thing for the Lord to give a little uplifting message, and then pass the hat for some contributions from the crowd. Instead of doing that, Jesus raised his voice and said quite the opposite: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister ... and their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." I can assure you that that is not the kind of message that is encouraging for a treasurer hoping to get more money.

Your modern-day translators and preachers can waltz around all they want, but Jesus said "hate" and that is exactly what he meant. He meant that you not only had to be willing to do without those people and things in your life, but that you counted them as your enemies. Furthermore, he wanted you to become willing to give up your life, literally, in order to become his disciple. You can be assured that many of the crowd left before he could tell his next parable.

The parable Jesus told next is my favorite because of its simplicity and obviousness. As with many of his parables, Jesus had seen something we had all seen, but had understood its deeper meaning. We had all seen buildings which were abandoned before they were finished, but never thought anything about them. Jesus understood them in a different way.

He said, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower." He finished that sentence and looked around, nodding at a partial structure in the distance. Not many of us had wanted to build a tower, but many of us wanted to build houses.

"Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to finish? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish the building, everyone who sees it will laugh at you. They will say, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'" From his past lessons, we apostles knew Jesus wasn't talking about buildings.

I can't prove it, but when Jesus said that last sentence, I believe he looked right into my eyes, right into my soul. Maybe that was the first time I realized I was not willing to give up everything to be his disciple. And if I wasn't willing to give up everything, I probably wasn't willing to give up very much. He made me count the cost of being his disciple, and I decided that I wasn't willing to pay the price.

That was the day my doubts began. I recalled Jesus saying, "Whoever is not with me is against me."<sup>1</sup> Now that I knew I was not wholeheartedly for him, I started finding little ways to be

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 12:30



against him. At first, I just discounted some of the things he said. I quit praying as much, then not at all. I quit listening with attention. I wanted to raise as much money as I could, (long pause) so I could..... steal more. If he said I was his enemy, I would prove that I was.

You want to be a friend of Jesus? How much are you willing to give up? Or not willing, as the case may be. You can't do that, you can't be unwilling to give it all up, Jesus said that. Maybe you should quit trying to do what Jesus says you cannot do. You are either his friend or his enemy. And, from my own example, you don't want to become his enemy.

I'm not the Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. That Lazarus is the brother of Martha and Mary, and he lived in Bethany, a couple of miles east of Jerusalem. That Lazarus was a rich man. I am the Lazarus who lives in a no-name village in Galilee. I am poor, my health is awful, and I stink. Worse, I am a sinner.

My only redeeming quality is that I loved to listen to Jesus teach. That was something I could afford to do since it was free and I had plenty of time to do it. All of his stories gave me new insight about God and God's kingdom. I never tired of hearing Jesus talk, and then sharing what I heard to the few people who would listen to me. It's hard to get people to listen to you when you stink. And you are poor. Even king Solomon said that poor people have no friends.<sup>1</sup>

I want to tell you about four stories I heard Jesus tell. When I finish you will understand why Luke chose to listen to me when he searched for sources of information.

The first story of Jesus has to do with a shepherd. In my lifetime, any story that had to do with a shepherd reminded people of King David, the most venerated shepherd of our nation, and maybe of all time. Jesus started his story simply enough, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go after the one lost sheep until he finds it?" Any good Jew would have asked himself, "What would King David do? Of course, he would have done that, and then he would kill a lion or bear to rescue the sheep if needed."<sup>2</sup> All of us were expecting to hear Jesus make a superhero of the shepherd.

Jesus continued the story by simply saying that the shepherd found the sheep, and joyfully took it home. Upon arriving home, he called together his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. Wow, anticlimactic. Where are the lions and bears? That's when I learned that Jesus wasn't talking about sheep.

Jesus finished the story by saying, "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." I was a sinner. I could repent and change my ways, and the angels in heaven would rejoice over me. A sinner, a stinking sinner. I was more important to Jesus and to God than all of the self-righteous Pharisees who were at that moment glaring at Jesus and at us sinners. But surely that was too impossible to be true. God rescuing a stinking sinner? Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 14:20

<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 17:36

Jesus followed up that story by telling of a woman who had ten silver coins but lost one. Same result, same rejoicing. Same lesson. God and his angels rejoice when a sinner, even a sinner who stinks, decides to repent. If Jesus said something twice, it meant the lesson was at least of double importance. Then he followed those two lessons with a third... that taught the same lesson.

Some of you know this as the Story of the Lost Son, others know it as the Parable of the Prodigal. But first, I must tell you about a man who still dominated the world, even though he had been dead for seventy-five years before Jesus told this story.

Julius Caesar changed the known world. He single-handedly changed the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire. He went from being a general to a dictator, and was well on his way to becoming emperor. There have been hundreds of books written about Julius Caesar, and they all agree about one thing. Julius Caesar was overly concerned about his "gravitas." Gravitas is a Latin word which means "weighty." It is similar to your English word gravity. In Caesar's world, gravitas had to do with reputation and dignity. It is no exaggeration to say that wars were fought, thousands were killed, and the world's direction changed in order for Caesar, and others, to protect and increase their gravitas.

Back to the Story of the Lost Son. A younger son comes to his father and asks for his share of his inheritance. The father gives it to him, the son moves to a faraway country where he wastes it on wine, women, and song. The son becomes so poor that he has to work with pigs. The son comes to his senses and returns home to beg forgiveness from his father. His father welcomes him back, throws a party for him, and then the father has a run-in with the older brother who is resentful of the younger son and his party.

Let me give you some background that may not be obvious to... Americans. The father was rich, so he was probably a highly respected leader of the community. When the younger son asked for his share of the inheritance, it was like saying he wished his father were dead. When the father gave the son his share, it was the most humiliating act possible for the father to do. The father lost all of his gravitas. When the son left the community, they all considered him dead to the community and to his family.

When the father welcomed the son back? Another humiliating action. The father lost any gravitas he may have regained when he ran out to the son to welcome him back. And, then to pile humiliation on top, the older brother disrespected the father further by refusing to join the party and pitching a fit.

When the Jews of my time heard the story, they expected Jesus to continue the story and have the father either disinherit both sons, or to have the community stone them to death. Instead because Jesus ended the story the way he did, the lesson Jesus imparted, that frankly made no sense to them, was that God so badly wants us to be reconciled to him that he is willing to suffer the loss of all his gravitas. His reputation, his dignity. The creator of the universe, the one

who killed thousands of Jews for worshiping idols, was willing to be humiliated just so one sinner could repent. Jesus certainly turned the views of God upside-down.

To sinners like me, that message was more than good news, it was sweet news. I had no gravitas, but had wished all of my life to have some... to be a respected member of our community? (he lets out a sigh) To have God give up all of his gravitas for me certainly imparted gravitas to me. The Pharisees were incensed at the story, because they spent all of their time trying to increase their reputation and dignity by following rules so that men would think highly of them. When Jesus told those three stories, it was a good day for sinners, and a not so good day for the Pharisees.

The fourth story was my favorite. In it, the hero is a poor beggar named Lazarus. I still remember the twinkle in Jesus' eye when he turned to look at me when he started the story. Gave me some gravitas, because it is the only story of Jesus in which a character is named. The least he could have done after telling the story was to make me rich, but instead, he just winked and walked away. I guess he didn't want me to suffer by being a rich man.

In the story, there is a beggar named Lazarus who is so poor that the dogs even lick the wounds on his body. Jesus was telling the truth with that little detail. Lazarus cannot move on his own, but is laid at the gate of a rich man every day literally begging for any shred of anything he can get. The rich man refuses to acknowledge the existence of the poor man, won't even send out the crumbs off of his table to feed him. The poor man dies and is carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man dies, is buried, and becomes tormented in Hades. The rich man is able to see Lazarus from faraway. He cries out, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

Abraham reminded the rich man that he had riches on earth and implied that he had not used them well. Lazarus, however had received bad things on earth, but was now comforted. Besides, there was a great chasm between the two that nobody could cross.

The rich man asked for Lazarus to go back and warn the rich man's family so they would not go to Hades, but Abraham said they should listen to Moses and the Prophets. In a sad confession, the rich man admitted that they would not do so unless someone came back from the dead. Abraham pointed out that if they wouldn't listen to Moses and the Prophets on their own, they wouldn't do so just because someone came back from the dead.

You can imagine that I was thrilled to find out that I would eventually be gaining eternal reward because of my suffering, although I later learned that gaining that eternal reward would be a part of following Jesus. The rest of the crowd heard at least the lesson that they should have pity on poor people, so I did gain a bit from that in coming years.

What we did not understand at the time was that Jesus actually had been to heaven and knew how to describe it. We thought he was just making up a nice story. We also did not understand

that he was talking about his own death and resurrection, and that so many people would refuse to believe in him even though he came back from the dead.

The Bible doesn't say so, but you can only imagine how I started following Jesus and how it impacted my actions. The women who followed Jesus had pity on me and on so many other poor people. You can only guess that when the rich man heard this story, that I became one of his pet projects.

One last thing, an observation. All of you, Americans, you are all rich in this world. You are. But I wonder if it impacts your actions? I won't even get to dip my finger in water to comfort people on the other side of the great chasm. Take it from Lazarus, you don't want to go there.

The Tenth Leper: Is it because I was formerly a leper, and he is worried about catching that horrible disease? Or that he will become ceremonially unclean?

The Young Ruler: I am hesitant be near him...near Simon. I am hesitant for a different reason than you might suppose. It's not because of my wealth. Or my status. Or the fact that he was a leper.

The Tenth Leper: It's uncomfortable being treated like this in public, but I have been completely shunned most of my life, so his hesitation is... (he shrugs it off with a sigh).

I was born with the name, Simon. That was a common name in Israel, and used by many people such as the apostle Simon Peter, Simon the brother of Jesus<sup>1</sup>, or Simon the Pharisee. Ironically, the Bible speaks of Simon the Leper from Bethany, whom many believe was either a relative of Lazarus of Bethany, or actually the same person as Lazarus of Bethany<sup>2</sup>. I am certainly not that Simon, because I am a Samaritan.

Being wealthy in my time had several massive advantages, but there were some things that reduced everyone to a level playing field with the poorest people in Samaria and in Israel. None of us had indoor plumbing, we all worshiped at a public place of worship, we all worshiped the same God and were equal in his eyes, oh, and all of us were subject to many of the same health problems. One of the worst of those health problems was leprosy. It seemed to strike the rich and poor indiscriminately. And it was incurable. Getting leprosy was tantamount to receiving a death sentence by slow and painful torture.

But we can all pretty much agree that any time in history, if you have it, leprosy is a horrible disease. It results in horrible skin disfigurement, and causes feeling to be lost in nerves, especially nerves of the extremities. The infection goes unfelt and untreated, so lepers often lose fingers or toes or noses, or even bigger body parts.

My life completely changed the day the priest examined me. In my day, we just knew that people with leprosy had to be kept away from everyone else. We Samaritans and Jews were fortunate, because God had given us specific instructions about identifying leprosy and separating people infected with it. This separation kept it from spreading. That fateful day, the

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<sup>1</sup> Mat. 13:55

<sup>2</sup> Mat. 26:6-13, Mark 14:2-9

priest determined that I was a leper... all of my family's money could not change that, horrifying undeniable fact.

I was rushed to the outskirts of town, wasn't even allowed to go back to my home to gather clothes or money. The priest was kind enough to walk the five miles to my house to tell my father. He was a prominent community figure. He gathered some clothes and food for me, and brought them near to where I was. We shouted to each other from a far distance, and he left my things on the ground. I had to rush to get them, he had to rush away. The tears that my family and I shed in those days. The loneliness and isolation I experienced. Nothing in my life had prepared me for such a hellish thing.

Lepers tended to hang out in groups because we were not banned from being around one another. In fact, we were the embodiment of Paul's phrase, "Here there is no Gentile or Jew."<sup>3</sup> Leprosy overcame all other distinctions. In fact, most of the men in my group were Jews, because the Jews in Israel were much tougher on lepers than the Samaritans were. Typically, we were desperately poor, and always hungry. Upon the threat of stoning, we stayed far away from all other people. "Leper, Leper" was what we were required to shout whenever anyone accidentally ventured near. Some of my friends chose suicide, by stoning, to put an end to their miserable lives. The poverty and hunger was...I can't even describe it, but what I really missed most was my family. And friends...their company, the talking, laughing, and the ability to worship God together, as a family... with our community.

Word began spreading through the leper communities that a young prophet in Galilee had miraculous healing powers, even the power to raise people from the dead. If he could do that, surely he could heal a leper or two. The spark of hope was faint, because none of us had the money or physical capability to travel the many miles to Galilee. It was like being trapped in a nightmare where we could almost, but not quite, touch a distant reality of being healthy again.

Hope started to grow from the stony ground of hopelessness. We got word that the young prophet was traveling to Jerusalem, and unlike many of the self-righteous Jews, he was going to take the short-cut through Samaria! We knew the road he would probably take, and the villages he would probably pass through since he had passed through Samaria before. Twelve of us, all men, started stumbling, and hobbling, crawling, anything we could to move toward that road. Only ten of us would finish the journey and when we rounded a corner, we could see him only a stone's throw away.

Spontaneously we started shouting, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us. Jesus, Master, have pity on us. Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" You would be embarrassed to make such a scene, but no force in the world could have stopped us from shouting over and over and over. He stopped... to look at us. Nobody had purposefully looked at us in years.

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<sup>3</sup> Col. 3:11

“Go, show yourselves to the priest.” (he repeats it, this time he counts words as he goes) “Go, show yourselves to the priest.” Only six words, said quietly by the Master of all diseases, and he turned and continued into the village. May not mean much to you, but those words meant everything to us. Those words meant we were to show ourselves to the priest because he could certify that we were healed of leprosy. But we looked at ourselves, and we were not healed.

One guy took a step toward the synagogue, and he began to transform. And then another guy took a step, and then I took a step. With every step we took, our skin began to...reconstruct, our fingers and toes began to reshape, appear from nowhere, our hair grew longer and thicker. We began to stumble faster, then we could walk, and then we began to run toward the priest's house. Run! I was overwhelmed... with gratitude. The others kept running toward the priest's house. I didn't mean to be disobedient, but I could go to the priest later. I had to thank Jesus and praise God that very moment. I whipped around and went back. To Jesus. I threw myself at his feet, thanking him with my words and tears. Those around Jesus drew back in horror, but he reached down, took my chin and lifted it up.

So quiet, his voice, the crowd strained to hear, He said, “Weren't ten of you cleansed?” He looked down the road where I'd come. “Where are the other nine?” Then louder, “Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” He looked directly into my eyes. “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” As if waking from a nightmare, I rose in relief and joy, and I can't even put it into words, and went to the priest. He examined me, and I was fully healed.

But that is not the end of the story. I started gathering all the information I could about Jesus. With my family's resources, it wasn't hard to do. I began to go throughout Samaria telling people about Jesus and the kingdom of God. In my travels I even found one Samaritan village where every single person already believed in him. I was told their conversion started with a Samaritan woman who gave Jesus some water at a well. Anyway, we worked together to share the word that the Messiah of both the Jews and Gentiles had come. I guess we must have had some effect. A few years later, when Philip the Evangelist arrived, he found it a fairly easy task to convert the Samaritans.

The Young Ruler: So, yes, I am hesitant to sit by Simon. Not because I don't want to be near him. I don't want him to have to be near me. (looks down in sadness) He is cleansed of his leprosy and his sins, but I refused to accept the forgiveness of my sins and therefore, remain unclean.

Like Simon, I was born into a wealthy family. I am called a ruler because my family had long had authority over our village and its surrounding area. As you know, authority often comes with wealth, even if neither is actually deserved. In my case, I wasn't arrogant about being in authority. I was much more concerned with becoming a righteous person. I loved to study the Scriptures and talk about God. I was scrupulous about obeying every law of Moses.



One day, a Pharisee friend of mine told me about a young prophet in Galilee. This prophet was reported to do miracles and explain the Scriptures in a way that no man had ever done. Because I was rich, it was no problem at all to travel and find the prophet. It only took ten days or so to find him. Rather than exert the privileges of wealth, I stayed on the fringe of the crowds that surrounded him.

The little story I heard first, nearly exploded my head. Jesus said, "If your brother or sister sins against you, tell them to stop. If they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and each time come back to you saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive them." So, my days of rule following started going out the window. You know what mattered? My heart, not my rule-following. That was just the beginning. Later, I heard that he expanded the seven times to seventy-seven.<sup>4</sup>

One day, Jesus looked around the crowd and his eyes settled on mine. He began a story that seemed pointed just toward me. He told about a servant who came in from a hard day at work, and then was told by the master to prepare his supper first. To you, that story sounds pretty harsh, but it just seemed normal to me and to the others in the crowd. He followed that with an obvious statement: "Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" Of course not, because as we all knew, that was what servants were supposed to do.

Jesus continued with, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" And then he stopped talking and looked at me. Sadly. He knew that I was incapable of understanding the full lesson he was teaching. I thought he was talking about the Jewish nation, but he was also talking about me.

One day, I could not stand it any longer. I moved to the front of the crowd, where I could stand directly in front of Jesus. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" As the words came out of my mouth, I realized I had been making a life-long assumption. My assumption was this, that eternal life came from what I did.

Jesus seemed to have been waiting for me to come to him. He could tell I was wealthy by my clothes, and most probably well educated. He said, "You know the commandments." He did not ask a question, just made a statement. And I responded in kind, "I have kept all of the commandments since I was young."

"You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give it all to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." His words devastated me, and he knew it. He just looked at me with compassion as my world came apart.

He didn't mean that I lacked *doing* anything, but that I lacked something in who I was. My rule-keeping had not accomplished the goal of making me righteous. Apparently, whatever I lacked

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<sup>4</sup> Mat. 18:22

could only be gained by giving away everything I owned. That was the price, everything. I wouldn't know what I was gaining until after I had given up everything. It seemed I was to gain eternal life, but an eternal life that included abject poverty and a life of being a follower of an itinerant preacher. I tried to quickly weigh the pros and cons, but missed another assumption.

I missed the understanding that my value system was askew. I valued material things on the same plane as spiritual life. Therefore, I could neither understand the meaning of eternal life nor its value. I just stood there. Stunned. Silent.

As if from a far, far distance I heard Jesus say, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God!"

Now it was the crowd's turn to stand in stunned silence. These people envied rich people like me who always had plenty to eat, and who sat in the best places at the synagogue. These people thought I was rich and they were poor because I was more righteous than they were. Their value system was under attack just as much as mine was.

Out of the crowd came a trembling voice. "Who then can be saved?" If the rich cannot be saved, surely the poor have no chance either. And, Jesus replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

The crowd turned to look at me, but I was gone. I went away sad because I had great wealth. Wealth I was not willing to give-up. I was unwilling to give up what would prove to be worthless for that which would prove to be invaluable.

What a devastating evaluation of a man. Unwilling to give up what is worthless for that which is invaluable. A sad, but almost understandable, comment about a young man. However, it is beyond tragic for a man to live his entire life and not change his mind. I haven't yet, and that is why I am ashamed to sit by Simon the Leper. Wouldn't you be ashamed to sit by him, too?

“Zacchaeus was a wee, little man, And a wee, little man was he.” You may think you know about me because you may have been singing a song about me since you were a child. Those first two lines have had such an influence on what you think about me; much more influence than the Bible has had.

Seriously, you have to admit that song makes me sound like a Jewish leprechaun. At a time when the average Jewish man was only about five feet and three inches tall, almost all men were short. The misconception about me happens because the Bible says I was short and could not see over the crowd. Think about it. How short would I have to be not to see over a crowd? Five foot two would probably do that, five feet even? But I didn’t have to be a leprechaun. And I certainly didn’t need to be...wide like so many illustrations show.

Now that we’ve had the altitude discussion, let’s move on to more important matters. When I first met Jesus, I lived in Jericho. Jericho was one of the oldest cities to exist, and is the oldest known city that had a protective wall. It was thousands of years old when Joshua came and destroyed it. In fact, the city has been destroyed and rebuilt many times. It was completely rebuilt by the time of Jesus. In fact, Herod the Great had built a fabulous palace complex nearby to use as his winter retreat. Jericho would again be destroyed by the Romans just before they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Jericho was located just west of the Jordan River, and several miles north of where the Jordan River entered the Dead Sea. Jericho was surrounded by the wilderness, so it sits like a jewel in a beige, rocky desert. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is only about 15 miles, but it rises 3400 feet in elevation, and took a full day to walk. It was on this road that Jesus placed his parable of the Good Samaritan.

My occupation was as a tax collector. In fact, I was the chief tax collector for the city. One afternoon, I was sitting in my booth and people started running by in extreme excitement. A rumor raced around town that the prophet Jesus was nearing and had healed a blind man outside of the city. In fact, things were so confused that I couldn’t tell whether Jesus had healed one blind man or two.<sup>1</sup> Stories swirling like a desert sandstorm! The only thing that seemed to agree was that a blind man had been immediately healed, and people were praising God for his deliverance.

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<sup>1</sup> Mat. 9:27-31

I was intrigued by a few of the details. The blind man had called the prophet “The Son of David.” This was a messianic title, and the prophet had not rebuked him. Could this man possibly be the messiah? After all, he had done an undeniable miracle.

Jesus had asked the man the question, “What do you want?” He had not asked the question, “Do you want to be healed?” What else could the man have asked for and received instead? Deliverance of Israel from Rome? The right to see the messiah come in his lifetime? I don’t know, wish for more wishes?

Lastly, Jesus had said the man’s faith had healed him. Jesus did not take credit for the miracle. The people praised God instead of Jesus. What kind of a man could this be, I thought?

I was as confused as everybody else about the miracle, but there was one thing that was crystal clear. I had to see this man, Jesus. I knew he was approaching the city, so I had to hurry to beat the crowds. I gathered up my expensive robe, and began running. I was too late. The crowd had gathered, and I was too short to see over their heads. Since I was a tax collector, a “hated” tax collector, there was no way the crowd would let me come through without an encounter with someone’s dagger.

I was frantic. There wasn’t any way I would let this opportunity go by. I thought about bribing someone to let me through, but quickly realized that was a bad strategy. I saw a nearby balcony and ran to the house and knocked on the door. Nobody answered, I felt like kicking in the door. But it was obviously very stout, and I didn’t want to look even more foolish by being unable to kick it in. There had to be another solution! Down the road, I saw a huge sycamore-fig tree, and I came up with the most brilliant idea I ever had in my life. I started running for the tree like someone avoiding me at tax time.

Almost an hour later, Jesus worked his way through the crowds and walked on the road directly beneath the tree. I thought I was hidden by the leaves, but he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down now. I must stay at your house tonight.” Without stopping to ponder how he knew my name or why he possibly needed to stay at my house, I came down so fast that it probably looked like I jumped. Hoping to sound important, I welcomed him to my house as loudly as I could.

The crowd started muttering. Loudly. “Jesus has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” I wasn’t embarrassed because tax collectors were often called much worse names than that, but I didn’t want my new guest to be embarrassed. Drawing myself up to my full height, I exclaimed, loudly, “Here and now, I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Have you ever said anything, and then wanted to physically grab the words back? How could a greedy tax collector ever say such a silly, stupid, foolish, idiotic, stupid, brainless, stupid thing? I

felt like Herod must have felt when he offered Salome half his kingdom just for dancing.<sup>2</sup> Jesus smiled at me, and I knew I had not offered enough.

He said, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Wow, what a great deal for me. I just gave up some stuff, and I was given salvation from the Messiah who could make salvation come true.

Before I could run to my house to start preparing dinner plans, Jesus motioned for me to sit on a nearby log with him. I didn't know it at the time, but he needed to prepare the crowds and his disciples for what was coming when he arrived at Jerusalem – not an immediate overthrow of the Roman government, but a slow conquering by the kingdom of God. I also didn't know he was about to mix two stories together for dramatic effect.

Jesus started, "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return." At this one dangerous sentence, the crowd collectively held their breath. Jesus was treading on deadly ground and they all knew it. It had to do with an event that had happened about twenty-five years prior.

Archelaus, the son of Herod, had been involved with a dispute over Herod's will. In order to resolve the dispute, which was hotly contested by his brother Herod Antipas, Archelaus had traveled to Rome to take his case before Caesar Augustus. Archelaus was also opposed by the Jews, because they were afraid of him due to his previous slaughter of 3,000 of them. Archelaus did receive the kingship of much of Israel that he wanted, but he was quickly deposed, and the Romans took over the areas he had ruled. It was not a subject that any of the Jews wanted to discuss openly, because the agents of Rome and Herod Antipas were everywhere.

Jesus started a second story to weave with the first story, as the crowd exhaled. He told about how the man of noble birth had chosen three slaves to leave money with while he traveled, with the clear expectation that he would return. Especially when mixed with the first story, the crowd assumed that the master had power of life or death over his three slaves based on his evaluation of their performance. He wasn't going to just put a note in their employee evaluation files.

As everyone in the crowd knew, the master did return home after being made king. He was more powerful than ever, but in a foul mood because of the opposition he had faced. His three slaves must have been trembling when he called for them to give account of his money.

The first came and said, "Sir, your mina has earned ten more." Did you notice that the slave didn't say, "I have earned ten more?" The slave knew he was just an instrument and needed to stay humble. The master replied, "Well done, my good slave. Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities."

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:17-29

At this, Jesus winked at me and paused for the crowd to absorb his outrageous story. A faithful slave just received a shockingly large increase in responsibility for having done what was expected. They were so appalled by this, that they could not process what might be coming.

Jesus continued with his story. The master beckoned to the second slave and he said, "Sir, your mina has earned five more." "You take charge of five cities." Now, the crowd was lulled into a rhythm.

The third slave said, "Sir, here is your mina. I hid it away safely to give to you on your return. I know you are a hard man. You take what you did not put in and reap where you did not sow." You could have heard a pin drop into the dust at my feet. The crowd winced as Jesus changed his voice into that of a harsh master.

"You wicked servant, I will judge you by your own words. Why didn't you at least put my money at interest so I could have that when I returned? Take away his mina and give it to the one who has ten. To everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

The crowd sat dumbfounded, what on earth would the king say next? "But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me."

Jesus stood, and started walking toward Jerusalem. He had no intention of eating at my house any more. He had accomplished with my heart what he wanted. Now he was waiting for his parable to take effect, even while knowing it would be two more months before people could even begin to understand it fully.

How did we understand the parable that day? God must have been the king, and our religious leaders must have been the slaves. But which leaders would get rewarded and why? And would the rest of the leaders really be killed by God himself? And how did any of that relate to those of us in the crowd. Surely this man Jesus was like the prophet Isaiah – almost impossible to understand!!

Did you ever wonder what happened to me after that day in Jericho? Well, the Sunday School song is definitely no help. Did I really give the money to the poor? Did I really pay back four times the amount I had cheated others? Did I stay a tax collector? The Bible doesn't give you any of those answers but use your imagination for a minute.

If you were me, wouldn't you have followed Jesus to Jerusalem that very day? I knew that my possessions were worthless, and my heart had been changed. Wouldn't you have stood in wonder as Jesus entered Jerusalem, and then taught in the Temple for the next few days? Wouldn't you have been in shock when Jesus was crucified and died? Wouldn't you have been incredulous that Jesus was resurrected and appeared to so many of us believers?

As you think back on that day when Jesus walked through Jericho, think of the parable and understand it in a different way. Jesus was the king who went away and came back. His enemies were the Jewish leaders who would either repent or be punished with eternal death. The slaves in the parable were his followers who were waiting for his return. What about the minas and the cities, what were they? And then you hear Jesus whisper, "Go and make disciples."

Ever feel left out? Then you can identify with me. I was Peter's brother. Peter, the outspoken one of the Apostles, and maybe the best known. As young men, we were fishing partners with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. The four of us were inseparable.

We were some of the earliest of Jesus' followers, and continued to be very close. But the longer we were with Jesus, the more I seemed to be distanced from the other three. For instance, when Jesus went on the Mount of Transfiguration, he took the other three, but not me.<sup>1</sup> On the night Jesus was betrayed by Judas and he went to pray, he took the other three, but not me.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, except for Jesus calling me, and then me telling Peter about Jesus, I am hardly ever mentioned, except in the listings of the apostles. Well, John did mention that I pointed out the boy with the five loaves and two fishes that kickstarted the feeding of the five thousand. And, I did get to join the other three when Jesus talked about the upcoming destruction of the Temple, but I was certainly never as important as Peter, James, and John.

I've wondered all my life why things turned out that way. Not smart enough? Not personable enough? Did I do something wrong? Maybe caused Jesus not to like me as much as the other three? I would never know during my lifetime why things turned out that way, but as I drew near to the end of my life, here is what I began to think. Jesus knew I depended too much on the other three, and he wanted me to depend only on him, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew that I would spend most of my adult life by myself as I went around spreading the Gospel. He knew how I needed to develop, even though it made me feel left out. Perhaps you are developing some good characteristics during your time of feeling left out?

I was with the other apostles when Jesus left Jericho and started toward Jerusalem. We didn't know it, but Jesus was nearing the end of his life, and would spend his last week on earth teaching in his father's house, the Temple. After a long day of walking from Jericho, we approached the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, which are located near the east side of the Mount of Olives, only a few miles from the Temple.

He turned to two of the disciples and told them to go to the next village and find a donkey colt there which no one had ridden, untie it, and return with it. If anyone questioned them, they were to simply say that the Lord needed it. Knowing that Jesus had friends in the area, none of

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 17:1

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:37



us thought much about the request, other than Jesus didn't seem tired enough to need a donkey.

Sometime later, they returned and reported that they had been questioned as Jesus suspected, and the owners of the donkey had let them have it after hearing their reply. Some of us tossed our cloaks on the donkey since it had no blanket, and Jesus got on to ride. And that is when things went wonky.

As our group went along the road, people started laying their cloaks on the ground. We began to understand that Jesus was enacting the role of a king, a victorious king. When we topped the Mount of Olives, it took our breath away.

Across the Kidron Valley, the Temple was gleaming in the midday sunlight. Its gold plating like an ethereal mirror. On the east side of the Temple Mount and on the west side of the Mount of Olives, thousands of families who had travelled for the Passover were camped out. Their campfire smokes rose in the air like thousands of fires of sacrifice. We disciples broke out in praise, and the louder we got, the more the crowds in the valley pitched in. As Jesus started down the steep path, more cloaks were placed on his path, people waving palm branches in joyful praise. The valley ringing with cries:

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” and “Peace in heaven and glory to God in the highest.”

Other Psalms were quoted and the people believed they were seeing their Messiah. But their enthusiasm would soon be quenched. The jealous Pharisees in the crowd immediately started demanding that Jesus silence his disciples. He told them that if his disciples were quiet, the very stones would praise instead.

As he neared the Kidron Valley at the bottom of the hill, Jesus began to weep. In words that none of us could fully comprehend, he began to prophesy about the coming destruction of the city and the Temple. He knew Jerusalem was God's special possession, and he could see its destruction as surely as he could see the dust and rocks on the path in front of him. He also knew that its future could change if its citizens would just recognize him as Lord...but he also knew they would not.

Let's pause, I need to point out something important for you to remember as you read any of the Gospels. None of them were written in strict chronological order like you are used to. The writers' intent was to impart truth, not follow a writing convention, an unimportant writing convention at that. Luke uses this time in his narrative to talk about Jesus cleansing the Temple, while Mark and Matthew placed that event much earlier in their narratives. Regardless of when Jesus cleansed the Temple by driving out the moneychangers, or if he did it two different times, you can rest assured that it did happen.

For several days in the last week of his life, Jesus kept a predictable pattern. He would rise early and pray, walk to the Temple with his disciples and teach the people, and then return to the Mount of Olives where he would spend the night. The Jewish officials were so unhappy with Jesus that they wanted to kill him, but the people were so enamored with him that the officials could not risk a riot. The Roman soldiers in the Antonia Fortress at the northwest corner of the Temple grounds were just waiting for an excuse to exert their superiority, and a riot would be a perfect excuse.

The Jewish officials tried to downplay Jesus to the people so they could maintain their own authority, but he would turn the tables on them. One day they went directly at him by asking him by whose authority he taught. They were accustomed to exerting authority that they had given each other, or the authority that came through being a descendant of Aaron. Apparently, they hadn't learned that Jesus wasn't an easy victim.

Jesus replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me: John's baptism – was it from heaven or of human origin?" That confounded them. Many of them had been baptized by John the Baptist, and the entire crowd revered John as a true prophet. They knew the crowd would violently turn on them if they said human origin, but they did not want to agree that John was a prophet. So, they replied that they didn't know where it was from. Jesus then refused to answer their question, which delighted the crowd.

Another time, they wanted to trap Jesus into saying something that could cause the Romans to take him away. Knowing the people hated paying taxes to the Romans, the Jewish authorities asked him the precarious question, "Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" That question was charged in other ways. First, by paying taxes to Caesar, it was almost like agreeing to the emperor worship the Romans demanded. Second, the Jews had to convert their money to Roman money in order to pay taxes, which was costly. And, the Roman money had images of the emperor on it, so it was like they were handling an idol when they handled Roman money.

Seeing through their duplicity, Jesus requested that they show him a denarius coin. Presumably someone had a denarius, and showed it to him. That in itself might have made them look bad. Then, Jesus asked, "Whose image and inscription is on it?" By using the word "image," Jesus was emphasizing the nature of the coin being an idol because the inscriptions typically glorified either the emperor or the empire, and the image on it was of the emperor. It was obvious that the coin was not of God. His conclusion was simply, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Rather than answering their question, he taught them about the correct way to look at life.

There are so many, many other stories to tell about the days before Jesus died, but I want to end with my most favorite in Luke's book. I like it because the hero of the story was someone who must have felt left out, like me.

Many of you are under the mistaken impression that we Jews had to give a tithe, or one tenth, of our income to God. In reality, most of us gave closer to 20% or 30%. The tithe was an

automatic, base amount. On top of that, we were required to give other sacrifices at several of the festivals, we had to pay a temple tax, and most of us gave other voluntary offerings for various reasons.

One way to give our offerings on the Temple grounds was to throw coins into some metal bowls, shaped somewhat like a Cornucopia horn. Heavy coins would bounce down the horn and make loud sounds, while small coins would barely be noticed. In other words, just by listening everyone could tell who was throwing in what amount.

As our group was standing there, an older, poor widow approached. I watched Jesus look at her, and thought maybe she reminded him of his own mother. As he watched intently, those around him began watching, and listening, too. I could hear the echoes of the rich peoples' coins as they bounced down the horns. You can just imagine that some of them tried to impress Jesus by throwing in a lot of money. Then, I watched the widow. She feebly reached out and dropped her offering. As the coins fell, I had to strain to hear the little, tiny, faint, ping...ping...ping...ping. And I felt so sorry for her since she knew we were all watching.

Then, I saw the tears in Jesus' eyes, he had to be thinking of his mother. He said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of those rich people. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." I started crying, too.

The poverty of that widow was in stark contrast to the wealth of the Temple and many of the Jewish leaders. Much of the Temple and its ornaments were gold-plated or made of solid gold. When the sun shone, the Temple was so brilliant as to be blinding. It was so overwhelming that we disciples could not help but comment on its beauty.

Jesus' response was so mysterious that we were confused then, and people are still confused two thousand years later. As pertains to the Temple buildings, Jesus seems to have been specifically prophesying how the Temple would be destroyed by the Romans forty years in the future. The very gold that was so beautiful to the disciples would be the cause for the Romans to tear the Temple and part of the Temple Mount to pieces. In order to find the gold that melted in the fires of 70 AD, the Romans would literally tear apart the buildings stone by stone. Even 2000 years later you could go to the Temple mount and see the enormous stones that were thrown down. They've left them exactly as they were. To this day. Some of Jesus' remarks appears to have caused some of the Christians to flee the city prior to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

Although Jesus' prophecies seem to be relatively straightforward concerning the Temple, it is far from clear how Jesus addressed the topics concerning the end of the age, when He would return, and other subjects. For that reason, the chapters of Matthew 24 and 25, and Luke 21 are rich material for those who study prophecy. Without being flippant or understating the importance of Jesus' prophecies, I will sum up what Jesus said: "Nobody knows when the end

will come, either for any person or for the world. So, always be ready. Be ready by preparing to withstand persecution and by behaving as a disciple of Jesus.”

Every day, approximately 152,000 people die in the world. Yesterday, the world ended for approximately 152,000 people. Jesus says you are wise if you are ready for your world to end, and foolish if you are not ready. I beg you, be a disciple of Jesus and live like one, so you are ready!

I started my story telling you how I often felt left out. But, in my loneliness, I couldn't see what Jesus did. My talent was to introduce people to Jesus, and he wanted to sharpen that talent and desire in me. Peter, I introduced him to Jesus. A little boy with five loaves and two fishes, I introduced him to Jesus. A bunch of Greeks who had one chance to meet him, I introduced them to Jesus. I overcame my loneliness by introducing people to Jesus. That same thing will work for you.

Peter:

Have you ever been interrupted while in the middle of a deep sleep? Perhaps you acted irrationally before you could fully wake up. That is what happened to me. But let me start at the beginning. The beginning of the end, that is.

During the last week of the life of Jesus, we settled into a simple, but uneasy, daily pattern. We spent the night on the Mount of Olives, just outside the walls of Jerusalem. The next morning, we crossed the Kidron Valley, climbed up the Temple Mount and entered the Temple grounds. Jesus taught the people, jostled with the Jewish leaders, and instructed his apostles and disciples. As the day ended, we returned to the Mount of Olives.

We knew the Jewish leaders were dangerous, but we did not know Satan had entered Judas Iscariot, one of us. He slipped away and went to the chief priests and temple guards to talk to them about betraying Jesus to them when the crowds were not present. They paid Judas thirty pieces of silver in advance for his treachery.<sup>1</sup> Why thirty pieces of silver, which wasn't a lot of money? Possibly to fulfill a prophetic passage in the book of Zechariah.<sup>2</sup> Possibly because that is all Judas demanded. He bargained away the most precious life ever lived for a pittance.

The day of Unleavened Bread came. This was the day during the Passover festival when the Passover lamb was to be sacrificed. I guess I was expecting Judas to make preparations since he was our treasurer<sup>3</sup> but Jesus turned to John and me, and told us to go make preparations. He gave us detailed instructions instead of his typical vague inferences. His instructions started with, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you." I was immediately taken aback. I had been with Jesus for a week and knew he had not had an opportunity to make complex plans. The odds of seeing a man carrying a jar of water were small. Men did not typically do this type of work.

John and I found things exactly as Jesus said. We met the man, followed him to a house, and asked the owner of the house where the Teacher could eat the Passover feast with his disciples. The owner showed us a furnished room upstairs, and we prepared for the Passover. Many of your scholars believe that the owner of the house was the mother of John Mark since Christians would soon meet in her house on a regular basis.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26:15, 27:3

<sup>2</sup> Zechariah 11:4-14

<sup>3</sup> John 13:29

When the appropriate hour came, we apostles and Jesus reclined around the table for Passover, like we had done every year of our lives. The meal did not go as we expected. The words Jesus used portrayed him as the Passover sacrifice. He even said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." We should have been stunned and immediately started to question him about his words.

Instead, we started arguing among ourselves about who was going to be greatest. This was not the first time we had had this argument, and I'm sure Jesus was devastated that we were still so prideful. Jesus took the argument and turned it into a lesson showing that the most humble among us would be the greatest. He backed up his words by showing how he had come to serve, not to be served. I should have let well enough alone, but I continued with a haughty attitude.

Jesus turned to me and said, "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." I did not catch his conclusion that I would fail while being sifted. I boasted, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." He looked at me with sad eyes and said, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times."

Jesus continued to talk to us for a long time, just as John recorded in his gospel account. While continuing to teach us, Jesus led us across the Kidron Valley and up the side of the Mount of Olives to a place known as Gethsemane. After a while, Jesus separated himself from us to pray to God. He had often done this, so we didn't think much of it until he asked James, John and me to keep watch with him. He felt so sorry for us because we could not even stay awake during this time of extreme danger.

I was dead asleep. A crowd of men with torches appeared out of nowhere and came toward Jesus. Judas was with the crowd and walked toward Jesus as if to kiss him in greeting. Jesus said, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" I grabbed a sword and hacked toward the nearest person to me, and cut off a man's right ear.<sup>4</sup> I had just woken up, wasn't thinking clearly, just reacted. Now, I was completely in a panic. I saw that the crowd consisted of soldiers and the temple guard, probably sent by the chief priests, elders, and other Jewish officials. They seized Jesus and started walking down the hill. We apostles scattered in every direction.

From my vantage point, I could see that the torches were headed to the southeast, toward the house of the high priest. I stumbled down the path in the dark, able to stay a short distance from the crowd.

As they went into the house, I came from the backside and sat near the fire in the courtyard, trying hard to keep my face hidden. This girl came up to me. "This man was also with him!" It

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<sup>4</sup> It was the servant of the high priest. John 18:10. Jesus healed him.

was a servant girl accusing me of being a follower of Jesus. I, of course, denied it but my accent and clothes gave me away. I denied my Lord at the mere words of a girl. Twice more I was accused of being a follower of Jesus, and twice more I denied it.

At the exact moment of my third denial, a rooster crowed, and Jesus turned and looked straight at me. I remembered what he had said to me, and I went away and wept bitterly. In the distance, I could hear them insulting Jesus, beating him.

Pilate:

I should have just stayed in Caesarea that wretched day. Why didn't I just stay in Caesarea that day? I had been the prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, an area that was also known as Palestine or Israel. As the representative of Emperor Tiberius, I was Rome. The eternal city. I had total power and control over the province. Even the power of life or death.

I took a large group of soldiers and made the seventy-mile, up-hill, dusty trip to Jerusalem, and prepared to stay there for a few weeks. I had most of the soldiers stay in the Antonia Fortress, our military garrison on the northwest corner of the Temple Mount.

Imagine me in a deep sleep after having a little too much to drink the night before. My attendant taps at my door. I answer, he motions for me to step away so as not to wake up my wife, and tells me that a group of Jewish leaders are waiting frantically to talk to me. He says things that seem odd, but he wants to make sure we don't unintentionally set off a riot by ignoring them.

The leader of the assembled religious brass points to a bloody man and says, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar, and claims to be Messiah, a king."

At that point, I didn't care a bit about what they had to say. The man they were pointing to was badly beaten and clearly posed no threat to me or the Empire. The charges were not even worthy of my time. So, I sarcastically asked the poor man, "Are you the king of the Jews?" I knew Herod was the king of the Jews.

"You have said so," the man replied. Not a bad answer if I don't say so myself, I just laughed. I announced to the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." I turned to leave, and the group leader frantically tried another charge.

"He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here!" Now, the leader thought he could get my attention by insinuating that this poor wretch might be causing an insurrection, but he got my attention in another way instead. He mentioned that the man was from Galilee, which meant that he was under the authority of Herod. Conveniently, Herod was only a few hundred yards away.

Herod would have to deal with a problem that had no good solution. He was either going to break Roman laws or disappoint the Jewish leaders and possibly cause a riot. Either way, I wanted to make Herod's life miserable. He was a pathetic, sad little man, and we were bitter enemies. It was an easy choice for me. I sent the crowd with their wretched prisoner to Herod, and headed back to sleep.

Now imagine my surprise a few hours later when the crowd reappeared and demanded to see me again. What had happened? I asked my assistant, and he gave me the short version. Herod was actually happy to see the man because he had heard of him, and wanted to see him do some great miracle. When the man just stood there, Herod eventually tired of his silence and had his soldiers ridicule him, beat him to a pulp, and dress him in a purple robe that signified his supposed royalty. Then, in a sign of deference to me, Herod sent him back for my judgment.

As that poor man stood there, weaving from fatigue and pain, I could easily see this was not a legal case, but some kind of religious dispute. I was in a no-win situation, and I frantically searched for a way out.

My first gambit; to tell the crowd that Herod and I both found no guilt in the man, and that I would punish him before releasing him. Rather than appeasing the crowd, this just made them more furious. The religious leaders were whipping the crowd into a frenzy, a riot was sure to break out soon.

My second tactical gambit: a brilliant maneuver, give the crowd a choice of releasing this man, or releasing a murderer, a revolutionary named Barabas. It was my custom to release someone at Passover, and I was sure of whom the crowd would not choose. Much to my surprise, they demanded the release of Barabas, and would not listen to my reasoning. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" they shouted.

They had me in a corner and they knew it, both the religious leaders and the crowd. I appealed again to them, but on the verge of a riot, and they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!" Their shouts prevailed. I released Barabas, and gave the prisoner to the crowd, which was tacit approval for him to be crucified.

Hours later, my centurion brought his report. The innocent man's name was Jesus. He was so fatigued that he could not carry his cross all the way to the hill of death, so my centurion seized someone from the crowd and had him carry it for him. My centurion was surprised at the large number of people who supported Jesus and followed them, but they were mostly women or men who posed no obvious problem.

With typical Roman efficiency, my soldiers took along two other men who were scheduled to be executed, and all three of them were crucified on Golgotha, with Jesus being placed in the middle.



As was often done, the soldiers gambled against one another to claim the clothing that would never be needed again by the prisoners. I had a notice placed above Jesus that said, "This is the king of the Jews." The soldiers and crowd delighted in mocking Jesus about his inability to save himself even though he was a king. The only one in the crowd who treated him with respect? One of the other crucified prisoners.

It was about noon, when a deep darkness came over the entire land lasting about three hours. The Jews, ever superstitious, were reminded of the plague of darkness when they were slaves in Egypt. They started to regret their actions. The enormous Temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom and the Jews went ballistic.

Jesus called out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He died. It had taken only a few hours for him to die, when it often took several days. My centurion was amazed. And deeply moved. He said that he praised the Jew's God, and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."

No sooner had the centurion finished his report than my assistant came with another urgent request. A wealthy Jew named Joseph had come to ask for the body of Jesus so he could bury it. He was in a hurry, he said he wanted to wrap the body in linen and place it in a new tomb before the Sabbath started.

Quite honestly I was thrilled to have this unexpected request. Usually we Romans would leave crucified bodies in place for a long time. It's a powerful reminder. However, since this Jesus had so many followers, I did not want the body there as motivation for them to unite and rebel, or make a sacred martyr of him. Having the body disappear was a good solution to a potential problem. I granted Joseph permission, and that was the end of the matter. At least it was the end as far as I expected.

Peter:

As it turned out, the end was only the beginning.

This is the last story from the Gospel of Luke. I was not an eyewitness to these events. That said, know that I am a *Greek* doctor, I am very jealous of my reputation would not ruin it by writing things I don't fully believe to be true. I carried out a careful investigation before writing. Meticulous, would be more precise. I spoke to eyewitnesses and studied the accounts that had already been written. Be assured, I am convinced of all that I write. Down to the most minute detail.

We've come to the end of Jesus' first life. When the Romans crucified someone, they finished the job. They were experts in death. Jesus was dead.

Joseph of Arimathea quickly buried Jesus' body on Friday before the Sabbath started. There was no time for him to properly prepare the body.<sup>1</sup> The Sabbath officially started on Friday at sundown, and it was forbidden to deal with dead bodies on a Sabbath.

Very early on Sunday morning, the Sabbath was over, several women hurried to the tomb with spices to prepare the dead body of Jesus. These women were devout followers of Jesus, and included Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. They never got the chance to prepare the body.

When they arrived at the tomb, the huge stone covering the entrance was rolled away, and the body was not in the tomb. They were stunned, astonished, just gaping at one another. Suddenly, two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. The men said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen!" The men went on to remind the women how Jesus had prophesied his crucifixion and his resurrection on the third day. Though deep in shock, the women remembered the words of Jesus.

Imagine the emotions of these women. On Friday, their leader, friend, their Messiah, was put on trial and condemned. He was killed by a horribly excruciating crucifixion. On Saturday, the Sabbath, they could do nothing but try to worship God while they mourned the death of Jesus. Never a lower emotional point than that day. On Sunday morning, they go to prepare the body of Jesus and find that he has risen from the dead. They had seen Jesus raise people from the dead, but they could not have conceived that he could raise himself from the dead! Their realization must have been overwhelming. Overwhelming to the point of...just, overwhelming joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:3-9

The women went back into Jerusalem, and told their story to the remaining eleven apostles and other followers of Jesus. They didn't believe the women at all. The story seemed ludicrous, kind of a too good to be true, know what I mean? Pure nonsense in their eyes. But Peter, he jumped up and ran to the tomb to see for himself. He found only strips of linen. And then left wondering what had happened. He could not bring himself to believe that their story was true, that Jesus could possibly be alive.

That same day, seven miles from Jerusalem, two disciples of Jesus were walking to Emmaus, a tiny village. They were talking about all that had happened in Jerusalem, when a man, just some stranger, came up to walk with them and asked what they were talking about. One of two, Cleopas, said "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened? They couldn't believe it, so they told the man how the one they'd hoped would rescue Israel was killed, but then his body was missing from the tomb - and supposedly was alive again.

The stranger began to explain what the scriptures said about the Messiah. They stopped to eat and, it hit the two, they recognized him! It was Jesus! But then, he was gone! Vanished! They rushed to Jerusalem to tell the apostles, kicking themselves because they hadn't realized who he was earlier. The apostles confirmed that the Lord had risen and had appeared to Simon Peter. The two told their story about how Jesus had appeared to them and explained the Messianic scriptures. They were in a daze, talking about the impossibilities of what was happening when the most miraculous thing happened!

A talking ghost appeared among them. "Peace be with you." But it wasn't a talking ghost...it was the Lord Jesus in a resurrected body. They freaked out. But at his request they touched him, his body was as solid as their own. They even touched the places on his hands and feet where the nails from his crucifixion had pierced him. They could not believe what was happening, they were amazed, they were overjoyed, but still they couldn't believe it...I mean, think about it. So, like a good Jewish boy, Jesus decided to solve the problem with food. Broiled fish. That's what they gave him. The Resurrected Lord took a piece of broiled fish and ate it. No more proof was needed.

In the most obvious "I Told You So" ever, Jesus reminded the group that he had told them this would happen in order to fulfill the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then, he opened their minds so they could finally understand what the Scriptures said. He said it was written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations. He said, "You are my witnesses, and I am going to send you what my Father has promised, but stay in Jerusalem until you have received power from on high."

The group was gaining understanding of what Jesus had been talking about for three years, but they could not even begin to comprehend what God was going to send to them to clothe them with power from on high. They would not find out what that was for another seven weeks.

Now, since I am a Greek writer, you should expect that my story ends here. The protagonist of the story has suffered unjustly, and has heroically overcome his enemies. Any classical Greek writer would have stopped here. I can't stop, because the story is not even close to being through.

Over the next forty days, Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people.<sup>2</sup> He gave many convincing proofs that he was alive, and taught about the Scriptures and what was going to happen. He was setting the stage for the coming of Holy Spirit, the revealing of the Church, and the explosive growth of Christianity.

After the end of forty days, Jesus led his followers to the Mount of Olives, near the vicinity of the village of Bethany. He lifted his hands and started blessing his followers. While he was blessing them, he began to rise in the air, and was taken up into Heaven. Regardless of what had happened over the previous forty days, his followers were still amazed to watch him rise in the air.

They worshiped the Lord, and then returned to Jerusalem as he had instructed them to do. They couldn't wait to be clothed with power from on high, whatever that meant. They did what so many others before them had done. They stayed at the Temple and continually praised God.

If you have a good memory, you might remember how we began twenty stories ago. I wrote the Gospel of Luke to Theophilus in order to give him an orderly and accurate account of the life of Jesus so that he could be certain of the things he had been taught.

The stories started with the miraculous birth of Jesus. From there, we talked about the three-year ministry of Jesus. Most of his ministry took place in the area around the Sea of Galilee, but he did make several trips to Jerusalem and other places. Our stories centered around the teachings and actions of Jesus. Sometimes he taught, sometimes he healed people or did miracles, and sometimes he did both.

Before Jesus, many Jews connected righteousness with rule-keeping. The better you keep the rules, the more you are obedient to God. Many of them connected righteousness with earthly well-being. The more earthly wealth you have, the more righteous you must be, and the more God must love you.

Jesus turned those mentalities up-side down. He taught that God loves all his children, and that God wants all of his children to have a relationship with him. He taught that love for God and other people is paramount in being obedient.

The teachings and actions of Jesus were so radical that he eventually offended the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem so much that they plotted to kill him. They eventually succeeded in doing

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:3, 1 Corinthians 15:6

so with the help of Pilate. With the death of Jesus, the Jewish leaders probably thought their problems were over.

When the news started circulating that Jesus had come back from the dead, the Jewish leaders panicked. Resurrection?! They even bribed the guards at the tomb to say that Jesus' followers had stolen his body.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately for them, Jesus appeared to more than 500 people in many different settings and times. His followers absolutely knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, and they began behaving that way.

Three decades after the death of Jesus, I was with Paul as he was on his missionary journeys, and we often talked about Jesus and the research I had accumulated. He summarized what we knew to be true: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."<sup>4</sup>

We first Christians fully believed that Jesus died, rose, and ascended to sit at the right hand of God. We had full hope and belief that Jesus would return. I hope that my research and my book have brought you to believe those same things.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:12-15

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:14