

CHAPTER 23, JESUS' MINISTRY BEGINS

TIMELESS TRUTH: JESUS: THE MESSIAH YOU'D NEVER EXPECT.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

If God's prophets were meant to be peculiar, John the Baptist did not disappoint. Eccentric is too mild a description for this wilderness dwelling preacher who wore odd clothes and lacked both a sense of tact and a balanced diet. His message, though, was right in step with a long line of prophetic predecessors. He called for Israel's repentance and baptized the penitent in the Jordan River.

John was awestruck when Jesus came to be baptized by him. Then he watched in amazement as heaven opened wide and the Spirit of God came to rest on Jesus. John and those with him were astonished to hear the voice of the Father Himself broadcasting His divine approval. The community of God had gathered to bear witness to their incarnation. The Spirit then led Jesus to a lonely wilderness, where he spent the next 40 days in one-on-one combat with Satan, the enemy of God. He confronted Satan's evil allurements and proved Himself obedient to the Father and triumphant over sin.

John the Baptist denied claims that he was Messiah, pointing to Jesus and announcing, "*Look, the Lamb of God.*" Andrew heard John's message and rushed to tell his brother, Simon Peter, and others that Messiah had come. Jesus gathered His band of followers and began training them with marvelous words and miraculous ways. His first miracle took place when He went to a wedding in Cana with his mother, Mary, and his disciples. The wine ran out, so Mary turned to Jesus to remedy the embarrassing state of affairs. Jesus simply instructed the servants to fill six jars with water and serve the guests. When they did, the guests marveled that finest wine had been kept such a secret until now and Jesus' disciples caught their earliest glimpse of the One who shared creative power with His Father.

The disciples became increasingly aware that Jesus was indeed their long-expected Messiah, but others were not so sure. A religious leader called Nicodemus had a clandestine encounter with Jesus to find some answers. Jesus' simple reply was, "*You must be 'born again' . . . of the Spirit. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Jesus had a similar conversation with a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water from a well. With her, he spoke of 'living water,' but the message was the same: accept His gift and be saved. When she mentioned the Messiah, Jesus confirmed His identity. She believed and shared the news with her entire village, as the second missionary of the new Messiah.

Jesus traveled the area, taught in the synagogues and healed the people. He ousted demons and cleansed socially exiled lepers. The crowds grew and so did His critics. On one occasion, four men dug through the roof of a house so they could bring their paralytic friend to Him. Before he healed him, Jesus forgave the man, while the religious teachers grew indignant over such claims. But Jesus validated His authority by commanding the paralytic to get up and walk. The Pharisees missed the miracle and were incensed that Jesus had violated tradition by healing on the Sabbath.

This Sabbath infringement, coupled with his absurd claim to be the Messiah Himself, on top of his questionable social circles, quickly turned the establishment against Him. And so the conspiracy to kill Jesus began. While many debated, questioned, and wondered about Jesus' identity, one thing was certain: Jesus was controversial. Some saw hope, but others hated Him and wanted only to be rid of Him. John the Baptist had loved Him from the beginning but now, languishing in prison, he began to doubt as well, demonstrating that even the best of us have our faith tested under difficult circumstances. But throughout this chapter, His baptism, His triumph over temptation, His miracles, and His message confirm Him as the long expected One who confounds expectations, is drawn to the least and the lost, and whose message is indeed for all, from the graduate professor to the immoral woman to the leper – the Anointed One indeed.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: When did you first begin to understand the message of Jesus as your Savior and Lord? Who helped you understand?

1. Identify the ways in which the God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit appear at Jesus' baptism (p. 322). Look up Isaiah 11:1-2 and 42:1 and Psalm 2:1-7.
2. What does Jesus' example teach us about how to resist temptation (p. 322)? (See Ephesians 6:10-17 for further insight.)
3. Upon what did the original disciples base their belief in Jesus (p. 324)?
4. Nicodemus and the woman at the well both had conversations with Jesus (p. 326-329). Why do they represent such a contrast?
5. How do the biblical Satan and other evil spirits compare to popular depictions of demons in films, television, literature, or art?
6. Jesus was constantly interacting with different types of people: curious Jews, antagonistic Pharisees, tax collectors, and society's castoffs. What can you learn about how to respond to different types of people from observing Jesus?
7. The faithful friends of the paralytic carried him to Jesus (p. 330-331). If you are comfortable, share with your group a time in your own life that you had to totally depend of the faith of a Christian friend to get you through.
8. Jesus clashed with the Pharisees who hoped to catch Him violating the Sabbath (p. 332). Doing work was punishable by death according to the Law (Exodus 31:14, Isaiah 56:1-2). Who is actually guilty of violating the Sabbath in this encounter?
9. John the Baptist who had earlier proclaimed, "*Look, the Lamb of God,*" was now languishing in prison where he began to wonder about this Jesus (p. 333-334). Look up Isaiah 35:5-6 and 61:1. Why did Jesus answer John the way He did?
10. John has his moment of doubt. Can doubts and faith co-exist? Do our circumstances today affect our view of Jesus' credibility, as it did with John?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 24, NO ORDINARY MAN

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Review the story of the soils (p. 335-336). Which best fits your faith walk?
2. Who do the shepherd and the woman in the lost sheep and lost coin parables represent? What do they value (p. 337)? Compare what God values in these parables to what the Pharisees value (see Luke 11:42-43 and 16:14.) Has your heart aligned more with God's or with the Pharisees' in the past week?
3. What does the Sermon on the Mount (p. 342, Matt. 6:25-34) teach you about worry and anxiety? In light of Jesus' teaching, what should be your relationship to wealth and material possessions?

DAY 2

1. Describe the Gerasene demoniac before and after his encounter with Jesus (p. 343-344). Compare this with Paul's description of every believer in Ephesians 2:1-10. What can you learn from this man about gratitude?
2. Review the healing of the woman with the bleeding disorder (p. 344-345) and then look up Leviticus 15:25-30. What do you suppose her life had been like for the past twelve years? How do you treat social outcasts and the infirm?
3. Jesus said to the crowd who followed Him, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill" (p. 349). Have you ever looked to Jesus to take care of your Lower Story needs? What is the right balance between Lower Story needs and an Upper Story perspective?

DAY 3

1. Jesus' miracles were not random; they showed his power over different forces in this world. What forces did He conquer? What areas of your life do you need to show more trust?
2. If you could go back in time and be an eyewitness to the Sermon on the Mount or experience any one of His miracles firsthand which would you choose and why?