

Journey To The Cross

LESSON 1 . . .

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

After more than 1,900 years, with all the social, democratic, and scientific achievements of mankind, Jesus Christ is still recognized by Christians and non-Christians alike as the greatest figure in any realm of human history. On any list of history's greatest men, the name of Jesus of Nazareth would be without rival in the number one position. More pages are printed about Jesus every week and more of His teachings are quoted every day than any hundred of the world's greatest people. Every week millions of dollars are given to institutions that seek to promote and propagate His teachings.

Any serious student of Jesus' life will be dumbfounded when he realizes the greatness, the influence, and the following without decline of the Man of Galilee, and will come to see the certainty of the fact that surely some day the promise of Philippians 2:10-11 will be fulfilled. What is this promise, and how does Jesus' continued influence today confirm it?

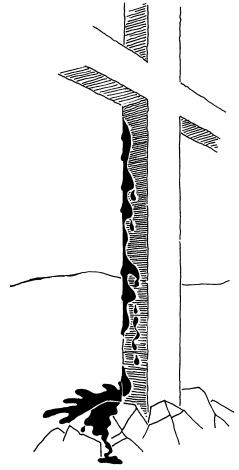
To have a better understanding of Jesus and the importance of His life, we must first look at world conditions during the time period in which He came to earth.

A. The History and Government of Rome

At the time of Jesus, the Romans dominated the civilized world. Rome was founded in the 8th century B.C. and became a republican form of government in the 5th century B.C. Pompey and Julius Caesar had extended Roman domination to include most of the eastern world. After Augustus (Octavian) defeated Antony and Cleopatra in a naval battle off the coast of Greece in 31 B.C., Rome moved into a period of peace and world domination.

Augustus set up a government that would become Rome's greatest contribution to the world. This government has been a pattern for scores of nations since then.

Centered in Rome, this government had two principal branches—the emperor and the senate. Ideally, the senate was to check and balance the power of the emperor, but the emperor had the power to remove a senator



from office, so the emperor had almost absolute power. He appointed rulers in various provinces of His empire.

In Palestine the Romans appointed native rulers who pledged loyalty and service to Rome in return for position and military protection. One such ruler we need to know about to understand Palestine at the time of Christ is Herod the Great, who ruled Palestine from 37 to 4 B.C.

According to Matthew 2:13-16, what infamous act was Herod the Great guilty of at the birth of Christ?

Herod the Great was a cruel and ruthless man, who is also credited in secular history with killing two of his wives and three of his own sons. However, Herod was an efficient ruler and gifted politician.

Because his ancestry was Idumean (Edomite), the Jews resented and hated him. Probably his greatest attempt to win the friendship of the Jews was the remodeling of the temple in Jerusalem. The renovated temple was magnificent, and its beauty dazzled visitors from around the world. However, even that did not succeed in winning the loyalty of the Jews.

Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. and left his dynasty to his sons. Lacking their father's ability and political know-how, the sons had to divide Palestine into separate provinces for each to rule. By looking at the map on page 15, list the provinces ruled by Herod's sons named below: (Also, see Luke 3:1.)

Archelaus (R-kuh-lay-us) (*Matt. 2:22*) _____

Herod Philip (*Matt. 14:3 & Mk 6:17*) _____

Herod Antipas (*Matt. 14:1-11 & Mk 6:14-23*) _____

Who was governor of Judea and Samaria at the time of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion (see Luke 23:1-5)?

B. The Religious Setting of Palestine

It is believed that about 4 million Jews lived in the Roman Empire, but only about 700,000 lived in Palestine. In Galilee and Decapolis, Gentiles outnumbered Jews. Therefore, even in Palestine various religions were prominent. The masses yearned for a God who loved them and could meet their needs. The religions of the Greeks and Romans—Gnosticism,

Epicureanism, and Stoicism—had left the generation of the 1st century skeptical of religion altogether.

Even Judaism, the worship of Jehovah, had become a vain and empty religion by the time of Christ. Describe the hypocrisy of Judaism as revealed by Jesus Himself in the following verses:

Matthew 23:1-6 _____

Matthew 23:13-15 _____

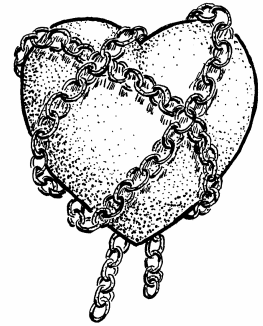
Matthew 23:23-28 _____

All the religions of Jesus' day left their followers engulfed in darkness, without hope or purpose. There was a deep, persistent longing for truth and religious fulfillment. Little did they know the God for whom they hungered and thirsted would come to be with them in flesh and blood—Jesus Christ.

C. The Morality of the Roman Empire

Before we study further, it must be noted there were some moral and decent people, like Seneca, in the Roman Empire, but they had no authoritative voice to combat the evils of their day. From reading the epistles in the NT one will quickly see sexual sins usually top the list when describing the people of Jesus' time. Every kind of sexual relationship has been attributed to the pagan gods and their worshippers. Many pagan temples had priestesses who were nothing more than prostitutes. Slave girls were often victims of immorality in temple worship.

Immorality was the fad of this era. Obscene pictures decorated the outside walls of dwellings for everyone to see. Divorce was at pandemic proportions, and family life was falling apart. Infanticide was socially acceptable. Unwanted infants were left in the street, or pitched in a ditch to die from exposure. It has been said cartloads of babies' skeletons could be taken from the bottom of the Tiber River.



Unwanted children were also abandoned in the city forum, on a hillside, or even in the streets. Often, deserted girls were picked up to be reared as prostitutes. Young boys would have their legs and arms broken and twisted so they could be used as deformed beggars to touch the emotions of passers-by.

In contrast to all this, what did the Lord Jesus teach concerning children, according to Matthew 18:1-6, Mark 9:36-37, and Luke 9:47-48?

Thousands of people were murdered at the gladiatorial games; in fact, hundreds or thousands might be slain in a single performance.

Political corruption, business fraud, immense immorality, breakdown in families, and the lack of any religion that gave real hope left many people in a state of depression and emptiness that led them to suicide.

Knowing this background, one can better understand Galatians 4:3-4: *Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: But when the **FULNESS OF TIME** was come, God sent forth His son, made of a woman, made under the Law.*

What do you think is the meaning of the phrase *fulness of time* in Galatians 4:4?

To begin comprehending God's love, one must realize it was this wicked Roman world, as well as our own, to which John 3:16 refers.

