

The Better Life Bible

New Testament

Dan Sindlinger

Lulu.com

The **Better Life Bible**

by **Dan Sindlinger**

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Preface

This translation is geared to people who have a busy lifestyle with limited time to read and study the Bible.

The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language during the first century C.E. The translator has attempted to accurately convey the meaning in a clear and natural manner. To convey the meaning clearly, it was often necessary to include implied information, eliminate redundancies, and leave out trivial information that distracts the reader from the focus of a particular context. To convey the meaning naturally, it was necessary to follow the linguistic and logical patterns of English instead of duplicating the patterns of the original Greek language.

Since translation cannot occur without interpretation, the translator reflects his understanding of the Greek text. Some people may disagree with his interpretation, but that will hopefully motivate them to read other translations of the Bible to form their own opinion.

The translator of *The Better Life Bible* is Dan Sindlinger, who graduated from Taylor University and attended the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the University of Washington, the University of North Dakota, the University of Texas, the University of Oklahoma, and the University of Liberia. He supervised Bible translation projects for six years among the Gola people of Liberia, West Africa, and ten years among the Lakota Sioux Indians of South Dakota. He also worked for the Harley Davidson motorcycle company for six years and a graphic arts firm for four. He has taught (gratis) New Testament Greek for 15 years and Biblical Hebrew for five.

The translator expresses his deep appreciation to all those who contributed toward this project, especially his devoted wife, without whose willingness to work full time to support them financially for the past seven years this project would not have been completed. She and Mike Loser deserve special thanks for reviewing the entire translation and offering helpful suggestions, as does Wayne Leman for setting up a web page.

The reader may like to know that the term *God's advice* is frequently used in this translation to express Greek terms that are often translated *word*, *law*, and *truth*. Also, first century place names are frequently replaced by current ones.

The palm tree on the front cover is a symbol of victory and joy. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, a lot of people waved palm branches, honoring him as the one who would lead them to a better life.

Contents

Matthew	7
Mark	59
Luke	93
John	149
Acts	183
Romans	233
1 Corinthians	245
2 Corinthians	257
Galatians	265
Ephesians	271
Philippians	275
Colossians	279
1 Thessalonians	283
2 Thessalonians	285
1 Timothy	287
2 Timothy	293
Titus	297
Philemon	299
Hebrews	301
James	309
1 Peter	313
2 Peter	317
1 John	319
2 John	323
3 John	325
Jude	327
Revelation	329



The Life of Jesus according to MATTHEW

Introduction

1 The following account highlights the life of Jesus Christ, the descendant of the famous Jewish leader David, whose ancestor was Abraham.

Jesus Is Born

A young woman named Mary became pregnant while she was engaged to a man named Joseph. Since they hadn't had sexual relations with each other, he assumed that she had relations with another man. Instead of publicly embarrassing her for this, he decided to break their engagement privately. But before he did, a messenger from God spoke to him in a dream:

“Mary didn't have sexual relations with another man as you think. It was God who caused her to become pregnant. So get married as you had planned and name the child *Jesus*, which means *helper*, because he will help people follow God's advice.”

Soon after this, Mary and Joseph were married, but they refrained from having sexual relations until after Mary delivered the child, whom they named *Jesus*. Many years before this, one of God's spokesmen predicted a young woman would bear a son who would be God's special messenger.

Since Jesus was born into a Jewish family, his ancestry was very important. His family tree includes 14 generations (900 years) from Abraham to the famous leader David, another 14 generations (400 years) from David to the time the Jewish people were taken captive by the Babylonians, and another 14 generations (530 years) from that time to Jesus:

MATTHEW

Abraham

Isaac
Jacob
Judah and his brothers
Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar
Hezron
Ram
Amminadab
Nahshon
Salmon
Boaz, whose mother was Rahab
Obed, whose mother was Ruth
Jesse
the famous leader **David**

Solomon, whose mother was Bathsheba
Rehoboam
Abijah
Asa
Jehoshaphat
Jehoram
Uzziah
Jotham
Ahaz
Hezekiah
Manasseh
Amon
Josiah
Jehoiachin and his brothers, born during **the time the Jewish people were taken captive by the Babylonians (598 BC)**

Shealtiel
Zerubbabel
Abiud
Eliakim
Azor
Zadok
Achim
Eliud
Eleazar
Matthan
Jacob
Joseph, whose wife Mary gave birth to
Jesus, the one God promised would help people enjoy a better life

MATTHEW

Some Astronomers Follow a Star to Find Jesus

2 Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in the district of Judea, where Herod the Great was the Roman leader at the time. Shortly after Jesus' birth, some astronomers who lived east of Judea observed a new star which they believed signified the birth of a new leader. They wanted to honor this newly born leader, so they decided to begin looking for him in the capital city of Jerusalem.

When Herod and his supporters heard about this potential threat to his power, they became very upset. So Herod summoned the religious leaders and asked where they thought this child was born. Quoting one of God's spokesmen who lived long ago, they suggested he was born in the small town of Bethlehem, just a few miles south of Jerusalem.

Herod then met separately with the astronomers to find out when they had first seen the new star. After getting the information he wanted, he suggested they go to Bethlehem to look for the child. Pretending he also wanted to honor the child, he told them to let him know where the boy was as soon as they found him. As they were leaving, they saw the star again and followed it until it settled above a house in Bethlehem. When they entered the house, they were thrilled to find the boy with his mother Mary, and they honored him with expensive gifts of gold, incense and perfume. Before the astronomers left Bethlehem, God warned them in a dream not to tell Herod where the child was, so they bypassed Jerusalem on their way home.

Herod Tries to Get Rid of Jesus

A messenger from God also warned Joseph in a dream of Herod's scheme,

“Herod is planning to send soldiers to find Jesus and kill him, so you need to take him and his mother to Egypt right away. Stay there until I tell you it's safe to return.”

Later that night, Joseph began the long journey to Egypt with Mary and Jesus.

When Herod discovered that the astronomers didn't tell him they had found Jesus, he was furious. Since he was convinced it was less than two years since they had seen the new star, and he assumed Jesus was still in Bethlehem, Herod ordered his soldiers to kill all the boys under two years of age in and around the town. Their mothers were so devastated that no one could comfort them. Long before this, God's spokesman Jeremiah reported the same reaction to a similar tragedy in a town named Ramah.

When Herod the Great passed away, God's messenger spoke to Joseph in another dream while he was still in Egypt,

MATTHEW

"It's safe for you to return to Palestine with Mary and Jesus now because the one who wanted to kill him has died."

On the way back to Palestine, Joseph heard that Herod's wicked son Archelaus had assumed leadership over the district of Judea, so he was afraid to return there. God's messenger then spoke to Joseph in another dream, advising him to raise Jesus in the town of Nazareth, in the district of Galilee, where God's spokesmen predicted he would grow up.

John Symbolizes the People's Desire to Change

3 When Jesus was about 30 years of age, a man named John began encouraging people to follow God's advice, as God's spokesman Isaiah had done long ago.

Even though John spent most of his time in a remote area of Judea, where he wore clothes made of camel fur and ate grasshoppers and honey, a lot of people went to hear him share God's advice for a better life. They came from Jerusalem and other towns in Judea, and even from towns across the Jordan River. Many of them wanted a better life, so they asked John to rinse them in the Jordan River to symbolize their desire to clean up their lives. John explained that he could only symbolize their willingness to follow God's advice, but someone else would help them actually do it.

When some religious leaders asked John to rinse them, he replied,

"Don't assume that you'll enjoy a better life just because you're descendants of Abraham. You need to make an effort, like everyone else. As you know, when a tree doesn't bear good fruit, a farmer usually chops it down and burns it; and when a farmer harvests his crops, he keeps the grain and burns the husks. A tree accomplishes its purpose when it bears good fruit, as a crop does when it produces grain. You can accomplish your purpose in life by following God's advice."

Before long, Jesus came from his home district of Galilee and asked John to rinse him, too. At first John refused,

"*You* should be rinsing *me*, not the other way around."

But Jesus replied,

"I want you to rinse me to demonstrate that I'm also committed to following God's advice."

So John complied. As Jesus came out of the water, John saw a dove land on Jesus and he heard a voice in the sky, both of which confirmed that Jesus was God's special messenger.

MATTHEW

Satan Tests Jesus' Character

4 Soon after this, Jesus went to a remote area where Satan, who personifies self-centeredness, tested his character. Since Satan knew that Jesus hadn't eaten for 40 days, he began,

“If you are God's special messenger, you should be able to change these stones into loaves of bread to satisfy your hunger.”

Quoting God's spokesman Moses who lived long ago, Jesus replied,

“Following God's advice is more important than satisfying my hunger.”

Satan then took Jesus up to the top level of the temple in Jerusalem where he continued,

“If you are God's special messenger, you should be able to jump from this height and not get hurt because one of God's spokesmen claimed that God's messengers would protect you from even stubbing your toe.”

Jesus replied with another quote from Moses,

“No one should ever test God's power.”

Satan then took Jesus on top of the highest mountain where he displayed all the wealth and power in the world,

“If you submit to me, I'll give you all of this.”

Quoting Moses again, Jesus responded,

“People should never follow advice that contradicts God's.”

Satan had no more tests, so he left Jesus alone.

Jesus Begins to Share God's Advice for a Better Life

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he returned to his hometown of Nazareth before continuing to Capernaum, on the northwest coast of Lake Galilee. Many years earlier, God's spokesman Isaiah predicted Jesus would go to this area, where the descendants of Zebulun and Naphtali had settled. These people were miserable until Jesus went there and explained that they could enjoy a better life if they honored God and cared about others.

As Jesus was walking along the shore of Lake Galilee one day, he invited two fishermen, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, to join him in sharing God's advice for a better life. Peter and Andrew promptly went along with Jesus, leaving their fishnets behind. A little later, Jesus invited

MATTHEW

two more fishermen, James and his brother John, who were repairing their nets in a boat with their father Zebedee. They were so anxious to go along that they left right away.

Jesus and his four followers traveled throughout the district of Galilee. Whenever he had the opportunity, he shared God's advice in the local worship centers and healed people with a variety of illnesses.

As people further north in Syria heard about Jesus, they came to ask him to heal many of their friends and relatives who were tormented by various illnesses and harmful spirits. By this time, people from Galilee, Judea, and even the Decapolis area across the Jordan River had begun following him.

Jesus Explains How People Can Enjoy a Better Life

5 Jesus went up on a hillside so his audience could see and hear him better as he spoke,

“To enjoy a better life, you must improve your attitude and behavior toward God and others. This involves feeling sincerely sorry for the unkind things you've said and done in the past, and being willing to follow God's advice. That includes being honest, making every effort to restore broken relationships, and helping others in need.

“Your life will make more sense when you realize your purpose for existence. Let me illustrate this with a couple of examples. As you know, one of the uses of salt is to improve the taste of food. But if salt loses its flavor, it no longer serves that purpose.

“The purpose of a lamp is to help people see when it's dark. Can you imagine lighting a lamp and then putting it in a box? That would defeat its purpose. People usually put their lamp on a table where it can serve its purpose well.

“Your purpose in life is similar to theirs – to help others enjoy a better life. The more you do so, the more they'll realize how much God cares for them.

“Even if others give you a hard time for following God's advice, as some people did to God's spokesmen long ago, you'll enjoy life more because you'll be living the kind of life God originally intended.

MATTHEW

Jesus Clarifies God's Timeless Advice

“What I’m going to tell you now doesn’t contradict what God’s spokesmen told you long ago. No one should eliminate a single detail from the advice God gave you then. But I need to clarify some of it because it has been distorted over the years. If you really want to enjoy a better life, you need to follow all of God’s advice and encourage others to do so. Putting up a good front, as some of the religious leaders do, accomplishes nothing.

“You’re all familiar with God’s advice that *You should not murder*. Obviously, murder can’t be tolerated. But the selfish motive to harm someone else reveals itself in other behavior such as verbal abuse, which is also unacceptable. Such behavior makes life very unpleasant and breaks down relationships between people.

“It’s more important to restore broken relationships than to make material offerings to God. So if you’ve harmed someone in any way, you should promptly apologize and repair the damage you’ve caused so that person won’t press charges and have you imprisoned. Once you’re in jail, you’ll be confined until your sentence is served, and that just delays the opportunity to restore your relationship.

“God also advised that *You should not break up your marriage to marry someone else*. In fact, you shouldn’t even *want* to marry someone else. It would be better to stop associating with that person so you don’t cause a lot of misery for yourself and your family.

“As you know, it’s the custom for a man to give his wife an official document when he divorces her. But it’s important that people accept responsibility for their actions when they insist on getting divorced. If a man divorces his wife for some selfish reason, he should accept responsibility for ruining their marriage. If he encourages the woman he wants to marry to get a divorce, he should accept responsibility for ruining that marriage, too.

“So you see, it’s not just your actions that make life miserable. It’s the selfish motives behind them.

“God also advised that *You shouldn’t break a promise*. Some of you often mention God in your promises to make them more convincing. But when you do that, you imply that your word isn’t

MATTHEW

trustworthy by itself. You need to try harder to keep your word so others can depend on what you say.

“You’ve heard God’s advice regarding *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. The intent of this was not to condone revenge but to make sure people receive appropriate consequences for their actions. Instead of seeking revenge, you should treat others with kindness. So don’t seek revenge if someone assaults you or steals something from you, but be generous when someone asks you for a gift, a loan, or some physical help.

“God also advised that *You should care about others*. Over the years, some people have added the phrase *and hate your enemies*, but that’s not part of God’s advice. Since God provides sunshine and rain throughout the world, it’s obvious that God cares about everyone, good or bad. God wants you to do the same, so you should pray for those who give you a hard time. If you only care about your friends, you aren’t doing anything special because even people who don’t follow God’s advice care about their friends. So you should try harder to do what God knows is best for everyone.

Jesus Discourages Hypocrisy & Selfish Recognition

6 “If you want to please God, you should have a humble attitude in everything you do. Don’t make a big show when you help people in need, so others will pat you on the back. God is aware of everything you do, so you can help others without anyone else knowing it and still receive God’s approval, which is all that really matters.

“And don’t try to impress others when you pray. God is the only one who needs to know when you’re praying. Those who pray to false gods pray long prayers because they think their gods will hear them if they pray long enough. Don’t waste your time doing that because God knows what you need before you even ask. Here’s my suggestion for a prayer that covers the basics,

Help us, God,
to give you the respect you deserve,
to follow your advice for a better life,
to obtain food and shelter,
to overlook the faults of others as you overlook ours,
and to overcome our self-centeredness.

MATTHEW

“Notice that I’ve included a reference to overlooking the faults of others. If you expect God to overlook your faults, you must also be willing to overlook the faults of others.

“One more suggestion. When you skip meals to focus on following God’s advice, don’t make it obvious to impress others. As I’ve said before, God is aware of everything you do, so you can skip meals without others knowing it and still receive God’s approval, which is all that really matters.

Jesus Explains What Is Important in Life

“Where you put your time and effort reflects what you consider important in life. Don’t waste them on accumulating possessions, which eventually wear out and can be stolen. When you help others in need, you’ll enjoy a more meaningful life. The decision is yours. You can spend your time and effort pursuing your own selfish interests or helping others, but you can’t do both at the same time.

“Don’t be concerned about having enough food and clothing for the distant future. There are more urgent matters that need your attention. As you know, the birds don’t worry about what they’ll eat from one year to the next because God provides the food they need. Since people are a lot more important than birds, God will surely provide the food you need, too. Remember, storing up food for the distant future doesn’t guarantee that you’ll live long enough to eat it.

“As for clothing, wild flowers don’t worry about what they’ll ‘wear’ because God provides beautiful ‘clothing’ for them as they grow. Even your wealthy leader Solomon who lived long ago didn’t look as nice in his expensive clothes as one of these flowers. Since God provides ‘clothing’ for the flowers that only last a short while, God will surely provide clothes for you, too.

“Self-centered people often worry if they’ll have enough food, water and clothing for the future. God knows you need these things. So if you help others now, God will motivate others to help you later. There’s enough to be concerned about today without worrying about the distant future.

MATTHEW

Jesus Emphasizes “the Golden Rule”

7 “The underlying theme of God’s advice is this,

Always treat others the way
you would like to be treated.

“So stop pointing out other people’s faults. The more you point out theirs, the more they’ll point out yours. Even when you think you have good advice for people, it might be better not to give it. Unless you practice what you preach, others will just resent your advice and consider you a hypocrite.

“Whenever you need God’s help, don’t hesitate to ask. As you know, parents try to give their children whatever they need. But God will help you even more than your parents.

“If you want to enjoy a better life, you’ll need to follow God’s advice. If you don’t make the effort, you’ll continue living the same miserable life a lot of other people do. But be careful. Some people appear to be as harmless as sheep, but they’re as dangerous as a pack of wolves because they threaten your enjoyment of life by discouraging you from following God’s advice. You’ll be able to tell who they are by their behavior, similar to the way you can tell whether a tree is healthy or not by its fruit. A healthy tree produces delicious fruit, but when the fruit is no longer edible, the owner usually chops the tree down and burns it because it has lost its purpose for existence. So look out for people who discourage you from following God’s advice, because they’re not fulfilling their purpose for existence.

“As I’ve said before, putting on an act accomplishes nothing. Only those who make a sincere effort to follow God’s advice will enjoy a better life. A time will come when a lot of people will claim that they followed God’s advice and that I helped them do a lot of amazing things such as sending away harmful spirits. But I’ll have to remind them that they never did any of those things.

“Those who make a sincere effort to follow God’s advice are like the wise builder whose house was able to withstand a violent rainstorm because he built it on a solid foundation. But those who pretend to follow God’s advice are like the foolish builder whose house totally collapsed during the rainstorm because he built it on shifting sand.”

The people were more impressed by what Jesus said than anything they had ever heard from their religious leaders.

MATTHEW

Jesus Heals a Man with a Serious Skin Disease

8 A lot of people went along with Jesus when he headed toward Capernaum. One of the men with a serious skin disease called leprosy asked Jesus to heal him. Jesus did so but asked him not to tell anyone until the religious leader publicly confirmed it. Jesus reminded the man to give something to God to show his appreciation, as God's spokesman Moses instructed their ancestors long ago.

Jesus Heals a Roman Military Officer's Aide

As Jesus and his followers entered Capernaum, a Roman military officer asked Jesus to heal one of his aides, who was paralyzed with terrible pain. When Jesus suggested going to the officer's home to heal the man, the officer replied,

"I know Jewish people aren't allowed to enter a non-Jewish person's house, so I realize you can't enter mine. But I'm sure you can heal my aide without even seeing him. As a military officer, I understand the concept of authority because I follow the orders of my superiors, and my soldiers and aides follow mine."

Jesus was so impressed by the officer's confidence that he commented about it to his followers,

"This non-Jewish man has more confidence in me than most Jewish people have. In fact, a lot of non-Jewish people will enjoy a better life because they follow God's advice, as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did long ago. But many Jewish people who refuse to follow it will continue to live a miserable life."

Jesus then told the officer that his aide would be well when he returned home.

Jesus Heals a Lot More People

Jesus and his followers continued walking to Simon Peter's home. When they arrived, Peter's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a fever. After Jesus healed her, she got up and began preparing food for them.

That evening, as God's spokesman Isaiah had predicted long before, Jesus healed a lot of other people tormented by a variety of illnesses and harmful spirits.

Since Jesus had helped a lot of people in that area, he decided to go to the other side of Lake Galilee to help others. When one of the religious leaders boasted that he would go wherever Jesus goes, Jesus responded,

MATTHEW

“I plan to travel all over the country, so I won’t be going home at the end of each day, as even animals and birds do. If you want to go along with me, you need to be willing to accept that kind of lifestyle.”

When another of Jesus’ followers wanted to delay their departure until he could make arrangements for his father’s burial, Jesus replied,

“Burying the dead is an important duty in our culture, but it’s even more important to encourage people who are still alive to follow God’s advice. The members of your family who have no interest in that can make arrangements for your father’s burial.”

Jesus Calms a Violent Windstorm

Later, as Jesus and his followers were crossing the lake, a violent windstorm came up and waves began pouring into their boat. Jesus had fallen asleep, so his followers woke him to warn him that they could all drown. Seeing how terrified they were, he reminded them,

“You wouldn’t need to be concerned if you had more confidence in God.”

They were amazed as he calmed the wind and water, realizing that he was no ordinary human being.

Jesus Frees Two Men Harassed by Harmful Spirits

Jesus and his followers then sailed south toward the town of Gadara. Two men were living along the coast in a burial cave because they were harassed by harmful spirits. Their behavior was so frightening that people stayed away from them.

When Jesus and his followers arrived on shore, the two men met him as he was getting off the boat. The spirits harassing the men realized that Jesus was a special messenger from God, so they knew they were in big trouble. They didn’t want Jesus to send them far away, so they asked him to send them into the herd of pigs grazing nearby. As soon as he did, the large herd ran down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned.

The pig herders told a lot of people in the nearby town what had happened. When they heard about the massive loss of pigs, they asked Jesus to leave because they were afraid something similar could happen to them.

MATTHEW

Jesus Heals a Man Who Is Paralyzed

9 Jesus and his followers then sailed back to Capernaum where some men brought a man on a stretcher who was paralyzed. When Jesus saw how persistent they were to reach him, he told the man that God would not punish him for failing to follow God's advice.

Some of the religious leaders considered this an insult to God since they believed that only God's spokesmen should make such a statement. Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he said,

“I'll heal this man's physical condition to prove that I'm one of God's spokesmen. But restoring his physical condition is only part of helping him enjoy a better life.”

As soon as Jesus healed him, the man stood up, picked up the stretcher and began walking home. The people who witnessed the event were amazed and thanked God for enabling Jesus to heal the man.

Some Religious Leaders Question Jesus' Activities

Jesus then went to the tax collector's office where a man named Matthew was collecting taxes. When Jesus invited Matthew to join him in sharing God's advice with others, he readily agreed.

Later that day, Jesus and his followers were eating dinner at Matthew's home with some tax collectors and others who didn't follow God's advice very well. Some of the religious leaders wouldn't associate with such people, so they asked Jesus' followers why he was associating with them. When Jesus overheard the question, he responded,

“As you know, people who are well don't need a doctor, so people who already follow God's advice don't need my help. But I'm here to help those who want to improve their attitude and behavior toward God and others. One of God's spokesmen told people long ago that helping others is more important than making material offerings to God.”

The religious group known as the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus' forerunner John often skipped meals to spend time asking God for direction in their lives. When John's followers noticed that Jesus' followers were eating dinner, they asked why his followers weren't skipping meals like the others. He used the analogy of a groom and his guests at a wedding reception to explain that his followers didn't need to skip meals while he was with them. They could skip all the meals they wanted to after he was gone. Using two more analogies of cloth and goat-skin wine containers, he implied that people should allow some flexibility for how others follow God's advice.

MATTHEW

Jesus Heals Even More People

At that point, one of the community leaders whose daughter had just died asked Jesus to bring her back to life. As Jesus and his followers were walking to the man's home, a woman who had excessive menstrual bleeding for 12 years approached Jesus from behind. Since she had heard that Jesus healed others, she was sure she would be healed, too, if she could just get close enough to touch him. So she worked her way through the crowd and got close enough to touch the edge of his coat. As soon as she did, she was healed. Jesus turned around and commended her for her confidence.

When Jesus and his followers arrived at the community leader's home, several people were wailing and playing flutes to mourn the girl's death. Jesus told them it wasn't necessary because she wasn't permanently dead. They laughed when he said this because they had never seen a dead person come back to life. After he asked them to leave, he went inside and brought the girl back to life. Everyone in the entire area soon heard the news.

As Jesus was walking to another house, two men who were blind asked him to heal them because they had heard that he was the descendant of their famous leader David, who would help people enjoy a better life. After they assured Jesus that they believed he could heal them, he touched their eyes as he restored their sight. He asked them not to tell anyone, but they were so excited to see again that they told everyone they met.

Before long, some people asked Jesus to free a man of a harmful spirit which had taken away his ability to speak. When Jesus sent the spirit away, the man could talk again. Most of the people who witnessed the event were amazed because they had never seen anything like this before. But some of the religious leaders tried to ruin Jesus' popularity by telling them that Satan enabled him to do it.

Jesus and his followers then traveled to a lot of other towns and villages. When people gathered in the local worship centers, he explained how they could enjoy a better life, and he healed a lot of people with a variety of illnesses. He was concerned that there were so many who needed help. They were like a flock of sheep that didn't have a shepherd, because they weren't getting the help they needed. So he turned to his followers and said,

“This is like harvesting a large crop that requires a lot of workers to accomplish the task. You'll need to ask God to motivate more people to help meet this tremendous need.”

MATTHEW

Jesus Chooses 12 of His Followers to Share God's Advice

10 Jesus then chose 12 of his followers to join him in sharing God's advice for a better life:

Simon, whom Jesus had nicknamed *Peter*
Andrew, Simon's brother
James, Zebedee's son
John, James' brother
Philip
Bartholomew
Thomas
Matthew, who had been the tax collector
another James, the son of Alphaeus
Thaddaeus
another Simon, who actively resisted Roman oppression
Judas Iscariot, who eventually turned against Jesus

Jesus enabled these men to heal people with a variety of illnesses, to free those harassed by harmful spirits, and to bring the dead back to life. He asked them to focus more on the misguided Jewish people than on the non-Jewish people in the district of Samaria. He told them they didn't need to take along any food, extra clothing or money because the people who followed God's advice would readily extend their hospitality. He reminded them that some people would refuse to listen, like the people in the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah long ago,

"As you know, sheep are an easy target for wolves. You'll be an easy target, too, for people who refuse to follow God's advice. So try to be as wise as an owl but as harmless as a dove.

"As you also know, one's followers usually suffer the same fate as their leader. So those who detest me because they think I'm Satan will surely hate you as well. They'll blame you for the dissension that following God's advice creates, and they'll look for any excuse to persuade the authorities to arrest and publicly torture you. If you see this about to happen, go on to another town in Palestine. I'll join you before you reach them all.

"If you're arrested, don't worry about what you'll say in court. Just share God's advice so the Roman leaders and spectators will have an opportunity to hear it.

"God cares about every single bird, even those worth very little money. But you're more important to God than a whole flock of birds. God knows everything about you, even how many strands

MATTHEW

of hair are on your head. You can rest assured that God will take care of you, no matter what situation you face. So don't be afraid if your life is threatened. The most that people can do is destroy your physical body. You should be more concerned about God, who determines your destiny after death.

“People within the same family may respond differently to God's advice, and this could create considerable conflict. Those who reject God's advice may even try to get rid of their own family members who accept it. But those who follow God's advice, despite the animosity of others, will enjoy a much better life. As they begin to sincerely care about others beyond their own immediate family to the point of being willing to die for them, they'll experience the real meaning of life as God intended, and they'll demonstrate it by extending their hospitality to you.”

Jesus Reassures His Forerunner John

11 After Jesus' 12 chosen followers left, Jesus continued sharing God's advice in the nearby towns. His forerunner John was still in prison at the time. Since John had heard that Jesus was healing people, he sent some of his followers to verify that Jesus was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life. Jesus reassured John's followers by pointing out that he healed a lot of people who were blind, deaf, unable to walk, or had a serious skin disease called leprosy, and he brought people who had died back to life. He explained that he was encouraging people to follow God's advice for a better life, which many people were already experiencing.

After John's followers left, Jesus spoke to the others,

“When one of God's spokesmen predicted that Elijah would be my forerunner, he was actually referring to John, who has been an outstanding spokesman for God because he didn't try to impress you by telling you what you wanted to hear. Ever since he began encouraging people to follow God's advice for a better life, a lot have been striving to be a part of it.

“A lot of you are like children who refuse to play a game when invited. John and I have explained that the game of life can be more enjoyable when you follow God's advice. Instead, you make flimsy excuses, such as claiming that John had a harmful spirit because he didn't socialize with people as much as you thought he should; and you criticize me for socializing too much because I associate with tax collectors and others who don't follow God's

MATTHEW

advice very well. If you were wise, you'd join our version of the game of life and discover how much more enjoyable it can be."

Jesus Points out What People Are Missing

Jesus then directed his comments to the people who had come from the towns north of Lake Galilee: Bethsaida, Chorazin, and the prominent town of Capernaum. He pointed out that even though they had seen him do a lot of amazing things, most of them were still unwilling to improve their attitude and behavior toward God and others,

"If the people who lived in the towns of Sodom, Tyre and Sidon long ago had seen me do as many amazing things as you have, a lot of them would have changed their ways, and Sodom would still be in existence today. But since you refuse to follow God's advice, your life will be as miserable as theirs. Although most of you are content with your self-centered lifestyle, I'm glad some of you realize there's a better way to live."

After thanking God that God's advice is simple enough for anyone to understand, Jesus reminded them that he was God's special messenger and then added,

"If you're tired of living just to satisfy your own selfish desires, you should follow my example to care about others and help those in need. Then you'll enjoy a much more useful and meaningful life."

Jesus Clarifies the Purpose of the Weekly Day of Rest

12 Later, as Jesus and his followers were walking beside a wheat field on the weekly day of rest, his followers were so hungry they picked some grain and ate it. This was an acceptable custom, but some of the religious leaders were upset that they did this on the weekly day of rest. When the religious leaders confronted Jesus about it, he replied,

"Don't you remember what our famous leader David did long ago when his soldiers needed food? He went to the temple and asked one of the religious leaders for bread. The only bread available was the bread that had been offered to God on the weekly day of rest, which only the religious leaders were allowed to eat under normal circumstances. But the religious leader gave that bread to David for his soldiers because he knew they were hungry.

"The purpose of the weekly day of rest is to refresh people after a week of hard work, but prohibiting people from eating defeats that

MATTHEW

purpose. Since my followers only picked enough grain to satisfy their immediate hunger, they didn't violate the weekly day of rest."

Jesus informed the religious leaders that they had their priorities reversed,

"You criticize my followers for satisfying their hunger on the weekly day of rest, and yet you make special offerings on that day. You should be more concerned about helping people in need on the day of rest than about making material offerings."

Jesus then went to the local worship center where there was a man with a disabled arm. Some religious leaders insisted that only the critically ill should be healed on the weekly day of rest. When they asked Jesus what his view was regarding healing on that day, he replied,

"If you had a sheep that fell into a hole on the weekly day of rest, you'd rescue it, wouldn't you? People are more valuable than sheep, so you should be even more concerned about them."

To demonstrate that people shouldn't hesitate to help others on the weekly day of rest, Jesus healed the man's arm. The religious leaders were very upset by this, so they began making plans to get rid of him. Since he knew what they were up to, he soon left the area. A lot of people went along with him, including many he had healed. He asked them not to tell others about their healing because he knew the religious leaders would increase their efforts to get rid of him before he was ready.

Despite opposition, God enabled Jesus to calmly share God's advice with everyone, as God's spokesman Isaiah had predicted long ago.

Jesus Defends His Connection with God

Some people then asked Jesus to free a man of a harmful spirit that had taken away his ability to see and speak. When Jesus sent the spirit away, the man could see and talk again. Those who witnessed the event were amazed and wondered if Jesus was the descendant of their famous leader David, who would help them enjoy a better life. Some of the religious leaders had heard how Jesus amazed the crowds by freeing people of harmful spirits, so they tried to ruin his popularity by claiming that Satan enabled him to do it. When Jesus overheard what the religious leaders were saying, he illustrated how ridiculous their suggestion was,

"Everyone knows that a military leader doesn't allow his soldiers to fight against each other, because that would weaken their

MATTHEW

strength against their opponent. If Satan enabled me to free people of harmful spirits, he would weaken his strength against God.

“Everyone also knows people must overpower others before they can do something against their will. When God enables me to free people of harmful spirits, I’m overpowering Satan because I’m doing this against his will.

“Where do your own followers think their ability to free people of harmful spirits comes from? Did you tell them it comes from Satan? Of course not, because they know that harmful spirits and Satan are on the same side against God.

“God overlooks all your faults but one – your stubborn refusal to let God help you improve your attitude and behavior.

“Most people can tell how healthy a tree is by its fruit. If the fruit is good, the tree is obviously healthy. People can also tell what others think by what they say. Those who tell the truth are honest. Those who distort the truth will eventually face the consequences for their dishonesty.”

When some of the religious leaders challenged Jesus to prove that he was God’s special messenger, he responded,

“The only thing that might convince you is that a lot of people are responding positively to my encouragement to follow God’s advice, as the people in Nineveh responded to God’s spokesman Jonah long ago. As you know, Jonah was in the belly of the huge sea creature a few days and nights before God brought him back on land. By the way, when I die, I’ll be in the grave the same amount of time before God brings me back to life.

“Unfortunately, some of you are like people who had a harmful spirit. When it was sent away, it looked for some place else to go. But since it didn’t find another home and they welcomed it back, it brought along seven other spirits that were even worse. In other words, you followed God’s advice for a while, but now you’re even more self-centered than you were before.”

While Jesus was speaking to the people inside someone’s home, his mother and half-brothers came to see him. It was too crowded to go inside, so they asked others to pass the word along that they were there. Jesus used their coming as an opportunity to explain that those who follow God’s advice are like members of his own family.

MATTHEW

Jesus Relates Sharing God's Advice to Spreading Seeds

13 Later that day, Jesus returned again to Lake Galilee. There were so many people who had gone along to hear God's advice that he spoke to them from a boat just offshore, while they listened on the beach. He used a lot of illustrations, such as this:

“One day a farmer spread some seeds by hand. As usual, they landed in a variety of places. Some seeds landed on hard ground, where the birds could easily snatch them. Some seeds landed in rocky soil where they began to sprout, but the sprouts soon withered and died because the rocks prevented their roots from growing. Some seeds landed among weeds that crowded the plants so much that they couldn't produce any grain. But some seeds landed on fertile soil and grew into plants that produced a lot of grain!”

Jesus Explains Why He Uses Illustrations

When some of Jesus' followers asked why he uses illustrations, he replied,

“Some of you already realize how much more enjoyable your life is since you've started following God's advice. But there are a lot of people who've heard it and seen the improvement it has made in other people's lives, but still don't understand what a difference it can make in their own. I use illustrations to relate God's advice to their everyday experiences to make it is easier for them to understand.

“A lot of God's spokesmen in the past would have loved to be in your shoes because you've not only had the opportunity to hear God's advice but to also see me demonstrate how to follow it. But even with this advantage, some of you don't understand because your minds are closed, as God's spokesman Isaiah predicted long ago.”

Jesus Explains His Illustration of Spreading Seeds

Jesus then explained his illustration about spreading seeds,

“I'm like the farmer who spreads the seeds. But instead of spreading seeds, I'm sharing God's advice for a better life.

“Some people are like the hard ground, where the seeds were eaten by the birds before they even had a chance to sprout. These

MATTHEW

people refuse to follow God's advice because they prefer their self-centered lifestyle.

"Some people are like the rocky soil in which the seeds began to sprout but died because the rocks prevented their roots from growing. These people begin to follow God's advice, but they stop when others give them a hard time.

"Some people are like the soil full of weeds, which crowded the plants so much that they couldn't produce any grain. These people also follow God's advice for a while, but they're so worried it might jeopardize their financial security or social status that they soon change their minds.

"Finally, some people are like the fertile soil that produced a lot of grain. These people diligently follow God's advice and help others enjoy a better life.

Jesus then added two more illustrations to show the potential of sharing God's advice with others,

"Sharing God's advice is like planting a tiny seed that grows into a plant large enough for the birds to build nests on its branches.

"Sharing God's advice is also like the yeast that spreads throughout a whole batch of dough."

Jesus Uses an Illustration about Weeds among Wheat

Jesus then used another illustration about weeds planted among wheat:

"People who follow God's advice are like the wheat that a farmer planted in a field. While everyone else was asleep, the farmer's enemy planted weeds among the wheat. As the wheat grew, so did the weeds. When the farmer's helpers noticed the weeds, they asked why they were so plentiful and if they should pull them out. He explained how the weeds got there but told his helpers not to pull them out because he didn't want any of the wheat damaged. He decided to let the weeds grow until the wheat was ready to be harvested, at which time his helpers could collect the wheat and burn the weeds."

As one of God's spokesmen predicted long ago, Jesus used a lot of illustrations to help people understand God's advice.

When Jesus' followers asked him to explain his illustration about weeds planted among wheat, he replied,

MATTHEW

“The farmer in my illustration represents me sharing God’s advice, and the field represents those who’ve had the opportunity to hear it. The wheat represents those who follow God’s advice, and the weeds represent those who refuse to follow it. The enemy who planted the weeds represents Satan. The farmer’s helpers represent my helpers, and the harvest time represents the beginning of a new era.

“The point of the illustration is this: people who refuse to follow God’s advice will continue to live a miserable, self-centered life. But those who follow it will enjoy a much better life.”

Jesus Shares Several More Illustrations

Jesus shared several more illustrations with his 12 chosen followers,

“Those who hear God’s advice should be like people who’ve discovered buried treasure on someone else’s land. After their discovery, they’re anxious to sell everything they own so they’ll have enough money to buy the property. Other people do the same thing when they find a rare and valuable object for sale. The correlation is this: those who hear God’s advice should be anxious to follow it.

“People who share God’s advice with others are like fishermen who separate the good fish from the bad. They help to distinguish those who choose to follow God’s advice from those who choose not to.”

After Jesus’ followers assured him that they understood his illustrations, he explained that his examples even help some of the religious leaders become more receptive to God’s advice since he relates it to their everyday experiences.

The People in Nazareth Disappoint Jesus

Some time later, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers returned to Nazareth, where he grew up. When he shared God’s advice with the people in the local worship center, a lot of people were very impressed by what he said and did. They realized he was an extraordinary person, but they found it difficult to accept because they knew his family. They knew that his stepfather Joseph was a carpenter, and they knew his mother Mary, his younger half-sisters, and his younger half-brothers: James, Joseph, Judas and Simon.

Acknowledging that God’s spokesmen usually receive less respect from people in their hometown, Jesus wasn’t surprised that the people who

MATTHEW

knew his family had difficulty accepting him for who he was. But he was disappointed that only a few had enough confidence in him to ask for healing.

Herodias Succeeds in Having John Executed

14 At this time, the Roman leader was Herod Antipas. His wife Herodias had become very angry with John, who rinsed people with water when they decided to follow God's advice. John was aware of the law against a woman remarrying before her former husband died, so he told Herod that his marriage to Herodias was illegal because her former husband (Herod's brother Phillip) was still alive. Since Herod began to consider the possibility of divorcing Herodias, she became so furious that she wanted John executed. But Herod didn't want to antagonize the people who considered John one of God's spokesmen, so he just had John arrested and put in jail.

On Herod's birthday some time later, Herodias seized the opportunity to get rid of John. During the celebration, she arranged for her daughter to dance for Herod and his guests. He was so pleased with her performance that he said he would give her whatever she wanted. When she asked her mother what she should request, her mother told her to ask Herod to execute John. When she did as her mother suggested, Herod's heart sank. But he couldn't break his promise with so many witnesses present, so he ordered his soldiers to execute John and take his head to her on a platter to verify his death.

When John's followers heard that he had been executed, they retrieved his body for burial and notified Jesus of his death.

Some time later, when Herod heard about all the amazing things Jesus was doing, he thought it was John, having come back to life.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Share Their Food

When Jesus heard about John's death, he decided to go to a place where he and his 12 chosen followers could be alone. Since they were on the shore of Lake Galilee, they got in a boat and headed up the coast. But a lot of people found out where they were going and arrived there first by running along the shore. Jesus was very concerned for the people, so he healed those who were ill.

That afternoon, some of Jesus' followers reminded him that it was getting late and suggested he tell the crowd of more than 5,000 to go to nearby villages to get something to eat. Instead, he encouraged his followers to share their own food, even though they only had five loaves of bread and two cooked fish.

MATTHEW

Jesus knew that would serve the purpose, so he asked the people to sit down on the grass and get ready to eat. After thanking God for the bread and fish, he cut them into pieces and gave them to his followers to distribute among the people. There was plenty of food for everyone, and even 12 baskets of leftovers!

Jesus Walks on Water

After the people had eaten, Jesus asked his 12 chosen followers to sail ahead of him to Bethsaida, on the northeastern coast of the lake. When the crowd left later that evening, he went up on a hill where he could see his followers rowing against a strong wind in the middle of the lake. Around dawn the next morning, they saw someone walking toward them on the water. They were terrified because they thought they were seeing a ghost. When Jesus identified himself, Peter asked if he could meet him on the water. Jesus agreed, so Peter got out of the boat and began walking toward him. But the wind and waves frightened Peter and he began to sink. As he yelled for Jesus to save him from drowning, Jesus took his hand and said,

“Where’s your confidence, Peter? Do you think I’d let you drown?”

The wind calmed down as they got into the boat. Amazed at what had just happened, Jesus’ followers acknowledged that he was God’s special messenger.

When Jesus and his followers reached the shore near Gennesaret, just south of Capernaum, some people recognized him and spread the word that he was there. Once again, a lot of people brought their sick friends and relatives. He healed all of them, including those who believed they could be healed just by touching the edge of his coat.

Jesus Challenges One of the Religious Leaders’ Traditions

15 One day, some of the religious leaders from Jerusalem noticed that Jesus’ 12 chosen followers didn’t rinse their hands the traditional way before they ate, so they questioned Jesus about it. He challenged their tradition by quoting what God’s spokesman Isaiah said long ago,

“Some people pretend to honor God by making up their own rules and convincing others that they’re part of God’s advice.”

Jesus explained,

“You religious leaders are doing just that. You’ve been very successful in making others think they’re following God’s advice when they’re just following yours. For example, God encourages

MATTHEW

people to respect their parents by helping them when they're in need. But you allow people to shirk their responsibility by letting them claim that they're giving God what they should be giving to their parents. What twisted thinking!"

Jesus then got the attention of others nearby as he made a final comment about their eating traditions,

"God cares a lot more about what comes out of people's mouths than what goes into them."

Later, after most of the other people had left, Peter asked Jesus what he meant. So he explained,

"What you eat just goes into your stomach and has very little effect on what you say or do, so you don't need a lot of guidelines on how to eat. But your attitude greatly affects what you say and do. For example, if you don't respect God or care about others, you're likely to lie, cheat, steal, murder, slander, have sexual relations without a lifelong commitment, ruin your marriage, or do other selfish things. God is far more concerned about your attitude and behavior than about what or how you eat."

When some of Jesus' 12 chosen followers asked Jesus if he realized he offended the religious leaders on their traditional hand rinsing, he replied,

"Some people just can't accept the truth. Those religious leaders are like the blind leading the blind, who end up walking off a cliff together. If you follow them, your life will be no better than it is now."

Jesus Heals the Daughter of a Non-Jewish Woman

After Jesus and his 12 chosen followers left Galilee, where most of the people were Jewish, they went northwest to the area around Tyre and Sidon where most of the people were non-Jewish. A Canaanite woman from that area had heard that Jesus was the descendant of the famous Jewish leader David and that he would help people enjoy a better life. When she asked him to send a harmful spirit away from her daughter, he seemed to ignore her. But when she persisted, he said he was spending most of his time with the Jewish people because non-Jewish people such as herself were usually not as interested in following God's advice. So she responded,

"Although I'm not a Jew, I'm ready and willing to follow God's advice."

MATTHEW

To this Jesus replied,

“I know you’re sincere, so I’ve sent the harmful spirit away from your daughter as you requested.”

Jesus Heals a Lot of Other Non-Jewish People

Jesus and his 12 chosen followers then returned to the area south of Lake Galilee. While they were there, Jesus healed a lot of people who were sick or physically impaired. Many of the non-Jewish people who witnessed Jesus’ healings were so amazed that they began to realize that the God the Jewish people worshiped was much greater than the objects to which they prayed.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Share Their Food Again

Before long, more than 4,000 people had gathered in the countryside to hear Jesus share God’s advice for a better life. By the third day, many of them had run out of food. Jesus expressed his concern to his 12 chosen followers, implying that they should share their own food with the crowd,

“If these people head for home without eating, some of them might not have enough strength to get there.”

But his followers replied,

“We don’t have nearly enough food for all these people.”

When Jesus asked them to check how much food they had, they only came up with seven loaves of bread and a few, small, cooked fish. After telling the crowd to get ready to eat, he thanked God for the bread and fish, cut them into pieces, and gave them to his followers to distribute among the people. There was plenty of food for everyone, and even seven large baskets of leftovers!

After the people had finished eating and were on their way home, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers sailed north to Magadan, a town on the western shore of Lake Galilee.

Some Religious Leaders Challenge Jesus

16 When some of the religious leaders in that area heard that Jesus was nearby, they challenged him to do something amazing to prove that he was God’s special messenger. He responded,

“When the sky is pink in the evening, you expect good weather the next day. When it’s cloudy in the morning, you expect rain. If you can predict the weather by looking at the sky, you should be able to figure out that I’m God’s messenger. A lot of people are

MATTHEW

responding positively to my encouragement to follow God's advice, as the people in Nineveh did to God's spokesman Jonah long ago."

Jesus and his 12 chosen followers then sailed toward Bethsaida on the northern shore of Lake Galilee, but his followers forgot to take some food along. When they arrived, Jesus warned them about the religious leaders,

"Be careful of the yeast of the religious leaders."

Thinking he meant the yeast in bread, his followers admitted they had forgotten to take some bread along. Disappointed that they didn't understand what he meant, he asked,

"Do you remember how many baskets of leftovers there were when just five loaves of bread fed more than 5,000 people, and how many leftovers there were when seven loaves of bread fed more than 4,000 people? These two incidents weren't just about bread. They demonstrated how far something can spread. This is why you should be careful of the yeast of the religious leaders."

Jesus' followers then realized that he wasn't referring to actual yeast but to the hypocrisy of some of the religious leaders.

Jesus Asks His Followers Who Others Think He Is

As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were walking north to the area around Caesarea Philippi, he asked them,

"When you hear others talk about me, who do they think I am?"

His followers replied,

"Some people think you are John, who symbolically rinsed people with water. Others think you are Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of God's other spokesmen, who they think has come back to life."

When Jesus asked his followers for their own opinion, Peter said,

"You're God's special messenger, who God promised would help people enjoy a better life."

Jesus responded,

"God has helped you arrive at this conclusion. Your father John named you *Simon*, but I've given you the nickname *Peter* (which means *rock*) to reflect your solid commitment to God. As I help you and others invite future generations to follow God's advice for a better life, remember that God allows people to choose the kind of life they wish to live. Those who decide to follow God's advice

MATTHEW

will enjoy the kind of life God originally intended. But those who refuse to follow it will continue to live self-centered lives.”

Jesus asked his followers not to tell anyone what Peter had just said because he didn't want the religious leaders to become more alarmed and determined to get rid of him before he was ready. He then explained that he would soon be beaten and executed in Jerusalem at the hands of the religious leaders, but he assured his followers that he would come back to life a few days after his death. This scenario didn't fit Peter's perception of the one who would help them enjoy a better life, so he insisted it couldn't happen. Jesus scolded Peter for contradicting him,

“Stop acting like Satan, who wants everything to go his way.”

Including the others, Jesus continued,

“If you want to enjoy a better life, you must stop being self-centered. What good is your life if you acquire fame and fortune but don't share it? The more you help others, the more you'll enjoy life. Make the most of your life by helping others in need, even if it means giving your life for them, as some of you will see me do.”

Peter, James and John Have an Awesome Experience

17 Six days later, Jesus invited Peter, James and his brother John to go along with him up a mountain. When Moses and Elijah, two of God's most prominent spokesmen who lived long ago, appeared and began talking with Jesus, his clothes turned brilliant white and his face became as bright as the sun. Peter was so excited that he suggested building three temporary shelters for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. But as a bright cloud covered all of them, God confirmed that Jesus was God's special messenger. This was such an awesome experience for Peter, James and John that they knelt and covered their eyes. Jesus told them not to be afraid, but by the time they opened their eyes and stood up, Moses and Elijah were gone.

Jesus knew that some of the religious leaders would try even harder to get rid of him before he was ready if they found out what had just taken place. So as they were coming down the mountain, he asked Peter, James and John not to tell anyone about their experience until after God's special messenger died and came back to life. They wondered what he meant, recalling that the religious leaders said Elijah would come back to life before God's special messenger would come. So Jesus explained that Elijah had already returned in the person of his forerunner John, and he predicted that he would be executed, as John was.

MATTHEW

Jesus Frees a Boy Harassed by a Harmful Spirit

As Jesus, Peter, James and John were returning to Jesus' other followers, they noticed that some other people were with them. One of the men approached Jesus and said,

“Please help my son. A harmful spirit has been causing him to have violent seizures that make him fall into fire and water. Since you weren't here, I asked your followers to send the spirit away, but they were unsuccessful.”

Jesus expressed his disappointment in his followers and then sent the spirit away. Later, when he was alone with them, they asked why they weren't able to send the spirit away. He replied,

“You were unsuccessful because you tried to do it on your own. When you trust God even a little bit, God will help you do amazing things, such as moving a mountain with just a verbal command.”

From there Jesus and his 12 followers returned to Galilee. When he reminded them that he would soon be executed, they were very depressed because they still didn't understand what he meant when he added that he would come back to life just a few days later.

Jesus Comments about Paying the Temple Tax

Jesus and his 12 followers then went to Capernaum. Each year at this time, a tax was collected to maintain the temple. When some tax collectors asked Peter if Jesus was planning to pay this tax, Peter assured them he would. Although Jesus wasn't with Peter at the time, he was aware of his conversation with the tax collectors. So when Peter returned home, Jesus asked,

“Do the leaders of our nation usually collect the temple tax from their own citizens or from foreigners?”

Peter said they usually collect it from foreigners, so Jesus replied,

“Since we're citizens, we wouldn't normally be expected to pay the temple tax. But we want to set a good example for others, so I want you to go fishing and catch a fish. In its mouth, you'll find enough money to cover the temple tax for both of us.”

MATTHEW

Jesus Describes the Best Follower of God's Advice

18 Some time later, Jesus' 12 chosen followers asked him which of them was the best follower of God's advice. He took a little child in his arms as he replied,

"If you want to be the best follower of God's advice, you'll need to replace your pride with the humility of a little child. When you do this, you'll be following my example.

"If others try to distract you from following God's advice, limit your association with them.

"None of you should consider yourselves better than anyone else because I'm here to help *all* of you follow God's advice for a better life. As you know, even though a shepherd still has 99 other sheep, he'll search for the one that wanders away until he finds it. When he does, he'll be thrilled. Like the shepherd, God is thrilled when people decide to follow God's advice."

Jesus Explains How to Resolve Conflict

Jesus then explained to his 12 chosen followers what they should do when other followers offend them:

"When any of my followers offend you, discuss the matter with them privately. If they're sincerely sorry for what they said or did, accept their apology. But if they don't apologize, try discussing the matter again with at least one other person who witnessed the offense. If they still refuse to apologize, ask a few more of my followers to encourage them to do so. If they still don't apologize, you'll need to explain to them again that the only way they'll enjoy a better life is to make an effort to improve their attitude and behavior toward God and others.

"As I mentioned before, God allows people to choose the kind of life they wish to live. But I'm more than willing to help people resolve their conflicts so they can enjoy the life God originally intended."

Jesus Gives an Illustration about Forgiving Others

Peter then asked Jesus,

"When people offend me over and over again, how many times must I forgive them? Can I stop when I've forgiven them seven times?"

MATTHEW

Jesus replied,

“You should continue to forgive them, even if they offend you more than 77 times! Here’s an illustration to explain why:

“Let’s suppose a businessman borrows \$500,000 from a banker. As time passes, the businessman becomes unable to repay his debt as agreed, so the banker decides to foreclose on the debt. When the businessman begs the banker to be patient, the banker feels sorry for him. So the banker decides not to foreclose on the loan, and he tells the businessman that he doesn’t even have to repay it. Some time later, the businessman goes to one of his friends who had borrowed just \$8,000, and he demands full payment immediately. Although his friend begs him to be patient, the businessman promptly sues him for the money. When others realize what the businessman did, they become very upset and report it to the banker. So the banker scolds the businessman for not caring about his friend and for not forgiving the debt, as the banker had done for him. He then proceeds to foreclose on the businessman’s loan after all.

“Like the banker in my illustration, God is ready and willing to forgive your faults. But if you want God to forgive you, you must be willing to forgive others.”

Some Religious Leaders Question Jesus about Divorce

19 After Jesus and his 12 chosen followers left Capernaum, they traveled south to Judea and then crossed the Jordan River. As usual, Jesus healed a lot of people who followed him.

Some religious leaders, still looking for a reason to get rid of Jesus, had also joined the crowd. They wondered what his view was on the controversial subject of divorce, so they asked,

“Do you think it’s all right for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”

Jesus knew they had a lot of respect for God’s spokesman Moses, so he quoted what Moses said long ago to emphasize that God did not encourage divorce:

“God’s original intent was for spouses to enjoy a lifetime together.”

The religious leaders then asked,

MATTHEW

“If that’s the case, then why did Moses advise a man to give his wife an official document when he divorced her?”

Jesus replied,

“He did it because he realized some marriages would eventually break up due to the self-centeredness of one or both spouses. But it’s important that people accept responsibility for their actions when they insist on getting divorced. If a man divorces his wife so he can marry another woman, he should accept responsibility for ruining their marriage.”

Later, Jesus’ 12 chosen followers concluded that men who divorce their wives shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place. When Jesus became aware of this, he said,

“In many cases, you’re right. As you know, some men naturally have very little attraction to women, others have their sexual drive diminished by castration, and others choose not to marry so they can devote more time to honor God by helping others. But many men just let nature take its course and get married without taking their lifelong commitment very seriously.”

Jesus Encourages People to Share

A while later, some people brought their children to Jesus for encouragement. Some of his followers tried to keep the children from bothering him, but he welcomed them. He put his arms around them and explained that everyone needs to be as humble as little children if they want to enjoy life as God intended.

After the children had left, a wealthy young man asked Jesus,

“How can I enjoy life as God intended? Is there something especially good I should do?”

Jesus replied,

“Since you’ve asked me about doing something good, you must realize that my advice comes from God.

“To enjoy life as God intended, you need to follow God’s basic advice for getting along with others: don’t murder or steal, keep your lifelong commitment to your spouse, respect your parents, tell the truth, and care about others as much as you care about yourself.”

The rich man answered,

“I’ve been doing all that, but is there anything else I should do?”

MATTHEW

Jesus continued,

“If you really want to enjoy life as God intended, you need to follow my example. Sell your belongings and give the money to people in need. Are you willing to do that?”

The rich man walked away disappointed because he couldn't bear to part with his money and possessions. Jesus then turned to his followers and said,

“It's especially difficult for rich people to enjoy life as God intended because they're usually so attached to their money and possessions that they aren't willing to share them with others.”

Jesus' followers were surprised to hear this because they figured wealthy people already had the ultimate life. So Jesus explained,

“It doesn't matter how rich you are, because it isn't how much you have that's important. It's what you do with what you have. If you let God help you increase your willingness to share with others in need, you'll see how much more enjoyable life can be.”

When Peter remarked that he and Jesus' other chosen followers had basically given up everything to follow him, Jesus responded,

“You have all been very committed to helping me share God's advice with the Jewish people. Anyone who is willing to give up their job and move away from their home and family to help others in need, as you have done, will receive great satisfaction in life. A lot of people will follow your example.”

20 Jesus then added an illustration,

“If you want to enjoy a better life, you should follow the example of a generous farmer who helped numerous men earn money to support their families. Early one morning, the farmer hired a few men to help him on his farm. Each of them agreed to accept a normal day's pay. About mid-morning, the farmer met other men who wanted to work, so he hired them and promised to pay them a fair wage. Around noon and mid-afternoon, the farmer hired more men who were looking for work. By late afternoon, there were still some men who had not been offered any work, so he hired them, too. At the end of the day, the farmer told his foreman to pay all the men a full day's pay, beginning with the last ones he hired. But the men he hired early in the morning complained that the others didn't deserve as much money because the others hadn't worked all day in the scorching sun, as they had. The farmer

MATTHEW

scolded them for criticizing his generosity, reminding them to be thankful for what they received.”

Jesus emphasized the point of his story,

“Everyone who is able should generously help others in need, whether they deserve it or not.”

Jesus Clarifies His Style of Leadership

As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were on their way to Jerusalem, he described what was going to happen to him when they arrived,

“The religious leaders are going to sentence me to die and then turn me over to the Roman leader, who will have me ridiculed, beaten and executed.”

But Jesus reminded them that he would come back to life just a few days later. Since James and John were still assuming Jesus would be a leader like their ancestor David, their mother asked Jesus if they could be his generals. After he explained that she had the wrong idea about his style of leadership, he asked them,

“Are you willing to help others to the point of giving your life for them, as I’m about to do?”

When they assured him they were, he continued,

“There aren’t many who have made such a deep commitment to God.”

Jesus’ other followers were upset with James and John for requesting the highest positions, so Jesus clarified his style of leadership,

“I don’t want you to force others to serve you, as the Roman leaders do. I want you to help others in need, as I’m doing.”

Jesus Heals Two More Men Who Are Blind

A lot of people went along with Jesus and his 12 chosen followers on their way to Jerusalem. As they passed through Jericho, they approached two blind men sitting alongside the road, asking people for help. The men had heard Jesus was the descendant of their famous leader David, who would help people enjoy a better life. So when they realized he was nearby, they yelled,

“Jesus! Help us!”

Some people tried to quiet them, but they yelled even louder. When Jesus responded, they asked him to restore their sight. He felt sorry for

MATTHEW

them, so he restored their sight as he touched their eyes. Since they could see again, they joined the others who were going along with Jesus to Jerusalem.

A lot of People Honor Jesus as He Enters Jerusalem

21 Before long, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers arrived at Olive Hill, next to Bethphage, a suburb of Jerusalem. He asked two of his followers to go to a nearby village to get a donkey and her colt. If anyone questioned why they were taking the donkeys, Jesus told the men to explain that he needed to borrow them for a while. When the men returned with the donkeys, they got the colt ready to ride. As Jesus rode it into Jerusalem, a lot of people spread cloths and leaves along the road in front of him, which was the custom for honoring someone important. One of God's spokesmen predicted long ago that their new leader would enter Jerusalem humbly riding on a young donkey.

The people celebrated and thanked God because they thought Jesus would be a great leader like their famous ancestor David, who would help them enjoy a better life. As the excitement spread throughout the city, some people wondered what all the fuss was about. Others explained that it was over the arrival of God's spokesman Jesus from Nazareth.

Jesus Scolds the Dishonest Merchants at the Temple

When Jesus arrived at the outer section of the temple, he noticed some merchants charging foreigners excessive prices for doves and other items that they needed for offerings. Other merchants were also overcharging them to exchange their money for local currency. Jesus didn't like what was taking place, so he sent the dishonest merchants out of the temple, scolding them with a quote from God long ago,

“The temple was built to help people worship me, but you're using it to take advantage of them.”

While Jesus was still at the temple, he healed some people who were blind or unable to walk. Some of the religious leaders saw this and heard children echo their parents' cheers honoring him as their leader, so they angrily confronted him. He reminded them that their ancestor David said children honor God just as well as grown-ups.

Later that evening, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers went to the nearby town of Bethany to spend the night.

MATTHEW

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Trust Him

Jesus was hungry the next morning as he and his followers were on their way back to Jerusalem. When he saw a fig tree in the distance, he expected it to have some figs on it. But when they reached the tree, Jesus pointed out that it would soon die because it no longer bore fruit. Not long after that, when his followers noticed that the tree had died, they were amazed, wondering how he knew it would die that soon. So he explained,

“You should realize by now that I’m able to do a lot more than predict the death of a fig tree. If you’d ask me to put Olive Hill into the Dead Sea, I could easily do it. So you may rest assured that I can do anything you ask.”

Some Religious Leaders Confront Jesus at the Temple

When Jesus and his followers returned to the temple, some of the religious leaders confronted him about the incident there the previous day,

“Who gave you permission to send the merchants out of the temple yesterday?”

Jesus knew they were hoping he would say something to give them an excuse to get rid of him, so he replied,

“Let me ask you a question first. If you answer my question, I’ll answer yours. Who do you think motivated John to symbolically rinse people with water? God, or a human being?”

Jesus’ question put the religious leaders on the spot. If they said God motivated John, they wouldn’t have any excuse for ignoring the advice he shared. On the other hand, if they said a human being motivated him, they were afraid his followers might react violently because they were convinced that he was one of God’s spokesmen. Realizing that either response would get them into trouble, the religious leaders told Jesus they didn’t know who motivated John. Since they didn’t answer *his* question, Jesus chose not to answer *theirs*.

Jesus Exposes the Religious Leaders’ Hypocrisy and Self-centeredness

Jesus then exposed the religious leaders’ hypocrisy with a short story,

“There once was a farmer who had two sons. When he asked them to work on the farm one day, his one son refused at first but later changed his mind and did as his father asked. His other son readily agreed but never followed through.”

MATTHEW

When Jesus asked the religious leaders which son did what his father requested, they acknowledged that it was the first one. So Jesus continued,

“You think you’re so much better than prostitutes and dishonest tax collectors, but they’re like the first son in the story. When my forerunner John explained how they could enjoy a better life, they began changing their attitude and behavior toward God and others. But you’re like the second son in the story because you want others to think you follow God’s advice, but you have your own agenda.”

Jesus then told the religious leaders another story in which he compared them to self-centered farmers who mistreated others,

“There once was a man who planted a vineyard. He built a fence around it and a watchtower to protect it from animals, and he made a winepress to squash the grapes. When he moved away, he leased the vineyard to some farmers. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent several messengers to get the rent payment, but the farmers beat them and even killed one of them. He then sent more messengers, but the farmers did the same to them. Finally, he sent his own son, whom he thought the farmers would respect more than the others. Since they knew that his son would eventually inherit the vineyard, they killed him so they could keep it for themselves.”

At that point, Jesus asked the religious leaders what the owner of the vineyard should do with the farmers. Not yet realizing that Jesus was comparing them to the farmers, the religious leaders replied,

“The owner should get rid of those self-centered farmers and lease the vineyard to others who are more trustworthy.”

Quoting what one of God’s spokesmen had written long ago, Jesus implied that the religious leaders refused to follow God’s advice. Then he told them that he wouldn’t waste any more time explaining how they could enjoy a better life. Instead, he would share God’s advice with people who really wanted a better life and were willing to improve their attitude and behavior toward God and others to experience it.

When the religious leaders realized that Jesus was comparing them to the hypocritical and self-centered characters in the stories, they were even more determined to get rid of him. But since they knew that many of his followers considered him one of God’s spokesmen, they were afraid his followers might defend him. So they decided not to take any action at that time.

MATTHEW

22 Jesus then added another story to illustrate that God invites everyone to enjoy a better life but a lot of people simply refuse it,

“There once was a governor who held a wedding reception for his son. The governor sent messengers to tell those he had invited that everything was ready for them to come, but none of them showed up. A little later, he sent messengers to remind them that a delicious dinner with all the trimmings was ready to be served. Some of them ignored the reminder and went off to work as usual. Others were so annoyed that they roughed up and even killed some of the messengers. When the governor heard about it, he sent soldiers to arrest the murderers and throw them in jail. He then sent messengers to invite others to come, no matter what their social status, so the reception hall would be full. As he entered the hall to welcome his guests, he noticed that one of them didn’t really want to be there, so he told his staff to escort the man outside.”

Some Religious Leaders Attempt to Trap Jesus

Some of the religious leaders soon devised a plan to try to get Jesus into serious trouble. Since they sharply disagreed with the supporters of Herod about paying taxes to Caesar, the emperor of the Roman Empire, one of them asked,

“Do you think we should pay taxes to Caesar?”

If Jesus agreed that they *should* pay taxes to Caesar, the religious leaders could claim he wasn’t following God’s advice. On the other hand, if he suggested that they *shouldn’t* pay taxes to Caesar, the Roman authorities could arrest him for treason and sentence him to die. They figured Jesus would be in big trouble either way. But he knew what they were up to, so he asked whose face and name were on the Roman coins. When they acknowledged they were Caesar’s, Jesus said,

“Since you’ve consented to live in a society that uses Roman currency, it’s appropriate for you to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. But don’t neglect to follow God’s advice.”

Jesus left quite an impression as he foiled the religious leaders’ scheme.

MATTHEW

Other Religious Leaders Challenge Jesus on Life after Death

Before long, the religious leaders who didn't think life continues after death challenged Jesus about it. Referring to God's spokesman Moses who lived long ago, they set the stage,

“Moses advised that when a married man dies before he has children, his brother should marry the widow so she would bear children for her deceased husband.”

Then the religious leaders set up a hypothetical situation to pose a question which implied that the idea of life after death was a ridiculous notion,

“Let's suppose a man who has six brothers dies before he has any children. Each of his brothers marries his widow, one after the other, but they all die before producing a child. If there is life after death as you say, which of the seven men would be the woman's husband in that life?”

Jesus replied,

“You don't understand why Moses gave this advice. He just did this so the deceased man would have a descendant to inherit his possessions. But when people come back to life after they die, they won't marry because they'll be like God's messengers.

“When God spoke to Moses long ago, God said, ‘I am the God whom Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are worshipping.’ By stating that these men were worshipping God, even though they had died many years earlier, God implied that death is not final.”

Again, those who heard what Jesus said were very impressed.

Jesus Summarizes God's Advice for a Better Life

When another religious group heard that Jesus had made a convincing case about life after death, they decided to ask his opinion on another topic of disagreement between the groups,

“What's the best advice that God has ever given us?”

Jesus replied,

“You should respect God more than anyone or anything else, and you should care about others as much as you care about yourself. This is the basis for all the other advice God has given you.”

Jesus then asked the religious leaders how they would identify the one God promised, who would help people enjoy a better life. They

MATTHEW

acknowledged that he would be a descendant of their famous leader David. Jesus then quoted David to clarify that the one God promised would be much more than just David's descendant.

Because of Jesus' impressive responses, his opponents decided not to challenge him publicly anymore.

Jesus Scolds the Religious Leaders for Their Hypocrisy

23 Jesus then spoke to the other people there, including his 12 chosen followers,

“You should follow the advice that the religious leaders received from God's spokesman Moses. But don't do everything they insist upon because some of them have added their own rules to God's advice. All their extra rules make life miserable for people, and yet they refuse to retract any of them.

“As you know, a lot of people wear straps around their forehead and left arm with little pouches attached that contain a portion of God's advice from Moses. But some of the religious leaders wear much wider straps to make sure others notice them. They also wear their religious robes in public, with especially long tassels along the bottom, so you'll recognize them and give them the best seats at banquets and in the local worship centers.

“Those religious leaders love it when people address them by their title. But I don't want you to use titles to make others think you're more important than anyone else. I just want you to help others in need, as I'm doing.”

Jesus then scolded the religious leaders directly,

“I'm very disappointed in you. Not only do you refuse to follow God's advice, but you also discourage others from doing so. In fact, when you instruct your followers, you convince them to be even more resistant to following God's advice than you yourselves are.

“You make life miserable for people in so many ways, such as fabricating your own rules for making a promise. Instead of allowing people to associate their promise with God by referring to the temple or the offering table, you require them to refer to the gold in the temple structure or to the offering itself. Referring to those things doesn't make a promise any more trustworthy. The important thing is that a promise is *kept*, not how it is made.

MATTHEW

“You’re so intent on impressing others with your offerings at the temple that you even give 10% of the tiny seeds from your herbal plants. But you fail to do what God considers far more important, namely, following God’s advice and helping people in need. You’re very religious about following your own petty rules, but you ignore what really matters to God.

“You’re like cups and bowls that are only washed on the outside, or like the beautiful tombstones on top of graves. You put on a good show for others, but your selfish attitude stinks, like the decaying bodies beneath the tombstones. Stop pretending to be what you’re not, and change your attitude so your behavior will be sincere.

“You try to make others think that you wouldn’t have been involved in the murder of God’s spokesmen long ago. But you’re proud to be the descendants of those murderers, and your attitude and behavior reflect that. If you don’t change, you’ll continue to make life miserable for yourselves and others. Even now you’re harassing those who share God’s advice and you’re trying to get rid of them any way you can. So you’re really no different from those who killed God’s spokesmen throughout history, from Adam’s son Abel to one of God’s most recent spokesmen, Barachiah’s son Zechariah, whom your ancestors murdered in the temple.

“I’ve tried hard to help you enjoy a better life, as a hen does when she protects her chicks under her wings. But you’ll continue to refuse my help until you acknowledge that I’m God’s messenger.”

Jesus Predicts the Destruction of the Temple

24 As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were leaving the temple complex, one of them remarked how beautiful the stone buildings were. Jesus informed them that the temple would soon be totally destroyed. Later, when they were alone with him on Olive Hill with the temple in sight, one of them asked when this would occur. So Jesus explained,

“As God’s spokesman Daniel predicted long ago, the temple will be dishonored and destroyed by the Roman army when it attacks Jerusalem. I won’t tell you exactly when this will happen, but it will be within your lifetime. When people begin hearing reports of numerous battles, earthquakes and famine, they’ll know the time is near.

MATTHEW

“The army could strike at any time, day or night, so everyone should be ready to escape at a moment’s notice. The attack will come unexpectedly, like a burglar who breaks into your home at night. A lot of people will be taken by surprise, like the people in Noah’s day who were living life as usual until the flood came and drowned them. Those who are working in their fields or right outside their home won’t have time to get any of their belongings, not even a coat. Some people will need to take refuge in the surrounding hills, so they should pray the attack won’t come in bad weather or on the weekly day of rest when travel is limited. Pregnant women and mothers with young children will find it particularly difficult at this time.

“During the invasion, some people will try to make you think that I’m still around. Don’t let them fool you, because I’ll physically be long gone by then. But my followers will be scattered all over the place. So when the soldiers come looking for me and can’t find me, they’ll arrest, publicly torture, and even kill some of you. A lot of people will despise you and try to persuade you to stop following God’s advice.

“There will be so much smoke from burning buildings that the sun, moon, and stars won’t be visible. Although this will be one of the worst catastrophes ever, God won’t allow it to be a total disaster. When the invasion is over, messengers will travel far and wide to let the survivors know that it’s safe to return to their homes. God will help them follow my example to put their lives back together again.

Jesus Encourages People to Help Others

“When managers make sure people get the food they need, they’ll get a promotion. But if they party on the job and abuse their workers, their supervisor will discipline them severely.”

25 Jesus then shared a story to illustrate that people should be prepared to help others,

“One evening, ten girls took their lamps along to a wedding reception to provide light for the procession from the groom’s home to the bride’s after the reception. Since they arrived early at the groom’s house, they fell asleep while waiting for him to open the door. When someone announced that he would soon open it, they woke up and checked their lamps. Five of the girls discovered that they hadn’t brought enough oil for their lamps, so

MATTHEW

they tried to borrow some from the others. But the other five girls were concerned that they might not have enough oil for all of them, so they suggested the others go and buy more oil for themselves. While they were gone, the groom opened the door and welcomed the girls who were prepared to provide light for the procession. When the other girls returned, they were turned away because they weren't ready when their help was needed."

Jesus Encourages People to Use Their Potential

Jesus told another story to illustrate that people must use their potential if they expect to enjoy a better life,

"There once was a wealthy man who was getting ready to go on a long journey. Before he left, he asked three financial agents to invest his money while he was gone. He gave the first agent \$250,000, the second \$100,000, and the third \$50,000. The first two agents doubled their money, but the third agent put his money in a safe place instead of investing it. When the wealthy man returned from his trip, he was so pleased with the first two agents' efforts that he promoted them to higher positions.

"The third agent admitted that he put his amount in a safe place instead of investing it because he was afraid he couldn't meet the wealthy man's expectations. As he returned the money, the wealthy man reprimanded him for not investing it,

'If you knew what I expected, you should've invested the money I gave you so it could've earned some interest while I was gone.'

"After firing the third agent and giving his amount to the first agent, the wealthy man reminded everyone that they must use their potential if they want to reap any benefits."

People Determine Their Own Destiny

Jesus then explained how people determine their own destiny,

"People determine the quality of their life by their response to God's advice. Those who follow it, as readily as sheep follow their shepherd, make life more bearable by giving food and clothing to people in need, extending hospitality to strangers, caring for the sick, and visiting people in prison. This is what God originally intended everyone to do. But those who refuse to

MATTHEW

follow God's advice, like goats that stubbornly go their own way, make life miserable for themselves and others."

A Woman Honors Jesus with Expensive Perfume

26 Jesus and his 12 chosen followers returned to Bethany to the home of Simon, who previously had a serious skin disease called leprosy. While Jesus was eating dinner, a woman put some very expensive perfume on him to express her admiration. Some of his followers criticized her for using such expensive perfume, suggesting she could have sold it for a lot of money and given the money to the poor. But Jesus scolded them for criticizing her because he was delighted by what she did. He reminded them that they would have plenty of opportunity to help the poor, but their time with him was almost over. Referring to their custom of putting perfume on people when they die, he explained that the woman's action was appropriate since he was going to die in just a few days.

Some Religious Leaders Finalize Plans to Get Rid of Jesus

At this time every year, the Jewish people celebrated their ancestors' freedom from slavery in Egypt, when God spared their first-born children from death. On the Wednesday before this weeklong celebration, Jesus explained to his 12 chosen followers that he would be put to death that Friday.

Meanwhile, some of the religious leaders were meeting again, this time at the home of the senior religious leader Caiaphas, to finalize their plans to get rid of Jesus without disrupting the celebration. When Judas Iscariot (one of Jesus' 12 chosen followers) showed up and offered to join their conspiracy, they agreed to pay him well for his help. Together they worked out a plan to have Jesus arrested without giving his followers a chance to offer resistance.

Jesus and His Followers Share the Celebration Meal

Thursday afternoon, when a couple of Jesus' followers asked where they should prepare the meal that began the weeklong celebration, Jesus replied,

"Go to Jerusalem and look for the man I described earlier. Ask him if we can share the celebration meal at his place."

They found the man Jesus had described and prepared the meal at his home. The bread they ate was made without yeast to remind them that God had freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. After Jesus thanked God for the bread, he invited his 12 chosen followers to eat it as he related

MATTHEW

it to himself, indicating that his purpose in life was to help others enjoy a better life.

Jesus then thanked God for their third cup of wine, which recalled God's promise to send someone to help people enjoy a better life. As he invited his followers to drink it, he related it to his blood, indicating that he was willing to risk his life to help others enjoy a better life.

While Jesus and his followers were eating, he revealed that one of them was turning against him. Surprised and disappointed, each of them denied that he was the one. Jesus then pointed out a striking contrast,

“I was born so I could help others enjoy a better life, as God's spokesmen predicted long ago. But the one who is turning against me will wish he had never been born.”

Judas suspected that Jesus was referring to him, and he was right. Jesus and his followers concluded the meal with songs and then returned to Olive Hill. Referring to one of God's spokesmen who lived long ago, Jesus predicted his followers would desert him later that night,

“When a shepherd dies, his sheep usually look for someone else to follow.”

Peter responded,

“I won't desert you, even if everyone else does.”

Jesus replied,

“That's easy for you to say now. But tonight, before you hear a rooster crow at dawn, you're going to deny that you even know me three times.”

Peter and the others insisted that they would never desert Jesus, even if it meant facing death. Jesus reminded them that his own death was very near, but he assured them that they would see him alive in Galilee soon afterward.

The Soldiers Arrest Jesus in Gethsemane Garden

Later that evening, while Judas went to tell the religious leaders where the soldiers could arrest Jesus, Jesus and his other 11 chosen followers went to Gethsemane Garden, just outside of Jerusalem. As Jesus walked a little distance away from the others with Peter, James and John, he shared his concern that he would soon be put to death, and he asked them to stay alert. After walking a little further alone, he asked God to spare him from suffering but acknowledged that he was willing to accept whatever God wanted.

MATTHEW

Peter, James and John had fallen asleep while Jesus was gone. When he returned, he told Peter how disappointed he was that they couldn't stay awake for the short time he was away. Before he left again, he suggested they ask God for strength to stay alert. But when he returned, they were sleeping again. When he came back a third time and found them still asleep, he woke them up so they would be ready for the soldiers' arrival.

While Jesus was talking to his followers, Judas arrived with armed soldiers and identified Jesus with the common greeting. As they arrested Jesus, one of his followers grabbed a sword and swung it at one of the soldiers, cutting off his ear. Jesus immediately scolded him,

“Put the sword away or you'll get yourself killed. God could provide thousands of angels to defend me. But this is part of God's plan, as God's spokesmen predicted long ago.”

Jesus pointed out that the religious leaders had plenty of opportunities to arrest him peacefully while he was sharing God's advice in the temple. Instead, they treated him like a dangerous criminal by sending armed soldiers, as God's spokesmen predicted long ago.

When the soldiers began taking Jesus back to Jerusalem, his followers quickly scattered.

The Religious Leaders Sentence Jesus to Die

The soldiers took Jesus to Caiaphas' residence, where the religious leaders were waiting to put him on trial. They were hoping several people would accuse him of a crime that deserved the death penalty. Two people accused him of planning to destroy the temple and rebuild it in a few days, but they couldn't agree on the details. Several others made up other allegations against him, but none of their versions matched. Since an accusation had to be verified by at least one other witness, all the charges against Jesus were useless.

Frustrated by the lack of evidence against Jesus, Caiaphas asked him to respond to the allegations, hoping he would incriminate himself. But Jesus wisely ignored him. As a last resort, Caiaphas asked him directly if he were God's special messenger, who would help people enjoy a better life. To this Jesus replied,

“Yes, I am, just as God's spokesmen predicted.”

Jesus' response was considered an insult to God, so Caiaphas pretended to be infuriated. But he was actually relieved to hear Jesus' reply because he knew the other religious leaders also heard it, eliminating the need for other witnesses. Since insulting God was a serious crime, the religious leaders agreed that Jesus deserved the death penalty. Some

MATTHEW

displayed their disgust by spitting in his face. Later, the soldiers blindfolded him and took turns hitting him, taunting him to identify who hit him each time.

Peter Denies Knowing Jesus

Earlier that evening, Peter followed the soldiers at a distance as they took Jesus to Caiaphas' residence. While Peter was waiting outside among the soldiers during the trial, a female servant walked by and recognized him as one of Jesus' followers. Fearing for his own safety, Peter denied knowing Jesus. Later, when Peter overheard the servant telling others that he was one of Jesus' followers, he again denied knowing Jesus. Before long, someone else remarked,

“We can tell by your accent that you're from the same area as Jesus, so you must be one of his followers.”

This time Peter swore to God that he didn't know Jesus. Soon afterward, a rooster crowed. When Peter heard it, he recalled Jesus' prediction that he would deny knowing Jesus three times before a rooster crowed. Realizing what he had done, Peter was heartbroken.

Judas Commits Suicide

27 When Judas learned that the religious leaders had sentenced Jesus to die, he regretted turning against him because he knew Jesus didn't deserve it. So Judas went to the temple to return the money to the religious leaders and to tell them that he had made a terrible mistake by joining their conspiracy. When they said they didn't care how he felt, he threw the money down and left. He was so filled with guilt that he later committed suicide.

The religious leaders realized they couldn't put the money Judas returned in the temple treasury because it had been used to get Jesus executed. So they decided to purchase some land from a potter to be used as a cemetery for foreigners. God's spokesman Jeremiah predicted that the money would be used for this purpose, and people acknowledged it for many years to come.

The Roman Leader Orders Jesus' Execution

The religious leaders couldn't execute anyone without the Roman leader's approval. So early Friday morning, they took Jesus to Pilate, the Roman leader of Judea. As they presented their case, Pilate was surprised that Jesus didn't defend himself against any of their accusations. He eventually concluded that none of them was valid, but he questioned Jesus

MATTHEW

about the charge that the religious leaders were most upset about, his claim that he was their leader. Although Jesus admitted making the claim, Pilate didn't consider that a crime.

During the trial, Pilate's wife sent him a message urging him to let Jesus go because she had a disturbing dream that he was innocent. Convinced that Jesus had committed no crime, Pilate realized the religious leaders just wanted to get rid of him because they considered him a threat to their control over the people. But Pilate didn't feel like hassling with the religious leaders, so he decided to let the common people decide Jesus' fate.

Every year at this time, Pilate let the people decide which prisoner he would release. On this occasion, he gave them the choice between Jesus and the notorious criminal named Barabbas. Pilate assumed the people would ask for Jesus' release, so he was surprised when they chose Barabbas. They might have chosen Jesus on their own, but the religious leaders convinced them to ask for Barabbas. When Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus, they told him to execute him on a cross. Since there was no valid charge against him, Pilate tried to change their minds, but they insisted. He realized they were on the verge of becoming violent, so he gave in to their demands. But he washed his hands in front of them to symbolize that he didn't want to be held responsible for Jesus' death. The people agreed to take responsibility, so Pilate released Barabbas and turned Jesus over to the soldiers to be beaten and executed.

The Soldiers Make Fun of Jesus

The soldiers took Jesus back to their headquarters where others joined them in making fun of his claim that he was a leader. They put a red robe on him and a "crown" made of thorns. They also put a stick in his right hand to represent a leader's scepter. Then they bowed in front of him, pretending to honor him as their leader.

When they were tired of making fun of him, the soldiers took the red robe off and put his own clothes back on. Then they spit on him and hit him on the head, driving the thorns into his flesh.

Jesus Is Executed on a Cross

Later, as the soldiers were taking Jesus to the place of execution named Golgotha, they passed a man named Simon who had just come to Jerusalem from Cyrene, a city in northern Africa. By this time, Jesus was too exhausted to carry the cross on which he was to be executed, so the soldiers ordered Simon to carry it for him.

When they arrived at Golgotha, which means *skull place*, the soldiers removed some of Jesus' clothes and drew straws to see who would get

MATTHEW

them. Someone offered him something to drink to dull the pain of the nails that would be driven through his hands and feet, but he refused. The soldiers then nailed him to the cross and fastened a board above him with a caption stating the alleged reason for his execution:

This is Jesus Leader of the Jews

While Jesus was hanging on the cross, some people recalled his remark that he would rebuild the temple in a few days, so they taunted him,

“If you really are God’s special messenger, save yourself by coming down from the cross.”

The religious leaders also ridiculed him,

“He’s helped others and claims he’ll lead us to a better life, but he can’t even help himself. If he could save himself by coming down from the cross, then we’d follow his advice.”

Even the two thieves hanging on crosses next to Jesus made fun of him.

It became very dark from noon until mid-afternoon, when Jesus quoted one of God’s spokesmen who had expressed confidence in God long ago, despite a seemingly hopeless situation. The first word Jesus quoted sounded similar to *Elijah*, another of God’s spokesmen who lived long ago. Since it was a common custom for people to call on Elijah for help whenever they were in serious trouble, some bystanders thought that was what Jesus was doing.

It was obvious that Jesus was in a lot of pain, so someone soaked up some wine in a sponge and started to hold it up to his mouth on a stick, thinking it would accelerate his death and shorten his suffering. But someone else yelled,

“Wait! Let’s see if Elijah comes and saves him.”

They waited a while, but Elijah didn’t show. When Jesus took his last breath, God split the thick curtain in the temple that separated the general worship area from the area that only the religious leaders could enter to make offerings to God for the people. This signified that the common people could approach God directly for help to improve their attitude and behavior, without relying on the religious leaders to approach God for them.

There was also a violent earthquake that dislodged the large rocks in front of walk-in graves, allowing a lot of God’s followers to walk out as

MATTHEW

God brought them back to life. After God brought Jesus back to life, they went to Jerusalem where a lot of people recognized them.

Some of the soldiers and their captain were so amazed by the earthquake and the other events taking place that they finally realized that Jesus was God's special messenger.

During Jesus' execution, Mary from Magdala, Zebedee's wife, and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, were watching what was happening from a distance. These three and several other women had come along with Jesus from Galilee to help wherever they could.

Jesus Is Buried

One of Jesus' followers was a wealthy man named Joseph, from the town of Arimathea, several miles north of Jerusalem. He asked Pilate for Jesus' body so he could give it a proper burial. After wrapping it in linen cloth, he laid it in his own walk-in grave, carved out of a stone hillside. With others' assistance, he closed the entrance by rolling a large rock in front of it. Both Marys made sure they saw where Joseph put Jesus' body so they could return there later.

Saturday morning, the religious leaders remembered Jesus' claim that he would come back to life a few days after his death. They were afraid his followers might remove his body from the grave so they could pretend he came back to life. To prevent this from happening, the religious leaders asked Pilate for a military guard. After the soldiers were stationed at the grave site, the religious leaders sealed the large rock at the entrance so they would know if anyone tried to move it.

Jesus Comes Back to Life

28 As both Marys were on their way to visit Jesus' grave around dawn Sunday morning, they felt the ground shaking. When they arrived at the grave, they discovered that a messenger in brilliant white clothing had just removed the large rock from the entrance so people could see that the grave was already empty. The soldiers were scared to death. The women were also frightened, so the messenger comforted them and explained,

“Jesus' body isn't here. Come and see for yourself. He's come back to life, just as he said he would. Go and tell his followers that he'll soon join them in Galilee as he promised.”

Amazed and excited, both Marys started running to tell Jesus' followers the good news, but Jesus met them before they had gone very far. After they expressed their admiration, he asked them to go on ahead and tell his followers that he would join them later in Galilee.

MATTHEW

Meanwhile, the soldiers who had been guarding Jesus' grave told the religious leaders what had happened. After discussing their dilemma, the religious leaders decided to bribe the soldiers to spread the rumor that Jesus' followers had removed his body during the night while the soldiers were sleeping. The religious leaders knew that sleeping on the job deserved a stiff penalty, so they assured the soldiers that they'd persuade Pilate not to hold them accountable. The soldiers accepted the bribe and spread the rumor, which a lot of people believed for many years to come.

When Jesus met his 11 chosen followers in Galilee, some of them at first weren't sure who he was. But the others recognized him immediately and expressed their admiration. While they were still together, Jesus made a final request,

“I want you to share God's advice for a better life with everyone in the world, and symbolically rinse those who make a commitment to honor God and care about others. Remember, you can always count on me for help.”

**PALESTINE IN THE
TIME OF JESUS**



The Life of Jesus according to MARK

Introduction

1 The following account highlights the life of Jesus Christ, who followed God's advice for a better life. When he was about 30 years of age, a man named John began encouraging others to follow God's advice, as God's spokesman Isaiah had done long ago.

Even though John spent most of his time in a remote area, where he wore clothes made of camel fur and ate grasshoppers and honey, a lot of people from Jerusalem and other towns in Judea went to hear him share God's advice for a better life. Many of them wanted a better life, so they asked John to rinse them in the Jordan River to symbolize their desire to clean up their lives. John explained that he could only symbolize their willingness to follow God's advice, but someone else would help them actually do it.

Before long, Jesus came from his hometown of Nazareth and asked John to rinse him in the river to demonstrate that he was also committed to following God's advice. As Jesus came out of the water, John saw a dove land on Jesus and he heard a voice in the sky, both of which confirmed that Jesus was God's special messenger. Soon afterward, Jesus spent 40 days in a remote area where he was tested by Satan, who personifies self-centeredness.

Jesus Shares God's Advice for a Better Life

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he returned to his home district of Galilee, where he explained that people could enjoy a better life if they honored God and cared about others. As he was walking along the shore of Lake Galilee one day, he invited two fishermen, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, to join him in sharing God's advice for a better life. Peter and Andrew promptly went along with him, leaving their fishnets behind. A little later, he invited two more fishermen, James and John, who were repairing nets in a boat with their father Zebedee and his helpers. James and John were anxious to go along, so they left right away.

Jesus and these four men went to the town of Capernaum on the northern shore of Lake Galilee. Since it was the weekly day of rest, Jesus had the opportunity to share God's advice in the local worship center. The people were more impressed by what he said than anything they had ever heard from the religious leaders. While he was speaking, a harmful spirit caused a man to yell,

MARK

“I know you are God’s special messenger. Have you come to get rid of me?”

Jesus responded by commanding the spirit to leave. The man screamed and shook as the spirit left, but then became calm and quiet. Everyone who saw what happened was amazed. They tried to figure out who Jesus was because they had never seen anyone get rid of a harmful spirit so quickly. The news spread like wildfire throughout the surrounding towns and villages.

Jesus Demonstrates that He Cares about People

Jesus, James and John then went along with Peter and Andrew to their house, where Peter’s mother-in-law was sick in bed with a fever. After Jesus healed her, she got up and began preparing food for them. That evening, he healed a lot of other people with a variety of illnesses, and he freed many who were harassed by harmful spirits. The spirits recognized him, but he didn’t allow them to tell others who he was.

The next morning, Jesus got up before everyone else and left town so he could be alone for a while. Peter, Andrew, James and John noticed he was gone, so they went looking for him. When they finally found him, they told him that other people were also looking for him. But he explained that he needed to move on to share God’s advice with people in other parts of Galilee. As he and the four men went from place to place, he shared God’s advice in the local worship centers and freed more people of harmful spirits.

One day, a man with a serious skin disease called leprosy asked Jesus to heal him. Feeling sorry for the man, Jesus healed him but asked him not to tell anyone until the religious leader publicly confirmed it. He reminded the man to give something to God to show his appreciation, as God’s spokesman Moses instructed people long ago. The man eventually told so many people about his healing that Jesus decided to avoid the towns because he knew people would flock to him. But even in the country, a lot of people from surrounding towns and villages went to see him.

Jesus Heals a Man Who Is Paralyzed

2 When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was there. A number of people went to hear him share God’s advice, so the room he was in became crowded. Some men brought a man on a stretcher who was paralyzed. Since they couldn’t get close enough to ask Jesus for healing, they decided to take the man up on the flat roof, remove some panels, and lower him on the stretcher next to Jesus.

MARK

When Jesus saw how persistent they were to reach him, he told the man that God would not punish him for failing to follow God's advice.

Some of the religious leaders considered this an insult to God since they believed that only God's spokesmen should make such a statement. Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he said,

“I'll heal this man's physical condition to prove that I'm one of God's spokesmen. But restoring his physical condition is only part of helping him enjoy a better life.”

As soon as Jesus healed him, the man stood up, picked up the stretcher and began walking home. The people who witnessed the event thanked God because they had never seen anything so amazing before.

Some Religious Leaders Question Jesus' Activities

When Jesus returned to Lake Galilee, a lot of people went to hear him share God's advice. Before long, he went to the tax collector's office where Alphaeus' son Matthew (also known as Levi) was collecting taxes. When Jesus invited Matthew to join him in sharing God's advice with others, he readily agreed.

Later that day, Jesus and his followers were eating dinner at Matthew's home with some tax collectors and others who didn't follow God's advice very well. Some of the religious leaders wouldn't associate with such people, so they asked Jesus' followers why he was associating with them. When Jesus overheard the question, he responded,

“As you know, people who are well don't need a doctor, so people who already follow God's advice don't need my help. But I'm here to help those who want to improve their attitude and behavior toward God and others.”

The religious group known as the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus' forerunner John often skipped meals to spend time asking God for direction in their lives. When some people noticed that Jesus' followers were eating dinner, they asked why his followers weren't skipping meals like the others. He used the analogy of a groom and his guests at a wedding reception to explain that his followers didn't need to skip meals while he was with them. They could skip all the meals they wanted to after he was gone. Using two more analogies of cloth and goat-skin wine containers, he implied that people should allow some flexibility for how others follow God's advice.

MARK

Jesus Clarifies the Purpose of the Weekly Day of Rest

Later, as Jesus and his followers were walking beside a wheat field on the weekly day of rest, his followers were so hungry they picked some grain and ate it. This was an acceptable custom but some of the religious leaders were upset that they did this on the weekly day of rest. When the religious leaders confronted Jesus about it, he replied,

“Don’t you remember what our famous leader David did long ago when his soldiers needed food? He went to the temple and asked one of the religious leaders for bread. The only bread available was the bread that had been offered to God on the weekly day of rest, which only the religious leaders were allowed to eat under normal circumstances. But the religious leader gave that bread to David for his soldiers because he knew they were hungry.

“The purpose of the weekly day of rest is to refresh people after a week of hard work, but prohibiting people from eating defeats that purpose. Since my followers only picked enough grain to satisfy their immediate hunger, they didn’t violate the weekly day of rest.”

3 Jesus then went to the local worship center where there was a man with a disabled arm. Some of the religious leaders were watching and waiting to see if Jesus would heal him. If he did, they were planning to accuse him of breaking their rule that only the critically ill should be healed on the weekly day of rest. Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he used the opportunity for an object lesson. He asked the man with the disabled arm to stand where everyone could see him. Then he asked the religious leaders,

“Is it better to do something good on the weekly day of rest, such as saving someone’s life, or something bad, such as committing murder?”

The answer to Jesus’ question was obvious but no one replied. Jesus was disappointed by their lack of response because it reflected their refusal to retract their ridiculous rule. To demonstrate that people shouldn’t hesitate to help others on the weekly day of rest, he healed the man’s arm for all to see. The religious leaders were very upset by this, so they began making plans with some supporters of Herod (the Roman leader of that area) to get rid of Jesus.

MARK

Jesus Heals More People

Jesus and his followers returned to Lake Galilee, where a lot of people had come from towns and villages throughout Galilee. Some people also came from the south – from Jerusalem and other parts of Judea, and from the country called Idumea. Some people came from the east – from places across the Jordan River. And others came from the north – from the area near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. A lot of people came for healing because they had heard that Jesus healed many others. As he healed some, others tried to get close enough to touch him. Since they were beginning to crowd him, he asked his followers to get a boat ready in case he needed it to talk to the people from offshore.

Among the crowd were people harassed by harmful spirits. When the spirits saw Jesus, they realized that he was God's special messenger. But he told them not to reveal it because he knew the religious leaders would increase their efforts to get rid of him before he was ready.

Jesus Chooses 12 of His Followers to Share God's Advice

Jesus then walked to a higher terrain where he chose 12 of his followers to join him in sharing God's advice and freeing people of harmful spirits. These 12 included:

Simon, whom Jesus had nicknamed *Peter*
James and John, sons of Zebedee, whom he nicknamed
the talkative men
Andrew
Philip
Bartholomew
Matthew
Thomas
another James, the son of Alphaeus
Thaddaeus
another Simon, who actively resisted Roman oppression
Judas Iscariot, who eventually turned against Jesus

Jesus Defends His Connection with God

A little while later, Jesus and his 12 followers went to a house where so many people had gathered that there wasn't enough food for everyone. Some religious leaders from Jerusalem had heard how Jesus amazed the crowds by freeing people of harmful spirits, so they tried to ruin his popularity by claiming that Satan enabled him to do it. When Jesus overheard what the religious leaders were saying, he illustrated how ridiculous their suggestion was,

MARK

“Everyone knows that a military leader doesn’t allow his soldiers to fight against each other, because that would weaken their strength against their opponent. If Satan enabled me to free people of harmful spirits, he would weaken his strength against God.

“Everyone also knows people must overpower others before they can do something against their will. When God enables me to free people of harmful spirits, I’m overpowering Satan because I’m doing this against his will.

“God overlooks all your faults but one – your stubborn refusal to let God help you improve your attitude and behavior.”

About that time, Jesus’ mother and half-brothers came to see him. It was too crowded to go inside the house, so they asked others to pass the word along that they were there. Jesus used their coming as an opportunity to explain that those who follow God’s advice are like members of his own family.

Jesus Relates Sharing God’s Advice to Spreading Seeds

4 Jesus returned again to Lake Galilee. There were so many people who had gone along to hear God’s advice that he spoke to them from a boat just offshore while they listened on the beach. He used a lot of illustrations such as this:

“One day a farmer spread some seeds by hand. As usual, they landed in a variety of places. Some seeds landed on hard ground, where the birds could easily snatch them. Some seeds landed in rocky soil where they began to sprout, but the sprouts soon withered and died because the rocks prevented their roots from growing. Some seeds landed among weeds that crowded the plants so much that they couldn’t produce any grain. But some seeds landed on fertile soil and grew into plants that produced a lot of grain.”

Jesus Explains Why He Uses Illustrations

After most of the people had left, some of Jesus’ followers asked why he used illustrations. So he replied,

“Some of you already realize how much more enjoyable your life is since you’ve started following God’s advice. But there are a lot of people who’ve heard it and seen the improvement it has made in other people’s lives, but still don’t understand what a difference it can make in their own. I use illustrations to relate God’s advice

MARK

to their everyday experiences to make it easier for them to understand.”

Jesus Explains His Illustration of Spreading Seeds

Jesus then explained his illustration about spreading seeds,

“I’m like the farmer who spreads the seeds. But instead of spreading seeds, I’m sharing God’s advice for a better life.

“Some people are like the hard ground, where the seeds were eaten by the birds before they even had a chance to sprout. These people refuse to follow God’s advice because they prefer their self-centered lifestyle.

“Some people are like the rocky soil in which the seeds began to sprout but died because the rocks prevented their roots from growing. These people begin to follow God’s advice, but they stop when others give them a hard time.

“Some people are like the soil full of weeds, which crowded the plants so much that they couldn’t produce any grain. These people also follow God’s advice for a while, but they’re so worried it might jeopardize their financial security or social status that they soon change their minds.

“Finally, some people are like the fertile soil that produced a lot of grain. These people diligently follow God’s advice and help others enjoy a better life.

“When a farmer plants a seed in fertile soil, the soil enables it to sprout and grow until the plant produces a full head of grain. Like a farmer, I’ve tried to ‘plant’ God’s advice in many people, but they must be willing to follow it if they want to enjoy a better life.

“Sharing God’s advice is like planting a tiny seed that has the potential to grow into a plant large enough for the birds to build nests on its branches.”

Jesus Compares People to a Lamp

Jesus then added another illustration,

“As you know, the purpose of a lamp is to help people see when it’s dark. Can you imagine lighting a lamp and then putting it under a chair or in a box? That would defeat its purpose. People usually put their lamp on a table where it can serve its purpose

MARK

well. Your purpose in life is similar to the lamp's – to help others enjoy a better life.”

Jesus used a lot of illustrations like these to help people understand. But his 12 chosen followers often had additional questions, which he answered when he was alone with them.

Jesus Calms a Violent Windstorm

That evening, Jesus decided to sail to the east side of Lake Galilee with his 12 chosen followers to share God's advice there. As they were crossing the lake, a violent windstorm came up and waves began pouring into their boat. Jesus had fallen asleep in the back, so his followers woke him to warn him that they could all drown. Seeing how terrified they were, he reminded them,

“You wouldn't need to be concerned if you had more confidence in God.”

They were amazed as he calmed the wind and water, realizing that he was no ordinary human being.

Jesus Frees a Man Harassed by Harmful Spirits

5 Before long, Jesus and his followers reached land near the town of Gergesa. A man was living along the coast in a burial cave because his behavior was too bizarre to live at home with his family. Harassed by harmful spirits, he wore little or no clothing, hit himself with stones, and screamed day and night. Some people tried to restrain him with chains to prevent him from hurting himself, but he always broke loose.

When Jesus and his followers arrived on shore, the man ran down the hillside to meet him as he was getting off the boat. The spirits harassing the man realized that Jesus was a special messenger from God, so they knew they were in big trouble. When Jesus asked their names, they replied,

“People refer to us as an army because there are so many of us.”

They didn't want Jesus to send them far away, so they asked him to send them into the herd of pigs grazing nearby. As soon as he did, the herd of about 2,000 pigs ran down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned.

When the pig herders told the people in the surrounding area what had happened to the man, they came to check it out for themselves. They were amazed to find him with his clothes on, sitting calmly, no longer acting like a maniac. But when they heard about the massive loss of pigs, they

MARK

asked Jesus to leave because they were afraid something similar could happen to them. As Jesus was getting back in the boat, the man who had been harassed by the spirits asked if he could go along. But Jesus suggested he go back to his hometown in the Decapolis area and tell his family that God had healed him. When the man's family saw him, they were amazed to see how much he had changed.

Jesus Heals a Woman and a 12-Year-Old Girl

When Jesus and his 12 chosen followers returned to the west side of Lake Galilee, a lot of people again gathered around him on the beach. Among the crowd was a man named Jairus, who was one of the leaders of the local worship center. He had come to ask Jesus to heal his 12-year-old daughter who was critically ill.

As Jesus and his followers were walking to Jairus' home, a woman who had excessive menstrual bleeding for 12 years approached Jesus from behind. Although she had spent all her money going to numerous doctors for treatment, she kept getting worse. Since she had heard that Jesus healed others, she was sure he would heal her, too, if she could just get close enough to touch him. So she worked her way through the crowd and got close enough to touch the back of his coat. As soon as she did, she realized she had been healed.

Although Jesus knew what happened, he turned around and asked who had touched his coat. His 12 chosen followers wondered why he wanted to know, since he should have expected someone to accidentally touch him, with all the people crowding around. But Jesus wanted to point out that someone had touched him on purpose, so he waited for the woman to identify herself. She was afraid he might be upset with her, so she was reluctant to come forward. When she eventually explained that she was sure she would be healed if she could just touch his coat, he commended her for her confidence.

About that time, some people from Jairus' home came and told Jairus that there was no longer any need to bother Jesus, because his daughter had died. Jesus overheard what they said, so he told Jairus not to be upset but to have confidence that he could bring her back to life. He decided to take Peter, James and his brother John along to Jairus' home. When they arrived, some people were wailing loudly to mourn the girl's death. Jesus told them it wasn't necessary because she wasn't permanently dead. They laughed when he said this because they had never seen a dead person come back to life.

After Jesus asked everyone to leave the house except for Peter, James, John, and the girl's parents, Jesus brought the girl back to life. When she got up and began walking around, those who saw it were amazed and

MARK

anxious to tell others what Jesus had done. But he asked them not to spread the news because he knew some of the religious leaders would try even harder to get rid of him before he was ready. He then encouraged her parents to give her something to eat.

The People in Nazareth Disappoint Jesus

6 Jesus and his 12 chosen followers then returned to Nazareth, where he grew up. When he shared God's advice and healed a few sick people in the local worship center on the weekly day of rest, a lot of people were very impressed by what he said and did. They realized he was an extraordinary person, but they found it difficult to accept because they knew his family. They knew that his stepfather Joseph was a carpenter, and they knew his mother Mary, his younger half-sisters, and his younger half-brothers: James, Joseph, Judas and Simon.

Acknowledging that God's spokesmen usually receive less respect from people in their hometown, Jesus wasn't surprised that the people who knew his family had difficulty accepting him for who he was. But he was disappointed that only a few had enough confidence to ask him for healing.

Jesus' Followers Share God's Advice

Jesus then encouraged his 12 chosen followers to share God's advice with people in the surrounding villages, while freeing those harassed by harmful spirits and healing those who were sick. He suggested they travel in pairs, wear shoes, and take something along for protection from wild animals. He told them they didn't need to take along any food, extra clothing, or money because the people who followed God's advice would readily extend their hospitality. He reminded them that some people would refuse to listen.

So the 12 men went from village to village, healing the sick, freeing people of harmful spirits, and sharing God's advice for a better life.

Herodias Succeeds in Having John Executed

At this time, the Roman leader was Herod Antipas. His wife Herodias had become very angry with John, who rinsed people with water when they decided to follow God's advice. John was aware of the law against a woman remarrying before her former husband died, so he told Herod that his marriage to Herodias was illegal because her former husband (Herod's brother Phillip) was still alive. Since Herod began to consider the possibility of divorcing Herodias, she became so furious that she wanted John executed. But Herod respected John and appreciated his advice

MARK

because he knew John always tried to do what was legally and morally right. So he just had John arrested and put in jail.

On Herod's birthday some time later, Herodias seized the opportunity to get rid of John. During the celebration with dignitaries, military commanders and prominent Galileans, she arranged for her daughter to dance for Herod and his guests. They were so pleased with her performance that Herod told her he would give her whatever she wanted, up to half of everything he owned. When she asked her mother what she should request, her mother told her to ask Herod to execute John. When she did as her mother suggested, Herod's heart sank. But he couldn't break his promise with so many witnesses present, so he ordered his soldiers to execute John and take his head to her on a platter to verify his death.

When John's followers heard that he had been executed, they retrieved his body for burial.

Some time later, when Herod heard about all the amazing things Jesus was doing, he thought it was John, having come back to life. But others thought Elijah or one of God's other spokesmen had come back to life.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Share Their Food

When Jesus' followers returned from the villages around Nazareth after sharing God's advice and healing those who were sick or harassed by harmful spirits, they started to share their experiences with Jesus. But there were so many people coming to see him that he and his followers didn't even have a chance to eat. So he decided to go to a place where he and his 12 chosen followers could be alone. Since they were on the shore of Lake Galilee, they got in a boat and headed up the coast. But a lot of people found out where they were going and arrived there first by running along the shore. The large crowd of people waiting for Jesus was like a flock of sheep that didn't have a shepherd. He was very concerned for them, so he used the opportunity to explain how they could enjoy a better life.

That afternoon, some of Jesus' followers reminded him that it was getting late and suggested he tell the crowd of more than 5,000 to go to nearby farms and villages to get something to eat. Instead, he encouraged his followers to provide food for them. They told him they didn't have enough money to buy food for so many people. When he asked how much food they had on hand, they only came up with five loaves of bread and two cooked fish.

Jesus knew that would serve the purpose, so he asked his followers to separate the people into groups of 50 or 100. After thanking God for the bread and fish, he cut them into pieces and gave them to his followers to

MARK

distribute among the people. There was plenty of food for everyone, and even 12 baskets of leftovers!

Jesus Walks on Water

After the people had eaten, Jesus asked his 12 chosen followers to sail ahead of him to Bethsaida, on the northeastern coast of the lake. When the crowd left later that evening, he went up on a hill where he could see his followers rowing against a strong wind. Around dawn the next morning, they saw someone walking toward them on the water. They were terrified because they thought they were seeing a ghost. After Jesus identified himself, he got into the boat as the wind calmed down. Not only were they stunned by what had just happened, they were still trying to figure out how five loaves of bread and two fish could feed more than 5,000 people.

When Jesus and his followers reached the shore near Gennesaret, just south of Capernaum, some people recognized him and spread the word that he was there. No matter where he went, people brought their sick friends and relatives. He healed all of them, including those who believed they could be healed just by touching the edge of his coat.

Jesus Challenges One of the Religious Leaders' Traditions

7 The Jewish people observed a lot of traditions, such as rinsing their hands and dishes a certain way before they ate. One day, some of the religious leaders from Jerusalem noticed that Jesus' 12 chosen followers didn't rinse their hands the traditional way before they ate, so the religious leaders questioned Jesus about it. He challenged their tradition by quoting what God's spokesman Isaiah said long ago,

“Some people pretend to honor God by making up their own rules and convincing others that they're part of God's advice.”

Jesus explained,

“You religious leaders are doing just that. You've been very successful in making others think they're following God's advice when they're just following yours. For example, God encourages people to respect their parents by helping them when they're in need. But you allow people to shirk their responsibility by letting them claim that they're giving God what they should be giving to their parents. What twisted thinking!

“I could give you many other examples where your own rules contradict God's advice.”

MARK

Jesus then got the attention of the other people nearby as he made a final comment about their eating traditions:

“God cares a lot more about what comes out of people’s mouths than what goes into them.”

Later, after Jesus and his 12 chosen followers had gone to someone’s house, they asked what he meant. So he explained,

“What you eat just goes into your stomach and has very little effect on what you say or do, so you don’t need a lot of guidelines on how to eat. But your attitude greatly affects what you say and do. For example, if you don’t respect God or care about others, you’re likely to be greedy, jealous, or proud, and you’re likely to lie, cheat, steal, murder, slander, have sexual relations without a lifelong commitment, ruin your marriage, or do other selfish things. God is far more concerned about your attitude and behavior than about what or how you eat.”

Jesus Heals the Daughter of a Non-Jewish Woman

After Jesus and his 12 chosen followers left Galilee, where most of the people were Jewish, they went northwest to the area around Tyre, where most of the people were non-Jewish. Jesus and his followers went to someone’s home, hoping to be alone for a while, but the word slipped out that he was there. When a local Greek woman asked him to send a harmful spirit away from her daughter, he remarked that non-Jewish people such as herself were usually not as interested in following God’s advice as the Jewish people were. So she responded,

“Although I’m not a Jew, I’m ready and willing to follow God’s advice.”

To this Jesus replied,

“I know you’re sincere, so I’ve done what you asked. Go home and see for yourself.”

When the woman returned home to her daughter, the harmful spirit was gone.

Jesus Heals a Man Who Couldn’t Speak or Hear

When Jesus and his 12 chosen followers left the area around Tyre, they traveled further north through Sidon and then south again to the Decapolis area. While they were there, some people asked him to heal a man who couldn’t speak or hear. So he took the man away from the crowd and healed him, as he put his fingers in the man’s ears and touched the

MARK

man's tongue. He asked those who brought the man not to tell anyone, but they were so amazed that the man could speak and hear that they couldn't help but tell others what Jesus had done.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Share Their Food Again

8 Before long, more than 4,000 people had gathered in the countryside to hear Jesus share God's advice for a better life. By the third day, many of them had run out of food. Jesus expressed his concern to his 12 chosen followers, implying that they should share their own food with the crowd,

“If these people head for home without eating, some of them might not have enough strength to get there.”

But his followers replied,

“We don't have nearly enough food for all these people.”

When Jesus asked them to check how much food they had, they only came up with seven loaves of bread and a few, small, cooked fish. After telling the crowd to get ready to eat, he thanked God for the bread and fish, cut them into pieces, and gave them to his followers to distribute among the people. There was plenty of food for everyone, and even seven large baskets of leftovers!

After the people had finished eating and were on their way home, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers sailed north to Dalmanutha, a town on the western shore of Lake Galilee.

Some Religious Leaders Challenge Jesus

When some of the religious leaders in that area heard that Jesus was nearby, they challenged him to do something amazing to prove that he was God's special messenger. Disgusted by their skepticism, he refused to do so.

Jesus and his 12 chosen followers then sailed toward Bethsaida, on the northern shore of Lake Galilee. His followers had forgotten to take more food along, so they only had one loaf of bread with them. As they were crossing the lake, Jesus warned them about the religious leaders and the Roman leader Herod:

“Be careful of the yeast of Herod and the religious leaders.”

Thinking he meant the yeast in bread, his followers admitted they had forgotten to take more bread with them. Disappointed that they didn't understand what he meant, he asked,

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“Do you remember how many baskets of leftovers there were when just five loaves of bread fed more than 5,000 people?”

“Yes,” they replied. “There were 12.”

Jesus continued,

“Do you also remember how many baskets of leftovers there were when seven loaves of bread fed more than 4,000 people?”

“Seven,” they responded.

Jesus implied that these two incidents were not just about bread. They demonstrated how far something can spread, like the hypocrisy of some of the religious leaders.

Jesus Heals a Man Who Was Blind

When Jesus and his followers arrived in Bethsaida, some people asked him to heal a man who was blind. Taking the man’s hand, Jesus led him out of the village. There Jesus spit into his own hands and then touched the man’s eyes, a common manner of healing at the time. When Jesus asked the man if he could see anything, he opened his eyes and said,

“I see people walking around, but they’re so blurred they look like trees.”

After Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes a second time, he could see clearly. But Jesus asked him not to tell anyone that he healed him.

Jesus Asks His Followers Who Others Think He Is

As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were walking north to the area around Caesarea Philippi, he asked them,

“When you hear others talk about me, who do they think I am?”

His followers replied,

“Some people think you are John, who symbolically rinsed people with water. Others think you are Elijah or one of God’s other spokesmen, who they think has come back to life.”

When Jesus asked his followers for their own opinion, Peter said,

“You’re the one God promised would help people enjoy a better life.”

Jesus asked his followers not to tell anyone what Peter had just said because he didn’t want the religious leaders to become more alarmed and determined to get rid of him before he was ready. He then explained that

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he would soon be beaten and executed at the hands of the religious leaders, but he assured his followers that he would come back to life a few days after his death. This scenario didn't fit Peter's perception of the one who would help them enjoy a better life, so he insisted it couldn't happen. Jesus scolded Peter for contradicting him,

“Stop acting like Satan, who wants everything to go his way.”

Including the others, Jesus continued,

“If you want to enjoy a better life, you must stop being self-centered. What good is your life if you acquire fame and fortune but don't share it? I'm very disappointed in anyone who lives such a life. Make the most of your life by helping others in need, even if it means giving your life for them, as some of you will see me do.”

Peter, James and John Have an Awesome Experience

9 Six days later, Jesus invited Peter, James and John to go along with him up a mountain. When Moses and Elijah, two of God's most prominent spokesmen who lived long ago, appeared and began talking with Jesus, his clothes turned brilliant white. Peter was so excited that he suggested building three temporary shelters for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. But as a cloud covered all of them, God confirmed that Jesus was God's special messenger.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus asked Peter, James and John not to tell anyone about their experience until after God's special messenger died and came back to life. They wondered what he meant, recalling that the religious leaders said Elijah would come back to life before God's special messenger would come. When they asked Jesus about it, he explained that Elijah had already returned in the person of his forerunner John, and he predicted that he would be executed, as John was.

Jesus Frees a Boy Harassed by a Harmful Spirit

As Jesus, Peter, James and John were returning to Jesus' other followers, they noticed a lot of people discussing something with them. Some of the people were so excited to see Jesus that they ran to greet him. When he asked what they had been discussing, one of the men explained,

“I came to ask you to free my son of a harmful spirit, which has caused him to have seizures and has taken away his ability to speak and hear. Since you weren't here, I asked your followers to heal him, but they were unsuccessful.”

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Jesus expressed his disappointment in his followers and then asked the man to bring his son. As they were returning, the spirit recognized Jesus and caused the boy to have another violent seizure. When Jesus asked how long the spirit had been harassing the boy like this, the man replied,

“Ever since he was very young. The spirit has nearly killed him by causing him to fall into fire and water. Please help him if you can.”

Jesus responded,

“Of course, I can. When you put your trust in God, God can help you do almost anything.”

The man then said,

“I know you’ve healed others but since your followers couldn’t heal my son, I wasn’t sure you could either.”

While more people gathered to see what the commotion was about, Jesus ordered the spirit to leave and never return. As it left, it caused the boy to scream and have another violent seizure. The boy’s body then became so lifeless that those who were there thought he was dead. But Jesus took the boy’s hand and helped him get up to show that he was alive and well.

Jesus and his 12 chosen followers then went to someone’s home to be alone. When they asked why they weren’t able to send the spirit away, Jesus replied,

“You were unsuccessful because you tried to do it on your own. You need God’s help to free someone of a harmful spirit.”

From there, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers returned to Galilee without telling anyone because he wanted to spend more time alone with them. When he reminded them that he would be executed and come back to life just a few days later, they still didn’t understand exactly what he meant, but they were too upset to ask him to explain.

Jesus Describes the Best Follower of God’s Advice

Some time later, as Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were returning to Capernaum, he heard them discussing something. When they arrived at Peter’s home, Jesus asked what they had been discussing. They were too embarrassed to tell him that they were trying to figure out which of them was the best follower of God’s advice. But he knew what they were thinking, so he took a little child in his arms and said,

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“If you want to be the best follower of God’s advice, you’ll need to replace your pride with the humility of a little child. When you do this, you’ll be able to follow God’s advice as I am.”

John then said,

“We saw a man freeing people of harmful spirits, who claims that you enable him to do it. But we told him to stop since he isn’t one of your 12 chosen followers.”

Jesus replied,

“Don’t discourage him. He’s just following my example. I’m sure he’ll demonstrate that by extending his hospitality to you when he has the opportunity.

“If others try to distract you from following God’s advice, limit your association with them.

“As you know, one of the uses for salt is to preserve food. Similarly, one of your purposes in life is to maintain good relationships. So stop being self-centered and try harder to get along with others.”

Some Religious Leaders Question Jesus about Divorce

10 After Jesus and his 12 chosen followers left Capernaum, they traveled south to Judea and then crossed the Jordan River. As usual, a lot of people followed Jesus to hear God’s advice. Among them were some religious leaders who wondered what his view was on the controversial subject of divorce. So they asked him,

“Do you think it’s all right for a man to divorce his wife?”

Jesus knew they had a lot of respect for God’s spokesman Moses, so he asked what instruction Moses had given long ago. They replied,

“Moses instructed a man to give his wife an official document when he divorced her.”

Jesus responded,

“Moses realized that some marriages would eventually break up due to the self-centeredness of one or both spouses. But God’s original intent was for spouses to enjoy a lifetime together.”

After Jesus and his followers had gone to someone’s home, they asked him to elaborate. So he explained,

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“It’s important that people accept responsibility for their actions when they insist on getting divorced. If a man divorces his wife so he can marry another woman, he should accept responsibility for ruining their marriage. On the other hand, if a woman divorces her husband so she can marry someone else, then she should accept responsibility for ruining the marriage.”

Jesus Encourages People to Share

A while later, some people brought their children to Jesus for encouragement. Some of his followers tried to keep the children from bothering him, but he welcomed them. He put his arms around them and explained that everyone needs to be as humble as little children if they want to enjoy life as God intended.

After the children had left, a rich man addressed Jesus as a good teacher and asked,

“How can I enjoy life as God intended? Is there something special I must do?”

Jesus replied,

“Since you addressed me as a good teacher, you must realize that my advice comes from God.

“To enjoy life as God intended, you need to follow God’s basic advice for getting along with others: don’t murder, cheat or steal, keep your lifelong commitment to your spouse, respect your parents, and tell the truth.”

The rich man answered,

“I’ve been doing that my entire life. But is there anything else I should do?”

Pleased with the man’s interest, Jesus continued,

“If you want to enjoy life as God intended, you need to follow my example. Sell your belongings and give the money to people in need.”

The rich man walked away disappointed because he couldn’t bear to part with his money and possessions. Jesus then turned to his followers and said,

“It’s especially difficult for rich people to enjoy life as God intended because they’re usually so attached to their money and possessions that they aren’t willing to share them with others.”

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Jesus' followers were surprised to hear this because they figured wealthy people already had the ultimate life. So Jesus explained,

“It doesn't matter how rich you are, because it isn't how much you have that's important. It's what you do with what you have. If you let God help you increase your willingness to share with others in need, you'll see how much more enjoyable life can be.”

When Peter remarked that he and Jesus' other 11 chosen followers had basically given up everything to follow him, Jesus responded,

“Although you may be criticized for it, those of you who are willing to give up your job and move away from your home and family to help others in need will receive great satisfaction in life. A lot of people will follow your example.”

Jesus Clarifies His Style of Leadership

As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were on their way to Jerusalem, he described what was going to happen to him when they arrived,

“The religious leaders are going to sentence me to die and then turn me over to the Roman leader, who will have me ridiculed, beaten and executed.”

Jesus' followers were alarmed to hear this, and amazed that he continued to lead the way to his own execution. But he reminded them that he would come back to life just a few days later.

Since Zebedee's sons James and John were still assuming Jesus would be a leader like their ancestor David, they asked Jesus if they could be his generals. After he explained that they had the wrong idea about his style of leadership, he asked,

“Are you willing to help others to the point of giving your life for them, as I'm about to do?”

When they assured him they were, he continued,

“There aren't many who've made such a deep commitment to God.”

Jesus' other followers were upset with James and John for requesting the highest positions, so Jesus clarified his style of leadership,

“I don't want you to force others to serve you, as the Roman leaders do. I want you to help others in need, as I'm doing.”

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Jesus Heals Another Man Who Is Blind

A lot of people went along with Jesus and his 12 chosen followers on their way to Jerusalem. As they passed through Jericho, they approached a blind man named Bartimaeus sitting alongside the road, asking people for help. He had heard that Jesus was the descendant of their famous leader David, who would help people enjoy a better life. So when Bartimaeus realized Jesus was nearby, he yelled,

“Jesus! Help me!”

Some people tried to quiet Bartimaeus, but he yelled even louder. When Jesus heard him calling, he invited him to come. As Bartimaeus approached Jesus and asked him to restore his sight, Jesus remarked,

“I’ve restored your sight because you believed I could do it.”

Since Bartimaeus could see again, he joined the others who were going along with Jesus to Jerusalem.

A Lot of People Honor Jesus as He Enters Jerusalem

11 Before long, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers arrived at Olive Hill, near Bethany and Bethphage, suburbs of Jerusalem. He asked two of his followers to go to a nearby village and get a young donkey, which had never been ridden and was tied to a gate near the street. If anyone questioned why they were taking the donkey, Jesus told the men to explain that he needed to borrow it for a while. When they returned with the donkey, they got it ready to ride. As Jesus rode it into Jerusalem, a lot of people spread cloths and leaves along the road in front of him, which was the custom for honoring someone important. They celebrated and thanked God because they thought Jesus would be a great leader like their famous ancestor David, who would help them enjoy a better life.

It was almost dark when Jesus arrived at the temple, so he and his 12 chosen followers went to Bethany to spend the night.

Jesus Predicts the Death of a Fig Tree

Jesus was hungry the next morning as he and his followers were on their way back to Jerusalem. When he saw a fig tree in the distance, he expected it to have some figs on it. But when they reached the tree, Jesus pointed out that it would soon die because it no longer bore fruit.

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Jesus Scolds the Dishonest Merchants at the Temple

When Jesus and his followers returned to the outer section of the temple, he noticed some merchants charging foreigners excessive prices for doves and other items that they needed for offerings. Other merchants were also overcharging them to exchange their money for local currency, and others were misusing the area as a shortcut to transport things. Jesus didn't like what was taking place, so he sent the dishonest merchants out of the temple, scolding them with a quote from God long ago,

“The temple was built to help people worship me, but you're using it to take advantage of them.”

The religious leaders didn't like how Jesus interfered with the activities at the temple, so they continued to look for an excuse to get rid of him. But they had to be cautious how they went about it because a lot of people were very impressed by what he said and did.

Later that evening, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers went to a nearby town to spend the night.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Trust Him

On their way back to Jerusalem the next morning, Jesus and his followers walked by the same fig tree. Peter remembered what Jesus had said the day before, so he exclaimed,

“Look! The fig tree's dead!”

Jesus responded,

“Are you surprised that what I predicted yesterday actually took place? If you'd ask me to put Olive Hill into the Dead Sea, I could easily do it. So you may rest assured that I can do anything you ask. But if you ask me to overlook your faults, you must be willing to overlook the faults of others as well.”

Some Religious Leaders Confront Jesus at the Temple

When Jesus and his followers returned to the temple, some of the religious leaders confronted him about the incident there the previous day,

“Who gave you permission to send the merchants out of the temple yesterday?”

Jesus knew they were hoping he would say something to give them an excuse to get rid of him, so he replied,

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“Let me ask you a question first. If you answer my question, I’ll answer yours. Who do you think motivated John to symbolically rinse people with water? God, or a human being?”

Jesus’ question put the religious leaders on the spot. If they said God motivated John, they wouldn’t have any excuse for ignoring the advice he shared. On the other hand, if they said a human being motivated him, they were afraid his followers might react violently because they were convinced that he was one of God’s spokesmen. Realizing that either response would get them into trouble, the religious leaders told Jesus they didn’t know who motivated John. Since they didn’t answer *his* question, Jesus chose not to answer *theirs*.

Jesus Exposes the Religious Leaders’ Self-centeredness

12 Jesus then told the religious leaders a story in which he compared them to self-centered farmers who mistreated others,

“There once was a man who planted a vineyard. He built a fence around it and a watchtower to protect it from animals, and he made a winepress to squash the grapes. When he moved away, he leased the vineyard to some farmers. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent a messenger to get the rent payment, but the farmers beat him and sent him back with nothing. He then sent another messenger, but the farmers did the same to him. He sent more messengers, but the farmers beat them all, and even killed some.

“He finally decided to send his own son, whom he loved very much and whom he thought the farmers would respect more than the others. Since they knew that his son would eventually inherit the vineyard, they killed him so they could keep it for themselves. Then the owner got rid of them and gave the vineyard to someone else.”

Quoting what one of God’s spokesmen had written long ago, Jesus implied that the religious leaders refused to follow God’s advice. When they realized that he was comparing them to the self-centered characters in the story, they were even more determined to get rid of him. But since they were afraid his followers might defend him, they decided not to take any action at that time.

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Some Religious Leaders Attempt to Trap Jesus

Some of the religious leaders soon devised a plan to try to get Jesus into serious trouble. Since they sharply disagreed with the supporters of Herod about paying taxes to Caesar, the emperor of the Roman Empire, one of them asked,

“Do you think we should pay taxes to Caesar?”

If Jesus agreed that they *should* pay taxes to Caesar, the religious leaders could claim he wasn't following God's advice. On the other hand, if he suggested that they *shouldn't* pay taxes to Caesar, the Roman authorities could arrest him for treason and sentence him to die. They figured Jesus would be in big trouble either way. But he knew what they were up to, so he asked whose face and name were on the Roman coins. When they acknowledged they were Caesar's, Jesus said,

“Since you've consented to live in a society that uses Roman currency, it's appropriate for you to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. But don't neglect to follow God's advice.”

Jesus left quite an impression as he foiled the religious leaders' scheme.

Other Religious Leaders Challenge Jesus on Life after Death

Before long, the religious leaders who didn't think life continues after death challenged Jesus about it. Referring to God's spokesman Moses who lived long ago, they set the stage,

“Moses advised that when a married man dies before he has children, his brother should marry the widow so she would bear children for her deceased husband.”

Then the religious leaders set up a hypothetical situation to pose a question which implied that the idea of life after death was a ridiculous notion,

“Let's suppose a man who has six brothers dies before he has any children. Each of his brothers marries the widow, one after the other, but they all die before producing a child. If there is life after death as you say, which of the seven men would be the woman's husband in that life?”

Jesus replied,

“You don't understand why Moses gave this advice. He just did this so the deceased man would have a descendant to inherit his

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possessions. But when people come back to life after they die, they won't marry because they'll be like God's messengers.

“When God spoke to Moses through the burning bush long ago, God said, ‘I am the God whom Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are worshipping.’ By stating that these men were worshipping God, even though they had died many years earlier, God implied that death is not final.”

Jesus Summarizes God's Advice for a Better Life

One of the religious leaders was very impressed by Jesus' response, so he asked Jesus another question:

“What's the best advice God has ever given us?”

Jesus replied,

“You should respect God more than anyone or anything else, and you should care about others as much as you care about yourself.”

The religious leader responded,

“You're absolutely right. That's much more important than just making material offerings to God.”

When he saw how perceptive the religious leader was, Jesus said,

“You already *know* how to enjoy a better life, but you need to put your knowledge into *practice*.”

Because of Jesus' impressive responses, his opponents decided not to challenge him publicly anymore.

Later, while Jesus was still at the temple, he reminded the people that the religious leaders knew the one God promised to help them enjoy a better life would be a descendant of their famous leader David. But Jesus quoted David to clarify that the one God promised would be much more than just David's descendant. The people were thrilled to hear this.

Jesus then added a warning about some of the religious leaders,

“These people are setting a bad example for you. They wear their religious robes in public so you'll recognize them and give them the best seats at banquets and in the local worship centers. But while they put up a good front with their long, phony prayers, they take advantage of people, especially widows. Following their self-centered lifestyle won't help you experience the kind of life God wants you to enjoy.”

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Jesus Commends a Poor Widow's Generous Gift

A little while later, Jesus and his followers were in the area of the temple where people gave money to help others in need. After noticing how much the wealthy people gave, he was so impressed by a poor widow's gift that he remarked to his followers,

“Look at that! This poor widow gave more generously than all those wealthy people. They only gave a small portion of their wealth, while this poor widow gave all the money she had.”

Jesus Predicts the Destruction of the Temple

13 As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were leaving the temple complex, one of them remarked how beautiful the stone buildings were. Jesus informed them that the temple would soon be totally destroyed. Later, when Peter, James, John and Andrew were alone with Jesus on Olive Hill with the temple in sight, one of them asked when this would occur. So Jesus explained,

“As God's spokesman Daniel predicted long ago, the temple will be dishonored and destroyed by the Roman army when it attacks Jerusalem. I won't tell you exactly when this will happen, but it will be within your lifetime. When people begin hearing reports of numerous battles, earthquakes and famine, they'll know the time is near.

“The army could strike at any time, day or night, so everyone should be ready to escape at a moment's notice. Those who are working in their fields or right outside their home won't have time to get any of their belongings, not even a coat. Some people will need to take refuge in the surrounding hills, so they should pray the attack won't come in bad weather. Pregnant women and mothers with young children will find it particularly difficult at this time.

“During the invasion, some people will try to make you think that I'm still around. But don't let them fool you, because I'll physically be long gone by then. So when the soldiers come looking for me and can't find me, they'll arrest, publicly torture, and even kill some of you. Members of your own family may even turn you in.

“If you're arrested, don't worry about what you'll say in court because God will help you find the right words. Just share God's

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advice so the Roman leaders and spectators will have an opportunity to hear it.

“There will be so much smoke from burning buildings that the sun, moon, and stars won’t be visible. Although this will be one of the worst catastrophes ever, God won’t allow it to be a total disaster. When the invasion is over, messengers will travel far and wide to let the survivors know that it’s safe to return to their homes. God will help them follow my example to put their lives back together again.”

A Woman Honors Jesus with Expensive Perfume

14 Jesus and his 12 chosen followers returned to Bethany to the home of Simon, who previously had a serious skin disease called leprosy. While Jesus was eating dinner, a woman opened a new container of very expensive perfume and put some of it on him to express her admiration. Some of his followers criticized her for using such expensive perfume, suggesting she could have sold it for a lot of money and given the money to the poor. But Jesus scolded them for criticizing her because he was delighted by what she did. He reminded them that they would have plenty of opportunity to help the poor, but their time with him was almost over. Referring to their custom of putting perfume on people when they die, he explained that the woman’s action was appropriate since he was going to die in just a few days.

Some Religious Leaders Finalize Plans to Get Rid of Jesus

At this time every year, the Jewish people celebrated their ancestors’ freedom from slavery in Egypt, when God spared their first-born children from death. On the Wednesday before this weeklong celebration, some of the religious leaders were meeting again to finalize their plans to get rid of Jesus without disrupting the celebration. When Judas Iscariot (one of Jesus’ 12 chosen followers) showed up and offered to join their conspiracy, they agreed to pay him for his help. Together they worked out a plan to have Jesus arrested without giving his followers a chance to offer resistance.

Jesus and His Followers Share the Celebration Meal

Thursday afternoon, after a lamb was killed for the meal that began the weeklong celebration, a couple of Jesus’ followers asked where they should prepare it. Jesus replied,

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“Go to Jerusalem and look for the man carrying a container of water. He’ll take you to a house where the owner will show you a large, upstairs guest room already set up for the occasion. You can prepare the meal there.”

They found the place Jesus had described and prepared the meal there. The bread they ate was made without yeast to remind them that God had freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. After Jesus thanked God for the bread, he invited his 12 chosen followers to eat it as he related it to himself, indicating that his purpose in life was to help others enjoy a better life.

Jesus then thanked God for their third cup of wine, which recalled God’s promise to send someone to help people enjoy a better life. As he invited his followers to drink it, he related it to his blood, indicating that he was willing to risk his life to help others enjoy a better life.

While Jesus and his followers were eating, he revealed that one of them was turning against him. Surprised and disappointed, each of them denied that he was the one. Jesus then pointed out a striking contrast,

“I was born so I could help others enjoy a better life, as God’s spokesmen predicted long ago. But the one who is turning against me will wish he had never been born.”

Jesus and his followers concluded the meal with songs and then returned to Olive Hill. Referring to one of God’s spokesmen who lived long ago, Jesus predicted his followers would desert him later that night,

“When a shepherd dies, his sheep usually look for someone else to follow.”

Peter responded,

“I won’t desert you, even if everyone else does.”

Jesus replied,

“That’s easy for you to say now. But tonight, before you hear a rooster crow twice at dawn, you’re going to deny that you even know me three times.”

Peter and the others insisted that they would never desert Jesus, even if it meant facing death. Jesus reminded them that his own death was very near, but he assured them that they would see him alive in Galilee soon afterward.

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The Soldiers Arrest Jesus in Gethsemane Garden

Later that evening, while Judas went to tell the religious leaders where the soldiers could arrest Jesus, Jesus and his other 11 chosen followers went to Gethsemane Garden, just outside of Jerusalem. As Jesus walked a little distance away from the others with Peter, James and John, he shared his concern that he would soon be put to death, and he asked them to stay alert. After walking a little further alone, he asked God to spare him from suffering but acknowledged that he was willing to accept whatever God wanted.

Peter, James and John had fallen asleep while Jesus was gone. When he returned, he told Peter how disappointed he was that they couldn't stay awake for the short time he was away. Before he left again, he suggested they ask God for strength to stay alert. But when he returned, they were sleeping again. When he came back a third time and found them still asleep, he woke them up so they would be ready for the soldiers' arrival.

While Jesus was talking to his followers, Judas arrived with armed soldiers and identified Jesus with the common greeting. As they arrested Jesus, one of his followers grabbed a sword and swung it at one of the soldiers, cutting off his ear. Jesus pointed out that the religious leaders had plenty of opportunities to arrest him peacefully while he was sharing God's advice in the temple. Instead, they treated him like a dangerous criminal by sending armed soldiers, as God's spokesmen predicted long ago.

Only one of Jesus' followers went along as the soldiers began taking Jesus back to Jerusalem. When they noticed the young man, they tried to arrest him by grabbing hold of his loose-fitting coat, but he slipped out of it and escaped.

The Religious Leaders Sentence Jesus to Die

The soldiers took Jesus to the senior religious leader's residence, where the other religious leaders were waiting to put him on trial. They were hoping several people would accuse him of a crime that deserved the death penalty. Some people accused him of planning to destroy the temple and rebuild it in a few days, but they couldn't agree on the details. Several others made up other allegations against him, but none of their versions matched. Since an accusation had to be verified by at least one other witness, all the charges against Jesus were useless.

Frustrated by the lack of evidence against Jesus, the senior religious leader asked him to respond to the allegations, hoping he would incriminate himself. But Jesus wisely ignored him. As a last resort, the senior religious leader asked him directly if he were God's special

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messenger, who would help people enjoy a better life. To this Jesus replied,

“Yes, I am, and that will soon become more evident.”

Jesus’ response was considered an insult to God, so the senior religious leader pretended to be infuriated. But he was actually relieved to hear Jesus’ reply because he knew the other religious leaders also heard it, eliminating the need for other witnesses. Since insulting God was a serious crime, the religious leaders agreed that Jesus deserved the death penalty. Some displayed their disgust by spitting in his face. Later, the soldiers blindfolded him and took turns hitting him, taunting him to identify who hit him each time.

Peter Denies Knowing Jesus

Earlier that evening, Peter followed the soldiers at a distance as they took Jesus to the senior religious leader’s residence. While Peter was waiting outside among the soldiers during the trial, warming himself by a fire, a female servant walked by and recognized him as one of Jesus’ followers. Fearing for his own safety, Peter denied knowing Jesus. Soon afterward, a rooster crowed. Later, when Peter overheard the servant telling others that he was one of Jesus’ followers, he again denied knowing Jesus. Before long, one of the by-standers remarked,

“We can tell by your accent that you’re from Galilee, where Jesus is from, so you must be one of his followers.”

This time Peter swore to God that he didn’t know Jesus. The rooster then crowed a second time. When Peter heard it, he recalled Jesus’ prediction that he would deny knowing Jesus three times before a rooster crowed twice. Realizing what he had done, Peter was heartbroken.

The Roman Leader Orders Jesus’ Execution

15 The religious leaders couldn’t execute anyone without the Roman leader’s approval. So early Friday morning, they took Jesus to Pilate, the Roman leader of Judea. As they presented their case, Pilate was surprised that Jesus didn’t defend himself against any of their accusations. He eventually concluded that none of them was valid, but he questioned Jesus about the charge that the religious leaders were most upset about, his claim that he was their leader. Although Jesus admitted making the claim, Pilate didn’t consider that a crime.

Convinced that Jesus had committed no crime, Pilate realized the religious leaders just wanted to get rid of Jesus because they considered him a threat to their control over the people. But Pilate didn’t feel like

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hassling with the religious leaders, so he decided to let the common people decide Jesus' fate.

Every year at this time, Pilate let the people decide which prisoner he would release. On this occasion, he gave them the choice between Jesus and the notorious criminal named Barabbas, who was on death row for murder during a recent rebellion against the Roman government. Pilate assumed the people would ask for Jesus' release, so he was surprised that they chose Barabbas. They might have chosen Jesus on their own, but the religious leaders convinced them to ask for Barabbas. When Pilate asked the people what he should do with Jesus, they told him to execute him on a cross. Since there was no valid charge against him, Pilate tried to change their minds, but they insisted. So he released Barabbas and turned Jesus over to the soldiers to be beaten and executed.

The Soldiers Make Fun of Jesus

The soldiers took Jesus back to their headquarters where others joined them in making fun of his claim that he was a leader. They put a purple robe on him and a "crown" made of thorns. Then they bowed in front of him, pretending to honor him as their leader.

When they were tired of making fun of him, the soldiers took the purple robe off and put his own clothes back on. Then they spit on him and hit him on the head, driving the thorns into his flesh.

Jesus Is Executed on a Cross

Later, as the soldiers were taking Jesus to the place of execution named Golgotha, they passed a man named Simon who had just come to Jerusalem from Cyrene, a city in northern Africa. By this time, Jesus was too exhausted to carry the cross on which he was to be executed, so the soldiers ordered Simon to carry it for him.

When they arrived at Golgotha, which means *skull place*, the soldiers removed some of Jesus' clothes and drew straws to see who would get them. Someone offered him something to drink to dull the pain of the nails that would be driven through his hands and feet, but he refused. It was about mid-morning when the soldiers nailed him to the cross and fastened a board above him with a caption stating the alleged reason for his execution:

Leader of the Jews

While Jesus was hanging on the cross, some people recalled his remark that he would rebuild the temple in a few days, so they taunted him,

MARK

“If you’re so powerful, save yourself by coming down from the cross.”

The religious leaders also ridiculed him,

“He’s helped others and claims to be the one that God promised would lead us to a better life, but he can’t even help himself. If he could save himself by coming down from the cross, then we’d follow his advice.”

Even the two thieves hanging on crosses next to Jesus made fun of him.

It became very dark from noon until mid-afternoon, when Jesus quoted one of God’s spokesmen who had expressed confidence in God long ago, despite a seemingly hopeless situation. The first word Jesus quoted sounded similar to *Elijah*, another of God’s spokesmen who lived long ago. Since it was a common custom for people to call on Elijah for help whenever they were in serious trouble, some bystanders thought that was what Jesus was doing.

It was obvious that Jesus was in a lot of pain, so someone soaked up some wine in a sponge and started to hold it up to his mouth on a stick, thinking it would accelerate his death and shorten his suffering. But someone else yelled,

“Wait! Let’s see if Elijah comes and saves him.”

They waited a while, but Elijah didn’t show. When Jesus took his last breath, God split the thick curtain in the temple which separated the general worship area from the area which only the religious leaders could enter to make offerings to God for the people. This signified that the common people could approach God directly for help to improve their attitude and behavior, without relying on the religious leaders to approach God for them.

At this point, the captain of the soldiers finally realized that Jesus was God’s special messenger.

During Jesus’ execution, Mary from Magdala, Salome, and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, were watching what was happening from a distance. These three and several other women had come along with Jesus from Galilee to help wherever they could.

Jesus Is Buried

One of Jesus’ followers was a respected religious leader named Joseph, from the town of Arimathea, several miles north of Jerusalem. He asked Pilate for Jesus’ body so he could give it a proper burial before the weekly day of rest began that evening. Pilate was surprised Jesus died so

MARK

soon, so he confirmed it with the captain of the soldiers before he gave Joseph permission to take Jesus' body. After wrapping it in linen cloth, he laid it in a walk-in grave, carved out of a stone hillside. With others' assistance, he closed the entrance by rolling a large rock in front of it. Both Marys made sure they saw where Joseph put Jesus' body so they could return there later.

Jesus Comes Back to Life

16 Saturday evening, after the weekly day of rest had ended, both Marys and Salome bought some perfume to put on Jesus' body. As they were on their way to his grave at dawn Sunday morning, they were wondering if some men would be there to roll the large stone away from the entrance so they could get in. But when they arrived, the entrance was already open. They went in and were surprised to see that Jesus' body was gone. A young man wearing a white robe explained,

“Jesus' body is no longer here because he has come back to life. Tell Peter and Jesus' other followers that he'll soon join them in Galilee as he promised.”

The women were so amazed and excited that they were speechless as they left the grave.



The Life of Jesus according to LUKE

Introduction

1 A lot of people tried to record the events that Jesus' followers observed. Since Luke had been following those events closely, he decided to record them for a man named Theophilus to confirm what others had told him.

God's Messenger Gabriel Predicts John's Birth

When Herod the Great was the Roman leader of the district of Judea, Zechariah was a member of the group of religious leaders that originated with Abijah. Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. Zechariah and his wife both followed God's advice diligently, but she was never able to have children, and now they were getting old.

One day, as Zechariah entered the temple in Jerusalem to begin his once-in-a-lifetime duty of burning incense to assist others in prayer, he was surprised to see a messenger from God standing beside the incense table. The messenger named Gabriel gave Zechariah some wonderful news,

"God is granting your request for a child. Your wife Elizabeth is going to have a son, whom you should name *John*. He'll bring a lot of joy to you and many others because he'll be devoted to God from the day he's born. He'll encourage a lot of people to change their attitude toward others and follow God's advice, as Elijah did long ago."

Zechariah replied,

"I doubt that this will happen, because my wife and I are too old to have a child."

Gabriel responded,

"God has sent me to give you this good news. But since you doubt that it will happen, you won't be able to talk anymore until your son is born."

The people waiting outside were surprised that Zechariah stayed in the temple so long. When he finally came out, he was unable to explain verbally what had happened. So he used sign language to communicate that God had given him a message while he was in the temple.

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Not long after Zechariah completed his week of service in the temple, God enabled his wife to become pregnant. Although she secluded herself for the next five months, she was thankful that God enabled her to have a child and regain respect in her community.

Gabriel Predicts Jesus' Birth

During the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent Gabriel to Joseph's fiancée Mary while they were living in the town of Nazareth, in the district of Galilee. Gabriel greeted her and said,

“God is going to do something very special for you.”

Mary wondered what he meant, so he explained,

“There's no need to be alarmed, because God is going to add much joy to your life. You're going to become pregnant and have a son, whom you'll name *Jesus*. People will refer to him as God's special messenger when God makes him a great leader like his ancestor David, and no one will succeed him.”

When Mary informed Gabriel that she hadn't yet had sexual relations, he replied,

“As you know, God is able to accomplish anything. Even though your relative Elizabeth is old and people thought she would never have a child, she is now in her sixth month of pregnancy. So God is also able to make you pregnant, even without sexual relations.”

Gabriel left after Mary indicated her willingness to do whatever God wanted.

Mary Visits Elizabeth

Before long, Mary went to Zechariah's home in a town among the hills just south of Jerusalem. When she greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth felt the baby move in her belly. God revealed to her that Mary was also pregnant, so she told Mary how happy she was for her. She explained that her baby moved when Mary greeted her, and she assured Mary that what God's messenger told her would definitely come true. Mary responded,

“I'm so thankful that God has chosen me to have this child. People will share my joy for generations to come as they realize how much God cares about them. Since the time of Abraham, God has helped our ancestors by providing food for them and removing arrogant rulers.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth until her son was born three months later.

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Elizabeth Gives Birth to Jesus' Forerunner John

Elizabeth's relatives and neighbors celebrated with her when she delivered her son. A week later, when the child was being dedicated to God, they suggested he be named after his father Zechariah. But Elizabeth insisted that he be named *John*, the name God's messenger Gabriel had suggested. After pointing out that none of the relatives had that name, they used sign language to ask Zechariah what he wanted to name the child. They were surprised when he wrote *John* on a tablet.

People throughout the area talked about the child and wondered what he would become as an adult, since God enabled him to be born.

When God allowed Zechariah to talk again, he said,

"I thank God for caring about us and providing someone to help us, as God's spokesmen predicted long ago. God promised our ancestor Abraham that God would protect us from our enemies and help us follow God's advice in everything we do. So our son John will encourage people to stop living a self-centered life and begin following God's advice so we can all enjoy life as God intended."

As John grew up, he spent most of his time in a remote area until he was ready to encourage others to follow God's advice.

Mary Gives Birth to Jesus

2 While Quirinius was the leader of Syria, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus decided that everyone in the Roman Empire must register in their home town for tax purposes.

At that time, Joseph and his fiancée Mary were living in a town called Nazareth, which was in the Syrian district of Galilee. Since he was a descendant of the famous Jewish leader David, he had to travel 70 miles southward to the district of Judea so he could register at Bethlehem, where David had lived long ago. Mary went along even though she was soon expecting a child.

Since there weren't any guest rooms available in Bethlehem, they stayed in a stable. It was there that Mary delivered her first child, which she wrapped in a blanket and laid in a feeding trough.

Not far away, some shepherds were watching over their sheep grazing at night. They were terrified when a messenger from God appeared, surrounded by bright light. The messenger told them not to be afraid because he had come to tell them that the one God promised, who would help everyone enjoy a better life, had just been born in Bethlehem. The messenger added that if they wanted to see him, they should look for a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a feeding trough.

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At that point, a lot of God's other messengers appeared and thanked God for the child who would encourage people to follow God's advice so they could enjoy a better life.

After God's messengers left, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem right away to look for the baby. They found him in a stable, lying in a feeding trough. Mary and Joseph were amazed by what God's messenger had told the shepherds about their son, and Mary thought a lot more about it as time passed.

On the way back to their sheep, the shepherds thanked God for this special occasion.

Joseph and Mary Dedicate Jesus to God

When the child was a week old, Joseph and Mary dedicated him to God and named him *Jesus*, as God's messenger Gabriel suggested before Mary became pregnant.

Since Jesus was their first son, Joseph and Mary took him to the temple in Jerusalem a month later to dedicate him to God and give two turtledoves or two young pigeons for an offering, as God's spokesman Moses instructed parents long ago.

One of the residents of Jerusalem named Simeon had been diligently following God's advice and looking forward to the arrival of the one who would help people enjoy a better life. God had assured Simeon that he would see God's special messenger before he died, so God motivated him to go to the temple when Joseph and Mary dedicated Jesus to God's service. When Simeon saw Jesus, he took him in his arms and thanked God,

“Now that I've seen the one that you promised will help everyone enjoy a better life, I can die in peace.”

When Joseph and Mary expressed surprise at what Simeon said, he continued,

“This child will help a lot of people decide whether or not they want to follow God's advice.”

One of God's spokesmen there was an 84-year-old widow named Anna, who had been married just seven years before her husband died. Her father was Phanuel, a descendant of Asher, one of Jacob's 12 sons. She spent most of her time at the temple and often skipped meals so she could spend more time in prayer. When she saw Jesus, she thanked God and spread the word that Jesus would help people enjoy a better life.

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Joseph and Mary then returned to their home in Nazareth. As Jesus matured, God enabled him to have a thorough understanding of God's advice.

Joseph and Mary Find Jesus in the Temple

Every year Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem for the annual celebration of their ancestors' freedom from slavery in Egypt. One year, as they were returning home after the celebration, they didn't realize that Jesus was still in Jerusalem. Since he was 12 years old at the time, they thought he was with others in their caravan. When they couldn't find him among their relatives and friends after the first day of travel, they returned to Jerusalem the next day to look for him. They were surprised to find him at the temple the following day, where he amazed the religious scholars with his profound questions and insightful responses. When Mary explained that she and Joseph had been anxiously looking for him, he replied,

“You should've known I'd be at the temple.”

Mary reflected on what he said as they returned to Nazareth. In the years that followed, Jesus helped people understand God's advice so they could enjoy a better life.

John Encourages People to Follow God's Advice

3 Fifteen years after Tiberius became the second Roman emperor, Zechariah's son John encouraged people to follow God's advice, as God's spokesman Isaiah had done long ago. Since John was in the vicinity of the Jordan River, he symbolically rinsed those who expressed their desire to clean up their lives.

At this time, Pontius Pilate was the leader over the district of Judea, Herod Antipas was the leader over the district of Galilee, Herod's half-brother Phillip was the leader over the districts of Iturea and Trachonitus, and Lysanias was the leader over the district of Abilene. The senior religious leader was Caiaphas, who succeeded his father-in-law Annas.

When some religious leaders asked John to rinse them, he replied,

“Don't assume that you'll enjoy a better life just because you're descendants of Abraham. You need to make an effort, like everyone else. As you know, when a tree doesn't bear good fruit, a farmer usually chops it down and burns it; and when a farmer harvests his crops, he keeps the grain and burns the husks. A tree accomplishes its purpose when it bears good fruit, as a crop does

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when it produces grain. You can accomplish your purpose in life by following God's advice."

The religious leaders asked John what he meant, so he explained,

"You should give your extra food and clothing to people who have none."

When some tax collectors asked John to rinse them to reflect their desire to clean up their lives, he told them not to collect more taxes than they should.

Some soldiers then asked how they could improve their behavior, so he replied,

"You should be content with your pay and not demand money from civilians under false pretenses."

Since everyone had been looking forward to the arrival of the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life, they asked John if he were that person. He explained that he could only symbolize people's willingness to follow God's advice, but someone else would help them actually do it.

While John was still rinsing people, Jesus came and asked John to rinse him to demonstrate that he was also committed to following God's advice. As Jesus was praying, John saw a dove land on him and heard a voice in the sky,

"You are my special messenger who will demonstrate how much I care about people."

At this time, Jesus and John were both about 30 years of age. Some time later, John publicly criticized Herod Antipas for his self-centered behavior, which included marrying his half-brother's wife while he was still alive. So Herod had John arrested and put in jail.

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The Ancestry of Jesus

Since Jesus was born into a Jewish family, his ancestry was very important:

Jesus

Joseph, whom most people considered Jesus' father

Heli

Matthat

Levi

Melchi

Jannai

Joseph

Mattathias

Amos

Nahum

Esli

Naggai

Maath

Mattathias

Semein

Josech

Joda

Joanan

Rhesa

Zerubbabel

Shealtiel

Neri

Melchi

Addi

Cosam

Elmadam

Er

Joshua

Eliezer

Jorim

Matthat

Levi

Simeon

Judah

Joseph

Jonam

Eliakim

Melea

Menna

Mattatha

Nathan

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David

Jesse
Obed
Boaz
Sala
Nahshon
Amminadab
Admin
Arni
Hezron
Perez
Judah
Jacob
Isaac

Abraham

Terah
Nahor
Serug
Reu
Peleg
Eber
Shelah
Cainan
Arphaxad
Shem
Noah
Lamech
Methuselah
Enoch
Jared
Mahalaleel
Cainan
Enos
Seth
Adam

God

Satan Tests Jesus' Character

4 After Jesus left the Jordan River valley, he went to a remote area where Satan, who personifies self-centeredness, tested his character. Since Satan knew that Jesus hadn't eaten for 40 days, he began,

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“If you’re God’s special messenger, you should be able to change this stone into a loaf of bread to satisfy your hunger.”

Quoting God’s spokesman Moses who lived long ago, Jesus replied,

“There’s more to life than satisfying one’s hunger.”

Satan then took Jesus on top of the highest mountain, where he displayed all the wealth and power in the world,

“If you submit to me, I’ll give you all of this.”

Quoting Moses again, Jesus responded,

“People should never follow advice that contradicts God’s.”

Satan then took Jesus up to the top level of the temple in Jerusalem, where he continued,

“If you are God’s special messenger, you should be able to jump from this height and not get hurt because one of God’s spokesmen claimed that God’s messengers would protect you from even stubbing your toe.”

Jesus replied with another quote from Moses,

“No one should ever test God’s power.”

Satan had no more tests, so he left Jesus alone.

The People in Nazareth Try to Kill Jesus

When Jesus returned to his home district of Galilee, a lot of people were impressed by what they heard about him, so they invited him to share God’s advice in their local worship centers. While he was in his home town of Nazareth, he went to the worship center on the weekly day of rest and read a portion of what God’s spokesman Isaiah had written long ago,

“God has enabled me to help people follow God’s advice so they can enjoy a better life.”

After Jesus read the selection, he rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. The people were surprised when Jesus explained that he was doing what he had just read about Isaiah. Since they considered him Joseph’s son, Jesus anticipated what they were thinking,

“You’re no doubt wondering why I don’t heal as many people around here as I did in the town of Capernaum. God’s spokesmen usually receive less respect from people in their hometown, and there are plenty of other people who need help. For example, when it didn’t rain for 3½ years in Palestine long ago, there were

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many widows because their husbands died from starvation. But God motivated Elijah to help a widow in the town of Zarephath, south of Sidon. Another example is the time a lot of people had a serious skin disease called leprosy in Palestine, but God motivated Elisha to help Naaman, who was from Syria.”

The people became very angry when Jesus pointed out that God cares about everyone, so they took Jesus to a steep cliff on the edge of town and were planning to throw him over it, but he evaded them.

Jesus Demonstrates that He Cares about People

Jesus returned to Capernaum on the northern shore of Lake Galilee. When he shared God’s advice in the local worship center on the weekly day of rest, people were very impressed by what he said. While he was speaking, a harmful spirit caused a man to yell,

“I know you are God’s special messenger. Have you come to get rid of me?”

Jesus responded by commanding the spirit to leave. As it left, it caused the man to fall down without hurting him. Everyone who saw what happened was amazed. They tried to figure out who Jesus was because they had never seen anyone get rid of a harmful spirit so quickly. The news spread like wildfire throughout the surrounding towns and villages.

Jesus then went to Simon Peter’s home, where Peter’s mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. After Jesus healed her, she got up and began preparing food for them. That evening, he healed a lot of other people with a variety of illnesses, and he freed many who were harassed by harmful spirits. The spirits knew he was God’s special messenger, but he didn’t allow them to tell others.

The next morning, Jesus got up before everyone else and left town so he could be alone for a while. Those who had been with him noticed he was gone, so they went looking for him. When they finally found him, they asked him to stay longer. But he explained that he needed to share God’s advice in other parts of Galilee.

Jesus’ Suggestion Fills Two Boats with Fish

5 Some time later, when Jesus was near Lake Galilee (also known as Lake Gennesaret), people crowded around him to hear him share God’s advice. Jesus noticed that two boats were not being used because the occupants were busy washing their fish nets. So he got into Peter’s boat and asked him to row it a little distance from shore so he could speak to

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the people from there. When he finished speaking, he suggested the fishermen cast their nets in deeper water. Peter replied,

“We haven’t caught any fish all night, but we’ll do as you suggest.”

Before long their nets were so full of fish that they were about to break, so the men motioned to their coworkers in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats with so many fish that they almost sank. Peter, Zebedee’s sons James and John, and all the other men were amazed at how many fish they caught.

Jesus Heals a Man with a Serious Skin Disease

Jesus invited Peter and some of his coworkers to join him in sharing God’s advice for a better life, so they went along with him as soon as they docked their boats. When they arrived in a nearby town, a man with a serious skin disease called leprosy asked Jesus to heal him. Jesus did so but asked the man not to tell anyone until the religious leader publicly confirmed it. He reminded the man to give something to God to show his appreciation, as God’s spokesman Moses instructed people long ago.

The news spread, so a lot more people came to hear Jesus share God’s advice and be healed. But Jesus went to a remote area to pray.

Jesus Heals a Man Who Is Paralyzed

When Jesus was sharing God’s advice some time later, some religious leaders from Jerusalem and other towns in the districts of Judea and Galilee were among his audience. Since God was enabling Jesus to heal people, some men brought a man on a stretcher who was paralyzed. But they couldn’t get close enough to ask Jesus for healing because the room was very crowded. So they decided to take the man up on the flat roof, remove some panels, and lower him on the stretcher next to Jesus. When Jesus saw how persistent they were to reach him, he told the man that God would not punish him for failing to follow God’s advice.

Some of the religious leaders considered this an insult to God since they believed that only God’s spokesmen should make such a statement. Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he said,

“I’ll heal this man’s physical condition to prove that I’m one of God’s spokesmen. But restoring his physical condition is only part of helping him enjoy a better life.”

As soon as Jesus healed him, the man stood up, picked up the stretcher and thanked God as he began walking home. The people who witnessed

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the event also thanked God because they had never seen anything so amazing before.

Some Religious Leaders Question Jesus' Activities

Jesus then went to the tax collector's office where a man named Matthew (also known as Levi) was collecting taxes. When Jesus invited Matthew to join him in sharing God's advice with others, he readily agreed.

Later that day, Jesus and his followers were eating dinner at Matthew's home with some tax collectors and others who didn't follow God's advice very well. Some of the religious leaders wouldn't associate with such people, so they asked Jesus' followers why he was associating with them. When Jesus overheard the question, he responded,

“As you know, people who are well don't need a doctor, so people who already follow God's advice don't need my help. But I'm here to help those who want to improve their attitude and behavior toward God and others.”

The religious group known as the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus' forerunner John often skipped meals to spend time asking God for direction in their lives. When the religious leaders noticed that Jesus' followers were eating dinner, they asked why his followers weren't skipping meals like the others. He used the analogy of a groom and his guests at a wedding reception to explain that his followers didn't need to skip meals while he was with them. They could skip all the meals they wanted to after he was gone. Using two more analogies of cloth and goat-skin wine containers, he implied that people should allow some flexibility for how others follow God's advice.

Jesus Clarifies the Purpose of the Weekly Day of Rest

6 Later, as Jesus and his followers were walking beside a wheat field on the weekly day of rest, his followers were so hungry they picked some grain and ate it. This was an acceptable custom but some of the religious leaders were upset that they did this on the weekly day of rest. When the religious leaders confronted Jesus about it, he replied,

“Don't you remember what our famous leader David did long ago when his soldiers needed food? He went to the temple and asked one of the religious leaders for bread. The only bread available was the bread that had been offered to God on the weekly day of rest, which only the religious leaders were allowed to eat under

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normal circumstances. But the religious leader gave that bread to David for his soldiers because he knew they were hungry.

“The purpose of the weekly day of rest is to refresh people after a week of hard work, but prohibiting people from eating defeats that purpose. Since my followers only picked enough grain to satisfy their immediate hunger, they didn’t violate the weekly day of rest.”

On another weekly day of rest, a man with a disabled right arm went to the local worship center when Jesus was sharing God’s advice. Some of the religious leaders were watching and waiting to see if Jesus would heal him. If he did, they were planning to accuse him of breaking their rule that only the critically ill should be healed on the weekly day of rest. Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he used the opportunity for an object lesson. He asked the man with the disabled arm to stand where everyone could see him. Then he asked the religious leaders,

“Is it better to do something helpful on the weekly day of rest, such as saving someone’s life, or something harmful, such as committing murder?”

To demonstrate that people shouldn’t hesitate to help others even on the weekly day of rest, he healed the man’s disabled arm for all to see. The religious leaders were very upset by this, so they began making plans to get rid of Jesus.

Jesus Chooses 12 of His Followers to Share God’s Advice

Jesus and his followers then walked to higher terrain where he spent the night in prayer. The next morning he chose 12 of his followers to join him in sharing God’s advice:

Peter, whose former name was *Simon*
Andrew, Peter’s brother
James
John, James’ brother
Philip
Bartholomew
Matthew
Thomas
another James, the son of Alphaeus
Thaddaeus, also named *Judas*
another Simon, who actively resisted Roman oppression
Judas Iscariot, who eventually turned against Jesus

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Jesus Emphasizes “the Golden Rule”

When Jesus and his followers returned to level terrain, they were met by a lot of people who had come from Jerusalem and other Judean towns in southern Palestine, and from the northern coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. While some people came to hear him share God’s advice, others wanted to be healed of their illnesses or freed from harmful spirits. As Jesus healed those nearby, others tried to get close enough to touch him so they could also be healed.

This is the advice that Jesus shared,

“To enjoy a better life, you must improve your attitude and behavior toward God and others. This involves feeling sincerely sorry for the unkind things you’ve said and done in the past, and being willing to help others in need.

“Always treat others the way *you* would like to be treated. So be generous when someone asks you for something, and don’t demand it back later. If someone assaults you or steals something from you, don’t seek revenge.

“Stop pointing out other people’s faults. The more you point out theirs, the more they’ll point out yours. On the other hand, the more forgiving you are toward them, the more forgiving they’ll be toward you; and the more you help them, the more inclined they’ll be to help you.

“You should even care about and help those who give you a hard time, without expecting anything in return. When you do this, you’ll reflect that God cares about everyone, including those who are self-centered. If you only care about your friends and only help those who can return your favors, you aren’t doing anything special because even people who don’t follow God’s advice do that.

“Even if others give you a hard time for following God’s advice, as some people did to God’s spokesmen long ago, you’ll enjoy a better life because you’ll be living the kind of life God originally intended.

“Those of you who refuse to share your wealth with people in need aren’t following God’s advice. Like some of your ancestors, you think you’re enjoying life because others applaud your financial success. But you’re not enjoying the kind of life God originally intended.

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“Some people are like the blind leading the blind, who end up walking off a cliff together. If you follow them, your life will be no better than it is now. Other people are like students who still have a lot to learn. So even when you think you have good advice for others, it might be better not to give it. Unless you practice what you preach, people will just resent your advice and consider you a hypocrite.

“As you know, you can tell whether a tree is healthy or diseased by its fruit. You can also identify a plant by its fruit. For example, if a tree produces figs, you know it’s a fig tree, and if a vine produces grapes, you know it’s a grape vine. You can identify people in a similar way, by what they say and do. People who care about others help those in need, while self-centered people are only concerned for themselves.

“Putting on an act accomplishes nothing. Those who make a sincere effort to follow God’s advice are like the wise builder whose house was able to withstand a violent rainstorm because he built it on a solid foundation. But those who pretend to follow God’s advice are like the foolish builder whose house totally collapsed during the rainstorm because he built it on ground without a foundation.”

Jesus Heals a Roman Military Officer’s Aide

7 When Jesus finished sharing God’s advice with the people, some of them went along with him to Capernaum. A Roman military officer had heard that Jesus was healing people, so he sent some Jewish leaders to ask Jesus to heal one of his senior aides who was seriously ill. When the Jewish leaders found Jesus, they encouraged him to do this for the officer because he was treating the Jewish people well and had even built a worship center for them.

As Jesus approached the officer’s home, the officer sent some of his friends to give Jesus this message,

“I know Jewish people aren’t allowed to enter a non-Jewish person’s house, so I realize you can’t enter mine. But I’m sure you can heal my aide without even seeing him. As a military officer, I understand the concept of authority because I follow the orders of my superiors, and my soldiers and aides follow mine.”

Jesus was so impressed by the officer’s confidence that he remarked to his followers,

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“This non-Jewish man has more confidence in me than most Jewish people have.”

When the officer’s friends returned to his home, they saw that his aide had been healed.

Jesus Brings a Widow’s Son Back to Life

The next day Jesus’ followers and a lot of other people went along with him to the town of Nain, about 20 miles southwest of Capernaum. As they approached the town, Jesus noticed some people carrying a deceased person on a stretcher toward the cemetery. A lot of people accompanied them, including the mother of the deceased. She had already lost her husband, and this was her only son.

Jesus felt sorry for her, so he approached the stretcher and told her she didn’t need to cry anymore. When he put his hand on the stretcher and told her son to get up, he sat up and began to talk. Everyone was amazed and thanked God for sending Jesus to demonstrate how much God cares for people.

The news of this event spread throughout the district of Judea and beyond.

Jesus Reassures His Forerunner John

Jesus’ forerunner John was still in prison at this time. When John’s followers told him that Jesus was healing people, John sent two of his followers to verify that Jesus was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life.

Jesus reassured John’s followers by pointing out that he healed a lot of people who were blind, deaf, unable to walk, or had a serious skin disease called leprosy. He also freed people of harmful spirits and even brought people who had died back to life. He explained that he was encouraging people to follow God’s advice so they could enjoy a better life.

After John’s followers left, Jesus spoke to the others,

“When John shared God’s advice for a better life, he didn’t try to impress you by telling you what you wanted to hear. He’s been an outstanding spokesman for God, as one of God’s spokesmen predicted long ago.

“A lot of you are like children who refuse to play a game when invited. John and I have explained that the game of life can be more enjoyable when you follow God’s advice. Instead, you make flimsy excuses, such as claiming that John had a harmful spirit because he didn’t socialize with people as much as you thought he

LUKE

should; and you criticize me for socializing too much because I associate with tax collectors and others who don't follow God's advice very well. If you were wise, you'd join our version of the game of life and discover how much more enjoyable it can be."

When the people whom John had symbolically rinsed heard this, they were even more inclined to follow God's advice. But some of the religious leaders continued to ignore it.

A Woman Honors Jesus with Expensive Perfume

One of the religious leaders named Simon invited Jesus to his home for dinner. When a woman who hadn't followed God's advice very well heard where Jesus was, she took some expensive perfume to honor him. She cried as she poured it on his feet, wiping them with her hair and kissing them.

Simon noticed the woman and figured if Jesus really were one of God's spokesmen, he would've known that she hadn't followed God's advice very well. Jesus knew what Simon was thinking, so he said,

"Let's suppose someone borrows ten times as much money as someone else. If neither one can repay their debt and the lender decides to cancel both debts, which person do you think would be more thankful?"

Simon replied,

"I think it would be the one who had the greater debt."

Jesus responded,

"You're absolutely right."

Drawing Simon's attention to the woman, Jesus scolded him for criticizing her,

"When I entered your home, you didn't offer me any water to wash my feet. But she washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. She even put perfume on them and kissed them.

"She realizes that she has a lot of faults. That's why she's so thankful that God isn't holding her accountable for them. People who think they only have a few faults aren't nearly as thankful."

When Jesus assured her that God isn't holding her accountable for her faults, those who were dining with him wondered who he was that he could make such a statement. He then explained to her that she was enjoying a better life because she had begun to follow God's advice.

LUKE

Jesus Shares God's Advice with Others

8 Jesus traveled to other towns and villages to encourage others to follow God's advice for a better life. A number of people went with him, including his 12 chosen followers and three women whom he had freed of harmful spirits or healed of other illnesses: Mary from Magdala (who had seven spirits), the wife of Chuza (one of Herod's aides), and Susanna. A lot of other women also went along to help out as much as they could.

Jesus Relates Sharing God's Advice to Spreading Seeds

Whenever a number of people gathered in a town to hear Jesus share God's advice, he used this illustration,

“One day a farmer spread some seeds by hand. As usual, they landed in a variety of places. Some seeds landed on hard ground where people walked, and where birds could easily snatch them. Some seeds landed in rocky soil where they began to sprout, but the sprouts soon withered and died because they couldn't get enough moisture. Some seeds landed among weeds that crowded the plants so much that they couldn't produce any grain. But some seeds landed on fertile soil and grew into plants that produced a lot of grain.”

When some of Jesus' followers asked why he uses illustrations, he replied,

“Some of you already realize how much more enjoyable your life is since you've started following God's advice. But there are a lot of people who've heard it and seen the improvement it has made in other people's lives, but still don't understand what a difference it can make in their own. I use illustrations to relate God's advice to their everyday experiences to make it is easier for them to understand.”

Jesus Explains His Illustration about Spreading Seeds

Jesus then explained his illustration about spreading seeds,

“I'm like the farmer who spreads the seeds. But instead of spreading seeds, I'm sharing God's advice for a better life.

“Some people are like the hard ground, where the seeds were eaten by the birds before they even had a chance to sprout. These people refuse to follow God's advice because they prefer their self-centered lifestyle.

LUKE

“Some people are like the rocky soil in which the seeds began to sprout but died because they couldn’t get enough moisture. These people begin to follow God’s advice, but they stop when others give them a hard time.

“Some people are like the soil full of weeds, which crowded the plants so much that they couldn’t produce any grain. These people also follow God’s advice for a while, but they’re so worried it might jeopardize their financial security or social status that they soon change their minds.

“Finally, some people are like the fertile soil that produced a lot of grain. These people diligently follow God’s advice and help others enjoy a better life.

Jesus Compares People to a Lamp

Jesus then added another illustration,

“As you know, the purpose of a lamp is to help people see when it’s dark. Can you imagine lighting a lamp and then putting it under a chair or in a box? That would defeat its purpose. People usually put their lamp on a table where it can serve its purpose well. Your purpose in life is similar to the lamp’s – to help others enjoy a better life.”

While Jesus was speaking to the people inside someone’s home, his mother and half-brothers came to see him. It was too crowded to go inside, so they asked others to pass the word along that they were there. Jesus used their coming as an opportunity to explain that those who follow God’s advice are like members of his own family.

Jesus Calms a Violent Windstorm

Some time later, Jesus decided to sail to the east side of Lake Galilee with his 12 chosen followers to share God’s advice there. As they were crossing the lake, a violent windstorm came up and waves began pouring into their boat. Jesus had fallen asleep, so his followers woke him to warn him that they could all drown. Seeing how terrified they were, he reminded them,

“You wouldn’t need to be concerned if you had more confidence in God.”

They were amazed as he calmed the wind and water, realizing that he was no ordinary human being.

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Jesus Frees a Man Harassed by Harmful Spirits

Before long, Jesus and his followers reached land near the town of Gergesa. A man was living along the coast in a burial cave because his behavior was too bizarre to live at home with his family. For quite some time, he wore little or no clothing. Some people tried to restrain him with chains to prevent him from hurting himself, but harmful spirits enabled him to break loose and run away.

As Jesus was getting off the boat, the man ran down the hillside to meet him. The spirits harassing the man realized that Jesus was a special messenger from God, so they knew they were in big trouble. When Jesus asked their names, they replied,

“People refer to us as an army because there are so many of us.”

They didn’t want Jesus to send them far away, so they asked him to send them into the herd of pigs grazing nearby. As soon as he did, the large herd ran down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned.

When the pig herders told the people in the surrounding area what had happened to the man, they came to check it out for themselves. They were amazed to find him with his clothes on, sitting calmly next to Jesus, no longer acting like a maniac. But when they heard about the massive loss of pigs, they asked Jesus to leave because they were afraid something similar could happen to them. As Jesus was getting back in the boat, the man who had been harassed by the spirits asked if he could go along. But Jesus suggested he go back to his hometown and tell his family that God had healed him.

Jesus Heals a Woman and a 12-Year-Old Girl

When Jesus and his 12 chosen followers returned to the west side of Lake Galilee, a lot of people were waiting for him along the shore. Among the crowd was a man named Jairus, who was one of the leaders of the local worship center. He had come to ask Jesus to heal his 12-year-old daughter who was critically ill.

As Jesus and his followers were walking to Jairus’ home, a woman who had excessive menstrual bleeding for 12 years approached Jesus from behind. Although she had spent all her money on doctors for treatment, they weren’t able to heal her. Since she had heard that Jesus healed others, she was sure he would heal her, too, if she could just get close enough to touch him. So she worked her way through the crowd and got close enough to touch the edge of his coat. As soon as she did, she was healed.

Although Jesus knew what happened, he turned around and asked who had touched his coat. When no one admitted it, Peter suggested that someone in the crowd accidentally touched him. But Jesus wanted to

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point out that someone had touched him on purpose, so he waited for the woman to identify herself. She was afraid he might be upset with her, so she was reluctant to come forward. When she eventually explained that she was sure she would be healed if she could just touch his coat, he commended her for her confidence.

About that time, someone from Jairus' home came and told Jairus that there was no longer any need to bother Jesus, because his daughter had died. Jesus overheard what they said, so he told Jairus not to be upset but to have confidence that he could bring her back to life. He decided to take Peter, James and his brother John along to Jairus' home. When they arrived, some people were wailing to mourn the girl's death. Jesus told them it wasn't necessary because she wasn't permanently dead. They laughed when he said this because they had never seen a dead person come back to life.

The only ones who entered the house with Jesus were Peter, James, John, and the girl's parents. When Jesus brought the girl back to life, her parents were amazed and anxious to tell others what Jesus had done. But he asked them not to spread the news because he knew some of the religious leaders would try even harder to get rid of him before he was ready. He then encouraged her parents to give her something to eat.

Jesus' Followers Share God's Advice

9 Jesus then encouraged his 12 chosen followers to share God's advice in other villages, and he enabled them to heal people who were sick or harassed by harmful spirits. He suggested they take something along for protection from wild animals but that they didn't need to take food, extra clothing or money because the people who followed God's advice would readily extend their hospitality. He reminded them that some people would refuse to listen.

So the 12 men went from village to village, healing the sick and sharing God's advice for a better life.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Share Their Food

After Jesus' followers returned and shared their experiences, Jesus took them to a remote area near the town of Bethsaida, on the northern shore of Lake Galilee. A lot of people followed him when they found out where he was going, so he used the opportunity to explain how they could enjoy a better life, and he healed those who were sick.

That afternoon, Jesus' followers reminded him that it was getting late and suggested he tell the crowd of more than 5,000 to go to nearby farms and villages to look for something to eat and a place to spend the night.

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Instead, he encouraged his followers to share their own food even though they only had five loaves of bread and two cooked fish.

Jesus knew that would serve the purpose, so he asked his followers to separate the people into groups of 50. After thanking God for the bread and fish, he cut them into pieces and gave them to his followers to distribute among the people. There was plenty of food for everyone, and even 12 baskets of leftovers!

Jesus Asks His Followers Who Others Think He Is

When Herod, the Roman leader of that area, heard about all the amazing things Jesus was doing, some people suggested that it was Jesus' forerunner John, having come back to life. But others thought Elijah or one of God's other spokesmen had come back to life. Herod recalled that he had John executed, so he was anxious to see who was actually doing these amazing things.

Some time later, after Jesus had spent some time in prayer, he asked his 12 chosen followers,

“When you hear others talk about me, who do they think I am?”

His followers replied,

“Some people think you are John, who symbolically rinsed people with water. Others think you are Elijah or one of God's other spokesmen, who they think has come back to life.”

When Jesus asked his followers for their own opinion, Peter said,

“You're the one God promised would help people enjoy a better life.”

Jesus asked his followers not to tell anyone what Peter had just said because he didn't want the religious leaders to become more alarmed and determined to get rid of him before he was ready. He then explained that he would soon be beaten and executed at the hands of the religious leaders, but he assured his followers that he would come back to life a few days after his death.

Including the others, he continued,

“If you want to enjoy a better life, you must stop being self-centered. What good is your life if you acquire fame and fortune but don't share it? I'm very disappointed in anyone who lives such a life. Make the most of your life by helping others in need, even if it means giving your life for them, as some of you will see me do.”

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Peter, James and John Have an Awesome Experience

Eight days later, Jesus invited Peter, James and John to go up a mountain to pray with him. While he was praying, the others fell asleep. Before long, Moses and Elijah, two of God's most prominent spokesmen who lived long ago, appeared and began talking with Jesus about his approaching death in Jerusalem.

When Peter, James and John woke up, they saw Moses and Elijah standing next to Jesus, whose face and clothing were brilliant white. Peter was so excited that he suggested building three temporary shelters for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. But as a cloud covered all of them, God confirmed that Jesus was God's special messenger.

Jesus knew the religious leaders would try even harder to get rid of him before he was ready if they found out what had just taken place. So he asked Peter, James and John not to tell anyone about it.

Jesus Frees a Boy Harassed by a Harmful Spirit

The next day, as Jesus, Peter, James and John were returning from the mountain, a lot of people were waiting for them. One of the men approached Jesus and said,

“Please help my son. He's my only child, and a harmful spirit has been causing him to have violent seizures. Since you weren't here, I asked your followers to send the spirit away, but they were unsuccessful.”

Jesus expressed his disappointment in his followers, and then asked the man to bring his son. As they were returning, the spirit caused the boy to have another violent seizure. When Jesus freed the boy of the spirit, everyone there was amazed at God's power.

Jesus then reminded his followers that he would soon be executed. They still didn't understand exactly what he meant but were too upset to ask him to explain.

Jesus Describes the Best Follower of God's Advice

Some time later, Jesus' 12 chosen followers were trying to figure out which of them was the best follower of God's advice. He knew what they were thinking, so he took a little child in his arms and said,

“When you replace your pride with the humility of a little child, you'll be able to follow God's advice as I am.”

John then said,

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“When we saw a man freeing people of harmful spirits, we told him to stop, since he isn’t one of your 12 chosen followers.”

Jesus replied,

“Don’t discourage him. He’s just following our example.”

Jesus and his 12 chosen followers then headed toward Jerusalem, where he would soon be executed. He sent James and John on ahead to look for lodging in a village in the district of Samaria. When the people refused to extend their hospitality, James and John suggested Jesus call on God to destroy them with fire, as God’s spokesman Elijah had done long ago. But Jesus scolded them for suggesting the idea.

As Jesus and his followers headed toward another village, a man boasted that he would go wherever Jesus goes. So Jesus responded,

“I plan to travel all over the country, so I won’t be going home at the end of each day, as even animals and birds do. If you want to go along with me, you need to be willing to accept that kind of lifestyle.”

When Jesus invited another man to follow him, the man wanted to delay their departure until he could make arrangements for his father’s burial. But Jesus replied,

“Burying the dead is an important duty in our culture, but it’s even more important to encourage people who are still alive to follow God’s advice. The members of your family who have no interest in that can make arrangements for your father’s burial.”

When another man requested to say *goodbye* to his family before leaving, Jesus said,

“You won’t be able to follow me unless you’re completely committed.”

More of Jesus’ Followers Share God’s Advice

10 Jesus then invited 70 of his other followers to share God’s advice and heal the sick. Suggesting they travel in pairs to the many places he was planning to visit, he added,

“This is like harvesting a large crop that requires a lot of workers to accomplish the task. You’ll need to ask God to motivate more people to help meet this tremendous need.”

He then told the 70 men that they didn’t need to take along any food, extra clothing or money because the people who followed God’s advice

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would readily extend their hospitality. He asked them to avoid conversations along the way that would distract them and cause delay. He reminded them that some people would refuse to listen, like the people in the town of Sodom long ago,

“As you know, lambs are an easy target for wolves. You’ll be an easy target, too, for people who refuse to follow God’s advice.”

He then directed his comments to the people who had come from the towns north of Lake Galilee: Bethsaida, Chorazin, and the prominent town of Capernaum,

“If the people who lived in Tyre and Sidon long ago had seen me do as many amazing things as you have, a lot of them would have changed their ways. But since you refuse to follow God’s advice, your life will be as miserable as theirs.”

When the 70 men returned and excitedly told Jesus that they were able to free people of harmful spirits, he put it into perspective,

“God made it clear that self-centeredness, as personified in Satan, is not part of the life God intended. So I’m helping you realize that the more you care about others, the more you’ll enjoy life. Freeing people of harmful spirits is just a small part of that process.”

After thanking God that God’s advice is simple enough for anyone to understand, Jesus reminded the 70 men that he was God’s special messenger. He then spoke to his 12 chosen followers,

“A lot of God’s spokesmen in the past would have been happy to be in your shoes because you’ve not only had the opportunity to hear God’s advice but to see me also demonstrate it.”

Jesus Explains How to Enjoy a Better Life

One of the religious leaders then asked Jesus,

“What do I need to do to enjoy a better life?”

Jesus responded by asking what God’s spokesmen had written long ago. The religious leader replied,

“You should respect God more than anyone or anything else, and you should care about your neighbor as much as you care about yourself.”

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Jesus replied,

“You already *know* how to enjoy a better life, but you need to put your knowledge into *practice*.”

When the religious leader asked Jesus to clarify what he meant by *neighbor*, he answered with a story,

“One day, as a man was traveling on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, some thieves robbed him and almost beat him to death. Some time later, a religious leader happened to come by. He saw the injured man lying beside the road but continued on his journey without offering any aid. Another religious leader came along later, but he also went on his way without helping the man.

“Finally, a man from the district of Samaria came along. He felt sorry for the injured man, so he treated his wounds and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him until the next day. Before he continued on his journey, the man from Samaria gave the manager of the inn enough money to take care of the injured man until he returned. He even promised to pay for any additional expenses that the manager might incur while he was away.”

After Jesus completed the story, he asked which of the three travelers acted more like a neighbor to the injured man? The religious leader replied,

“The one who helped him.”

So Jesus encouraged the religious leader to help others in need, no matter who they are, as the man in the story had done.

Jesus and his 12 chosen followers then went to the village where Mary and her sister Martha lived. After Martha welcomed Jesus into their home, she began preparing food for him while Mary listened to him share God’s advice for a better life. Martha became upset that Mary wasn’t helping her prepare the meal, so she asked Jesus to tell Mary to help. But he told Martha that what Mary was doing was important and he didn’t want her to miss the opportunity.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Pray

11 Some time later, after Jesus had finished praying, one of his followers asked him to teach them how to pray, as his forerunner John had done for his followers. So Jesus offered this prayer as a general guide:

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“Help us, God,
to give you the respect you deserve,
to follow your advice for a better life,
to obtain food and shelter,
to overlook the faults of others as you overlook ours,
and to overcome our self-centeredness.”

Jesus then added,

“Let’s suppose a friend of yours is traveling and comes to your house late at night, but you don’t have any food to offer him. If you go to another friend’s house to borrow some food, he might initially tell you that he can’t help because he and his family have already gone to bed. But if you keep asking, he’ll eventually give you what you need.

“Whenever you need God’s help, don’t hesitate to ask. As you know, parents try to give their children whatever they need. But God will help you even more than your parents.”

Jesus Defends His Connection with God

Some time later, Jesus restored a man’s ability to speak by freeing him of a harmful spirit. The people who witnessed the event were amazed. When some of them claimed that Satan rather than God enabled him to do it, Jesus illustrated how ridiculous their suggestion was,

“Everyone knows that a military leader doesn’t allow his soldiers to fight against each other, because that would weaken their strength against their opponent. If Satan enabled me to free people of harmful spirits, he would weaken his strength against God.

“Everyone also knows people must overpower others before they can do something against their will. When God enables me to free people of harmful spirits, I’m overpowering Satan because I’m doing this against his will.

“Where do your own followers think their ability to free people of harmful spirits comes from? Did you tell them it comes from Satan? Of course not, because they know that harmful spirits and Satan are on the same side against God.

“Unfortunately, some of you are like people who had a harmful spirit. When it was sent away, it looked for some place else to go. But since it didn’t find another home and they welcomed it back, it brought along seven other spirits that were even worse. In other

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words, you followed God's advice for a little while, but now you're even more self-centered than you were before."

While Jesus was talking, a woman remarked that his mother must be thrilled to have a son like him. But he reminded her that *everyone* who follows God's advice will enjoy life.

As more people gathered to hear Jesus share God's advice, some of them challenged him to prove that he was God's special messenger. So he responded,

"The only thing that might convince you is that a lot of people are responding positively to my encouragement to follow God's advice, as the people in Nineveh responded to God's spokesman Jonah long ago.

"As you know, the purpose of a lamp is to help people see when it's dark. Can you imagine lighting a lamp and then putting it in a box? That would defeat its purpose. People usually put their lamp on a table where it can serve its purpose well. Your purpose in life is similar to the lamp's – to help others enjoy a better life."

One of the religious leaders then invited Jesus to join him for dinner. When they commented that he didn't rinse his hands the traditional way before eating, he responded,

"You religious leaders are like cups and bowls that are only washed on the outside. If you'd let God help you improve your attitude, you wouldn't need to perform your pretentious rituals.

"You're so intent on impressing others with your offerings at the temple that you even give 10% of the tiny seeds from your herbal plants. But you fail to honor God and care about others. You're very religious about following your own petty rules, but you ignore what really matters to God.

"You love it when people recognize you and give you the best seats in the local worship centers. But you're like a grave that people pass by without realizing what's inside. In other words, you put on a good show but your attitude stinks, like the decaying body in the grave."

One of the religious leaders took offense to what Jesus said, so Jesus replied,

"You religious leaders have added your own opinions to God's advice. All your extra rules make life miserable for people, and yet you refuse to retract any of them.

LUKE

“You’re proud to be the descendants of the people who murdered God’s spokesmen long ago, and you try to get rid of those who encourage others to follow God’s advice. So you’re really no different from those who killed God’s spokesmen throughout history, from Adam’s son Abel to one of God’s most recent spokesmen, Zechariah, whom your ancestors murdered in the temple.

“I’m very disappointed in you. Not only do you refuse to follow God’s advice, but you also discourage others from doing so.”

As Jesus turned to leave, the religious leaders tried to get him to say something that they could use against him.

Jesus Encourages People to Follow God’s Advice

12 After several thousand people packed the area, Jesus warned his followers,

“Be careful of the religious leaders who just pretend to follow God’s advice. The truth will eventually come out, so keep sharing God’s advice. If you’re arrested for doing so, don’t worry about what you’ll say in court because God will help you find the right words.

“God cares about every single bird, even those worth very little money. But you’re more important to God than a whole flock of birds. God knows everything about you, even how many strands of hair are on your head. You can rest assured that God will take care of you, no matter what situation you face. So don’t be afraid if your life is threatened. The most that people can do is destroy your physical body. You should be more concerned about God, who determines your destiny after death.

“God overlooks all your faults but one – your stubborn refusal to let God help you improve your attitude and behavior.”

Jesus Discourages Selfishness and Greed

When a man asked Jesus to help him get his inheritance from his brother, Jesus replied,

“I don’t get involved in inheritance disputes.”

Jesus reminded the others that they shouldn’t be selfish or greedy, because no one will enjoy the kind of life God intended by accumulating

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more material possessions than they need. Jesus illustrated this with a story,

“One year a wealthy farmer’s crops produced extremely well. When he realized that he didn’t have enough space to store all the grain, he decided to tear down his barns and replace them with larger ones. Since he had enough grain to last for many years, he figured he could take it easy and have fun. But one day God reminded him how stupid he was to think that he would live long enough to use all the grain he had stored, because he was going to die later that same day.

“This is how it is with selfish people. They usually don’t get to use what they hoard for the future. So you shouldn’t be concerned about having enough food and clothing for the distant future. There are more urgent matters that need your attention. As you know, the birds don’t worry about what they’ll eat from one year to the next because God provides the food they need. Since people are a lot more important than birds, God will surely provide the food you need, too. Remember, storing up food for the distant future doesn’t guarantee that you’ll live long enough to eat it.

“The same is true for clothing. Wild flowers don’t worry about what they’ll ‘wear’ because God provides beautiful ‘clothing’ for them as they grow. Even your wealthy leader Solomon who lived long ago didn’t look as nice in his expensive clothes as one of these flowers. Since God provides ‘clothing’ for the flowers that only last a short while, God will surely provide clothes for you, too.

“So don’t worry if you’ll have enough food, water and clothing for the future. God knows you need these things. If you help others now, God will motivate others to help you later so you can all enjoy life as God intended.

Jesus Explains What Is Important in Life

“Where you put your time and effort reflects what you consider important in life. Don’t waste them on accumulating possessions, which eventually wear out and can be stolen. If you’re serious about following God’s advice, you’ll share what you have with people in need.

“You need to be like the attendants who were ready and eager to provide light for the procession from the groom’s home to the bride’s after the wedding reception, no matter what time of night it

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was. The groom rewarded them by inviting them to dinner and serving them personally. So you should always be ready to help others in need because the opportunity could arise at any time.”

When Peter asked if he was referring only to his 12 chosen followers, Jesus offered another illustration to show that he was referring to everyone,

“When managers make sure that people get the food they need, they’ll get a promotion. But if they party on the job and abuse their workers, their supervisor will discipline them severely. Managers who aren’t fully informed of their duties will receive less discipline than the others. So the more knowledge people have, the more is expected of them.

“I’m committed to encouraging everyone to follow God’s advice even though I realize some people’s response to it may create considerable conflict within families.”

Jesus then directed his comments to the others nearby,

“When it’s cloudy, you expect rain, and when the wind blows from the south, you expect scorching heat. If you can anticipate the weather, you should be able to figure out how to restore broken relationships. If you’ve harmed someone in any way, you should promptly apologize and repair the damage so that person won’t press charges and have you imprisoned. Once you’re in jail, you’ll be confined until you’ve served your sentence, and that just delays the opportunity to restore your relationship.”

Jesus Stresses the Need to Improve Attitude and Behavior

13 When someone told Jesus that the Roman leader Pilate recently executed some Jewish people in Galilee, he responded,

“Those who died there didn’t deserve to die any more than anyone else. The same is true for the 18 people who died in Jerusalem when the tower at one of the reservoirs fell on them.

“There once was a fruit tree that didn’t produce any fruit three years in a row. The owner told his caretaker to cut it down so the land could be used for something else. But the caretaker asked him to give it one more year so he could cultivate and fertilize it. If it still didn’t become productive, it would suffer the consequences. Like an unproductive tree, you’ll also suffer the consequences if you don’t improve your attitude and behavior toward God and others.”

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Jesus Heals a Woman on the Weekly Day of Rest

Some time later, as Jesus was sharing God's advice in a local worship center on the weekly day of rest, he noticed a woman who was unable to straighten her back. She thanked God when Jesus enabled her to stand up straight for the first time in 18 years.

The leader of the worship center was furious that Jesus healed someone on the weekly day of rest, so he reminded the people to come for healing on any day of the week but that one. Jesus heard this, so he responded,

“Some of your rules don't make sense. You allow people to give their animals water on the weekly day of rest, but you don't want someone to heal this Jewish woman who has been suffering for 18 years.”

Those who criticized Jesus were embarrassed, but the others were glad that he cared about them and was willing to help them.

Jesus Illustrates the Potential of Sharing God's Advice

Jesus then illustrated the potential of sharing God's advice with others,

“Sharing God's advice is like planting a tiny seed that grows into a plant large enough for the birds to build nests on its branches.

“Sharing God's advice is also like the yeast that spreads throughout a whole batch of dough.”

Jesus then headed toward Jerusalem, sharing God's advice in towns and villages along the way. When someone asked if only a few people would enjoy a better life, he replied,

“A lot of people would like to enjoy a better life, but they don't make the effort to follow God's advice. So if you want to enjoy a better life, you must be willing to follow God's advice. You'll be disappointed when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and a lot of non-Jewish people enjoying life while you aren't.”

When some religious leaders suggested that Jesus leave the area because the Roman leader Herod was planning to have him killed, Jesus responded,

“You can tell him I'll be leaving here in a few days, after I've healed the sick and freed those harassed by harmful spirits. I'm on my way to Jerusalem, where a lot of God's messengers have been killed over the years. I've tried hard to help the people there enjoy a better life, as a hen does when she protects her chicks under her

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wings, but they'll continue to refuse my help until they acknowledge that I'm God's messenger."

Jesus Heals Another Person on the Weekly Day of Rest

14 On another weekly day of rest, Jesus went to the home of one of the senior religious leaders to share a meal with several religious leaders. He knew they were paying close attention as a man swollen with fluid approached him, so he asked them if it was all right to heal someone on the weekly day of rest. Since they didn't respond, he went ahead and healed the man. He then asked if any of them would neglect to rescue one of their own children or animals if it fell into a deep hole on the day of rest. Again, there was no response.

Jesus noticed how the religious leaders tried to get the best seats at the dinner table, so he gave them some advice,

"When someone invites you to a wedding reception, I suggest you don't choose the best seat. If you do, you'll be embarrassed if the host asks you to move to another seat so someone else can sit in the best seat. You'll impress the other guests more by choosing one of the worst seats and letting the host invite you to a better one. You should realize that you're likely to be embarrassed if you think you're more important than others. But if you acknowledge that they're just as important as you are, you'll gain their respect."

Jesus then gave some advice to the host,

"When you invite people to a meal, you shouldn't only invite those that you hope will return the favor, such as your friends, relatives or wealthy neighbors. You'll get more satisfaction from inviting those who can't return the favor, such as people who are poor or physically impaired."

When one of the religious leaders remarked that some people will enjoy the fabulous meals God will provide in the life to come, Jesus told a story,

"There once was a man who invited a lot of people to his home for a banquet. When he sent a messenger to tell them that all the preparations had been made, they all had some excuse for not going. One man said he had to check out some land he just purchased. Another man claimed he had to inspect ten oxen that he recently bought. Another man said he couldn't go because he just got married.

LUKE

“The host was disappointed when he heard this, so he told the messenger to invite those who were begging in the streets, the poor and physically impaired. The messenger did so, but there was still plenty of room for more. Since the host wanted his house to be full, he told the messenger to invite more people.

“Just as those who were invited first to this banquet didn’t get to enjoy the meal, many of those I invited first to a better life won’t get to enjoy it.”

Jesus Talks about Commitment

Some time later, Jesus shared a couple of illustrations with the people following him to Jerusalem to get them to think about their level of commitment,

“When people build something, they should figure out how much it’s going to cost so they’ll know if they have enough money to finish the job. Others will make fun of them if they’re not able to complete the task.

“When a commander goes to war with 10,000 soldiers, he should calculate whether or not he can defeat the opposing army of 20,000. If he doesn’t think he can win, he should try to make a truce before the battle begins.

“Before you commit yourself to following my example, you should decide if you care about others beyond your own family to the point of being willing to give your life for them.

“As you know, one of the uses of salt is to improve the taste of food. But if salt loses its flavor, it can no longer serve that purpose. Your purpose for existence is basically the same as the purpose of salt – to help others enjoy a better life. If you stop doing that, you’ve lost your purpose in life.”

God Is Thrilled when People Decide to Follow God’s Advice

15 When some tax collectors and others who didn’t follow God’s advice very well came to hear Jesus, some of the religious leaders criticized him for associating with them. He heard what they said, so he gave several illustrations to show that even though a lot of people might already follow God’s advice, God is thrilled when more people follow it:

“Although a shepherd may have 99 other sheep, he’ll search for the one that wanders away until he finds it. When he does, he’ll

LUKE

take it home and invite his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him.

“Although a woman may still have nine of the ten special coins that her husband gave her at their wedding, she’ll look for the one she lost until she finds it. When she does, she’ll invite her friends and neighbors to celebrate with her.

“There once was a man who had two sons. When the younger son asked for his inheritance, the father gave each of them their share. A few days later, the younger son traveled far away and squandered his share. Just when he had spent all his money, food became scarce. He was so desperate that he got a job feeding pigs, but he didn’t earn enough money to buy sufficient food. He would have been happy to eat the food that he fed the pigs, but his boss wouldn’t let him. When he realized he would soon die of starvation, he remembered that his father’s hired hands always had plenty to eat. So he decided to return home, apologize to his father for not following his advice, and offer to work as a hired hand.

“As he was approaching home, his father saw him coming and ran to greet him. After he apologized, his father told the housemaids to give him clean clothes and prepare a special meal to celebrate his return. When the older son returned from working in the field, he heard music and dancing, so he asked one of the housemaids what was going on. As she explained, he became very angry. His father encouraged him to join in the celebration but he refused, complaining that his father never had a celebration for him, even though he had always followed his father’s advice. But his father explained that they should celebrate his younger son’s return.”

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Help Others in Need

16 Jesus then added another illustration to encourage his followers to help others in need so they’ll return the favor later,

“There once was a very wealthy man who learned that his financial manager was mishandling funds. When the manager was fired, he was told to turn over the financial records. He knew he wasn’t strong enough to be a laborer, and he had too much pride to be a beggar, so he came up with a plan to ensure that he would have food and lodging later. His scheme was to reduce the amount that people owed the estate. So he cut one person’s debt of 700 gallons of oil in half, and he reduced another person’s debt

LUKE

of 100 containers of grain to 80. His boss even complimented him for being so clever.”

Jesus acknowledged that self-centered people are generally more crafty at doing business than others are, but he added,

“If you don’t help others, you can’t expect others to help you. You can use your money for yourself or for helping others, but you can’t do both at the same time.”

When some religious leaders heard Jesus say this, they laughed at him for insinuating that they didn’t use their money to help others. So he responded,

“You may fool others into thinking that you follow God’s advice, but God knows how you really are. God is disgusted with your pretentiousness.

“Ever since my forerunner John began encouraging people to follow God’s advice for a better life, as God’s spokesmen did long ago, a lot of people have been striving to be a part of it.

“No one should eliminate a single detail from the advice God gave you long ago. For example, it’s important that people accept responsibility for their actions when they insist on getting divorced. If a man divorces his wife so he can marry another woman, he should accept responsibility for ruining their marriage. If he encourages the woman he wants to marry to divorce her husband, he should accept responsibility for ruining that marriage, too.”

Jesus then told them a story to illustrate how important it is to help others in need,

“There once was a wealthy man who had expensive clothes and lived a very comfortable life. Near the entrance to his home, a poor man by the name of Lazarus begged to eat the rich man’s scraps, while dogs licked the open sores that covered his body.

“Eventually, both men died. When the rich man saw that Lazarus was in the company of Abraham, he asked Abraham to have Lazarus bring him some water for relief from the intense heat. Abraham explained that Lazarus and the rich man’s situations had reversed. While they were alive, the rich man enjoyed a life of comfort while Lazarus experienced a miserable life. Now it was the other way around, and there was no way to change it.

LUKE

“The rich man then asked Abraham to have Lazarus warn the rich man’s five brothers so they wouldn’t end up where he was. Abraham explained that they just need to follow God’s advice, which Moses and God’s other spokesmen recorded long ago. The rich man thought his brothers might be more likely to follow God’s advice if someone who had come back to life would talk to them. But Abraham told him that wouldn’t make any difference.”

Following God’s Advice Should Be the Normal Routine in Life

17 Jesus then turned to his 12 chosen followers,

“If others try to distract you from following God’s advice, you should limit your association with them. When my followers offend you, you should discuss the matter with them. If they’re sorry for what they said or did, accept their apology, even if they offend you and apologize numerous times a day.”

When they asked Jesus to help them do that, he replied,

“When you trust God even a little bit, God will help you do amazing things, such as moving that tree to the middle of the lake with just a verbal command.”

Jesus then illustrated that following God’s advice should be the normal routine in life,

“Those of you who have servants don’t invite them to eat before you do. Their normal routine is to prepare your dinner so you can eat first. Like humble servants, you should follow God’s advice as your normal routine.”

Jesus Explains the Importance of People’s Attitude

As Jesus and his followers continued their journey to Jerusalem, they entered a village between the districts of Samaria and Galilee. While keeping a safe distance away, ten men with a serious skin disease called leprosy asked Jesus to heal them. He told them to go and show themselves to the religious leaders to verify their healing. As the men were going, their leprosy disappeared. When they noticed it, the only one who thanked God and returned to thank Jesus was the man from Samaria, where the people are looked down upon. After Jesus told the man that he was healed because he trusted God, Jesus remarked,

“I healed ten men, but the only one who returned and thanked God was this non-Jewish man.”

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A little while later, some of the religious leaders asked Jesus when they should expect the better life he spoke about, so he explained,

“It’s not something you just sit back and observe. It involves improving your attitude and behavior toward God and others.”

Jesus Warns His Followers of Coming Catastrophe

Jesus then warned his followers of the catastrophe that would soon occur,

“After I’m gone, you’ll wish I were still here. Some people will try to make you think I am, but don’t let them fool you. They’ll turn against you after they get rid of me. A lot of you will be taken by surprise, like the people in Noah’s day who were living life as usual until the flood came and drowned them, and like the people in Lot’s day who were also living life as usual until they were destroyed by fire from the sky.

“You need to be ready for what’s coming so you can escape at a moment’s notice. Those who are working in their fields or right outside their home won’t have time to get any of their belongings. If they try, they’ll end up dead like Lot’s wife. So if you want to stay alive, you’ll have to be willing to give up your possessions.”

When Jesus’ followers asked where this would happen, he replied,

“Those who are planning to get rid of me will try to get rid of my followers, wherever they are.”

18 Jesus then gave his followers an illustration to encourage them to ask God for help when faced with opposition,

“There once was a judge who had no respect for God and no compassion for other people. A widow had asked him on numerous occasions to stop someone from mistreating her. But the judge ignored her until he had to help her to avoid embarrassment.

“Unlike this apathetic judge, God will respond quickly to those who ask for help when mistreated for following God’s advice.”

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Jesus Encourages Improvement in Attitude and Behavior

Jesus gave another illustration to those who thought they were following God's advice better than others,

“One day a religious leader and a tax collector went to the temple to pray. The religious leader thanked God that he followed God's advice better than the tax collector, boasting that he skipped meals two days a week and gave 10% of his income at the temple. Meanwhile, the tax collector simply acknowledged that he failed to follow God's advice.

“This tax collector expressed more willingness than the religious leader to improve his attitude and behavior toward God and others. You're likely to be embarrassed if you think you're more important than others. But if you acknowledge that they're just as important as you are, you'll gain their respect.”

A while later, some people brought their children to Jesus for encouragement. Some of his followers tried to keep the children from bothering him, but he welcomed them. He put his arms around them and explained that everyone needs to be as humble as little children if they want to enjoy life as God intended.

Jesus Encourages People to Share

After the children left, a wealthy community leader addressed Jesus as a good teacher and asked,

“How can I enjoy life as God intended? Is there something special I should do?”

Jesus replied,

“Since you addressed me as a good teacher, you must realize that my advice comes from God.

“To enjoy life as God intended, you'll need to follow God's basic advice for getting along with others: don't murder or steal, keep your lifelong commitment to your spouse, respect your parents, and tell the truth.”

The rich man answered,

“I've been doing that my entire life. But is there anything else I should do?”

Jesus continued,

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“If you want to enjoy life as God intended, you’ll need to follow my example. Sell your belongings and give the money to people in need.”

The rich man was disappointed, because he couldn’t bear to part with his money and possessions. So Jesus remarked,

“It’s especially difficult for rich people to enjoy life as God intended because they’re usually so attached to their money and possessions that they aren’t willing to share them with others.”

Jesus’ followers were surprised to hear this because they figured wealthy people already had the ultimate life. So Jesus added,

“God can accomplish what people can’t.”

When Peter remarked that he and Jesus’ other chosen followers had basically given up everything to follow him, Jesus responded,

“Although you may be criticized for it, those of you who are willing to give up your job and move away from your home and family to help others will receive great satisfaction in life.”

As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were on their way to Jerusalem, he described what God’s spokesmen predicted would happen to him there,

“The religious leaders are going to sentence me to die and then turn me over to the Roman leader, who will have me ridiculed, beaten and executed.”

Jesus reminded them that he would come back to life just a few days later. But his followers still didn’t completely understand what he meant.

Jesus Heals Another Man Who Is Blind

A lot of people went along with Jesus and his 12 chosen followers on their way to Jerusalem. As they passed through Jericho, they approached a blind man named Bartimaeus sitting alongside the road, asking people for help. When he heard a lot of people coming, he asked what was going on. Someone explained that a lot of people were following Jesus, the descendant of their famous leader David, who would help people enjoy a better life. So Bartimaeus yelled,

“Jesus! Help me!”

Some people tried to quiet Bartimaeus, but he yelled even louder. When Jesus heard him calling, he asked his followers to bring him closer. Bartimaeus then asked Jesus to restore his sight. As Jesus did so, he remarked,

LUKE

“I’ve restored your sight because you believed I could do it.”

Bartimaeus joined the others who were going along with Jesus to Jerusalem, and they all thanked God that he could see again.

Zacchaeus Climbs a Tree to See Jesus

19 A wealthy supervisor of tax collectors named Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus before he and his followers left Jericho. But Zacchaeus was too short to see over the other people who blocked his view. Since he knew the direction that Jesus was going, he ran ahead and climbed a tree so he could see him as he passed by. When Jesus saw him, he asked if he could spend the night at his house. Zacchaeus was happy to accommodate him.

Some people criticized Jesus for spending the night there because they assumed Zacchaeus was a dishonest person. But when he told Jesus that he would give half of his belongings to the poor and pay back four times as much for anything he received dishonestly, Jesus remarked,

“This man will enjoy a better life because he has decided to follow God’s advice, as our ancestor Abraham did long ago. I want to help others do the same.”

Jesus Encourages People to Use Their Potential

Jesus then told a story to illustrate that people must use their potential if they expect to enjoy a better life,

“There once was a wealthy man who was getting ready to travel a great distance to be appointed as governor over a large area. Before he left, he gave ten of his financial agents several thousand dollars to invest while he was gone.

“The residents of that community didn’t like the man, so they sent some representatives to tell the authorities that they didn’t want him to be their governor. But he got the position anyway.

“When he returned, he asked his financial agents how much they earned on the money he had given them. He was so pleased with the agent who increased his amount by ten times that he gave him authority to govern ten towns. Another agent increased his amount by five times, so the newly appointed governor gave him authority to govern five towns.

“But another agent admitted that he put his amount in a safe place instead of investing it because he was afraid he couldn’t meet the governor’s expectations. As he returned the money, the governor reprimanded him for not investing it,

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‘If you knew what I expected, you should’ve invested the money I gave you so it could’ve earned some interest while I was gone.’

“The governor then gave this agent’s money to the agent who had increased his amount by ten times, and he reminded everyone that they must use their potential if they want to reap any benefits.”

A Lot of People Honor Jesus as He Enters Jerusalem

Before long, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers arrived at Olive Hill, near Bethany and Bethphage, suburbs of Jerusalem. He asked two of his followers to go to a nearby village and get a young donkey, which had never been ridden and was tied to a gate near the street. If anyone questioned why they were taking the donkey, Jesus told the men to explain that he needed to borrow it for a while. When they returned with the donkey, they got it ready to ride. As Jesus rode it into Jerusalem, a lot of people spread cloths along the road in front of him, which was the custom for honoring someone important. They celebrated and thanked God for all the amazing things Jesus had done, and they honored him because they thought he was the one God promised, who would lead them to a better life.

When some of the religious leaders told Jesus to scold the people for honoring him, he responded,

“If these people didn’t honor me, the rocks around us would.”

As he walked toward the temple, he looked down across the people and lamented,

“I wish you all understood how to get along with one another, but you still don’t get it. Before long, your enemies will totally destroy this city, and they’ll surround and kill you and your children because you won’t be expecting their attack.

Jesus Scolds the Dishonest Merchants at the Temple

When Jesus entered the outer section of the temple, he noticed some merchants charging foreigners excessive prices for items that they needed for offerings. He didn’t like what was taking place, so he sent the dishonest merchants out of the temple, scolding them with a quote from God long ago,

“The temple was built to help people worship me, but you’re using it to take advantage of them.”

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The religious leaders didn't like how Jesus interfered with the activities at the temple, so they continued to look for an excuse to get rid of him. But they had to be cautious how they went about it because a lot of people were very impressed by what he said.

Some Religious Leaders Confront Jesus at the Temple

20 While Jesus was sharing God's advice in the temple the next day, some of the religious leaders confronted him about the incident that took place there the previous day,

“Who gave you permission to send the merchants out of the temple yesterday?”

Jesus knew they were hoping he would say something to give them an excuse to get rid of him, so he replied,

“Let me ask you a question first. If you answer my question, I'll answer yours. Who do you think motivated John to symbolically rinse people with water? God, or a human being?”

Jesus' question put the religious leaders on the spot. If they said God motivated John, they wouldn't have any excuse for ignoring the advice he shared. On the other hand, if they said a human being motivated him, they were afraid his followers might react violently because they were convinced that he was one of God's spokesmen. Realizing that either response would get them into trouble, the religious leaders told Jesus they didn't know who motivated John. Since they didn't answer *his* question, Jesus didn't answer *theirs*.

Jesus Exposes the Religious Leaders' Self-centeredness

Jesus then told a story in which he compared these religious leaders to self-centered farmers who mistreated others,

“There once was a man who leased his vineyard to some farmers when he moved away. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent a messenger to get the rent payment, but the farmers beat him and sent him back with nothing. He sent two more messengers, but the farmers did the same to them.

“He finally decided to send his own son, whom he loved very much and whom he thought the farmers would respect more than the others. Since they knew that his son would eventually inherit the vineyard, they killed him so they could keep it for themselves. Then the owner got rid of them and gave the vineyard to someone else.”

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Quoting what one of God's spokesmen had written long ago, Jesus implied that the religious leaders refused to follow God's advice. When they realized Jesus was comparing them to the self-centered characters in the story, they were even more determined to get rid of him. But since they were afraid that his followers might defend him, they decided not to take any action at that time.

Some Religious Leaders Attempt to Trap Jesus

Some of the religious leaders soon devised a plan to try to get Jesus into serious trouble with the Roman authorities by sending some people to ask him a trick question. Pretending to be devoted to following God's advice, they asked,

“Do you think we should pay taxes to the Roman emperor Caesar?”

If Jesus agreed that they *should* pay taxes to Caesar, the religious leaders could claim he wasn't following God's advice. On the other hand, if he suggested that they *shouldn't* pay taxes to Caesar, the Roman authorities could arrest him for treason and sentence him to die. They figured Jesus would be in big trouble either way. But he knew what they were up to, so he asked whose face and name were on the Roman coins. When they acknowledged they were Caesar's, Jesus said,

“Since you've consented to live in a society that uses Roman currency, it's appropriate for you to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. But don't neglect to follow God's advice.”

Jesus left quite an impression as he foiled the religious leaders' scheme.

Other Religious Leaders Challenge Jesus on Life after Death

Before long, the religious leaders who didn't think life continued after death challenged Jesus about it. Referring to God's spokesman Moses who lived long ago, they set the stage,

“Moses advised that when a married man dies before he has children, his brother should marry the widow so she would bear children for her deceased husband.”

The religious leaders then set up a hypothetical situation to pose a question which implied that the idea of life after death was a ridiculous notion,

“Let's suppose a man who has six brothers dies before he has any children. Each of his brothers marries the widow, one after the

LUKE

other, but they all die before producing a child. If there is life after death as you say, which of the seven men would be the woman's husband in that life?"

Jesus replied,

"Marriage only applies to this life. When people come back to life after they die, they won't marry because they'll be like God's messengers.

"When Moses wrote about God speaking to him through the burning bush long ago, he referred to God as the God whom Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are worshipping. By stating that these men were worshipping God, even though they had died many years earlier, Moses implied that death is not final."

Some of the religious leaders complimented Jesus on his reply, so no one asked any more questions about the matter of life after death.

Jesus then reminded those around him that the religious leaders knew the one God promised to help them enjoy a better life would be a descendant of their famous leader David. But Jesus quoted David to clarify that the one God promised would be much more than just David's descendant.

Jesus then warned his followers about some of the religious leaders,

"These people are setting a bad example for you. They wear their religious robes in public so you'll recognize them and give them the best seats at banquets and in the local worship centers. But while they put up a good front with their long, phony prayers, they take advantage of people, especially widows. Following their self-centered lifestyle will prevent you from experiencing the kind of life God intended for you to enjoy."

Jesus Commends a Poor Widow's Generous Gift

21 A little while later, Jesus and his followers were in the area of the temple where people gave money to help others in need. After noticing how much the wealthy people gave, he was so impressed by a poor widow's gift that he remarked to his followers,

"Look at that! This poor widow has given more generously than all those wealthy people. They only gave a small portion of their wealth, while this poor widow gave all the money she had."

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Jesus Predicts the Destruction of the Temple

As Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were leaving the temple complex, some of them remarked how beautiful the stone buildings were. After Jesus informed them that the temple would soon be totally destroyed, they asked when this would occur. So he explained,

“When the Roman army surrounds Jerusalem, you’ll know it’s about to be destroyed, as one of God’s spokesmen predicted long ago. I won’t tell you exactly when this will happen, but it will be within your lifetime. When people begin hearing reports of numerous battles, earthquakes and famine, they’ll know the time is near.

“The army could strike at any time, so everyone should be ready to escape at a moment’s notice. The attack will be so swift that those who are working in their fields won’t have time to return to the city to get their belongings. Everyone in the city should try to escape. Some people will need to take refuge in the surrounding hills. Pregnant women and mothers with young children will find it particularly difficult at this time.

“As people hear the rumbling of oncoming soldiers, they’ll be terrified about what is heading their way. A lot of people will be taken captive, wounded, or killed by the Romans as they take over the city. There will be so much smoke from burning buildings that the sun, moon and stars won’t even be visible.

“During the invasion, some people will try to make you think that I’m still around. But don’t let them fool you, because I’ll physically be long gone by then. So when the soldiers come looking for me and can’t find me, they’ll arrest, publicly torture, and even kill some of you. Members of your own family may even turn you in.

“If you’re arrested, don’t worry about what you’ll say in court because I’ll help you find the right words. Just share God’s advice so the Roman leaders and spectators will have an opportunity to hear it.

“Although this will be one of the worst catastrophes ever, God won’t allow it to be a total disaster. When the invasion is over, God will help you follow my example to put your lives back together again.

“So don’t let drinking parties or other activities distract you from being prepared for this coming event. Instead, ask God to help

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you avoid it by encouraging others to follow God's advice, as I'm doing."

Jesus continued sharing God's advice with a lot of people who came to the temple early each morning to hear him, and he spent the nights sleeping outside on Olive Hill.

Some Religious Leaders Finalize Plans to Get Rid of Jesus

22 At this time every year, the Jewish people celebrated their ancestors' freedom from slavery in Egypt, when God spared their first-born children from death. A few days before this weeklong celebration, some of the religious leaders were meeting again to finalize plans to get rid of Jesus without disrupting the celebration. When Judas Iscariot (one of Jesus' 12 chosen followers) showed up and offered to join their conspiracy, they agreed to pay him for his help. Together they worked out a plan to have Jesus arrested without giving his other followers a chance to offer resistance.

Jesus and His Followers Share the Celebration Meal

On Thursday Jesus asked Peter and John to prepare the meal that began the weeklong celebration. When they asked Jesus where they should prepare it, he replied,

"Go to Jerusalem and look for the man carrying a container of water. He'll take you to a house where the owner will show you a large, upstairs guest room already set up for the occasion. You can prepare the meal there."

They found the place Jesus had described and prepared the meal there. That evening, while Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were eating, Jesus remarked that he had been looking forward to sharing this final meal with them before he died.

The bread they ate at this meal was made without yeast to remind them that God had freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. After Jesus thanked God for the bread, he invited his followers to eat it as he related it to himself, indicating that his purpose in life was to help others enjoy a better life. Jesus then thanked God for their third cup of wine, which recalled God's promise to send someone to help people enjoy a better life. As he invited his followers to drink it, he related it to his blood, indicating that he was willing to risk his life to help others enjoy a better life.

Jesus revealed that one of his followers at the table was turning against him. Surprised and disappointed, each of them denied that he was the one. Jesus then pointed out a striking contrast,

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“I was born so I could help others enjoy a better life, but the one who is turning against me will not experience it.”

When his followers began debating which of them was the best leader, Jesus clarified his style of leadership,

“I don’t want you to lead by force, as the Roman leaders do. I want you to help others in need, as I’m doing.”

Jesus then addressed Peter,

“You’ll be tempted to abandon me, but I’ve asked God to help you follow my example and encourage the others to do so.”

Peter responded,

“I’m willing to go to prison or even die with you.”

Jesus replied,

“That’s easy for you to say now. But tonight, before you hear a rooster crow at dawn, you’re going to deny that you even know me three times.”

Jesus reminded his followers that when they shared God’s advice throughout the area, they didn’t need to take along any food, extra clothing or money because the people who followed God’s advice extended their hospitality. But then he said,

“Judas might as well sell his coat and buy a sword to carry out the conspiracy against me. One of God’s spokesmen predicted long ago that I would be treated like a criminal.”

When some of his followers pointed out that they already had two swords, Jesus said that was sufficient.

The Soldiers Arrest Jesus on Olive Hill

Later that evening, while Judas went to tell the religious leaders where the soldiers could arrest Jesus, Jesus and his other 11 chosen followers went to Olive Hill just outside of Jerusalem, where they had often gone before. When they arrived, Jesus suggested his followers ask God for strength to stay alert. After walking a little further alone, he asked God to spare him from suffering but acknowledged that he was willing to accept whatever God wanted. When he returned to his followers, he saw that they had fallen asleep, so he woke them up and reminded them to ask God for strength to stay alert.

While Jesus was still talking to his followers, Judas arrived with armed soldiers and identified Jesus with the common greeting. When Jesus’

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followers realized that the soldiers had come to arrest him, they asked if they should fight. But before he replied, one of his followers grabbed a sword and swung it at one of the soldiers, cutting off his ear. Jesus intervened to prevent more violence, and then healed the soldier's ear.

Jesus pointed out that the religious leaders had plenty of opportunities to arrest him peacefully while he was sharing God's advice in the temple during the day. Instead, they treated him like a dangerous criminal by sending armed soldiers to arrest him at night.

Peter Denies Knowing Jesus

Peter followed the soldiers at a distance as they took Jesus to the senior religious leader's residence. The soldiers made a fire outside to stay warm, so Peter stood by the fire. A female servant recognized that he was one of Jesus' followers and pointed it out to the soldiers. Fearing for his own safety, Peter denied knowing Jesus. A little later, when someone else recognized Peter as one of Jesus' followers, he denied it again. About an hour later, another person remarked,

“We can tell you're from Galilee, the same district Jesus is from, so you must be one of his followers.”

While Peter was denying it for the third time, a rooster crowed. As Jesus turned around and looked at him, he recalled Jesus' prediction that he would deny knowing Jesus three times before a rooster crowed. Realizing what he had done, Peter was heartbroken.

The Religious Leaders Sentence Jesus to Die

The soldiers made fun of Jesus as they beat him. They blindfolded him and took turns hitting him, taunting him to identify who hit him each time. The next morning the religious leaders took him to court. When they asked if he were the one God promised would help people enjoy a better life, he said,

“If I admitted it, you wouldn't believe me anyway.”

So they asked him if God had chosen him to be their leader. They considered his response to be an admission, so there was no need for witnesses.

The Roman Leader Orders Jesus' Execution

23 The religious leaders couldn't execute anyone without the Roman leader's approval. So early Friday morning, they took Jesus to Pilate, the Roman leader of Judea. They accused Jesus of discouraging people from

LUKE

paying taxes to the Roman emperor and claiming to be the Jewish leader whom God had promised would help them enjoy a better life.

As the religious leaders presented their case, Pilate was surprised that Jesus didn't defend himself against their accusations. He eventually concluded that none of them was valid, but he questioned Jesus about the charge that the religious leaders were most upset about, his claim that he was their leader. Although Jesus admitted making the claim, Pilate didn't consider that a crime.

The religious leaders also accused Jesus of causing trouble in Galilee. When Pilate discovered that he had come from there, Pilate decided to send him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at the time and had jurisdiction over that area.

Herod was delighted to meet Jesus because he had heard a lot about him and was hoping he would do something extraordinary. Although Herod interrogated him thoroughly, Jesus made no response. The religious leaders tried their best to incriminate him, but Herod sent him back to Pilate after the soldiers ridiculed him for claiming to be a leader. This was the first time Herod and Pilate cooperated on something.

Pilate told the religious leaders that Jesus was not guilty of anything that deserved the death penalty, so he was just planning to give Jesus a stern warning before letting him go.

Every year at this time, Pilate let the people decide which prisoner he would release. On this occasion, he gave them the choice between Jesus and the notorious criminal named Barabbas, who was on death row for murder during a recent rebellion against the Roman government. Pilate assumed the people would ask for Jesus' release, so he was surprised that they chose Barabbas. When Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus, they told him to execute him on a cross. Since there was no valid charge against him, Pilate tried to change their minds, but they insisted. So he released Barabbas and turned Jesus over to the soldiers to be executed.

Jesus Is Executed on a Cross

Later, as the soldiers were taking Jesus and two criminals to the place of execution named Skull Hill, they passed a man named Simon who had just come to Jerusalem from Cyrene, a city in northern Africa. By this time, Jesus was too exhausted to carry the cross on which he was to be executed, so the soldiers ordered Simon to carry it for him.

As a lot of people followed, Jesus turned to the women who were crying and said,

“Save your crying for when catastrophe strikes this city. As you head for the hills to escape, you'll wish you didn't have young children to slow you down.”

LUKE

When they arrived at Skull Hill, the soldiers nailed Jesus to a cross and placed him between two criminals on crosses. A little while later, the soldiers drew straws to see who would get the clothes they had removed from Jesus.

Among the bystanders were some religious leaders who ridiculed Jesus,

“He’s helped others and claims to be the one that God promised would help us enjoy a better life, but he can’t even help himself.”

As the soldiers offered Jesus some wine, they also ridiculed him,

“If you actually were the leader of the Jewish people, you would be able to save yourself.”

The soldiers then fastened a board above him with a caption stating the alleged reason for his execution:

Leader of the Jews

Even one of the criminals hanging on a cross next to Jesus taunted him,

“If you actually were the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life, you would be able to save yourself and us.”

But the other criminal scolded him,

“You should respect God especially now, because you’re about to die, as I am. Both of us are getting what we deserve, but Jesus has done nothing wrong.”

When he asked to be included in the life that God would like everyone to enjoy, Jesus replied,

“You’ll begin to experience it today!”

It became very dark from noon until mid-afternoon, when Jesus took his last breath. At that point, God split the thick curtain in the temple that separated the general worship area from the area that only the religious leaders could enter to make offerings to God for the people. This signified that the common people could approach God directly for help to improve their attitude and behavior, without relying on the religious leaders to approach God for them.

The captain of the soldiers thanked God when he realized who Jesus was, and he acknowledged that Jesus had committed no crime. Shocked that an innocent man had been executed, the bystanders were very upset as they returned to their homes.

LUKE

A lot of people who knew Jesus observed these events from a distance, including the women who had followed him from Galilee.

Jesus Is Buried

One of the religious leaders who followed God's advice well and looked forward to a better life was named Joseph, from the town of Arimathea, several miles north of Jerusalem. He asked Pilate for Jesus' body so he could give it a proper burial before the weekly day of rest began that evening. After wrapping it in linen cloth, he laid it in a walk-in grave, carved out of a stone hillside. After the women from Galilee, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and James' mother Mary, saw where Joseph put Jesus' body, they went to get perfume to put on it after the weekly day of rest.

Jesus Comes Back to Life

24 As the women from Galilee approached Jesus' grave with perfume around dawn Sunday morning, they noticed that the large stone had been rolled away from the entrance. When they went inside, they were surprised to see that his body was gone. Two men in brilliant white clothing explained,

“Jesus' body is no longer here because he has come back to life. When he was in Galilee, he told you he would come back to life a few days after he was executed by those who refuse to follow God's advice.”

The women recalled what Jesus had said and returned to tell the rest of his followers that his grave was empty. But some thought the women were making up a story, so Peter ran to the grave to see for himself. When he only saw the cloths in which Jesus' body had been wrapped, he wondered what happened to it.

Jesus Joins Two of His Followers on Their Way to Emmaus

Later that day, two of Jesus' followers were walking toward the village of Emmaus, about seven miles west of Jerusalem. While they were discussing what had happened over the past few days, Jesus joined them, but they didn't recognize him. When he asked what they were discussing, the one named Cleopas stopped abruptly and asked Jesus if he hadn't heard what had just taken place in Jerusalem.

Jesus pretended he didn't know, so they explained,

“Although Jesus shared God's advice and helped many people in need, the religious leaders demanded that he be executed on a

LUKE

cross. We were hoping he was the one that God promised would help our people enjoy a better life.

“We were shocked when some of the women in our group went to his grave early Sunday morning and found it empty. They explained that messengers from God told them that Jesus had come back to life. So some of his chosen followers went to the grave and confirmed that it was empty.”

Jesus replied,

“Apparently, you still aren’t convinced that God’s spokesmen predicted long ago that the one God promised, who would help people enjoy a better life, would be executed and then come back to life.”

Jesus pointed out references in the writings of Moses and God’s other spokesmen that related to this special person. When Jesus and the two men arrived at Emmaus, they thought he was going to continue on to another town. But since it was almost evening, they invited him to spend the night. While they were eating supper, Jesus thanked God for the bread and passed it to the others. At that point, they recognized who he was, but he soon disappeared.

After remarking how excited they were earlier that day when Jesus clarified what God’s spokesmen had written long ago, they headed back to Jerusalem. When they arrived, Jesus’ other followers told them there was no question that Jesus had come back to life, because Peter saw him. The two men explained that Jesus joined them as they were walking to Emmaus, but they didn’t recognize him until they were eating supper together.

Jesus Visits His 11 Chosen Followers and Others

While the two men were talking with Jesus’ 11 chosen followers and others, Jesus came and greeted them. They were frightened at first because they thought he was a ghost. But then he identified himself by showing them the wounds in his hands and feet. He invited them to touch him to prove that he wasn’t a ghost. Some still couldn’t believe that he was alive, so he requested something to eat. When they saw him eat a piece of broiled fish, they were convinced that he wasn’t a ghost.

LUKE

Jesus' Last Words to His Followers

Jesus then said,

“Before I died, I explained that Moses and God’s other spokesmen predicted that the one God promised, who would help people enjoy a better life, would be executed and come back to life a few days later. They also predicted that you would follow his example to encourage everyone everywhere to stop living a self-centered life and begin following God’s advice. God has promised to give you special help, so stay here in Jerusalem until you receive it.”

The group then followed Jesus a short distance toward Bethany, a town southeast of Jerusalem. After encouraging them to follow his example, he disappeared for the last time. They were very excited as they went to the temple in Jerusalem to thank God that Jesus had come back to life.

PALESTINE IN THE
TIME OF JESUS



The Life of Jesus according to JOHN

Introduction

1 God created the world with the intent that everyone would follow God's advice and enjoy a wonderful life. But because of people's tendency to be self-centered, this hasn't happened. So God motivated a man named John to encourage people to follow God's advice. A lot of people have chosen not to, but those who follow it are enjoying the kind of life God intended. It isn't automatic for people of any particular race, and self-centered people don't experience it.

Since no one has ever seen God, God enabled Jesus to demonstrate better than anyone else how much God cares about us. Jesus clarified the advice God gave our ancestors through God's spokesman Moses so we would understand how much we should care about others.

John Meets Jesus for the First Time

While John was rinsing people with water near the town of Bethany, east of the Jordan River, to symbolize their desire to clean up their lives, some of the religious leaders from Jerusalem asked if he was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life. When John denied it, they wondered if he was one of God's spokesmen from long ago such as Elijah, having come back to life. After John assured them that he wasn't, they asked who he was so they could tell the other religious leaders. He explained that he was just an ordinary person encouraging others to follow God's advice, as God's spokesman Isaiah did long ago.

The religious leaders then asked John why he was rinsing people if he wasn't one of God's special spokesmen from long ago nor the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life. He explained that he could only symbolize people's willingness to follow God's advice, but someone else would help them actually do it.

Some time later, John explained what happened when Jesus arrived the next day,

“When God first motivated me to rinse people with water, God indicated that a dove would identify God's special messenger who would help people follow God's advice. After I saw a dove land on Jesus, I told the religious leaders that he was the one I was referring to earlier.”

JOHN

People Begin Following Jesus

The next day, as Jesus walked past John and two of his followers, John pointed out that Jesus was the one who would help people follow God's advice. When Jesus noticed that John's two followers were following him, he asked what they wanted. They explained that they wanted to spend some time with him, so he invited them to his home. Since it was late afternoon when they arrived, they stayed overnight.

One of the men was named Andrew, who later told his brother Simon that Jesus was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life. When Simon returned with Andrew, Jesus said,

“Your father John named you *Simon* but I'm giving you the nickname *Peter*, which means *rock*.”

The next day Jesus decided to go north to the district of Galilee. When he arrived at Bethsaida on the northern coast of Lake Galilee, where Andrew and Peter were originally from, he invited Philip to follow him. Philip later told his friend Nathaniel that he had met Joseph's son Jesus from Nazareth, whom Moses and God's other spokesmen had written about. Nathaniel was skeptical that anyone special could come from such an insignificant town as Nazareth, so Philip suggested he go and check it out for himself. When Jesus met Nathaniel, he said,

“You're a descendant of Jacob and you've never tried to deceive anyone.”

Nathaniel wondered how Jesus knew him, so Jesus explained,

“I saw you sitting in the shade of a fig tree before Philip encouraged you to come meet me.”

When Nathaniel acknowledged that Jesus was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life, Jesus replied,

“God will help me do much greater things than this.”

Jesus Changes Water into Wine

2 Several days later, Jesus' mother and some of his followers traveled southwest with him to attend a wedding in the town of Cana. During the reception, Jesus' mother noticed that the wine was all gone, so she mentioned it to him. Responding to her concern, he asked the servers to fill six large containers with water and take some to the head server. As they were taking it to him, it turned into wine! He was so surprised how good it tasted that he remarked to the groom,

JOHN

“People usually serve their best wine first. But you’ve saved your best wine for last!”

This was the first time Jesus did something so extraordinary to show how much he cared about people, so his followers became even more inclined to follow his example.

After the wedding celebration, Jesus’ mother, brothers and some of his followers returned with him to the town of Capernaum on the northern coast of Lake Galilee. A few days later, they traveled 80 miles south to Jerusalem for the annual celebration of their ancestors’ freedom from slavery in Egypt.

Jesus Scolds the Dishonest Merchants at the Temple

When Jesus arrived at the outer section of the Jewish temple, he noticed some merchants charging foreigners excessive prices for sheep, cattle and pigeons that they needed for offerings. Other merchants were also overcharging them to exchange their money for local currency. Jesus didn’t like what was taking place, so he took a piece of rope and chased the sheep and cattle away. He tipped over the tables, spilling the money containers of those who were exchanging currency, and he told the merchants selling pigeons,

“Take these things out of here and stop using God’s house as a market.”

Jesus’ followers recalled that their famous ancestor David was also very devoted to God. But some of the religious leaders confronted Jesus for what he had just done,

“Give us some proof that God has given you the authority to send these people out of the temple.”

Jesus responded,

“After you’ve destroyed this temple, I’ll restore it in just a few days.”

The religious leaders replied,

“It took 46 years to build this temple. You’re crazy if you think you can rebuild it in just a few days!”

But Jesus was referring to himself, not the temple building. Many months later, when Jesus came back to life a few days after he died, his followers realized Jesus’ remark was a prediction of what eventually took place.

JOHN

While Jesus was in Jerusalem during the annual freedom celebration, a lot more people began following him because they saw him do some extraordinary things. But he didn't expect them all to continue because he knew how fickle people can be.

People Should Readily Follow God's Advice

3 One evening, when a religious leader named Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus was one of God's spokesmen because he had done some extraordinary things, Jesus responded,

"If you want to enjoy a better life, you must be willing to begin life over again."

Nicodemus knew Jesus wasn't referring to a second physical birth, but he wasn't sure what he meant. So Jesus continued,

"You'll enjoy a better life when you let God help you follow God's advice. Like the wind, which seems to have a mind of its own, you must decide for yourself whether or not you want to follow God's advice."

Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus asked him to explain further, because he knew Nicodemus had helped others understand God's advice. So he directed his reply to all who were listening,

"No one else understands God as well as I do. But if you don't trust what I've told you about things that can easily be verified, you'll have trouble trusting what I'm going to tell you about God.

"Whoever follows God's advice will enjoy a better life, as the people did long ago when they looked at the brass snake that God told Moses to mount on a pole."

Since God cares about everyone, God provided Jesus to help us follow God's advice so we can all enjoy a better life. The more we follow his example, the more we'll enjoy life. But a lot of people will continue living a miserable life because they insist on following their own selfish desires.

After Jesus and his followers left Jerusalem, they began rinsing people who wanted to symbolize their desire to clean up their lives.

John Encourages People to Follow Jesus' Example

Meanwhile, John was symbolically rinsing people in the town of Aenon, near Salim, about 40 miles northeast of Jerusalem, since there was plenty of water there. Some of the religious leaders told John's followers

JOHN

that Jesus' followers were also rinsing people. When John learned of this, he remarked,

“They’re doing what God wants them to do. As I’ve said before, Jesus is the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life, not me. As you know, the groom and his bride are the important people at a wedding reception. I’m like the best man, who is just happy to be of some help to the groom.

“God has enabled Jesus to demonstrate God’s advice much better than anyone else. Those who follow it are proving that God’s advice really works because they’re enjoying a better life. Those who refuse to follow it will continue to live a miserable life.”

Jesus Breaks a Traditional Social Barrier in Samaria

4 When Jesus realized some of the religious leaders were trying to make John jealous that Jesus' followers were symbolically rinsing more people than John was, Jesus decided to return to the district of Galilee. On the way there, he and his followers went through a town in the district of Samaria called Sychar, which was near the strip of land that Jacob had given his son Joseph long ago. Jesus was tired from the long journey, so while his followers went to town to buy food that evening, he rested by the well Jacob had used many years before.

When a Samaritan woman came by to get water, Jesus asked her for a drink. She was well aware that Jews didn't usually associate with Samaritans, so she replied,

“I’m a Samaritan and you’re a Jew. Why would you ask me for a drink?”

Jesus answered,

“If you knew who I am, you’d be asking *me* for a drink because I can give you water that will refresh you more than this water.”

She responded,

“But the well is deep and you don’t even have a bucket. Where else can you get water around here? I doubt that you’ll find a better well than this one because it provided enough water for our ancestor Jacob’s entire family and their livestock.”

Jesus replied,

“Everyone who drinks water from this well will become thirsty again. But whoever drinks the refreshing water I’m referring to will never be thirsty.”

JOHN

The woman responded,

“Give me some of that water so I won’t ever be thirsty again or need to come here for water.”

Jesus began to reveal who he was by asking her to go home and bring her husband back. When she said she didn’t have one, Jesus acknowledged that she was telling the truth and added,

“You’ve had five husbands in the past, and you’re not married to the man you’re living with now.”

At this point, she realized Jesus was one of God’s spokesmen, so she mentioned something that had been bothering her,

“The Jews insist we should worship God in Jerusalem, but our ancestors have always worshipped God on this mountain.”

Jesus replied,

“Don’t let that bother you. Before long, people will be worshipping God everywhere, not just here and in Jerusalem. God is helping the Jewish people understand that the only way to really worship God is to follow God’s advice, no matter where you are.”

The woman responded,

“I know God promised that someone would come to help us enjoy a better life. When he arrives, he’ll explain how it will happen.”

Jesus replied,

“I’m the one you’re referring to.”

By this time, Jesus’ followers had returned. They were surprised that he had been talking with a woman, but none of them said anything. She was so excited that she forgot to take her bucket along as she hurried back to town to tell others that the man who knew so much about her might be the one that God promised would help them enjoy a better life.

Meanwhile, Jesus’ followers were encouraging him to eat something. But he responded,

“You don’t understand what gives me energy.”

His followers were wondering if someone else had given him something to eat, so he explained,

“My energy comes from encouraging others to follow God’s advice.

“As you know, the person who harvests a crop is just as happy as the one who plants it because they both play an important role in

JOHN

providing the food necessary for a good life. I'm inviting you to join me in 'harvesting a crop' that others have 'planted'. In other words, I want you to help me encourage others to follow God's advice so everyone can enjoy a better life."

When the woman told others about Jesus, a lot of people believed that he was the one that God promised would help them enjoy a better life. Since they asked him to stay longer, he spent a couple of days there. After others heard him speak, a lot more were convinced that he was the one who would help people enjoy a better life.

Jesus Heals a Government Official's Son

Jesus then continued northward to his home district of Galilee and arrived at the town of Cana, where he had changed water into wine. He was aware that God's spokesmen usually receive less respect from people who know their families, but the people in Galilee welcomed him because some of them had seen what he did in the temple during the annual freedom celebration in Jerusalem.

When a government official in Capernaum heard that Jesus was in Cana, 16 miles away, he went there to ask Jesus to return with him to heal his son who was seriously ill. After Jesus acknowledged that a lot of people didn't believe he could heal those who were sick, he replied,

"You can return to your home now because your son is well."

Unlike many others, the official believed that Jesus had healed his son, so he headed home. On the way, his aides met him and told him that his son was well. When he asked what time his son's condition improved, they said his fever broke the previous day around noon. The official knew that was when Jesus said his son was well, so his entire family was convinced that Jesus healed him.

This was the second time that Jesus did something so extraordinary in Galilee.

Jesus Heals a Man on the Weekly Day of Rest

5 Some time later, Jesus returned to Jerusalem for another Jewish celebration. Near the sheep's entrance to the city was a hot spring called Bethesda, with five decks around it. A lot of people who were physically impaired waited on the decks for the water to swirl because they believed that the first person to get in the water while it was swirling would be healed. As Jesus walked by the spring, he asked a man who had been physically impaired for 38 years if he wanted to be healed. The man replied,

JOHN

“I don’t have anyone to help me get in the water when it swirls. Whenever I try, someone else always gets there first.”

So Jesus healed the man and said,

“You can get up and walk now. Take your mat along with you.”

Since this occurred on the weekly day of rest, some of the religious leaders were upset that the man was carrying his mat. When they scolded him for it, he explained,

“The man who just healed me told me to take my mat along with me.”

They asked who healed him, but he was unable to identify Jesus because he blended in with the crowd.

When Jesus saw the man later at the temple, he encouraged him to follow God’s advice so he could enjoy a better life. Since the man was now able to identify Jesus, he told the religious leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him. When they gave Jesus a hard time for healing someone on the weekly day of rest, he responded,

“My father helps people any day of the week, and so do I.”

Jesus Clarifies His Purpose in Life

When Jesus referred to God as his father, the religious leaders thought he meant that he had a closer relationship with God than they did. They were also upset that he healed someone on the weekly day of rest because they thought only the critically ill should be healed on that day, so they decided to get rid of him. Knowing what they were thinking, Jesus said,

“Whoever respects God should also respect me. I’m just doing what God wants me to do, which is to help people follow God’s advice so they can enjoy a better life. Those who cater to their own selfish desires will continue to live a miserable life.

“When some of you asked John about me, he told you the truth, that I’m helping people follow God’s advice, as he is doing. So it shouldn’t surprise you that a lot of people are beginning to enjoy life more. But an even better indication that I’m doing what God wants is the fact that I’m demonstrating God’s advice by helping people in need.

“Apparently, some of you aren’t familiar with God’s advice, because you’re not following my example. You should spend more time reading what God’s spokesmen wrote long ago because

JOHN

they already explained how you can enjoy a better life. They even referred to me, but some of you still refuse to follow my example.

“Those of you who don’t respect God won’t respect me either. You’ll follow someone else’s advice if it appeals to your self-centeredness, but you won’t follow God’s advice, which I’m demonstrating for you. If you’re more concerned about getting other people’s approval than God’s, you won’t be very motivated to follow God’s advice.

“I’m not here to point out your shortcomings. God’s spokesman Moses already did that long ago. If you followed the advice that God gave our ancestors through Moses, you’d follow my example, because I’m following the same advice. But if you’re not willing to follow what Moses wrote, you won’t be willing to follow my example either.”

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Share Their Food

6 When it was almost time again for the annual freedom celebration, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were on the east side of Lake Galilee, which is also known as Lake Tiberias. While they were resting on a hillside, they saw more than 5,000 people approaching, many of whom had seen him heal those who were sick or physically disabled.

When Jesus asked Phillip if they had enough money to buy food for so many people, he replied,

“We don’t have enough money to buy even a little food for each of them.”

Peter’s brother Andrew added,

“There’s a boy here with five loaves of bread and two cooked fish, but that’s nothing for all these people.”

Jesus knew that would serve the purpose, so he asked his followers to tell the people to sit down on the grass and get ready to eat. After thanking God for the bread and fish, he cut them into pieces and gave them to his followers to distribute among the people. When everyone was full, he asked his followers to collect the leftovers so nothing would go to waste. There was plenty of food for everyone, and even 12 baskets of leftovers!

When the people realized what Jesus had just done, they were convinced that he was the one God promised would come to help people enjoy a better life. Jesus knew they wanted to make him their political leader, so he went further up the hill to avoid them.

JOHN

Jesus Walks on Water

After dark that evening, Jesus' 12 chosen followers got in a boat without him and headed toward Capernaum, on the northern coast of the lake. Before long, the waves increased because it had become very windy. When they were about three miles from shore, they saw Jesus walking toward them on the water. They were terrified at first because they didn't realize it was Jesus until he identified himself. But they were glad that he joined them because they had almost reached their destination.

Jesus Encourages the People to Follow His Example

The next day the people were looking for Jesus back on the east side of the lake, but they couldn't find him. They knew he hadn't gone with his 12 chosen followers in the only boat docked there the night before. Since some other boats from Tiberias arrived since then, the people decided to sail to Capernaum to look for him there. When they found him in the local worship center, they wondered when he arrived. He responded,

“You came looking for me again because you were even more impressed that I satisfied your hunger than that I healed those who were sick or physically disabled. But you should be more interested in the special food from God than in food that spoils.”

When they asked how they could get this special food from God, Jesus replied,

“You need to follow my example.”

They recalled that God's spokesman Moses had given their ancestors food from God while they were living in the desert, so they asked Jesus to do something extraordinary to prove that he was one of God's spokesmen. He responded,

“The food that Moses gave our ancestors just satisfied their temporary hunger, but the special food that God is offering will help everyone enjoy a better life.”

When they asked Jesus to give them that food, he explained,

“I'm the special food that my father is offering. If you'd follow my example, your hunger for a better life would be satisfied. But a lot of you simply refuse to do that.”

Some of the people knew Jesus' parents, so they were upset that he referred to God as his father. But Jesus stuck to the point,

“As one of God's spokesmen indicated long ago, God wants everyone to have a good understanding of God's advice. I'm

JOHN

demonstrating the kind of life God is inviting everyone to enjoy, but you need to follow my example to experience it.

“A lot of our ancestors saw no change in their lives after they ate the food that God provided in the desert. But whoever eats the special food that God is providing now will enjoy a better life.”

The people knew he wasn't suggesting that they actually eat his body, but they weren't sure what he did mean. So he explained,

“The only way you'll enjoy a better life is by risking your life to help others follow God's advice, as I'm doing.”

He knew a lot of his followers still had trouble understanding what he meant, so he continued,

“What's so hard to understand? Only God can help you enjoy a better life; you can't do it by yourself. Some of you just don't want to follow my example.”

Jesus knew that those who refused to follow his example wanted to get rid of him, so he added,

“You won't be ready to follow my example until you're willing to follow God's advice.”

By this time, a lot of people had decided to stop following Jesus. So when he asked his 12 chosen followers if they wanted to quit, too, Peter replied,

“We're following you because we know you're the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life.”

But Jesus knew that Judas Iscariot was turning against him, so he remarked,

“I selected 12 of you to join me in encouraging others to follow God's advice, but one of you has changed his mind.”

The Religious Leaders Want to Get Rid of Jesus

7 Several months later, it was almost time for the annual celebration in which the people thanked God for helping their ancestors survive in tents in the desert for 40 years.

Jesus had been spending more time in the district of Galilee because some of the religious leaders in the district of Judea were planning to get rid of him. When his brothers encouraged him to return to Judea for the celebration and do some of the spectacular things that he had done in Galilee, he responded,

JOHN

“I’m not ready to return to Judea just yet. Some of the people there despise me because I’ve pointed out that they aren’t following God’s advice. They’re not upset with you, so you can go to Jerusalem whenever you want.”

So Jesus’ brothers went on ahead to the celebration. He went a few days later, trying not to draw attention to himself. Since the religious leaders expected him to show up, they were looking for him. The common people had mixed feelings about him. Some thought he was a good man, while others thought he was trying to mislead them. But they were all careful not to express their opinions openly because they didn’t know how the religious leaders might react.

About midway through the eight-day celebration, Jesus began sharing God’s advice in the temple. The religious leaders were aware that Jesus had no formal education, so when they remarked how impressed they were, he replied,

“The advice I’m sharing is God’s, not mine. People who want to follow God’s advice should be able to easily distinguish it from anyone else’s. Those who give their own advice may be doing it for selfish reasons. But those who share God’s advice are only interested in honoring God. God’s spokesman Moses gave you God’s advice long ago, but you’re not interested in following it. That’s why you want to get rid of me.”

Some bystanders were beginning to think Jesus was paranoid, so they asked who wanted to get rid of him. The answer became more apparent as he continued talking to the religious leaders,

“Some of you were shocked that I healed someone on the weekly day of rest several months ago. But you circumcise males on that special day to remind them of their commitment to God, as Moses and our other ancestors did. So you shouldn’t be upset that I healed someone. You should let God’s advice determine what can be done on the weekly day of rest instead of making up your own rules.”

Since Jesus was talking so openly in the temple, some people expected that the religious leaders would want to get rid of him. They didn’t think he was the one that God promised would help them enjoy a better life, because they knew where he had been born and raised. He knew what they were thinking, so he corrected them,

“It should be obvious that I’m sharing God’s advice, of which you know very little.”

JOHN

A lot of other people had already decided to follow Jesus because they were convinced he was the one that God promised would help them enjoy a better life. When the religious leaders learned of this, they sent law enforcement officers to arrest him. But his response deterred them,

“I won’t be here much longer. I’ll soon be going to a place where you won’t be able to find me.”

The officers wondered where he could go that they wouldn’t be able to find him. They wondered if he was planning to leave Palestine to share his message in other countries.

Each day of the celebration, the people recalled how God provided water for their ancestors during the 40 years in the desert. On the climactic last day of the celebration, Jesus identified himself with the water that sustained their ancestors. He encouraged everyone who wanted to enjoy a better life to follow his example of helping others, as God had helped their ancestors.

Some of the people who heard this were convinced that he was one of God’s spokesmen. Others thought he was the one that God promised would help them enjoy a better life. But others insisted that the one God promised would not have come from Galilee, as Jesus did, because God’s spokesmen predicted he would be a descendant of their famous ancestor David and come from the town of Bethlehem, where David was born. So some of the people wanted Jesus arrested, but the law enforcement officers decided not to. When the religious leaders asked why they didn’t, they said,

“We’ve never heard anyone speak the way he does.”

The religious leaders replied,

“Has he misled you, too? We expect some of the common people to be misled because they don’t know our traditions very well. But you and those of us who are religious leaders should know better.”

At that point, Nicodemus, one of the religious leaders who had a conversation with Jesus several months earlier, remarked,

“We shouldn’t judge people until we’ve heard their defense.”

Another religious leader replied,

“People from Galilee rarely become religious leaders, so we don’t expect any of God’s spokesmen to come from there.”

JOHN

8 On each day of the celebration, the people recalled how God provided a light to lead their ancestors through the desert to the land where they would enjoy a better life. Since Jesus also illuminated the way to a better life, he referred to himself as a light. But one of the religious leaders reacted,

“How can we be sure that what you’re saying is true if no one else verifies it?”

Jesus replied,

“You should be able to determine that what I’ve said is true without someone else verifying it. But according to God’s spokesmen of long ago, only one other party needs to verify that what I’ve said is true, and my father can do that.”

When the religious leaders asked who his father was, he responded,

“If you realized who I am, you would know who my father is.”

Although Jesus was speaking publicly in the outer section of the temple where people deposited their monetary gifts, no one made any attempt to arrest him. So he continued,

“Some of you won’t be able to follow me where I’m going, so you’ll continue to live a miserable, self-centered life.”

The religious leaders wondered if he meant he was going to commit suicide, so he added,

“You’ll continue to live a miserable, self-centered life if you don’t realize who I am and follow my example.”

When they asked him to explain who he was, he said,

“I already told you who I am. I’m here to help people follow my father’s advice so they can enjoy a better life.”

The religious leaders didn’t realize he was referring to God, so Jesus added,

“When you realize who I am, you’ll understand that I’m helping people follow God’s advice.”

Jesus then directed his comments to the people who had begun to follow his example,

“The more you follow my example, the more you’ll enjoy the freedom God wants you to have.”

But they replied,

JOHN

“What do you mean? We’re descendants of Abraham, and we’ve never been anyone’s slaves.”

Jesus explained,

“Everyone who refuses to follow God’s advice is actually a slave to their own self-centeredness, which I can help you overcome. Since you’re descendants of Abraham, you should be anxious to follow God’s advice, as he did. But some of you would rather get rid of me so you can maintain your self-centered lifestyle.”

When they insisted that they already followed God’s advice, Jesus responded,

“You make other people’s lives miserable by your self-centered lifestyle. That’s not what God wants. If you really respected God, you would also respect me and follow my example, because I’m just trying to help you follow God’s advice.”

The religious leaders then accused Jesus of being a trouble-maker, so he replied,

“I’m not a trouble-maker, and I’m not trying to impress anyone. The truth is, whoever honors God by following my example will never die.”

The religious leaders reacted,

“Now we know you’re a trouble-maker. You’re claiming that whoever follows your example won’t die, but even Abraham and God’s other spokesmen died. Do you think that what you’re doing is more important than what they did?”

Jesus responded,

“If I were the only one who thinks that what I’m doing is important, it wouldn’t be of much use to others. It’s important to God because I’m helping people understand how to follow God’s advice so they can enjoy a better life. Even Abraham is glad to see what I’m doing.”

The religious leaders were shocked that Jesus implied that he saw Abraham even though he was less than 50 years of age, so he replied,

“I existed before Abraham was even born.”

At that point, they picked up stones to kill him, but he was able to slip away unharmed.

JOHN

Jesus Heals a Blind Man on the Weekly Day of Rest

9 Some time later, while Jesus and his 12 chosen followers were still in Jerusalem, they saw a man who had been blind since birth. The common assumption was that people had physical problems because they or their parents didn't follow God's advice. So when his followers asked whether it was the man's or his parents' failure to follow God's advice that resulted in his blindness, Jesus replied,

“Neither one. But this is an opportunity to demonstrate that God cares about him. I want to make use of every opportunity I have to let people know that God cares about them.”

Jesus made mud with his spit and applied it to the man's eyes, a common manner of healing at the time. He then told the man to go to the nearby reservoir named Siloam and wash the mud off. When he did, he was able to see for the first time in his life. As the people in the neighborhood met him later, some thought he was the same man who usually asked them for food or money, but others insisted it was someone else who just resembled him. When he confirmed that he was the same man, they asked how he received his sight. He explained that someone put mud on his eyes and told him to wash it off at the nearby reservoir, but he didn't know who that person was.

Since the man was healed on the weekly day of rest, some people took him to the religious leaders for questioning. When they asked how he received his sight, he explained again. Since his healing violated their tradition that only those who are critically ill should be healed on the weekly day of rest, some of the religious leaders assumed that God wasn't the source of the healing. But others didn't think anyone could do something so extraordinary without God's help. When they asked the man who he thought the person was who had healed him, he said he thought he was one of God's spokesmen.

The religious leaders were still skeptical that this man had been blind, so they questioned his parents. They confirmed that he had been blind since birth, but they didn't know how he received his sight. They knew the religious leaders threatened to ostracize anyone who claimed that Jesus was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life. So they told the religious leaders to ask their son how he received his sight, since he was old enough to speak for himself.

The religious leaders tried to convince the man that God couldn't have enabled Jesus to heal him, because Jesus violated their tradition. After the man told them that he was just glad he could see, they interrogated him further to find out how Jesus healed him. Reminding them that he had already explained, he asked if they were interested in becoming Jesus'

JOHN

followers. They then accused *him* of being a follower of Jesus, stressing that they followed God's spokesman Moses who lived long ago. So the man responded,

"It should be obvious who enabled Jesus to give me sight. No one has ever healed someone blind since birth, so Jesus couldn't have healed me if God hadn't helped him. Since God only helps people when they follow God's advice, Jesus was apparently doing so."

The religious leaders resented the fact that the man refuted them with their own logic, so they ostracized him from their religious group, insisting that his blindness was the result of his or his parents' failure to follow God's advice.

When Jesus learned of this, he asked the man if he wanted to follow the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life. The man said he did, so Jesus explained that he was helping people understand and follow God's advice so the quality of life would improve for everyone.

Some of the religious leaders nearby heard what Jesus said, so when they boasted that they already understood God's advice, he responded,

"You may think you understand God's advice but you obviously don't, because you're not following it very well."

Jesus Uses an Illustration about Sheep

10 "Let me give you an illustration. As you know, sheep enter their pen by following their shepherd through the gate as he calls them by name. They don't follow someone whose voice they don't recognize. Unlike sheep who go through the gate, a thief tries to find another way into the pen."

Some of the religious leaders didn't understand what Jesus meant, so he explained,

"I'm like the shepherd who leads his sheep through the gate. They follow him out to pasture and back into their pen because they know he'll help them enjoy as good a life as possible. When he sees a wolf attacking, he's willing to risk his life to protect them, but the hired hand runs away because he's more concerned about his own safety. A thief is even worse because his goal is to kill the sheep."

"I'll risk my life to help people enjoy a better life. No one is forcing me to do this. I follow God's advice because I know God cares about me, and a lot of people follow my example because they know I care about others."

JOHN

The religious leaders had different reactions to what Jesus said. Many of them thought a harmful spirit was causing him to lose touch with reality. But others disagreed, insisting that a harmful spirit couldn't have enabled him to heal the blind man.

When winter came, it was time for the annual celebration of the rededication of the temple. As Jesus was walking through the outer section of the temple known as Solomon's Porch, some religious leaders asked,

"If you really are the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life, when are you going to announce it publicly?"

Jesus replied,

"I've already demonstrated who I am by what I've said and done, but you just don't acknowledge it. You're like sheep that don't recognize their shepherd's voice. God doesn't want people like you to prevent others from enjoying a better life, and neither do I.

"The sheep that recognize their shepherd's voice follow his direction because they know he'll help them enjoy a better life. That's why a lot of people have begun to follow me."

When the religious leaders again began picking up stones to kill Jesus, he responded,

"God has enabled me to help a lot of people in need. Is that why you want to kill me?"

The religious leaders replied,

"It's not on account of the good things you've done, but because you've insulted God by suggesting that you're on God's level."

But Jesus refuted their accusation,

"Long ago one of God's spokesmen quoted God using the term *God* while addressing people who were responsible for helping others follow God's advice correctly. God has also given me this responsibility, so I'm not insulting God by referring to myself as God's special messenger. Since I'm following God's advice, you should follow my example."

The religious leaders tried to arrest Jesus, but he avoided them and returned to the east side of the Jordan River, where John had first begun rinsing people to symbolize their desire to clean up their lives. Although John didn't do anything spectacular, a lot of people began following Jesus because John had told them all about him.

JOHN

Lazarus Dies

11 A man named Lazarus was staying with his sisters Mary and Martha in a village named Bethany because he was very sick. When Jesus received a message from Mary and Martha that Lazarus was ill, he considered it an opportunity to show them how much he and God cared about them. So two days later, Jesus invited his 12 chosen followers to return with him to the district of Judea, where Bethany was located. When they questioned whether he really wanted to go, reminding him that the religious leaders had tried to kill him there, he replied,

“We only have a limited number of hours each day to help others, so we should make good use of that time while we have it. Since our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, I want to go wake him up.”

Jesus’ followers thought he meant that Lazarus was just sleeping, so they figured he was getting better. But Jesus clarified what he meant,

“Lazarus is dead. I’m glad I have this opportunity to show you how much I care about people.”

Realizing that Jesus would be risking his life to return to Judea, one of his chosen followers named Thomas suggested they go along and share the risk. Since it was only a couple of miles from Jerusalem to Bethany, a lot of people had gone there to comfort Mary and Martha. By the time Jesus and his followers arrived, Lazarus had already been in the grave four days. Martha met Jesus on the outskirts of the village and said,

“If you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. But I know God will help you do whatever you ask.”

When Jesus told Martha that Lazarus would come back to life, she said,

“I know he’ll come back to life at the end of the world, when everyone else does.”

But Jesus replied,

“Do you believe that I can help people enjoy a better life, both before and after they die?”

Martha responded,

“Yes, I believe that you’re God’s special messenger who can help people enjoy a better life.”

After Martha returned home, she whispered to Mary that Jesus had come to their village and wanted to talk to her. As Mary went to see him,

JOHN

her friends followed because they thought she was going to Lazarus' grave to mourn. When she met Jesus, she expressed her admiration and made the same remark that Martha had made,

“If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.”

Empathizing with Mary and her friends, Jesus began to cry as he asked where Lazarus was buried. When they saw him crying, they realized how much he cared for Lazarus. Since some of them knew that Jesus restored the sight of the man who was blind, they wondered if he could bring Lazarus back to life.

Jesus Brings Lazarus Back to Life

Jesus cried again as he approached Lazarus' tomb, a cave with a large rock at the entrance. When he asked some people to remove the rock, Martha pointed out that Lazarus' body would stink because it had been there four days. But Jesus told her that if she believed he could help people enjoy a better life, he would demonstrate it for her.

After the people removed the large rock, Jesus looked upward and prayed to God,

“Thank you for your help. I want these people to realize that I'm your messenger.”

Jesus then raised his voice,

“Come out, Lazarus.”

Lazarus walked out of the cave with the burial cloths hanging from his hands, feet, and face, so Jesus asked some people to remove them.

A lot of people who witnessed this event decided to follow Jesus. But some went to the religious leaders and told them what had happened. So they called a special meeting to discuss how to deal with the fact that Jesus was doing so many extraordinary things. If they didn't do anything, they figured a lot more people would follow him, and the Roman government would withdraw their authority. The senior religious leader named Caiaphas reminded the others that it was better for one person to die than a whole nation, so he suggested that Jesus should die to keep the Jewish nation intact. The religious leaders then began making plans to kill him. To avoid them, he went to the city near the desert named Ephraim along with his 12 chosen followers.

It was nearly time again for the annual freedom celebration, so a lot of people went to Jerusalem to prepare for it. The religious leaders looked for Jesus in the temple, hoping he would show up for the celebration.

JOHN

They also spread the word that if anyone knew where he was, they should notify them so they could arrest him.

Mary Honors Jesus with Expensive Perfume

12 Six days before the annual freedom celebration, Jesus and his 12 chosen followers returned to Bethany. While Martha was serving dinner to Jesus, Lazarus, and the others, Mary poured some very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair.

Judas Iscariot criticized Mary for using such expensive perfume, suggesting she could have sold it for a lot of money and given it to the poor. But he didn't really care about the poor. Since he carried the money container for Jesus and his followers, Judas just wanted more money to draw from for his own personal use.

Jesus scolded Judas for criticizing Mary, reminding him that they would have plenty of opportunity to help the poor but their time with him was almost over. He also explained that Mary was putting perfume on him in anticipation of his death, since it was customary to put perfume on people after they die.

When others found out that Jesus was at Lazarus' home, they went to see him. A lot of people began following him because he brought Lazarus back to life, so the religious leaders decided to get rid of both of them.

A Lot of People Honor Jesus as He Enters Jerusalem

The word spread that Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a young donkey the next day, a lot of people waved palm branches, honoring him as the one God promised, who would lead them to a better life. Jesus' 12 chosen followers later recalled that one of God's spokesmen predicted long ago that their new leader would enter Jerusalem humbly riding on a donkey. Meanwhile, some of the religious leaders were becoming even more concerned that a lot of people were following Jesus.

Jesus Encourages People to Risk Their Lives for Others

Some non-Jewish people had also come to Jerusalem to participate in the celebration. When they met Phillip from the town of Bethsaida, they told him they wanted to see Jesus. Phillip mentioned it to Andrew, so they went together to tell Jesus. He replied,

“It will soon be evident how much I care about others. In order for a grain of wheat to serve its purpose, it must be willing to be buried so it can grow and produce a lot more grains of wheat. In order for people to serve their purpose in life, they must be willing

JOHN

to give their lives for others, as I'm about to do. Self-centered people will not enjoy the kind of life God intended.

"I could ask God to prevent my suffering and death, but instead I'm asking God to help me demonstrate how much people should care about each other."

Jesus then heard a voice confirm that God will continue to demonstrate how much people should care about each other. Some bystanders thought it was a messenger, while others thought it was thunder. So Jesus explained,

"The message was meant for you, not me. If you want to enjoy a better life, you must stop being self-centered and be willing to give your life for others, as I'm about to do."

The people responded,

"According to God's spokesmen who lived long ago, the one God promised, who would help us enjoy a better life, will never die. But you're suggesting that he will. So who is he?"

Jesus replied,

"I'll only be with you a little longer to help you follow God's advice instead of your own self-centered traditions. If you continue to follow them, you'll be as lost as a person who travels in total darkness.

"I'm not here to point out your faults. God wants me to clarify and demonstrate God's advice so you can enjoy a better life. When you follow my example, you're following God's advice. Those who choose not to follow it will continue to live a miserable life."

Jesus then went somewhere to be alone. Even though he had frequently demonstrated that God wants people to care about others, a lot of people still refused to follow his example. God's spokesman Isaiah expressed the same frustration long ago. A lot of people don't even try to follow God's advice because their minds are closed.

Some community leaders began following Jesus' example, but they were discreet about it since they were afraid that the religious leaders might ostracize them from their religious group. They were more concerned about maintaining their status with their religious group than about pleasing God.

JOHN

Jesus Washes the Feet of His 12 Chosen Followers

13 As the annual freedom celebration approached, Jesus knew that Simon Iscariot's son Judas had decided to turn against him and that he would soon be executed. During the evening meal, Jesus removed his outer robe and tied a towel around his waist. He poured water into a basin and began washing and drying the feet of his 12 chosen followers. When Peter asked if he was planning to wash his feet, too, he replied,

"I'll explain why I'm doing this in a few minutes."

At first Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet because he knew it was more appropriate for him to wash Jesus' feet. But when Jesus indicated that it was an important lesson in following his example, Peter asked him to wash his hands and face as well. Jesus responded,

"You've already washed them, so only your feet need washed."

When Jesus finished, he put his robe back on and returned to his seat. Then he explained why he washed their feet,

"Since you've decided to follow my example, you should help others with humble tasks, such as washing their feet. You'll enjoy doing this because they'll welcome your help when they realize that you're following God's advice.

"Many years ago one of God's spokesmen related that a close friend turned against him. This is now happening to me, because one of you has decided to turn against me."

Jesus Acknowledges that Judas Was Turning Against Him

When Jesus shared the disturbing news with his 12 chosen followers that one of them was going to turn against him, they wondered which of them it would be. Since I (John) was one of Jesus' chosen friends, I was sitting right next to him. After Peter motioned for me to ask Jesus who he was referring to, Jesus said,

"It's the one to whom I'll give this piece of bread."

When Jesus gave the bread to Judas, Judas could no longer pretend that he was still one of Jesus' followers. So Jesus told him to go ahead with what he had planned. Judas left right away, but none of Jesus' other followers had any idea what he was up to. Since he carried their money, some thought Jesus wanted him to give some money to the poor or buy more food for the week-long celebration.

After Jesus and his followers went outside, he continued,

JOHN

“You should care about others to the point of giving your life for them, as God is helping me do. This may seem like a new idea, but people will know you’re following my example when you care that much about others.

“As I told the religious leaders recently, I’m soon going to a place where you won’t be able to find me.”

When Peter asked Jesus where he was going, he replied,

“Right now you can’t go where I’m going, but you’ll eventually get there.”

Peter claimed he was willing to die with Jesus, but Jesus made him face reality,

“That’s easy for you to say now. But tonight, before you hear a rooster crow at dawn, you’re going to deny that you even know me three times.”

14 “Don’t be too upset. If you’re willing to follow God’s advice for a better life, you’ll want to follow my example.”

Following Jesus’ Example is Essential for a Better Life

When Thomas asked Jesus to explain, he replied,

“The only way you’ll really know how to follow God’s advice for a better life is by following my example.”

Phillip then asked Jesus to tell them more about God, so he continued,

“I’ve shared God’s advice with you and God has helped me demonstrate it, so you just need to follow my example. If you do, you’ll be able to help a lot more people than I was able to. I want everyone to realize how much God cares about them, so don’t hesitate to ask me for help.

“Self-centered people ignore God’s advice, but God is always ready to help those who are willing to follow it. If you respect me, you’ll try to do that.

“I won’t leave you stranded. Although I’m soon going to die, you’ll see me when I come back to life. After you die and come back to life, you’ll realize that I was helping you follow God’s advice. Since I’ve demonstrated how much God and I care about you, you should show your respect for me by following my example.”

JOHN

Another of Jesus' followers named Judas (not Simon Iscariot's son) wondered why only his followers would see him when he comes back to life. So he explained,

“People who don't respect me aren't interested in following my example.

“After I'm gone, God will help you recall what I've told you so you can enjoy a better life. So don't be upset. I've told you that I'll be returning. If you care about me, you'll be glad that I'm going to be with God, who is greater than I am. I'm telling you this so you'll be able to accept what's about to happen. I won't say much more because the religious leaders are soon going to carry out their plan to get rid of me. I'll let them do it because I want everyone to know that I honor God by following God's advice, no matter what the consequences.”

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Care about Others

15 As Jesus and his followers were on their way to the garden just east of Jerusalem, he continued,

“As you know, some branches on a vine produce a lot of fruit, and some don't produce any. A farmer prunes the productive branches so they'll become even more productive, and he removes those that don't produce anything. Since God is helping you follow my example to care more about others, you're like the branches that the farmer prunes to be more productive.

“As you also know, branches can't produce anything if they're not attached to the vine. When they break off, they die and are eventually burned. If you stop following my example, you'll be as useless as broken branches.

“Like a farmer who helps the branches on a vine become more productive, God wants to help you care more about others. Since God cares about me and I care about you, you should also care about others. I've already demonstrated this for you, so you just need to follow my example.

“I want you to care about each other so you can all enjoy a better life. The most we can do for others is give our lives for them, as I'm about to do. God will help you follow my example.

JOHN

Jesus Prepares His Followers for the Reaction of Others

“You’ve seen how the religious leaders react negatively toward me, so you should expect the same treatment. They get along fine with people like themselves, but they dislike people who follow my example. So they’ll want to get rid of you just like they’re planning to do to me.

“If the religious leaders followed my example, they wouldn’t have any contention with you. But they refuse to acknowledge that I’ve been demonstrating God’s advice. They have no excuse for ignoring it and hating God and me, so they’re just like the people who hated one of God’s spokesmen long ago.

“The more God helps you and others follow my example, the more evident it will be that I’ve been following God’s advice. You can verify that I’ve been doing this since the day you met me.

16 “Thinking they’re doing what God wants, some religious leaders will ostracize you from their religious group, and some will even try to get rid of you permanently. But they don’t realize that they’re not following God’s advice nor my example. I’m telling you this now so you won’t be confused when it happens.

“When I told you that I’m soon going to be with God, only one of you asked me to explain. I know you’re disappointed that I’m leaving, but God will help you encourage others to stop living a self-centered life and begin helping people in need. I could tell you a lot more, but you wouldn’t be able to absorb it right now. Although I’ll soon be leaving, it won’t be long before I return.”

Some of Jesus’ followers wondered what he meant by his last comment, so he began to explain,

“The religious leaders will be celebrating while you’re in mourning. But like a woman’s pain is replaced with joy when she gives birth to a child, your sadness will be replaced with joy when you see me after I’ve come back to life.”

Jesus added that he was God’s messenger and that he was soon going to die. Since he knew what was about to happen, his followers were convinced that he was God’s messenger. He tried to prepare them for the coming events,

“Although you’ve been following me up to now, every one of you will soon abandon me. Don’t be discouraged when the religious leaders give you a hard time. I’ve shown you that you’ll enjoy a

JOHN

better life by following God's advice instead of their self-centered rules."

Jesus Prays to God

17 To prepare for the coming events, Jesus prayed to God,

"Help me demonstrate how much you care about people so they'll follow my example and enjoy a better life.

"My chosen followers acknowledge that I'm your messenger and they realize that when they follow my example, they're actually following your advice. But as one of God's spokesmen predicted long ago, one of them has chosen to do otherwise. Since I'm about to die, I'm asking you to help the rest get along well together.

"Since these men have begun following your advice, some of the religious leaders have given them a hard time. Help them to continue following your advice and resist self-centered traditions, as I've done. I want them to realize that you've cared about others ever since you created the world and that they should care about others, as I do.

"Help all my followers to get along well together, as you and I do, so self-centered people will realize that you care about them and that they must care about each other if they want to get along well with each other."

The Soldiers Arrest Jesus

18 Later that evening, Judas knew that Jesus and his 11 other chosen followers were going across the Kidron Valley (just east of Jerusalem) to the garden where they had often gone before, so he told the religious leaders that they could arrest Jesus there. A squad of armed soldiers carried lamps and torches as Judas led them to the garden. When they arrived, Jesus asked them who they were looking for. They explained that they were looking for the Jesus who was raised in Nazareth. When he said that he was the one they were looking for, they fell backward to the ground. He knew they only wanted him, so he asked them to let his followers leave unharmed, as he had predicted. But before they left, Peter drew a sword and swung it at Malchus, one of the religious leaders' soldiers, cutting off his right ear. Jesus scolded Peter immediately,

"Put the sword away and don't interfere with God's plan."

JOHN

The Religious Leaders Question Jesus

The soldiers tied Jesus' hands and took him to Annas, who preceded his son-in-law Caiaphas as the senior religious leader. When Annas asked Jesus what advice he had been giving his followers, he replied,

“A lot of people have heard me speak in the temple and local worship centers. You can ask any of them because I have nothing to hide.”

One of the soldiers standing nearby slapped and scolded Jesus for answering as he did, so he responded,

“I wasn't disrespectful. I simply answered the question in a way that showed I have nothing to hide.”

Annas then told the soldiers to take Jesus to Caiaphas, who had reminded the other religious leaders that it was better for one person to die than a whole nation.

Peter Denies that He Was One of Jesus' Followers

Peter and I (John) followed Jesus and the soldiers to Caiaphas' residence. Peter could only go as far as the outside gate, but I was allowed to enter the courtyard because the guard knew me. When I asked the guard to let Peter enter, she asked if he was also one of Jesus' followers. Peter denied it and joined the soldiers who were warming themselves by a fire. One of them also asked if he was one of Jesus' followers. Fearing for his own safety, he denied it again. A while later, a soldier, who was related to the man whose ear Peter had cut off, claimed he saw Peter in the garden with Jesus. Soon after Peter denied for the third time that he was one of Jesus' followers, a rooster crowed.

The Roman Leader Questions Jesus

Early Friday morning, Caiaphas told the religious leaders to take Jesus to Pilate, the Roman leader of Judea. Since their tradition prohibited them from participating in the celebration dinner after being in a non-Jewish home, they decided not to enter Pilate's residence. So Pilate went outside to see why they brought Jesus to him. When they explained that Jesus committed a crime, Pilate told them to try him in their own judicial system. But they reminded him that they couldn't execute someone without his approval.

Pilate then took Jesus inside and questioned him about his claim that he was a leader of the Jewish people. When Jesus asked if this was a crime, Pilate admitted that the religious leaders brought this charge against

JOHN

him. Since Pilate wondered what he did that upset the Jewish people and their religious leaders so much, Jesus explained,

“I’m not an ordinary leader. If I were, my followers would have fought those who arrested me. My purpose for living is to help people understand God’s advice so they’ll change their attitude and behavior.”

Pilate then went back outside to talk to the Jewish people,

“There is no valid accusation against this man. Every year at this time, I let you choose one prisoner for me to release. Do you want me to release this man who claims to be your leader?”

The people refused and asked for Barabbas instead, even though they knew he was a thief.

19 Pilate had his soldiers bring Jesus outside as he announced again that he was innocent. But when the religious leaders and their soldiers saw him, they told Pilate to execute him on a cross. So Pilate replied,

“You’ll have to do that yourselves because I’ve found no reason to execute him.”

They explained that according to their law he must be executed because he claimed to be the one that God promised would lead them to a better life.

Pilate became alarmed when they persisted that Jesus be executed. So he took Jesus back inside and asked him where he was from. When Jesus didn’t answer, Pilate reminded him,

“Don’t you realize that I can let you go free or I can order your execution?”

Jesus then replied,

“Yes, I realize you have the authority to do either, but Caiaphas has his own self-centered agenda.”

Pilate had decided to let Jesus go free, but the religious leaders reminded him that the Roman emperor would not tolerate anyone who threatened his authority. So around noon on Friday Pilate took Jesus outside again to the place where he pronounced his verdicts. When the people insisted that Pilate execute Jesus on a cross, Pilate asked,

“Are you sure you want me to execute the one who claims to be your leader?”

The religious leaders replied,

JOHN

“Yes, the only leader we acknowledge is the Roman emperor Caesar.”

Finally, Pilate turned Jesus over to his soldiers to be beaten and executed. They took him back to their headquarters and put a purple robe on him and a “crown” made of thorns. Then they beat him while pretending that he was the leader of the Jews.

Jesus Is Executed on a Cross

The soldiers made Jesus carry his own cross to the place of execution named Golgatha, which means *skull place*. When they arrived there, they nailed him to the cross and placed him between two other men on crosses. Four soldiers then divided his clothes among themselves and drew straws for his seamless robe, as one of God’s spokesmen predicted long ago.

Pilate instructed his soldiers to write the following caption on a board and fasten it above Jesus:

This is Jesus of Nazareth Leader of the Jews

A lot of people would read this because the cross was near the city and the caption was written in three languages: Hebrew, Latin and Greek. So the religious leaders tried to convince Pilate to change it to *He claims to be the leader of the Jews*, but he refused.

While Jesus was hanging on the cross, his mother, her sister, Clopas’ wife Mary, and Mary from Magdala were standing nearby. I (John) was standing beside his mother, so Jesus asked me to treat her like my mother and he asked her to treat me like her son.

When Jesus was close to death, he said he was thirsty, as one of God’s spokesmen predicted long ago. So someone soaked up some wine in a sponge and held it up to his mouth on a stick.

Jesus Dies

Just before Jesus died, he said,

“I’ve accomplished my goal.”

The religious leaders didn’t want Jesus and the two criminals to remain on the crosses the next day because it was a special holiday. So they asked Pilate to have their legs broken to hasten their death. The soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals but when they came to Jesus, it appeared that he was already dead. One of the soldiers stuck a spear into his side and saw water come out with blood, confirming that he was dead. God’s spokesmen predicted long ago that none of Jesus’ bones would be

JOHN

broken but that he would be stabbed. I (John) know these things actually took place because I witnessed them myself.

Jesus Is Buried

One of Jesus' followers was a man named Joseph from the town of Arimathea, several miles north of Jerusalem. Since he was intimidated by the religious leaders, he had been discreet about being one of Jesus' followers. But he decided to ask Pilate for Jesus' body so he could give it a proper burial.

Nicodemus, the religious leader who had visited Jesus one evening, brought plenty of perfume. He helped Joseph apply it and wrap Jesus' body in linen cloths according to our Jewish custom. It was almost time for the weekly day of rest to begin, so they put Jesus' body in a tomb in the nearby garden.

Jesus Comes Back to Life

20 Around dawn Sunday morning, Mary from Magdala went to visit Jesus' tomb. When she arrived, she noticed that the large rock had been removed from the entrance and Jesus' body was not inside. She came right away to tell Peter and me (John) that it was gone, so we ran there to see for ourselves. I arrived at the tomb first, but I stopped at the entrance. As I leaned over and looked inside, I could see the cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus. When Peter arrived, he went inside and noticed that the cloth which had been placed over Jesus' head was lying separate from the others. I also went inside and was convinced that Jesus had come back to life. We didn't know at the time that one of God's spokesmen predicted this long ago.

Jesus Visits Several People

Peter and I (John) returned home, but Mary stayed at the tomb to mourn. When she leaned over and looked inside, she saw two messengers dressed in white, one sitting at each end of the stone slab where Jesus' body had been. When they asked why she was crying, she explained that she didn't know where his body was. As she turned around, she saw Jesus but didn't recognize him. He also asked why she was crying. She thought he was the caretaker who may have removed Jesus' body, so she asked him where it was. When he called her by name, she realized who he was. He asked her to tell his chosen followers that he was soon going to return to God.

That evening, Jesus' followers were meeting in secret because they were afraid of the religious leaders. When Jesus came and greeted them,

JOHN

they were thrilled to see him. After he showed them his hands and side, he challenged them,

“I want you to be God’s messengers, as I’ve been. God will help you encourage others to follow God’s advice, but some people will simply refuse.”

Thomas, the twin, wasn’t with the rest of Jesus’ chosen followers when Jesus visited them. So when they told Thomas that Jesus had come back to life, he said he wouldn’t believe it unless he could touch the nail prints in Jesus’ hands and the wound on his side.

A week later, while Jesus’ chosen followers were again meeting in secret, Jesus came and greeted them again. He told Thomas,

“Touch my hands and side so you’ll be convinced that I’ve come back to life.”

When Thomas acknowledged that God brought Jesus back to life, Jesus said,

“You had to see me in person to be convinced that I’ve come back to life, but others are thrilled when they simply hear the news.”

Jesus Visits Seven of His Chosen Followers

21 A little while later, Jesus visited seven of us a third time after he came back to life. Thomas, Peter, Nathaniel from the town of Cana in the district of Galilee, my brother James and I (John), and two others were at Lake Galilee, also known as Lake Tiberias. Peter wanted to go fishing so the rest of us went along, but we caught nothing that whole night. Around dawn, Jesus came to the edge of the water and asked if we had any success. We admitted that we hadn’t, so he suggested we cast our net on the other side of the boat. None of us recognized him because the sun was just coming up and our boat was about 100 yards from shore. When we caught so many fish that we weren’t able to pull the net into the boat, I realized who he was.

When I told Peter it was Jesus, he dove into the water and swam to shore. The rest of us rowed there, dragging the net full of fish behind us. As we approached the beach, we could see bread and fish roasting over a fire. When we arrived, Jesus told us to bring some of the fish we had just caught so we could eat breakfast with him. So Peter dragged the net containing 153 large fish onto the beach.

As Jesus handed us the roasted fish and bread, the others also recognized him. When we finished eating, he asked Peter,

“Do you think you’re more devoted than my other followers?”

JOHN

Peter replied,

“Yes, and I think you know I am.”

When Jesus predicted that Peter would eventually be executed for following God’s advice, Peter asked what would happen to me (John). Jesus told him to focus on following his example and not be concerned that I might live a lot longer. Some of his followers later spread the rumor that I wouldn’t die, but that’s not what Jesus’ meant.

Conclusion

Jesus’ followers saw him do a lot of other extraordinary things, but I (John) hope I’ve shared enough to convince you that he’s the one that God promised would help you enjoy a better life. I personally observed the events I’ve recorded, so I know they actually took place. If everything Jesus did were written down, there wouldn’t be enough space to store it.

PALESTINE IN THE
TIME OF JESUS



↑
Antioch

MEDITERRANEAN

SEA

GALILEE

Lake Galilee

• Nazareth

• Caesarea

SAMARIA

Jordan River

JUDEA

• Jerusalem •

• Azotus

Dead
Sea

• Gaza

Acts 1, 4-6

ACTS

The Activities of Jesus' Early Followers

Introduction

1 When Luke recorded many of Jesus' activities and teachings for a man named Theophilus, his account ended with Jesus giving his 11 chosen followers final instructions just before he ascended into the sky.

Jesus Encourages His Followers to Share God's Advice

During the first 40 days after his death, Jesus appeared to his 11 chosen followers numerous times and encouraged them to share God's advice for a better life. The last time he was with them, he suggested they stay in Jerusalem a few more days until God helped them encourage others to follow God's advice, as John did when he symbolically rinsed people with water.

When Jesus' followers asked when the Jewish people would enjoy a better life, Jesus explained,

“You don't need to know God's timetable. God will help you encourage others to follow my example in Jerusalem and the entire district of Judea, in the neighboring district of Samaria and throughout the world.”

Jesus Ascends into the Sky

After Jesus finished talking to his followers on Olive Hill, they watched him ascend into the sky and disappear behind a cloud. While they were still looking upward, two men in white clothing explained that he would return the same way he left.

Jesus' Followers Replace Judas Iscariot with Matthias

Jesus' 11 chosen followers then returned to Jerusalem, just a few minutes' walk from Olive Hill. They were staying in a second-floor room and regularly got together to pray with Jesus' brothers, his mother Mary and some other women. His 11 chosen followers included:

ACTS

Peter
Andrew (Peter's brother)
James
John (James' brother)
Thomas
Matthew
Philip
Bartholomew
another James (the son of Alphaeus)
Simon (who actively resisted Roman oppression)
Judas (also called Thaddaeus; the son of another James)

Before long, Peter spoke to 120 of Jesus' other followers,

“Long ago God's spokesman David mentioned that a close friend had turned against him. The same thing happened to Jesus when Judas Iscariot helped the religious leaders arrest him.

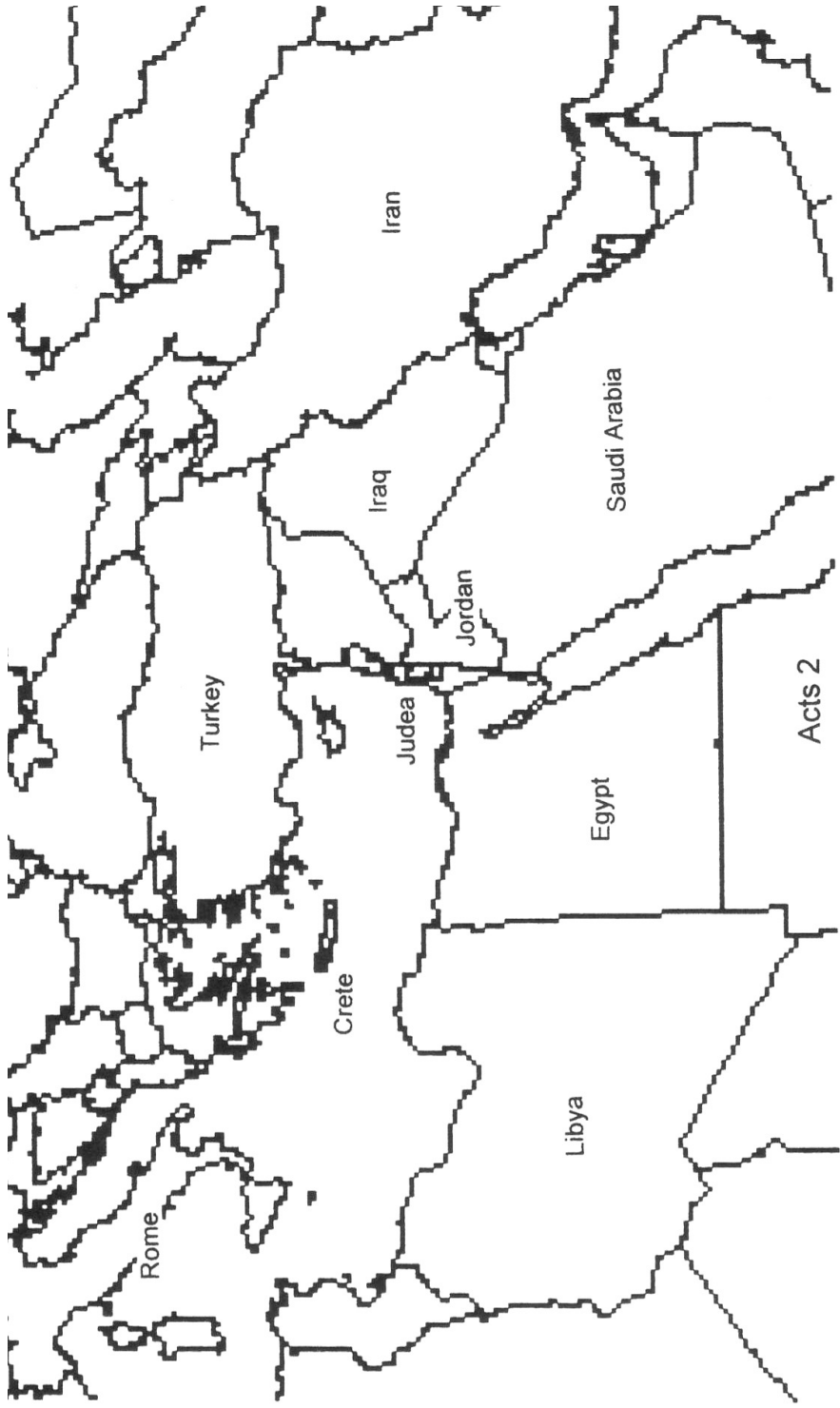
“After Judas committed suicide in a field, the religious leaders bought it with the money they had given him to help them arrest Jesus. Everyone in Jerusalem now calls it *the field of death*. Long ago God's spokesman wrote in the book of Psalms that no one would live in such a place and that a deceased leader should be replaced.

“As a replacement for Judas, we should choose one of Jesus' followers who saw him alive after he died, and who was with us from the time John rinsed him with water until he ascended into the sky.”

Jesus' 11 chosen followers asked God to help them choose between Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas (also called Justus) to be Judas Iscariot's replacement. Their final choice was Matthias.

God Enables Jesus' Followers to Speak Other Languages

2 Fifty days after God brought Jesus back to life, a lot of Jewish people had come to Jerusalem to thank God for the spring harvest. While his 12 chosen followers were together, they heard a noise that sounded like a strong wind blowing inside the room. As a glowing flame appeared above each of them, God enabled them to share God's advice in a variety of languages.



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When the people heard God's advice in their own language, some were surprised and excited. They wondered how they could understand Jesus' followers from Galilee, since they themselves had come from Judea, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, various parts of Turkey, Crete, Rome, Egypt, and northern Libya. But others made fun of Jesus' followers, assuming that they had drunk too much wine. So Peter responded,

“Please listen closely to what I'm about to say. We're not drunk, because it's only mid-morning and you know that we only drink wine with our evening meal. God's spokesman Joel predicted long ago that God would help people share God's advice and give them direction through dreams, visions, and other means. He also predicted that God would do extraordinary things, such as making the sun dark and the moon red, before people would decide to follow God's advice for a better life. As you know, God enabled Jesus to do extraordinary things, but you still executed him on a cross.

“God's spokesman David was thrilled long ago when God promised to bring him back to life instead of leaving his body in the grave to rot away. God also promised to bring one of David's descendants back to life, whom people would respect even more than David. God was referring to Jesus, and we're witnesses to the fact that God brought him back to life and that he ascended into the sky. We have the greatest respect for him and, as you can see, God is helping us follow his example. So even though some of you insisted that he be executed on a cross, you should realize that God chose him to help you enjoy a better life.”

When the people heard what Peter said, they were so sorry that they asked him and Jesus' other chosen followers what they should do. Peter replied,

“Ask someone to rinse you with water to symbolize your desire to follow Jesus' example. God has promised to help you, your children, and anyone else who accepts God's invitation to a better life.”

About 3,000 people responded to Peter's encouragement to be rinsed with water to symbolize their desire to follow Jesus' example. While learning, eating and praying with his 12 chosen followers, they were amazed at the extraordinary things they did. They enjoyed sharing their food and belongings with others in need, and they went to the temple every day to thank God for such an enjoyable life. Day after day, God motivated others to join them.

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God Uses Peter to Enable a Disabled Man to Walk

3 About mid-afternoon one day, Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray. Sitting near one of the entrances was a man more than 40 years of age who had never been able to walk. Everyday some people carried him there so he could request money from others entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John approaching, he asked them for money. Peter explained that he didn't have any money but he could help the man walk, as Jesus would do. When he took the man's right hand and helped him get up, his legs became strong and he was able to walk. He went along with Peter and John into the temple, jumping up and down as he thanked God. When others realized that he was the man who sat near the temple every day asking for money, they were amazed to see him walking.

The man went outside with Peter and John to the area next to the temple known as Solomon's Porch. When Peter noticed a number of people gathering around in amazement, he asked,

“Why are you so surprised? We didn't enable this man to walk by ourselves. It was the God whom our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshiped who enabled this man to walk. We just did what Jesus would do.

“When the Roman leader Pilate offered to free one of the prisoners, some of you chose a murderer instead of Jesus. You insisted that he be executed, even though he was helping you enjoy a better life. You and your leaders didn't realize what you were doing. God's spokesmen predicted long ago that the one God promised to help people enjoy a better life would suffer and die, and that's what happened to Jesus. But God brought him back to life, which we can verify because we've seen him.

“When you change your attitude and follow God's advice as Jesus did, God will help you enjoy a better life. Moses predicted that God would enable someone to be a spokesman like himself to help people follow God's advice. Years later, Samuel and all God's spokesmen who succeeded him reminded our ancestors of God's promise that one of Abraham's descendants would help others enjoy a better life. Eventually, God enabled Jesus to fill that role by helping others follow God's advice.”

ACTS

Some Religious Leaders arrest Peter and John

4 By this time the number of Jesus' followers had grown to around 5,000, so some of the religious leaders were very upset that Peter and John kept spreading the word that God brought Jesus back to life. They were arrested one evening and kept in jail overnight. The next day the religious leaders had a meeting with their superiors, including Annas, Caiphas, John, and Alexander. When they asked Peter and John who authorized them to heal the disabled man, God gave Peter the courage to reply,

“We want you and all the Jewish people to know that we’re following the example of Jesus from Nazareth, whom you executed on a cross and God brought back to life. Although you refuse to follow his example, that’s the only way we can all enjoy a better life.”

The religious leaders were surprised how courageous Peter and John were despite their limited education, and they couldn’t deny that the man could walk because he was standing nearby. So they told Peter and John to go outside while they discussed what they could do to stop the word from spreading beyond Jerusalem. They decided to order Peter and John to stop talking about Jesus. But Peter and John insisted that God wanted them to spread the word. After giving them a stern warning, the religious leaders let them go without punishment because a lot of people were giving God the credit for healing the disabled man.

Jesus' Followers Pray for Courage and Share Possessions

When Peter and John went home and told Jesus' other followers what the religious leaders said, they prayed to the God who created the land, water, sky and everything else,

“Long ago your spokesman David wondered why the people and their leaders refused to follow you and the one you chose to help them enjoy a better life. But you knew what would happen when both Jews and non-Jews persuaded Herod and Pontius Pilate to execute Jesus. Give us courage to continue sharing your advice, and help us heal others and do other extraordinary things, as Jesus did.”

When they finished praying, the house shook as God gave them the courage to share God’s advice and tell others that God brought Jesus back to life after he died.

A lot of Jesus' followers shared their wealth with others. Those who owned land or houses sold them and gave the income to his 12 chosen followers to distribute to those in need. A descendant of Levi named

ACTS

Joseph was one of the landowners who did this. He was from the island of Cyprus, and Jesus' followers nicknamed him Barnabas, which means *encourager*.

Ananias and Saphira Suffer the Consequence for Selfishness

5 Ananias and his wife Saphira also sold their land, but they kept some of the income for themselves instead of giving it all to Jesus' 12 chosen followers. When Peter discovered it, he confronted Ananias about their selfishness, which Satan personifies. As Peter pointed out that they hadn't followed God's advice, Ananias fell over dead. Some young men took him away and buried him.

When Saphira arrived three hours later, she was unaware of what had happened. Peter asked her if she and her husband had sold their land for the amount they gave him. When she insisted that they did, Peter also confronted her about not following God's advice. As soon as he told her that the young men who buried her husband were also going to bury her, she fell over dead, too. So the young men took her away and buried her beside her husband.

Everyone who heard about this became very alarmed.

Jesus' 12 chosen Followers Heal a Lot of People

Jesus' 12 chosen followers did a lot of extraordinary things for the people who gathered in the area next to the temple known as Solomon's Porch. Many men and women respected Jesus' chosen followers and began following Jesus' example, but they were afraid to go to the temple. So they took their sick friends and relatives out to the streets and laid them on mats so they would be near Peter as he walked by. People from nearby towns also brought those who were sick or harassed by harmful spirits, and they were all healed.

Some Religious Leaders Arrest Jesus' 12 chosen Followers

The leaders of the religious group known as Sadducees were very upset with Jesus' 12 chosen followers, so they had them arrested and thrown in jail. During the night, one of God's messengers let them out and told them to go to the temple and share God's advice for a better life, which they did the very next morning. Some of the religious leaders heard about this, so they called a meeting with other religious leaders and sent guards to check if Jesus' followers were still in jail. When the guards returned, they explained that the doors of the jail were securely closed and guards were stationed at the doors, but there was no one inside. Someone else mentioned that Jesus' followers were at the temple encouraging

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people to follow God's advice as Jesus did. So the religious leaders had the guards arrest them, but they didn't use force because they were afraid others might react.

The senior religious leader reminded Jesus' 12 chosen followers that they had been sternly warned to stop talking about Jesus. He was upset that they continued to do so anyway and that they blamed the religious leaders for Jesus' death. So Peter replied,

“We must obey the God our ancestors worshiped, who chose Jesus to help our people change their attitude and follow God's advice. We can verify that God brought him back to life after you executed him on a cross.”

The religious leaders became very angry and wanted to kill Jesus' 12 chosen followers. But Gamaliel, one of the leaders of the religious group known as Pharisees, whom everyone respected for his knowledge of God's advice, asked the guards to take Jesus' followers outside for a while. Then he addressed the other religious leaders,

“Be careful what you do to these men. Some time ago, about 400 people followed Theudas, who claimed to be important. When he was killed, those who followed him scattered and their movement disappeared. Later, during the registration for taxes, a lot of people began following Judas, from the district of Galilee. But when he died, those who followed him also scattered.

“So I'm suggesting you let these men go. If they're self-motivated, their movement will eventually disappear. But if God is behind them, you won't be able to stop them, because God is a lot more powerful than you are.”

The religious leaders decided to follow Gamaliel's suggestion, so they called Jesus' followers back inside. After the religious leaders had them beaten and warned them again to stop talking about Jesus, they let them go. As they left, they were glad that God considered them worthy to suffer for following God's advice, as Jesus did. Every day they told people at the temple or in their homes that Jesus was the one that God promised would help them enjoy a better life.

Jesus' Followers Select Seven Men to Assist Widows

6 As more people began following Jesus' example, those who spoke Greek complained that their widows were receiving less daily assistance than the widows who spoke Hebrew. So Jesus' 12 chosen followers met with them and explained,

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“If we spend our time distributing aid to widows, we won’t be able to pray with others and encourage them to follow God’s advice. So you need to select seven men who are willing and able to do this.”

The people agreed and selected the following men:

Stephen, who diligently followed God advice
Philip
Prochorus
Nicanor
Timon
Parmentas
Nicolas, who was from the town of Antioch in Syria

Jesus’ 12 chosen followers laid their hands on the seven men while asking God to help them perform their task.

As more people in Jerusalem heard God’s advice, a lot of religious leaders and others began following it as Jesus did.

Some Religious Leaders Arrest Stephen

When some people from northern Africa and several parts of Turkey heard that Stephen was sharing God’s advice and doing extraordinary things, they confronted him about it. They weren’t able to convince him to stop, so they persuaded some men to spread the word that he had insulted Moses and God. When some religious leaders heard this, they became upset and had Stephen arrested. Some people falsely testified that he claimed Jesus was planning to destroy the temple and change the traditions that originated with Moses. But as the religious leaders observed Stephen more closely, it appeared that he really was one of God’s messengers.

Stephen Responds to the False Charges against Him

7 When the senior religious leader asked Stephen if the accusations against him were true, he responded,

“While our ancestor Abraham was living in Iraq, God suggested he leave his relatives and move to the area that God would show him. So when his father died, he moved to the city of Haran in southeastern Turkey, which is the area that God promised him and his descendants even before he had any children.

"God told Abraham that his descendants would live as strangers in another country and be treated as slaves for 400 years. But God promised to hold that nation accountable and predicted that

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Abraham's descendants would eventually worship God here. When his son Isaac was eight days old, he circumcised him to symbolize that he had dedicated him to God. Isaac did the same to his son Jacob, and Jacob did the same to Joseph and his 11 other sons.

“Joseph's brothers eventually became jealous of him and sold him to slave traders who took him to Egypt. But God helped him survive there. When the Egyptian leader realized how wise Joseph was, he made him an advisor and put him in charge of his entire estate. When there was a famine throughout Egypt and Palestine, our ancestors didn't have enough food. So when Jacob heard that there was still food in Egypt, he sent his sons there to get some.

“The second time Jacob's sons went to Egypt for food, Joseph revealed that he was their brother and he introduced them to the Egyptian leader. Joseph asked them to bring their father and other relatives, a total of 75 people. Jacob and his sons eventually died in Egypt, but their bodies were taken to the town of Shechem in northern Palestine and buried in the grave that Abraham had bought from Hamor's sons.

“As Abraham's descendants increased in Egypt, God's promise was coming true until another leader took over. Since the new Egyptian leader had never met Joseph, he mistreated our ancestors and ordered their male babies to be killed. It was during this time that Moses was born. He was a beautiful child, so his parents hid him in their home for three months. When they realized they could no longer hide him, they placed him in a basket near the riverbank, where the Egyptian leader's daughter found him. Since she raised him as her own son, he learned the Egyptian language and culture.

“When Moses was 40 years of age, he decided to visit the Jewish people to whom he was related. While he was there, he saw an Egyptian physically assault a Jew, so he killed the Egyptian on the spot. He assumed the Jewish people understood that God was using him to help them, but he was wrong. The next day, when Moses tried to stop two Jewish men from fighting, the instigator pushed him away and asked if he was going to kill him, as he did the Egyptian the day before. So Moses left and lived in the area known as Midian in the southeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula, where he raised two sons.

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“Forty years later in the desert near Mount Sinai, Moses was amazed that God spoke to him through a burning bush,

‘I’m the God whom your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshiped.’

“God asked Moses to remove his shoes out of respect and then continued,

‘I’m aware that my people are being mistreated and suffering in Egypt. I’ve heard their cries for help, so I want you to go there and help them.’

“God enabled Moses to do some extraordinary things as he led the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and across the desert for 40 years. He told them that God would eventually select another person to be a spokesman like himself.

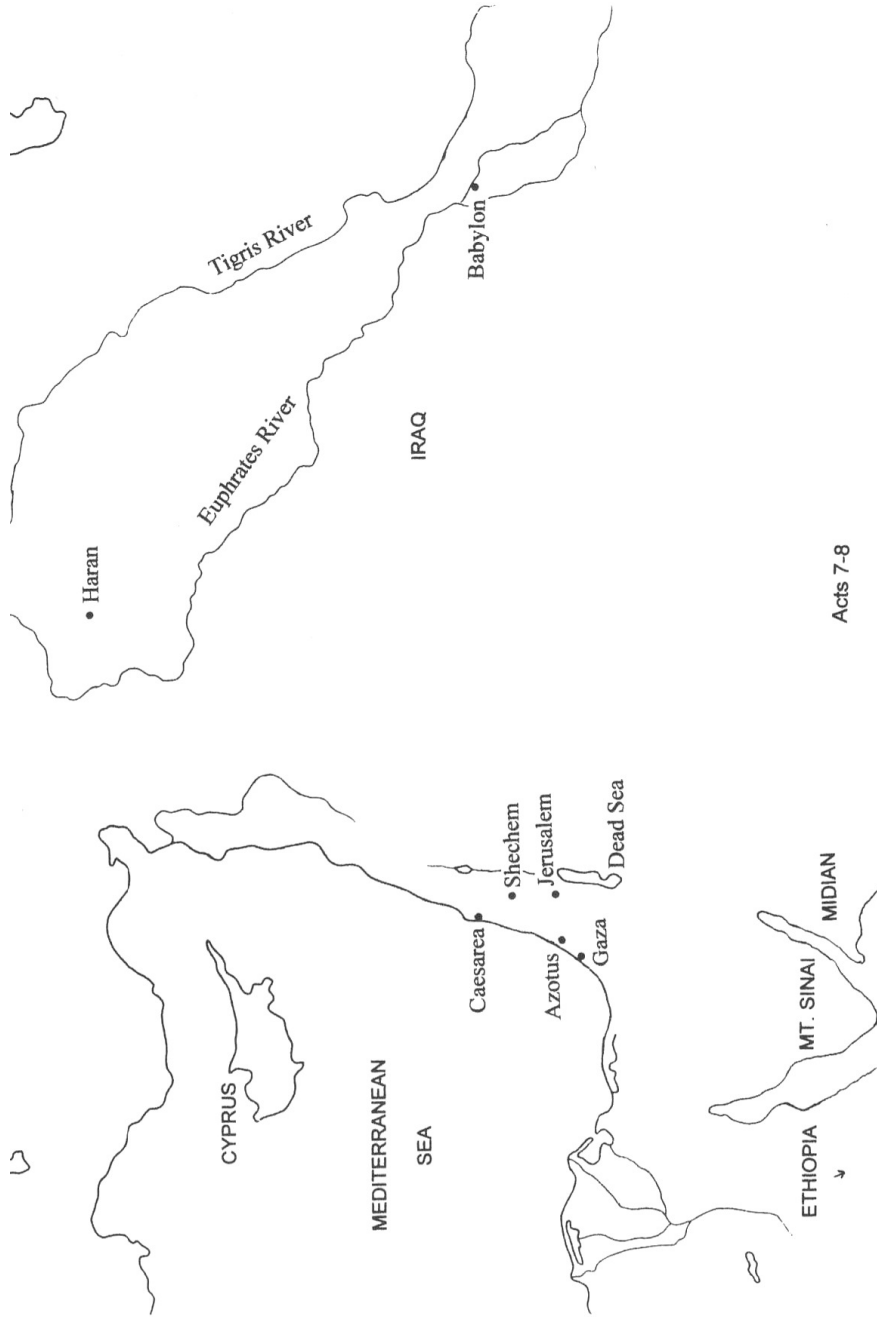
“On Mount Sinai, one of God’s messengers gave Moses instructions for a better life, which have been passed down to us. While he was on the mountain, the people became impatient and asked Moses’ brother Aaron to help them make an idol like the ones in Egypt. When they finished molding the idol in the shape of a calf, they celebrated and made offerings to it.

“One of God’s spokesmen wrote long ago that the people made no offerings to God during their 40 years in the desert. They eventually worshiped Moloch, the star god Remphan and other idols, so God let them be exiled to Babylon.

“While the people were in the desert, God gave Moses instructions to construct a special tent to remind them to worship God. They passed that tent down to their descendants, whom Joshua led into other countries. Years later, our famous leader David wanted to build a permanent temple to honor the God that Jacob worshiped, but David’s son Solomon built it when he became the leader. One of God’s spokesmen reminded our ancestors that God doesn’t live in a temple. Since God created the entire universe, God is present everywhere.

“You’re as stubborn as our ancestors were. They gave God’s spokesmen a hard time and killed those who predicted the coming of the one who would help us follow God’s advice. Now you’ve done virtually the same thing. You turned against Jesus and had him killed because you refuse to follow God’s advice.”

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The Religious Leaders Stone Stephen to Death

The religious leaders became very angry at Stephen. As he looked up toward the sky, God gave him the courage to tell them that Jesus reflected God's character better than anyone else. Those who had testified against Stephen took him out of town and began throwing stones at him. They took off their coats and laid them beside a young man named Saul, who approved of what they were doing. Just before Stephen died, he expressed his trust in Jesus and asked God not to hold the people accountable for what they were doing. Stephen's close friends were heart broken as they buried him.

People in Samaria Become Followers of Jesus

8 At this time some people were harassing Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. Saul was going from house to house, arresting women as well as men and putting them in jail. So all of Jesus' followers except his 12 chosen ones scattered throughout the districts of Judea and Samaria. There they encouraged others to follow God's advice as Jesus did.

Philip also went to Samaria and told the people about Jesus. They were thrilled that he healed a lot of their friends and relatives who couldn't walk or had harmful spirits. For quite some time, a man named Simon amazed the people with his illusions. Children as well as adults thought he received his ability from God. But when Philip explained that they could enjoy a better life by following God's advice as Jesus did, both men and women were rinsed with water to symbolize their commitment to follow his example. After Simon was also rinsed, he followed Philip around and was amazed by the extraordinary things he did.

When Jesus' 12 chosen followers in Jerusalem heard that the people in Samaria were receptive to God's advice, they sent Peter and John to pray with them. As Peter and John laid their hands on the people and prayed, God enabled them to share God's advice with others. When Simon saw this, he offered Peter and John some money to learn how he could do this for others. But Peter replied,

“Your money can't buy what God gives people for free. You need to ask God to help you change your self-centered attitude.”

So Simon asked Peter and John to pray that God would help him do so. On their way back to Jerusalem, Peter and John encouraged a lot of other Samaritans to follow God's advice for a better life.

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Philip Tells an Ethiopian Official about Jesus

One day around noon, one of God's messengers told Philip to go to the road that went through the desert from Jerusalem to Gaza. There he met the treasurer for the female leader of Ethiopia, who had gone to Jerusalem to worship God and was on his way back to Ethiopia. While sitting in a chariot, he was reading a text that God's spokesman Isaiah had written long ago. When Philip approached the chariot as God's messenger suggested, he asked the man if he understood what he was reading. The man admitted that he couldn't understand it without help, so he invited Philip to join him in the chariot. This is the text the man was reading:

“He died willingly, like a lamb that doesn't resist when it is sheared and led away to be killed.”

The man asked Philip if Isaiah was referring to himself or to someone else. Using this text as a starting point, Philip told him about Jesus. As they continued down the road, they approached a body of water. When the man saw it, he asked Philip to rinse him with water to symbolize his desire to follow God's advice as Jesus did. After Philip did so, God led him to the town of Azotus while the man went the other direction, thrilled about what had happened. Philip continued north to the city of Ceasarea, sharing God's advice for a better life all along the way.

Jesus Talks to Saul on His Way to Damascus

9 While Saul was harassing and threatening Jesus' followers, the senior religious leader gave him authority to arrest those at the worship centers in Damascus and take them back to Jerusalem. On his way there, a blinding light from the sky suddenly shone on him. As he sat down with his eyes closed, someone asked,

“Why are you harassing me and my followers?”

When Saul asked who was speaking, Jesus identified himself. Saul was so impressed that he asked Jesus what he should do. So Jesus told him to continue going to Damascus, where he would receive further instructions. Those who were traveling with him were alarmed that they heard someone speaking but didn't see anyone. When Saul opened his eyes, he realized he couldn't see, so his friends led him by the hand the rest of the way to Damascus. He didn't eat or drink anything for three days while his sight was gone.

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One of Jesus' followers in Damascus was named Ananias. Jesus told him in a dream to go to Judas' home on Straight Street and ask for the Saul who was born and raised in the city of Tarsus. Jesus explained that when Saul was praying earlier, he had a vision that Ananias would come and pray for him to restore his sight. Ananias reminded Jesus that Saul harassed Jesus' followers in Jerusalem and had the authority to arrest those in Damascus. But Jesus explained that Saul had changed, that he was going to encourage others to follow Jesus' example and would suffer the consequences for doing so.

When Ananias met Saul at Judas' home, Ananias explained that Jesus sent him to restore Saul's sight and encourage him to share God's advice with others, as Jesus did. After Ananias prayed for Saul, he regained his sight and asked to be rinsed with water to symbolize his willingness to follow Jesus' example. Saul resumed eating and began regaining his strength.

Saul Encourages Others to Follow Jesus' Example

While Saul stayed with Jesus' followers in Damascus for several days, he told people in the worship centers that Jesus was the one that God promised would help them enjoy a better life. Those who heard Saul were confused, wondering if he was the one who had harassed Jesus' followers in Jerusalem and if he had come there to arrest them and take them back to the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

Several days later, some Jews became so upset with Saul that they decided to kill him, so they guarded the exits of the town day and night to prevent him from leaving. When he found out about it, Jesus' followers helped him escape through an upper story window at night, lowering him in a basket.

When Saul returned to Jerusalem, he wanted to join Jesus' followers there. But they were suspicious of him, unconvinced that he was now a follower of Jesus. So Barnabas took him to Jesus' 12 chosen followers. Saul explained that after Jesus spoke to him on his way to Damascus, he encouraged the people there to follow Jesus' example. From that point on, Jesus' followers in Jerusalem accepted Saul. He encouraged others in the area to follow Jesus' example, but some of the Jews who spoke Greek became upset with him and began planning to kill him. When Jesus' followers heard about it, they took him to the seaport of Ceasarea, where he boarded a boat going to his home town of Tarsus, in southeastern Turkey.

Jesus' followers throughout the districts of Judea, Samaria and Galilee were increasing in number and enjoying life as long as they followed God's advice and encouraged others to do so.

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Peter Heals Aeneas and Brings Tabitha Back to Life

During his travels, Peter stayed with Jesus' followers in the town of Lydda. He met a man there named Aeneas, who had been confined to bed for eight years because he was paralyzed. As Peter explained that Jesus had healed him, he encouraged him to get up and stretch. When the people in the area saw that he was healed, they decided to follow Jesus' example.

One of Jesus' followers in the nearby seaport of Joppa was a woman named Tabitha, who is called Dorcas by those who speak Greek. She had helped a lot of people in need but eventually got sick and died. After her family bathed her, they laid her body in an upstairs room. When they heard that Peter was close by in Lydda, they sent two men there to ask him to come as soon as possible. The men took Peter to the room upstairs, where the widows cried as they showed him the clothes that Tabitha had made.

After he asked everyone else to leave the room, Peter knelt down and asked God to bring Tabitha back to life. When he turned toward her and asked her to get up, she opened her eyes and sat up. After he took her hand and helped her stand, he invited the widows and Jesus' other followers back into the room to show them that she had come back to life. As the word spread throughout Joppa, a lot of people decided to follow Jesus' example. Peter stayed there for quite a while with a man named Simon, who tanned hides for a living.

God Gives Peter a Lesson on Discrimination

10 A Roman military leader named Cornelius was living in Caesarea. He and his family respected God, prayed regularly, and helped a lot of people in need. While he was praying one afternoon, a messenger from God addressed him by name. Although he was alarmed, he asked the messenger what he wanted. The messenger replied,

“God knows that you help people in need, and God has heard your prayer. Send some men south to Joppa to ask Peter to come and tell you how you and your family can enjoy a better life. He's staying with a man named Simon, who lives near the coast and tans hides for a living.”

After God's messenger left, Cornelius related this to two of his servants and a soldier, whom he sent to Joppa. Before they arrived the next day, Peter had gone up on the flat roof of Simon's house to pray. He was getting hungry around noon, so Simon's servants began preparing something to eat. Meanwhile, he saw something come down out of the sky. It looked like a large table made out of cloth, with its four corners forming legs as it came to rest on the ground. There was a variety of wild

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animals, reptiles and birds on it, so a messenger from God told him to eat whatever he wanted. But Peter refused, explaining that he had never eaten any of these because his tradition didn't allow it. The messenger told him that he should accept whatever God provides. After they repeated this dialog two more times, the cloth table went back up into the sky.

Peter Meets with the Roman Military Leader Cornelius

While Peter was reflecting on what had just happened, the men that Cornelius sent arrived at Simon's home and asked if Peter was staying there. The messenger from God then told Peter,

“Three men are looking for you. Since I've arranged for them to come, I want you to go along with them without delay.”

So Peter came down off the roof and introduced himself to the men. When he asked what they wanted, they explained,

“A lot of Jewish people realize that the Roman military leader named Cornelius respects God and has helped a lot of people in need. A messenger from God encouraged him to ask you to come and tell him how he and his family can enjoy a better life.”

Peter invited them to stay overnight. The next day he and some of Jesus' followers from Joppa went along with them to Caesarea. Cornelius was anticipating Peter's arrival, so he invited his relatives and close friends to join them. When Peter arrived the following day, Cornelius began worshipping him. But Peter reacted,

“You shouldn't worship me, because I'm just an ordinary person like you.”

When they went inside Cornelius' house, Peter noticed that a lot of people were there, so he said,

“As you know, Jewish people don't usually associate with non-Jews. But I'm here because God has shown me that I shouldn't discriminate against others. Now why have you asked me to come?”

Cornelius explained that while he was praying at home in the afternoon four days ago, a messenger from God addressed him by name and said,

“God knows that you help people in need, and God has heard your prayer. Send some men to Joppa to ask Peter to come and tell you how you and your family can enjoy a better life. He's staying with

ACTS

a man named Simon, who lives near the coast and tans hides for a living.”

Cornelius continued,

“I sent messengers right away to ask you to come, and I’m so glad you did. We’re ready to hear more about God.”

Peter replied,

“I’ve learned that God is pleased with everyone who honors God and follows God’s advice, no matter what ethnic group they belong to. As you know, John rinsed people with water to symbolize their commitment to follow God’s advice. Then God motivated Jesus from Nazareth to encourage people in the districts of Galilee and Judea to follow God’s advice for a better life. God enabled him to help people in need and free those with harmful spirits.

“We saw Jesus do these things throughout Jewish country and in Jerusalem, where he was executed on a cross. But God brought him back to life after just a few days, and some of us had the opportunity to eat and drink with him again. He wants us to tell others that he’s the one God’s spokesmen wrote about long ago, whom God chose to help people follow God’s advice for a better life.”

While Peter was still talking, the non-Jews who were listening began sharing God’s advice in a variety of languages. When the men who came with him expressed their surprise, he remarked that no one should prevent these non-Jews from being rinsed with water to symbolize their commitment to follow God’s advice as Jesus did. After they were rinsed, they invited Peter to stay for a few days.

Some Jews confront Peter about Associating with Non-Jews

11 Some of Jesus’ Jewish followers in the district of Judea heard that non-Jews were beginning to follow God’s advice. So when Peter returned to Jerusalem, they questioned him about going into the home of non-Jews and eating with them. He explained,

“While I was praying in Joppa, I saw something come down out of the sky. It looked like a large table made out of cloth, with its four corners forming legs as it came to rest on the ground. There was a variety of wild animals, reptiles and birds on it, so a messenger from God told me to eat whatever I wanted. But I refused and explained that I’ve never eaten any of these because our tradition

ACTS

doesn't allow it. The messenger told me that I should accept whatever God provides. After we repeated this dialog two more times, the cloth table went back up into the sky.

“When three men from Caesarea arrived at the house where I was staying, the messenger from God told me to go with them without delay. Six of Jesus' followers went along with us. When we arrived at the home of Cornelius, he explained that a messenger from God suggested he send some men to Joppa to ask me to come and tell him how he and his family could enjoy a better life.

“While I was talking to these non-Jewish people, they began sharing God's advice in a variety of languages, as we recently did. I then recalled what Jesus said, that God would help people encourage others to follow God's advice, as John did when he symbolically rinsed people with water. Since God is helping them follow Jesus' example, I sure don't want to interfere.”

After Jesus' Jewish followers heard Peter's explanation, they thanked God for helping non-Jews follow God's advice so they could enjoy a better life, too.

People in Antioch Begin Following Jesus' Example

Some of Jesus' followers who left Jerusalem after Stephen was killed went to the coastal area called Phoenicia, the island of Cyprus and the city of Antioch in Syria. Most of them encouraged other Jews to follow Jesus' example, but God motivated some of Jesus' followers from Cyprus and the city of Cyrene in north Africa to encourage non-Jews in Antioch to follow Jesus' example. When Jesus' followers in Jerusalem heard that a lot of non-Jews in Antioch had begun following Jesus' example, they sent Barnabas there. He was glad to see that God was also helping non-Jews enjoy a better life, and he encouraged them to keep following Jesus' example.

Barnabas then went to Tarsus to get Saul and bring him back to Antioch. They stayed there for a year to help the people follow Jesus' example. It was there that the term *Christian* first came to be used for Jesus' followers.

About that time, some other people who had been sharing God's advice in Jerusalem went to Antioch. One of them was named Agabus, whom God enabled to predict that the entire district of Judea was going to experience a severe famine. This eventually happened while Claudius was the leader of the Roman Empire. So when Barnabas and Saul went to Jerusalem, Jesus' followers sent as much food along as they could.

ACTS

One of God's Messengers Rescues Peter from Prison

12 At that time, Herod Agrippa was the Roman leader over that area. He was harassing Jesus' followers and even had John's brother James killed. When he heard that some of the Jewish leaders approved of it, he had Peter arrested and was planning to put him on trial as soon as the annual Jewish freedom celebration was over. Four guards were posted at his cell throughout the day.

Jesus' followers prayed diligently for Peter while he was in prison. The night before the trial, he was sleeping while chained between two guards, and there were other guards at the prison door. The dark cell lit up when a messenger from God arrived and woke him. As the chains fell off his arms, the messenger told him to get dressed and follow him. After passing two guard posts, the iron gate at the outer entrance of the prison opened by itself. While they were walking down the street, the messenger left. Peter thought he was dreaming but then realized that God had sent a messenger to rescue him from Herod and the Jewish people who anticipated his execution.

Peter went to the home of John Mark's mother Mary, where a lot of Jesus' followers were praying for him. When he announced that he was at the gate outside of the house, a girl named Rhoda recognized his voice. She was so excited that instead of going to open the gate for him, she ran and told the others that he was there. They thought she was joking, but she insisted. Then they thought it might just be his guardian angel, so they were ecstatic when they saw that it really was Peter. He motioned for them to calm down so he could explain how God rescued him from prison. Before leaving, he asked them to tell James and the rest of Jesus' followers what had happened.

The next morning the guards were frantic that Peter was gone. Herod ordered a search for him, but it was unsuccessful. He interrogated the guards before having them killed and returning to Caesarea.

Since the people in the seaports of Tyre and Sidon were also targets of Herod's harassment, they tried to maintain a good relationship with his assistant Blastus so they could keep getting food supplies. One day, after Herod delivered an impressive speech dressed in his royal robe, the people claimed that he was a god. But since he didn't give God the credit, a messenger from God inflicted him with worms and he soon died.

More and more people began following God's advice and sharing it with others.

ACTS

God Selects Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for a Special Task

13 When Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, John Mark went along with them. Those who helped people follow Jesus' example in Antioch included:

Barnabas
Saul (Paul)
Simeon Niger
Lucius, who was from the city of Cyrene
Manaen, who was raised with Herod Antipas

When God told them to select Barnabas and Saul for a special task, they skipped meals to pray for God's help and direction. Barnabas and Saul went west to the seaport of Seleucia and then sailed south to the seaport of Salamis on the island of Cyprus. There they and John encouraged Jewish people in the local worship centers to follow God's advice.

Barnabas and Saul then went across the island to the city of Paphos, where they met a Jewish astronomer named Bar-Jesus and an intelligent Roman official named Sergius Paulus. When Sergius asked Barnabas and Saul to share God's advice with him, Bar-Jesus tried to convince them to follow his own advice. So Saul, whose Roman name was Paul, responded,

"You're so self-centered that you can't seem to stop misleading people from following God's advice. God will help you stop by making you blind for a while."

Bar-Jesus immediately lost his vision and tried to find someone to lead him around by hand. When Sergius saw what happened, he was amazed and decided to follow God's advice.

Paul Addresses a Jewish Audience in Another Antioch

John returned to Jerusalem while Paul and the others sailed north to the seaport of Perga in the district of Pamphilia in southern Turkey. They continued north to the town of Antioch in the district of Pisidia, where they went to the local worship center on the weekly day of rest. After reading a text that one of God's spokesmen had written long ago, the religious leader invited anyone to offer an encouraging message. Paul accepted the invitation and addressed the Jewish audience,

"God helped our ancestors escape from Egypt, took care of them in the desert for 40 years, and helped them defeat seven nations so they could live in Palestine. God provided leadership for 450 years until God's spokesman Samuel became leader. When our

ACTS

ancestors asked for a different kind of leader, God let a descendant of Benjamin named Saul lead them for 40 years. Then God turned the leadership over to Jesse's son David, who followed God's advice well.

"God promised that one of David's descendants would help our people enjoy a better life, which Jesus has done. But before he arrived on the scene, John encouraged people to be rinsed with water to symbolize their commitment to follow God's advice. He explained that someone else would help them follow it more effectively than he could.

"Jesus demonstrated how to follow God's advice for a better life. But the people in Jerusalem and their leaders refused to follow his example, even though they often heard God's spokesmen predict the consequences. There was no good reason to execute Jesus, but the people insisted that the Roman leader Pilate do so. When they took Jesus off the cross, they laid him in a grave, but God brought him back to life. His followers from Galilee saw him in Jerusalem for several weeks afterward, and they spread the word.

"We want to remind you of the promise God made to our ancestors long ago, which is recorded in the second Psalm. When God brought Jesus back to life, God kept this promise that the body of God's special messenger would not rot away. Although David followed God's advice, he was buried and his body decayed, just like our other ancestors. But Jesus' body didn't decay because God brought him back to life. That's why we're encouraging you to follow the advice God gave Moses, as Jesus did. Just *having* it isn't enough. God's spokesmen predicted long ago that some people would continue living a miserable life because they refuse to believe the amazing things that God does."

As Paul and his companions were leaving the local worship center, some people asked to hear more about God on the next weekly day of rest. During the week, Paul and Barnabas encouraged both Jews and non-Jews to follow God's advice for a better life, and a lot of them decided to do so. On the next weekly day of rest, nearly everyone in the city went to the local worship center to hear more about God. When some of the religious leaders saw the large crowd, they became jealous and berated what Paul said. So Paul and Barnabas courageously responded,

"We've encouraged you to follow God's advice for a better life, but since you refuse, we're also encouraging non-Jews to follow it. God told our ancestors long ago that they should encourage non-

ACTS

Jews to follow God's advice so *everyone* would have the opportunity to enjoy a better life."

The non-Jews thanked God because they were happy to hear this. They began following God's advice for a better life and encouraged others throughout the area to do so. Meanwhile, the religious leaders convinced the city officials to expel Paul and Barnabas from the area. As they went southeast to the city of Iconium, Jesus' followers in Antioch were following God's advice and enjoying a better life.

Paul and Barnabas Share God's Advice in Iconium

14 When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Iconium, they went to the Jewish worship center to encourage people to follow God's advice, and lot of Jews and non-Jews did so. While Paul and Barnabas were there, God enabled them to do some amazing things. They explained how much God cares about everyone, but some Jews convinced some of the non-Jews to follow *their* advice instead of God's. When Paul and Barnabas heard that this group was planning to kill them, they went south to Lystra, another town in the district of Lyconia in south-central Turkey. There they encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life.

Paul Heals a Disabled Man and Is Stoned in Lystra

While Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra, a man who had been unable to walk since birth heard Paul speaking. Paul knew the man wanted to follow God's advice for a better life, so he asked the man to stand up. When other people saw him stand up and walk around, they thought Paul and Barnabas were gods who just looked like men. They called Barnabas *Zeus* and Paul *Hermes*, since he did most of the speaking. The temple for Zeus was just outside of town, so the religious leader brought decorated oxen to be killed to honor Paul and Barnabas. But when they heard about it, they said,

"You shouldn't do this, because we're just ordinary men like you. We want you to follow the advice of the God who made the earth, the sky, the sea, and everything in them. Although God let your ancestors do whatever they wanted, God still sends rain so your crops bear fruit and you can enjoy the harvest."

Paul and Barnabas were barely able to convince the people not to kill the oxen to honor them as gods. But then some Jewish people from Antioch and Iconium arrived, and they persuaded others to join them in stoning Paul. When they thought he was dead, they dragged him out of town. But Jesus' followers helped him get up and return.

ACTS

Paul and Barnabas Visit Derbe, Perga and Attalia

The next day Paul and Barnabas went southeast to Derbe, another city in the district of Lyconia. They encouraged the people there to follow God's advice for a better life, and a lot of them decided to do so.

Paul and Barnabas then retraced their steps to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch to encourage Jesus' followers to keep following God's advice, even if they experienced hardship for doing so. Paul and Barnabas selected leaders for Jesus' followers along the way, skipping meals so they'd have more time to pray. They went south through the district of Pisidia to Perga, in the district of Pamphylia. After they encouraged the people there to follow God's advice, they proceeded southwest to the seaport of Attalia. From there they sailed east, back to Antioch in Syria, where they originally started their trip. They stayed with Jesus' followers for quite a while, relating what God helped them accomplish by giving them the opportunity to encourage non-Jews to follow God's advice for a better life.

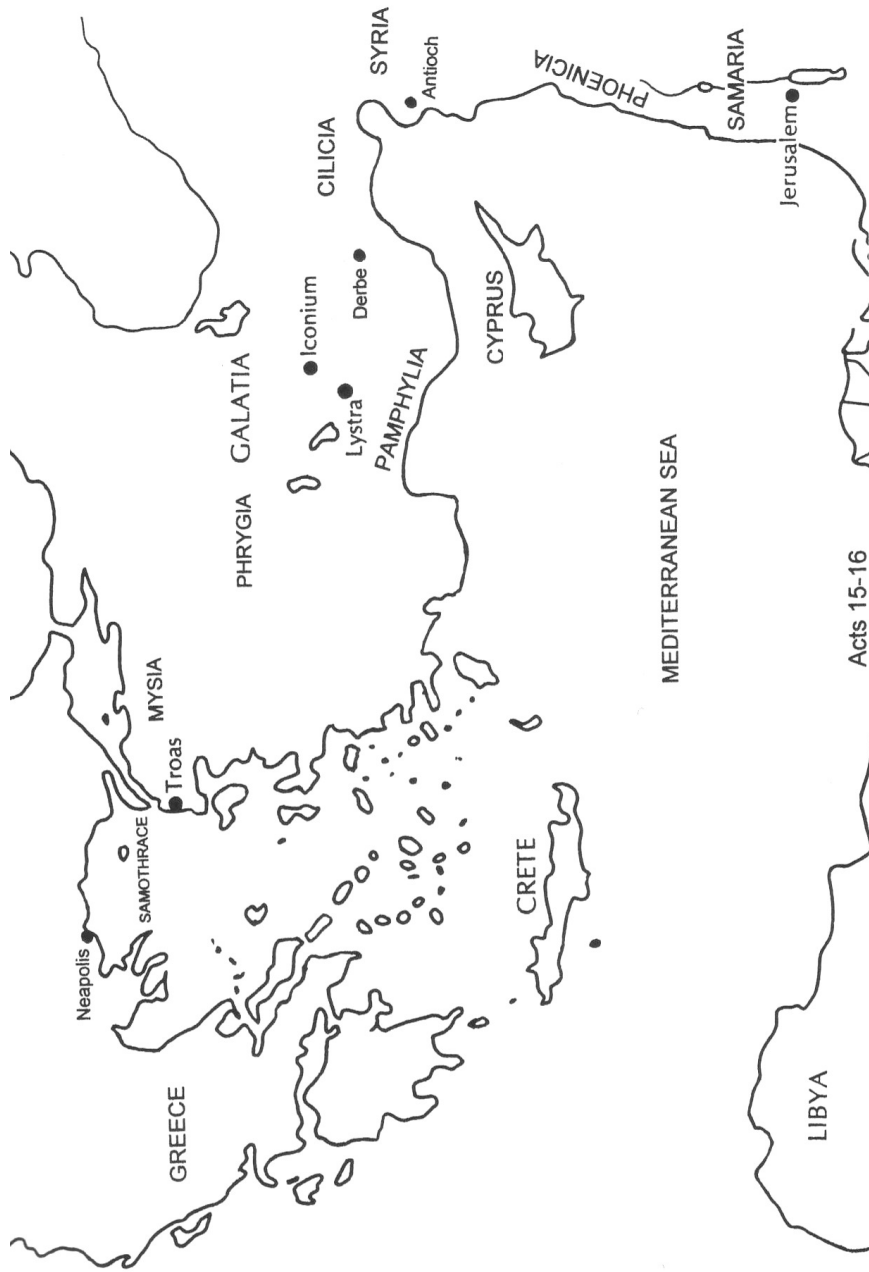
Some of Jesus' Followers Insist on Circumcising Non-Jews

15 Some of Jesus' followers from Judea were telling the non-Jews that they couldn't enjoy a better life unless they were circumcised, as God's spokesman Moses had written long ago. Paul and Barnabas disagreed, so Jesus' followers in Antioch decided to send Paul, Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with Jesus' 12 chosen followers. As they traveled south through the districts of Phoenicia and Samaria, they told Jesus' followers along the way that non-Jews were beginning to follow God's advice. They were thrilled to hear this.

When Paul, Barnabas and the others arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus' followers welcomed them. After Paul and Barnabas explained what God had helped them accomplish, some of Jesus' followers insisted that non-Jews had to be circumcised. After much discussion, Peter said,

“As you know, God recently chose me to encourage non-Jews to follow God's advice. Since God is helping them do so, you shouldn't hinder what God is doing by putting this extra burden on them, which even we and our ancestors have had trouble bearing. We can all enjoy a better life just by following God's advice as Jesus did.”

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The people listened intently as Paul and Barnabas described the amazing things that God enabled them to do among non-Jews. Then James said,

“Peter has just explained that God encourages non-Jews to follow God’s advice. One of God’s spokesmen wrote long ago that God would help David’s relatives and everyone else follow God’s advice. So we shouldn’t hinder non-Jews from following God’s advice, but we should send them a letter to encourage them to stop making offerings to idols. Moses wrote about this long ago and people have read it for generations in local worship centers every week.”

Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch with Judas and Silas

Jesus’ followers selected Judas Barsabbas and Silas to go along with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch, sending the following letter along with them:

“Greetings to Jesus’ non-Jewish followers in Antioch and throughout the districts of Syria and Cilicia,

“We’ve heard that some people from here have upset you by insisting that you have to be circumcised. Since we didn’t authorize them to say this, we’re sending Judas and Silas along with Paul and Barnabas to verify that God doesn’t want to make it more difficult than what is necessary. So just stop making offerings to idols.

Sincerely,
Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem”

When Paul and the others arrived in Antioch, the people were thrilled to receive the letter. Judas and Silas encouraged Jesus’ followers for a while and then returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch to invite others to follow God’s advice for a better life.

Some time later, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they revisit every city where they had encouraged people to follow God’s advice, to see how they were doing. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, but Paul refused because John had returned to Jerusalem instead of going along with them when they were in the district of Pamphilia. So Barnabas and Paul decided to split up. While John went along with Barnabas to the island of Cyprus, Silas went along with Paul to encourage Jesus’ followers in the districts of Syria and Cilicia.

ACTS

Timothy Joins Paul and Silas in Western Turkey

16 Paul and Silas then went back to Derbe and Lystra, where they met one of Jesus' followers named Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and whose father was Greek. Jesus' followers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of Timothy, so Paul invited him to travel with them. Paul suggested that he get circumcised, since they were planning to visit a lot of Jews who knew that Timothy's father was Greek. As they traveled from town to town, they encouraged people to follow the suggestions of Jesus' 12 chosen followers in Jerusalem. As time passed, Jesus' followers increased in number and commitment.

Paul, Silas and Timothy then went northwest through the districts of Galatia and Phrygia to the district of Mysia. They considered going east from there to the district of Bithynia, but God motivated them to go west to the coastal city of Troas. The night after they arrived, Paul had a dream that a man from Greece asked him to come and help the people there. We thought God wanted us to help them follow God's advice for a better life, so we decided to go there right away.

Lydia and Her Family Decide to Follow Jesus' Example

On our way to Greece, we spent the night on the island of Samothrace and arrived at the city of Neapolis the next day. We went on to Philippi, the first city in Greece to be established as a Roman colony, and we stayed there for several days. On the weekly day of rest, we went to the place by the river where the people usually went to pray. We spoke with some of the women, one of whom was named Lydia. She sold expensive cloth that had been made in the town of Thyatira in western Turkey, where she was from. Since she already worshiped God, she was very receptive to Paul's encouragement to follow God's advice as Jesus did. After she and her family were symbolically rinsed with water to show their willingness to do so, she invited us to stay for a while.

Paul and Silas are Thrown in Prison at Philippi

Some time later, as we were going back to the place by the river to pray, we met a female slave with a spirit that enabled her to tell people's fortunes, which generated a lot of money for her owners. She followed us around for several days, announcing that we were encouraging people to follow God's advice for a better life. This annoyed Paul, so one day he commanded the spirit to leave her, as Jesus had done for others. When her owners realized that she could no longer earn money for them, they took Paul and Silas to the local authorities, claiming that they were causing trouble by encouraging Roman citizens to follow Jewish customs. Since a

ACTS

lot of other people supported their accusation, the authorities ordered Paul and Silas to be beaten and thrown in prison. The guard was instructed to put them in the most secure part of the prison with their feet in stocks.

A Prison Guard and His Family Follow God's Advice

Around midnight, while the other prisoners were listening to Paul and Silas sing hymns and pray, an earthquake violently shook the prison, causing all the cell doors to open and breaking the prisoners' restraints. When the prison guard woke up and saw what happened, he assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was going to commit suicide. But Paul told him not to harm himself, since all the prisoners were still there. After the guard got a lamp and led Paul and Silas outside, he asked them what he needed to do to enjoy a better life. They explained that if he and his family followed God's advice as Jesus did, they would all enjoy a better life. The guard treated their wounds while they shared God's advice with his family. After he and his family were rinsed with water to symbolize their commitment to follow God's advice, the guard invited Paul and Silas to come to his home to eat and celebrate that his entire family had decided to follow God's advice.

The next morning the authorities sent messengers to tell the guard to release Paul and Silas. But when the guard told them that they were free to go, Paul informed the messengers that he and Silas had been beaten publicly and thrown in prison without a trial, even though they were Roman citizens. So he insisted that the authorities release them publicly. When the authorities learned that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were afraid they would be held accountable for having Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in prison. So they apologized and asked them to leave the city. Paul and Silas agreed but decided to go to Lydia's home to encourage Jesus' followers before they left.

Paul, Silas and Timothy Visit Thessalonica

17 Paul, Silas and Timothy then went west through the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica. As usual, Paul went to the Jewish worship center on the weekly day of rest. Three weeks in a row he explained that Jesus was the one God's spokesmen wrote about long ago, who would help people enjoy a better life, and who would come back to life after death. When Paul and Silas invited the people to follow Jesus' example, some Jews and a lot of Greeks, including a number of prominent women, decided to do so.

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But some other Jews recruited several men to stir up trouble. The men went looking for Paul and the others at Jason's home but didn't find them there. So they took Jason and some of Jesus' other followers to the local authorities, claiming they were causing trouble by suggesting that Jesus would replace the Roman leader. The authorities were very upset about this, so they required bail from Jason and the others before letting them go.

Paul, Silas and Timothy Visit Berea and Athens

That night some of Jesus' followers encouraged Paul, Silas and Timothy to continue westward to Berea. When they arrived, they visited the Jewish worship center. The people there were more eager to follow God's advice than the people in Thessalonica. Every day they studied what God's spokesmen had written long ago to verify what they heard. A lot of Jews and Greeks, including prominent women, decided to follow God's advice.

But when some of the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul was encouraging people in Berea to follow God's advice, they went there to stop him. So Jesus' followers took him to Athens by boat, while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. Paul sent them a message to join him as soon as possible. While he was waiting for them to arrive, he was disturbed by all the idols he saw in Athens. So every day he talked with people at the Jewish worship center and the local market. Some who belonged to the philosophical groups known as Epicureans and Stoics didn't understand what Paul was talking about. They thought he was referring to some foreign god named Jesus, who had come back to life after he died. But they were curious, so they invited Paul to come to their discussion group, where they critiqued any new idea that came along. Paul accepted their invitation and explained,

“As I was walking through town, I noticed that you worship a variety of gods. One altar has the inscription, *For the god we don't know anything about*. This is the God I came to tell you about. God isn't limited to man-made temples because God made the world and everything in it. Since God is the source of all life, God isn't dependant on anyone's help. Every human being has come from the first person God created, and God determines how long people live.

“Since God is the source of our existence, as some of your own poets have stated, we should try to learn more about God. Although God overlooks your ignorance, you shouldn't portray God as an image formed out of gold, silver or stone. What God desires is for *everyone* to follow God's advice so we can all enjoy

ACTS

a better life. The reason that God brought Jesus back to life after he died was to verify that God had chosen him to help people accomplish this.”

When Paul mentioned that God brought Jesus back to life after he died, some people made fun of him. But others believed what he said and wanted to hear more. So as he left, some people went along with him, including a woman named Damaris and a man named Dionysius, one of the discussion group leaders.

Paul Shares God’s Advice with People in Corinth

18 When Paul left Athens, he went to the city of Corinth, where he met Aquila, a Jewish man who was born and raised in the district of Pontus in northern Turkey. Aquila and his wife Priscilla had recently left Italy because the Roman emperor Claudius ordered all Jewish people to leave Rome. Since Paul’s occupation was the same as Aquila and Priscilla’s, he stayed with them so they could make tents together. But on every weekly day of rest, he went to the local worship center to encourage both Jews and non-Jews to follow God’s advice.

While Silas and Timothy were returning from northern Greece, Paul explained to the Jews in Corinth that Jesus was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life. Some of them refused to believe Paul, so he told them that they were responsible for themselves, and that he would spend more time sharing God’s advice with non-Jews.

When Paul left the local worship center, he went to the house next door, where Titius Justus lived. Titius and Crispus, one of the leaders of the worship center, both followed God’s advice, as did Crispus’ entire family. So a lot of people in Corinth were rinsed with water to symbolize their commitment to follow God’s advice.

That night God encouraged Paul in a dream,

“Don’t be afraid. I’ll protect you so you can keep sharing my advice, because there are still a lot of people in this city who will follow it.”

So Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth, encouraging the people to follow God’s advice. During that time, Gallio was the Roman leader of southern Greece. One day some Jews took Paul to Gallio, accusing him of encouraging people to worship God in a way that contradicted their tradition. Before Paul even explained, Gallio told his accusers,

“If this involved a violation against Roman law, I would patiently listen to your complaint. But since it pertains to your Jewish tradition, you’ll have to resolve the matter yourselves.”

ACTS

Gallio then asked them to leave. Some time later, they took a leader of the local worship center named Sosthenes to Gallio, but he also refused to listen to their complaint.

Paul Encourages Jesus' Followers in Turkey

After Paul had spent enough time with Jesus' followers in Corinth, he went to the seaport of Cenchrea, where he cut his hair short to express his thanks to God. From there he sailed to the seaport of Ephesus in western Turkey with Aquila and Priscilla. He went to the local worship center there to encourage the Jews to follow God's advice. As he was leaving, they asked him to stay longer, so he said he would return if or when God wanted him to.

Paul then sailed back to Caesarea, where he greeted Jesus' followers before going north to Antioch. After spending some time there, he went west through the district of Galatia to the district of Phrygia in western Turkey, encouraging Jesus' followers along the way.

Apollos Shares God's Advice in Ephesus and Greece

A Jewish man named Apollos followed God's advice diligently. He lived in Ephesus but was born and raised in Alexandria, on the northern coast of Egypt. He was a dynamic speaker and was very familiar with what God's spokesmen wrote long ago. He encouraged people to follow God's advice but was unaware that someone succeeded John, who symbolically rinsed people with water. So when Aquila and Priscilla heard Apollos speak in the local worship center, they informed him that Jesus had demonstrated how to follow God's advice.

When Apollos decided to go to Corinth, Jesus' followers wrote a letter asking the people to welcome him. He helped a lot of people follow God's advice and had lively discussions in public with the Jews, explaining that Jesus was the one God's spokesmen wrote about long ago, whom God promised would help people enjoy a better life.

Paul Visits Ephesus

19 While Apollos was still in Corinth, Paul went to Ephesus and asked about a dozen men if they were following God's advice as Jesus did. They said they weren't aware of Jesus, so Paul asked who had rinsed them with water to symbolize their willingness to follow God's advice. When they said it was John, Paul replied,

“While John rinsed people with water to symbolize their willingness to follow God's advice, he encouraged them to follow the example of the one who succeeded him, namely, Jesus.”

ACTS

So the men decided to be rinsed again to symbolize their commitment to follow Jesus' example. As Paul placed his hands on them, God enabled them to share God's advice with others in a variety of languages.

For the next three months, Paul went to the local worship center to encourage people to follow God's advice as Jesus did so they could enjoy a better life. Since some people refused and made derogatory remarks, Paul and Jesus' other followers decided to share their message at the place where Tyrannus often taught. They went there every day for two years, so most people in western Turkey heard about Jesus.

The Seven Sons of Sceva Confront a Harmful Spirit

God helped Paul do some amazing things in Ephesus. People who were sick or harassed by harmful spirits became well just by touching articles of his clothing that were taken to them. Some Jewish exorcists decided to use Jesus' name in their effort to free others of harmful spirits. But when the seven sons of the religious leader Sceva tried to free a man of a harmful spirit, it recognized Jesus' and Paul's authority but not theirs. The man with the spirit physically overpowered them, so they ran away, leaving their coats behind. When the people in Ephesus heard about it, they were alarmed but gained a lot more respect for Jesus. After those who followed God's advice shared their experiences, the exorcists publicly burned their expensive resource books. As time passed, more and more people began to follow God's advice as Jesus did.

While Paul spent more time in western Turkey, he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to northern Greece. He was planning to visit Rome after returning to Jerusalem.

Conflict Arises concerning the Greek Goddess

About that time, a silversmith named Demetrius and his coworkers were earning a good income by making miniature temples of the Greek goddess Artemis. One day he told his coworkers,

“As you know, we're earning a good income by making miniature temples. But Paul is convincing people here and throughout western Turkey that our gods are not real. This is jeopardizing our occupation and degrading Artemis, whom people worship throughout the world.”

The coworkers became very angry and insisted that the people of Ephesus still worship Artemis. As the word spread throughout the city, people gathered at the amphitheater. They took Gaius and Aristarchus along because they knew they had come with Paul from northern Greece. Paul wanted to go, too, but Jesus' other followers wouldn't let him. Some

ACTS

friends of his who were community leaders also discouraged him from going.

There was a lot of confusion at the amphitheater. Most people didn't even know why they were there. Some of the Jews made Alexander go up front to get the people's attention and explain the situation. But when they discovered that he was a Jew, they chanted for two hours that they worship Artemis. Finally, a city official was able to get their attention,

“Everyone knows that the people of Ephesus honor and protect the temple of the great Artemis. There's no question about that, so there's no need to get so upset. The men you brought here haven't defamed your goddess and they haven't stolen anything from her temple. If Demetrius and his coworkers want to accuse someone, they should present their case in court. If you have any other concerns, they'll be handled in the proper manner. There's no reason for the disorderly conduct that we've had here today.”

The official then told everyone to go home.

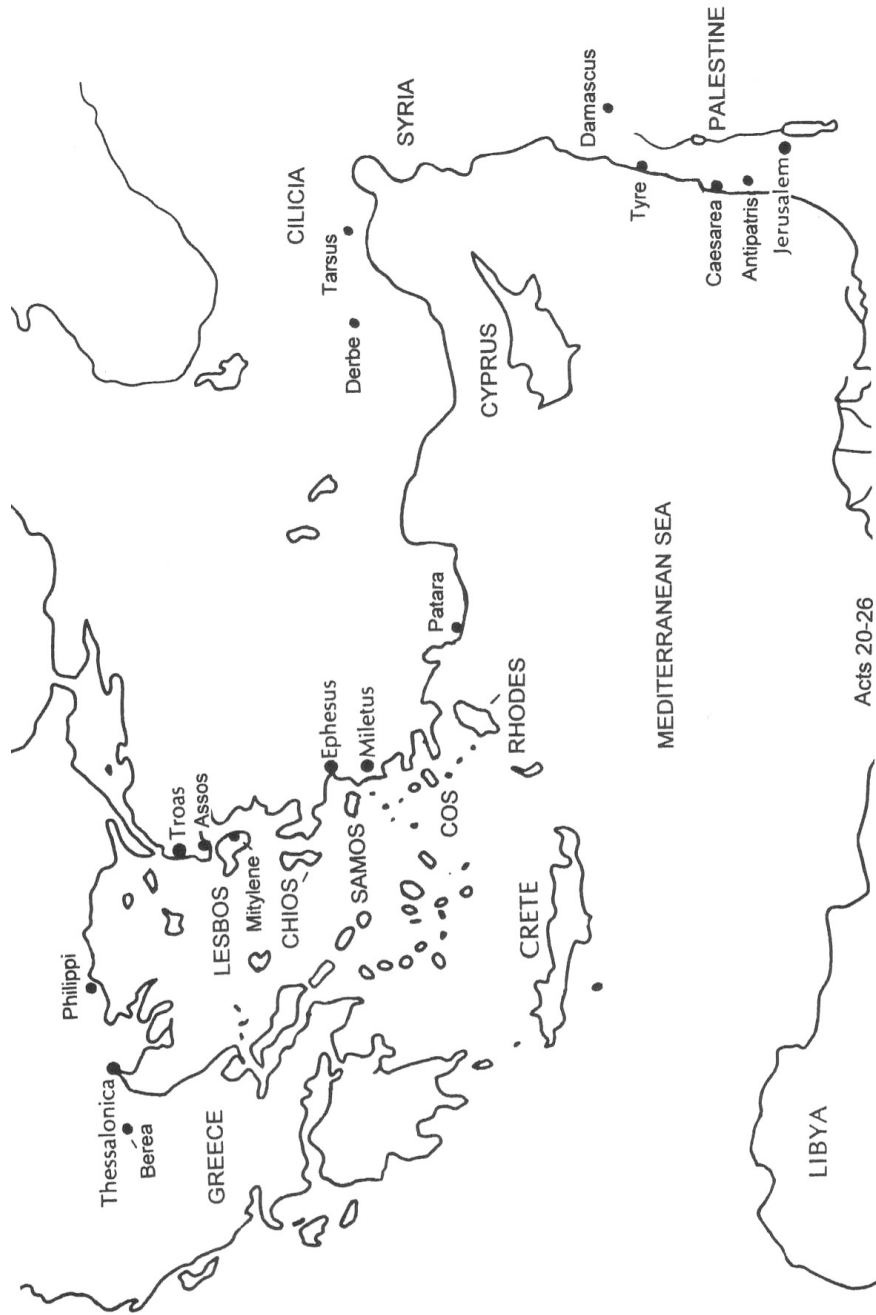
Paul Returns to Greece and Western Turkey

20 After the crowd dispersed, Paul encouraged Jesus' followers before heading back to northern Greece. After he encouraged Jesus' followers there, he went to southern Greece, where he stayed for three months. When he learned that some Jews were planning to get rid of him, he returned to northern Greece instead of sailing to Syria as he had planned. Several men accompanied him:

Timothy
Gaius, from the town of Derbe
Aristarchus and Secundus, from Thessalonica
Sopater, the son of Pyrrhus, from the city of Berea
Tychicus and Trophimus, from western Turkey

While we were in Philippi, they sailed to the seaport of Troas in northwestern Turkey. We joined them five days later, after our annual freedom celebration, and we stayed a week.

ACTS



ACTS

Eutychus Falls out of the Window at Troas

Paul was planning to leave on Monday, so after dinner Sunday evening, he shared God's advice with Jesus' followers until midnight. A young man named Eutychus was sitting by an open window because our lamps were making the room warm. Unfortunately, he fell asleep while Paul was talking and fell three stories. Everyone thought he was dead, but Paul went down and hugged him when he discovered he was still alive. We were all very relieved. A little later, we went back upstairs and Paul continued sharing God's advice until dawn.

Paul Visits Several Areas in Western Turkey

Paul left Monday morning, walking south to the seaport of Assos while the rest of us went there by boat. Then we sailed further south together to the seaport of Mitylene on the island of Lesbos. Continuing south the next day, we sailed to the area across from the island of Chios. We docked at the island of Samos on Wednesday and arrived at the seaport of Miletus on Thursday. Paul decided not to stop at Ephesus on the way because he was hoping to reach Jerusalem in time for the spring harvest celebration.

Paul Talks to the Leaders of Jesus' Followers at Miletus

While we were in Miletus, Paul asked the leaders of Jesus' followers in Ephesus to meet with him. When they arrived, he explained,

“As you know, ever since I came to western Turkey, I tried my best to encourage everyone, publicly and privately, to follow God's advice as Jesus did, even though some Jews gave me a hard time for doing so. Now I'm planning to go to Jerusalem and I know what could happen there. God warned me that wherever I go, some people may give me a hard time and throw me in jail. But this doesn't bother me because I'm not concerned about my own life. I just want to help others follow Jesus' example so they can enjoy a better life.

“Since you won't see me again, I want you to know that I've tried my best to help you follow Jesus' example, and you should do the same for others. Unfortunately, some of you will mislead those who are following it. You've depended on me for three years to help you follow God's advice so you can enjoy the life God promised. Now you must depend directly on God.

“You don't need to give me money or clothing because I work whenever I can to cover my coworkers' expenses as well as my

ACTS

own. But I encourage you to help others in need because Jesus pointed out that you'll enjoy life more when you *give* help than when you receive it."

Paul then prayed with the leaders. Before they accompanied him to the boat, they hugged him and cried because they were disappointed that they wouldn't see him again.

Paul Visits Jesus' Followers in Tyre

21 We sailed south to the islands of Cos and Rhodes, and then east to the seaport of Patera in southeastern Turkey. Then we sailed to northern Palestine, passing the island of Cyprus on our left. We docked at the seaport of Tyre, where the boat unloaded its cargo. Since we met some of Jesus' followers there, we stayed a week. While we were there, they warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem. At the end of the week, they accompanied us to the boat, along with their wives and children. After we prayed, we said goodbye and boarded the boat while they returned home.

Paul Visits Jesus' Followers in Ptolemais and Caesarea

From there we sailed south to the seaport of Ptolemais, where we spent the day visiting Jesus' followers. The next day we sailed further south to Caesarea, where we stayed for several days with Philip, one of the seven men whom Jesus' followers selected to distribute aid to widows. Philip had four unmarried daughters who encouraged others to follow God's advice. While we were there, one of God's spokesmen named Agabus came from the district of Judea. He put Paul's belt around his hands and feet as he explained that God predicted some Jews would tie Paul up in Jerusalem and turn him over to non-Jews. When we heard this, we discouraged Paul from going there. But he replied,

"Don't try to change my mind. I'm willing to be tied up and even killed in Jerusalem, as Jesus was."

When we realized that Paul wouldn't change his mind, we prayed for God's will to be accomplished. Then we headed for Jerusalem along with some of Jesus' followers from Caesarea. Mnason, one of Jesus' first followers on the island of Cyprus, also came along and invited us to stay with him in Jerusalem.

Paul Arrives in Jerusalem

When we arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus' followers gave us a warm welcome. The next day we went to visit James and Jesus' other chosen followers. Paul greeted them and explained how God had helped him

ACTS

encourage non-Jews to follow God's advice. They thanked God for that but shared their concern,

“As you know, thousands of Jewish people are diligently following God's advice. But some people claim that you're discouraging them from circumcising their children and following other traditions that Moses introduced. When they find out that you're here, they'll be very upset, so here's our suggestion. Go to the temple with the four men who've made a special promise to God and pay for their offering so they can have their head shaved to show that they've kept their promise. This will let everyone know that you still follow our traditions.

“But Jesus' non-Jewish followers don't need to observe this tradition. As you know, our letter to those in Antioch simply encouraged them to stop making offerings to idols.”

The next day Paul did what they suggested.

Paul Is Beaten and Arrested

About a week later, some Jews from western Turkey saw Paul in the temple. They had previously seen him in Jerusalem with Trophimus, whom they knew was a non-Jew from Ephesus, and they assumed Paul had taken him into the temple. So they spread the rumor that he was discouraging Jewish people from following their traditions and that he disrespected the temple by taking non-Jews inside. Some Jews became very upset about this, so they dragged him out of the temple and closed the doors.

When the Roman military commander heard that some people in Jerusalem were trying to kill Paul, he took some soldiers and officers along to restore order. When the people saw them, they stopped hitting Paul. The commander ordered him to be heavily chained and asked the crowd who he was and what he had done. But since there was a lot of confusion, the commander couldn't determine what had actually happened, so he instructed the soldiers to take Paul to their quarters. When they arrived at the stairs of the quarters, the soldiers had to carry him because the crowd was becoming violent, insisting that he be killed.

As Paul was being taken inside the soldiers' quarters, he asked the commander in the Greek language for permission to speak. When the commander heard Paul speak Greek, he asked if he was the Egyptian who had recently incited riots and hid 4,000 rebels in the desert. Paul replied,

“I'm a Jew from Tarsus, a prominent city in the district of Cilicia. Please let me speak to the people.”

ACTS

The commander gave Paul permission, so he stood on the top flight of stairs and got the people's attention by speaking in Hebrew,

Paul Addresses the Angry Crowd

22 “Let me explain. I’m a Jew who was born and raised in Tarsus, in the district of Cilicia. Our respected religious instructor Gamaliel taught me God’s advice, and I’ve tried to follow it as passionately as you do. I harassed Jesus’ followers and threw them in prison. Some have died in the process.

“Our religious leaders can verify that they gave me authority to arrest Jesus’ followers in Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. But on my way there around noon, a blinding light from the sky suddenly shone on me. As I sat down with my eyes closed, someone asked why I was harassing him and his followers. When I asked who was speaking, the man identified himself as Jesus from Nazareth. Those who were traveling with me also saw the light but they didn’t hear Jesus talking to me. When I asked what he wanted me to do, he told me to continue going to Damascus, where someone else would tell me what to do. Since the light had blinded me, those who were with me led me by the hand the rest of the way.

“The Jewish people in Damascus respected a man named Ananias, who followed God’s advice diligently. When he came and asked me to look at him, I opened my eyes and could see again. He told me that the God our ancestors worshiped wanted me to better understand God’s will by learning about Jesus, who had followed God’s advice completely. Ananias predicted that I would encourage everyone I meet to follow Jesus’ example. Then he suggested that I be rinsed with water to symbolize my commitment to follow God’s advice as Jesus did.

“When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, Jesus told me to leave the city right away because some people there didn’t want to hear about him. I tried to object, explaining that they knew I had arrested his followers in the local worship centers and threw them in prison, and that I approved of his follower Stephen’s death, while guarding the coats of those who stoned him. But Jesus insisted I share God’s advice with non-Jews far away.”

The crowd listened to Paul’s explanation but persisted that he be killed. They expressed their anger by yelling, ripping their clothes and

ACTS

throwing dust into the air. So the military commander instructed the soldiers to take Paul to their quarters and whip him to find out why the crowd was so upset. As the soldiers were tying him up to be whipped, he asked the military officer standing nearby if it was legal to whip a Roman citizen who hadn't had a trial. The officer knew it wasn't, so he informed the commander that Paul was a Roman citizen. The commander was alarmed to learn this, so he personally asked Paul if it was true. When the commander admitted that it cost him a lot of money to become a Roman citizen, Paul stated that he had been a citizen since birth. So the soldiers immediately untied him.

The commander still wanted to know what the charges were against Paul, so he ordered the religious leaders to convene for a hearing the next day.

Paul Addresses the Religious Leaders

23 During the hearing, Paul insisted that he hadn't done anything to offend God. When the religious leader Ananias ordered the guards to slap him across the face, he responded,

“God could do the same to you, because you pretend to follow God's advice while judging me, but you're not doing so when you order someone to hit me.”

Some people scolded Paul for talking to the religious leader this way, so he replied,

“I didn't realize that he's a religious leader. I know one of God's spokesmen told our ancestors long ago that we should respect our leaders.”

Paul was aware that some of the religious leaders were Pharisees, who believed that God will bring people back to life after they die. He also knew that some of the religious leaders were Sadducees, who rejected that belief and the belief that God sends messengers to people. So he pointed out that he was a member of the Pharisees and that some people were criticizing him for the belief that God will bring people back to life after they die. When he mentioned this, the Pharisees began arguing with the Sadducees, insisting that Paul hadn't done anything wrong, and acknowledging that a messenger from God may have spoken to him.

The military commander was concerned that Paul could get seriously hurt during the heated debate, so he instructed the soldiers to take Paul to their quarters. That night God encouraged Paul to help the people in Rome follow God's advice, as he had done in Jerusalem.

ACTS

Some Jews Plan to Kill Paul

The next day, more than 40 Jews made plans to kill Paul and promised not to eat or drink anything until they succeeded. They presented their plan to the religious leaders,

“Ask the military commander to bring Paul back from the soldiers’ quarters so you can interrogate him further. We’ll ambush and kill him before he gets here.”

When Paul’s sister’s son heard about the plan, he went to the soldiers’ quarters and told Paul. So Paul asked one of the officers to take the boy to the commander. When the commander asked the boy in private what he wanted, he explained that the religious leaders were going to ask the commander to bring Paul back the next day so they could interrogate him further. Then he pleaded,

“Please don’t agree to do that, because more than 40 men are planning to ambush and kill him. They’ve promised not to eat or drink anything until they succeed, and they’re just waiting for you to put their plan in motion.”

As the commander gave the boy permission to leave, he asked him not to tell anyone that he warned him about the plan. The commander then gave two officers these instructions,

“Get 200 soldiers and 70 cavalrymen ready to leave for Caesarea at 9:00 tonight. Put Paul on a horse and take him to Felix, the leader of the district of Judea.”

The commander sent this letter along with them:

“Honorable Felix,

“Some Jews have tried to kill this man, but I rescued him when I discovered that he’s a Roman citizen. I wanted to know what the charge was against him, so I ordered their religious leaders to question him. I learned that it only pertained to their religious traditions and that he didn’t deserve a prison term, much less death. When I discovered their plan to ambush and kill him, I decided to send him to you, and I told his accusers that they’d have to present their case to you.

Sincerely,
Claudias Lysias”

That night the soldiers and cavalry took Paul as far as Antipatris. The next day the soldiers returned to Jerusalem while the cavalry took him the rest of the way to Caesarea, delivering him to Felix along with the

ACTS

commander's letter. After Felix read the letter, he asked where Paul was from. When he learned that Paul was from the district of Cilicia, he said he wouldn't hear Paul's case until his accusers arrived. So he ordered Paul to be kept under guard at the headquarters of the Roman emperor.

Felix Hears the Accusations against Paul

24 Five days later, Ananias went to Caesarea with some other religious leaders and their attorney, Tertullus. When Felix invited them to present their case against Paul, Tertullus did the speaking,

“Honorable Felix,

“Thanks to you, we're enjoying peace in our district and have seen many improvements.

“We don't want to waste your valuable time, so I'll be brief. This man has been causing trouble everywhere among the Jewish people. He's one of the leaders of Jesus' followers known as the Nazarenes, and he tried to dishonor the temple before we arrested him. You can question him yourself to verify these charges.”

After the Jewish leaders confirmed the allegations, Felix motioned to Paul to give his defense,

“I know that you've been a judge in our district for many years, and I'm glad to have the opportunity to defend myself. As you know, I went to Jerusalem to worship 12 days ago. There's no evidence that I caused trouble at the temple, in the other worship centers, or anywhere else in the city. My accusers claim that I'm a heretic because I'm one of Jesus' followers, but I worship the same God our ancestors worshiped, and I follow the advice that God's spokesmen recorded long ago. I even share the same belief that some of my accusers do, that God will bring everyone back to life after they die.

“I always try my best to respect God and care about others. For many years I've gone to the temple to make offerings to God and give money for people in need. The Jews from western Turkey who claim that I was causing trouble in the temple would be here now if they had any evidence to support their accusation.

“The only charge that my accusers can substantiate is the statement I made to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, that I believe God will bring people back to life after they die.”

ACTS

Felix now had a little better idea of what Jesus' followers believed, but he told Paul that he would wait until the military commander Lysias arrived to decide his case. He then instructed an officer to put Paul in prison and allow his friends to provide for his needs.

A few days later, Felix and his Jewish wife Drusilla sent for Paul to learn more about the beliefs of Jesus' followers. As Felix thought about the consequences for not following God's advice, he became alarmed and told Paul to leave until another time. He had frequent conversations with Paul, hoping he would eventually offer him a bribe. But until he was replaced by Porcius Festus two years later, Felix left Paul in prison to retain the approval of the Jews.

Festus Hears the Allegations against Paul

25 Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea, he went to Jerusalem. The religious leaders informed Festus of their charges against Paul and asked him to have Paul brought to Jerusalem for trial, planning to ambush and kill him on the way there. But Festus told them that Paul would be kept in Caesarea, and he invited those who wanted to press charges to accompany him when he returned.

About ten days later, Festus returned to Caesarea. The very next day, he held a hearing for Paul. The religious leaders from Jerusalem brought several serious charges against him, but they had no evidence for any of them. Paul insisted that he had followed God's advice and never dishonored the temple or the Roman emperor. Festus wanted to please the Jews, so he asked Paul if he would agree to be tried by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. But Paul replied,

“You already know that the Jews don't have any valid charges against me. If I had committed a crime that deserved the death penalty, I wouldn't challenge it. But I shouldn't be handed over to those who have no basis for their charges, so I appeal to the Roman emperor.”

After Festus conferred with his advisors, he told Paul that his appeal was granted.

Some time later, Agrippa II, the leader of a nearby district, and his sister Bernice went to Caesarea to welcome Festus. After they were there for several days, Festus explained Paul's situation to Agrippa,

“My predecessor Felix left a man in prison named Paul, whom the religious leaders in Jerusalem recently asked me to condemn to death. I explained that Roman law doesn't allow someone to be condemned before he's had the opportunity to defend himself. So the day after I returned to Caesarea, I conducted a hearing. When

ACTS

his accusers presented their case, I was surprised that their charges only pertained to their religious traditions and a man named Jesus, whom Paul claims God brought back to life after he died. I wasn't sure what to do, so I asked Paul if he would agree to be tried by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. But he appealed to the Roman emperor, so I'm keeping him in custody until the emperor is ready."

Agrippa wanted to hear what Paul had to say, so Festus made arrangements for another hearing the next day. After Agrippa and Bernice made a royal entrance into the assembly hall accompanied by military commanders and city officials, Festus had Paul brought in as he explained the situation,

"Some Jewish people here and in Jerusalem are insisting that I condemn Paul to death. But he hasn't done anything that deserves the death penalty. So when he appealed to the emperor, I decided to grant his request. Since I'm not sure what charges to list, and I can't send a prisoner to the emperor without a list of charges, I'd like you to help me question him."

Paul Defends Himself against the Accusations

26 Then Agrippa gave Paul permission to defend himself,

"I'm glad to have the opportunity to respond to the accusations that some of my fellow Jews have made against me. I realize you're already familiar with our customs and controversies, but please be patient as I explain.

"My fellow Jews are aware that when I was a young man, I became a member of the Pharisees, who try very hard to follow God's advice and who believe that God will bring people back to life after they die. But now some Jews want to execute me for believing what God promised our ancestors.

"I used to harass Jesus' followers because I thought they weren't following God's advice. Our religious leaders gave me permission to throw them in prison in Jerusalem, and I even supported their execution. I was so outraged that I often went to the local worship centers in other districts to harass Jesus' followers and force them to curse him.

"But one day around noon, as I was on my way to Damascus with the authority of our religious leaders to arrest Jesus' followers, a light brighter than the sun shone on me and my fellow travelers.

ACTS

While we sat on the ground with our eyes closed, someone asked me in Hebrew why I was harassing him and his followers. When I asked who was speaking, the man identified himself as Jesus. He explained that he wanted me to follow his example by helping others follow God's advice for a better life, instead of submitting to the self-centeredness that Satan personifies.

"Since then, I've encouraged people in Damascus, Jerusalem, and throughout Judea and other districts to follow God's advice as Jesus did. This is why some Jews wanted to kill me in the temple. But God protected me because I only shared what Moses and God's other spokesmen predicted long ago, that the first person God brought back to life would be the one who was executed for helping others enjoy a better life."

When Paul finished speaking, Festus suggested that he must not have his facts straight. But Paul replied,

"No, this is the truth. I'm sure Agrippa believes what God's spokesmen said long ago."

When Agrippa remarked that Paul almost convinced him to follow Jesus' example, Paul responded,

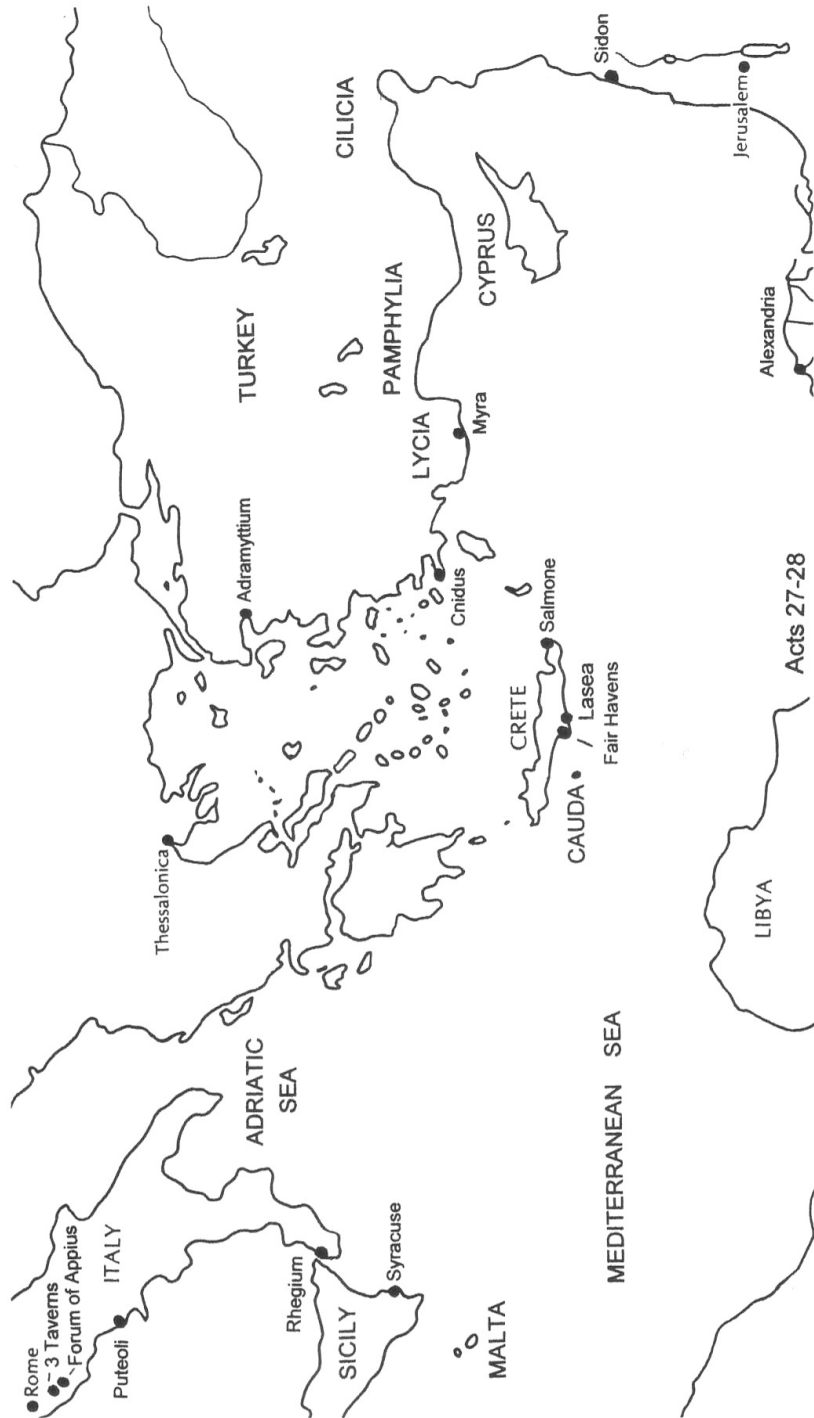
"I pray that you and everyone else here would follow Jesus' example but that you wouldn't be imprisoned for it, as I am."

After Festus, Agrippa and his sister Bernice left the assembly hall, they decided that Paul didn't deserve the death penalty or even a prison term. Agrippa told Festus that Paul could've been released if he hadn't appealed to the Roman emperor.

Paul Is Shipwrecked on the Way to Rome

27 The Roman military commander named Julius was given the responsibility to take Paul and some other prisoners to Italy. The ship we boarded was from the seaport of Adramyttium in northwestern Turkey, where it was scheduled to return. A man named Aristarchus from Thessalonica went along with us. When we arrived at the seaport of Sidon in northern Palestine, Julius was kind enough to let Paul visit his friends.

ACTS



Acts 27-28

ACTS

From there we had to sail north of the island of Cyprus because of the contrary wind. We sailed past the districts of Cilicia and Pamphylia in southern Turkey to the seaport of Myra in the district of Lycia. There the commander transferred us to a ship from Alexandria that was headed for Italy. It took us several days to get near the seaport of Cnidus, in southwestern Turkey. The wind prevented us from going further west, so we sailed south past the seaport of Salmone, on the east side of the island of Crete. We continued around the south side of Crete to the seaport of Fair Havens, just west of the town of Laesea.

Since the journey was taking longer than expected and it was almost winter, sailing was becoming more treacherous. So Paul warned the crew that the ship and cargo could be destroyed and we could all be killed. But the captain and the owner of the ship persuaded the commander to sail northwest to the seaport of Phoenix, on the southwest side of Crete, since it had a better harbor for the ship to spend the winter. So when a mild wind began blowing from the south, the crew resumed sailing, staying close to the shore of Crete. But before long, a strong wind from the north known as the Euroclydon drove us close to the small island of Cauda, where the crew managed to bring the utility boat on board and reinforce the bottom of the ship. Since they were afraid that we might be driven onto sand bars along the northern coast of Africa, they threw some things overboard the next day to lighten the ship. Some of us helped them throw some more things overboard the following day.

We hadn't seen the sun or stars for many days and the storm was still pounding us, so we lost hope that we would survive. But Paul encouraged us,

“You should've accepted my advice and stayed in Crete. But none of us will die, even though we'll have to run the ship into an island. Tonight one of God's messengers told me not to be afraid, because we'll all survive and I'll eventually appear before the Roman emperor. So don't worry. I believe it'll happen as God said.”

In the middle of the night two weeks later, while we were near the Adriatic Sea, the crew realized that the wind was driving the ship close to land. They checked the depth of the water and found that it was 120 feet deep. When they checked it again a little later, it was 90 feet deep. They were afraid the ship would be driven against a reef, so they dropped four anchors off the back and prayed for daylight. Some of the crew decided to abandon ship, so they began lowering the utility boat into the water, pretending to drop anchors off the front of the ship. But Paul realized what they were doing and warned the commander and some soldiers that if

ACTS

the crew didn't stay on board, no one else would survive. So the soldiers cut the ropes on the utility boat and let it fall into the sea.

When it was almost dawn, Paul encouraged everyone to eat because they hadn't eaten in two weeks. He insisted that none of them would be harmed but they'd have to eat to survive. So after he thanked God for the food and began to eat, everyone else ate, too. There were a total of 276 of us on board. When we finished eating, we threw the rest of the wheat overboard to lighten the ship.

Although the crew didn't recognize the land they saw at dawn, they decided to run the ship onto the beach. They cut the ropes to the anchors, loosened the ropes on the rudders, and raised the front sail to catch the wind. The front of the ship ran aground, but the waves battered the rear. The soldiers were planning to kill the prisoners so they wouldn't get away. But the commander wanted to save Paul, so he ordered those who could swim to jump overboard and swim to land. Since the rest reached land on planks and anything else that floated, everyone on board survived.

28 When the local residents came to help us, we learned that we were on the island of Malta. They made a fire for us because we were wet and cold. As Paul added a bundle of wood to the fire, the heat caused a snake to crawl out and bite him on the hand. When the local residents saw the snake bite him, they assumed he had murdered someone and expected him to die. But he shook it off into the fire and had no adverse reaction to it. Since he didn't die right away and his hand didn't even swell, they concluded he must be a god.

The local leader named Publius welcomed us and extended his generous hospitality for three days. While we were there, his father became ill with fever and severe diarrhea, so Paul prayed for him. When others who were sick learned that the man became well, they asked us to heal them, too. They were so thankful that when we left three months later, they provided what we needed.

We boarded another ship from Alexandria, which had spent the winter on the island and had a large image of twin gods displayed. We sailed north to Syracuse, a seaport on the southeast side of Sicily, where we stayed for three days. We continued north to the seaport of Rhegium, on the southwestern tip of Italy. The next day the wind again blew from the south, so we arrived at the seaport of Puteoli on the west coast of Italy the following day. Some of Jesus' followers invited us to stay there for a week. When word reached his followers in Rome that we were coming, they met us at Forum of Appius and Three Taverns, two towns south of Rome. As we left, Paul thanked God for their encouragement.

ACTS

Paul Arrives in Rome and Meets with the Jewish Leaders

When we arrived in Rome, the military commander delivered all the prisoners to the prison except for Paul, whom he allowed to live alone under private guard. Three days later Paul met with the Jewish leaders and explained his situation,

“Although I didn’t commit a crime or break any of our traditions, I was arrested in Jerusalem and turned over to the Roman authorities. After they interrogated me, they wanted to let me go because there was no evidence that I deserved the death penalty. But the Jews insisted I be executed, so I had to appeal to the Roman emperor. The only reason I was arrested is that I encouraged people to follow God’s advice so they could enjoy a better life.”

The Jewish leaders replied,

“We haven’t received any written accusations against you from the district of Judea, and no Jews have come to file charges against you. But since there is such widespread opposition to Jesus’ followers, we’re interested in hearing what you have to say.”

Some time later, several of the Jewish leaders visited Paul for the entire day. Referring to what Moses and God’s other spokesmen wrote long ago, he explained that people need to follow God’s advice as Jesus did to enjoy a better life. Some of the Jewish leaders agreed, but as others started to leave, Paul quoted what God’s spokesman Isaiah told our ancestors,

“Although you appear to listen, you don’t understand because you’re not really interested. Since you’ve closed your eyes and ears, I can’t help you follow God’s advice for a better life.”

Paul then informed the Jewish leaders that a lot of non-Jews are following God’s advice for a better life.

During the next two years, no one tried to stop Paul from helping others follow God’s advice and learn more about Jesus.

ROMANS

1 One of Jesus' followers named Paul, who encouraged people to follow God's advice for a better life, wrote this letter to Jesus' followers in Rome.

God Wants Everyone to Enjoy a Better Life

Dear Friends,

God's spokesmen explained long ago that the one who would help us enjoy a better life would be a descendant of our famous leader David and come back to life after death. The one they were referring to is Jesus. God has given us the privilege of inviting others to follow his example so everyone would have the opportunity to enjoy a better life.

I'm thankful that wherever I go people are aware that you're following Jesus' example. I often ask God to make it possible for me to visit you so we can encourage each other. I'm anxious to invite others in your community to follow Jesus' example because I know God wants everyone to enjoy a better life, regardless of their religious background. This isn't anything new. One of God's spokesmen mentioned long ago that whoever follows God's advice will enjoy a better life.

Following God's Advice Is the Path to a Better Life

God is very disappointed with people who refuse to follow God's advice and discourage others from following it. Even though God's power is evident in everything God created, some people still choose not to acknowledge God. They think they're clever by portraying God as a human being, an animal, a bird, and even a reptile. But they're obviously not very smart because they show more respect for the things God created than for the one who created them. Some men and women even misuse their own bodies, and they'll suffer the consequences for it.

Since these people refuse to follow God's advice, God lets them think and do whatever they want. Their self-centeredness pervades their lives and reveals itself in many ways. They don't respect God nor their parents as they should, and they're not loyal to anyone but themselves. Instead of caring about others, they slander and insult them. And instead of helping people in need, they try to obtain more things for themselves by cheating, fighting, and even murdering to get them. Although they have some knowledge of God's advice, they keep doing things that make their lives miserable, and they encourage others to join them.

ROMANS

Following God's Advice Is a Personal Choice

2 You shouldn't criticize others for not following God's advice, because you don't follow it very well yourselves. Just knowing how patient God is and how much God cares about you should motivate you to want to improve your attitude and behavior. To enjoy a better life, you must do more than *listen* to God's advice; you need to *follow* it. As long as you refuse to do so, your life will be miserable.

God doesn't consider certain people more special than anyone else. Those who honor God by following God's advice will enjoy a better life, no matter who they are; and those who are self-centered will have a miserable life, regardless of their religious background.

Although they're not aware of it, some people already follow God's advice because they learned to do so in childhood. But as I invite others to follow Jesus' example, they must decide for themselves whether or not they want to.

Warning against Hypocrisy

Although you claim to follow God's advice and encourage others to follow it, you don't practice what you preach. You tell others not to steal, but you do it yourselves. You even steal idols, which you pretend to detest. You encourage others to keep their lifelong commitment to their spouse, but you don't do it yourself. You're proud that God has given you advice, but you insult God by not following it. God's spokesmen pointed out long ago that some of our ancestors dishonored God, and now you're doing the very same thing.

Religious Traditions Can be Misleading

Your Jewish heritage should help you follow God's advice. If people from a different heritage follow it, they'll be able to easily detect whether or not you are. Don't waste your time joining a particular religious group just to impress your friends, because the only way you can honor God is by following God's advice.

3 Those of us who have a Jewish heritage have a definite advantage over others because our ancestors were given God's advice long ago. The fact that some of them didn't follow it doesn't make it any less valid. One of God's spokesmen pointed out many years ago that God's advice is reliable and effective. So when people refuse to follow it, they should expect God to be disappointed.

It wouldn't make any sense to think that we can enjoy a better life by not following God's advice. Some people have accused us of claiming

ROMANS

that the less we follow it, the better our lives will be. But that's obviously not the case.

I've mentioned before that those who share our heritage don't have any advantage over anyone else when it comes to actually following God's advice. God's spokesmen pointed out long ago that no one understands or follows God's advice completely because everyone has a tendency to be self-centered.

A lot of people make life miserable for others by physically and verbally abusing them, and neglecting to help those in need. They don't realize they could enjoy a better life by following God's advice as Jesus did. So no one should brag about their religious background, because the only way they can enjoy the life God intended is by following God's advice, not their self-centered traditions.

There is only one God who cares about us and overlooks our shortcomings. God's spokesmen related long ago that *everyone* has the opportunity to enjoy a better life by following God's advice, and this hasn't changed.

We Should Follow Abraham's Example

4 Our ancestor Abraham would've had reason to brag if he could've attained a better life all by himself, without God's help. But one of God's spokesmen explained long ago that Abraham enjoyed life more because he followed God's advice.

As you know, when people work for a living, their employer is obligated to pay them. But when we follow God's advice, God isn't obligated to help us enjoy a better life. God does it willingly. Our famous ancestor David alluded to this long ago when he said we enjoy life more when we realize that God even overlooks our faults.

So don't assume you'll enjoy a better life just because you bear the physical symbol of Abraham's commitment to God. He enjoyed a better life by following God's advice before that symbol was even given. That's why he serves as such a good example that *anyone* can enjoy a better life.

When God promised Abraham that one of his descendants would help others enjoy a better life, God expected people to follow Jesus' example. If we could enjoy a better life just by following our traditions, God's promise would be meaningless and there would be no point in following Jesus' example. But as you know, many of our traditions just make our lives miserable.

Since God created the world, Abraham knew that God could keep the promise that he would have a lot of descendants. Even when he was nearly 100 years old, and he and his wife Sarah were well beyond the normal child-bearing years, he was still confident that God would keep

ROMANS

that promise. One of God's spokesmen explained long ago that Abraham enjoyed a better life because he lived as though God's promise would definitely come true. But what this spokesman said didn't only apply to Abraham. It applies to *everyone* who follows God's advice as Jesus did.

Thankful for Jesus' Example

5 Since we've begun following Jesus' example, we're enjoying life as God intended. We're thankful that Jesus helped us realize how much God cares about us. We're also thankful that we've experienced some hard times because they've helped us realize that following God's advice really works. As we care more about each other, we see that a better life is a real possibility.

As you know, people rarely give their lives for others, even if it's for someone who follows God's advice extremely well. But Jesus was willing to be executed to help us realize how much God cares about us even when we don't follow God's advice. While his willingness to die has helped us improve our attitude toward God, his exemplary life has made an even greater impact by helping us relate better to others so we can enjoy a better life. We're very thankful that God provided Jesus for this purpose.

Jesus' Example Contrasts Adam's

Since Adam was the first human being, he was the first person to experience a very unpleasant life by choosing not to follow God's advice. His descendants followed suit, but they weren't very conscious of it until they received God's advice through God's spokesman Moses. Since then, we've become more aware of how much God cares about us and wants us to enjoy a better life.

While Adam exemplified that people experience a miserable life when they choose not to follow God's advice, Jesus demonstrated that people enjoy a much better life when they follow it.

Make the Right Choice

6 Don't assume that the less you follow God's advice, the more you'll enjoy life. That's not about to happen. If you want to enjoy a better life, you need to make a definite decision to follow Jesus' example. Some of us have already made a commitment to follow God's advice even to the point of death, as Jesus did. Since God brought him back to life, God surely has the ability to help us follow his example.

You must make a choice, as you do when you decide which employer to work for. You can choose to live a miserable, self-centered life, or you can choose to follow God's advice for a better life.

ROMANS

Some of you realize that refusing to follow God's advice makes life very unpleasant for others as well as yourself. So you're ashamed of a lot of things you've done in the past and have decided to follow God's advice as Jesus did so you and others can enjoy a better life.

Stop Following Self-centered Traditions

7 As you know, our traditions only apply to us while we're alive. For example, one of our traditions forbids a woman from marrying someone else while her husband is alive. But when he dies, she is no longer obligated to him. In a similar way, you need to consider yourself deceased so you won't feel obligated to follow all of our traditions. Then you'll be able to focus on following God's advice, as Jesus did.

A lot of the traditions we used to follow made our lives very unpleasant because they reinforced our self-centeredness. But now we have a new outlook on life. We used to think we were enjoying life until God's advice made us realize just how self-centered we are. For example, one of God's guidelines reminds us that we shouldn't try to get what belongs to someone else.

We all have this tendency to be self-centered. Even when we have good intentions, we don't always follow through with them; and when we don't want to do something selfish, we sometimes end up doing it anyway. So God's advice is good for us because it helps us make better choices to avoid doing things that make our lives miserable. I'm thankful that God has given us the opportunity to enjoy life more by following Jesus' example instead of our self-centered desires.

God Helps Us Enjoy a Better Life

8 Since God knew that a self-centered lifestyle is a very unpleasant one, God enabled Jesus to demonstrate how to follow God's guidelines so we could enjoy a better life. But a lot of people still refuse to follow them because they're content with their self-centered lifestyle. Some of us used to be afraid to abandon any of our traditions, but now we're determined to change because we realize that self-centeredness makes life miserable. I'm convinced that the more we care about others as Jesus did, the more we'll experience the kind of life God originally intended.

Our ancestors anxiously looked forward to enjoying the better life God promised. But some of them lost hope that they would ever experience it because they were having such a hard time, as many of us have had. We didn't even know how to pray during these difficult times, but God still

ROMANS

met our needs, so we never lost hope. Now that God is helping us follow Jesus' example, we're beginning to enjoy the life God intended.

Jesus demonstrated that God cares about everyone. It doesn't matter whether we are followers or leaders, powerful or weak, enjoying life as God intended or still living a miserable, self-centered life. Although Jesus was executed for clarifying how we should care about others, he lives on through us when we help those who are having a hard time, who need food or clothing, or who are on the verge of death, as one of God's spokesmen echoed long ago.

God Invites Everyone to Enjoy a Better Life

9 Our ancestors received God's advice for a better life, which Jesus clearly demonstrated, but a lot of my fellow Jews refuse to follow it. This makes me so sad I wish I could trade places with them.

As you know, God promised that Abraham's wife Sarah would have a son, whom they named Isaac. Years later, God promised that Isaac's wife Rebecca would have children, and that their younger son Jacob would enjoy a better life than their older son Esau. This wasn't based on anything Jacob and Esau did, because they hadn't even been born, yet. It was just part of God's plan.

But we shouldn't criticize God. As you know, clay doesn't question why the potters shape it a certain way, because they can shape it any way they want to. God's spokesman Moses pointed out long ago that God has the same prerogative with people. For example, God allowed Pharaoh to become the leader of Egypt to demonstrate God's power.

Years later, God's spokesman Hosea reminded the Jews that God also invited non-Jews to follow God's advice. God's spokesman Isaiah pointed out that while all the Jewish people had the opportunity to enjoy a better life, only some of them took advantage of it. He predicted that a lot of people wouldn't follow the example of the special individual that God would provide to help them enjoy a better life. If it weren't for that individual, many people would have no better life than those who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah long ago. Some Jewish people are still enduring an unpleasant life because they think they can achieve a better life without God's help. Meanwhile, a lot of non-Jews are enjoying a better life because they're following God's advice.

ROMANS

Paul Expresses Concern for His Fellow Jews

10 I regularly ask God to help my fellow Jews enjoy a better life. I know a lot of them are very religious, but they don't point their enthusiasm in the right direction. Since they don't know how to follow God's advice correctly, they continue following their own misleading traditions. If they want to follow God's advice the right way, they need to care about others, as Jesus did.

God's spokesman Moses explained long ago that you don't have to search for God's advice, because you already know it. But you need to follow it the way Jesus did to enjoy a better life.

Another of God's spokesmen explained long ago that whoever follows God's advice will enjoy a better life, no matter what religious background they have. Obviously, people need the right information before they can act on it. That's why God's spokesman Isaiah indicated long ago how important it is for people to share God's advice with others, but he pointed out that not everyone who hears it will follow it.

As I mentioned before, our Jewish ancestors were aware of God's advice, but many chose not to follow it. So God decided to let the Jewish people see how non-Jews respond to it. Isaiah reported later that some non-Jews had begun following it, but a lot of Jewish people still refused.

Paul Encourages His Fellow Jews to Follow God's Advice

11 God has certainly not given up on the Jewish people. I should know, because I'm a descendant of Abraham, through his great-grandson Benjamin.

You may recall that God's spokesman Elijah asked God for help long ago when the Jewish people killed all God's other spokesmen, destroyed their offering tables, and were looking for him. God encouraged him by reminding him that a lot of other Jewish people were still following God's advice. But even today not all of them follow it.

Another of God's spokesmen pointed out that God allowed the Jewish people the freedom to reject God's advice. But our famous ancestor David became so disgusted by their behavior that he asked God to make their lives miserable. While a lot of them continued to reject God's advice, non-Jews began to accept it.

Paul Shifts His Attention to the Non-Jews

It's important that I continue sharing God's advice with those of you who are not Jewish. While a lot of Jewish people have refused to follow God's advice, many of you have changed your attitude and behavior and

ROMANS

begun to enjoy a better life. The more my fellow Jews see this happening, the more they'll want to do the same.

Jewish people who follow God's advice are like a cultivated fruit tree that is more productive than a wild one. But Jewish people who refuse to follow God's advice are like branches that have broken off of the tree, because they are essentially useless. Non-Jewish people who follow God's advice are like branches from a wild fruit tree that have been grafted into the cultivated tree, because they're enjoying a more productive life. God would like to graft the "broken branches" back into the cultivated tree so they, too, could enjoy a more productive life.

You non-Jews should stop bragging that God has offered you the opportunity to enjoy a better life. You wouldn't have this opportunity if it weren't for the Jewish people who shared God's advice with you in the first place. So don't take it for granted. If a lot of Jewish people can miss it, you can, too. God cares about everyone but lets them suffer the consequences for the bad choices they make. If you want to enjoy a better life, you need to follow God's advice on a regular basis.

One of God's spokesmen predicted long ago that a special Jewish person would help people improve their attitude and behavior so they could enjoy a better life. While Jewish people are quick to claim their heritage, many are reluctant to follow God's advice. But God keeps encouraging them to do so because God cares about them.

God is so much wiser than everyone else that no one could begin to give *God* advice, so we should respect God by following the advice God has given *us*.

The Importance of Following God's Advice

12 Since God cares about all of us, I want to encourage you to follow God's advice instead of your own selfish desires. But don't expect more of yourselves than God does. As you know, the various parts of a person's body have different functions. This is how it is with those of us who follow Jesus' example. God enables us to do it in a variety of ways. Some of us share God's advice with others and help them understand it. Some of us try our best to provide leadership for others. Some of us enjoy helping others by encouraging them and giving generously to meet their needs.

You should be anxious to follow God's advice instead of your own selfish desires, because that's your only hope for a better life. You can begin by respecting and caring about others as much as you do for your own family. Celebrate with them when they're happy and empathize with them when they're sad. Spend as much time helping others in need as you do socializing with your friends.

ROMANS

Try to get along with everyone. One of God's spokesmen indicated long ago that you should let God decide what to do with people who refuse to follow God's advice. When they give you a hard time, ask God to help you focus on their good qualities. Instead of taking revenge, give them food and water when they're hungry and thirsty. That's a good way to let them know you sincerely care about them.

A Summary of God's Advice

13 Those of you who follow God's advice should respect your government officials and be willing to pay taxes to support them because they're part of God's general plan to help you enjoy life. There's no need to be afraid of them if you obey the laws they enforce. But if you don't, you'll suffer the consequences. You should obey the law to fulfill its purpose, not to avoid its consequences.

All God's advice can be summed up in the following:

You should care about others
as much as you care about yourself.

So you shouldn't steal, murder, or break up a marriage to get what belongs to someone else. Follow Jesus' lifestyle instead of going to drinking parties, having sexual intercourse with whomever you want, or being jealous of what others have. The more you follow God's advice instead of your own selfish desires, the more you'll enjoy life.

Don't Criticize Others

14 Encourage those who are just beginning to gain a better understanding of God's advice. Some people think they're following God's advice by eating only vegetables, but it doesn't matter what you eat as long as you acknowledge that God provided it. Jesus helped me realize that people can eat almost anything unless they're convinced it dishonors God. If you care about others, you won't criticize them for not eating a particular food, because they may be convinced that it dishonors God.

Jesus risked his life to show us how to enjoy a better life, so don't spoil it by criticizing each other about what you eat. You can eat or drink almost anything as long as you don't offend someone in the process. So instead of bickering over this, try to get along with everyone and encourage each other to follow God's advice.

Some people also disagree about which days are more special than others. Since we rarely establish our own customs, we generally do what we've been taught. Some people are taught not to eat certain foods, and some are taught that certain days are more special than others. Everyone

ROMANS

should determine these matters for themselves. We shouldn't squabble over them because Jesus has helped us realize it's much more important to follow God's advice, as one of God's spokesmen pointed out long ago.

15 Those of us who have a good understanding of God's advice should care enough about others to help them understand it, too. Some people rejected Jesus when he did this, as others rejected one of God's spokesmen long ago. But we should honor God by patiently helping others understand God's advice.

Jesus reaffirmed what three of God's spokesmen related long ago, that the promises God made to our Jewish ancestors also apply to non-Jews. God's spokesman Isaiah predicted that non-Jews would respect the descendant of our famous ancestor David. I know you're following Jesus' example well and I hope you'll encourage others to do the same so you can all enjoy the better life you've been looking forward to.

Paul Share His Plans

God has given me the privilege of sharing Jesus' exemplary life with non-Jews from Jerusalem to Yugoslavia. As one of God's spokesmen mentioned long ago, a lot of people have not yet heard God's advice. Although I'm hoping they'll respond favorably and let God help them improve their attitude and behavior, I won't try to impress them with what others have said and done.

I've wanted to visit you many times over the years but just haven't had the opportunity. I hope I will when I go to Spain. Right now I'm on my way to deliver a gift from some non-Jews in Greece to some poor Jewish people in Jerusalem who are following Jesus' example. Since Jewish people had helped these non-Jews understand how to follow God's advice, they wanted to return the favor by helping some Jewish people in need. After I deliver their gift, I plan to visit you on my way to Spain and tell you more about Jesus.

Now that you're beginning to care about others as Jesus did, I'd like you to join me as I ask God for protection from the people in Judea who *aren't* following his example, so I can help those in Jerusalem who are. God willing, I'll then have the opportunity to visit you so we can encourage each other.

Paul Sends Greetings

16 I'd like you to extend a warm welcome to Phoebe, who has helped me and Jesus' followers in Cenchrae, a seaport in southern Greece. She'll be helping a lot of people, so give her all the support you can.

ROMANS

Please give my greetings to Priscilla and her husband Aquila, who risked their lives for me. Jesus' non-Jewish followers and I really appreciated their help. Please give my greetings also to . . .

- . . . my close friend Epenetos, one of the first people in Turkey to follow Jesus
- . . . Mary, who has been a great help to you
- . . . my relatives Andronicus and Junia, who shared God's advice even before I did, and spent time in jail with me for doing so
- . . . my good friend Ampliatus
- . . . Urbanus, who helps us tell others about Jesus
- . . . my close friend Stachys
- . . . Apelles, an outstanding follower of Jesus
- . . . Aristobulus' family
- . . . my relative Herodion
- . . . Jesus' followers from Narcissus' family
- . . . Tryphena, Tryphosa, and my good friend Persis, who follow Jesus' example well
- . . . Rufus, another outstanding follower of Jesus, and Rufus' mother, who treats me like her son
- . . . Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the rest of their family
- . . . Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, Olympas, and the rest of Jesus' followers in their family

Jesus' other followers here also send their greetings:

- my coworker Timothy;
- my relatives Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater;
- my host Gaius and those who meet at his home;
- Erastus, the town mayor, and his brother Quartus;
- and Tertius, who is writing this letter for me.

Concluding Remarks

I'm glad to hear you're following Jesus' example, but stay away from people who try to distract you. They're just interested in pursuing their own desires, and they mislead naive people with their smooth talk

I thank God that Jesus clarified the advice God's spokesmen related long ago and that God is ready and willing to help you follow it.

Sincerely,

Paul

First Letter to the CORINTHIANS

1 Paul and Sosthenes were followers of Jesus who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. With Sosthenes' assistance, Paul wrote this letter to Jesus' followers in Corinth, a prominent city on the southeastern coast of Greece.

Encouragement to Follow Jesus' Example

Dear Friends,

I often thank God for helping you enjoy life more by following Jesus' example.

Some of Chloe's friends mentioned that you've formed splinter groups around Apollos, Peter, and me. But I want you all to follow *Jesus*, not me. It was *he* who died on a cross for your benefit, and you were symbolically rinsed with water to express your commitment to follow *his* example, not mine. As far as I can recall, the only ones I symbolically rinsed were Crispus, Gaius, and the family of Stephanas. I'm glad I didn't rinse any others, because I don't want people to get the impression that they should follow me instead of Jesus. He allowed himself to be executed on a cross to demonstrate how committed we should be in following God's advice. So God wants me to encourage people to sincerely follow his example, not just symbolize their commitment to do so.

Long ago God promised to show that following any advice that contradicts God's is useless and foolish. But a lot of people think that following God's advice to obtain a better life is ridiculous. For example, many Jews are expecting God to do something extraordinary to produce a better life, and many Greeks think they can achieve it by acquiring more wisdom. But we're encouraging everyone to follow Jesus' example, which only makes sense to those who realize that's the best way to follow God's advice.

Some people think Jesus was foolish for allowing himself to be executed on a cross, but his death has helped motivate others to follow God's advice. Some people think God is also foolish and weak, but God is much stronger and wiser than they are. God uses those who appear to be weak, foolish, or poor to embarrass those who think they're strong, wise, or wealthy. So you should honor God, as one of God's spokesmen suggested long ago, by following God's advice the way Jesus did.

2 We'll keep encouraging you to follow God's advice, which existed even before God created the world. If our leaders had followed it when Jesus was alive, they wouldn't have executed him on a cross. One of

1 CORINTHIANS

God's spokesmen acknowledged long ago that some people don't experience the positive results of following God's advice because they think it's ridiculous. But we're encouraging you to follow it as Jesus did, because this is how God helps us enjoy a better life. When I visited you, I didn't try to persuade you to follow God's advice, because I knew Jesus' death would have more impact than anything I could say.

3 I'm trying to explain things as simply as I can because I realize a lot of you have just recently begun to follow Jesus' example. But as long as you form splinter groups around Apollos or me, you're not following the advice God helped us share with you. To use a farming analogy, you're like seeds that I've planted and Apollos watered. We're helping you begin to follow God's advice, but God is helping you grow. So God is more important than we are.

To use another analogy, we're working together to build you into a special kind of temple. God enabled me to lay the foundation by encouraging you to follow Jesus' example. But you must continue the building process by actually *following* it. Whether or not you're burned at the stake for doing so, God will help you enjoy a better life. If anyone tries to prevent that from happening, they'll suffer the consequences.

If you think you're smarter than God, you need to change your attitude because your wisdom is foolishness compared to God's. One of God's spokesmen mentioned long ago that God exposes those who think they're smart. Another spokesman pointed out that God knows how useless advice is that conflicts with God's.

So stop forming splinter groups around Apollos, Peter, and me, and don't be concerned about how soon you'll die. Just focus on following God's advice as Jesus did.

4 God knows that Apollos and I are trying hard to help you. But there's no reason to brag about either of us, because we both encouraged you to follow God's advice.

Some of you think you've already attained the ultimate life. I wish you did, but we're risking our lives to demonstrate that you should be as committed as Jesus was in following God's advice. We're often hungry and thirsty, and we don't have any decent clothes to wear. Some people give us a hard time and treat us like trash because we do manual labor and don't have a place to call home, but we're still kind and patient with them. I'm not telling you this to embarrass you but to let you know what you may also experience some day.

A lot of others are helping you follow Jesus' example now, but I was the first to encourage you to do so, and I sent Timothy to help.

1 CORINTHIANS

Encouragement to Practice What We Preach

Some of you who claim to follow Jesus' example don't think I'll come visit you again. But I will, just as soon as God enables me to. Then I'll know whether your actions correspond with your words. God is more concerned about what you do than what you say, and I'd rather encourage you to follow God's advice than to scold you for not doing so.

5 I've heard that one of the men there is having sexual relations with his stepmother. People who reject God's advice don't even do that. But instead of scolding the man for this, you're bragging about it. So here's what I've decided you should do. When you meet as a group, explain the consequences of such self-centered behavior and encourage the man to follow God's advice as Jesus did, so he'll enjoy a better life.

As you know, a little yeast affects a whole batch of dough. If you don't want bread to rise, you must make sure there's no yeast in it. In a similar way, if you want to enjoy a better life, you must encourage everyone in your community to follow God's advice. Jesus allowed himself to be executed to demonstrate how committed we should be.

When I asked you in a previous letter not to socialize with people who dishonor God by being selfish or having inappropriate sexual relations, I wasn't referring to those who reject God's advice. I was referring to those who claim to follow it. You should also discourage them from insulting others or becoming intoxicated. God will deal with those who reject God's advice, but you should encourage those who claim to follow it to live up to their claim.

6 I've heard that someone intends to ask an individual who rejects God's advice to settle a disagreement. You should realize that you can only improve the world by following God's advice, so you should be able to resolve your own disagreements. Since you make decisions about everything else that affects your lives, you should be embarrassed to ask people you don't respect to settle your disagreements. At least one of you should be smart enough to settle them without relying on someone who refuses to follow God's advice. It would be better not to take any legal action at all when someone offends you, but some of you just can't restrain yourselves.

You should realize that those who refuse to follow God's advice won't enjoy a better life. That includes people who cheat, steal, get drunk, insult others, or have sexual intimacy outside of a committed relationship. Some of you used to behave like this, but now God is helping you follow Jesus' example.

I could do anything I want but I choose not to, because some things aren't helpful to others. So we should devote our lives to honoring God

1 CORINTHIANS

instead of seeking our own pleasure. God helped Jesus do so and will do the same for us.

Advice Concerning Marriage

As you know, a man is physically attached to a prostitute when he has sexual relations with her. So don't be sexually intimate with someone unless you're in a committed relationship. Your body is like a temple because its purpose is to honor God.

7 In your letter, you wondered if spouses should refrain from having sexual relations. Unless they've agreed to spend time in prayer, I suggest they give their spouse the affection they promised so they're not tempted to get it from someone else.

Although God provides a lot of opportunities for people to marry, I think it would be better under the present circumstances that they remain single, as I am. So I'm encouraging those who've lost a spouse or aren't yet married to remain single. But if they can't control their sex drive, it's better to get married than to have sexual relations with someone to whom they're not committed.

If your daughter is old enough and wants to get married, it's okay to let her do so. But it might be better for her to stay single because a wife is legally bound to her husband as long as he's alive. When he dies, she's free to marry someone who follows Jesus' example, but I think she'd be happier staying single.

As far as I know, Jesus didn't offer any advice for people who've never been married, but I think he would agree that it's better to be single during these hard times. If a couple does decide to marry, they should try to preserve their marriage. They'll have the usual marital problems, which I'm trying to help them avoid.

If a wife who rejects God's advice is content to stay with her husband, he shouldn't divorce her, because he could encourage her and their children to follow it so they'll enjoy a better life. The reverse is also true. But if such a wife insists on leaving her husband, he should let her go. God wants people to get along well with each other, so they shouldn't be forced to stay together. Jesus discouraged married couples from getting a divorce. But if they do, I suggest they remain single.

Soon it won't matter whether people are single or married, happy or sad, buyers or sellers, because the world as we know it will no longer exist. So we should devote our time and energy to helping others in need, as Jesus did. A single person can do that better than married couples because they usually devote much of their time and energy to their spouse.

1 CORINTHIANS

Jesus gave his life to encourage us to follow God's advice, no matter who we are or what social status we have. It doesn't matter if you're Jewish or not. If you're someone's slave, try to be content in your situation. But if your owner offers you freedom, take advantage of it.

Advice Concerning Meat Offered to Idols

8 You also wondered whether you can eat meat that has been offered to idols. A lot of us know we can, since we're devoted to the only real God and we realize that idols don't actually exist. We know that there's only one God who created the world and that Jesus helps us follow God's advice so we can enjoy a better life. We're self-centered if we don't care enough about others to share this knowledge with them.

Since some people still believe that there are a lot of gods on earth and in the sky, they think they shouldn't eat meat that has been offered to them. But God doesn't care what we eat as long as it doesn't make it harder for others to follow God's advice. If they see us eating meat in the temple of idols, they might assume we're honoring those idols. Since they don't realize that idols don't even exist, we don't want to give them the wrong impression. Jesus gave his life to encourage us all to follow God's advice so we can enjoy a better life. If we mislead others, we're undoing what Jesus did. So I won't eat a particular food if I think it will divert someone from honoring God.

Assistance for Those Who Share God's Advice

9 Jesus personally asked me to encourage you to follow his example, and you're beginning to do so. You've provided food for Peter and Jesus' other followers and their wives when they came to share God's advice. You should do the same for Barnabas and me. As you know, soldiers are paid for their service, and farmers eat their produce and drink the milk from their animals. This principle was stated in the advice God gave Moses long ago:

Don't prevent oxen from eating grain while they thresh it.

God cares more about people than oxen, so this applies to us, too. Since we help you follow God's advice, you should help us with our physical needs, as you do for others. But we're not insisting on this. We'll make the best of our situation so we can continue to help others follow Jesus' example.

As you know, our religious leaders eat some of the food we offer to God in the temple. So God expects you to assist the rest of us who help you follow God's advice. I haven't yet received any assistance from you,

1 CORINTHIANS

but I'm not asking for any because I'd rather die than have others think that I'm sharing God's advice for financial gain. I don't brag about helping others follow God's advice, because I know it's something that must be done. I'd be miserable if I didn't do it, but it's important that people realize I'm not doing it for financial gain.

More Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

I'm willing to help everyone follow God's advice, no matter who they are, so we can all enjoy a better life together. As you know, a lot of people train themselves to run a race they hope they'll win. I try hard to follow God's advice, as if I were training to run a race, so I'll enjoy the better life I've been telling others about.

10 Our ancestors trusted Moses as God led them across the desert and through the sea. They ate the food God provided and drank the water that God produced from the rock. But a lot of them died in the desert because they ignored God's advice. This is a good reminder for us to follow God's advice instead of depending on ourselves.

One of God's spokesmen wrote long ago that a lot of these people complained about following God's advice and chose to worship idols instead. As a result, 23,000 of them died from disease and many died from poisonous snakebites. God's spokesmen warned us long ago not to make the same mistake. We're all tempted to do so, but God is more than willing to help us follow God's advice.

When we eat bread and drink wine to celebrate our ancestors' freedom from slavery, we're making a commitment to follow God's advice as Jesus did. This is a group activity, as it is for those who eat the food they offer to idols. I'm not suggesting that idols are real, but when people offer them food, they're honoring them instead of God. Since you can't honor both at the same time, you should choose to honor God, who is much greater than we are.

You should be concerned about the welfare of others as well as your own. Although you can do whatever you choose, not everything you do is helpful to others. You can eat whatever is sold at the market without your conscience bothering you because God created the world and everything in it. You can also eat whatever you're served when you accept a dinner invitation from someone who doesn't follow God's advice. But if they tell you the food has been offered to an idol, you should refuse to eat it so you don't give them the impression that you worship the idol. Try hard to honor God in everything you do, including what you eat and drink.

1 CORINTHIANS

11 I commend you for following Jesus' and my example in helping others enjoy a better life, regardless of their background. When men follow God's advice as Jesus did, women will follow their example.

Concern over the Tradition of Covering One's Head

We have a tradition that men shouldn't cover their head as women do when they pray or share God's advice. It's embarrassing when they break this tradition. Women would be just as embarrassed to have their head shaved, identifying them as slaves. Our tradition reminds us that God created a man first and then made a woman from the man.

But God made men and women dependent on each other. Women wouldn't be here if God hadn't made a woman from a man, and men wouldn't be here if women didn't bear children. So you must decide for yourselves whether women should follow our tradition of covering their head when they pray. We think long hair serves as a natural covering, but not everyone who follows God's advice agrees.

Keeping the Focus on the Celebration Meal

I'm disappointed to hear that there's some friction when you get together to celebrate our ancestors' freedom from slavery. Some of you bring extra food and eat it in front of those who don't bring anything to eat. If you're hungry before the celebration meal, you should eat at home before you come so you're not criticized for eating in front of others. We'll discuss this further when I come to visit you.

Your focus should be on the celebration meal that Jesus shared with his 12 chosen followers the night before he was arrested. After he thanked God for the bread, he invited his followers to eat it with him to indicate their willingness to follow his exemplary life. When they finished eating the bread, he picked up the third cup of wine, which represented God's promise to send someone to help us all enjoy a better life. He invited his followers to drink it with him to indicate their willingness to give their life, as he was about to do, to help others enjoy a better life.

Whenever you eat the bread and drink this cup of wine at the celebration meal, you'll be reminded of Jesus' exemplary life and death. So before you eat the bread and drink the wine, you should decide if you're willing to follow his example. A lot of people are sick and have died because they haven't done so. But Jesus wants us to follow his example so we won't suffer the same fate.

1 CORINTHIANS

Following Jesus' Example Is a Team Effort

12 You used to worship idols that can't even talk, but God motivated you to follow Jesus' example and help others in a variety of ways. Some of you . . .

- . . . encourage others to follow God's advice
- . . . take care of those who are sick
- . . . assist others in developing their abilities
- . . . determine who sincerely respects God
- . . . learn and translate other languages

Those of us who follow Jesus' example are like a body with many different parts. We may be Jews, Greeks or slaves, but we're all committed to following God's advice.

Your foot and ear are part of your body, just as your hand and eye are. Every part has a different function. If your body were just a big eye, you wouldn't be able to hear; and if your body were just a big ear, you wouldn't be able to smell. So each part provides an important function for your body, and God designed them so they function together. If one part gets hurt, your entire body suffers. When that part heals, the rest of your body feels better.

Once again, those of us who follow Jesus' example are like parts of a body that have different functions. Some of us . . .

- . . . share God's advice in distant places
- . . . share God's advice in our own community
- . . . help others understand God's advice better
- . . . assist others in developing their abilities
- . . . take care of those who are sick
- . . . help others in need
- . . . provide leadership
- . . . learn and translate other languages

But none of these functions is as important as the basic component of God's advice.

The Basic Component of God's Advice

13 If we shared God's advice with others in their own language but didn't care about them, our message would just be a lot of hot air. If we knew how to do amazing things but didn't care about others, we would be of little help to them. If we bragged about giving everything we own to people in need but didn't care about them, we wouldn't gain their respect.

But if we really cared about others, we would be patient and kind, not jealous, proud, selfish or rude. We would not hold grudges or be quick to

1 CORINTHIANS

take offense. We would willingly follow God's advice and tell the truth so we could enjoy life as God promised. Eventually, there won't be any need to share God's advice with others in their own language, but we should never stop caring about them.

Right now we can only share as much about God as we know. We're like children who have a limited reasoning and speaking ability, so our knowledge of God is limited. It's like looking at ourselves in a foggy mirror. But one day we'll know God as well as God knows us. Until then, we should care about others and encourage them to follow God's advice so we can all enjoy the better life God promised.

Language Barriers in Sharing God's advice

14 Use the abilities God has given you to demonstrate that you care about others. I wish you could all speak several languages so you could encourage others to follow God's advice in their own language. If you speak in a language that no one else understands, only God will hear you. So if you want others to understand your message, you must translate it into their language.

If I shared God's advice in a language you don't understand, you wouldn't know that it's any different from other advice. Let me illustrate. If a flute and a harp didn't make distinct sounds, you wouldn't be able to tell them apart; and if a trumpet didn't have a unique sound, soldiers wouldn't prepare for battle. So if you share God's advice in a language people don't understand, you're just wasting your breath.

Since people speak a lot of different languages, it's important that you ask God to help you translate your message into each one. For example, when you thank God for something, those who are praying with you need to understand what you're saying or they won't even know when you're finished.

I thank God that I can speak more languages than any of you. But I'd rather say five words in a language that others understand than 10,000 words that are meaningless to them. If God enabled me to pray and sing in a language I didn't understand, I'd ask God to help me understand it.

I want you to understand God's advice so you can follow it. One of God's spokesmen wrote long ago that people heard it in their own language but didn't follow it. So even though you show people that you care about them by sharing God's advice in their own language, they may still choose not to follow it.

If those of us who follow God's advice all spoke a different language when we get together, others would think we're crazy. But if we share God's advice in one language at a time, others will join us in honoring God. So when you get together, feel free to sing and share God's advice

1 CORINTHIANS

with each other in your own language. Just take turns and limit those who share to three. If there's no one present to translate for some who would like to share, they'll have opportunity to do so another time.

God likes order, so you need to be organized when you share God's advice in public. Let those who are more familiar with it do the speaking. It may be embarrassing for some to ask questions in public, so they should ask someone in a more private setting.

If any of you think God may be motivating you to share God's advice with others, I hope you realize it's the same advice I'm sharing with you in this letter. You can share it in any language, but do it in an orderly manner.

Overcoming the Fear of Death

15 You should be enjoying a better life if you're following God's advice as I've encouraged you to do. I explained that Jesus was willing to die to express his commitment to follow God's advice. But he came back to life a few days after he was buried, as God's spokesmen predicted long ago. Peter, James, Jesus' other chosen followers, and a group of 500 other people, most of whom are still alive today, saw Jesus after he came back to life. Eventually, I saw him, too.

I don't deserve the privilege of encouraging others to follow Jesus' example because I used to persecute his followers. But God cares about me and helped me change dramatically. I've worked a lot harder than others to encourage you to follow Jesus' example, but that doesn't matter as long as you follow it.

Some of you insist that dead people can't come back to life. If that were true, we'd be liars because we're claiming that God brought Jesus back to life. If he didn't come back to life, you'd be wasting your effort following his example, you wouldn't be following God's advice, and those who've already died would miss the better life God promised. So if this were the case, others would really pity us.

But Jesus *did* come back to life. Although everyone will die as Adam did long ago, those who follow Jesus' example will come back to life, as he did. They'll enjoy the better life God promised, without worrying about the authorities giving them a hard time. Jesus demonstrated that nothing should prevent us from honoring God, not even the threat of death.

Some of you are being symbolically rinsed with water for Jesus' followers who have already died. But if they won't come back to life, there's no point in doing that.

My life is constantly in danger for encouraging you to follow Jesus' example. I had to physically defend myself while I was here in Ephesus, on the west coast of Turkey. If dead people won't come back to life, we

1 CORINTHIANS

might as well party until we die. But don't be misled by those who reject God's advice. Since you're aware of it now, you should try to follow it.

Some people wonder what kind of body dead people will have when they come back to life. As you know, when you sow a seed, God enables it to grow into what it was designed to be. It could become a plant, a bird, a fish, an animal, or a person. They all have their own unique qualities, like the sun, moon and stars.

That's how it is with the deceased. When God brings them back to life, God renews their body. One of God's spokesmen wrote long ago that Adam was the first person to experience life. Now Jesus is the first person to experience life after death. God made Adam from the dust of the earth and brought Jesus back to life. Since we're all descendants of Adam, we're all going to die, but those of us who follow God's advice will come back to life as Jesus did.

When we die, we'll immediately experience the ultimate life. One of God's spokesmen wrote long ago that people should consider death a victory rather than defeat. We used to fear death before we followed God's advice, but we thank God that Jesus has helped us overcome that fear. So you should keep following his example, now that you know how important it is.

Visiting Plans

16 I'd like all of you to set aside a portion of your income every Sunday for those who are in need. I've asked Jesus' followers in Galatia, the central district of Turkey, to do the same. When I arrive, I'll send a letter along with those you've selected to take your gifts to Jerusalem. Or if they want, I'll go along with them.

I'm planning to visit you on my way to northern Greece after we celebrate the first harvest season. I hope to stay a while, and if God agrees, I'll spend the winter with you. Although there's a great opportunity to share God's advice here in Ephesus, there are a lot of people who don't want to hear it.

I'd like you to welcome Timothy when he stops by, since he's also traveling from place to place to encourage people to follow God's advice. We're looking forward to him coming here, so please give him whatever he needs to continue his journey.

I've encouraged Apollos and some of Jesus' other followers to visit you. Although he doesn't want to come right now, Apollos will come when he can.

1 CORINTHIANS

Concluding Remarks

I want to encourage you to follow God's advice and care about others. As you know, the members of Stephenas' family were the first ones to follow Jesus' example in your area. I'd like you to cooperate with them and everyone else who helps others in need. I'm glad that Stephenas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus helped to meet your needs. Be sure to thank them for doing so.

Jesus' followers in western Turkey send their greetings, particularly Aquila, his wife Priscilla, and the others who meet in their home.

I care about you and want you to enjoy a better life by following God's advice as Jesus did. Those who don't honor God will continue living a miserable life.

Sincerely,

Paul

Second Letter to the CORINTHIANS

1 Paul and Timothy were followers of Jesus who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. With Timothy's assistance, Paul wrote this letter to Jesus' followers in Corinth and throughout southern Greece.

Encouragement during Hard Times

Dear Friends,

I thank God for caring about us and encouraging us when others give us a hard time for following God's advice. Jesus is a great encouragement because he was also willing to suffer for following it. We've suffered so much here in western Turkey that we thought we were going to die. But we trusted God, who has the ability to bring people back to life. God spared our lives and will do so again. Thanks for praying for us and sending us a gift.

We want you to know that we really care about you. Silvanus, Timothy and I explained that Jesus demonstrated how God's promises will come true. We're writing this letter to let you know how glad we are that you're following his example.

I'm planning to come visit you soon on my way to northern Greece and again on my way back to Judea to help you enjoy life as God intended.

2 But I've decided not to come while I'm discouraged, because I want us to be able to encourage each other when I'm there. So I'm writing during these hard times to let you know that I care a lot about you and that you're a great encouragement to me.

I'm also writing to remind you to follow God's advice. I'm aware that you reprimanded the one who has disappointed you, but now you need to let him know that you care about him so he doesn't become depressed. The more we care about others as Jesus did, the less we're self-centered, which Satan personifies.

When I went to the town of Troas in northwestern Turkey, God gave me the opportunity to encourage the people there to follow Jesus' example. But I was anxious to find Titus, so I continued on to northern Greece.

I thank God for helping us share our knowledge of Jesus in many places. We help people decide whether or not they wish to follow God's advice for a better life, as Jesus did. Our motive is sincere, unlike some other people's.

2 CORINTHIANS

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

3 We don't need a letter of recommendation to let others know that we've helped you follow God's advice as Jesus did, because they're already aware that God has been using us to help you do more than just read about it.

When God gave Moses advice for a better life on stone tablets long ago, the Israelites weren't able to look at his face for awhile because it was so bright. But as God helps people follow that advice, the effect is even more impressive. In other words, *following* God's advice is much more important than receiving it.

We're sharing God's character more openly than Moses did when he covered his face to prevent others from seeing God's bright reflection. Until recently, people who've only *read* about God's character haven't understood it very well. But since Jesus exemplified it, we understand it better and God is helping us reflect it in our lives.

Enduring Hardship for the sake of Others

4 So we've decided to help others follow God's advice as Jesus did. Since those who are self-centered will refuse to follow it, they'll continue to live a miserable life.

The God who separated light from darkness during the creation of the world has helped us better understand God's character through Jesus' exemplary life. So now we're following God's advice and encouraging others to do so, as God's spokesmen did long ago. Although some people treat us very badly, we're willing to risk our lives to help you follow Jesus' example so you can enjoy a better life. We're thankful that God brought Jesus back to life after he died and that God will do the same for us.

Although the hardship we suffer is ruining our bodies, we're glad it's building character, because that's more important in the long run. **5** God is helping us prepare for death and has assured us that we'll be with God afterward.

We're trying hard to follow God's advice, because Jesus demonstrated that we'll enjoy a better life when we care about others. Since we respect God a lot more than anyone else, we're encouraging everyone to follow God's advice. God knows we're sincere, and we hope you do, too.

God motivated Jesus to give his life to demonstrate how much he cared about us and to motivate us to care about others instead of being self-centered. It doesn't matter who we are or what social status we have, because God isn't concerned that we've failed to follow Jesus' example in the past. The more we follow it from now on, the more God will help us improve our attitude and behavior. Jesus followed God's advice

2 CORINTHIANS

completely, but God allowed him to be treated as if he didn't to encourage us to follow it, no matter how we're treated.

6 One of God's spokesmen said long ago that God is ready and willing to help people enjoy a better life. That's why we're encouraging everyone to follow God's advice, even though we've endured a lot of hardship for doing so. We've been beaten, thrown in prison, given hard labor, and deprived of food and sleep. We were often close to death and we have almost nothing, but we're glad to be alive so we can help others enjoy a better life. God is helping us to be kind, patient, honest, and respectful so we don't offend anyone.

We hope you'll be as open and honest with us as we are with you. Don't spend a lot of time with people who refuse to follow Jesus' example. Dedicate your life to honoring God instead of idols. God promised long ago to help people enjoy life, as good parents do for their children. **7** So you should show your respect for God by improving your attitude and behavior.

We haven't hurt or taken advantage of anyone, so we hope you'll give us a warm welcome when we come again. As I've said before, we care about you so much that we're willing to risk our lives for you. Even though we're experiencing hardship, I'm so glad you're following God's advice that I'm constantly telling others about it.

Some people gave us a hard time when we went to northern Greece, but God encouraged us when Titus came to visit. I was thrilled when he explained that you were concerned about me.

I'm glad my last letter motivated you to improve your attitude and behavior so you can enjoy a better life. As you know, when people aren't sincere about their intent to change, they continue living a miserable life. But you admitted your anger, fear, greed, and vengefulness before you decided to follow God's advice.

I'm not writing to scold the individual who harmed someone, nor to comfort the victim, but to let you know that we care about all of you.

We were completely honest about everything we told you and Titus. We're thrilled that you encouraged him when he was there. Since you gave him such a warm welcome, he's even more concerned about you than he was before.

Encouragement to Help Others in Need

8 We want you to know that God has motivated Jesus' followers in northern Greece to help others in need. Even though they were poor and experiencing hardship themselves, they were ready and willing to give more than they could afford to help others in need. Since they followed

2 CORINTHIANS

God's advice as we suggested, we've asked my partner Titus to help you do the same. You understand God's advice well and have shown that you care about us, so you should also care about others.

You're aware that Jesus cared so much about you that he gave up everything to set a good example so you can enjoy a better life. You indicated last year that you were willing to follow his example, so now you need to help others in need. That's how it worked long ago. Those who were able to gather a lot of food shared with those who could only gather a little.

I thank God that Titus is willing to visit you. We're sending along with him someone else highly respected, whom some of Jesus' followers had chosen to accompany us to make sure their gift reached its destination. We're also sending another trustworthy and reliable individual. Please give them the same warm welcome that you've given others.

God Encourages Generosity

9 I told the people here in northern Greece that last year you promised to make a generous gift to them. They're very excited about that, but I don't want anyone to be embarrassed when I come to get it, because some of them may be coming with me. So I've asked Titus and two other individuals to go on ahead and help you get it ready so you won't feel pressured when I arrive.

As you know, if you only plant a few seeds, you can only expect a small harvest. On the other hand, if you plant a lot of seeds, you can anticipate a large harvest. So you should consider giving generously rather than sparingly. Since God is generous, one of God's spokesmen pointed out long ago that people who respect God give generously to others in need.

We show our appreciation for what we have by sharing it with others. Since God provides the seeds to produce our food, God also provides the desire to share it. When you give generously to others in need, they're thankful that God cares about them and that you're following Jesus' example.

Encouragement to Help Others Follow Jesus' Example

10 I want to encourage you to follow God's advice and help others follow Jesus' example. Don't judge someone by the way they look on the outside. If they're trying to follow Jesus' example, they have the same goal we do. Since I'm physically drained and not a very impressive speaker, some people think I'm trying to intimidate you through my

2 CORINTHIANS

letters. But they should realize that my goal is the same, whether I write a letter or visit you in person.

We shouldn't compare ourselves to others or take credit for what they've accomplished. We should give God the credit, because God helps us accomplish what really matters. We should focus on the task God has given us, which is to encourage each other to follow Jesus' example.

Concern over Being Misled

11 I hope you'll continue to be patient with me. I'm just concerned that someone could come along and mislead you, as Eve was misled long ago.

Although I'm not an impressive speaker like some of God's other messengers, I've shared God's advice with you so you can enjoy a better life. Some people expect payment for their advice, but I've shared God's advice for free. When I was there with you, some of Jesus' followers in northern Greece brought me what I needed. So I wasn't a burden to you then, and I don't plan to be in the future.

I keep encouraging you to follow Jesus' example because I really care about you. Some people are pretending to be Jesus' messengers and are taking credit for what *we're* doing. You're letting them take advantage of you, which we would never do. While I'm trying to stop this from happening, I'm not surprised by their self-centeredness, which Satan personifies. But they'll suffer the consequences for it.

Paul Recalls the Hardship He Experienced

This may seem rather silly, but since a lot of other people are taking credit for their accomplishments, I guess I should take some credit, too. I'm a descendant of Abraham and Israel, so I'm as Jewish as these other people are. I've followed Jesus' example more diligently than they have and I've worked harder, spent more time in prison, been beaten and closer to death more often. The Jewish authorities have given me 39 whiplashes on five different occasions. I was beaten three times by the Romans, stoned once, shipwrecked three times, and marooned at sea for an entire day.

I've been on many journeys and faced a lot of dangerous situations in cities, in the desert and on the sea. I've encountered dangerous rivers, thieves, fellow Jews, non-Jews, and people who pretend to follow Jesus' example. I've endured hard labor, hunger, thirst, lack of sleep, and exposure to the cold. When the soldiers under the Roman leader Aretas tried to arrest me in Damascus, I escaped through a window and was lowered in a basket. Meanwhile, I've been deeply concerned about Jesus' followers everywhere. God knows this is all true.

2 CORINTHIANS

12 This may not be very helpful, but I must share it anyway. God revealed to me that after one of Jesus' followers died fourteen years ago, he heard a language that he had never heard before. I prefer to share other people's experiences rather than my own, unless it has to do with weakness. I'm honest about mine so others don't get the wrong impression.

God has given me some physical discomfort to remind me not to brag about the revelations I've had. I've asked God three times to take this discomfort away, but God's response was that I should realize that God cares about me even when I'm in pain. Since I empathize with others more when I'm physically weak, I'm glad to have some discomfort so I'm more motivated to help others in need, as Jesus did. That's why I welcome sickness, poverty, insults, persecution, and other stressful situations.

You should be grateful that I've helped you experience some amazing things, as Jesus' chosen followers did for others. The only difference between you and Jesus' followers elsewhere is that I haven't been a financial burden to you.

Plans for Another Visit

I'm ready to visit you for the third time, but I won't ask you to help me because I'm more concerned about helping *you*. As you know, parents usually help their children more than the other way around. I'm happy to spend my life helping you, although the more I care about you, the less I care about myself. Some claim I'm a burden to you, but I even sent Titus and one of Jesus' other followers to help you honor God as Jesus did.

I'm concerned that we won't meet each other's expectations when I arrive. I hope there won't be any jealousy, disagreements, anger, insults, or gossip. God will help me express my disappointment over those who still refuse to follow God's advice.

13 At least two people can verify that when I visited you the last time, I promised to visit you again. If you want evidence that I encouraged you to follow God's advice as Jesus did, just look at the impact he's had on you. If we're executed on a cross as he was, God will enable him to live on through you as he does through us.

2 CORINTHIANS

Final Comments

We're asking God to help you follow Jesus' example so you can enjoy a better life. I'm writing to encourage you to follow it now so I won't have to when I arrive.

Remember that God cares about you and wants to help you enjoy a better life, so encourage each other to follow God's advice as Jesus did.

Everyone here sends their greetings.

Sincerely,

Paul

GALATIANS

1 One of Jesus' followers who shared God's advice for a better life was named Paul. Together with a number of other followers, he addressed this letter to Jesus' followers in Galatia, the central district of Turkey.

Paul Shares His Background

Dear Friends,

I'm writing to remind you that God cares about you and that Jesus devoted his life to helping you follow God's advice so you can enjoy a better life.

I'm surprised that some of you are thinking about following a distorted version of God's advice instead of following Jesus' example. You should ignore anyone who tries to lead you astray, even if he claims to be a messenger from God. The advice I've shared with you, which Jesus demonstrated throughout his life, is from God. So focus your attention, as I do, on pleasing God, not other people.

As you know, I used to harass Jesus' followers. In fact, I wanted to get rid of anyone who challenged my religious traditions, and I was more enthusiastic about it than any of my peers. But God invited me to share Jesus' exemplary life with others. I knew there were some people in Jerusalem who were already doing this, so instead of going there, I went to Arabia and then back to Damascus, a prominent city in Syria. It wasn't until three years later that I went to Jerusalem, where I met Jesus' brother James and spent a couple of weeks with Peter, one of Jesus' chosen followers. After going back through Syria, I returned to my home district of Cilicia, along the southern coast of Turkey.

A lot of Jesus' followers in the district of Judea are well aware that I harassed them, but they've heard that I've drastically changed and am now encouraging others to follow him. Although they haven't yet met me, they're very thankful that God has transformed my life.

Religious Traditions can be Misleading

2 Fourteen years after my first trip to Jerusalem, I returned there with Barnabas and Titus to discuss a very important matter. I told Peter, James, and John in private that I had been sharing God's advice with people of other religious backgrounds, one of whom was Titus. They agreed that Titus didn't need to follow all our religious traditions when he became a follower of Jesus. I also told them that some people were pretending to follow Jesus so they could persuade you to follow our traditions.

GALATIANS



Although Peter, James, and John are well-known followers of Jesus, they weren't able to give me any special insight since God doesn't relate to them any differently than us. They realize that God motivated Peter to share God's advice primarily with people of our own religious background, and that God motivated me to share it primarily with people of other backgrounds. So they encouraged Barnabas and me to focus on our target audience while they focused on theirs. They also encouraged us to continue helping the poor, which I've tried hard to do.

GALATIANS

When Peter later went to Antioch, the capital of Syria, he began to mislead a lot of Jesus' followers, including Barnabas. Peter had been comfortable sharing meals with people of other religious backgrounds until some of James' friends convinced him otherwise. Although Peter knew better, he began to follow our divisive tradition of refusing to share meals with people who aren't members of our own religious group. When I realized what he was doing, I publicly reminded him that many of our religious traditions are detrimental to a better life, so he shouldn't encourage people to follow them.

Some of us who share our religious heritage realize that the only way we can really enjoy a better life is by following Jesus' example instead of many of our religious traditions. When I realized Jesus cared about us to the extent that he was willing to die for us, I stopped following many of our traditions and began following his example. If we could enjoy a better life just by following our traditions, he wouldn't have been executed for pointing out how misleading many of them are.

God Offers a Better Life to Everyone

3 You're foolish if you're thinking about following all our religious traditions while you're well aware that Jesus was executed for exposing how hypocritical many of them are. God was beginning to make dramatic improvement in your lives by helping you follow Jesus' example, but you'll throw that away if you try to follow all our traditions.

If you want to enjoy a better life, you must follow God's advice, as our ancestor Abraham did long ago. According to God's spokesman Moses, God explained to Abraham that if he followed God's advice, *everyone* could enjoy a better life, which a lot of people have already begun to experience.

Moses also related that God expects people to follow *all* of God's advice. This includes following the example of Jesus, Abraham's descendant. So it should be obvious that no one can enjoy a better life just by following religious traditions. Jesus was willing to be publicly executed for exposing many of our misleading traditions so people of other religious backgrounds would realize that they could also enjoy the life God promised to Abraham and his descendants.

As you know, when someone makes a promise, no one else can modify it or break it. When God promised Abraham and his descendants a better life, God explained that a descendant of his would help them experience it. The guidelines that God gave our ancestors 400 years later didn't alter God's promise. They just gave our ancestors some direction until Jesus personally demonstrated how we could enjoy a better life. If we could experience it by following our misleading interpretations of

GALATIANS

God's guidelines, God's promise to Abraham would have been meaningless. Everyone who follows Jesus' example is a descendant of Abraham, regardless of their religious background, gender, or social status, in the sense that they can also enjoy the better life God promised Abraham and his descendants.

4 As you know, when children are promised something, they anxiously look forward to receiving it. In a similar way, while our ancestors were trying to follow all our religious traditions, they were looking forward to the better life God promised. Jesus demonstrated this kind of life, and God is ready and willing to help us experience it.

So don't obligate yourselves to follow all of our traditions which require annual, monthly, and even daily observance. You were beginning to allow God to improve your lives, but now I'm wondering if my efforts to help make this happen have been wasted. I really hope you'll choose to follow Jesus' example, as I have.

You've always treated me well. Even when I first shared God's advice with you as an ordinary person, you warmly welcomed me, not only as a messenger from God, but as if I were Jesus himself. You used to be so excited that you were willing to do almost anything for me. But the more I share the truth with you, the more you seem to resent it. I'm glad you're always seeking to do what's right, even when I'm not with you. But it hurts to learn that others are trying to mislead you. I wish I could be with you right now to encourage you to keep following Jesus.

The Analogy of Sarah and Hagar

It appears that those of you who are thinking about following all our religious traditions don't really understand what it means to follow God's advice. So I'll refer again to our ancestor Abraham. As you know, he had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was born because Abraham's wife Sarah insisted he conceive a child with her servant Hagar so he could have a son, as God promised. But several years later, God enabled Sarah herself to conceive and bear Isaac, even though she was way beyond the normal child-bearing years.

Hagar and Sarah represent two different attitudes toward God. Since Hagar bore a child to Abraham at Sarah's insistence, Hagar represents people who insist on doing things their own way, like those who insist on following their own interpretation of the guidelines God gave Moses on Mount Sinai.

Sarah, on the other hand, represents those who realize they will enjoy life more when they follow God's advice. As one of God's spokesmen indicated long ago, Sarah was thrilled when God enabled her to bear Isaac

GALATIANS

even though she was very old. So we should realize that we will also enjoy the better life God promised when we follow God's advice.

As you may recall, Ishmael was proud to be the older son, and he gave Isaac a hard time for being much younger. In a similar way, some people are proud of our religious traditions and are giving Jesus' followers a hard time for not following them.

When Sarah realized that she had used Hagar and Ishmael to accomplish her own selfish goal, she asked Abraham to send them away. We also should abandon our self-centeredness, and follow Jesus' example instead. **5** Since he already demonstrated how we can enjoy a better life, don't subject yourselves to traditions that will make your lives miserable.

How to Enjoy a Better Life

If you decide to join my religious heritage, you'll be obligating yourselves to follow a lot of traditions instead of Jesus' exemplary life. In effect, you'll be missing out on the better life God wants us all to enjoy, which we've been looking forward to. The quality of our life has nothing to do with membership in a particular religious group. The important thing is that we care about others as Jesus did.

The people who are trying to persuade you to follow all our religious traditions are not messengers of God. As you know, it only takes a little yeast to cause a whole batch of dough to rise. I hope you won't let a few people lead a lot of you astray. If they want to live a miserable life, that's their choice.

Some people are giving me a hard time because I don't encourage you to follow all our religious traditions. But it's far more important that you follow Jesus' example, so you must ignore those who are trying to persuade you otherwise.

The basis for all the guidelines God gave us through Moses can be summed up in the following statement:

You should care about others
as much as you care about yourself.

So you will only enjoy a better life when you sincerely care about others and help them when they're in need. If you don't, your life will be miserable.

It's definitely a challenge to follow God's advice, but if you don't make the effort, you won't experience the better life God wants you to enjoy. People who refuse to follow God's advice don't care about God or others. They form separatist groups, engage in verbal or physical conflicts, and have wild parties.

GALATIANS

On the other hand, people who follow God's advice enjoy a more peaceful life because they care about others and are more patient, kind, generous, honest, and humble.

Those of us who follow Jesus are trying not to be self-centered. Since God has given us life, we should be anxious to follow God's advice. **6** So when you see others observing misleading traditions, tactfully encourage them to follow God's advice. But be careful that they don't mislead you in the process.

We should monitor our own behavior without comparing ourselves to others. Since we're all responsible for our actions, what happens in our life is often the result of our behavior. In other words, if we choose to follow misleading traditions, we'll experience a miserable life. But if we choose to follow God's advice, we'll experience the kind of life God wants us to enjoy. The more we follow God's advice, the more we'll enjoy the results of our efforts. So we should help everyone in need, especially those who follow God's advice.

Conclusion

Those who are trying to convince you to follow all our religious traditions aren't interested in risking their lives to follow God's advice as Jesus did. They just want to impress their friends by adding you to the membership roll. But I'm glad Jesus showed us that following many of our religious traditions accomplishes nothing. It's caring about others and helping others in need that produces a better life.

By the way, if some people are still wondering whether I'm a follower of Jesus, you can tell them I have scars to prove it.

Sincerely,

Paul

EPHESIANS

1 Paul, one of Jesus' followers who shared God's advice for a better life, wrote this letter to Jesus' devoted followers in Ephesus, a major seaport on the west coast of Turkey.

Following God's Advice Enables People to Enjoy Life More

Dear Friends,

Before God even created the world, God's intention was that we would follow God's advice and care about others as much as Jesus did. We should be thankful that Jesus was willing to die to help us understand how much God cares about us. The more we follow Jesus' example, the more we'll enjoy the kind of life God originally intended.

Since you've heard God's advice and have begun following Jesus' example, your lives have improved, just as God promised. While I'm delighted to hear that you care about others, I'm asking God to help you realize that the only way you can enjoy the ultimate life is by caring about others as much as Jesus did. The fact that God brought Jesus back to life clearly indicates that God has far more power than anyone else to help you experience life to its fullest.

2 Our lives used to be as miserable as many other people's because we refused to follow God's advice. We thought we could enjoy life by simply satisfying our own selfish desires. But God cared about us so much that God promised to provide a special individual to help us really enjoy life. That person is Jesus, the perfect example for us and all future generations.

God's original plan was that we would help others in need, as Jesus did. Since we're enjoying life much more by following his example instead of our own selfish desires and religious traditions, it's obvious that we can't take credit for it ourselves.

As you know, we used to separate ourselves from those of you who have different religious backgrounds from ours. Before you realized that Jesus came to help *everyone* enjoy a better life, you had little hope for the future. But now you know that he was even willing to die to help us all understand how to follow God's advice correctly. Wherever he went, he challenged many of our divisive traditions and encouraged people to honor God together, like members of the same family.

Those of us who follow God's advice are like the stones used in building a temple to honor God. Those who've shared God's advice in the past are like the stones in the foundation. Jesus is like the keystone at the top of an arch, because he demonstrated how to follow God's advice better

EPHESIANS

than anyone else. You're like the rest of the stones that participate in building the temple. In other words, as you join us in following God's advice, we honor God together.

3 You may have heard that I'm in prison because I've told people that Jesus came to help *everyone* enjoy a better life. As I mentioned before, God helped me understand this, and I wanted to share this knowledge with you. Unlike a lot of people in the past who lived self-centered lives, some people are following God's advice and sharing it with those of other religious backgrounds so they can also enjoy the better life God promised.

Although I'm not respected nearly as much as some of Jesus' other followers, God has given me the privilege of telling you how much better life can be when you follow God's advice in any situation, as Jesus did. Ever since God created the world, God's plan was that Jesus would demonstrate the best way to follow God's advice, and his followers would courageously invite their community leaders to follow his example. So don't be discouraged that the local authorities have imprisoned me for carrying out God's plan.

I'm asking God to help you understand how deeply Jesus cared about others so you'll follow his example and enjoy the kind of life God originally intended. God is able to help you improve your lives far more than you can imagine, so if you really want to experience a better life, you'll need to make a habit of following Jesus' example.

What It Means to Follow God's Advice

4 I want to encourage you to care about others and be humble, kind and patient, so that you'll get along well with each other. Since there's only one God, your only hope for a better life is to follow God's advice as Jesus did.

God gave people various abilities to help others follow God's advice. The goal is to follow it as well as Jesus did, so don't let yourselves be distracted, as children often are. We should work together to let others know that we really care about them and want to help them follow God's advice.

If you want to enjoy the kind of life God intended, you need to abandon your selfish attitude and behavior. You must stop lying, because lies are more harmful than you think. When you become angry about something, resolve the matter as soon as possible so you don't build up resentment. Instead of stealing, get an honest job so you can help people in need. Instead of hurting others by the selfish things you say and do, encourage them whenever you have the opportunity. Be kind to others and

EPHESIANS

overlook their faults, as God overlooks yours. You should care about others to the point that you're willing to die for them, as Jesus did.

Any improvement in your attitude and behavior is evidence that God is helping you experience the kind of life God wants everyone to enjoy.

5 God is very disappointed with people who not only refuse to follow God's advice but also try to mislead others. They'll continue living the miserable life they've chosen. Some of the things they do in secret are too disgusting to even mention. So instead of getting involved in their senseless activities, keep encouraging them to follow God's advice.

Take a good look at your own behavior so you can make the most of your life. Instead of pursuing your own selfish desires, such as getting drunk and having a miserable hangover, make an effort to discover what God knows is best for you. Then you'll be singing songs that honor God and express your gratitude for Jesus.

Another aspect of following God's advice is respecting each other. As you know, when a man and a woman get married, they create a new family unit. If the husband cares about his wife as much as he does about himself, she'll be happy to do what he suggests. Jesus was willing to die to help us understand how to follow God's advice so we can enjoy a better life. When a husband cares that much about his wife, she'll be more than willing to follow his advice.

6 God explained long ago that if children respect their parents, they'll enjoy a better life. But in order for that to happen, parents must demonstrate that they really care about their children, as God does.

Those of you who work for someone else should be conscientious in your job. Don't just try to impress the boss when he's looking. He'll reward you when you do something constructive, whether you do it willingly or not. So you might as well do it willingly, as you would for Jesus. Those of you who are managers should realize that God doesn't favor certain people, so neither should you.

Preparation to Follow God's Advice

As you know, a soldier prepares himself before he goes into battle. He puts armor on his head, feet, chest, and around his waist; and he holds a shield in one hand and a sword in the other. Like a soldier, you need to prepare yourself for the challenge that lies before you. But your battle is not against people. It's against the self-centered attitudes and value systems that pervade the world. If you want to enjoy a better life, you'll need to be prepared to follow God's advice, which includes telling the truth and helping people get along with each other. So ask God to help

EPHESIANS

you follow God's advice as willingly as Jesus did, and to give me the courage to share it with my fellow prisoners.

Final Comments

I've asked my friend Tychicus, a devoted follower of Jesus, to deliver this letter to you so he can encourage you and let you know how I'm doing. Those of you who follow Jesus should realize that God cares about you and wants you to enjoy life.

Sincerely,

Paul

PHILIPPIANS

1 Paul and Timothy were followers of Jesus who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. With Timothy's assistance, Paul wrote this letter to Jesus' followers in Philippi, a prominent city on the northeastern coast of Greece.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

I'd like you to enjoy the kind of life God originally intended, which Jesus demonstrated.

Every time I think of you, I thank God that you're following God's advice. The gift you sent me while I'm here in prison is evidence of this.

God knows that I care about you as much as Jesus does. I'm praying that your concern for others will continue to grow as you gain more knowledge and understanding of God's advice, and I'm praying that you'll diligently follow it until Jesus returns in human form.

Since I've been here, I've shared God's advice with the guards and other prisoners. They realize that I'm only here because I'm a follower of Jesus. As others become aware that I'm even sharing God's advice in prison, they're gaining more courage to share it elsewhere.

Encouragement to Follow Jesus' Example

Some people encourage others to follow Jesus' example because they sincerely care about them. Others act like it's a competitive sport, which adds to my stress while I'm in prison. But I'm just glad they're doing it, even if their reasons aren't the best.

I appreciate your prayers because I know God will help me get through this rough time. I just hope I'll have the courage to honor Jesus if the authorities decide to execute me. If they do, I'll be glad to die as he did. But I'm pretty sure they're going to let me live. If so, I'll be able to come and help you follow his example so you can enjoy a better life.

Whether I come or not, I hope you'll keep encouraging each other to follow his example. Don't be afraid of those who want to prevent you from enjoying life as God intended. They'll try to give you a hard time for following God's advice, as they've done to Jesus and me.

2 It would make me very happy to see you care about others and help those in need, as Jesus did. None of you are more important than anyone

PHILIPPIANS

else, so there's no reason to be self-centered or egotistic. You should be as concerned about others as you are about yourselves.

Pattern your life after Jesus'. Although he demonstrated God's character better than anyone else, he didn't pretend to be God. He lived like an ordinary human being and diligently followed God's advice until the day he was executed on a cross. God enabled him to live an extraordinary life so a lot of people would reflect God's character by following his example.

To enjoy a better life, you need to follow God's advice every day, not just when I'm with you. God will give you the desire and energy to follow it without questioning or complaining. The more *you* follow it, the more others will be motivated to follow it. I'm sure you're as glad as I am that I encouraged you to follow Jesus' example and that you decided to follow it.

Plans to Send Timothy and Epaphroditus

You've seen how Timothy works with me like a son to encourage others to follow God's advice. He's the only one who cares as much about you as I do. I'm planning to send him there as soon as I can so he can bring back some encouraging news. I hope God will soon make it possible for me to come, too.

You've heard that Epaphroditus almost died after risking his life to bring me your gift. Since God spared his life, he's anxious to see you again. So I'm planning to send him along with Timothy. Please give him a warm welcome for being willing to risk his life for me.

Warning about Religious Pride

3 I'm glad God motivated me to look out for your welfare, and I don't mind doing it. Watch out for people who insist that you follow their religious traditions. We honor God by following Jesus' example, not by following certain traditions.

If anyone should think that their religious background is better than anyone else's, *I* should. I was dedicated to God a week after I was born, my parents were direct descendants of Jacob's son Benjamin, and I eventually became a member of an elite religious group. When I didn't think Jesus' followers were following God's advice correctly, I gave them a hard time to try to make them change. I thought I could force them to follow my religious views, but now that I know how Jesus lived, I realize that was the wrong approach. A much better way to get others to follow God's advice is by setting a good example, as Jesus did. I discovered that imposing my religious views on others doesn't work. I must be willing to risk my life to help others, as Jesus did.

PHILIPPIANS

I've not yet succeeded in following God's advice completely, but I continue trying because Jesus has set a good example for me. I try to forget the past and focus on living as he did, which is what God invites us all to do. God will help you follow the example that I and others have set for you.

I want to warn you again, as I've done many times before, that some people refuse to follow Jesus' example. They brag about things they should be ashamed of. It makes me sad to know that they'll continue to live a miserable life because they're self-centered and only concerned about material things.

We're striving to enjoy life as God originally intended, which Jesus helps us experience as we model our lives after his. **4** I care about you and want you to enjoy life, too, so I'm glad you're committed to following his example. I'd like Syzygus to help Euodia and Syntyclus as they work with Clement and the rest of us to share God's advice for a better life.

The Example Everyone Should Follow

You should be kind to everyone, as Jesus was. Instead of worrying about things, let God know what you need and thank God for what you already have. God will help you enjoy a better life than you can imagine if you focus on following Jesus' and my example: be honest, help others in need, follow God's advice, and try to resolve conflicts.

Thanks for the Gift

As you know, since I began encouraging people in Greece to follow God's advice, you're the only ones who helped me twice while I was in Thessalonica.

I thank God that you're still concerned about me and found an opportunity to send a gift. I didn't ask for anything because I've learned not to depend on others. I know what it's like to live in poverty and luxury, and I've learned that God helps me to be content in either situation. Nevertheless, I accept your generous gift as an offering to God.

Just as God motivated you to meet my needs, God will motivate others who follow Jesus' example to meet yours. Let's thank God for this new way of life.

PHILIPPIANS

Final Comments

I want to include greetings from Jesus' followers here, especially those who work for the Roman emperor.

I hope you'll care as much about others as Jesus did.

Sincerely,

Paul

COLOSSIANS

1 Paul and Timothy were followers of Jesus who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. With Timothy's assistance, Paul wrote this letter to Jesus' followers in Colossae, a city in western Turkey.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

As you know, our only hope for a better life is following God's advice. People throughout the world are beginning to put it into practice, as you are.

Epaphras, the man who originally shared God's advice with you, told us that you're beginning to care more about others, as Jesus did. We thank God for this and are asking God to help you understand and follow God's advice even more so you'll enjoy life in spite of the hardships you face.

Since Jesus demonstrated how to follow God's advice better than anyone else in history, God wants everyone to follow his example. You used to refuse to follow God's advice, but now you're so committed that you even risk your lives to help others in need, as Jesus did.

A lot of people haven't heard God's advice for many years, so God has given me the opportunity to share it with them. I've been telling people everywhere that following Jesus' example is their only hope for a better life. I'm glad I could help them, despite the hardship that comes with it.

2 I've been wanting to visit you and the people in the nearby city of Laodicea to encourage you to care about others and to help you gain a better understanding of God's advice, which Jesus clearly demonstrated. Although I haven't met you personally, I'm glad to hear that you're committed to following his example instead of the advice of others.

Warning about Misleading Traditions

You should be thankful that you've had the opportunity to learn about Jesus. He's demonstrated how to follow God's advice better than anyone else in history, so don't let anyone convince you otherwise. If you follow his example, you'll be following God's advice correctly. Instead of being circumcised, you were rinsed with water to symbolize your willingness to follow it. God overlooks your self-centered behavior of the past and is helping you live the kind of life Jesus did.

COLOSSIANS

Jesus courageously demonstrated that God disapproves of people who pretend to be religious. When such people criticize you for not observing their traditions, such as refraining from eating or drinking certain things or celebrating certain days, they're just trying to make themselves look religious. Those traditions have no value in helping people improve their behavior toward God and others. Following Jesus' example is what really matters.

How to Follow God's Advice

3 Jesus encouraged *everyone* to follow God's advice, no matter who they were. When you started following his example instead of human traditions, you began following God's advice. The more you follow his example, the more you reflect God's character. So stop being selfish and greedy. God is disappointed when you seek revenge, lose your temper, insult others, or lie.

God cares about you and wants you to care about others, as Jesus did. When you do, you'll be kind, humble, patient, and overlook the faults of others, as God overlooks yours. So you should be thankful that someone encouraged you to follow God's advice. You can express your appreciation by singing songs that honor God.

You should also thank God for Jesus and follow his example in everything you say and do. If you're a wife, you should follow your husband's advice when it corresponds with God's. If you're a husband, you should care about your wife and be kind to her. If you're a parent, you should honor God by encouraging your children to be obedient.

If you're an employee, you should diligently do what your boss tells you to do, as if you're doing it for God or Jesus. As you know, you'll get paid what you deserve. If you do your job well, you'll get paid well for it.

4 If you're an employer, you should treat your workers fairly, as you would like God to treat you.

Keep praying and thanking God for opportunities to encourage others to follow Jesus' example, as I'm doing while I'm in prison. Make good use of every opportunity and always be polite and tactful when answering questions.

I'm sending our friends Tychicus and Onesimus, both devoted followers of Jesus, to encourage you and let you know how everything is here.

COLOSSIANS

Greetings

Aristarchus, who's in prison with me, sends his greetings. Barnabas' cousin Mark, whom I asked you to welcome when he comes, and Jesus Justus also send their greetings. These Jewish men have been a great encouragement to me because they've been helping others follow God's advice for a better life.

Epaphras also sends greetings. He prays often that you'll follow God's advice completely. I've seen how deeply concerned he is for you and Jesus' followers in the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Luke, our doctor friend, and Demas also send their greetings.

Give my greetings to Jesus' followers in Laodicea, especially those who meet in Nymphas' house. Please share this letter with them and read the letter I sent to them.

Tell Archippus to keep encouraging others to follow Jesus' example. I'm writing these greetings myself while I'm in prison.

Sincerely,

Paul

First Letter to the THESSALONIANS

1 Paul, Silas, and Timothy were followers of Jesus who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. They wrote this letter to Jesus' followers in Thessalonica, a prominent city on the northeastern coast of Greece.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

Whenever we pray, we thank God that you've decided to follow God's advice and help others in need, as Jesus did. Since you began doing this while you were experiencing a hard time, you realize how practical it is. You're good examples of how God helps people enjoy a better life when they follow God's advice.

Jesus' followers throughout Greece and surrounding countries have already heard about you, so we don't have to tell them ourselves. They know we encouraged you to stop worshipping idols and begin following God's advice. God keeps the memory of Jesus alive to help us avoid the consequences of our self-centered behavior.

2 As you know, the people in Philippi gave us a hard time before we came to help you follow God's advice, but God gave us the courage to do so anyway. We didn't try to flatter you or appeal to your selfish nature to lure you to follow it. We were just serving as God's messengers, as Jesus did, and letting you know that we care about you. We worked day and night helping those in need and encouraging you to follow God's advice, as parents encourage their children. We're thankful that you've decided to do so and that God is helping you enjoy a better life.

Some of your fellow citizens are giving you a hard time for following God's advice, as some people in Judea did when they killed Jesus and God's other spokesmen. They even drove *us* out so we wouldn't encourage others to follow God's advice. But now they're suffering the consequences.

Since we've been gone for some time, I'd really like to visit you again, but we haven't had the opportunity. We're just glad to hear that you're following Jesus' example. When we were with

3 you, we told you that some people would give you a hard time for doing so, which we've also experienced. So while we were in Athens, we decided to send Timothy to help and encourage you. When he returned and told us how much you care about others, he mentioned that you

1 THESSALONIANS

appreciated our first visit and are looking forward to the next one. We thank God that you're following Jesus' example, but we're praying for another opportunity to help you follow it even better. We hope God will help you care about others as much as we care about you, and that you'll follow God's advice as well as Jesus and others did.

4 We want to encourage you to work honestly for what you need. If you cheat to get it, God will hold you accountable. So when you refuse to follow God's advice, you're rejecting God's help for a better life.

As I mentioned, people throughout Greece know that you care about others, and we want to encourage you to keep doing so. We also want to remind you to work hard so you won't need to rely on others for help.

We want to let you know what's going to happen to your loved ones who've died so you won't be without hope, as some people are. God brought Jesus back to life after he died and will do the same for everyone who follows his example. So spread the word that we'll spend the rest of our existence with God.

5 There's no point in my speculating about when people will suffer the consequences for not following God's advice, because you already know that it will happen when they least expect it. They may think they can avoid it but it will definitely occur, like the pain that comes with childbirth.

While others are ignoring God's advice, we should follow it so we can enjoy life as God intended. God wants us to care about others to the point of giving our lives for them, as Jesus did. When we do that, we'll avoid the consequences of self-centered behavior. So you should continue to encourage each other to follow his example.

You should also respect your leaders who are helping you follow God's advice. Instead of seeking revenge against others, try to get along with them, encourage those who are unemployed or discouraged, help those who are sick, and be patient with everyone.

God would like you to enjoy life as Jesus demonstrated it. So ask for help whenever you need it and remember to thank God for it. Let God help you evaluate the advice people offer. If it corresponds with God's, go ahead and follow it, but if it appears to be self-centered, ignore it. The more you follow God's advice, the more you'll enjoy life as Jesus did.

Please share this letter with everyone there. Give them our greetings and ask them to keep praying for us.

Sincerely,

Paul

Second Letter to the THESSALONIANS

1 Paul, Silas, and Timothy were followers of Jesus who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. They wrote this letter to Jesus' followers in Thessalonica, a prominent city on the northeastern coast of Greece.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

We often thank God that you're following God's advice and caring more about others, as we encouraged you to do. We've been telling Jesus' other followers how well you're doing, despite the fact that some people are giving you a hard time. The time will come when God will let them suffer the consequences for refusing to follow God's advice. They'll be miserable while you'll be enjoying a better life. We're always asking God to help you follow God's advice and generously help others in need, as Jesus did.

2 Since you've decided to follow his example, we want to caution you not to be surprised if someone claims that you were already enjoying the ultimate life. Don't let anyone mislead you. We warned you while we were with you that some people are so self-centered that they'll try to convince you to follow their advice instead of God's. Their self-centeredness is personified in Satan, who enables them to do extraordinary things to deceive you. But they'll eventually suffer the consequences for refusing to follow God's advice.

We're thankful that God cares about you and is helping you follow God's advice so you can enjoy a better life. God is encouraging you through us, personally and by letter, to keep following Jesus' example in everything you say and do. **3** When you pray, ask God to help us encourage others to follow it.

While we were with you, we worked day and night so we wouldn't have to depend on you for food. We didn't have to, but we wanted to demonstrate that everyone should work for their food so they don't impose on others. We've heard that some people aren't following our example, so you should encourage them to do so.

2 THESSALONIANS

Final Comments

God wants to help you care about others as much as Jesus did so you'll enjoy a wonderful life.

As usual, I'm sending greetings in my own handwriting.

Sincerely,

Paul

First Letter to TIMOTHY

1 Paul was one of Jesus' followers who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. He wrote this letter to Jesus' devoted follower Timothy, who was in Ephesus, a major seaport on the west coast of Turkey.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Tim,

I want to remind you that God cares about you and wants you to enjoy the kind of life Jesus demonstrated.

While I was on my way to Greece, I suggested you spend some time in Ephesus so you could encourage the people to follow God's advice instead of arguing about what happened in the past. God wants everyone to sincerely care about others, but some people just talk about it. They'd like to teach others how to follow God's advice, but they don't understand it very well themselves.

Since God's advice is so helpful, *everyone* should follow it, but especially murderers, kidnappers, liars, those who have inappropriate sexual relations, and anyone else who prevents others from enjoying life as God intended.

I'm thankful that Jesus considered me worthy to encourage others to follow his example, despite the fact that I used to verbally and physically abuse his followers. I didn't realize then that I wasn't following God's advice very well. Jesus devoted his life to helping people understand how to follow it better, and I definitely needed help. I'm so thankful that God cares about me and that Jesus demonstrated how patient God is with those of us who want to enjoy a better life.

I want to encourage you to keep striving to follow the advice God's spokesmen recently gave you. Hymenaeus, Alexander, and some other people have ruined their lives by refusing to follow it. As they suffer the consequences of self-centeredness, which Satan personifies, they'll hopefully gain more respect for God.

2 I also want to encourage you to pray for others, especially our leaders, so we can all live in peace. God wants everyone to enjoy a better life, but this will only happen if everyone has a good understanding of God's advice and follows it. As I said, Jesus devoted his life to helping others understand how to follow it better. That's why I'm encouraging people to follow his example.

1 TIMOTHY

Women should ask God to help them assist others in need instead of buying expensive clothes and jewelry, or spending a lot of time fixing their hair. They should respect their husbands and be willing to learn how to follow God's advice. Although God created Adam before Eve, she disregarded God's advice before he did. But mothers like her will enjoy a better life when they diligently follow God's advice and care about others.

3 Men should ask God to help them get along well with others. If a man wants to help others follow God's advice, he should follow it well himself. So he should be tolerant, non-violent, have good judgment, be a good manager, exercise self-control, and welcome strangers. He should be respected even by people who don't follow God's advice so he won't be a target for criticism. He should have some experience so he won't suffer the consequences of pride, as Satan did. He shouldn't be greedy, hot tempered, an excessive drinker, or have more than one wife. His wife should be respected by others, exercise self-control, and follow God's advice well. His children should also follow God's advice. If they don't, he won't be very successful in helping others follow it.

I'm hoping to visit you soon but if I get delayed, I want you to know how to help others follow God's advice so they'll realize how effective it is and encourage others to follow it.

4 God predicted that some people would follow misleading advice instead of God's. Their consciences would become so distorted that they would convince others to refrain from getting married or eating certain kinds of food. But those who follow God's advice should realize that everything God created is good, and they should thankfully accept it.

When you help others follow God's advice, you'll be doing what Jesus did. Since God wants to help everyone enjoy a better life now and in the future, you should encourage others to learn and follow God's advice instead of dwelling on the past. So don't abandon your role as one of God's messengers. Try to be a good example for others, and don't let anyone discourage you just because you're younger than they are. If you continue to follow God's advice and encourage others to do so, you'll all

enjoy a better life. **5** But don't be too hard on those who aren't yet following God's advice. Encourage them, as you would your parents and brothers and sisters.

Those who follow Jesus' example should help the widows in their own family so other followers can help the widows who have no family. If a widow has children and grandchildren, God wants them to help meet her needs, as she once did for them. A lonely widow depends totally on God for help after her comfortable married life has ended. So you should encourage her family to help meet her needs. If they refuse to do so,

1 TIMOTHY

they're definitely not following God's advice. The widow I'm referring to is at least 60 years old and hasn't remarried. She's raised children, extended her hospitality to strangers, helped others in need, and followed God's advice in many other ways.

Some young widows would like to remarry so they can live a more comfortable life than Jesus did. But they won't enjoy life as God intended if they talk about unimportant things and don't do anything productive, like some other women. I'd like to see young widows remarry and take good care of their family so others won't have any reason to criticize them.

God's spokesmen wrote long ago that people should be compensated for their work. So you should compensate good leaders well, especially those who follow God's advice. If someone accuses them of not following it, don't take any action unless the accusation is supported by at least two witnesses. Let others know if they're found guilty, but be careful that you don't make any hasty or biased decisions.

It's obvious that some people are enjoying life because they're following God's advice, and that others are living a miserable life because they refuse to do so.

By the way, I know you usually drink water, but it might be helpful to drink a little wine for your frequent ailments.

6 Everyone should respect and follow their superiors, especially those who follow God's advice, because they care about people and try to help them.

Some ignorant and arrogant people refuse to follow God's advice as Jesus did. They think God wants them to become financially successful. But their business negotiations reflect their self-centeredness and greed, which leads to rudeness and conflict. They don't realize that following God's advice would enable them to be content with what they already have.

As you know, we brought nothing into the world when we were born, and we can't take anything with us when we die. While we're alive, all we really need is food and shelter. But some people want more than that, so they submit to their self-centeredness and do foolish and harmful things that ruin other people's lives as well as their own.

I want to encourage you to follow God's advice as Jesus did, even when the Roman leader Pilate threatened to execute him. A lot of people have seen how you care about others and help those in need so they'll enjoy a better life. Since God is the ultimate and immortal leader of the world, keep following God's advice until the life Jesus demonstrated becomes a reality.

I want you to warn rich people not to brag about their financial success or trust in their temporary wealth. Since God has provided everything we

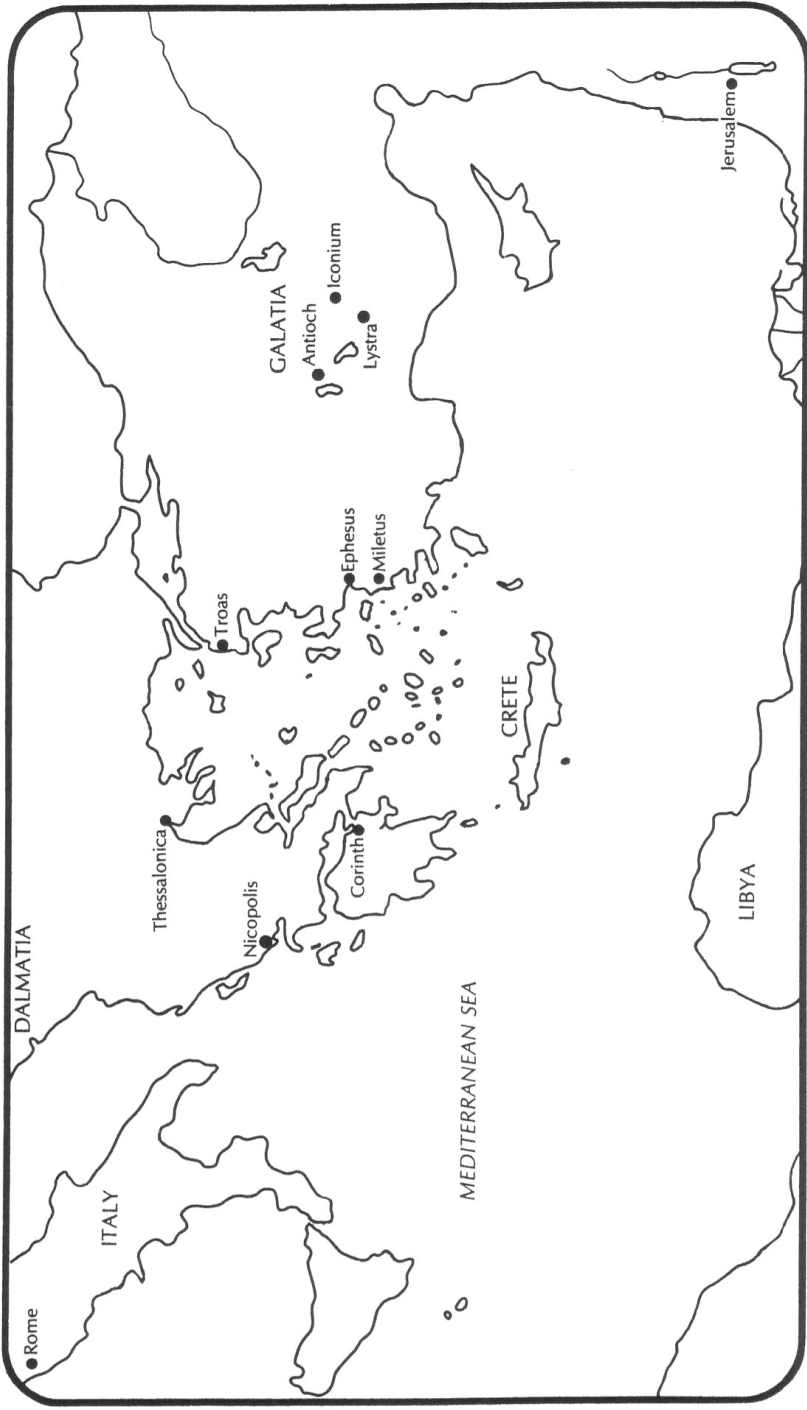
1 TIMOTHY

need to enjoy life, they should trust God and generously help others in need so everyone can enjoy a better life.

Watch out for people who mislead others by spreading their own useless advice instead of God's.

Sincerely,

Paul



Second Letter to TIMOTHY

1 Paul was one of Jesus' followers who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. He wrote this letter to his close friend Timothy, who was in Ephesus, a major seaport on the west coast of Turkey.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Tim,

I want to remind you that God cares about you and wants you to enjoy the kind of life that Jesus demonstrated.

I thank God that you're following God's advice, as your mother Eunice and grandmother Lois are doing, and I pray every day that you're encouraging others to do the same. I remember how sad you were when I left, so I'm looking forward to cheering you up when we see each other again.

Don't be embarrassed that Jesus was arrested and executed for encouraging others to follow God's advice. That's why I'm in prison right now. God will help us endure hardship so others can enjoy a better life.

God's plan even before the creation of the world was that everyone would care about each other and enjoy a wonderful life. Jesus demonstrated that this can happen if we follow God's advice instead of our own self-centered desires. So we shouldn't be embarrassed to suffer hardship for encouraging others to follow his example.

As you know, Phygelus, Hermogenes and a lot of others in western Turkey deserted me because they were embarrassed that I was in prison. But Onesiphorus helped me a lot while I was in prison there and also here at Rome. So I hope God will be very kind to him and his family.

2 I'd like you to encourage Jesus' followers to help others follow his example, as I've been doing. You must be willing to suffer hardship like a dedicated soldier, undistracted by other matters. As you know, athletes must follow the advice of their coaches if they expect to win, and farmers must work hard to harvest their crops. God will help you understand how this relates to you.

As you know, I'm in prison because I told others about Jesus, who was a descendant of our famous leader David and who came back to life after he died. But being in prison doesn't stop me from encouraging others to follow God's advice. I'll endure anything so others can enjoy a better life by following Jesus' excellent example. The more we're willing to suffer hardship and risk our lives for each other, the more we'll all enjoy a better

2 TIMOTHY

life. But if we refuse to help others, God can't help us enjoy a better life, because helping others is the basis of God's plan for our lives.

I'd like you to remind others not to argue over unimportant matters. Try to set a good example as you follow God's advice. Hymenaeus, Philetus and others are discouraging people from following it by claiming that they're already enjoying the ultimate life. But anyone who respects God should want to follow God's advice. As you know, some people have expensive as well as ordinary dinnerware in their homes. They use their expensive dinnerware to show their respect for special guests. So you should follow God's advice to show your respect for God.

Instead of pursuing your own selfish desires, you should care about others and help those in need, as Jesus did, so you'll all enjoy a better life. Avoid people who ask stupid questions just to provoke an argument. Be kind and humble, and patiently encourage others to abandon their self-centeredness.

3 Those who claim to follow God's advice but are more interested in satisfying their own selfish desires will continue to make life miserable for others. They don't respect God or their parents as they should, and they're not loyal to anyone but themselves. They're arrogant, irresponsible, antagonistic, and violent. Instead of caring about others and helping those in need, they insult and slander people. Instead of being thankful for what they have, they cheat others to get more. They sneak into homes and kidnap vulnerable women to satisfy their selfish desires. Such men are as foolish as Jannes and Jambres were when they refused to follow the advice God gave Moses long ago.

You've seen how I follow God's advice and care about others, and how God helped me endure hardship when I was in the towns of Antioch, Iconium and Lystra in central Turkey. Everyone who follows Jesus' example can expect to experience some hardship. But keep following God's advice, which you began learning as a child, because it gives you the guidance you need to enjoy a better life. Those who pretend to follow it aren't fooling anyone but themselves.

4 I urge you to use every opportunity to help others decide if they want to follow God's advice as Jesus did. Some people will refuse and continue to pursue their own selfish desires. They'll even recruit others to spread their own advice. So you can expect to receive a hard time when you encourage them to follow God's advice.

I've committed my life to God, so I'm ready to die at any time. When I do, God will give me the ultimate life, along with everyone else who follows Jesus' example.

2 TIMOTHY

I asked Tychicus to replace you there so you can come here. Try to come before winter because Luke is the only helper I have right now. Demas went to the town of Thessalonica to tend to personal business, Crescens went to the district of Galatia, and Titus went to the district of Dalmatia. When you come, bring Mark along because he's a great helper, and bring my coat and the books I left with Carpus in the town of Troas.

Watch out for the metalworker named Alexander, because he strongly opposes God's advice. He's treated me badly, but I'll let God deal with him for that.

None of Jesus' followers showed up to support me at my preliminary hearing. But I'm thankful that God saved me from being executed and helped me share God's advice for a better life with those who hadn't heard it before.

Greetings

Please give my greetings to Priscilla, her husband Aquila, and the family of Onesiphorus. I left Trophimus in the town of Miletus because he was ill, and Erastus is in the city of Corinth.

Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and Jesus' other followers send their greetings.

God be with you.

Sincerely,

Paul

TITUS

1 One of Jesus' followers named Paul encouraged others to follow God's advice so they could enjoy the better life God promised. He wrote this letter to Titus, who was also one of Jesus' followers.

Good Leaders

Dear Titus,

I want to remind you that God cares about you and wants you to enjoy the kind of life that Jesus demonstrated.

When I left you on the island of Crete to appoint leaders for Jesus' followers in each town, I asked you to select men who hadn't been arrested, who have no more than one wife, whose children are obedient, who aren't proud, greedy, hot tempered, or excessive drinkers, but who welcome strangers, have good judgment, help others in need, exercise self-control, follow God's advice diligently, and encourage others to follow it.

How to Follow God's Advice

As you know, a lot of people in Crete claim to follow God's advice, but their behavior proves otherwise. A prominent poet admitted that the people there are notorious for being deceptive and self-centered. They even teach their children to behave like that.

Encourage the people to stop following the Jewish traditions that restrict them from eating certain foods. Those of us who follow God's advice realize that we can eat anything.

2 Encourage them to also make good decisions. Older men should demonstrate God's advice by caring about others. Older women should honor God by not spreading rumors or drinking excessively. Instead, they should teach the younger women to respect their husbands and take good care of their children and home.

Try to set a good example for the younger men so others will have no reason to criticize you. They should do what their boss tells them, without stealing or being disrespectful, so others will see the value of following God's advice.

God cares about everyone and wants to help us all make good decisions so we can enjoy a better life. So keep encouraging others to follow God's advice and be kind, humble, and ready to help people in need, as Jesus did.

TITUS

3 There was a time when we thought we could achieve a better life on our own. We didn't care about each other and were only interested in satisfying our own selfish desires. But we realize now that God cares about us and is helping us enjoy a better life by following God's advice, as Jesus demonstrated so well.

Since following God's advice benefits everyone, you should encourage those who respect God to set a good example. They should avoid foolish arguments over their ancestry and traditions, because that doesn't help people in need. They should also avoid people who've been scolded more than once for such divisive behavior, because they're not following God's advice.

Final Comments

Encourage everyone there to help Zenas and Apollos continue their travels to share God's advice with others.

When Artemas or Tychicus arrives there, I'd like you to meet me at the town of Nicopolis in Greece, where I'm planning to spend the winter.

Please greet all our friends there.

Sincerely,

Paul

PHILEMON

1 Paul and Timothy were followers of Jesus who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. With Timothy's assistance, Paul wrote this letter primarily for Philemon, but he addressed it to all of Jesus' followers who met in Philemon's home, including Apphia and Archippus.

Concerning Onesimus

Dear Friends,

I want to remind you that God cares about you and wants you to enjoy the kind of life that Jesus demonstrated. I'm glad to hear you're beginning to care about others and help those in need. I thank God for this and pray that it will continue.

While your slave Onesimus was in prison with me, I encouraged him to follow Jesus' example. When he decided to do so, he became a lot more helpful to both of us. It's probably good that he left you for a while, because now he can help us encourage others to follow God's advice, in addition to providing manual labor. I'd like him to stay and help me share God's advice with the other prisoners, but I don't want to keep him here without your knowledge or approval.

Since I care a lot about you and am trying to follow Jesus' example, I'd like to make a suggestion. Please give Onesimus a warm welcome when he arrives, as you would for me. If he owes you any money, I'll take care of it when I see you. You can get a room ready for me because I'm hoping God will answer your prayers for me to visit you soon.

Greetings

Epaphras, who's also in prison for being a follower of Jesus, sends his greetings. My coworkers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke send theirs, too.

Sincerely,

Paul

Letter to the HEBREWS

One of Jesus' followers wrote the following letter to Jewish people who were already following God's advice for a better life.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

1 As you know, God created the earth and the entire universe. Unlike God, they're just temporary, like clothes that wear out.

In the past, God communicated with people through God's spokesmen in a variety of ways to help them enjoy a better life, but God eventually chose Jesus to fill that role. He demonstrated God's advice better than anyone else, so we respect him more than any of God's other messengers.

2 We can't expect to enjoy a better life if we ignore the advice God's messengers shared with us. God has done a lot of amazing things for those who follow God's advice, so we should try hard to follow it.

One of God's spokesmen indicated long ago that God didn't just give responsibility to God's messengers to shape the future of the world. God gave that responsibility to everyone, but a lot of people are afraid to risk their lives to follow God's advice. We highly respect Jesus for allowing himself to be executed to demonstrate that we shouldn't fear death and to encourage us to take the risk.

3 So those of you who are trying to follow God's advice should respect Jesus and Moses. But you should respect Jesus more because he's helping God establish a new society. As you know, Moses was instrumental in conveying God's advice to future generations, but Jesus is actually helping us follow it so we can enjoy a better life.

One of God's spokesmen reminded people long ago not to stop following God's advice, as our ancestors did after Moses led them out of captivity in Egypt. God was so disappointed with their attitude and behavior during their 40 years in the desert that God told them they wouldn't enjoy a better life without following God's advice. Make sure this doesn't happen to you. Encourage each other every day to follow God's advice, even if it means giving your life, as Jesus did.

4 We're concerned that some of you may not experience the better life God promised. As you know, God created our awesome world in six days, but the people in the desert didn't enjoy life as God intended because they refused to follow God's advice. If God's spokesman Joshua had succeeded in leading them to a better life, our famous leader David

HEBREWS

wouldn't have needed to encourage their descendants to follow God's advice.

So if we want to enjoy a better life, we must try hard to follow God's advice, which helps us improve our attitude and behavior better than a sharp sword can cut through tendons and bones. We should follow the example of Jesus, who was tempted to stop following God's advice but didn't give in. God is ready and willing to help us whenever we need it.

5 As you know, our religious leaders assist others in making offerings to God to symbolize their commitment to follow God's advice. Since they don't follow it completely themselves, they empathize with others when they make their own offerings to God.

Our religious leaders don't appoint themselves to their respected position. They're selected by God, as Aaron was long ago. The same is the case with God's special messenger, Jesus. God chose him to be a special religious leader like Melchizedek.

When Jesus' life was at risk for following God's advice, he begged God to spare him. But he was willing to die to demonstrate the extent to which those of us who follow God's advice should go to help others enjoy a better life.

You're like infants who drink milk before they learn to eat solid food. You need to learn how to follow God's advice yourselves before you can help others follow it.

6 God wants us to make progress in following Jesus' example, so we shouldn't keep discussing the basics, such as being rinsed with water to symbolize our commitment to follow God's advice. Those who stop following Jesus' example, even after they've seen how effective it is, make a mockery of his death on a cross.

As you know, God sends rain to help the land produce useful plants. But if the land produces weeds, it gets burned. You're like the land that produces useful plants because you honor God by caring about others and helping those in need. We want to encourage you to continue to pattern your life after people who diligently follow God's advice so you'll enjoy the better life God promised.

When God promised Abraham a lot of descendants long ago, it eventually happened. To back up a promise, people often refer to someone greater than themselves. But no one is greater than God, so when God promises a better life, we can be sure it will happen.

Jesus encouraged us to follow God's advice, as the religious leader Melchizedek did long ago. **7** His parents are long gone, so there's no record of his birth, death or ancestry. But people will always consider him

HEBREWS

a great religious leader because he encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life, as his name reflects.

When Melchizedek commended our ancestor Abraham for trusting God's promises and defeating his opponents, Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils. Years later, when Levi and his descendants were chosen to serve as our religious leaders, Abraham's descendants gave them a tenth of their income. Since Levi's great grandfather Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils, in a sense Levi did, too. This suggests that Melchizedek was a greater religious leader than Levi.

If Levi and his descendants had been more effective in helping others follow God's advice, there wouldn't have been a need for another religious leader like Melchizedek. But it became necessary to expand the leadership beyond Levi's family. So God selected Jesus, one of Judah's descendants, whom Moses hadn't designated to be religious leaders. There have been a lot of religious leaders over the years because they all eventually die and are forgotten, but Jesus' exemplary life will never be matched. Everyone who follows God's advice as he did will enjoy a better life.

God initially chose ordinary men to be religious leaders but finally selected Jesus, who followed God's advice completely. He's just what we need. He doesn't have to give his own offering every day before he gives the offerings of others to symbolize their commitment to follow God's advice. He gave his own life.

8 My point is this. God provided Jesus to help us follow God's advice, and he did it better than anyone else. He made an offering to God, as other religious leaders do, but it wasn't like their traditional offerings. They just scratch the surface by symbolizing their commitment to follow God's advice, using the special tent that God instructed Moses to make long ago. Jesus demonstrated that we must be much more committed to following God's advice if we want to enjoy the better life God promised.

If people could enjoy a better life by following God's advice superficially, there wouldn't be any need for a deeper commitment. When our ancestors failed to follow God's advice after God helped them escape captivity in Egypt, God promised to change their attitude so they wouldn't have to be persuaded to follow God's advice. They would do it willingly when they realize they can enjoy a new and better life.

9 God initially instructed people to use a special tent to express their commitment to follow God's advice. In one area of the tent there was a lamp stand and a table, where the religious leader laid the bread that was offered to God. A more restricted area was separated by a curtain. This area contained a gold-plated table for incense and a gold-plated wooden box. Inside the box was a gold jar that contained some of the food that

HEBREWS

God had given the people in the desert long ago. Also inside the box were God's advice written on stone and Aaron's walking stick that had sprouted leaves. Mounted on the lid of the box were figures with wings that represented God's messengers.

The religious leaders used the first area of the tent to present offerings to God for themselves and others. But only the senior leader entered the restricted area once a year to offer animals to symbolize the people's commitment to follow God's advice. Although they gave offerings, refrained from eating and drinking certain things, and observed a lot of other rules, they weren't very committed to following God's advice.

Jesus is like the senior religious leader, but instead of offering goats and calves to symbolize his commitment to following God's advice, he gave his own life. Sprinkling the blood and ashes of animals on certain things was somewhat effective in motivating people to follow God's advice, but Jesus' death was much more effective. He demonstrated that those who want to enjoy a better life must be willing to risk their lives to follow God's advice.

When people make a will, they have to die before it becomes effective. In a similar way, when some people make a commitment to follow God's advice, they willingly give up the life of an animal to symbolize their commitment. Moses initiated this custom long ago when he sprinkled the blood of calves and goats on the special tent and everything inside, including the people and God's advice written on stone.

But we should indicate our level of commitment to follow God's advice with more than animal offerings. Jesus didn't need to enter the restricted area in the special tent to offer animals every year, as the senior religious leader did. He gave his own life to demonstrate how committed he was to following God's advice. Those of us who hope for a better life should follow his example.

10 The animal offerings that the religious leaders present to God each year aren't very effective in motivating people to follow God's advice. If they were, the religious leaders wouldn't need to keep offering them year after year. They just symbolize people's commitment to follow God's advice. When Jesus gave his life to show us how committed we should be, it became clear that he was God's special messenger. Since his example is so much more effective than offering animals, there's really no need to offer them anymore.

We should have the courage to risk our lives to follow God's advice, as Jesus did, because God's promises eventually come true. So keep encouraging each other to care about others and help those in need instead of being self-centered, as some people are. The more we follow God's advice, the sooner we'll experience the better life God promised.

HEBREWS

If we ignore God's advice, our offerings are meaningless and we can expect terrible consequences. As you know, when at least two people witnessed someone refusing to follow the advice God gave Moses long ago, that individual was put to death. The consequences will be even worse for those who belittle Jesus' kindness toward others and his willingness to die for following God's advice. Since their fate will be determined by God, they should be very concerned.

I'm sure you remember how much you suffered when you and your friends were insulted and harassed for following God's advice. You felt sorry for those who were put in prison, but you didn't mind that your belongings were stolen, because you knew your life would eventually improve. So don't be discouraged. Keep following God's advice, as we are, so you can experience the better life God promised.

11 Our ancestors demonstrated long ago that following God's advice is the only way the world can be restored to the way it was when God originally created it.

Although Abel died long ago, it's well known that God was more pleased with his offering than his brother Cain's, because Abel had followed God's advice.

Here are several examples of how God rewarded people for following God's advice long ago. Instead of letting Enoch die a normal death, God took him directly from earth. When God warned Noah that a flood would destroy the world, Noah followed God's advice and built a large boat that saved his family.

Abraham followed God's advice when he traveled to the land that God promised his descendants. His wife Sarah was very old and had been unable to bear children her entire life, but she believed God's promise that she would have a child. Although Abraham was also very old, Sarah had a child, and they eventually had lots of descendants, more than the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the seashore.

When God asked Abraham to offer his only son Isaac, whom God had promised would produce a lot of descendants, Abraham began to do so. He knew that God was able to bring people back to life, which God essentially did by providing a sheep as a substitute offering.

Abraham followed God's advice when he lived in tents with Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob as temporary residents in the land God promised, waiting for God to establish a new society. They all died before it became a reality, but God was pleased that they had followed God's advice.

Before Isaac died, he asked God to help his sons Jacob and Esau enjoy a prosperous life, and before Jacob died, he did the same for his grandsons. When his son Joseph was dying, he told his brothers that God

HEBREWS

would help them leave Egypt, and he asked them to take his body along with them.

Since Moses was a beautiful baby when he was born, his parents refused to obey the Egyptian leader's order to kill every male Jewish baby. They trusted God and hid Moses for three months until the Egyptian leader's daughter found him and pretended that he was her son. When he was grown, he respected God more than the Egyptian leader, so he decided to stop living a luxurious life. He left his adopted family and lived with the Jewish people, who suffered for following God's advice, as Jesus eventually did. One memorable night, Moses encouraged them to trust God and spread the blood of a lamb above and beside their doorways so God's messenger wouldn't kill their firstborn children along with the Egyptians'. Soon afterward, God enabled them to walk through the Red Sea on dry ground, but the Egyptian army pursuing them drowned in it.

Years later, the walls surrounding the city of Jericho crumbled when the Jewish people followed God's advice and walked around it for seven days. Since Rahab had extended her hospitality to strangers, her life was spared while those who ignored God's advice were destroyed.

I could give a lot of other examples of people who followed God's advice: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and many of God's spokesmen. They defeated hostile nations, subdued lions, put out fires, escaped death, recovered from illness, helped others in need, and enjoyed the outcome of God's promises.

Some people survived, but others endured torture so they would enjoy a better life later. Some were so poor that they wore sheep or goat skins for clothing. Since they were harassed and abused, they lived in the desert, or in caves among the hills. Some were ridiculed, beaten, and chained in prison. Others were stoned, sawn in half, or killed with a sword. Although they followed God's advice, they didn't fully experience the better life God promised, which we'll all eventually enjoy together.

12 As you can see, a lot of people have followed God's advice over the years, so we should try hard to do the same. Jesus is our best example because he let himself be executed on a cross instead of pursuing his own pleasure. That's why we respect him more than any of God's other messengers. You should be encouraged when you compare your situation to his, because you haven't been killed for following God's advice, as he was.

You should be glad that God corrects you when you fail to follow God's advice, because that shows that God cares about you. Parents do the same with their children. If God didn't correct you, you would think that God doesn't care. It's not pleasant to be corrected, but it helps us follow God's advice better. We respected our parents and followed their

HEBREWS

advice while growing up, but now we must follow God's advice if we hope to enjoy a better life.

Try hard to get along with others so they'll realize that God cares about them. Don't ignore God's advice, as Esau did when he traded his inheritance to his younger brother for a meal. As you know, Esau later begged his father for his inheritance, but his father had already given it to his brother.

When God gave advice to Moses, God told him that if anyone touched the smoke-covered mountain, they would be stoned to death. As he related this to the people, they were so frightened that they asked him not to let God speak directly to them.

You're part of a community that strives to follow God's advice as Jesus did. His death has a much greater impact than Abel's in motivating others to follow God's advice. God caused an earthquake long ago and promised to do it again so we'll realize that material things are not as important as caring about others, which is how we show our respect for God.

13 So you should continue to care about others and extend your hospitality to strangers, because some of them have been God's messengers. Help people who are in prison, as you would like them to help you if you were there. Respect those who are faithful to their spouses, because God is disappointed with those who aren't. Follow the example of those who've shared and followed God's advice, especially Jesus. God has promised to help us when we're in need, so we should depend on God instead of material things and not be afraid of what others might do to us.

Don't follow advice that contradicts God's. Some people won't eat the animals whose blood they've given to the religious leader to symbolize their commitment to follow God's advice. You should be more concerned about helping others in need than about what kind of food you eat. We should thank God for Jesus' exemplary life and be willing to die on a cross for following God's advice, as Jesus did, so the new world we've been looking forward to can become a reality.

God is pleased when you help each other. Follow your leaders' instruction so their efforts to help you follow God's advice will be enjoyable and effective.

I've written this letter to encourage you to follow God's advice and help others in need, as Jesus did. God keeps the memory of Jesus alive and he'll always be respected for devoting his life to that endeavor.

Ask God to help us follow God's advice and to make it possible for me to visit you soon. Our friend Timothy has recently been released from prison. If he arrives soon, I'll bring him along.

HEBREWS

Please greet everyone who is following God's advice there, especially the leaders. The people here in Italy send their greetings.

Sincerely,

(anonymous)

JAMES

1 One of Jesus' followers named James wrote the following letter to people who had already heard God's advice for a better life.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

Since some of you have fallen on hard times, you can be glad you've already heard God's advice because now is the time to put it into action. When you see how well it works, you'll want to keep following it. The more you do, the better your life will be. If you're not sure how it applies to some situations, don't hesitate to ask God for help. If you rely on the haphazard advice of others, you won't get the help you need from God.

You should be anxious to follow God's advice, whether you're the one receiving help or the one giving it. If you have a lot of money, your wealth should be temporary, like the blossoms on a flower, because there are plenty of opportunities to share it with people in need.

When you apply God's advice during hard times, you'll find that you really do enjoy life more, just as God promised. But if you follow your own selfish desires, you'll end up experiencing a miserable life. God doesn't want that to happen. The God who created the sun, moon, and stars only wants the best for everyone.

So stop spreading self-centered advice that upsets people. Spend your time listening to God's advice, but don't be stupid and think that's all you need to do. If you don't apply it to your life, you'll soon forget it, like people who look in a mirror and forget what they look like as soon as they walk away. When you're convinced that God's advice will help you enjoy a better life, you'll be eager to follow it.

If you consider yourself religious but never apply God's advice to your life, you're just fooling yourself because that kind of religion is useless. God's idea of religion involves helping others in need, such as orphans and widows, not pursuing your own selfish interests.

Caution Not to Treat Some People Better Than Others

2 When you treat some people better than others, you're not following God's advice as Jesus did. For instance, when you offer the best seats in the local worship center to wealthy people but tell poor people to stand or sit on the floor, you're treating wealthy people better than the poor. God doesn't want you to do that.

JAMES

God promised a better life to everyone who follows God's advice, but some of you are acting like only the rich deserve it. While you show little respect for the poor, it's the rich who often take advantage of others and drag them into court. This contradicts what it means to follow Jesus' example. When you treat some people better than others, you're not following the advice God gave long ago:

You should care about others
as much as you care about yourself.

Putting God's Advice into Practice

It's important to follow *all* of God's advice. This includes *You should not break up your marriage to marry someone else*, and *You should not cause others to die, even by neglect*. If you haven't broken up your marriage to marry someone else, but you've neglected to help others survive, you've failed to follow God's advice. The more you help others in need, the more you'll enjoy life as God intended.

If you don't follow God's advice, the condition of your community won't improve. For example, when you encounter people who need food and clothing, it doesn't do any good just to tell them to stay warm and get enough to eat. You must give them what they need. In other words, for God's advice to have any effect, you must do more than just talk about it. It's great that you acknowledge God's existence, but even harmful spirits admit that. If you want to distinguish yourself from them, you need to put God's advice into practice.

According to one of God's spokesmen who lived long ago, our ancestor Abraham pleased God when he was willing to give his only son Isaac as an offering. Several generations later, Rahab did what God wanted when she gave Joshua's spies a place to stay in Jericho and helped them escape safely. As you can see, following God's direction made a big difference in these people's lives, so you should make a real effort to follow God's advice and not just talk about it. You can't live without breathing, and you can't follow God's advice without action.

The Importance of What We Say

3 Not many of you share God's advice with others because you realize they're always watching to see if you practice what you preach. But none of us is able to do that completely. We don't always *say* the right things, much less, *do* them.

As you know, something small can produce significant results. A bridle can control a horse and a rudder can steer a large sailboat in a strong wind. Even a tiny flame has the capability to burn down an entire forest.

JAMES

What we say can also have a tremendous impact. For example, when we spread rumors or give bad advice, we make other people's lives miserable.

It's ironic that we can train animals, birds, reptiles, and fish to do what we want, but we often can't control our own talk. Some of the time we honor God by what we say, but there are many times we dishonor God, such as when we insult others. Everyone knows that fresh water and saltwater don't come from the same source, nor do figs and grapes. They each reflect their source. So if we want to reflect the character of the God who made us, we must be more conscious of what we say.

When you make a promise, don't refer to God to try to convince people that you'll keep your word. When you do this, you're implying that your word isn't trustworthy by itself. You need to try harder to keep your word so others can depend on what you say.

Instead of spreading self-centered advice that makes life miserable for others, you should apply God's advice to everything you say and do. Try to get along with everyone, care about others, encourage good behavior, help others in need, treat everyone the same, and practice what you preach. This is the only way you'll really enjoy a better life.

The Negative Impact of Self-centeredness

4 Many of you don't get along with others because you each have your own self-centered agenda. When you want something badly enough, you're ready to fight and even kill for it. One of God's spokesmen knew what he was talking about when he pointed out long ago that we all tend to be jealous of what others have.

Another spokesman reminded us that God is more willing to help those in need than those who live a selfish life of luxury. If you wonder why you don't always get the things you ask for, it's because God is more concerned about meeting basic needs than satisfying selfish desires.

You should be sorry for living the kind of lifestyle that only gratifies yourself. Let God help you improve your attitude and behavior so you can enjoy the kind of life God originally intended.

Stop criticizing others by your own standards. When you do, you're implying that God's standards aren't as good as yours. What arrogance! God has given you the best advice, but it's up to you to decide whether you want to apply it and enjoy a better life, or to ignore it and continue living a miserable, self-centered life.

If you think you can do whatever you want, *whenever* you want, you don't realize that life is limited, like the early morning fog that eventually disappears. Instead of bragging about doing your own thing, you should use the time God gives you to help others in need.

JAMES

5 Those of you who have more money than you need should realize that you're living a self-centered life of luxury. You're sad that your gold and silver is tarnishing in a safe and your expensive clothes are deteriorating in storage. Meanwhile, your employees complain that they aren't getting paid, and some even die because you neglect your responsibility.

Encouragement to be Patient and Persistent

As you know, a farmer must wait patiently until his crops grow and produce fruit. Those of you who are having a hard time must also be patient until God puts an end to it. God's spokesmen were glad they persisted through hard times long ago, and the familiar story of Job reminds us that God cares about us and helps us endure them. But don't blame others for your hardships. The more you blame *them*, the more they'll blame you.

Remember to thank God when everything is going well. But if you're having a hard time following God's advice, ask the leaders of your group to pray with you for God's help.

Apologize to the people you've offended and ask God to help you restore your friendship. When you ask God to help you do what's right, you'll see how readily God responds. God's spokesman Elijah is a good example. When he asked God to prevent it from raining long ago to encourage the Jewish leader Ahab to improve his attitude and behavior toward God, it didn't rain for three and a half years. Later, when Elijah asked God to let it rain, it did, and the crops produced a huge harvest.

One final thought: when you help others follow God's advice, you're helping them enjoy life more by focusing on meeting the needs of others instead of satisfying their own selfish desires.

Sincerely,

James

PETER'S 1st Letter

1 Peter was one of Jesus' followers who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. He wrote this letter to those who were following it to some degree throughout Turkey, in the regions of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. But God wanted them to follow it to the extent that Jesus did.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

We thank God for caring about us and giving us hope that we'll come back to life after death, as Jesus did.

Although you're experiencing some hard times now, you should be glad that God is helping you follow Jesus' example, which is more valuable than gold, so you'll enjoy a better life in the future.

God's spokesmen told your ancestors long ago that God promised to send someone who would willingly suffer to help you enjoy a better life. Ever since then, people who respect God have been looking forward to his coming. Although you haven't met Jesus personally, you'll definitely enjoy a better life by following his example than by accumulating a lot of material things.

So stop being self-centered. Use good judgment as you follow Jesus' example. This is what God's spokesmen meant when they wrote long ago that everyone should reflect God's character in their behavior. God treats everyone fairly, so if you want God to help you enjoy a better life, you'll need to follow God's advice. You should realize that it wasn't material things such as gold or silver that caused you to improve your learned behavior. It was Jesus' total commitment to following God's advice, which existed before the world was even created. God brought him back to life after he died so you would be more inclined to follow his example.

Your life is much better when you follow God's advice and care about others. One of God's spokesmen mentioned long ago that traditions are only temporary, like the blossoms on a plant. But God's advice is completely reliable, which is why we're encouraging you to follow it.

2 Stop pretending to follow God's advice, and stop slandering others out of jealousy. You know that God cares about you and wants you to enjoy a better life, so you should be as motivated to follow God's advice as newborn babies are to nurse from their mothers.

Jesus followed God's advice even though some people gave him a hard time for doing so. You should do the same. One of God's

1 PETER

spokesmen predicted long ago that God would send someone to be the best example for others to follow. Although some people refuse to follow Jesus' example, those of you who do will not be disappointed.

You should be thankful that God cares about you and gives you guidance so you can enjoy a better life. Try hard to stop being self-centered so those who've accused you of not following God's advice will see that you've changed.

You should obey every authority that honors outstanding citizens and punishes criminals. When you respect God and those in authority, others won't have any grounds to accuse you of not following God's advice. So try your best to respect the authorities, even if they mistreat you. You don't impress God when you endure punishment that you deserve, but you do when you endure hardship for following God's advice, as Jesus did when he was executed on a cross. Instead of retaliating against those who insulted him and caused him to suffer, he let God determine their fate.

You used to be like sheep that ignored their shepherd's guidance, but now you're willing to follow God's advice for a better life.

3 Those of you who are wives should respect your husbands so your conduct will encourage them to follow God's advice. You don't need to wear expensive clothes and jewelry, or spend a lot of time fixing your hair. God is much more concerned that you express a humble and respectful attitude. As you know, Sarah respected her husband Abraham long ago, as other wives respect their husbands. When you follow their example, you can rest assured that you're following God's advice.

Those of you who are husbands should respect your wives because they depend on you to help them enjoy the better life you've been praying for.

God is ready and willing to help you care about others and help those in need. Instead of retaliating against people who offend you, you should respond with kindness so others will treat you the same. If you want to enjoy a better life, you shouldn't do or say anything that will harm someone else.

No one should give you a hard time for following God's advice, but don't be afraid if some people do. If you're prepared to tactfully explain why you follow it as Jesus did, they'll be embarrassed for criticizing you. It's better to suffer for *following* God's advice than to suffer for *ignoring* it. Jesus suffered for following it to demonstrate that we need to do the same if we want God to help us enjoy a better life.

As you know, God was very patient with the people who refused to follow God's advice long ago during the time of Noah. The flood is a reminder that just eight people followed God's advice and built a large boat to survive. Your symbolic rinsing with water is a reminder that

1 PETER

you're enjoying a better life not because you're a little cleaner on the outside, but because you've made a commitment to follow God's advice, which Jesus demonstrated better than anyone else.

4 You should be prepared to suffer for following God's advice, as Jesus did. You used to pursue your own selfish desires and have drinking parties, but now your friends are criticizing you for no longer joining them. We encouraged them to follow God's advice so they could also enjoy a better life, but they refused.

When you pray, ask God to help you care about others instead of pursuing your own selfish desires. Welcome travelers without complaining. Use the special abilities God has given you to help others so they'll realize that God cares about them. Ask God to help you say and do only what honors God, as Jesus did.

Don't be surprised that some people are giving you a hard time for following Jesus' example. You should be glad they are, because it reflects that you're honoring God.

You should be ashamed if you're suffering the consequences for murder, stealing, or interfering in other people's lives. But you shouldn't be embarrassed if you're suffering for following Jesus' example, because that honors God. The time has come to make a total commitment to follow God's advice. It may be difficult to do, but those who don't will never enjoy life as God intended. It's evident that those who are willing to suffer for following God's advice are totally committed.

5 Since I personally saw Jesus suffer for following God's advice, I'm committed to doing the same. So I want to encourage those of you who are leaders among Jesus' followers to lead them willingly, not because you have to or because you hope to gain something from it. Lead them by example, as Jesus did, not by force.

Those of you who are young should respect your elders. But you should all depend on God for help because God cares about you and is ready and willing to help you.

Some people will give you a hard time for following God's advice, as they do to others. But God cares about you and wants you to follow the example of Jesus, who only suffered a short while.

1 PETER

Final Comments

I'm writing this brief letter with the assistance of Silas, one of Jesus' followers, to encourage you to follow God's advice.

My student Mark and Jesus' other followers here in Rome send their greetings.

Remember that God will help you enjoy life more as you follow Jesus' example.

Sincerely,

Peter

PETER'S 2nd Letter

1 Peter was one of Jesus' followers who encouraged others to follow God's advice for a better life. He wrote this letter to those who were following it to some degree, but not to the extent that Jesus did.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

Jesus promised that the more we follow his example, the more we'll enjoy life as God intended. So you should try hard to follow his example and care about everyone, not just your friends. Since he predicted that I'm soon going to die, I want to help you follow his example while I'm still alive so you'll continue doing so after I'm gone.

Those of us who personally knew Jesus have told you what a great impact he made in our lives. A few of us were on the mountain when God confirmed that Jesus was God's special messenger. But God's advice should have an even greater impact on you because it's like the sun displacing the darkness at dawn. It's important to remember that God motivates people to share God's advice with others. They don't do it on their own.

2 Some people distort God's advice, as others have done in the past. A lot of people follow such distorted advice because it appeals to their self-centeredness. So God will let them suffer the consequences, like those who ignored God's advice in the past. As you know, only Noah and seven others survived the flood long ago because they followed God's advice. Everyone else was destroyed.

Another example of what happens when people ignore God's advice is the fiery destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah long ago. Lot was the only one who followed God's advice and was upset by the people's disgusting behavior, so God helped him escape before the cities were destroyed. God is ready and willing to help others escape similar situations, but those who are self-centered and refuse to respect their leaders will suffer the consequences. God's messengers don't need to ask God to punish such arrogant people, because they'll suffer the consequences, like animals that ignore their instincts.

People who ignore God's advice are as useless to others as a well that produces no water, or a cloud that produces no rain. Such people have drinking parties and encourage others to ignore God's advice, as God's spokesman Balaam did long ago. But God enabled Balaam's donkey to speak to him and convince him to change his mind.

Although their own life was miserable, some people convinced those who had begun following God's advice to do whatever they wanted. But now their life is worse than it was before. They would have been better off not to have enjoyed a better life at all than to experience it for a while and then return to their previous lifestyle. They're like a dog that returned to eat its own vomit, or a washed pig that went back into the mud.

3 I'm writing this second letter to remind you to follow God's advice, which God's spokesmen encouraged your ancestors to follow long ago and which Jesus' followers have encouraged you to follow. It doesn't look like things have changed much since the beginning of time, so I want to warn you that self-centered people will make fun of God's promise that you'll enjoy a better life. But they forget that God created the world long ago by separating the water, which later caused many people to die in the major flood.

Some day there will also be a huge fire in which people will again suffer the consequences for refusing to follow God's advice. Exactly when this will happen is not important. God doesn't break a promise, as some people would like to think. But God is very patient and wants everyone to have ample opportunity to improve their attitude and behavior. So you'll need to follow God's advice if you want to avoid the coming fire.

We look forward to a new world in which people will enjoy the kind of life God originally intended. So try hard to follow God's advice, as our good friend Paul encouraged you to do in his letters. Those who distort it will suffer the consequences, so don't let them mislead you.

Try to care as much about others as Jesus did. We'll always admire him for that.

Sincerely,

Peter

JOHN'S 1st Letter

1 Dear Friends,

I'm writing to let you know that Jesus demonstrated the kind of life God wants everyone to enjoy. Some of us have personally seen, heard, and even touched him. He reminded us that God cares about everyone and wants us to do the same.

We're not being honest when we claim to follow God's advice but continue living a self-centered life. When we make a sincere effort to follow God's advice as Jesus did, God overlooks our past behavior and helps us care more about others.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

2 I want to encourage you to follow the same God's advice that God gave our ancestors long ago. More people are beginning to follow it since Jesus showed us how.

The best way to show your respect for God is by caring about others, as Jesus did. God is ready and willing to help you follow his example. If you claim to respect God but don't care about others, you're a hypocrite.

When you care more about yourself and your possessions than you care about others, you're not following God's advice. It's like you're living in total darkness, unable to see the hazards around you. So stop striving to achieve fame and fortune, which only provide temporary gratification. Instead, help people in need, as God suggests, so you'll enjoy long-term satisfaction.

As I said, Jesus demonstrated the same advice God gave our ancestors long ago. Those of you who follow it realize that God is helping you improve your behavior by overcoming your self-centeredness.

A lot of your own family and friends will make your lives miserable because they refuse to follow God's advice. They don't believe that Jesus reflected the character of God, and they deny that he was the one that God promised would help people enjoy a better life.

Don't let them mislead you. The only way you'll enjoy the better life God promised is by following Jesus' example. As you courageously do that, you'll be convinced that the advice he demonstrated is God's.

The Essence of God's Advice

3 The more you care about others, the more you reflect that God cares about everyone. By following God's advice correctly, Jesus demonstrated

1 JOHN

how to improve your behavior toward God and others. If you refuse to follow his example, you won't have the guidance you need in life.

Don't let anyone mislead you. Those who refuse to follow Jesus' example are following in the footsteps of Satan, who rebelled against God long ago. It's easy to tell the difference between them and those who follow God's advice, because they care about others.

As I've said before, this is the same advice God gave our ancestors long ago. It's obvious that Cain didn't care about his brother Abel, because he killed him out of jealousy. So don't be surprised when self-centered people make life miserable for you, too.

The more you care about others, the more you'll realize that God is helping you improve your attitude and behavior. Eventually, you'll even be willing to risk your life for others, as Jesus did.

Jesus demonstrated that the essence of God's advice is caring about others. So you're following God's advice when you help others in need, and not just talk about it. Since self-centered people don't help others in need, they obscure the fact that God cares about everyone.

God's advice is more reliable than your conscience, so don't hesitate to ask God to help you follow it.

4 People love to give advice, so make sure it corresponds with God's before you follow it. You can tell it does if it encourages you to follow Jesus' example.

As you know, people usually follow advice that appeals to their self-centeredness. But you're following God's advice because you know it's much better than anyone else's.

God wants to help you enjoy a better life by improving your attitude and behavior. When you care about others as Jesus did, you'll know you're following God's advice. If you respect God, you'll try hard to do that.

No one has ever seen God, but they can see God's character reflected in the way others treat them. So when you improve the way you treat others, you'll know you're beginning to reflect God's character.

Those who don't care about others have reason to be concerned about the consequences they'll face for their actions. But those of you who care about others don't need to be concerned because you're doing what God knows is best for everyone.

God told our ancestors long ago that they show their respect by caring about others. So if you claim to respect God but don't care about others, you're obviously a hypocrite.

5 It's not all that difficult to care about others, because God is ready and willing to help. As you know, everyone has a tendency to be self-centered,

1 JOHN

but God will help you overcome your self-centeredness by helping you follow Jesus' example.

Jesus risked his life to demonstrate that God's advice for a better life is much better than anyone else's. You can tell by the improvement in your attitude and behavior that following his example really works. So you should realize that when you follow it, you're doing what God knows is best for everyone.

To summarize, Jesus clarified God's advice so you could enjoy a better life. If you respect God, you'll care about others as much as you care about yourself. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Sincerely,

John

JOHN'S 2nd Letter

John wrote this letter to people who had already heard God's advice for a better life.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

Those of us who follow God's advice care a lot about you, so we want to remind you that God also cares about you and wants you to enjoy a better life by helping others in need, as Jesus did

I'm thrilled that you've decided to follow the advice God gave our ancestors long ago, because that's the best way to show your respect for God.

A lot of people refuse to acknowledge that Jesus demonstrated God's advice. Don't let them ruin the new life you've begun to enjoy. If they try to convince you to follow their self-centered advice, don't pay any attention to them or your life will be miserable again.

I'd like to say a lot more, but I'll save it for when I have the opportunity to visit. By the way, Jesus' followers send their greetings.

Sincerely,

John

JOHN'S 3rd Letter

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Gaius,

I care a lot about you, so I've asked God to give you good health and an enjoyable life.

I'm thrilled to hear that you're following God's advice. Nothing makes me happier than to learn that people with whom I've shared God's advice are actually following it.

Your friends and even some strangers mentioned that you helped them continue their journey to share God's advice with others. Since they're not receiving help from anyone else, we should continue to help them as much as we can.

I had written to some of Jesus' followers in your town about coming to visit, but Diotrephes prevented them from extending their hospitality. When we arrive, I'll remind him of that as well as the unkind things he said about us, and the fact that he caused some of Jesus' followers to leave your group.

You should pattern your life after people who care about others, such as Demetrius, not after those who are self-centered.

I'd like to say a lot more, but I'll save it for when I have the opportunity to visit. By the way, your friends send their greetings. Please give my greetings to all my friends there.

Sincerely,

John

JUDE

One of Jesus' followers named Jude wrote this letter to others who respected God and were committed to following Jesus' exemplary life.

Encouragement to Follow God's Advice

Dear Friends,

Since some people refuse to follow God's advice as Jesus did, I've been wanting to write to encourage you to keep following it so you'll enjoy a better life.

As you know, when God rescued our ancestors from slavery in Egypt long ago, God's messenger killed the firstborn of every Egyptian who ignored God's advice, from the irresponsible leaders to the prisoners on death row. The destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah and nearby cities by fire is another example of what can happen when people ignore God's advice. People are dreaming if they think they can avoid the consequences for their behavior. They definitely do experience the effect, just like animals that don't follow their instincts. It has happened to Cain, who killed his brother, to Balaam, who gave in to greed, and to Korah, who rebelled against God. Even Satan was warned by God's messenger Michael that God would deal with him for challenging Moses' final destiny.

People who pretend to follow Jesus' example threaten your community welfare because they only care about themselves. They're as useless to others as clouds that produce no rain, trees that bear no fruit, and stars that no longer shine.

God's spokesman Enoch, a seventh generation descendant of Adam, predicted that a leader with many followers would help identify those who ignore God's advice. As you may recall, Jesus' followers told you that those who ignore it will make fun of you. They're self-centered and divisive. Although they brag about having the freedom to do whatever they want, they complain about life.

Ask God to help you care more about others and help those in need, as Jesus did, so you can enjoy a better life.

Sincerely,

Jude



TURKEY

Pergamum

Thyatira

Sardis

Philadelphia

Laodicea

Smyrna

Ephesus

PATMOS

CRETE

Jerusalem

MEDITERRANEAN
SEA

REVELATION of Coming Events

1 When God informed Jesus of coming events, he shared the information with John so he would share it with Jesus' other followers. Whoever pays attention to it will be glad they did.

John's Letter to Jesus' Followers in Western Turkey

Dear friends,

God cares about you and wants to help you enjoy a better life. As you know, Jesus cared about us so much that he gave his life to help motivate us to follow God's advice. Since God brought him back to life, we honor him more than any other leader. God's spokesmen predicted long ago that a lot of people would be very disappointed that he was killed. But God brought him back to life because God has control over the end of life as well as its beginning.

Like some of you, I was put in prison on Patmos Island for following God's advice as Jesus did. When I was praying one Sunday, I heard someone behind me speak loud and clear,

“Write down what you're about to see and send it to my followers in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

When I turned around to see who was speaking, I saw someone standing among seven gold candles holding seven stars in his right hand. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash around his waist. His hair was as white as snow, his face was as bright as the sun, and his feet were as shiny as polished brass. His voice was as pleasant as the sound of a waterfall, but his message was as penetrating as a sharp sword.

When I first saw him, I was nearly scared to death. But he consoled me and said,

“I dedicated my life to helping others as God does. Although I died, God brought me back to life to help others overcome their fear of death. I want you to write down what you've just seen and what you're about to see.

“The seven candles represent my followers in the towns I just mentioned, and the seven stars in my right hand represent a messenger for each town.”

REVELATION

Jesus' Message to His Followers in Ephesus

2 “This is what I want you to write to my followers in Ephesus,

‘I know you try hard to follow God’s advice as I did, and you don’t support those who just pretend to do so, like the Nicolaitans. But I’m concerned that you don’t care about each other as much as you used to. If you don’t change your attitude and behavior, your positive influence on others will soon be gone.’

“Whoever follows God’s advice will enjoy life as God intended.”

Jesus' Message to His Followers in Smyrna

“This is what I want you to write to my followers in Smyrna,

‘I know you’re experiencing a hard time physically, but your life is better in other ways. While some people criticize you for following God’s advice, they themselves just pretend to follow it, like Satan. Don’t be afraid when they throw you in prison for ten days to test your level of commitment. If you’re willing to suffer and even die for following God’s advice, you’ll eventually enjoy the ultimate life.’

“Whoever follows God’s advice doesn’t need to fear death.”

Jesus' Message to His Followers in Pergamum

“This is what I want you to write to my followers in Pergamum,

‘Although a lot of people there refuse to follow God’s advice, like Satan, I know you’ve tried hard to follow my example, even when Antipas was killed for doing so. But I’m concerned that some of you are beginning to follow the advice of Balaam, as Balak did long ago when he encouraged the Israelites to eat the food offered to idols. I’m also disappointed that some of you are following the advice of the Nicolaitans. If they don’t change their attitude and behavior soon, I’ll encourage them again to follow God’s advice, which is as penetrating as a sharp sword.’

“Whoever follows God’s advice will enjoy the life God promised.”

REVELATION

Jesus' Message to His Followers in Thyatira

“This is what I want you to write to my followers in Thyatira,

‘I know you care about and help each other even more than you did when you first started following God’s advice. But you’re allowing a woman named Jezebel to encourage others to eat the food offered idols. I gave her time to change her behavior but she refused, so I’ll let her suffer the consequences. If her followers refuse to change their behavior, I’ll let them also suffer the consequences so you’ll know that I let people make their own decisions and suffer the consequences for them.

‘Keep following God’s advice as I did. I won’t ask you to do anything else.’

“Those who follow God’s advice will help others enjoy a better life, like a shepherd does for his sheep.”

Jesus' Message to His Followers in Sardis

3

“This is what I want you to write to my followers in Sardis,

‘I know you have a reputation for following God’s advice, but you’ve almost stopped. Remind each other of your commitment to change your behavior and follow God’s advice. If you stop following it, I’ll return when you aren’t ready, like a thief who comes when you least expect it. I’m glad that at least a few of you are following God’s advice so you can enjoy the ultimate life with me.’

“Whoever follows God’s advice will enjoy a better life, and I’ll make sure God knows who they are.”

Jesus' Message to His Followers in Philadelphia

“This is what I want you to write to my followers in Philadelphia,

‘I know most of you are following God’s advice as I did. But some people just pretend, as Satan does. I want them to know that I really care about you and will help you whenever your commitment to follow God’s advice is tested.’

“Whoever follows God’s advice will enjoy the better life God promised, and I’ll make sure God knows who they are.”

REVELATION

Jesus' Message to His Followers in Laodicea

“This is what I want you to write to my followers in Laodicea,

‘I know you’re following God’s advice to some extent, but not very well. Your behavior is as disgusting as the putrid water people refuse to drink.

‘You think you’re already enjoying a good life, but you don’t realize how miserable you really are. Since I care about everyone, I’m encouraging you to follow my example and help those in need.’

“Whoever follows God’s advice will help others enjoy a better life.”

John Begins to Record Jesus' Revelation of Coming Events

4 Jesus then began to show me what would soon occur. I first saw God sitting on a throne made of jewels, which emitted thunder and lightning and had a rainbow overhead. Twenty-four leaders were seated around God, wearing white robes and gold crowns. On a sea of crystals in front of God’s throne were seven burning candles that represented Jesus’ followers. Beside the throne were four creatures that looked like a lion, an ox, an eagle and a human being. Each of them had six wings, with eyes on every side. The four creatures and the 24 leaders were constantly thanking God for everything God created.

5 One of God’s messengers asked who would open the seven securely sealed letters that God was holding. When it appeared that no one could, I began to cry. But one of the 24 leaders consoled me because Jesus, the most respected descendant of Judah and David, was able to open them. Jesus looked like a beautiful lamb with seven horns and seven eyes that represented God’s messengers throughout the world. When God gave him the letters, the four creatures and 24 leaders began honoring him. They each held a small harp and gold bowls filled with incense as they sang,

“You can open the letters because you were willing to die to encourage people everywhere to follow God’s advice.”

Then thousands of God’s messengers and living beings everywhere began honoring God and Jesus.

REVELATION

Jesus Opens Six of the Seven Letters Containing Hardship

6 As Jesus opened the first letter, one of the four creatures showed me a man on a white horse holding a bow. He was given a crown to symbolize his quest to rule the world.

As Jesus opened the second letter, one of the other four creatures showed me a man on a red horse. He was given a large sword to represent his intent to create conflict so people would kill each other.

As Jesus opened the third letter, another one of the four creatures showed me a man on a black horse. He was holding a scale to represent the relative cost of food. One of the other four creatures announced that wheat and barley had become very expensive, but not oil or wine.

As Jesus opened the fourth letter, the last of the four creatures showed me a man on a jaundiced horse. He was called Death because he had the authority to eliminate one-fourth of the world's population by violence, starvation, or wild animals.

When Jesus opened the fifth letter, I saw people who had been killed for following God's advice. They asked God how long it would be before their killers would be held accountable. As each of them was given a white robe, God told them that more people would die for following God's advice.

When Jesus opened the sixth letter, the earth shook, the sun went black and the moon turned red. Stars fell to the earth like ripe fruit does when the tree is shaken by a strong wind. Every mountain and island was displaced. People from all levels of society hid in caves and behind rocks in the mountains, thinking that God and Jesus were expressing their anger.

John Sees Those Who Had Followed God's Advice

7 Then I saw a messenger in each quarter of the earth stop the wind from blowing across the land and sea. But God's messenger told them to let the wind blow until all those who followed God's advice had been clearly identified. Included in that group were 144,000 of Jacob's descendants, 12,000 from each clan:

Judah	Naphtali	Issachar
Reuben	Manasseh	Zebulun
Gad	Simeon	Joseph
Asher	Levi	Benjamin

Countless others from every ethnic group in the world wore white robes and honored God and Jesus with palm branches for helping them enjoy a better life. The four creatures, the 24 leaders and all of God's messengers also honored God.

REVELATION

One of God's messengers asked me if I knew who the people wearing the white robes were. When I admitted I didn't, he explained,

“They were harassed and a lot of them were killed for following God's advice, as Jesus was. But now they're thanking God day and night because God has eliminated every reason for sadness. They won't ever again be hungry, thirsty or overheated in the sun, because Jesus is taking care of them like a shepherd takes care of his sheep.”

Jesus Opens the Seventh Letter Containing More Hardship

8 When Jesus opened the seventh letter, God gave trumpets to seven messengers. Another messenger filled a gold container with incense at the gold worship table so the smoke would accompany prayers to God. Then he filled his container with fire from the worship table and threw it down to earth, causing thunder, lightning and earthquakes.

When the first messenger blew his trumpet, hail and fire pelted the earth and burned up a third of the trees and other vegetation.

When the second messenger blew his trumpet, a large ball of fire was hurled into the sea, causing a third of it to turn to blood as people on ships and sea creatures died.

When the third messenger blew his trumpet, a large star fell on a third of the rivers and springs. It was called *The Bitter Star* because it made the water so bitter that a lot of people died because they couldn't drink it.

When the fourth messenger blew his trumpet, the sun didn't shine for a third of the day, and the moon and stars didn't shine for a third of the night. Another messenger warned people of the devastating effect of the last three trumpets.

9 When the fifth messenger blew his trumpet, another messenger opened the door to a deep pit in the earth. Thick smoke billowed out, blocking the light of the sun. Out of the smoke came locusts that resembled horses dressed for battle. Their face looked human and they had long hair like a woman, but their teeth were like a lion's and their tail had a stinger like a scorpion's. They wore iron breastplates and a gold crown, and their wings sounded like a herd of horses pulling chariots into battle. Their leader was the one who released them from the pit, who was known as the Destroyer. Although they weren't allowed to destroy any vegetation or kill anyone, for five months they stung those who refused to follow God's advice. A lot of people became so miserable that they wished they could die. The next two hardships are even worse.

When the sixth messenger blew his trumpet, someone at the gold worship table in front of God's throne told another messenger to release

REVELATION

four messengers near the great Euphrates River. They were just waiting for the opportunity to kill a third of mankind. Their army consisted of a vast cavalry with red, yellow and blue breastplates. The head of each horse resembled a lion's that spit out fire and sulphur, and their tail looked like the head of a snake. In spite of this, the people who survived didn't change their behavior. They continued to murder, steal and practice witchcraft, and they didn't stop worshiping harmful spirits or idols that couldn't see, hear or walk because they were made of gold, silver, brass, wood and stone.

10 Then I saw another messenger from God come down to earth. He was surrounded by a cloud and had a rainbow overhead. His face was as bright as the sun and his legs were like pillars of fire. While holding a letter, he put his right foot on the sea and his left foot on land. He roared like a lion to get our attention, and it thundered seven times as he read the letter. I was going to write down what he said, but God told me not to. The messenger promised that when the seventh messenger blew his trumpet, the God who created the universe would reveal the same advice God's spokesmen received long ago. As the messenger gave me the letter, he said it contained good advice that would be difficult to follow. When I read it, I realized he was right. God asked me to share this advice with people everywhere.

11 Another messenger gave me a measuring stick with these instructions,

“Measure God's temple, the worship table and the other objects used for worship. But don't bother measuring the area outside because non-Jews will demolish Jerusalem for several years. During that time, I'll send two men to encourage everyone to follow God's advice. If anyone tries to harm them while they're doing so, fire will come out of their mouths and destroy their assailant. The men will be able to prevent it from raining, turn water to blood, and get people's attention in other ways as often as they wish.

“When the men complete their task, a beast will come out of the pit and kill them. Their corpses will lie in the streets of Jerusalem for several days before they're buried so the people can celebrate that the men will no longer challenge their lifestyle. Since Jesus was also killed in Jerusalem, some people refer to it as Sodom or Egypt, where a lot of people refused to follow God's advice long ago.

REVELATION

“But after several days, God will bring the two men back to life, and those who see them will be terrified. As the men ascend in a cloud, an earthquake will destroy a tenth of Jerusalem and 7,000 people will be killed. The rest will choose to honor God.”

When the seventh messenger blew his trumpet, others acknowledged that with Jesus’ help, God had made the world a much better place. So the 24 leaders expressed their thanks,

“Thank you, God, for helping people enjoy a better life. You’ll reward those who were killed for following your advice, but those who refuse to follow it will suffer the consequences.”

When someone opened God’s temple and exposed the special box that symbolized God’s presence, there was thunder, lightning, large hail and an earthquake.

God’s Opponents Will Harass and Kill Jesus’ Followers

12 Then I saw a pregnant woman wearing a crown with 12 stars on it. Her clothes were as bright as the sun, and her shoes shined like the moon. When her pregnancy was full term, she cried as she gave birth to a child.

I also saw a large red dragon with ten horns and a crown on each of its seven heads. He appeared as the snake in the story of creation and is called Satan because he personifies anyone who opposes God and tries to get others to follow *their* advice instead of God’s. Michael and some of God’s other messengers subdued him and banished him to earth along with a third of God’s messengers. The rest celebrated and said,

“Now that the one who misleads people from following God’s advice has been subdued, they’ll be able to enjoy a better life. They overcame their fear of death when they learned that Jesus wasn’t afraid to die for following God’s advice. But we’re concerned about those who are still alive, because Satan is angry that he only has a limited time to influence them.”

The dragon stayed near the woman while she was in labor so he could kill her child as soon as it was born. She eventually delivered a son who would help people enjoy a better life, as a shepherd does for his sheep. After her son was dedicated to God, the dragon tried to find her. But she had been given two large eagle wings so she could fly to a remote area that God had prepared for her. She lived there for several years. The dragon spit out a flood of water to sweep the woman out of her refuge, but the earth drained the water away. He became so furious that he now harasses her descendants who follow God’s advice as Jesus did.

REVELATION

13 Then I saw a creature come from the sea that looked like a leopard, although his mouth resembled a lion's and his feet looked like a bear's. He had a crown on each of his ten horns and a disrespectful name on each of his seven heads. One of his heads had been seriously injured, but it fully recovered. Since the dragon enabled the sea creature to greatly influence others, a lot of people worshiped both of them. The dragon enabled the sea creature to insult God and harass a wide range of people for several years. Many of those who followed God's advice as Jesus did were thrown in prison or killed.

Then I saw another creature come out of the earth with two horns that resembled a sheep's. He persuaded a lot of people to worship the sea creature by doing amazing things, such as causing lightning to strike the earth. He convinced them to make an idol of the sea creature, through which he ordered those who refused to worship the idol to be killed. He also persuaded people of all social levels to put the sea creature's name or the number 666 on their right hand or forehead so only *they* could buy and sell things. An intelligent person should be able to figure out who the sea creature is because the number 666 is the total value of the letters in his name.

A Lot of People Will Honor God

14 Then I saw Jesus standing on Mount Zion with 144,000 people, the first of those who followed God's advice as he did. They were playing harps and singing a new song as they honored God, the four creatures and the 24 leaders. Meanwhile, a messenger made this appeal to the people still on earth,

“You should all honor the God who made the earth, sky and water, because God will help you enjoy a better life.”

Another messenger announced that those who refuse to follow God's advice will no longer mislead others. A third messenger added,

“God is very disappointed with those who worship the sea creature. Jesus and God's other messengers will witness the miserable life they've chosen to live.”

Another messenger told me to write this message from God,

“Those who are killed for following God's advice will eventually enjoy the ultimate life.”

Then I saw a man sitting on white cloud wearing a gold crown and holding a sharp sickle. A messenger came out of the temple and told the man to use his sickle to harvest the earth. When the man had finished,

REVELATION

another messenger came out of the temple with a sharp sickle. A messenger from the incense table told the one with the sickle to gather the ripe bunches of grapes, so he cut them and put them in God's large winepress. The juice from the grapes filled an area about five feet high and 200 miles long.

15 Those who refused to worship the sea creature were standing on a sea of sparkling crystals. They were playing harps and honoring God with the same song that Moses and Jesus had sung:

“Everything you do is amazing. You're honest and always willing to help people everywhere. When they realize how special you are, they'll respect and honor you.”

A Lot of People Will Experience Terrible Hardship

Then I saw seven more messengers come out of the temple, dressed in bright linen clothes with a gold sash around their waist. One of the four creatures gave them seven gold bowls, each containing some hardship. The temple filled with smoke to reflect God's presence, and no one could enter it again until the seven messengers had emptied their bowls.

16 Someone from the temple told the seven messengers to pour the contents of their bowls on the earth. When the first one did, the people who worshiped the sea creature developed painful sores. But instead of changing their behavior, they cursed God for the sores.

As the second messenger emptied his bowl into the ocean, it turned to blood and everything in it died.

When the third messenger poured his bowl into the rivers and springs, they also turned to blood. He remarked that God was fair in turning the drinking water of those who worship the sea creature to blood, since they killed God's spokesmen and others who followed God's advice. The messenger at the temple altar agreed.

The fourth messenger poured his bowl on the sun, causing it to burn the people with intense heat. They cursed God because they knew God could stop it, but they still refused to change their behavior and honor God.

The fifth messenger emptied his bowl on the sea creature, causing those who worshiped him to be in total darkness.

When the sixth messenger poured his bowl on the great Euphrates River, it dried up, enabling the leaders from the east to cross. Three harmful spirits that looked like frogs came out of the mouths of the dragon, the sea creature, and the one who persuaded people to worship the sea creature. They're recruiting others from all over the world to fight God's

REVELATION

followers at Mount Meggido, so they should be prepared for an attack at any time.

As the seventh messenger emptied his bowl into the air, it produced thunder, lightning, hail, and the worst earthquake in history. It split the city that dishonors God into three sections, destroyed many other cities, and obliterated every island and mountain. The people cursed God for the devastating storm that dropped hailstones weighing as much as a hundred pounds.

The City that Dishonors God Will Be Destroyed

17 The sixth messenger showed me what will happen to the city that dishonors God, where a wide variety of people influence others throughout the world to dishonor God. The messenger took me to a remote area where the city appeared as a woman sitting on a red creature with seven heads and ten horns, covered with insulting names. She wore expensive clothes and jewelry and reveled over the long list of people who were killed for following God's advice as Jesus did. She was clearly identified as the city that dishonors God.

The messenger explained that the red creature's seven heads represent the seven hills where the city is located. They also represent seven leaders, five from the past, the current one, and the one who will lead for a brief period in the future. The red creature represents the eighth leader, who will eventually be destroyed.

The messenger also explained that the ten horns on the red creature represent ten other leaders, whom he'll select to rule with him for a short while. Together they'll try to eradicate Jesus' influence, but they won't succeed because those who follow God's advice realize that Jesus is the best leader of all. Ironically, these ten leaders and the red creature will eventually destroy the city that dishonors God.

18 Another messenger from God remarked,

“The prominent city that dishonors God will become a ghost town for scavenger birds. Unfortunately, a lot of people in other nations dishonor God just like that city, by taking advantage of others to enrich themselves.”

Then another messenger added,

“Stop dishonoring God so you won't experience the same consequences. That city was proud and thought it would never suffer hardship, but it will experience twice as much hardship as it caused others. Some day a famine will strike it and the people will suffer and die. Then the city will be burned.

REVELATION

“When others see the smoke rising in the distance, they’ll realize the city is suffering the consequences for its behavior. The captain, crew and merchants on ships will grieve over losing such a profitable market. They’ve sold gold, silver, jewels, pearls, linen, silk and other expensive cloth, things made of ivory, valuable wood, brass, iron, and marble. They’ve also sold cinnamon, incense, perfume, wine, olive oil, flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, chariots, and slaves.

“Everyone who honors God should be glad that God will hold the city accountable for its self-centeredness.”

As one of the stronger messengers picked up a huge rock and threw it into the sea, he said,

“This is how quickly that city will be destroyed. The craftsmen and the musicians who play harps, flutes and trumpets will be gone. The sound of grinding grain and wedding celebrations, and the light from lamps will also be gone.

“The merchants are masters at convincing people that they have to live lavishly in order to enjoy life, which is why a lot of God’s spokesmen and others have been killed for following God’s advice.”

19 A lot of people are thanking God for helping them follow God’s advice as Jesus did so they can enjoy a better life. They’re also thankful that those who refuse to follow God’s advice will suffer the consequences for their behavior. As the 24 leaders and four creatures worshiped God, someone asserted that *everyone* should honor God.

Then a messenger told me to record this message from God,

“Those who follow Jesus’ example will have a huge celebration.”

As I started to worship the messenger, he stopped me, explaining that he’s a follower of Jesus, just I am. He reminded me to only worship God, as Jesus encouraged others to do.

God’s Opponents Will Be Defeated

Then I saw Jesus sitting on a white horse. His eyes were bright and he was wearing a lot of crowns and a robe covered with blood. The people who followed him were wearing white clothes and were also on white horses. Like a shepherd who uses a rod to defend his sheep, Jesus uses God’s advice to defend his followers. He’s clearly the best leader of all time.

REVELATION

A messenger told the birds to get ready to eat the flesh of political and military leaders, horses, cavalymen, and everyone else who was soon going to die. When the sea creature and the armies came to fight Jesus and his followers, the sea creature and the one who convinced people to worship him were thrown into a lake of burning sulfur. The birds ate the flesh of the rest who chose to die rather than follow God's advice for a better life.

20 Then I saw a messenger from God chain the dragon (Satan) in the deep pit so he couldn't mislead anyone for a long time. At the beginning of that period, God brought back to life those who were killed because they followed God's advice as Jesus did instead of worshipping the sea creature. They honored God and Jesus during this time, but God didn't bring the rest back to life until later.

When Satan is released for a while, he'll recruit countless people throughout the world to attack those who follow God's advice. But God will destroy them with fire and throw Satan into the lake of burning sulfur, where the sea creature and the one who convinced people to worship him already are. All three will suffer constantly there.

God will hold everyone accountable for what they did while alive, and only those who followed God's advice will enjoy the life God promised.

The World as God Originally Intended

21 Then the world appeared as God originally intended it, where people honor God as a bride honors her husband. After someone stated that God will help people stop hurting and killing each other, God added,

"I'll always help people follow my advice so they can enjoy a better life. But those who choose to murder, lie, worship idols, or mislead others will continue to live a miserable life."

One of the messengers who had emptied one of the seven bowls took me up on a mountain and showed me Jerusalem, whose residents now honor God as Jesus did. The city sparkled like crystal and had impregnable walls with 12 gates, three on each side. There was a messenger at each gate, which represented the 12 Jewish clans. The wall had 12 foundations that represented Jesus' first 12 followers.

The messenger who showed me Jerusalem measured the city's dimensions with a gold measuring stick. It was very large and beautiful. Each foundation was decorated with a different jewel, such as jasper, sapphire, emerald, and topaz. Every gate was made of pearl, and the main street consisted of pure gold.

REVELATION

There was no temple in the city because God and Jesus were right there. Their presence provided plenty of light, so there was no need for the sun, moon or lamps. People from all over the world are coming to the city to honor God because the gates are always open to those who follow God's advice as Jesus did.

22 There was a sparkling clean river flowing from the throne where God and Jesus were sitting. On the bank was a tree that heals people with its leaves and bears 12 kinds of fruit throughout the year.

Concluding Remarks

The messenger told me that God wants me to encourage those who follow God's advice to be ready for these coming events. When I began to worship the messenger for revealing these events to me, he reminded me that he follows God's advice as I do, so I should only worship God. Then he explained that when I share this information, some people will continue to follow God's advice but others will choose not to.

God is always ready and willing to help people follow God's advice so they can enjoy a better life. But those who murder, lie, worship idols, and mislead others will continue to live a miserable life.

Jesus told me that when I share this vision with those who follow God's advice, they'll be motivated to invite others to enjoy a better life. But those who distort what I've written here will suffer the consequences and miss out on the magnificent life God described. God wants us to follow Jesus' example so this life will soon become a reality.

Sincerely,

John

