
The Life of Christ



James Stalker, M.A., D.D.

Revised and Edited by Michael J. McHugh

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Preface

Each year thousands of new books flood the marketplace of ideas and most of these titles touch upon topics that are barely worth consideration. As the wisdom of Scripture tells us, “of the making of books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). The book that follows, however, is truly an exception for it contains a topic that is of vital and eternal importance to all manner of men—the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

It is the purpose and plan of the following text to present readers with a brief and edifying overview of the life of Jesus Christ. The author, James Stalker, has done a masterful job at providing readers with the essential details of Christ’s life and work so they can easily comprehend the grand scope of the Savior’s mission.

Helpful maps, Scripture references, chapter questions, and key vocabulary terms have been included in an effort to enhance the study of this book. Students who desire to get the most out of their study of *The Life of Christ* should make use of these helpful resources. Obviously, it is wise for students to read the Bible itself as they move through their study, paying attention to the Scripture references that are provided throughout this textbook.

It is the prayer of the publishers of this book that God may be pleased to use this volume to strengthen the faith of those who are seeking a closer relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. To know Christ, unto salvation, is indeed, the greatest and most necessary blessing.

Michael J. McHugh
Arlington Heights, Illinois
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Chapter Two

The Nation and the Time

The Interval Between the Testaments

We now approach the time when, after thirty years of silence and obscurity in Nazareth, Jesus was to step forth on the public stage. Consequently, this is the point at which to take a survey of the circumstances of the nation in whose midst His work was to be done, and also to form a clear conception of His character and aims. Every great biography is a record of the entrance into the world of a new personality, bringing with it something different from all that was there before, and of the way in which it gradually gets itself incorporated with the old, so as to become a part of the future. Obviously, therefore, two things are needed by those who wish to understand Christ—first, a clear comprehension of the nature of His mission; and secondly, a view of the world with which it is to be incorporated. Without the latter, the specific difference of the former cannot be understood, nor can the manner of its reception be appreciated—the welcome with which it is received, or the opposition with which it has to struggle. Jesus brought with Him into the world more that was unique and destined to modify the future history of mankind than anyone else who has ever entered it. But we can neither understand Him nor the challenges which He encountered in seeking to change and influence history, without a clear view of the condition of the sphere within which His life was to be passed.

The Theater of His Life

When, having finished the last chapter of the Old Testament, we turn over the leaf and see the first chapter of the New, we are very apt to think that in Matthew we are still among the same people and the same state of things as we have left in Malachi. No idea, however, could be more erroneous. Four centuries elapsed between Malachi and Matthew and performed as total a change in Palestine as any equivalent period has almost ever performed in any country. The very language of the people had been changed; and customs, ideas, parties, and institutions had come into existence that would almost have prevented Malachi, if he had risen from the dead, from recognizing his country.

The Political Condition of the Country

Luke 3:1–2

Politically, the nation of Israel had passed through extraordinary changes. After the Exile, it had been organized as a kind of sacred State under its high priests. As years passed, however, conqueror after conqueror had since marched over it, changing everything; the old hereditary monarchy had been restored for a time by the brave Maccabees; the battle of freedom had many times been won and lost. At last, however, a foreign ruler sat on the throne of David as the country was completely under the mighty Roman power, which had extended its sway over much of the civilized world. It was divided into several small portions, which the foreigner held under different tenures, as the English once held India. Galilee and Perea were ruled by petty kings—sons of that Herod under whom Jesus was born—who occupied a relation to the Roman emperor similar to that which the subservient Indian kings once had to the English

Monarchy. Judea was under the charge of a Roman official, a subordinate of the governor of the Imperial province of Syria. Roman soldiers paraded the streets of Jerusalem; Roman standards waved over the fortresses of the country; Roman tax collectors sat at the gate of every town. To the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish organ of government, only a shadow of power was still conceded—its presidents, the high priests, being mere puppets of Rome, set up and put down with the utmost caprice. So low had the proud nation fallen, whose ideal it had ever been to rule the world and whose patriotism was a religious and national passion as intense and unquenchable as ever burned in any country.

External Religiosity

In religion, the changes had been equally great and the fall equally low. In external appearance, indeed, it might have seemed as if progress had been made instead of retrogression. The nation was far more orthodox than it had been at many earlier periods of its history. Once its chief danger had been idolatry; but the chastisement of the Exile had corrected that tendency forever, and thenceforward the Jews, wherever they might be living, were uncompromising monotheists.¹ The priestly orders and offices had been thoroughly reorganized after the return from Babylon, and the temple services and annual feasts continued to be observed at Jerusalem with strict regularity. Besides, a new and most important religious institution had arisen, which almost threw the temple with its priesthood into the background. This was the synagogue² with its elders and rabbis. It does not seem to have existed in ancient times at all but was called into existence after the Exile by reverence for the written Word. Synagogues were multiplied wherever Jews lived; every Sabbath they were filled with praying congregations; exhortations were delivered by the rabbis—a new order created by the need of expounders to translate from the Hebrew, which had become a dead language; and nearly the whole Old Testament was read over once a year in the hearing of the people. Schools of theology, similar to our seminaries, had sprung up, in which the rabbis were trained and the sacred books interpreted.



Inner Decline

Matthew 15:1–20

But, in spite of all this religiosity, true faith and godliness had sadly declined. The externals had been multiplied, but the inner spirit had disappeared. However rude and sinful the old nation had sometimes been, it was capable in its worst periods of producing majestic religious figures, who kept high the ideal of life and preserved the connection of the nation with Heaven; and the inspired voices of the prophets kept the stream of truth running fresh and clean. But during four hundred years, no prophet's voice had been heard. The records of the old prophetic utterances were still preserved with almost idolatrous reverence, but there were not men with even the necessary amount of the Spirit's inspiration to understand what the Scriptures taught. Most of the Jews, therefore, worshiped a false god of their own making.



1. *Monotheists* are those who believe that there is only one God, as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
2. *Synagogue* refers either to the place of worship and communal center of a Jewish congregation or to a body of followers of Judaism who worship together; this term is derived from the Latin *synagoga* and from the Greek συναγωγή which means “assembly,” which comes from the word συναγω, that is “to bring together” or “to lead.”

The Pharisees

Luke 11:37–44

The leading religious men of the time were the Pharisees. As their name indicates, they originally arose as champions of the separateness of the Jews from other nations. This was a noble idea, so long as the distinction emphasized was holiness. It is far more difficult, however, to maintain this distinction than such external differences as peculiarities of dress, food, language, etc. These were, in course of time, substituted for genuine holiness. The Pharisees were ardent patriots, ever willing to lay down their lives for the independence of their country and hating the foreign yoke with impassioned bitterness. They despised and hated other races, and clung with undying faith to the hope of a glorious future for their nation. But they had harped so long on this idea that they had come to believe themselves the special favorites of Heaven—simply because they were descendants of Abraham—and to lose sight of the importance of humility and mercy. They multiplied their Jewish peculiarities but substituted external observances—such as fasts, prayers, tithes, washings, sacrifices, and so forth—for the grand distinctions of love to God and love to man. As Christ Himself stated, the Pharisees were clean on the outside but full of deceit and pride in the inner man (Matthew 23:25, Luke 11:39; cf., Mark 12:38, 39).

The Scribes

Mark 7:5–16

To the Pharisaic party belonged most of the scribes. They were so called because they were both the interpreters and copyists of the Scriptures and the lawyers of the people; for, the Jewish legal code being incorporated in the Holy Scriptures, jurisprudence became a branch of theology. They were the chief interpreters in the synagogues, although any male worshipper was permitted to speak if he chose. They professed unbounded reverence for the Scriptures, counting every word and letter in them. They had a splendid opportunity of diffusing the religious principles of the Old Testament among the people, exhibiting the glorious examples of its heroes and sowing abroad the words of the prophets. In many respects, the synagogue was one of the most potent engines of instruction ever devised by a people. Sadly, however, they entirely missed their opportunity. They became a dry ecclesiastical and scholastic class, using their position for selfish aggrandizement and scorning those to whom they gave stones for bread. Whatever was most spiritual, living, human, and grand in the Scriptures, they passed over lightly. Generation after generation, the commentaries of their famous men multiplied, and the pupils studied the commentaries instead of the inspired Scriptures.

Moreover, it was a rule with them that the correct interpretation of a passage was as authoritative as the text itself; therefore, the interpretations of the famous masters were eventually held to be as precious as the Scripture itself. These mass of opinions became known as “the traditions of the elders.” Over time an arbitrary system of exegesis came into vogue, by which almost any opinion whatever could be thus connected with some text and stamped with divine authority. Every new invention of Pharisaic singularity was sanctioned in this way. Peculiarities were multiplied until they regulated every detail of life—personal, domestic, social, and public. They became so numerous, that it required a lifetime to learn them all; and the learning of a scribe consisted in acquaintance with them, and with the dicta of the great rabbi and the forms of exegesis by which they were sanctioned. This was the chaff with which they fed the people in the synagogues. The conscience was burdened with innumerable details, every one of which was represented to be as divinely sanctioned as any of the Ten Commandments. This was the intolerable burden which Peter said neither he nor his fathers had been able to bear (Acts 15:10). This was the horrible nightmare which sat so long on Paul’s conscience. But worse consequences flowed from it.

It is a well-known principle in history that, whenever a ceremonial law is separated from its spiritual or moral foundation, the latter will soon be overlooked. The Scribes and Pharisees had learned how, by arbitrary analysis and self-serving discussion, to explain away the weightiest moral obligations and to

cover up the neglect of them by multiplying ritual observances. Thus men were able to flaunt in the pride of so-called righteousness while indulging their selfishness and vile passions. Society was rotten with vice within and whitewashed with a self-deceptive religiosity without.

The Sadducees and Herodians

Matthew 22:15–46

There was a party of protest. The Sadducees cast doubt upon the authority attached to the traditions of the fathers, demanding a return to the Bible and nothing but the Bible, and cried out for morality in place of ritual. But their protest was prompted merely by the spirit of denial and not by a warm opposite principle of religion. They were skeptical, cold-hearted, worldly men. Though they praised morality, it was a morality unwarned and unilluminated by any contact with that upper region of divine forces from which the inspiration of the highest morality must always come. They refused to burden their consciences with the painful platitudes of the Pharisees, but it was because they wished to live a life of comfort and self-indulgence. They ridiculed the Pharisaic exclusiveness but had let go what was most distinctive in the character, the faith, and the hopes of the nation. They mingled freely with the Gentiles, deceptively imitated Greek culture, enjoyed foreign amusements, and thought it useless to fight for the freedom of their country. An extreme section of them were the Herodians, who had yielded to the usurpation of Herod and, with courtly flattery, attached themselves to the favor of his sons.

Class Divisions and Social Conditions

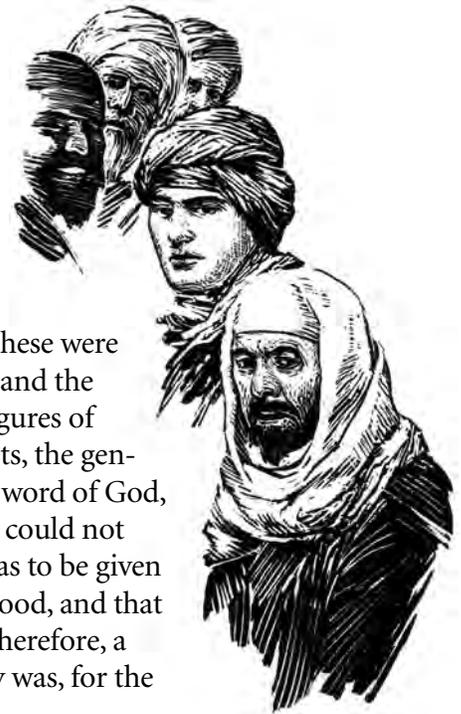
The Sadducees belonged chiefly to the upper and wealthy classes. The Pharisees and scribes formed what we should call the middle class, although also deriving many members from the higher ranks of life. The lower classes and the country people were separated by a great gulf from their wealthy neighbors but attached themselves by admiration to the Pharisees, as the uneducated always do to the party of outward zeal. Down below all these was a large class of those who had lost all connection with religion and well-ordered social life—the publicans, harlots, and sinners, for whose souls no man cared.

Such were the pitiable features of the society on which Jesus was about to discharge His influence. Christ was facing a nation enslaved; the upper classes devoting themselves to selfishness, seeking favor by flattery, and skepticism; the teachers and chief professors of religion lost in mere shows of ceremonialism and boasting themselves the favorites of God, while their souls were honeycombed with self-deception and vice. To make matters worse, the body of the people was misled by false ideals; and seething at the bottom of society lay a neglected mass of unblushing and unrestrained sinners.

Messianic Hopes of the People

Matthew 21:1–16

This was the people of God! Yes; in spite of their awful degradation, these were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the heirs of the covenant and the promises. Away back beyond the centuries of degradation towered the figures of the patriarchs, the kings after God's own heart, the psalmists, the prophets, the generations of faith and hope. Yes, and in front there was greatness, too! The word of God, once sent forth from heaven and uttered by the mouths of His prophets, could not return to Him void. He had said that the perfect revelation of Himself was to be given to this nation, that in this nation was to appear the perfect ideal of manhood, and that from it was to issue forth the regeneration of all of God's chosen ones. Therefore, a wonderful future still belonged to this nation. The river of Jewish history was, for the



time, choked and lost in the sands of the desert, but it was destined to reappear again and flow forward on its God-appointed course. The time of fulfillment was at hand, much as the signs of the times might seem to forbid the hope. Had not all the prophets from Moses onward spoken of a great One to come, who, appearing just when the darkness was blackest and the degradation deepest, was to bring back the lost glory of the past?

In every age, God always has a few faithful souls who will pray for the Consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25). Indeed, there are good men even in the worst of periods. Likewise, there were good men in the selfish and corrupt parties of the Jews. In such periods, however, piety especially does linger in the lowly homes of the people. Just as we are permitted to hope that in the Roman Catholic Church or the High Church within the Anglican church there may be those who—in spite of all the ceremonies put between the soul and Christ—reach forth to Him and, through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, seize the truth and pass by the falsehood, so among the common people of Palestine there were those who, hearing the Scriptures read in the synagogues and reading them in their homes, instinctively disregarded the vain comments of their teachers and saw the glory and holiness of God.

It was especially to the promises of a Deliverer that such souls attached their interest. Feeling bitterly the shame of national slavery, the hollowness of the times, and the awful wickedness which rotted under the surface of society, they longed and prayed for the advent of the coming One and the restoration only the Messiah could give the soul.

Messianic Hopes of the Scribes and Pharisees

John 6:11–15

The scribes also busied themselves with this element in the Scriptures; and the cherishing of Messianic hopes was one of the chief distinctions of the Pharisees. But they had caricatured the prophetic utterances on the subject by their arbitrary interpretations and painted the future in colors borrowed from their own carnal imaginations. They did speak of the advent as the coming of the kingdom of God and of the Messiah as the Son of God, but what they chiefly expected Him to do was—by the working of marvels and by irresistible force—to free the nation from servitude and raise it to the utmost worldly grandeur. They undoubtedly entertained that, simply because they were members of the chosen nation, they would be allotted high places in the kingdom, and never suspected that any change was needed in themselves to meet Him. The spiritual elements of the better time, holiness and love, were lost in their minds behind the dazzling forms of material glory.

The Task Before Him

Such was the appearance of Jewish history at the time when the hour of national destiny was about to strike. It imparted to the work, which laid before the Messiah, a distinctive complexity. It might have been expected that He would find a nation saturated with the ideas and inspired with the visions of His predecessors, the prophets—at whose head He might place Himself and from which He might receive an enthusiastic and effective cooperation; but it was not so. He appeared at a time when the nation had lapsed from its ideals and deceptively imitated their most grand features. Instead of meeting a nation mature in holiness and consecrated to the heaven-ordained task of blessing all other peoples—which He might easily lead up to its own final development and then lead forth to the spiritual conquest of the world—He found that the first work which lay before Him was to proclaim a reformation in His own country. The Lord Jesus was destined to encounter and endure the opposition of prejudices that had accumulated there through centuries of degradation. As the Old Testament Scriptures foretold, the Messiah was ordained to be despised, rejected of men, and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).

Chapter 2 Questions

1. Read Matthew 21:33–46 and explain how this passage relates to your textbook lesson.
2. How much time had elapsed between the prophet Malachi and the time of Christ's earthly ministry?
3. What nation held political sway over Judea during Christ's ministry?
4. In what sense can it be said that most people in Israel were merely externally religious?
5. Describe the nature of the inner spiritual decline in Israel prior to Christ's public ministry.
6. Who were the Pharisees and what were their distinguishing characteristics?
7. Who were the scribes and what role did they play in Jewish culture?
8. Describe the Sadducees and explain why they protested the policies of the Pharisees.
9. To what or whom were the Herodians loyal?
10. Who cared for the spiritual needs of the lower classes of people in Jewish society?
11. What type of Messiah were the Jewish religious leaders expecting?
12. Why could Christ not count upon the loyal support of His fellow Jewish brethren who were, in fact, hoping for the Messiah to come?

Key Terms

Malachi

Maccabees

Palestine

monotheist

Herod

degradation