

## The Political and Religious Background of the Gospels Scott Ashley 2011-11-12

Good afternoon, everyone.

Before we get into the Bible classes starting next week, we need to understand some of the background to help us understand those events of the Gospels as we read about them. The purpose of these classes is to emphasize who Jesus Christ was and what His message was. But to understand some of His actions, we need to understand **the political and religious background of the Gospels**. So that's what we'll focus on today—the political and religious background of the Gospels. If we are to understand the Gospels, we need to understand the context of the times in which these events took place.

So let's take a look first at the **political world** of Judea and Galilee, which was part of the larger Roman world of the Roman Empire. I want to start with a passage back in **Galatians 4:4**—“**But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.**”

What does that mean when it talks about “the fullness of the time had come”? Obviously it's talking about the time for prophecies of the birth of the Messiah to be fulfilled, but I want to look at this from another angle today as well.

And that is that it was the influence and power of the **Roman Empire** that actually *allowed* the gospel to be spread during that time. Consider, for example, what would conditions have been like had Jesus been born, say, a hundred years earlier or a hundred years later? Had Jesus begun His ministry a hundred years earlier, Judea was in great turmoil because Rome was trying to consolidate its hold over Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean region. Had He begun His ministry a hundred years later, the Jews were in open rebellion against Rome and Judea would have been in the middle of a major war. It would have been *impossible* for an organized Church to begin and for the gospel to be effectively spread under those conditions.

**Pax Romana** How many of you have heard of the term *Pax Romana* and know what that means? **Pax Romana—“peace of Rome”** It means literally “peace of Rome” and refers to the Roman Empire basically enforcing a level of peace, security and stability that hadn't existed before in that area. To understand the alternative, you might think of what's happening in Afghanistan right now. Without a strong central government to maintain peace and order, it's every man for himself. That's generally been the pattern in the Middle East when there hasn't been a strong authority to maintain order.

**Roman soldiers** When the Roman empire rose up, in spite of its failings, one major benefit that it brought to the entire Mediterranean region was the *Pax Romana*, a period of peace and stability that lasted through much of the first century—the time of Jesus Christ's ministry and the early years of the Church. Why was this important?

Consider that there are dozens of references to robbers and thieves in the books of the New Testament. That tells you something about the environment of the day. You might remember the parable of the good Samaritan, where a man traveling from Jerusalem to

Jericho is set on by thieves along that road and badly injured, left half-dead. Jesus' audience could identify with that. Jesus was describing very real conditions of His day.

You might remember that Jesus was crucified with two robbers alongside Him. Paul mentioned that one of the perils he faced in his travels was robbers. These things indicate how bad things were when Judea was an *occupied* territory. Imagine how bad it would've been had there *not* been Roman troops there to enforce a level of peace! So again, the *Pax Romana* created a window of time during which the Gospel could be spread and the early Church established.

So even though robbers were a problem, **under Roman rule** conditions were much better than they had been before. But that wasn't the only factor in which Rome had a hand in allowing the gospel to spread and the Church to get started. Were some other factors at work that didn't exist before this time?

*Transportation* was a big factor. There were at least two modes of transportation that made giant strides under Roman rule. One was the *Roman road system*. **Interstate highway** Just as our U.S. interstate highway system was originally developed to allow for military troops and equipment to be moved rapidly from one place to another, the Romans developed a massive system of good roads throughout their empire for the same reason. **Roman road with chariot ruts** In fact, building roads was a major job of the Roman military when they weren't fighting. This road system allowed people to travel relatively safely and quickly throughout the empire. And yes, there are places like this, in Ephesus, where you can still see the ruts made by the chariot wheels that were worn into the stones.

**Roman road** Thus we see in the Gospels many places where Jesus and the disciples are walking from one place to another along those Roman roads. But we also see another mode of transportation mentioned often in the book of Acts, which is *by ship*. **Roman ship mosaic** Paul is also regularly catching rides on commercial cargo ships from one place to the next as he travels spreading the gospel.

This also was a benefit of the *Pax Romana*. Before and after this time the Mediterranean Sea was filled with pirates and you took your life in your hands whenever you sailed there. **Map of Roman Empire** So the fact that Paul is regularly catching rides on commercial cargo ships shows that there was a great deal of commercial activity all over this end of the Mediterranean after Rome cleaned out the pirates. It was so reliable that you even find Paul taking up a collection of food from Church members in Macedonia and shipping it to Church members down in Judea where there was a famine underway. You see him making travel plans to be in a certain place at this or that Holy Day, traveling by ship.

There was another factor at work also, and it's a major reason we have a New Testament today. **Hand with scroll** There was a *mail system* that allowed people in one place to send letters to people in other places. We don't know much about it, and clearly in some cases personal messengers took letters back and forth, but clearly Paul used letters to regularly communicate with individuals and specific churches or areas of churches. And

it's because of this that we have a New Testament today. In some cases he sent letters all the way from Rome to people like Timothy or to some of the churches in Asia Minor.

Another important factor was the Greek language. **Greek writing** Greek was common throughout the Roman Empire, inherited from the Greek Empire. Many languages were spoken throughout the Roman Empire—Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, and more—but Greek was common, much like English today is the worldwide standard language for business and commerce. It didn't matter where you went in the Roman Empire, you'd find people who spoke and could understand Greek.

That's why the New Testament was written and preserved in Greek—it was the commonly understood language of the time. Greek is also a highly specific language capable of expressing complex theological concepts and issues. Had there not been a universal language in use throughout the Roman Empire, it would've been much more difficult to spread the gospel. So the common use of the Greek language was another important factor.

So the Roman Empire really created a stability that hadn't existed before, it created a climate in which the gospel could spread and the Church could grow throughout the Roman Empire, and it had a common language most people could understand. And it is in this atmosphere that the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament were written and spread.

Rome was also quite tolerant toward other religions. When the Romans conquered an area, they let the inhabitants continue with their existing religions so long as things were peaceful. And sometimes the Romans even incorporated some of those religious practices and took them back with them to Rome. Here, for example, is a statue of the **Egyptian god Anubis**, the jackal-headed god, that was found in Rome—and notice how he's wearing a perfect Roman toga. They have actually found a number of statues of Egyptian gods in Rome, not to mention Greek gods, Persian gods and even gods from as far away as India.

This tolerance allowed the Jews of the land of Israel to continue their worship and the Jerusalem temple without change during the lifetime of Jesus. It also allowed Christianity to spread, because Christianity was initially viewed as simply another branch of Judaism. *New* religions weren't allowed because that was destabilizing, and the Romans wanted stability, but since Judaism and early Christianity were indistinguishable to the Romans, Christianity was allowed to spread without opposition in its early years. So this was very important to the background of Jesus Christ's ministry and the establishment and spread of the Church that He would build.

There are two Roman emperors who reigned during the time of the Gospels. The first is **Augustus**, sometimes known as Caesar Augustus or Augustus Ceasar. He is also known to historians as Octavius or Octavian. He was the great-nephew and heir of the famous Julius Caesar.

Augustus was the Roman ruler from 27 B.C. through A.D. 14. It was Caesar Augustus who called for the census or registration that we read about in Luke 2. That is why Joseph

and Mary were commanded to go down to Bethlehem because Joseph was of Bethlehem in Judah. Augustus was a firm believer in the power of the Imperial State.

There were different ideas about how Rome should be ruled, but under Augustus, the power of the Imperial State was thoroughly established. He is considered to be the first of the Roman Emperors, with power such that he was over the Roman Senate.

Augustus is considered to be a wise ruler and not a tyrant like many of the later Roman Emperors such as Nero or Caligula. One of the things he did that affected this part of the world was an idea he picked up from Alexander the Great, who did this several centuries earlier. When you get into the epistles of Paul, you read that the epistles were written to certain cities like Philippi, Ephesus, Colosse and so on. The way that some of these cities were established and administered was as a result of what Augustus did and Alexander before him. **When a military man retired**, Augustus would give him an incentive such as free land or some kind of monetary help to encourage them to go to certain areas or cities in the Roman Empire and settle.

So when Paul wrote certain of his letters to the Christians in some areas, a number of these started out as colonies that were led by former military men. And so you can appreciate the fact of this influence on the brethren in the areas where this happened. It was a way of **establishing Roman culture** and values throughout the Roman world, just as Alexander had done several centuries earlier when he had taken this part of the world from the Persian Empire of Darius. These are some of the reasons why Greek and Roman culture and influence were so strong in this part of the world, although the underlying culture was Jewish or pagan.

Then we come to the second of the Caesars, **Tiberius**. Tiberius became the ruler in A.D. 14 and he lived and ruled until 37 AD. He was the stepson and adopted son of Augustus and was 56 years old when he began to rule. So he was an older man during his reign and during the time of Jesus' ministry. So those are the two rulers with which we will be dealing in the four Gospels.

Below the Roman Emperors was another level of rulers referred to as the Herodians. The Herodians were a family the family of **Herod the Great**. Herod the Great ruled from 37 B.C. until probably 3 B.C..

I'll ask you a question: What well-known building was Herod the Great famous for building? We find it mentioned often in the Gospels and Acts. He rebuilt **the temple** in Jerusalem. Herod the Great was a great builder. Let's learn a few other things about this man.

**Herod** was 22 years of age when he began to rule. He received the favor of both the Roman leaders Octavian, later to become Caesar Augustus, and Mark Antony. Octavian and Anthony were leaders in Rome who eventually became enemies as they vied for control of the Empire. And as a result of Herod the Great receiving the favor of both Octavian and Anthony, he was set in office as the King of the Jews under the Romans.

When the wise men came to Jerusalem and told Herod that a new King of the Jews had been born, Herod was not pleased to hear that. He had already been told by Roman

Caesars that *he* was the King of the Jews. And this brings us to something else about Herod, which is that he was paranoid and not a nice man.

With Herod the Great there was a lot of intrigue going on behind the scenes. If you have a copy of Josephus, you might want to read some of the background of what was going on during his reign. It was quite a story.

Herod was an Edomite or Idumean by birth, and not a Jew. The Jews did not like or respect him for many reasons. One was because he turned the High Priesthood into a political appointment. The High Priesthood was supposed to be a hereditary position given by God through Moses to the sons of Aaron. Only a son of Aaron was supposed to become the High Priest.

But one of the first things Herod did when appointed King of the Jews was to name his own **High Priest**. It didn't make any difference who it used to be, he named his own. Herod appointed a man named Aristobulus as High Priest. Josephus gives us quite a bit of detail in showing us what happened to the entire priesthood during the time of Christ.

This helps us understand and appreciate why Jesus was so angry when He went into the temple and twice cleansed it during His ministry, casting out the moneychangers. The High Priests were basically illegitimate. Some of them had bought or bribed their way into office and it had become a corrupt institution. This is directly behind some of the conflict between the priests and Jesus Christ. The priesthood became a mockery of what it had been.

So what happened to Aristobulus? Herod the Great made this man High Priest, but Aristobulus became very popular. He became so popular that he was probably more respected and liked than Herod the Great. So what Herod did was to throw him a big banquet. He was the guest of, and at that banquet Herod had him drowned.

This is only one thing that this man did. He also had several wives, the favorite of which was a lady named Mariamne or Miraim. He was also insanely jealous of her. On one of his journeys he left orders that if he didn't return alive that she was to be put to death. In other words, if he couldn't have her, nobody was going to have her. Mariamne found out about this and when he came back, she was not a happy camper.

She accused him of murdering her grandfather, who had indeed been put to death by Herod the Great. And as a result of that and other accusations against Herod, he had her put into prison and eventually executed. As a result of this and other factors, possibly including venereal disease, he went insane over a period of time. This might explain some of the things we read about him in the Gospels, such as killing the infants in Bethlehem.

Herod was not totally bad. There was relative peace during the reign of Herod the Great, in part because he had built up the military and constructed fortifications.

He also did a tremendous amount as far as public works. His building programs, because they were so extensive, promoted the economy and the economy was good during the time of Christ. What were some of the things he did? As we mentioned, he rebuilt the **temple in Jerusalem**. It was one of the great wonders of the ancient world, constructed on a gigantic platform covering about the size of 30 football fields. He transformed

Jerusalem into a world-class city with formidable defenses, the staggering temple complex, and his own large palace, as reconstructed in this model.

He built the city of Caesarea Maritima—Caesarea by the sea—from scratch. He pioneered the use of hydraulic concrete that would set underwater, and used it to build a huge breakwater and port completely from scratch. Caesarea Maritima became a great city with its own theater, hippodrome for chariot racing, and another fabulous palace overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. He rebuilt the ancient Israelite capitol of Samaria as a Roman city. He built another great palace at Jericho, which was his winter palace.

Herod was also paranoid, so he built places like Masada—a great fortress and palace out in the desert near the Dead Sea. Masada was equipped with huge storehouses said to contain enough food for 10,000 men for 10 years. Here is a view of the remains of his three-level palace there, with drops of about a thousand feet straight down.

Not far from Bethel he built another fortress and palace complex called the Herodium—essentially creating a man-made mountain with his own 10-story palace inside it. This is where his tomb was finally discovered after years of searching only a few years ago. He built several others that we don't have time to talk about now.

Why did he build so many fortress palaces? Because he was paranoid, he built all these as a means of escape so that if he were threatened, he would basically be less than a day's march from one anywhere in his kingdom and if trouble arose he would always have a place to go to be safe from his enemies. A lot of them were also in or near the desert, because he was an Edomite, an Idumean, and if things go too hot he could always flee into the desert and return to Idumea south of Judea.

Herod was so paranoid that he had his favorite wife killed, as well as several of his sons. This is why Caesar Augustus said of Herod, "I would rather be one of Herod's pigs than one of Herod's sons." The pig stood a greater chance of survival than his own sons did. I've mentioned in a previous sermon how as Herod was dying, he commanded that all the notable leaders among the Jews from all parts of the nation were rounded up and shut up in a stadium where they were to be killed upon his death so there would be mourning throughout the kingdom. He knew the people wouldn't mourn for him, so he determined that they would mourn regardless. But after he died, wiser heads prevailed and the leaders were released rather than murdered.

Herod died in about 3 B.C., and after that, his kingdom was divided up among various members of the Herodian family who were responsible for certain sections. No one family member inherited Herod's entire kingdom. So at any one time you might have in the Gospel accounts two or three members of the Herodian family ruling simultaneously over different areas.

One of these was Archelaus. He was not a major factor as far as the Gospels are concerned. Archelaus was an influence in Judea from 3 B.C. to 6 A.D. He is mentioned in Matthew 2:22, where it explains why Jesus' stepfather Joseph didn't go to Bethlehem when he brought his family back from Egypt after the death of Herod the Great. It says of Joseph: **"But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his**

**father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.”**

**Philip the Tetrarch** was another. Philip ruled from 3 B.C. to 34 A.D. He ruled over the **northeastern area** of his father’s kingdom. He was not a cruel leader. He had a bit more respect than some of the others who indeed were very cruel. He built the city of Caesarea Philippi that is mentioned in the Gospels, and being a humble man like so many other rulers of the time, named the city after himself and Caesar.

Another member of the Herodian family was **Herod Antipas**. Herod Antipas ruled from 3 B.C. to 39 AD. He was responsible for **Galilee and the area across the Jordan River**. He is referred to in **Luke 13:32** where Jesus says, **“Go, tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.’”**

Jesus calls him ‘that fox’ because he was as sly and cunning as a fox.

Herod Antipas was not well respected, especially by the Jews. One thing that he did was to build the **city of Tiberias**, named after the Roman Emperor Tiberias, on top of a graveyard, which to believing Jews made the city unclean. As a result of that, the only way he could get anybody to move into the town that he had built was to put in non-Jews, because the Jews wouldn’t live there.

Tiberias is only a few miles from Capernaum, the center of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. It was the biggest city in the area, but not once do the Gospels mention Jesus visiting Tiberias. Why? Presumably because it was considered unclean. But there was another reason, too. And that’s because Herod Antipas is the man who put John the Baptist to death. You can read about that in Mark 6:14-29. Tiberias is also where Herod Antipas lived. This is probably another reason that Jesus never visited Tiberias. He knew that Herod Antipas had had John the Baptist beheaded, and knew the same thing could happen to Him, too, if he crossed this ruler.

This is also the Herod mentioned in Luke 23:7-12 when Pilate sent Jesus to Herod before he was crucified. **Luke 23:7**—**“And as soon as he [Pilate] knew that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.”**

We’ll now move from the political background and get into the **religious background**. There are three religious groups that we’ll discuss, the **Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes**. And there are two other groups, the Zealots and the Herodians, mentioned in the Gospels that are more political than religious. We already somewhat discussed the Herodians, who were supporters of the family of Herod. They were largely secular and supported the political powers that be. The opposite of the Herodians were the Zealots, whom we’ll talk about in a few minutes.

The group we’re probably most familiar with is the **Pharisees**. They were the largest and most influential of the sects in the New Testament. The word “Pharisee” comes from the **Hebrew word “parash,”** which means “to separate.”

They began to have influence about 135 B.C. So they were well established by the time Jesus came on the scene and began His ministry. They had been around for more than a hundred years. Their approach to the law was very technical and detailed. They looked at every small precept and anything that could be associated with evil in the smallest way was condemned. Their approach was to build a fence around the law so you couldn't possibly break it. They didn't even want to be close to anything that might even speak or give the impression of being evil.

And also, they considered the oral law to be just as binding as the written law—something we'll talk about later when we see that in the Gospels. The oral law was basically their own traditions. You'll remember, in Matthew 23 in particular, where Jesus gives an excoriating attack on their traditions. He said to them, you teach the traditions of men and by that you deny what God really intended.

There were differences in beliefs between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees believed in the existence of angels and spirits. The Sadducees did not. They also believed in the resurrection of the body. The Sadducees did not. They got way off balance in many things— you'll recall that they were very meticulous in tithing to the point that they counted the tiny little seeds that were so small you could barely see them, but they denied the greater matters such as justice, mercy and faith.

I'll share with you a humorous way that people used to define the **different types of Pharisees**. You don't need to these down; this is just for purposes of illustration.

One was called the **Shoulder Pharisee**. He paraded his good deeds before men like a badge on the shoulder.

The second is the **Wait-A-Little Pharisee**. He would ask someone to wait for him while he performed a good deed. You know, wait just a minute, let me do this good thing, and there's somebody here to watch how great I am.

The **Bruised Pharisee** was one who bruised himself by walking into walls because he shut his eyes to avoid seeing a woman. So this was the Blind Pharisee.

The **Hump-Backed Pharisee** was the one who would walk with his head looking down rather than observe something that might tempt him. So he was the one who would walk down the street with his head bowed all the time.

The fifth is the **Ever-Reckoning Pharisee**, who is always counting his good deeds to see if they offset his failures. He was always keeping score. By the way, all of these were Pharisees that you don't want to be like or do.

There were two other types also. The sixth is the **God-fearing Pharisee**. This was a Pharisee who, like Job, revered and respected God—but because he feared God and was afraid of being punished.

And last was the truly righteous Pharisee, called the **God-loving Pharisee**. He was one who obeyed God because he loved God, like Abraham.

The Pharisees were a very influential group. Not all of them were hypocrites and spiritually blind. There were some who were genuine in following through and trying the best they could to obey the law in the way God intended. **Who were some of these?**



Nicodemus, for example, was a Pharisee who earnestly sought to do what was according to the way Christ taught. Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Christ's body in his own tomb, was another. And another was the apostle Paul, who at one time was a vehement persecutor of the Church before he was converted. But notice what he said in Acts 23:6:

**Acts 23:6**—"But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, 'Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!'"

Notice that he does not say, "I was a Pharisee." He says, "*I am a Pharisee, and* the son of a Pharisee." Paul had been a Pharisee, and apparently still considered himself one.—although now a Pharisee who was now converted by God's Spirit. So we shouldn't categorize all Pharisees in the same way or paint them all with the same brush.

Of all the sects of Judaism, Phariseeism alone had survived. If you go to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, as I did three weeks ago, some of the same things that some of the groups do today with the side curls and the black garb and the ritual washing and the bowing and bobbing while praying at the Western Wall—these are some of the same traditions of the Pharisees that have survived down to our day in what is called Orthodox Judaism.

These are the same people who told me to stop taking pictures with my camera 20 minutes before sundown because to them the Sabbath started a half hour before sundown and I was kindling a fire by taking pictures because my camera was creating an electrical current when I pressed the shutter button to take a photo. So their tradition of adding their own picky rules to the law is still alive and well.

Now the next group that we'll talk about is the Sadducees. According to tradition, they derived their name from the sons of Zadok. Zadok was the High Priest during the time of David and Solomon. "Zadokees" became "Sadducees."

As far as how some of these groups really began, including the Pharisees and Sadducees, is difficult to pin down. It's possible that what we know as one group actually might have come together from several different groups over a period of time.

But regardless, the Sadducees were generally the priests; they came from the sons of Zadok who were priests. They were closely associated with the temple and generally controlled the temple and what happened there. As a part of their beliefs, they believed that only the Torah—the five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—were truly divinely inspired. They did not believe that the rest of the Old Testament, the Writings and the Prophets, were inspired.

They also denied the existence of angels and spirits. This is what the controversy in Acts 23:6-8 that we just read about with Paul was all about. – this is what that controversy was over. The Sadducees did not believe in a spirit world. They did not believe in angels, nor did they believe in a resurrection.

Because of their beliefs, they were much more open to Greek ideas than were the Pharisees. This is one reason why the Pharisees and Sadducees clashed. The Sadducees were more open to ideas from the Greek philosophers.

Politically, the Sadducees were opportunists. They took advantage of every political opportunity that they could. And the Sadducees would ally themselves with whatever the powers that be were. Whatever was going to be best for them at a particular time, that's what they tried to ally themselves with.

As far as the Sadducees are concerned, you don't hear much about them after the **destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D.** With the temple destroyed, and with them being so closely aligned with the temple, they essentially lost their identity and melted away after 70 A.D. The Pharisees, on the other hand, continued to survive because their focus was on being zealous for the law. That was much more their focus than the temple itself.

The next group that we'll briefly talk about is the **Essenes**. We don't know very much about them who were very isolationist and lived in the desert. Josephus does describe a little bit about this particular group. They were an ascetic brotherhood who, as best we can tell, rejected the priesthood in Jerusalem as being corrupt—which it was—and they moved out into the desert near the Dead Sea to remain uncorrupted.

Do any of you know what this group has been associated with? The **Dead Sea Scrolls**. For those of you who had been to Israel, if you got down towards the Dead Sea, you might have gone down to Qumran. This was an Essene community. They have the ritual baths and a library and various other things there at the site of Qumran.

They were quite unbalanced. They abstained from marriage and recruited by going out and getting men to come and be a part of their group. This group held all things in common. They maintained themselves by manual labor and taking whatever kinds of jobs there were to support themselves. Apart from that we don't know much about them. They were never a very large or influential group. They disappeared when the Romans came through in the Jewish revolt of 67 to 70 A.D.

You will perhaps read in some commentaries that John the Baptist came from this sect. I don't believe that, because again, some of their teachings like celibacy were unbiblical.

The last group that we'll discuss is the Zealots. They were more of a political group, although you could say that in their political goals they were almost a religious group. But they were not a religious group in the same way that the Pharisees and Sadducees were. They were a group of fanatical nationalists. They were the extreme nationalist types who wanted to overthrow the Romans at all costs.

They were similar to what we have occasionally seen in what are commonly called the militia groups or militia movements who say that they do not believe that it is right for us to be under a government, pay taxes, have driver's licenses and that kind of thing. This was the kind of group this was. It was a very super-nationalistic group.

One of the groups that helped actually to lead to the **destruction of Jerusalem** in 70 A.D. was the Zealots. They stirred up more trouble and eventually did more harm than they did good. They started the revolt that led to and aided in the overthrow of Jerusalem and the captivity of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Let's turn to a couple of scriptures here. One is in Luke 6:15, where we have the naming of the original 12 apostles.

**Luke 6:15**—“**Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot . . .**”

Simon was a member of this group, the Zealots. So one of the 12 apostles was a Zealot. Acts 1:13 says basically the same thing:

**Acts 1:13**—“**And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James.**”

So here again was a man who was a part of this group, the Zealots, who wanted to throw out the Romans out and reestablish Jewish rule.

The Zealots were known for **carrying a dagger** underneath their cloak, and if they had the opportunity they would pull them out the dagger and stab a Roman or those who were viewed as collaborating with the Romans. If you've ever watched the movie *Masada*, that's who these people were who were going around raiding attacking and killing the Romans. In the Gospels, these would have been the people who wanted Jesus Christ to proclaim himself King and Messiah who would rise up and lead the people into battle against the Romans.

Now consider that one of Jesus Christ's disciples was an individual the Gospels call Simon the zealot. He would have been one of these individuals who supported fighting and killing the Romans and raising up a leader to drive them out. That doesn't mean he was like that during all the time he spent as one of Jesus' disciples, because he obviously changed his views, but I've often wondered about the interpersonal dynamics among the disciples when you had one who was a zealot and another one, Matthew Levi, who was a tax collector for the Romans.

The Gospels don't talk about it, but it had to be quite interesting. If you think you have difficulties getting along with some of your fellow church members at times, consider what it might have been like to have a Zealot and a tax collector for the Romans living together for 24 hours a day for several years.

This is all that we have time for today, but we will go into one other aspect of background material next week before we get into the Gospels and that is the background of the four Gospels themselves. Why do we have four different Gospels instead of just one? Why didn't Jesus write His own Gospel? Who were the writers of the four Gospels, and who were they writing to? We'll talk about these things next time.