

The 4 GOSPELS in one story

Part 5

Introduction

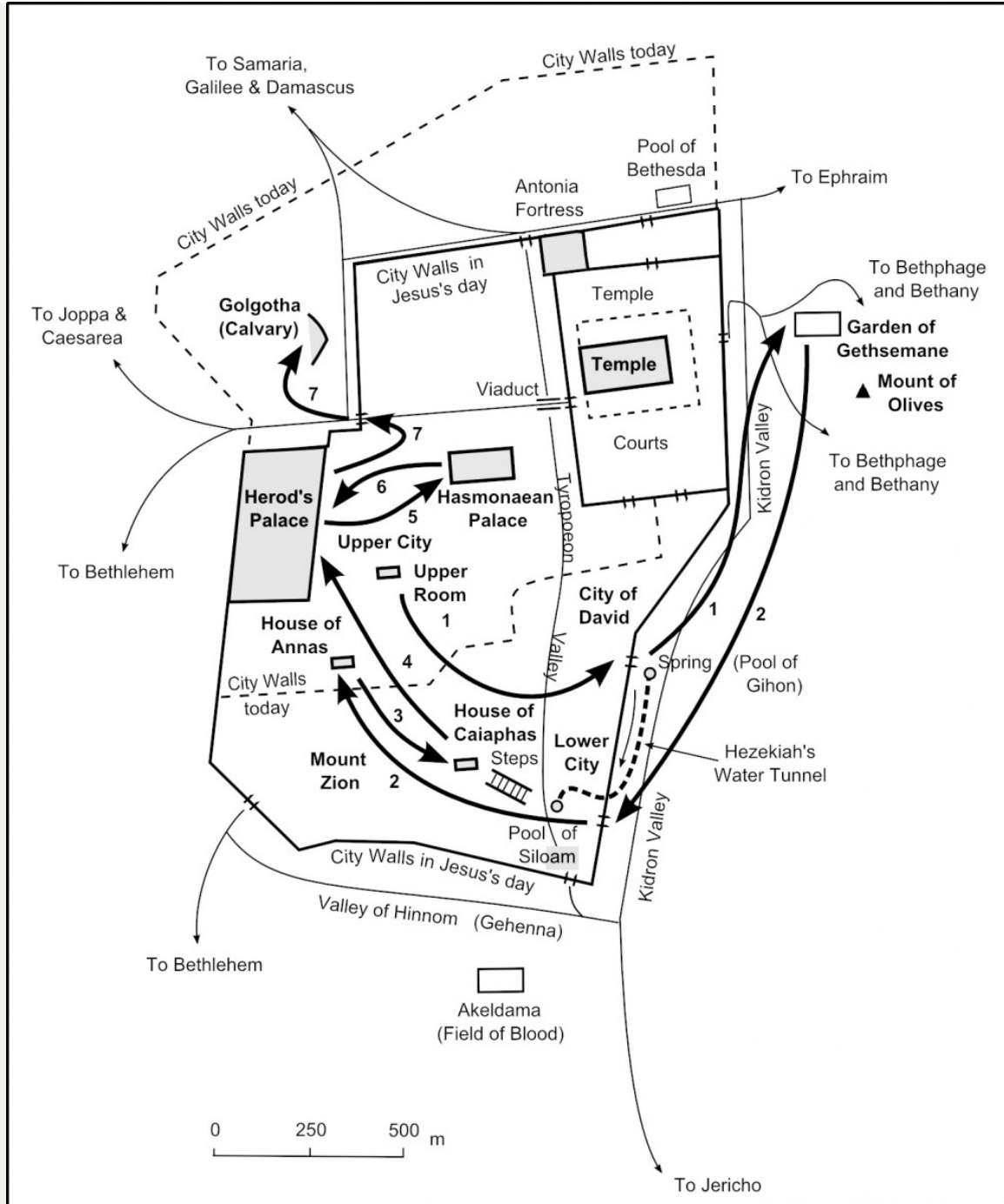
All four gospels are combined to read as one story rather than four separate ones.

Nothing is left out of any of the four gospel accounts, and the story flow and sequence of action are as accurate as possible.

A few background/historical details are added along the way to fill in the picture.

Chapter One – Strike the shepherd...

Following their Passover meal together, Jesus and his disciples left the “Upper Room” (route 1 on the map) and they headed east out of the Old City of Jerusalem into the Kidron Valley towards the Mount of Olives.



It was a familiar walk for Jesus, a route he often took between the city and the village of Bethany on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. And along the route at the foot of the western slope was a favourite grove of olive trees that Jesus often took his disciples to. And that's where Jesus was headed again.

As they walked north through the Kidron Valley together, Jesus talked with them some more, in the most intimate terms too, because in turning to them he called them, "My children." It certainly made real what he'd prayed and talked about at their Passover meal earlier, about he and his Father loving them like the Father had loved him, so Jesus was really like a father to them too now.

He felt like a father to them too, because he knew their world was about to tumble down around them, so again he wanted to prepare them for it. "I'm with you for only a very short time now," he told them, "and then I'll be gone. You'll wonder what on earth has happened to me, and you'll search around frantically for me, but like I told the Jews there is no way anyone can go where I'm going, including you."

Simon Peter was the first to react, asking Jesus the obvious question as to where such an impossible-to-reach place could be.

"Listen, Simon," Jesus replied. "I only said you can't come with me now. But that's not the end of it, because I'll be back, and you can come with me then."

That wasn't what Peter wanted to hear, and again he asked the obvious question, "But why can't I come with you now?"

"Oh, Simon, Simon," Jesus answered, "Just because you can't come with me right away doesn't mean I'm separating myself from you forever. Satan is the one who's tried to separate us, not me. Satan even sought permission to separate all of you from me, as if you're just chaff being blown away by the wind. But I was having none of that. I prayed for you, and especially for you, Simon, that severe testing would not weaken your trust in me. And when praying for you, Simon, I also had in mind that you'd do the same for the others here with you, to keep their trust strong too."

Jesus then turned to address all of them. "I know you think you love me and trust me, but tonight every one of you will ditch me. So, you'll be the ones doing the separating, not me. But 'strike the shepherd,' Scripture says, 'and the sheep scatter'. So that's Satan's plan, to strike me so you scatter. But I won't be gone forever. I'll still be your shepherd and you my sheep, so when I come back from where I'm going I'll be with you again to lead you back to Galilee."

But Peter wasn't happy with that either, because as far as he was concerned, "Everyone else might ditch you, Master, but I never will. If it's prison you're headed for, then I'll come with you. And if it's death, I'll die with you too."

"But would you really give up your life for me?" Jesus asked him. "I don't think so, because this very night, Simon, you're going to deny even knowing me. Before

the dawn rooster gets to crow even twice tomorrow morning you will have denied knowing me three times already.”

Peter was incensed. “Never,” he cried. “Never will I deny knowing you, even if it means dying with you.”

And the other disciples immediately jumped in with: “Me too, me too.”

But Jesus quickly switched to another subject: “Remember when I sent you out to the villages and towns earlier to preach the message and heal people? And remember how I told you not to worry about taking a lot of stuff with you? Well, did you ever find yourselves short of what you needed?”

“No,” they all replied. “We never lacked anything.”

“Well, this time I’m telling you it’s going to be different,” Jesus told them, “because things are about to turn nasty for you and very difficult, so think about what you’ll need for tough times and go out prepared. That coat you’re wearing won’t be enough to protect you, so trade it in for a sword, because the prophecy that said, ‘He’s going to be treated like a dangerous criminal’ is about to be fulfilled in me, as are all the other prophecies that were made about me.”

But all the disciples heard was the word “swords.” Well, that was more like it, a chance to fight back. So it didn’t take them long to find two swords and eagerly show them to Jesus.

But all Jesus said was, “Yes, well, enough of that.”

Chapter 2 – Jesus’ agony...

Their twenty minute walk from the city had brought them to the bridge over the Kidron Valley brook, and from there they headed east up the western slope of the Mount of Olives to an orchard of olive trees known as the “Oil Press,” or the Garden of Gethsemane. It was just off the main path climbing to the ridge above, and a favourite spot for Jesus and his disciples when they’d needed a break. It even had a cave they could shelter in too.

It was like walking into a trap, though, because Judas could easily have guessed this was the place where Jesus would be, having been there with Jesus many times already. The garden was also out of sight of the crowds, so arresting Jesus would not cause a riot.

On arrival at the olive orchard, Jesus told them he was going to a quiet spot to pray, taking Peter and the brothers James and John with him, leaving the other disciples to rest where they were.

And that’s when the horror of what was about to happen to him hit him. With heart thudding, body shaking, and head near to bursting Jesus cried out to the three disciples, “Something terrible is happening to me. I can hardly breathe. I

feel like I'm being stabbed to death. So, don't you dare leave me; stand guard here with me while I pray."

And with that he stumbled off into the darkness, only to collapse face down on the ground a stone's throw away, crying out "Father, O Father, I'm in agony. I know you can stop it right now, but only if it fits with your purpose, because it's always your will I'm after, not mine."

The pain was so unbearable that for an hour Jesus begged God to ease it, but he remembered his disciples were keeping a lookout for him, so he stumbled back to them, only to find the three of them fast asleep.

He shook Peter awake. "How can you be asleep, Simon? Is just an hour standing guard with me too much for you? How will you ever stand the test when your turn comes? When I said, 'Keep watch with me', I meant be on guard like a sentry, alert and wide awake for any hint of trouble - and praying for help too, of course, because the spirit is willing, all right, but the flesh is still weak."

Jesus knew what he'd just said applied as much to himself as well, so back again he went a second time to pray, but this time not to ask the Father to take the pain away. Instead, he said, "If your will can only be accomplished by me drinking every last drop of this agony, then so be it. Your will be done."

And that's when an angel appeared beside him, because Jesus' agony had become so great that blood mingled with the sweat pouring off his face as he prayed.

His disciples, meanwhile, had totally collapsed. Grief and anxiety had utterly exhausted them. So again, Jesus found them in a deep sleep.

"How can you be asleep?" he shouted. "This isn't the time for sleeping it's for praying, because all hell is about to be let loose, and how will you survive it?"

It was all too much for them. They simply sat there in silence, not knowing what to say. So Jesus went to pray again: same words, same agony, and the same sleeping disciples on his return too.

"Not asleep again," he sighed. "Hey, the time of resting is over," he shouted, rousing them from sleep. "Come on, get up. Sleep time is over because hell is upon us. My enemies are here already to take me away. There they are, coming to get me right now. And there he is, the very man who will turn me in. So get up and let's be ready to meet them."

Chapter 3 – Judas comes...

And there, leading a whole crowd of people streaming up the hill in the darkness with their lanterns and torches flickering came Judas.

Behind him was a long, winding line of Roman soldiers, officers of the Temple guard, and a gang of other assorted men, all armed with clubs and swords, and all under orders from the chief priests and other religious leaders in Jerusalem, some of whom were in the crowd too. They'd put Judas in charge, and on his signal identifying which one was Jesus they would immediately move in.

"The one I kiss, that's the man you're after," Judas had explained earlier. "Arrest him on the spot and get him out of there as quickly as possible."

As bold as can be, then, Judas marched right up to Jesus and kissed him.

Jesus responded by saying, "Judas, my dear, dear friend, what is all this about? You come here to this spot where we've shared so many good times together and you kiss me as though you're greeting me in friendship, just like you used to do. But that's not what you're really here for, is it? This isn't a kiss of friendship, it's a kiss of treachery. You're selling me out to the enemy, Judas. But this is what you came to do, so do it."

Before anyone could step in to arrest him as Judas had arranged, Jesus took charge instead. He pushed past Judas and spoke to the crowd, none of whom had made a move yet, leaving Judas all on his own behind him.

"I see you're armed and ready to arrest someone," Jesus said, "so, tell me, who is it?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," several people shouted.

"Well, that's me," Jesus replied.

But instead of jumping in to arrest him, the crowd shrank back away from him, with several people actually falling over.

"Who is it you wanted again?" Jesus asked, after a brief pause to let those who'd fallen over to get back on their feet again.

"Jesus of Nazareth" shouted those who'd recovered.

"I told you already it's me," Jesus replied. "I'm the one you came for. Not these men with me. Let them go." Jesus' main concern wasn't himself, it was his disciples, because, as he'd said in his prayer in the Upper Room, he hadn't lost any of them, and he was still protecting them even now.

Well, this time the crowd didn't hesitate. Several men leapt in and grabbed Jesus. His disciples immediately panicked and yelled out to Jesus, "We're coming for you," at which point, Peter whipped out his sword, took a wild swing at Malchus, the high priest's servant, and lopped off his right ear.

"That's enough," Jesus yelled, and struggling free from the men holding him he put his hand on the man's ear and it was instantly and perfectly healed. "Sheath your sword, right now," he then yelled to Peter, "because people who live by the sword are those who die by it too. What do you think you were doing? Didn't it cross your mind that I could've asked the Father for the kind of power you've seen him give me, and he could have sent twelve entire battalions of angels flying

to my defense? But if he'd done that how would all those prophecies about me be fulfilled? What's happening here, Simon, is what the Father wants to happen. This is the cup he gave me to drink from."

Jesus then turned to the crowd, stunned into immobility yet again by the instant healing of the servant's ear, and he yelled out to them next:

"Why are you coming at me all armed and dangerous as though you're in for a fight with a monstrous criminal? You know who I am. You saw me preaching away in full view at the Temple, for several days too, and at no point did you lift a finger against me, either in public or behind the scenes. So why are you coming out to get me all cunning and furtive at night like this? Only evil could have done that to you. And prophecy too, of course, because everything you're about to do was predicted long ago to happen."

With the crowd still stunned into silence, the disciples saw their opportunity to run, so into the darkness they disappeared, and no one followed. They were safe, just as Jesus intended.

Jesus now stood there, alone, except for a young man wrapped in a single linen garment, which stirred the crowd to try and grab him too. But all they could get a hold of was the man's garment, which peeled away from him, and off he ran into the night too, totally naked.

Chapter 4 – To Annas first...

The captain of the guard had Jesus tied up with rope, and the soldiers trooped Jesus back down the hill to the Kidron Valley, south along the river path to the south gate of the lower city (route 2 on the map), and then into the city to the palace of Annas, head of a great high priestly dynasty and still the most respected Jewish authority in the land, even though his son-in-law was the official high priest that year.

Jesus, still bound, stood before Annas, a man who knew the power of his office in getting people to admit to their crimes. He was a seasoned veteran of intimidation and interrogation tactics, and was used to people cringing and crumbling under pressure. So he got things under way immediately, asking Jesus about his teachings and his followers, pretending he didn't know much about either in the hope of catching Jesus off guard, or unearthing something incriminating.

But Jesus saw right through that, and he wasn't the least bit intimidated by Annas' office, or his clever tactics either.

"If you think I'm hiding something, I'm not," Jesus told him. "I've spoken openly in synagogues, and at the Temple, and all over the country where Jews

meet. So why are you asking me what I taught, when you could easily ask any one of thousands of people in the street what I said and get the facts from them?"

"The cheek of it," one officer yelled, leaping out of his seat. "Is that how you answer the high priest?" he screamed, pointing at Annas. And ignoring the fact that Annas wasn't actually the high priest the officer slapped Jesus across the face.

To which Jesus calmly replied, "If you can point out something I've said that's so wrong, then tell me. But if you can't point to anything, then why did you hit me?"

Annas quickly realized this was not going well, because if word got out that they were already slapping a man around who hadn't been proved guilty yet and could easily be proved to be innocent too, it would be they, not Jesus, who had incriminated themselves. It was time to get rid of Jesus before any other officer lost his temper.

So he ordered the soldiers to escort Jesus to Caiaphas (route 3 on the map), Caiaphas being the ruling high priest. This was the same Caiaphas who earlier on had said it was far better for one man to die than the entire nation. That was his answer to those who were scared that Jesus' popularity would bring down the Roman fury on all of them. To Caiaphas, though, Jesus' growing reputation would act like a lightning rod and draw the Roman attention to him. Caiaphas had no clue at the time that he'd predicted Jesus' death, nor could he have guessed that he'd soon be in the position to make Jesus' death happen as well.

Chapter 5 – To Caiaphas next...

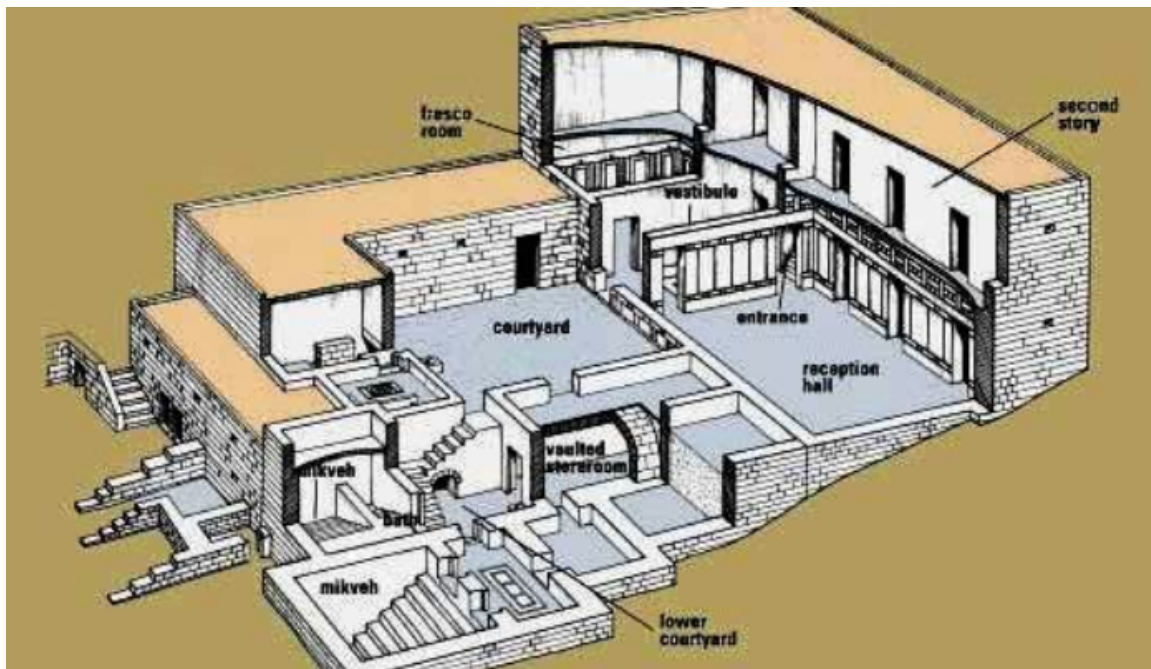
Caiaphas lived in a palatial mansion, large enough for the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, to meet in. Jesus was about to face the highest court in the land, so if they could prove him guilty as charged his sentence would be severe and final.

Meanwhile, shuffling along at the rear of the long line of people escorting Jesus to Caiaphas were Simon Peter and John. They'd escaped into the darkness back at the orchard of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, but had managed to weave their way unnoticed to the city to see where Jesus was being taken.

When the soldiers stopped outside Caiaphas' palace, John ran up to them, mentioning the high priest knew him already, and he was given permission to enter. But that left Peter outside the building still, so John hurried back to ask the woman at the door if she could let Peter in as well. The woman beckoned to Peter and asked him quite casually, "And are you one of Jesus' disciples too?"

Peter panicked and blurted out, “No, I’m not.” Which was an odd answer, because why deny being a disciple when the woman had already let John in, knowing he was a disciple too?

But at least he was in. Through the entrance and to his left was the sumptuous Reception Hall where the trial would be held. Straight ahead was a vestibule that led down some steps to an open stone paved courtyard, and this is where the guards and servants were. It was a cold night, so they were huddled round a large glowing charcoal fire in the centre. Peter slid in amongst them to keep himself warm while he waited to see what happened next. John, meanwhile, was in the Reception Hall, about to actually witness what happened to Jesus.



Despite it still being night-time the Council of priests, scholars and other assorted religious elders assembled in the Reception Hall, and Jesus was brought before them.

They soon made clear what line of attack they would take - and what their main concern was too - because the first question they fired at Jesus was: “Are you the Messiah?”

To which Jesus calmly replied, “Whatever I say you won’t believe me anyway. And if I ask what you mean by your question you won’t bother answering either.”

Since that was all Jesus had to say, the Council called in their witnesses in the hope of securing enough evidence, even if it was a pack of lies, to have Jesus charged and sentenced to death.

The witnesses paraded in one by one, full of stories about what Jesus was supposed to have said and done, but the stories were so contradictory they had to be thrown out as evidence. During that entire session not one person came up with any evidence that justified a charge against Jesus.

It reached the point that only two witnesses remained, and with the law requiring two witnesses to make a charge stick, this was the Council's last chance.

The first witness sounded promising because he pointed at Jesus and in a loud, confident voice declared, "I swear I heard this man say - and these are the very words he said - 'I will rip down the Temple of God and build it up again in three days.'"

The second witness quickly jumped in at that point shouting just as loudly, "Yes, that's right. Those are the exact words he said: 'I will destroy this Temple built by human hands, and in three days I'll build a new one without human hands.' I swear I heard him say that too."

Sensing the positive response in the Council, both witnesses began to blab out more stuff about Jesus, but this time their stories didn't agree at all. Before they dug themselves even deeper, therefore, the high priest leapt from his seat while one of them was still waffling away, and glaring at Jesus he yelled, "And what do you say to that, then? Faced with such clear evidence from these two fine men against you, what is your defense?"

It was a total farce, of course, and Jesus simply ignored it, saying nothing in response.

Decorum and justice then deserted the high priest at this point, as he stomped up to Jesus and nose to nose he shouted, "I demand to know, here and now, by the authority of the living God vested in my office, that you tell this court if you are the Messiah, the Son of our Blessed God. Yes, or no."

"Yes," Jesus replied without hesitation. "You are correct. I am the Messiah, the Son of man, and I will be seated soon at the right hand of the mighty God in the very clouds of heaven."

At which point the high priest in a fit of fury tore off his priestly robes - which he should never have done according to the Law of Moses in Leviticus 21:10. He then had the audacity to yell, "Sacrilege and heresy. This man has blasphemed." And with a triumphant cry he turned to the Council and oozing self-righteous fury shouted, "Who needs any more witnesses? From his own mouth he has condemned himself. What do you say to that, then?"

The entire Council erupted with cries of "Death, death to the blasphemer."

And those who'd been holding Jesus began to punch him and spit in his face. Cackling madly the cream of the Jewish religious hierarchy yelled childish insults

at Jesus. And with their blood up they descended into yet further embarrassment of their office by blindfolding Jesus and slapping him in the face, crying out, "So who hit you, eh? If you're the Christ, you should know." And it all looked like such fun that even the servants and the officers in the courtyard joined in, twirling Jesus round and hitting him.

Chapter 6 – The rooster crows...

All during this time, while the trial was in progress and the witnesses were being questioned, Peter had stayed glued to his spot by the fire. A servant girl passing by the fire saw him sitting there and thought she recognized him. "Aren't you one of those who followed Jesus the Galilean?" she asked him, peering more closely at him in the dim light of the embers. "Yes, I do believe you are," she cried.

"Oh no I'm not," Peter answered quickly. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't even know the man."

Another servant sitting by the fire looked up at Peter, and on taking a closer look he also said, "Oh yes, he's one of them all right."

"And I say I'm not," Peter replied, really nervous now in case anyone else recognized him. Clearly he couldn't sit by the fire any longer, so he left and stood in the porch that led into the courtyard.

And that's when he heard a rooster crow.

It was still before dawn so Peter felt safe in his dark corner of the courtyard, but another servant girl had watched him leave and she'd recognized him too. She spread the word to several others that she knew who he was, and they all trooped out to the porch, where she too peered at Peter in the dim light and said, "Yes, I'm sure of it; this man was definitely with Jesus."

"Is that right?" several of them asked him, closing in.

Really scared now Peter whispered intently, "I swear to you I wasn't with Jesus. I don't know the man."

At last they left, but word must have continued to spread about Peter, because an hour later a relative of Malchus, whose ear Peter had cut off, turned up to confront him.

This really was awkward, because the man announced he'd been at Gethsemane when Jesus had been arrested and he'd actually seen Peter lop off Malchus' ear. Worse still, the man had brought several other people with him,

one of whom said, "I saw him there too," and another who said, "You're one of them all right, and a Galilean too, I can tell by your accent."

Peter was so scared he actually began cursing and shouting, "Get away from me. Didn't you idiots hear what I said? I - don't - know - the - man. Get it?"

At which point the rooster began a second call. Peter lifted his head to listen, and that's when he saw Jesus looking at him. From where Peter was standing there was a clear line of sight through two open doorways to the middle of the Reception Hall, and on seeing Jesus and hearing the rooster crow, it burst into Peter's brain that Jesus had said this would happen, that before the rooster had finished crowing twice Peter would have denied knowing Jesus three times already.

Peter ran outside and burst into tears.

Chapter 7 – Judas dies...

In the Reception Hall, meanwhile, it was bedlam, with men still shouting accusations at Jesus, and Jesus in the middle being punched and spat on.

And watching it all was Judas.

He was horrified. The entire trial had been a sham. The witnesses weren't even credible, let alone accurate. The high priest had totally ignored the law, several times, and even broken the law himself. The Council, supposedly representing the brightest and best in Israel, had disintegrated into a mob of unruly children. It was a total travesty of justice.

By the end of the trial it was obvious to Judas that the only innocent man in the entire room was Jesus, and yet he was the one being condemned to death.

Judas felt sick. What had he done?

The bag of silver coins he'd just been paid for having Jesus arrested suddenly felt like red hot pebbles against his skin. So he ran to the Temple, found the priest who had paid him and said, "Here, take your filthy money back. I have done a great wrong, betraying an innocent man."

"What do we care?" the priest replied coldly. "It's your problem, Judas, not ours."

And that's when Judas realized they'd simply used his weakness for money to kill Jesus. How could he have been so blind and stupid?

In utter disgust at himself, the priest and everything else about this insane, corrupt system, Judas flung all thirty pieces of silver to the Temple floor as hard as he could, scattering coins in all directions, and he stormed out of the Temple.

There was only one way to end the pain that was now tormenting his brain. He would have to kill himself.

He got a rope and headed for a field with a large tree suitable for hanging himself. But it all went wrong. When he leapt off the branch the rope didn't hold and he crashed to the ground instead, and split open his body so badly his insides spilled out and that's what killed him. In both life and in death, then, it had all turned out so horribly for Judas.

Back at the Temple, meanwhile, the priests had been scurrying around picking up all the money Judas had thrown away. But what should they do with it?

"We can't put blood money in the Temple treasury, can we? It wouldn't be right at all," one of them said. The others agreed.

They decided instead to spend the money on a potter's field as a burial place for strangers. It seemed like an odd choice, but six hundred years ago Jeremiah had predicted - which Zechariah later wrote down - 'They valued me at only thirty silver coins, so the Lord told me to give it to the poor potter instead.' But even accurately predicting the thirty pieces of silver, and the mention of the potter tying in with the potter's field they'd just bought, didn't ring any bells in the priests' heads. What did get their attention, though, was the name given to the field they'd bought, because it was called the 'Field of Blood'. And that part was just as accurate too, because it was blood money that had bought it.

Chapter 8 – To Pilate next...

By very early morning Jesus had been sentenced to die by the Sanhedrin Council, but permission was still needed from the Romans to go through with the actual execution. And that meant another trip, this time to Herod's palace to meet with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea (route 4 on the map).

Pilate had travelled down from Caesarea to Jerusalem to oversee security, because tension was high during the Passover festival. The luxury of the governor's residence in Herod's palace made up for it. This was the same place where the Magi had first met with Herod announcing Jesus' birth, and now it would become the place where his death would be sealed as well.

The Jews in the party did not enter the palace, because entering a Gentile home would defile them, and that would disqualify them from taking part in the ceremonial eating of the Passover lamb that evening. So they took that law seriously all right, while thinking nothing of sentencing an innocent man to death, and the very man the Passover lamb pictured too. But none of the Jews saw any problem with that either.

Pilate was fully aware of what the Jews were up to, because Roman soldiers had been sent out to oversee Jesus' arrest earlier. Pilate also knew the Jewish fetish against entering a Gentile building, so he stepped outside the palace when he got word that the Jews had arrived with Jesus.

"So, what exactly are you accusing this man of?" he asked them.

Well, that was a surprise. They hadn't expected Pilate to question their decision, and they could hardly say, "Because this man called himself the Messiah," because that would mean nothing to Pilate, and it wasn't breaking any Roman law either. It was an awkward moment until someone piped up, "Well, we wouldn't have brought him to you if he wasn't a criminal."

"But if he's broken one of your laws, you deal with it," Pilate replied.

"Yes, we've done that already," came the reply, "but we don't have the authority to execute him."

So, things were panning out just as Jesus had predicted, that eventually he'd be turned over to the Gentiles to do the actual act of killing him.

And then someone caught on as to what really might grab Pilate's attention. "We brought this man to you because we are convinced he's a danger to the entire nation. He's trying to get people to rebel against Rome, by saying we shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, because he's our king, not Caesar."

That made Pilate pause. But was it true? He decided he would ask Jesus himself in private, so he walked back inside the palace, telling Jesus to follow him.

"Is it true," he asked Jesus, "that you are the King of the Jews?"

"Is that a question you personally want answered," Jesus replied, "or was it suggested to you by others?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate asked testily. "Look, I don't know what's really going on here, because these are your people and your priests who dragged you here. So, all I'm asking is, 'What have you done?'"

"Well, if that man outside was right," Jesus replied, "that I'm a rebel king setting up my own kingdom now, then my followers would have fought tooth and nail to protect me from these Jews who want me dead, right? But it hasn't happened, has it? That's because it's never been my aim to set up my kingdom now, nor have I ever encouraged people to take over in power now. I have a kingdom, yes, but its roots aren't in this world, or in this nation."

"But you're still saying you're a king, right?" Pilate asked.

"Oh yes," Jesus replied. "I was born a king, and as king I came to this world, but never to fight. I came as a king to bring truth to people, to tell them I know what life is truly all about. And it's those who see me in that light, as simply the bringer of truth, who follow me as their king."

"Truth, you say," Pilate sniffed. "But who really knows what truth is?" And that's all Pilate had to say.

Chapter 9 – To Herod next...

Clearly, Jesus was no danger to anybody, so Pilate beckoned Jesus to follow him and they both went back outside again, where Pilate announced to the crowd, “I find nothing wrong with this man at all.”

Well, that brought a flurry of yells and accusations from the chief priests and elders, who by this time had consulted together and come up with all kinds of incriminating evidence against Jesus to impress Pilate.

Pilate stood beside Jesus as the accusations came flying in. But Jesus just stood there and said nothing.

“Have you no answer?” Pilate asked Jesus. “I mean, listen to them. Can’t you hear what they’re saying? Why don’t you defend yourself?”

But still Jesus stood there, silent and utterly composed. It was nothing like Pilate had ever seen before. Usually people got all defensive and flustered and hot under the collar when accused so publicly and viciously like this - but not Jesus.

So the accusers just shouted louder and heaped on every accusation they could think of. It was one accusation in particular, though, that did catch Pilate’s attention. A man had been yelling that Jesus was fomenting rebellion all over the nation, all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

It was the word Galilee that did it. He asked the crowd if Jesus was from Galilee, and the resounding cries of “Yes” were exactly what Pilate wanted to hear, because that put Jesus under Herod’s jurisdiction. So now he could send Jesus to Herod, who also happened to be in Jerusalem at the time, staying at the luxurious Hasmonean palace in the wealthy part of the Upper City a short distance away (route 5 on the map).

Unlike everyone else so far, Herod was actually delighted to meet Jesus. He’d heard a lot about Jesus and his miracles for some time now, and hoped Jesus would perform a miracle for him too.

But first he had a lot of questions for Jesus, which he asked loudly enough for everyone to hear. But for some odd reason Jesus didn’t say a thing. And nor did he answer back to any of the accusations being yelled out in a steady barrage by the Jewish priests and scholars.

Herod began to wonder if Jesus was all there. Maybe this man was a bit odd after all, so Herod began to taunt Jesus instead to get a reaction out of him. He invited his soldiers to have a go at him as well. They even dressed Jesus up in clownish clothes to make him look ridiculous.

It was all such fun for Herod that he was jolly glad Pilate had sent Jesus to him, and it nicely healed a quarrel they'd had earlier that had kept them apart for some time. Pilate didn't mind so much, then, when Herod sent Jesus back to him (route 6 on the map).

Chapter 10 – Back to Pilate...

Pilate had to step outside his palace again to address the crowd. He finally got the priests and the religious contingent quietened down enough to say to them, "You brought this man to me because you said he was stirring people to rebellion. Well, I found no evidence to support that. I examined him personally, and so did Herod, and Herod sent him straight back to me because he found nothing to be concerned about either. Neither Herod nor I believe that this man has done anything close to deserving death. So I've decided he should have a flogging but then be released."

The priests could sense Jesus slipping out of their hands, so they started yelling, "Away - with - him. Away - with - him," in a steady rhythmic chant. And then someone remembered that Pilate always released a prisoner during the Passover festival, so why not demand that man's release instead of Jesus?

They came up with the worst possible choice of person, a man called Jesus Barabbas, who'd been thrown in prison for leading a gang of murderous rebels on a violent rampage in Jerusalem. If anyone had been inciting people to open rebellion, it was Barabbas, not Jesus. He was an extremely dangerous man and a well-known thief, and definitely not the kind of man that anyone in his right mind would want released back into the community.

But it would get rid of Jesus, so the chant quickly changed to, "Release Barabbas. Release Barabbas."

There was no turning back now, and Pilate knew it. He had to honour his own custom of releasing someone or he'd have a major riot on his hands. He also knew what blind hatred and envy could do to people, and it dawned on him that this was, in fact, what the fuss was all about. The chief priests were so jealous of Jesus they would not settle for anything less than his death.

But surely they didn't want a vicious character like Barabbas let loose instead, did they? Perhaps if he put that point to the crowd they'd see sense, so he asked them, "Which of the two do you want me to release - Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus the so-called Messiah and King of the Jews?"

That stopped the chanting, because putting Barabbas side-by-side with Jesus like that made Jesus look really good by comparison.

It was a good move by Pilate, and the chief priests could see their quarry slipping out of their fingers yet again. So in desperation bordering on madness the priests pleaded with the crowd to seek the release of Barabbas. Pilate waited until they'd managed to get the crowd's attention, and then he jumped in with his question again: "Which of the two names do you want me to release to you?"

The chief priests pointed at Jesus and started screaming, "Not him. Not him. We want Barabbas."

The sight of their own high priests in such an agitated state was a powerful influence on the crowd, who believed their priests represented God. So Pilate waited to see which way the wind would blow.

A message was then handed to him, which much to his surprise came from his wife. In the message she'd written, "Don't you have anything more to do with judging that man (Jesus). I had a vivid dream last night that showed me how good he is, and I've had a terrible day watching what's happening to him."

Well, by now, Pilate was just as anxious to see Jesus released as his wife was. But he was also tied down by his own Passover custom to release a prisoner. And pressured by their priests the Jews would never want Jesus released. If he couldn't release Jesus, therefore, what else should he do with him?

And that's when he made his big mistake, because he shouted above the priests: "What should I do with this Messiah Jesus you call your king, then?"

It was the opening the priests had been hoping for. They swiveled round to face the crowd and shouted, "Hang him on a cross," which sent a thrill through the crowd, and they all started shouting, "To the cross with him. To the cross."

Even Pilate was amazed by this sudden mob madness. He shouted as loud as he could above the racket, "But why? Why would you do this to him? What crime has he committed that deserves such a death? A flogging, yes, but after that I shall release him."

The instant roar of voices screaming for Jesus to be crucified did not deter him. He caught the attention of the captain of the guard and commanded him to take Jesus back into the palace to the Praetorium.

Chapter 11 – Pilate buckles...

The entire Praetorian Guard, garrisoned at Herod's vast palace to protect the Emperor and the Roman governor in residence, marched Jesus into the Judgment Hall. Pilate did not stay to watch.

Jesus faced the elite of the Imperial Roman army on his own. To them Jesus was just sport, a Jew to be mocked, but a Jew who actually claimed he was a king too, and that made the sport much more fun. So they stripped him, tied him to a

post and whipped him, taking huge chunks out of his flesh and even exposing some inner organs. With Jesus in agony and weak from loss of blood, the soldiers then dressed him in a royal purple cloak, plaited some thorny branches into a makeshift crown and jammed it on his head. To complete the mockery the soldiers put a cane in Jesus' right hand and knelt before him and in voices oozing sarcasm they cried out, "O hail the king. Hail the Jewish king. We salute you, your great kingship," and so on. And as each man rose he spat at Jesus, slapped him in the face, took the cane from him and hit him on the head with it.

Pilate let them have their fun for a while, then he went outside again and announced to the crowd that he'd still found Jesus to be innocent, and was bringing him back out. At which point Jesus appeared in the doorway, still wearing the purple cloak and the crown of thorns.

Pilate turned to watch Jesus as he was escorted to the platform, hoping perhaps that the sight of Jesus in his ridiculous outfit and shattered, bleeding body would satisfy the crowd's craving for blood.

"Look at him," Pilate shouted.

But back came an instant roar of voices chanting, "Crucify him. Crucify him."

"Well, have it your way," Pilate yelled back. "You take him and crucify him, because I don't find him guilty of any wrong."

"But according to our law he's guilty," one of the priests shouted back. "He claims he's the Son of God, and by our law that means the death penalty."

Pilate's mind spun. This man Jesus was the 'Son of God' too? Now he really felt uneasy, so he immediately commanded the soldiers to escort Jesus back to the Praetorium again. Once there, Pilate went straight up to Jesus and asked him, "Just who are you?" But Jesus did not reply.

"All right, then," Pilate tried again, "Where are you really from?" But Jesus still did not reply.

"Why won't you answer me?" Pilate spluttered. "Don't you realize it's in my power to have you released or killed?"

And that did get a response from Jesus. "You wouldn't have any power over me at all if it hadn't been given to you from above. And since it's never been you or your power that brought me to this point, you're far less guilty than my accusers who did."

Pilate was really anxious now to have Jesus released, but the shouts from outside had taken on an ominous tone. Now they were shouting, "You're no friend of Caesar if you let him go. A man who claims to be king is opposing Caesar."

And that made Pilate's mind spin even more. This was getting worse by the minute. So he had Jesus escorted outside the Praetorium to what was called 'The Pavement,' a mosaic floor with a judgment seat, and that's where he made Jesus

sit. He then stepped back and pointing at Jesus he shouted, "Your king, people, your king."

"Away with him," the crowd yelled.

Pilate looked shocked. "You mean you want me to kill your king?"

"We've got no king but Caesar," came a shout, and from a chief priest no less.

With a major riot in the making, and nothing he could say to stop it, Pilate walked slowly over to a bowl of water and methodically washed his hands in it. He then turned to the crowd and said, "I wash my hands of this man's blood. I am innocent and so is he. From now on he is your responsibility."

"His blood on our hands, then" someone shouted.

"And on our children's too," another person added.

Scared now that a lynch mob would charge up and drag Jesus off to kill him - a disaster politically for Pilate - he quickly announced his sentence, that since the Jews had taken all responsibility on themselves, they could have what they wanted. Barabbas the dangerous killer would be released, and Jesus the innocent would be killed.

John, who'd witnessed every moment, noted the time as around "the sixth hour," or about 6:30 in the morning by Roman time.

Chapter 12 – The deed is done...

The soldiers took the purple robe off Jesus and put his own clothes back on, and marched him off to be crucified at Golgotha, along with two thieves sentenced to death that same day (route 7 on the map).

All three men had to carry their own crosses, but Jesus was so weak from the flogging that he collapsed as they left the city. The soldiers spied a Cyrenian heading into town from the country - Simon, father of Alexander and Rufus - and told him to carry Jesus' cross.

A huge crowd was now trailing out of the city behind Jesus. The loud wailing of the women made Jesus turn to them and cry out as best he could, "Women of Jerusalem, don't grieve for me. It's you and your children you should grieve for, because the future for you is awful. Women will be glad they aren't nursing children and don't have children. People will be in such agony they'll be begging for the earth to swallow them up. Take what you see happening to me as a warning, then, because if this can be done to me, an innocent man, think what the future holds for the guilty. If a green tree like me can be burned, a dry, withered one stands no chance." But would anything now wake these people up to what was coming?

More than two hours had now passed since Pilate had sentenced Jesus, bringing the time to around 8:30 am. A short while later the trail of people reached Golgotha, the “Place of the Skull” as the Jews called it.

Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh and gall to dull the pain, but he refused it. Without more ado, he was nailed to his cross, and placed between the crosses of the two thieves. As the cross was dropped into its hole, Jesus’ only thought was, “Father, forgive them, for they have no idea what they’re doing.”

It was now the “third hour,” according to Mark, nine in the morning by Jewish time.

Above Jesus’ head on the cross was nailed a board with the words, “This is Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews,” commissioned by Pilate himself, and written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. And with Golgotha being so close to the city, many Jews got to read it.

When the chief priests got wind of the wording they immediately stormed off to Pilate informing him that it shouldn’t read “King of the Jews,” it should read, “He claimed to be King of the Jews.”

Pilate was having no more of their nonsense, however, and he quickly dismissed them with “What I have written stands,” and that was that.

Meanwhile, the soldiers back at Golgotha wanted to divide Jesus’ clothes into four lots, one for each of them, but discovered that Jesus had worn a one-piece cloak without seams. So rather than rip it into four separate parts, they drew lots for who got the whole thing, and in so doing fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 22:18 that said that’s what they’d do.

Chapter 13 – The taunts begin...

The soldiers on guard sat back and kept a watchful eye on the people who stopped by. Word had obviously spread quickly that Jesus had been nailed to a cross at Golgotha, because people were pouring out of the city to have a look.

Some took great pleasure in shaking their heads at Jesus and shouting out, “So you’re the man who said he’d destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, eh?”

Others in sneering tones called out, “If you’re really the Son of God, go on, get off that cross and prove it.”

“Him? The Son of God?” another scoffed, “he can’t even protect himself.” And the soldiers just laughed and let it happen.

The chief priests and scholars couldn’t be more pleased at the people’s response. It was like a game as to who could come up with the best insult. So they threw in a few insults of their own too.

“He says he came to save others but he couldn’t even save himself, could he?” one of them shouted.

Another shouted, “He was always telling us all to trust in God, right? Well, let’s see him free himself and then we’ll believe.”

Another got as close to the cross as he could and pointing at Jesus he cried out, “You’re telling me that’s God’s chosen Messiah, the king of all Israel, the Son of God? Yes? Well, let’s see if God agrees - by rescuing him right now.”

The soldiers thought this was all such fun that they joined in too, one of them waving a sponge soaked with vinegar in Jesus’ face, while another waved his spear at the board above Jesus’ head and shouted, “If it’s true you’re a king, free yourself.”

One of the two thieves even chimed in, crying out, “And aren’t you the Messiah as well? So why don’t you save yourself, and us too?”

But the other thief immediately came to Jesus’ defense: “How can you ask him to save us after what we’ve done? Have you no respect for God? Do you expect him just to dole out the same justice for you as for Jesus, when Jesus is hanging there for nothing he’s done wrong? We deserve what we’ve got, but he doesn’t.”

And turning to Jesus he said, “Remember me, please, when you come in your kingdom.”

“Don’t you worry,” Jesus replied. “You’ll be right beside me in it this very day.”

Jesus then turned his attention to his mother, who was close by with his aunt Mary Clopas and Mary Magdalene, whom he’d freed from seven demons. It was seeing John, his favourite disciple, standing there beside his mother that made Jesus call out, “Mother - John is now your son. And John - my mother is now your mother.” And from that point on John gave Jesus’ mother a home with him.

Chapter 14 – Jesus dies...

Three hours passed while Jesus hung there. And then, suddenly, at noon it became very dark. All over the country the darkness spread, totally obscuring the sun. For three whole hours it lasted, effectively putting a stop to all the taunting and stupid comments. Except for the groans of those on the crosses, there was silence.

At around three, Jesus stirred, and the silence was shattered by his piercing scream, “O Eli, Eli, my God, my God - why have you deserted me?”

In yelling out to Eli, some thought Jesus was calling out to Elijah. “So let’s see if Elijah comes to save him then,” someone scoffed.

Jesus sagged back utterly exhausted. Everything that needed to be done had been done, except one more tiny detail. “I am thirsty,” he whispered.

And in those three words yet another centuries old prophecy, proving the identity of Jesus, was fulfilled, this time Psalm 69:21.

In answer to Jesus, a man soaked a sponge in vinegar, fixed it on a stalk of hyssop, and pressed it to Jesus' mouth. And with that done Jesus cried out, "It is finished. It's all finally been done. I place my life in your hands now, my Father." Jesus' head sagged. One last breath, and then he was dead.

Chapter 15 – More fulfilled prophecies...

Immediately, the curtain in the Temple split from top to bottom, and a powerful earthquake struck, splitting open the ground and shattering many of the tombs of previous saints, exposing their bodies. When Jesus was later raised back to life, their bodies were too, and out of their graves they came to walk around Jerusalem, to the surprise of many people who saw them.

Shattered too, meanwhile, were the Roman soldiers standing watch at the crucifixion site. They were extremely scared, watching Jesus die and then that awful earthquake. The captain of the guard especially had been thoroughly humbled by the experience, because he looked up at Jesus' crumpled body and said, "Oh yes, he was an innocent man all right," and then in a nod to God he added, "And, no doubt, he was truly the Son of God too."

That same thought had struck many others too, causing them to beat their chests with their fists in frustration and misery that such a terrible thing had happened to such a good man.

Looking on from a distance in a circle of abject misery, were the women who had so faithfully supported Jesus' work in Galilee, who had then followed him to Jerusalem and stayed with him to the bitter end. In the group were Mary Magdalene, Salome, the mother of James and John, Zebedee's sons, and another Mary, mother of a James too and Joseph.

But with sunset closing in, heralding the beginning of the great Passover festival, there was no time to waste. The bodies of those crucified needed to be buried before the sun set.

A request was put in to Pilate, therefore, that the legs of those on the crosses be broken to hasten their death. The legs of both thieves were broken first, but when a soldier went to break Jesus' legs, it looked like Jesus was already dead. To make sure of it the soldier sliced Jesus wide open with his lance, and out poured a cascade of water and blood.

By not breaking Jesus' legs and piercing him instead, two more prophecies confirming Jesus' identity were fulfilled, the one from Psalm 34:20 that said, "No

bone of his will be broken,” and the one from Zechariah 12:10 that said, “They’ll stare at the one they pierced.”

And all these events can be confirmed as true, because they were written down by John, who saw them all happen.

Chapter 16 – The burial...

News had not yet got back to Pilate that Jesus was dead, so when he heard there was a man at the palace door wanting permission to take Jesus’ body off the cross for burial, he was surprised that Jesus had died so soon. Checking with the captain of the guard, who confirmed that Jesus really was dead, Pilate immediately gave his permission.

The man at the palace door was Joseph, a wealthy man from the Jewish city of Arimathea, and an honourable member of the Jewish Council, who had courageously stood up and opposed the ridiculous accusations and schemes aimed at Jesus by his fellow Council members.

Secretly, Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. He’d loved Jesus’ stories about God setting up his Kingdom on the Earth, but he didn’t dare let on how he felt for fear of how his fellows on Council might react. But Jesus’ bogus trial was so disgusting, and the contempt of the law so blatant by his fellow Councillors, that Joseph made it clear he wanted no part of it - a courageous move under the circumstances, but courage that had now taken him to Pilate too.

Joseph was not alone, however. Sharing both his opposition to Council and his desire to have Jesus properly buried, was another Council member, Nicodemus. This was the same Nicodemus who’d gone to Jesus by night, and now three years later here he was going to Jesus again, but this time carrying seventy pounds of myrrh and aloe burial spices. Joseph had bought a clean linen sheet, so between them they lifted Jesus’ body off the cross, and in typical Jewish burial tradition, wrapped his body in the linen sheet along with the spices.

In a garden close by, Joseph had recently had a new tomb carved out of the rock, and since sunset was closing in fast, this was really handy for quickly storing Jesus’ body. They placed his body in the tomb, managed to roll a huge stone across the entrance, and then hurried off home.

Watching all this from a little distance away were the same ladies who’d been at the crucifixion, and seeing where Jesus’ body had been stored they too hurried off home to prepare ointment and spices. But they ran out of time and had to stop when sunset came.

Sunset, however, didn't stop the chief priests and Pharisees going to Pilate the following morning, again blatantly breaking their own Sabbath laws - another great irony since they'd been so critical of Jesus breaking the Sabbath laws.

Their reason for going to Pilate is that they too had seen where Jesus' body had been stored. "So," the chief priest in charge said to Pilate, "we come asking that the tomb be properly protected. Our reason for asking is that the impostor Jesus said he would rise again after three days, and his disciples could easily slip his body out of the tomb and pretend he's risen, making his claims even harder to disprove. Could you, then, make sure the tomb is securely guarded for the next three days, against such a thing happening."

"Of course" Pilate replied. "I will send some soldiers to act as guards, and you make the tomb as secure as you can."

The priests met with the guards at the tomb, and just to make sure there was no funny business by Jesus' disciples, they sealed the stone as well, and had the guards thoroughly check it.

Chapter 17 – The empty tomb...

That night there was another great earthquake, during which an angel rolled away the stone and sat on it. The angel was as bright as lightning, reducing the guards to a crumpled heap of fear and trembling.

Just before dawn next morning, the women set off for the tomb with their anointing spices now ready, and arrived just as the sun appeared.

While walking to the tomb they'd been discussing how on earth they were going to roll away the giant stone blocking the entrance. But when they got there, not only had the stone been rolled back, but Jesus' body had disappeared as well.

Mary Magdalene was the first to recover from the shock, and she ran off to find John and Peter. It came as a terrible shock to them too when she said Jesus wasn't in the tomb and she had no idea where those who had removed him had put him instead.

Both men jumped up at once and ran to the tomb, with John outrunning Peter and arriving well ahead of him. With the stone rolled back John could see into the tomb, but he didn't dare take a step inside.

When Peter arrived, however, he strode right in without any hesitation. He found the linen sheet Jesus had been wrapped in lying on the floor, and Jesus' head covering rolled up and placed in a separate spot. Peter shouted to John what he'd found, so in John went, and it was just as Peter said.

They both stood in the empty tomb scratching their heads. But not a thought between them that the reason the tomb was empty was because Jesus had come alive again, just as he'd said he would.

Totally flummoxed, they left the tomb and went back home.

Chapter 18 – Back to life again...

Mary Magdalene, meanwhile, had been waiting desperately for news from the two men, but time passed and no John or Peter.

By now she was frantic and sobbing, so in company with the other women she went back to the tomb. They approached the opening slowly and peered in, and then very slowly stepped inside.

To their astonishment two angels suddenly appeared in dazzling white, one sitting at each end of the slab where Jesus had been placed. The shock of the empty tomb was distressing enough, but this was terrifying. They all screamed and fell to the ground.

"Oh, my dear," one of the angels said, touching Mary's shoulder lightly, "why are you so upset?"

"Because," she sobbed, "he's been taken, and I don't know who took him, or where to."

"But if you're looking for Jesus why are you looking for him here?" the angel replied. "This is a place for dead people, and Jesus isn't dead, he's alive, just as he said he'd be. Remember what he told you back in Galilee, that he'd be grabbed by evil men and killed by them, but three days later he'd be alive again? Well, you saw him put in here, and he isn't here now, is he? So up you get and go tell Peter and the rest of them that he's alive, and just as he promised he'll meet them all in Galilee."

Still trembling, but now with excitement rather than fear, the women were about to rush off when someone called out to them, "Who are you looking for?"

Mary Magdalene turned, and thinking it was the local gardener she replied, "Look, if you've moved him, tell me where to, so I can have him properly prepared for burial."

"Mary," was all the man said, but she recognized the voice instantly, and cried out, "Rabboni, my teacher."

The other women swung round, and in a pile of bodies threw themselves at Jesus' feet.

Jesus quickly told them, "Please don't hang onto me, because I must go to the Father. So off you go as the angel said and tell the rest to head straight back to

Galilee and I'll see them all there. And tell them where I'm going now too, that I'm off to see my Father and their Father, to my God and their God."

They immediately hurried back to tell the others, speaking to no one along the way. When they ran in to tell the disciples and the others yelling, "We've seen him, we've seen him!" it was like walking into a funeral. All the disciples were huddled together and obviously in a deeply distressed state.

None of them responded to the women's excited cries.

So Mary tried the same approach the angel had taken with her: "Remember what he told us back in Galilee?" and she repeated what Jesus had said.

But there was no reaction to that either.

So all the women joined in, describing what they'd seen at the tomb, the linen sheet on the floor, the angels, Jesus talking to them - the whole story in vivid detail - but still no reaction.

The disciples just sat there, as if the women were mad, including Mary, who clearly wasn't lying when she said she'd seen Jesus alive and talked to him. But they still could not believe her.

Chapter 19 – Hiding the facts...

One has to wonder what happened to the Roman guards stationed back at the tomb to guard it, because they too had seen an angel, and witnessed with their own eyes the stone being rolled back and the angel sitting on it.

Their legs had simply crumpled under them when the angel appeared like a bolt of lightning, and they'd hit the ground frightened out of their wits, but they'd survived to tell the tale. So, when they'd sufficiently recovered to stagger up and walk a few steps, they wobbled their way back into the city to report what had happened to the chief priests.

Unlike the disciples, the priests believed every word, and they hurriedly called an emergency meeting of the Council. The soldiers, still badly shaken, were each told to describe what had happened.

It was soon clear that something extraordinary had happened. But just looking at the soldiers was convincing enough, because there they stood, the elite of the Roman army, and they were still trembling and extremely nervous.

There was a grim silence after the last soldier's story clearly confirmed that everything they'd said and seen was true. But, as one of the priests pointed out, the soldiers were the only people who'd actually seen what happened. No one else had. So it could all be contained quite easily if the soldiers could be persuaded to stay quiet and tell no one.

And that was just as easy to do too. Pay them enough to stay quiet. Offer them a bribe so big they wouldn't dare say a word to risk losing it.

Ah, but, another priest added, people who knew the soldiers were bound to ask them what had happened, and how it could have happened too, especially when Pilate had specifically sent those soldiers to stop anything happening.

It was another good point; so back into a huddle they all went.

After a lot of murmuring mixed with awkward silences and rubbing of beards, the chief priest in charge finally broke from the huddle, beckoned the soldiers over and told them, "This is what you must do if anyone asks you what happened. Tell them the impostor's disciples snuck in during the night, and while you were asleep they stole his body. And if Pilate gets wind of what happened, don't worry, we'll talk to him and clear you of any blame. And here's enough money for each of you to retire on or start a new life if you need to. All we ask is that you spread that story, and the money remains yours."

The soldiers were happily surprised by how much money they'd been given, so they did as told, and their story quickly spread among the Jews, who still believe it even now.

Chapter 20 – The stranger...

Early that evening, two of Jesus' disciples were on their way to the village of Emmaus, about seven miles west of Jerusalem.

Their minds were in a whirl, trying to sort out what had happened back in Jerusalem. Their conclusions were quite different, so they were arguing away quite heatedly when another man joined them and asked them what they were so earnestly talking about.

They stopped walking, looked at him sadly and one of them, Cleopas, said, "You mean you haven't heard what happened? You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't."

"Hasn't heard what?" the stranger asked.

"All that stuff that happened to Jesus of Nazareth," Cleopas replied. "And what a great man he was too, a great prophet. Everything he said and did was just marvelous. He was a great blessing from God, and lots of people thought that too. But now he's gone and all because of our chief priests and the Council, who persuaded Pilate to have him sentenced and killed. And we were thinking and hoping that Jesus had come to restore Israel back to her former glory, and maybe even greater glory too."

"And then this morning," Cleopas continued, "the third day since all this began, some of our women turned up at the house where we were all meeting

together, and told us this crazy story about them arriving at Jesus' tomb to anoint his body and finding his body had disappeared, and they couldn't find it anywhere. And when they entered the tomb they found two angels who told them that of course Jesus wasn't there because he was alive. And when some of the men rushed off to the tomb to see for themselves, they discovered the women were right. An empty tomb and no Jesus."

To Cleopas' great surprise the stranger put an arm round his shoulder and said, "My dearest, dearest friends, how can you be so thick? Really, how can you people be so slow to get it? What about all those prophecies in Scripture that talk of the Messiah having to suffer first - before there could be any glory? Remember them?"

Clearly they didn't remember them, so the stranger pointed out scripture after scripture that made reference to the Messiah, going all the way back to Moses and on through all the other prophets.

The miles sped by and before they knew it they were in Emmaus already. When the disciples found out that the stranger was only passing through Emmaus they begged him to stay with them. It was well into evening already and would soon be too dark to travel, so the stranger happily accepted.

When supper was served, the stranger reached across to the loaf of bread and after a brief prayer he broke off a piece for each of them. And that's when it happened. It hit the two men with a wallop that the stranger across the table from them was Jesus.

He smiled at them - and disappeared.

The two men sat there with their mouths open, too stunned to speak.

When speech returned and their minds began functioning again, it all came flooding back what Jesus had told them.

"Our hearts were on fire, right?" one of them said.

"Yes, and to think it was there in Scripture all along," the other said. "And didn't he make it all come alive, like we were seeing it for the first time? We must go tell the others as quickly as possible."

It was getting dark already, but they gathered their things and headed straight back to Jerusalem.

Chapter 21 – it was the fish that did it...

In Jerusalem the other disciples were just sitting down for their supper - doors locked for fear of the Jews - when Cleopas and his friend arrived. They were quickly ushered in to the excited cries of, "He's alive, he's alive," and "Peter has seen him already," and that, of course, led to the two disciples telling their story

too, of Jesus joining them on their journey to Emmaus, and how they'd suddenly recognized him when he broke off pieces of bread for them.

They were still talking away when, suddenly, Jesus was in the room with them.

"Stay calm," he said. "No need to panic."

But panic they did anyway, because they thought he was a ghost.

"A ghost?" Jesus snorted. "But why can't it be me, when so many people have already told you I'm alive? And why are you acting so scared, as if I'm some sort of evil apparition? And why the doubts too, when it's obvious by my hands and feet that it's me? Come here and touch me if you don't believe me, because ghosts don't have bodies, do they?"

He held out his hands first, then held up his feet for them to see, and then he lifted his robe and showed them the great gaping gash in his side. But they still didn't believe it was him.

Jesus then surprised them by asking them, "Have you got anything to eat?"

Someone shuffled up with some fish. They all stared at him as he ate it. And that's what did it. This was no ghost; this was Jesus. Their doubts fled in a flash, and they launched themselves at him in a huge hug of joy.

Chapter 22 – Thomas holds out...

Thomas wasn't there, though, when Jesus had suddenly appeared. And when the others told him about it he wasn't impressed at all either.

"I'm not believing a thing," he said, "until I see the holes in his hands the nails made, and I can feel them too. And no way am I going to believe you unless I can see that hole in his side and I can put my hand in it." And that was that, Thomas wasn't budging.

A week passed. The disciples called another meeting, again with the doors locked, and this time Thomas was with them.

So, when Jesus suddenly appeared at that meeting too, it wasn't surprising that he immediately turned to Thomas.

"Ah, Thomas, my friend," he said. "I hear you wanted to see my hands. Well, here they are. Come and touch them. And you wanted to feel the hole in my side too, right?" And again, Jesus lifted his robe. "So go on, touch and see, and hopefully then you'll be convinced."

Thomas didn't take one step forward. He simply stood there gaping, his eyes moving from Jesus' hands to his side, and finally to his face. He managed to splutter out, "My Lord - and my God."

“Well, that’s more like it,” Jesus smiled. “At least you believed me when you saw me. It would have been much easier all round, though, if you’d believed without having to see.”

“And now to the rest of you,” Jesus continued, “I’ve got a job for you just like my Father had a job for me. And for that job you’ll need the Holy Spirit just like I needed the Holy Spirit.” And since they understood the Holy Spirit in terms of breath, Jesus took a deep breath and let it out in a symbolic gesture of them receiving the Holy Spirit too.

“And one more thing. Your message about me is the key to people’s lives, because if they believe what you say, that I came to forgive their sins, they will have the freedom from sin that forgiveness gives them. But if they don’t believe, they’ll be stuck in their sins and won’t experience that freedom. So get that message across to people, and the Spirit will be with you to help you make it clear.”

Chapter 23 – Follow me...

Jesus had promised all eleven disciples a special meeting in Galilee after he’d risen from death, and now was the time for it, he said, so up to Galilee they went. Most of them were thrilled to be with him again, just like the tight-knit little group they’d been before, but some still couldn’t wrap their minds round him actually being alive.

It wasn’t quite like before, however, because Jesus wasn’t with them all the time, so Peter said he was off fishing, and would any of the others like to join him? James, John, Nathanael, Thomas, and two others said they’d like that, so they dropped anchor a little way off shore and fished all night, but they didn’t catch even one tiny fish.

As the sun came up, a man standing on the beach shouted to them, “Did you catch anything?”

“No, not a thing.”

“Then try on the right hand side of the boat,” the man shouted back, “lots of fish there.”

Well, why not? So out the net went, and just like that it was full of fish, and so full they couldn’t even lift the net back into the boat.

John yelled out, “The man on the beach - it’s him!”

Peter swiveled round, looked toward the beach, grabbed his jacket, and in his usual impetuous way jumped into the water and swam to shore, while the rest rowed the boat to shore towing the net full of fish behind them.

On the beach the man already had a charcoal fire going with fish cooking and bread warming.

“Let me see what you caught,” he said.

Peter managed to drag the net far enough onto the sand for them to see and count the catch: One hundred and fifty three big ones - and the net hadn't even broken either.

Only Jesus could have pulled that off, and they all knew it, but none dared ask him.

“Come and have some breakfast,” Jesus said, portioning out a share of the bread and fish to each of them.

After breakfast, Jesus called Peter over to him for a walk and a private chat. “Now then, Simon,” he said, “answer me this: Do you love me - and love me more than all the others do, like you've said before?”

“Well, yes, of course I still do,” Peter replied. “You know I love you.”

“Good. Then feed my lambs,” Jesus said.

He let Peter think about that for a while as they walked along the beach. And then Jesus asked him again, “Simon, do you love me - and I mean, really love me?”

“Yes, yes, of course I really love you,” Peter replied earnestly.

“That's good. Then look after my sheep.”

Peter was feeling a bit uneasy. What was Jesus getting at? Again a pause, and then Jesus asked a third time, “Simon, are you really, really sure you love me?”

This time Peter felt hurt, because it sounded like Jesus didn't believe him, so he answered rather loudly, “You know everything, so you must know how much I love you.”

To which Jesus replied, “That's good, Simon Bar-Jonah. Then you make sure you feed my sheep.”

“And I say all this, Simon, because you have a tough road ahead. From now on your life will no more be yours than life is for an old man. It's not like when you're young and you can dress up like you please to go where you please. When you're old you go where you're taken, and that's the picture you carry with you from this point on, because you follow me now, Simon, and you go where I take you, and if that means you die to God's glory, then so be it.”

Peter noticed John was following them, so he inclined his head back in John's direction and asked Jesus, “So what happens to John, then?”

“If I choose to let him live until I return, what business is that of yours? Your job is to follow me. So you stick to that.”

Some of the disciples took that to mean John wouldn't die. But Jesus only meant that John's future was not Peter's concern.

Chapter 24 – Let the world know...

During the next forty days Jesus met and talked with his disciples several times - to a group of five hundred of them on one occasion, and to just James on another. He saved his last appearance for a meeting with his disciples in Jerusalem, after they'd returned there from Galilee.

His reason for meeting them one last time was to tell them that the Father had put him totally in charge of everything in both heaven and earth. That's the kind of authority he now carried, so when he'd told them earlier to "Follow me," this was why they should follow him.

Their first response was, "Well, does that mean you'll be restoring the Jewish monarchy and making Israel great again?"

"The timing of that is the Father's business," Jesus replied. "Can we concentrate instead on what your business is? Do you remember me showing you how the scriptures all point to me, and how all the things that Moses and all the prophets and the Psalms said about me must be fulfilled to the tiniest detail? Well, let me go over those scriptures with you again, and I'll tell you why that's so important."

"It's important because they prove the Messiah would die and rise again in three days. And with that proof in the bag it can now be announced to the whole world, starting right here in this city, that forgiveness and a total change of heart are now possible for anyone and everyone because of me. It's possible at last because the controlling power of evil has been broken."

"And you've witnessed this happening already, right? You've seen evil sent packing, you've seen people turn their lives around, you've seen people thrill at knowing everything horrible about themselves has been forgiven. Wherever you go, then, spread the news that these things can now happen to anyone."

"And all you need to do is teach people what I taught you. It was my teaching that changed people. Immerse them, as I did, in what the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are up to. Help people see what God's aims are on this planet, just as I did, so they too want to join in what he's doing and serve in whatever ways they can, because that's the most freeing and fulfilling purpose in a human life. And get people to understand that ignoring God leaves them stuck in a life of hopelessness and frustration."

"I'm now the powerhouse driving this world because of my death and resurrection. And those of you with me right now who believe that will do wonderful things to prove it, like healing people's physical and mental illnesses, speaking in languages you never learned, and not being harmed by poison and snakebites."

“But the best gift of all is the one my Father promised, so wait here in Jerusalem until he gives it to you. It’s the gift predicted by John the Baptist, when he said I would baptize with the Spirit, not with water like him. And the proof of you being immersed and saturated with that Spirit will be the power you have to get this message out to the whole world. And rest assured that every moment of every day I will also be with you, just like I was with you before. Never will you be without me to the end of the world.”

Chapter 25 – Jesus leaves...

It was time now for Jesus to leave, just as he’d told his disciples he would and had so carefully prepared them for.

He led them one last time out of Jerusalem, up the familiar path beside the Kidron brook, across the brook to the Mount of Olives, up the western slope past the olive orchard at Gethsemane to the ridge above, and then over the ridge and down the eastern slope to a spot near Bethany.

He stopped, and while his disciples stood looking at him he raised his hands toward them and blessed them, and as he was blessing them he began to rise slowly from the ground, higher and higher into the sky until he entered a cloud and disappeared from sight.

The disciples kept looking, looking, eyes still glued to the cloud. It was a shock, therefore, when a voice beside them said, “You Galileans, why are you just standing there gazing up into the sky?”

The disciples all spun round to see two men in bright white robes, one of whom then said, “This Jesus you just saw rising into the heavens is now at God’s right hand, sitting there right beside him. But he’ll be back one day, returning to the earth in exactly the same way you just saw him leave it.”

They were thrilled, that the Jesus they’d loved so much would be back, and bursting with confidence and love for him they headed straight back to their favourite meeting spot in Jerusalem to tell the others.

From then on to the day of Pentecost they were in the Temple every day together, thanking God and asking him to now bless them in their work, just as he’d blessed Jesus before them.

And God answered all right, because on Pentecost he gave them the Holy Spirit he’d promised, and from that moment on they went out preaching all over the country, just like Jesus had, with all sorts of miracles backing them up too.

And I, John, can vouch for it all being true. So now it’s your turn to read what happened and believe Jesus is the Son of God, and reap the results like so many others. I could tell you loads more, but that would fill way too many books!