

The steadfast-love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every-morning;
great is your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:22-23 (ESV)



The Christian life is a journey.

TrailNotes speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the “landscape” we are passing through in this trail-laced, wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. **TrailNotes** is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we’re learning and doing.

ElderTalk: The Zealots

MATT GODSIL

Welcome back to our series on the people groups that Jesus encountered in His ministry here on earth. God sent His Son at a designated time with the specific circumstances that may appear strange to us, but actually were quite intentional. Israel was involved in a great conflict between two kingdoms, the Kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of this world. Each of the groups we are looking at had a variety of different responses to the onslaught of the world, which had taken the form of Hellenism. Hellenism proposed that man was the center of the universe, and everything in that universe became about the individual. Man is the measure of all things. Hellenism was about Empire, the narrative of self-preservation and self-elevation, the pursuit of personal power in the midst of survival. It was introduced in this wave by Alexander the Great and the conquering armies of Macedonia and Greece and later by Rome.

We have looked at the responses by three groups and their response to Hellenism over the past months in *TrailNotes*, beginning with the Sadducees. This was a priestly group of Jewish authority that operated like a corrupt Jewish mafia and ran the temple system, but also coordinated with the Roman presence and compromised a workable relationship with them.

The Herodians were the second group we looked at that on the surface also seemed to thrive as they compromised their Judaism in order to blend into the Roman world. Why couldn’t the Jews get along and thrive within the context of their circumstances?

In my previous submitted article (*September 2024 issue*) I introduced you to the Essenes. These were a priestly group that didn’t want to have anything at all to do with Hellenism and its orientation to self, but distanced themselves in large part by retreating to the desert and dedicating themselves to the text of Scripture while waiting upon the Lord’s return.

We have two more groups to cover. In this article, we will examine a group called the Zealots.

A LITTLE HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR THE RISE OF THE ZEALOTS

Alexander the Great took over his father’s leadership position when he was yet a teenager. He would be dead by the time he was 32. In that short period he conquered the entire civilized world. One of his campaigns brought him to the land of Israel. He arrived during the reign of the great High Priest, the last of the Men of the Great Assembly, Simon the Just. Most historians say that Alexander came in about the year 329 BC. (He was dead by 323 BC.) The Jews were terrified of the now victorious Greeks because the Jews had backed Persia in the war. There were two choices. We will see this story repeated over and over again in the time of the Second Temple. One choice was to fight, which is what the Jews did later with the Romans. The second was to somehow come to an accommodation with the enemy.

Simon the Just chose the second course. The Jews were not about to defeat Alexander in battle; therefore, the correct way to deal with the matter was to come to an accommodation with him. After Alexander died in 323 BC, his empire was divided up between his two generals, and the general Seleucus took over as the Seleucid Empire. Eventually the Seleucid Empire would be led by a king named Antiochus Epiphanes, who performed what is in Scripture was described as the “abomination of desolation” in his taking over of the temple where he sacrificed a pig. A revolt was led by Judas Maccabeus, who overthrew the Seleucids in



Antiochus Epiphanes (215 BC-164 BC) on left and Judas Maccabeus (d. 161-160 BC) on right (cropped from a 1634 painting by Rubens).



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an eight-day war, which we commemorate in the story of Hanukkah. The Maccabean group who revolted were the founders of the Zealot movement, and they turned the kingdom of Israel over to the priesthood, who would then become the Sadducees. The Zealots were a passionate group of freedom fighters who did not serve as priests, but who wanted to preserve the Jewish faith with zeal for the Lord. They headed north to concentrate in Galilee, leaving the temple to the Sadducees. Their passion for the Lord would not be compromised, but they were the group who would be ready to take violent action to preserve their relationship with the Lord.

After the revolt and turning the temple over to the priesthood, the Zealot group formed into what was called the Hasidim, or “Pious Ones.” They headed north to settle in Galilee. They were actually made up of two sub groups, the Zealots and the Pharisees. The Zealots were the group who piously took to violent action. These Zealots were known as the Kanaim, which in Hebrew translates as “zeal.” This word shows up on the Scripture where God says, “I am a jealous God.” It is not envy-jealousy, but it means the passionate zeal one has for a lover/spouse. The Kanaim or Zealots had their inspiration in the Old Testament characters. The first is Phinehas from Numbers 25:6-9.

“Behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas, (the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest) saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.” (ESV)



Dug into the slopes of Mount Arbel are caves which were the hideouts for the Zealots, who fought against the Greeks and Romans.

The second character of great influence upon the Zealots was the prophet Elijah. He initially appeared in 1 Kings:17, and then at the time of a failed sacrifice by the priests of Baal, stepped forward and prayed. *“‘Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant, and I’ve done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.’ Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.*

“When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, ‘The Lord, He is God. The Lord, He is God.’ Then Elijah commanded them, ‘Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away.’ They seized them and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.” (1 Kings 18:36b-40 NIV)

Elijah would be our other character that the Zealots would look at and go, “Yes, the fire and the passion—the wrath of Elijah.” These would be the poster children of this movement. That drove their worldview.

So within 20 years of their installation, the priesthood had become completely corrupt and Hellenistic. Throughout the entire century of the Hasmonean dynasty, the Zealots embraced the concept of redemptive violence, as seen in Phinehas and Elijah. They justified their violence as a cleansing that would restore the integrity of the relationship with God in His temple, ultimately ushering in the age of Messiah.

The intolerable occurred when Rome established a Nabataean-Idumean as king of the Jews in Jerusalem. Herod the Great had bankrolled the Roman Empire and was even backed by Julius Caesar to become king in 45 BC. The priesthood married one of their priestly daughters to Herod to establish a pagan as the king of Israel. The Zealots revolted and hid out in Galilee, battling the Romans and the soldiers of Herod in guerrilla-style warfare.

Jesus went through all the towns of Galilee and would have engaged with Zealots in their synagogues. In fact, Jesus called two Zealots to be his disciples, Simon the Zealot and (some scholars believe) Judas Iscariot. The war between the Zealots, the Romans, and the temple priesthood/Sadducees concluded eventually at the great battle of Masada in 72-73 AD.

So the great question of the Zealots for each of us, is this: Is it righteous for believers to attempt to advance and save the church through violence? Is killing justified in the kingdom of heaven here on earth? The problem is that redemptive violence is not what Jesus calls for when

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we follow Him.

God desires to have followers who have zeal. When Jesus calls His disciples, He's going to call at least two of them who are Zealots. Besides the two disciples mentioned earlier, He's going to call others that have these Zealot tendencies. We see Peter chopping somebody's ear off. Even the people that lived in Galilee would have been sympathetic, especially these young disciples, to the Zealot worldview. Jesus and God call the Elijahs of this life. They are called Zealots because they are the ones that are going to get God's will done.

Often it is the Zealot who is going to have the passion to impact the status quo. It is great to study the Word and avoid the impurities of this world. But in our time in the church, we need to make sure that we are using the weapons of Jesus and move according to God's way. We need to use the weapons of love, mercy, and compassion, but we also should bring an element of zeal to the engagement of the world by the church, zeal to the extent that the followers of Jesus would be willing to lay their lives down for the love for Jesus and others. The early church is full of this kind of zeal. When we consider our own zeal, is there a place for this jealous passion for our God and Savior?

We read in 1 Kings 18 where Elijah engaged in the big showdown against the prophets of Baal. He had experienced the terrible power of almighty God. Yet in the aftermath, he had a crisis of confidence and disillusionment about his ministry. He was afraid and had had enough, even though the Lord displayed His mighty power in front of him. He hid under a broom tree, then retreated to a cave, where the Lord spoke with him in a uniquely special way. We read in 1 Kings 19:12-18 (NIV):

“After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’ The LORD said to him, ‘Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven

thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.’”

Consider that God showed His awesome, terrible power through wind, earthquake and fire, but He actually spoke to Elijah through a gentle whisper. It is through this still small voice that God speaks love, which actually restores broken hearts. The loving voice inspires loving others and changing hearts. Elijah is shown that redemptive violence will not change the hearts of people. Love works; all the fire—it doesn't work. If we were to just willfully love people and show others how to love, hearts of people would be changed. The love would remind them of who God is. As followers of Jesus, love is the only thing that has the potential to change hearts. It is not the great showdown. It is not the logic and intellectual aspects of apologetics or winning an argument. Spears through your enemy and fiery displays on the altars of Mount Carmel do not change human hearts. Maybe these are useful and good. But loving discipleship of fellow human beings is the beginning of changing the hearts of men and women toward God and one another. Zeal—the passionate love for God—is the Spirit of God in us motivating, driving, and inspiring everything we do. Zeal is a really good part of being a follower of Jesus. But let us listen to the gentle whisper of God, the still small voice.

The voice of love is the voice of Jesus. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)*

Note: Many of the historical references not mentioned in the Bible and included above have come from multiple online sources, including the Bema Podcast and bemadiscipleship.com with Marty Solomon and Brent Billings.

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(A complete list of church functionaries
will return next month)

The Chosen — A PHENOMENOM

Soon to begin its fifth season, *The Chosen* has become an under-the-radar juggernaut, reaching more than 250 million viewers to become one of the most watched shows on the planet. Aside from the U.S, it's especially popular in Brazil, Poland, India, Mexico, and the Philippines—with famous fans from Whoopi Goldberg to Blake Sheldon.



Jesus (as portrayed by Jonathan Roumie) on the road with His disciples—in a scene from The Chosen.

“Of course, this show is about a Jewish man and His Jewish followers, so I’m going straight to their stories and try not to impose my faith tradition over it. Yes, there are plenty of sermons. But the show never gets too preachy. I’m not trying to convert anybody through the arts,” Dallas Jenkins, the series creator said. “It’s a historical drama.”

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- 4 Games Reach Family Game Night, at GFC, 6:30 to 8:30 PM.**
- 5 Elder Jadaé Fox preaching on 1 Peter 3:8-12.**
- 8, 15, 22, 29 Connect groups for all ages, 6:30 to 8:00 PM.**
- 12 Elder Matt Godsil preaching on 1 Peter 3:13-17.** 
Coins for Kids fundraiser for Child Evangelism Fellowship begins.
- 16, 23 Women of Grace meet to pray, 9:00 to 10:00 AM.**
- 19 Greg Frankenfield preaching on 1 Peter 3:18-22. Sanctity of Life Sunday.**
- 26 Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on 1 Peter 4:1-6.** 

Nearly a third of the viewers are not Christians, according to a poll conducted by producers. “It’s a show for everyone, not just for people of faith,” says Lara Silva, who plays Eden, the wife of Simon Peter. “We get messages from people who say: ‘I’m an atheist; this show’s cinematography is too good to pass up.’ That’s mind-blowing.”

Whether viewers believe in His divinity or not, “Jesus was a man who changed the world forever.”

This is just the beginning. *The Chosen* covers the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, leaving 62 books yet to tell *The Chosen*, which is off the beaten track, has found a way to provide something for its audiences that Hollywood has yet to do.

Ed. The above has been taken from a newsstand magazine, “The Chosen, The Ultimate Companion To Jesus’ Story—As Never Told Before,” published recently by A360 Media. If you’ve not seen any of this series on TV or at the movie theater, do so. You are in for a moving and often thought-provoking treat.