

**Transformed by Faith Series, Part 7**  
**“Ready Like Freddy”**

***Who Did Jesus Feed?***

Small Group Web Support Material

## **What's Inside?**

It's easy to forget that the people Jesus fed lived in a culture and a time very different from ours. Consider that over 7,000 people gathered to listen to Jesus, on a workday, out in the open. Jesus taught them without a microphone or a podium. Neither He nor his disciples rented a "Cox Arena" to accommodate the crowds, organized shuttles or traffic directors (they didn't have cars to drive there...), or hire a graphic artist to design programs, flyers, or handouts.

Yes, things were different – it was a different time and place. A different set of cultural norms governed the lives of the people and an oppressive political climate overshadowed their comings and goings.

This packet of information is designed to help you and your small group better understand daily life during the time of Christ. More specifically, it is designed to help you answer the question ***Who did Jesus serve?*** In side you will find information on the political climate, social structures, economic setting, and religious beliefs.

## **How Do I Use This?**

This packet is designed to provide you and your group members with information relevant to the Bible lesson. This packet can be used in the following manner:

1. Print copies for your group members to read before, during, and after group.
2. Consider printing one copy of each section (i.e. daily life, political setting, etc...), distributing them to your group members, and asking each member to summarize the section.
3. Use the following extension questions:
  - In reading this, what stuck out in your mind? What did you learn? Did it generate new questions in your mind?
  - Consider each section by asking, "If I had to write this for life in San Diego, CA, USA today, what would I write?"
  - Compare and contrast our way of life with the Judean way of life.
  - Consider: What might have been the mindset of the people listening to Jesus teaching. What did they think politically, morally, ethically, economically, etc...?

## **First Century Context: Political, Economic, Cultural, Religious, and Educational**

### **Political Setting**

For thousands of years, the Jewish people were primarily subject to foreign rule (Egyptian, Syrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, etc.), with only brief periods of independence. In the first century, Romans ruled the Mediterranean area known as Palestine (modern day Israel), where Jesus was born and lived his life. In the hierarchy of power, the Jewish self-government reported to the authority of the local Roman government (King Herod), which reported to Rome (Emperor Caesar).

1. The Roman government practiced syncretism, **accepting that all religious beliefs, philosophical teachings, and government systems are ultimately compatible**, or a reflection of, a larger system – the Roman system. They practiced one of the first “one country, two systems” policies – pronouncing that all people had religious freedom, political freedom, and freedom of thought, yet maintaining strict control.
2. The **Jews held much distrust and often hatred for the Roman Empire** – they were unwilling subjects. At the time of Jesus’ birth, the local Roman ruler, King Herod, initiated a massacre of all Jewish baby boys born at the time. Herod was also responsible for placing forbidden idols within the Jewish temple. Such actions added more reasons for Jewish resentment of the foreign Roman government.
3. **The Jews understood the world to be divided into two types of people: Jewish and Gentile (non-Jew). The Jews worked hard to disassociate themselves from the Gentiles.**
4. **The Jewish people accepted their freedom in both their governing system and in maintaining their own traditions, yet the Roman government required that everything be ultimately subject to Roman authority.** For example, Jewish citizens were under the authority of the Jewish court system (the Sanhedrin), yet all rulings for the death penalty were sent to the Roman government.
5. **The Jewish religious and governing system was divided between two parties: the Pharisees** – the ‘people’s party’, taught the law and traditions of Israel’s patriarchs, and were strictly conforming to Jewish law; and the **Sadducees** – the wealthy and conservative leaders who rejected the traditions in favor of political and religious cooperation with the Romans.

## Economic Setting

The economy of first century Israel was supported by three key segments: agriculture of olives, figs, grains, dates, and vineyards; trade fostered by Israel's key location on the Mediterranean Sea; and large government building projects sponsored by King Herod.

1. **King Herod employed many laborers by commissioning many public works** (e.g. building temple in Jerusalem, palaces, ports, fortresses, stadiums, ornate stone carvings, etc.)
2. **There was a very large disparity between rich and poor.**
3. **The upper class was made up of the temple priests and priestly aristocracy** (including the Sadducees – a Jewish sect)
4. **The middle class was comprised of traders and merchants, artisans** (stonecutters, masons, sculptors, etc.) **and craftsman** (metal, wood, cloth dye). The Pharisees (another Jewish sect), sages, scribes, and teachers were also a part of the middle class.
5. **The lower class was made of laborers** (weavers, stone carriers, slaves (non-Jewish person taken into slavery because of debt), and the **unemployable** (lepers, blind, insane, crippled, etc.)
6. The Roman government **required heavy taxation of its people**. Tax collectors were local employees considered to be outcasts and traitors.
7. **Jews were also required to give sacrifices to the temple** – sometimes in the form of money, and usually by purchasing sacrificial animals to offer to the priests.
8. **Traveling teachers made their living by traveling from town to town and accepting gifts from those who came to hear them.**
9. During the first century, **the temple courtyards had often become a marketplace** – local merchants would sell sacrificial animals at excessive cost in order to turn a profit from the tourists or religious seekers that would come to the temple.

## Cultural Setting / Daily Life

Jesus spent most of his life in and around the farming village area of Nazareth. Similar to many farming villages throughout the world, life was patterned after traditions, roles and rituals passed down from many generations beforehand.

**Population:** The village area of Nazareth was populated mostly by Jews, but also with some diversity of Syrians, Greeks, and Romans. The major city of Palestine was Jerusalem, which was more cosmopolitan and contained far greater ethnic diversity.

**Language:** The common language in the Roman Empire was Greek. However, at the time it was common for Jews to also use Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin. Jesus' every day language was Aramaic.

**Village Life:** The hub of a village was the marketplace and shops. And for a Jewish village, the synagogue was a central meeting place, and the seat of the local Jewish government.

**Housing:** Houses were all purpose 1-2 room squares, with dirt floors, flat roofs, low and narrow doorways, and front wooden doors. Often people would sleep on flat roofs during hot nights. The houses were arranged around a central shared courtyard where neighbors performed daily chores (cooking, laundry, etc.) in each other's company. Water was carried in from a public well and stored in a courtyard cistern. Lighting was provided by earthenware oil lamps. People slept on mats, and owned limited personal goods.

**Food:** The woman's daily job included preparing food for her family – for example, they would grind grain, bake bread, milk the animals, and make cheese. Typically a family ate two meals: breakfast – light or small amounts of food taken to work; and dinner – a large meal with cheese, wine, vegetables and fruits, and eggs. As for meat, fish was most common, followed by chicken or fowl. Red meat (beef and lamb) was served only on special occasions, and pork and crustaceans were absolutely forbidden. Most foods were boiled or stewed in a big pot and seasoned with salt, onions, garlic, cumin, coriander, mint, dill, and mustard. Food was sweetened with wild honey or syrups from dates or grapes. Food was generally served in a common bowl and eaten by dipping in with the fingers.

**Clothing:** The undergarment was called a “tunic”. The outer garment was called a “mantle” – it was loose fitting with fringes, bound by blue ribbon. Men wore a belt – a four-inch wide leather belt or cloth “girdle”. If one was wearing only an undergarment, then he was said to be “naked” or “stripped”. If one was wearing only an undergarment (tunic) and belt, they were said to be wearing a “loincloth”. The phrase “to gird your loins” meant that the tunic was pulled up between the legs and tucked into the belt. People also wore sandals on their feet, and a white cloth over their head, hanging to their shoulders. This cloth protected them from the sun.

**General Physique:** Most Jews were fairly small in stature, light-skinned but tanned from sun. Most had black or brown hair worn long, and most men wore beards.

**Family Structure:** The husband was the spiritual and legal head of the house. He was responsible for feeding, sheltering and protecting the family. Children were instructed early to honor their parents. A Jewish family lived by very strict moral, social and religious rules. Parents, unmarried children, and a married son and spouse would often all live under one roof.

**The Role of Women:** In first century Israel, women were considered second-class citizens, akin to slaves. The fact that they are mentioned as avid followers of Jesus is unusual – that they would be allowed to follow him with his disciples, and that the authors of Jesus' biographies would mention their presence at all.

**Jesus' Family life:** Joseph (Jesus' father) was a carpenter, making their family a part of the middle class. Mary (Jesus' mother) was a teenager who was "promised" by her parents to be married to Joseph (at the time when Jesus was considered to be miraculously conceived). Following their marriage, and Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph had other children as well.

## **Religious Setting**

Jewish leaders fought for the purity of their belief in one God in the face of conflicting foreign religions. Yet at the same time, they fragmented into sects divided over variations of the Jewish law.

1. **The Jewish people believed in one God** (monotheism) who was invisible and could not be portrayed. In contrast, the **surrounding cultures believed in many gods** (polytheism) who could be represented by images or idols.
2. **Jewish tradition was centered on the Sabbath Day** – the day began on Friday at sundown and ended at Saturday sundown. Sabbath was started with prayer, the lighting of the candles by the wife of the household, followed by a joyful Friday supper. Sabbath was considered to be a day of rest and worship, where everything one did was in honor of God.
3. **The Jewish people were seeking a "Messiah" or savior** – they were waiting for the leader God had promised who, according to their understanding, would bring them spiritual renewal and political freedom from centuries of foreign oppression, currently from the Roman Empire.
4. **The culture of first century Israel was very interested in the supernatural** – it was common for people to believe in curses and be controlled by superstitions.
5. **The major religious holiday during the Jewish year was the Passover feast** celebrating the deliverance of the Jewish people from their slavery in Egypt. During the Passover, many Jews would travel to Jerusalem in order to celebrate in the holy city. This is why Jesus and his disciples traveled to Jerusalem for their last supper together – they were celebrating the Passover. This is also the tradition that caused so many Jews to be present in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

## Educational Setting

For the first century Jew, religion, law, history, ethics and education were inseparable. Through both written (Torah) and oral (Mishna) law, teaching was passed from generation to generation. Rabbi's (teachers) and synagogues were highly esteemed aspects of society.

1. The Roman Empire thrived on syncretism – seeking to have all people (Greek, Syrian, Egyptian, Jew, etc.) maintain their own traditions and philosophies, and yet seeing them all under a general Roman perspective.
2. **The Jewish education emphasized law, ethics, and history for the purpose of right, moral living.** In contrast, the Greek education system called “gymnasium” emphasized science, arts, linguistics and bodily training.
3. Most Roman citizens were influenced by the teachings of different philosophical systems; the two major philosophies of the time being Stoicism and Cynicism.
4. **For Jews, the “Torah”, translated “law” was the source of all learning** – religion, history and ethics. The Torah includes the first five books of the modern Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy)
5. **The “synagogue” translated “house of assembly” was the Jewish place of both worship and education**
6. Young Jewish boys started formal education at the age of 5, learning to read and write. At age 10, boys would start to learn the Jewish law. Formal education was complete by age 18. Young girls would learn at home from their mothers and other women. Young men were educated by a Rabbi (teacher) from the local synagogue.
7. Young men, seeking advanced education as “scribes” or doctors of the law, could study a broader range of topics with a religious motivation in mind.
8. At the highest level of education, a scholar would go to a great or renowned teacher and become a disciple, often learning through daily discussions and activities. These men were known according to who their teachers were– “from the school of...”

Jesus studied at the synagogue – in one instance when Jesus was 12 years old as recorded in Jesus’ biography by Luke, the author says “They (Jesus’ parents) found him (Jesus) in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.” ([Luke 2:46-47](#))