



The Trouble with Jesus

SAMPLE

Considerations
Before You
Walk Away

The
TROUBLE
With Jesus

SAMPLE
Constance Hastings



NASHVILLE

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Considerations Before You Walk Away

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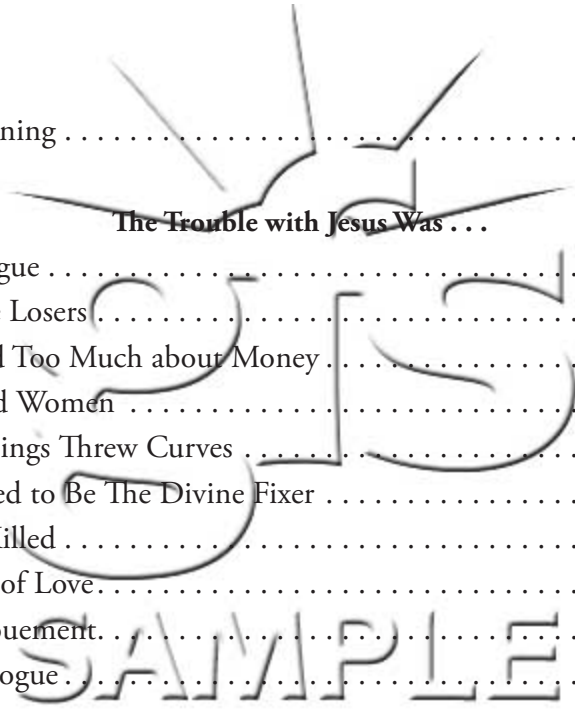
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In the Beginning

Now, let's be clear about this. You can tell your story any way you see it. And I can jump in with my two-bit commentary when I want. But none of this "Believe it or you're going to burn" crap. I am only willing to listen because I agree Jesus's story might have some things I like about it. But it's my choice what I do with it. I've been given other belief systems about the universe, how we got here, and what it means to pass through this life. I guess, though, that I just think there's more. I'm willing to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt. And doubt is what I bring to this table.

A lot of questions don't get answered, and when I look around, when I look inside myself where not many get to see, those questions swell into doubts. I just don't know what to think about Jesus. You've got a different slant on him which merits a different take. Most try to make him somewhere between your best friend and/or a Marvel superhero who's going to make everything all good. But you talk like his middle name is Trouble. From what little I do know about him, trouble finished him off for good. So go ahead. Let's do this. Let's find this Trouble.

Jesus. If ever there was a contentious figure, he ranks at the top. This first-century Jew caused more trouble to both the Roman Empire and the disenfranchised Jews than any other leader or social/religious movement in history, either before or after his existence. Volatile tensions in the Middle East have brewed for many millennia. And Jesus defined some of it. Interestingly, while he had his followers, they were not among the movers and shakers of his day. His influence, though, permeated beliefs in a subversive appeal, undermining systemic processes in the culture. In the centuries afterward, controversy has continued around his life even as there are those who would downplay and dismiss his story. Starting even in beginning sections of the New Testament in the Bible, Jesus's purpose in upsetting and changing the status quo is announced.

However, too often his narrative as told in the Gospels are read as separate vignettes, just little portrayals of his life. This kind of reading, more often than not, leads to a cafeteria style of theology with an emphasis on "favorite Bible stories," a style that does not give the full message of Jesus's incarnation and purpose while on Earth. Diluted in this way, one is left with an impression of a meek and mild Jesus that is safe and sanitary, easily dismissed from the real significance of life. With that perspective, it is easy to fail to see how impactful, significant, and centered in deep meaning were his life and teaching.

On the other hand, when read in the broader expanse of cultural context, the narratives of Jesus's life prove to be dangerous. That's where the trouble begins. When this drama unfolds, his life is seen through a different, more clarifying lens. It is a perspective that stabs at the core of what is thought to be everything from common sense to established justice. Questions and doubts need articulation. Evaluation of possible results when his message is applied require scrutiny. When faced honestly, a decision must be made if one would become his follower and perpetrate the same kind of trouble that he started two thousand years ago.

Some parameters and background need to be understood. Although first century Palestine's culture was heavily dominated by Hebraic tradition, it was not immune from Roman and Greek influences brought by the occupations of soldiers, the resulting commerce, and the practice of pagan religions. While the oral traditions of the Jewish heritage were a time-honored practice, the framing of these tales, especially in later written form, adopted literary styles understood throughout the Roman Empire. Thus, the four books of the New Testament known as the Gospels, written in Greek, have elements of Greek drama recognized and understood throughout the reach of the empire. The structure gave a familiarity to the first readers of these manuscripts that aided their understanding of the message and themes of the Gospels.

For example, the fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, begins with an introduction to the identity and character of Christ: "In the beginning the Word," which is later identified as Jesus. Unlike the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke, John's prologue does not deal with birth narratives. His Gospel almost makes those stories secondary. Instead, John's revelation opens with words which could be proclaimed by a Greek chorus, an outside voice giving background and insight into the action of the drama. As such, the Word speaks and is answered. This voice stands mostly apart from the action as witness to the narrative, sometimes adding to the tension of the scene. Ultimately, it frames who this Jesus is, and in doing so, it sets the stage for trouble.

This chorus voice has not died out, for the Gospels are no mere recitation of an ancient historical figure. They make claims both explicit and covert about God and the kind of understanding, relationship, and purpose known and revealed in Jesus Christ. An honest, engaged reading of the Gospels refuses then to be static, accepted simply at face value. It brings in alternative viewpoints, reasoning familiar to other worldviews. Emotional at times, it challenges the drama with its connection to the characters and the audience of listeners/readers from the setting of its time into later centuries. The contemporary chorus wrestles with accepting the Gospels'

claims or rejecting them. For the message to be embraced, the presentation of choice must be maintained. Thus, while the Word was in the beginning, it speaks even now and desires to be answered.

Are you saying I'm not the first to do this? What I have to say, how I say it, even the very fact that I am saying it are really part of Jesus's story? That would mean I can add my estimations to those who were there, those who have tried to figure this out, those who feel like me. Might as well dive in head-first. Okay, I join my voice with them as they add to mine. God, bring on your trouble.

Further Provocations for Your Consideration

If you, too, relate to the chorus voice of Doubt, I invite you to add your thoughts, doubts, challenges, and emotional outbursts as you read. Use the margins to scribble comments, and circle words and phrases in the text. Ask honest questions. Go further and start a Jesus-trouble journal. Utilize the questions following each chapter. Add your voice to the chorus and enter into its drama.

1. What is your attitude toward doubt?

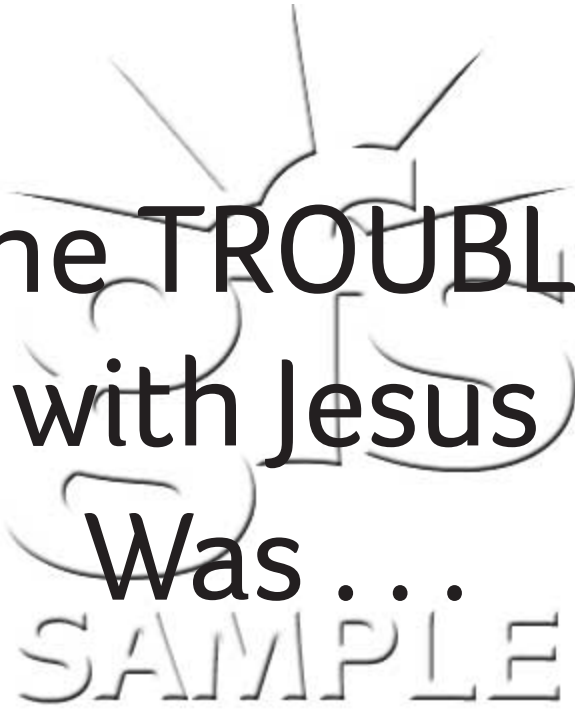
2. What positive outcomes could there be when doubt is allowed at the discussion table?

3. What role does fear play in doubt?

4. Questioning is doubt's sister. What is the difference between an honest inquiry and a manipulative ploy to deflect or avoid the issue at hand?

5. How does openness to any idea that may change former perspectives affect wrestling with doubts and questions?

6. For Jesus's message to be embraced, the presentation of choice must be maintained. Why must choice always be a foundation of this discussion?



**The TROUBLE
with Jesus
Was ...**

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His Prologue

Likely, the first sense of something wrong was heard in the pounding hoofbeats coming from the north. Fast and hard, the sound meant that the Romans were once again pressing the Jews for something more. Just a few years earlier, it had been a tax census, the Emperor Caesar Augustus draining them so the empire could have its roads and palaces. What more could their Roman overlords get out of them?

Helmets partially obscured their faces so that individual identities could not be determined in other times and places. Their purpose needed a mask, for with precision they reached out to steal the lives of the most vulnerable and innocent. Slit throats gurgled blood, silencing mouths that had been filled that morning with mother's milk. Knives and sabers speared those whose toddling steps could not run fast enough. Fathers' pleas and mothers' horrors only brought a more determined murderous fury. All baby boys born in the last two years or so in this place known as Bethlehem were butchered for the sake of protecting King Herod from his paranoiac fear of losing power. But the very one he wanted to eliminate was not among the slaughtered. The child's parents had left hurriedly and became refugees in a foreign place, escaping the trouble their son brought for now so he could live for another time and purpose.

This is what I mean. It's sickening that children would be slaughtered, but even more so, sickening that this baby, the one who's supposed to be the Son of God, escaped it and left innocent ones to die who had had nothing to do with him. Imagine the unsuspecting parents who saw their children die like that. What kind of God allows this? Don't we have enough to suffer with just to get through life? We have our own trouble. Jesus, don't bring us yours.

The Pattern of Trouble Is Set

The prologue in the Gospel of John states: "In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). This is no mere baby boy who rose to a small level of prominence as an itinerant rabbi. The chorus states in no uncertain terms: Jesus *is* God. As God, this Jesus existed "in the beginning," and, by implication, even before the beginning because he is a cocreator with God who formed the universe. His identity means trouble—trouble, that is, for those who would keep God at a distance, separate and safe from interfering with personal choices in life. It harkens back to the man and woman in the garden who, in taking the forbidden fruit, desired to be like God and thus, by extension, displace their Creator (Genesis 3).

John's prologue, therefore, sets the stage for conflict, a necessary element for drama and its trouble. The ancient chorus chants, "So the Word became human and made his home among us" (John 1:14). The entrance of God in human form threatens the human reach for control of one's life and destiny. Autonomy is challenged, for self-determination is confronted by a God who would interrupt human designs.

Even more threatening, called the Word, Jesus not only speaks for God even as he is God, but he also comes as light and love. To be apart from light is to be in darkness, and to be loved and experience that love, even in the condition of one's creation, one must become united with the lover

(vv. 4, 14). The trouble with Jesus is that he comes as a God whose love will change and consume one's soul to the point of being reborn, creating a new person who is foreign to that which natural and intellectual inclinations would lead. The prospect is not totally welcome, for although "he came into the very world he created, . . . the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him" (vv. 10–11). Push-back erupts at the start. The chorus has set the stage for what was to come.

The Hero

Another necessary element of the drama is established. The hero must be one of high, noble birth. He is the Creator and the Source of everything there is (v. 3). His entrance brings him into the world saying, "The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone" (v. 4). Later, he would be called Savior, the one whose light would give abundant and eternal life. Full of grace and truth, unfailing love and faithfulness, he possesses virtues worthy of a hero.

Yet, there will be something in his character that will lead to his demise. In fact, his very virtue is what will establish the conflict. Darkness cannot exist in light, and truth, love, and grace threaten the darkness that abides by power and control. By subtle implication, the chorus foreshadows the trouble to come. The very attributes that make Jesus a hero, a cosmic being who becomes human and proclaims peace and love, will clash with the established order of the day. Trouble will be his destiny.

You know what? This sounds familiar. They say all great stories are really just one story repeated in different settings and times. It's what all good myths are made of. And all myths need a hero. Right from the beginning, it's clear Jesus can stand with the best of them, from good ol' Greek gods to Marvel superheroes. Yeah, let's settle in for this one and play with it. So what else have you got?

Adjusted Natural Order

Before Jesus makes his entrance into our world, the Gospel of Luke starts the narrative with an adjustment to known and expected physical processes. Zechariah, an old priest serving in the Jerusalem temple, is visited by an angel informing him that his elderly wife, Elizabeth, would deliver a son who will be like the prophet Elijah. This new prophet will prepare the people for the “coming of the Lord” (Luke 1:17). When Zechariah questions this possibility, he becomes mute, unable to talk again until the child is born. This birth to an old couple is called a miracle, one for which the childless Elizabeth rejoices. Yet miracles also represent adjusted order—when that which happens is outside the expected, predictable known order to life. Old women do not have children. Preceding the entrance of the hero, there is a reversal of reproductive functions.

This Jesus will reverse, change, and upset the world.

The impossible will happen.

It can only mean trouble.

Even more troubling is the hero’s entrance. This time a virgin, a young teenage girl, receives an angelic message of another reversal. Without having sexual relations with a man, she will conceive by “the power of the Most High” (v. 35). Mary is “confused and disturbed” (v. 29) at the announcement. Beyond the questions of how this could happen are its consequences to her. According to Jewish law, if a woman was found not to be a virgin before marriage, she should be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22:20–21). Mary’s very life would be in jeopardy. For her to agree to the angel’s proclamation—to say, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true”—was to stand squarely in the face of trouble (Luke 1:38).

Thus, along with her cousin Elizabeth, Mary becomes a player in this story, the story which will shake the world to its foundations. Both women will eventually lose their sons to executions. By that which they are blessed, they will also know the deepest grief and trouble. Still, they believe the

angel's messages to them. They are witnesses to “nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37 NIV).

The Magnificat: Song of Praise . . . and Trouble

Shortly after the angel's announcement, Mary visits Elizabeth who greets her with words later prayed by Roman Catholics for centuries: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (v. 42 NASB). Elizabeth confirms that the source of Mary's blessing is because “you believed that the Lord would do what he said” (v. 45). Mary accepts what God will do through her. She then breaks out in a song of praise and thanksgiving, known as The Magnificat (vv. 46–55). The core of this song points to the trouble to come. This child she carries will be a blessing, but the blessing is for those who struggle. It is for the poor, the hungry, those who live in the margins, and it is a reversal of the status quo. For in this reversal, the powerful and rich will lose—and that will cause trouble.

Finally, Mary's blessing also spells trouble. She is the conduit through which this Christ, the Messiah, will enter the world. This divine act reverses the role of women. God could have come into the world in any way. Instead, the one who made the universe chose to enter through the womb of a woman and was born by one of the very processes that made a woman “unclean” in this early society. Jewish law had an aversion to female blood, and the process of childbirth rendered a woman not fit for contact with those in her company. After all the suppression experienced by women throughout history, the mother of the Son of God is blessed. God's action and Mary's yes to her Lord reverses the curse received by the woman in the garden, and the sanctity of life is affirmed yet again. Nevertheless, for those who benefit from the inequality of the genders, it means trouble.

Okay, this isn't all bad. Forget the virgin birth and old lady pregnancy adjusted-order miracles. Yet, in how the story is going, letting women off the hook for all that's wrong with

the world, bringing them back as major players, and allowing them significance in history are where the world should be heading anyway. Yeah, let's sit with this for a while.

A Birth That Was All Wrong

For all the sentimentality that's pumped into the Christmas season, the birth of Jesus was mostly a story that came with more than its fair share of trouble. A close examination of Luke 2 details the tumultuous predicaments that came into play as "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14 NIV). All of Judea was under the control of the Roman Empire, and the order had gone out from Emperor Caesar Augustus that a census would be taken for the purposes of taxing the people. This tax would not benefit the taxed; instead, it would support the corrupt and immoral practices of the foreign powers in place. Everyone had to return to his ancestral center to be counted. Despite her impending delivery, Mary with her "husband" Joseph had to travel the rough road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of seventy miles. It was just one more way their people knew trouble and so were looking for a Messiah who would save them from this oppression.

Even with his faithfulness to Mary and care of her during pregnancy, Joseph had internal struggles about his relationship with her. Their custom of engagement was closer to being married except they would not have sexual relations. The promises and vows had been said. As any man would, Joseph initially had considerable reservations about Mary's pregnancy. Betrayal on her part would have been his first conclusion, and nobody would have blamed him. Yet, within him must have been immense compassion, for he was unwilling to break the engagement publicly (Matthew 1:19).

But again, an angel intervened, revealing how God was reversing order to save his people. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," the angel told him, "For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (vv. 20–21). Without saying a word, Joseph obeys.

Recall that Zechariah became mute after the angel brought news that he and Elizabeth were to have a child. Zechariah and Joseph, the two men most immediately impacted by these reversals of order, either have no recorded words of their own or are rendered speechless. Only the women have voice. Another reversal is achieved.

Whoa! But that is good! Women get their say. The point is these gals were heard, at least in this part of Jesus's story. What an achievement, and the kid isn't even born yet. Beginning to see why you call him a hero.

If all was right in the world, the entity that would be later called “The Holy Family” should have had basic needs supported as their baby was birthed into life. Again, the overlays on the Christmas story today are often with pretty music, sleigh bells, and an overabundance of presents. But the real situation was stark. Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem with no place to stay. Even with family residing in town, there were too many people and “no place for them in the inn.” Mary delivered her baby in a stable, a place for animals, and laid him in a “manger,” a feeding trough for a bed. She wrapped him in “swaddling clothes”—nothing more than strips of cloth (Luke 2:7 KJV). It was the “best” the world would accommodate for the Light of the world. This child knew poverty and trouble from the beginning.

The First to Receive the Gospel

Undoubtedly exhausted from long travel and childbirth, the family was not left alone. Shepherds ran into town to “see this thing” that had happened (v. 15 NIV). These men were not sweet little characters portrayed in children's Christmas pageants. No, they were a motley crew whose life situation was to do the dirty work for those of better social status. Today, they could be compared to those who work as chicken catchers for poul-

try growers, the ones who step into the filth of chicken houses and chase frantic birds before they are packed into crates and shipped to factories for slaughter and packaging for consumers. As outsiders, these shepherds knew both danger and cold in the fields as well as disdain from the society who benefited from their labor for food and ritual animal sacrifice for their sins. For them to show up right after the baby was born must have been like having a motorcycle gang run through the halls of a maternity ward. Their very presence would have been out of place and brought trouble.

Yet, they had a story that was from another place. Angels had come to them this time, and a glory, a radiance surrounded them. Light broke into darkness. Fear struck the shepherds, for they had no idea what this light could mean except for trouble. Yet one of the angels told them good news, the gospel message that the long-awaited Messiah and Savior had been born, and the baby was to be found in an unlikely place, a manger. The heavenly host, the armies of heaven, then released a cacophony of praise, saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased” (v. 14) The chorus broke in again.

The shepherds ran to Bethlehem to witness for themselves this child who would reverse the order of those who were dirty and poor. They told “everyone” what the angel had said about this child. Those who heard their story were “astonished” (vv. 17–18). Were they astonished at the shepherds’ story or astonished that they would come up with such a tale? Could these men who were at the bottom of the social scale, these disenfranchised and hardened characters who herded dirty, dumb sheep, be the first to receive the gospel, the announcement of the Messiah? The passage does not say whether the shepherds were believed, just that people were astonished. No wonder! This was a reversal of how important, life-changing proclamations with religious and political impact happened. If true, it only meant trouble.

Nice intro here, baby Jesus boy. Sorry you didn’t get the red carpet when you arrived, but Christmas songs would be

lost without a manger. Oh yeah, we'll root for you and your shepherd boys. People of the night know things the rest of the world never see. Don't think, though, that your story is going to get much traction with a start like this. If you're going to make your entrance with people like these, then you'll get all the trouble you want.

Wise Men, But Not Like Us

The shepherds were not the only ones who knew this special child was born. Far away in another land and culture, astrologers/astronomers had seen a phenomenon that caused them to take a long journey. A new star had appeared, and they had interpreted it to mean a king was born in this country to which the star seemed to be leading them. Known as the wise men or magi in traditional Christmas stories based on Matthew 2, these men were foreigners and would have brought strange dress, language, customs, and a troubling presence in that they didn't look like everyone else, even with the relative diversity of the area. Their arrival in Jerusalem was with the mistaken assumption that the educated and powerful also had indications of the new king's birth. But this supposedly good news was received as trouble. No one, neither King Herod nor the senior priests in the temple, knew anything about it. The inquiry was taken as a threat to both.

The original readers of this story knew Herod and what likely was coming. It wouldn't be pretty. As a politician, he had built and improved many cities and municipal projects, but he also had to keep a thumb on the Jews who were not fully submissive to Rome, much less to him—not an easy task. Smart though, he manipulated the religious leaders to quell for the time being their desire to be once again a sovereign nation. However, Herod also was mentally unstable in his later years and notorious for being paranoid about challenges to his position and power, even to the point of killing his own family members. News of another king was a prospect that would require elimination.

Likewise, the high priests felt that they should have had some kind of indication if the Messiah, a king bringing deliverance, was born. Were they not the gatekeepers of the temple and the enforcers of Jewish law who kept the people faithful? They continually chastised the Jewish faithful for their lack of perfection in obedience, promoting the belief that it was required before the Messiah's entrance. Certainly, God would reveal this to them first. To be announced by foreigners, those outside the faith and their control, did not sit well with the priests.

Therefore, such intelligence, unconfirmed as it was, still was considered by both parties as a warning to their status and security. Not that Herod or the priests believed this story was real, but if others believed it, it could threaten their political and religious grip on power, wealth, and control of the people. Though usually at odds, Herod and the priests conspired in an unholy alliance about what to do with the report of this Messiah. Their pact foreshadowed what would happen thirty years or so later when political and religious leaders of the day would again conspire to remove Jesus. It laid the plot that was filled with trouble.

Just as the shepherds were directed to search for a baby lying in a manger, the wise men were told to search for this child in Bethlehem. The religious scholars of that day pointed to the prophecy in the ancient books of Micah and Samuel that this would be the place of the Messiah's birth. The wise men again observed the star and followed it to Bethlehem where it "stopped over the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:9). Time evidently had passed, for the passage now refers to a child instead of a baby. The family also was living in a house rather than a stable. With joy, these foreigners worshipped this child and opened their treasure chests of gifts. But again, modern-day Christmas pageants convey a different picture than that which would have been understood by first-century readers. Certainly, gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh are known to be lavishly expensive. Yet, the impact of their meaning meant trouble. Each gift carried its own significance for what this child would be. Gold was for a king, frankincense

was for priestly worship, and myrrh meant his demise as it was used as an embalming spice. In brief, this kingly priest was going to die.

Symbolism. Good technique. Don't tell the story outright. Let seemingly simple elements foreshadow what is to come. Too bad you don't have some foreboding music to accompany the gift presentation. Yeah, your holiday songs just about hide the real story.

Herod had seemed interested in the foreigners' report, asking for details of the star's appearance. He requested the wise men return and brief him once they found this child so he also could worship him. Yet, Herod's intentions were not so honorable. Again, an angel intervened in dreams, warning the wise men not to report back to Herod and telling Joseph to take his family and immediately leave for Egypt because Herod intended to kill the child. With the provisions from the wise men, they left under the cover of night and stayed in Egypt until Herod died. The holy family and the Son of God became refugees on the run, compelled to flee for their lives. Trouble was at their door, ready to break in and bring death.

The juxtaposition of the shepherds and the wise men is just as troubling. Mary's song of praise had clearly declared that her child would be the Savior of the poor. The wise men, however, were very wealthy. Still, God had chosen them to have an integral part in the holy family's journey, for their call was to give safety and provision to this poor family out of their own "treasure chests" (v. 11). It indicates that the divine intention of the relationship of the rich to the poor is to provide vital needs and, in these places, give praise. Years later, Jesus would say "to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48 NRSVA). For those who would use their wealth just for their own benefit, it means trouble.

So the family escaped, but trouble was not avoided. When Herod realized what the wise men had done, he gave orders for all boys two years old

and younger in and around Bethlehem to be killed. The prophet Jeremiah had said long ago, and the chorus in this narration reiterates, that there would be anguish, weeping, and mourning for dead children in this ancestral burial place of Rachel. The birth of the Prince of Peace ultimately led to the slaughter of the innocents. Horror and sacrifice, trouble in its sickest form, surrounded Jesus.

Years later, Joseph and Mary, again directed by an angel in a dream, returned with their child to Mary's hometown of Nazareth. Another messianic prophecy was fulfilled: "He will be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:23). But it also raised another question: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Anything, that is, except trouble?

Further Provocations for Your Consideration

1. The comparison of Jesus to mythological heroes is not a major stretch of perspective. Does this concept help with your understanding of his story, particularly in these introductory accounts? If so, how? How does it detract from what you know of Jesus or have been told?

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2. Whereas the shepherds were economically at the bottom of the social scale, the wise men, though wealthy, would also be considered outsiders for their ethnicity, customs, and strange religious understand-

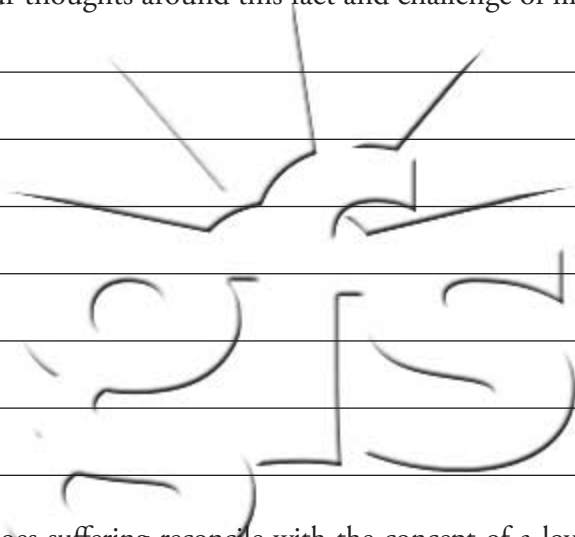
ings. Yet they are integral to the story of the Christ child's birth. How do you interpret their significant presence in this narration?

3. Mary's song and the angelic revelation to shepherds indicate that God's coming is for the poor and the suffering. The wise men's lavish gifts to the child gave provision for safety and escape from Herod. How would this emphasis find challenges in today's lifestyles and ambitions?

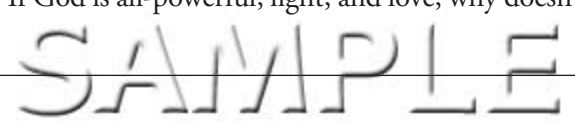
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4. Trust in any form has an inherent tension in it. What does it take to tolerate that tension?

5. “The birth of the Prince of Peace ultimately led to the slaughter of the innocents.” Though the story details violence and its resulting suffering from political power, it’s no secret that pain is inflicted from many sources: disease, prejudice, greed, the need for control and power, you name it. People have cried out to God since the beginning of forever, “Why do you allow this to happen?” What are your thoughts around this fact and challenge of life?



6. How does suffering reconcile with the concept of a loving God? Or does it? If God is all-powerful, light, and love, why doesn't God stop it?



After Words:

Provocations from Others

Want more? Disclaimer here. This book is not a tell-all. Not even close. Jesus's good friend and disciple wrote in his report, "Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). However, based on what the writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did say about Jesus, plenty of other books have been written.

It must be said, no one stands alone in the formation of faith. True, reading as close as possible to the original sources about Jesus from those who knew him and his followers is primary. Yet, it must be recognized that much of faith is built on the struggles of those who have been on this journey and wrestled with questions and doubts so others don't have as hard a time. The trouble with Jesus is that his life compels his followers to tell their stories of that journey and pass on what nuggets of wisdom and strength they have gleaned by doing so. I thank God for them, and I pray that this book may be that for all who take the trouble to read it.

So, in honor and fairness to all those who have struggled with Jesus's story and claims, below is a small list of resources I recommend for those who would allow Jesus-trouble into their considerations of where he has a

place in one's soul and life purpose. Some of these resources are specific to the life and times and teachings of Jesus, while others are broader in discussion of God and the Bible. Some of these are classics, even bestsellers in the Christian canon and require deep contemplation in dedicated reading. Others are lesser known, easy reads but no less challenging to Jesus's narrative. All have found a place on my bookshelf from time to time, and some have traveled, finding homes in hands beyond my own. Suffice it to say, all of these have merit in regard to who Jesus was and how he is accepted today.

First, though, I recommend that you find a Bible you like in a format you will use. The Bible is available everywhere from apps for phones and tablets to paperback and leather-bound volumes in large print. Whichever you choose, let it be one that you can highlight, mark with notes, or leave questions on the page. (God will appreciate the exchange.) Audible versions are also available. (Good for those who need to yell back.)

Select a Bible in a translation that you will read. While lovers of sixteenth century Shakespearian literature may revel in the Kings James Version, modern translations of the Hebrew and Greek deliver the message also. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New International Version (NIV), and Contemporary English Bible (CEB) are reliable selections. The Message, a total paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson, is popular for its creative poetic style. In this book, I mainly used the New Living Translation (NLT) because of its readability. Some modern translations also strive to be gender inclusive. So while God is referred to as "He" when directly translated from the original texts, Jesus came to save both women and men. (Thank God!)

Bibles are also available with additional study notes and commentary. If you are willing to move forward in your considerations, this is important. Study notes will provide additional contextual information, sometimes maps of the geography, and some cross-references. (No, Jesus was not the first to say love God and neighbor.) Such notes will help you find these kinds of things.

Commentaries can be specific to the reader: Women's Bibles, Kid's Bibles, Teen's Bibles, and more. I use the Life Recovery Bible written for those who have addictive habits they are trying to overcome. (Like who hasn't something in their life they don't need to shake off?)

With the Good Book in your hands, read it. I recommend reading it every day. Start with the section called the New Testament. In its first four "books" is Jesus's story. Everything else before it in the Bible (called the Old Testament) is the prequel to Jesus, and everything else following is the sequel. So start with the most important part, the four Gospels, which focus on Jesus and the gospel (good news) he came to present. From there you can decide where to go next.

You'll find in your online search for a Bible plenty of study books that have various themes. Those are great, but more important is to connect with other people who will sit with you and this Jesus-trouble. Here are two places you can go online for personal help:

- **Alpha:** Search www.alphausa.org. If you like English accents, this one is for you. Actually, you don't have to have a preference to join. "Alpha is a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith, typically run over eleven weeks. Each talk looks at a different question around faith and is designed to create conversation." That was right from the website. You can search for a group in your area, or if it's better for your life or lifestyle, there are online sessions available. What's great about this group is you don't have to say a thing or you can say anything. At the least, the questions they raise are good for consideration, and they also feed you fairly well if you attend an in-person group.
- **Celebrate Recovery:** Search www.celebraterrecovery.com. You are likely familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous and twelve-step groups. What distinguishes CR is that it names Jesus as its higher power. Yes, you'll find in these groups people who struggle with addic-

tions. But more so, this program is for persons with all kinds of “hurts, habits, and hang-ups.” If your consideration of Jesus-trouble is coupled with those kinds of issues that trip up your life, this is one of the best places you can go to engage those issues.

Numerous Christian books can provide summaries, insights, answers, and inspiration concerning Jesus, his life, and teachings. Here are some that I’ve found especially beneficial:

Thurman, Howard. 1976. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. This book gives a perspective of the losers Jesus chose and loved. Just read the “Foreword” by Vincent Harding. You won’t put the book down from there.

Paul, Greg. 2004. *God in the Alley: Being and Seeing Jesus in a Broken World*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press. If you think you can be like Jesus by helping the losers and the poor but walk away like nothing happened and not be changed, then don’t follow this guy’s example. But read it anyway just to see how it’s done.

McGrath, James F. 2021. *What Jesus Learned from Women*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books. This book gives a creative narration that’s fully researched in the historical context of the biblical passages relating to the women Jesus knew, healed, and for whom he was a powerful advocate.

Alcorn, Randy. 1989. *Money, Possessions and Eternity*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House. This resource is comprehensive and convicting for those who take seriously what Jesus said about money. This one will also cost you, and not just for the price of the book.

Cloud, Henry, and John Townsend. 1992. *Boundaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. Jesus stressed relationship with God and neighbor. And this can’t happen without healthy boundaries cemented in love. This must-read has been a bestseller for good reason.

- Kalas, J. Ellsworth. 1992. *Parables from the Back Side: Bible Stories with a Twist*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. Jesus was a master storyteller. This book delightfully demonstrates how Jesus packed these tales with relatable lessons not always examined on the first read. From here, check out Kalas's other books in this series From the Back Side.
- MacNutt, Francis. 1974, 2002. *Healing*. Notre Dame, IN: Ava Maria Press. Do you think miracles stopped after the first century? Read the accounts of healings from this former Roman Catholic priest who lived his life dedicated to his belief in the person of Jesus and what that faith can accomplish.
- O'Reilly, Bill, and Martin Dugard. 2013. *Killing Jesus*. New York: Henry Holt and Co. The authors provide thorough research on the historical and political context that came into play leading to Jesus's crucifixion. Raw accounts make it real.
- Willimon, William H. 2006. *Thank God It's Friday: Encountering the Last Seven Words from the Cross*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. Not a difficult read, but not an easy read either. Take each chapter slowly. Maybe even read each chapter more than once before progressing to the next one. Listen to these last words Jesus spoke from his cross.
- Lewis, C. S. 1997. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Scribner. Such a classic this is, you'll find it on your preferred online book-shopping website in multiple editions by several publishers. All attest to how this book, first published in 1952, is not going away. It also takes a dedicated reading, worth it for the one who wants an understanding of what Christianity is supposed to be. (Not saying this is how all those who claim it really live it. So what? The Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint, as they say.)
- Huffman, Eric. 2021. *Scripture and the Skeptic: Miracles, Myths, and Doubts of Biblical Proportions*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. Good presentation with a sense of humor and relatable illustrations. You can tell from the title that it discusses the entire Bible, not only the Jesus

narratives. It's worth a look without needing to devote tons of time. (At least the first time through.)

Metaxas, Eric. 2005. *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about God (But Were Afraid to Ask)*. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press. Gives a great presentation in the Q&A format that each chapter utilizes. Very readable as well. Again, this book is broad in scope, but the chapter titles quickly give sight to the question most pressing. Also, Metaxas has a follow-up book (2007) with more questions covered. *Everything Else You Always Wanted to Know about God (But Were Afraid to Ask)*.

Strobel, Lee. 2016. *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. Considered a gold standard for apologetics. Yes, there is a movie by the same title. Still, read the book for more in-depth arguments for Jesus's life and resurrection.

Finally, if you'd like more of *The Trouble with Jesus* in blog form, you'll find me at <https://constancehastings.com>, with each blog usually around a five-minute read. Comments, questions, this doesn't make sense . . . whatever your response to Jesus in your considerations is welcomed.

SAMPLE

Acknowledgments

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me;
your love, O Lord, endures forever.

—**Psalm 138:8**

Left to my own ambitions, my life would not have taken the path it has. Yet the making of *The Trouble with Jesus: Considerations Before You Walk Away* is in many ways the culmination of the one I was given. God's hand of grace and formation not only gave me life work and relationships which I cherish but also brought about this book through those experiences.

The Trouble with Jesus: Considerations Before You Walk Away is not of my own invention. I had no intention to write a book. Sure, there was a time when I worked as a freelance reporter, and I had many articles published in newsletters. None of that, however, entailed the investment of time, the sacrifice of who I thought I was meant to be, and the wrestling I needed to make in the consideration of the life of Jesus Christ.

What you hold in your hands came about in the not surprising request of a church women's group. Aldersgate United Methodist Women approached me about leading a Saturday morning Bible study. With a life-

time of biblical studies, seminary training, ordination, and leadership in churches and throughout the Peninsula-Delaware Conference, I should have been able to just pull out a scripture and message. Didn't happen.

For two months or so, I struggled with what would have spiritual impact on these dedicated, smart, well read, professional, church ladies. No passage in all of the sixty-six books of the Bible inspired me to go with it. Finally, one day I just looked up and said out loud, "The trouble is with Jesus." No celestial chimes rang out, but I knew that would be it.

The Trouble with Jesus began with a three-hour class. Soon I realized I had the outline of a book. The skeptical voice in the book was familiar in my head as well. As Jesus lived in the midst of trouble, there would be, and still is, challenge to him and his message. I could see the pages forming around it.

Except—when you work hard and stretch yourself in many places, something has to give. But the call to write would not go away. I learned many years before how this insistent nudge meant God had another plan for what I was meant to do. Six years later, I turned over many positions and projects in which I served and followed my husband to Florida. We told people that our move was to be near our son and his wife, which truly was a joy. But I agreed to go only if I could have time and space to write. My family generously gave it to me.

Like many novices, I thought I only had to crank out the pages, send them off to an agent/publisher, and God would take it from there. Lord have mercy, but there is more to writing a book than this former teacher of great literature realized. God pushed me down that path with great mentors and coaches to learn how to structure my writing, promote what was coming through blog writing and garnering subscribers, and what form of publishing would best afford the book in print, digital, and audio forms.

Specifically, from my knees I thank God for Rhonda Robinson and her Scribe Tribe who developed my website and brought about the blog; Amanda Rooker of Split Seed for her manuscript editing as a confirmed

skeptic; Bill Watkins of Literary Solutions for applying his immense biblical insight and strong theological perspectives, not to mention skill in formatting and structuring the book for publication; W. Terry Whalin of Morgan James Publishing for leading me into the publishing process; and all of the team members of Morgan James Publishing for their expertise in taking *The Trouble with Jesus: Considerations Before You Walk Away* from a holy nudge to book in hand.

Beyond these, I also ask blessing upon all who have prayed for this book in its creation: family, life groups, Bible study friends, and pastors who have passed on inspiration in their own writings and sermons. Standing next to them are my former students and counseling clients whose lives have enriched mine with their stories of struggle in their own kinds of trouble. Subscribers to my blog have given me support and encouragement along the way. I believe God put all of you in my life for the specific reason of teaching me how wide, long, high, and deep his love really is (Ephesians 5:18).

Beside me in this journey, my husband Robert (Bob) Hastings has been a little patient, tolerant of the trouble I've been, and an example of love in marriage that brought me into a community of the faithful (sometimes known as church), affirmed the gifts given to me, and gave me to God so that together we can be not just good people but greater together in who we are. Honey, I love you and thank God for giving you to me.

Again, not the path I would have chosen but the one I was given. Life has had directions that were none of my own doing except that I live in the grace that nudges, calls, pushes me for that purpose. Like everyone else, I've wrestled against it. Yet, the trouble with Jesus is he doesn't give up even when we want to walk away. Thank God for that.

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me. Likewise, God will do for you. Thus, by God's will and glory, in the movement, activity, and power of the Holy Spirit, and because of the forgiveness, mercy, goodness, love, and grace known in the holy and blessed name of Jesus, I humbly give *The*

Trouble with Jesus: Considerations Before You Walk Away to you, faithful doubter. May the ways God leads you to understand and believe in Jesus, the Son of God, and the trouble he brings surprise you, shape you, deepen you, and transform you forever and ever.

The peace of Christ be with you. Shalom.

—Connie Hastings



About the Author



Constance Hastings is the granddaughter of Italian immigrants and Georgia sharecroppers

Most of her life she has lived in Delaware, the Mid-Atlantic region, until a few years ago when she and her husband decided to split residences between Wilmington, Delaware and Jacksonville, Florida so as to be near both their children.

She attended a small Christian school through the eighth grade for not quite the right reasons. Her family lived in the inner city during school desegregation, and so to keep her out of that conflict, her parents sent her to Wilmington Christian School close to home. She wasn't the typical student there. Her father owned a bar, and her mother took her to Sunday school and, when old enough, just dropped her off to attend on her own.

To the school's credit, they loved her and taught her well. While learning enough of the usual academics, she excelled at Bible study, putting those kids whose dads were preachers and missionaries to shame. There she took on for herself a belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

She studied literature as an undergraduate, and then followed up by earning a Master of Instruction at the University of Delaware. Connie feels that she learned to write when teaching high school composition. Though a lover of great authors, she became a teacher of the disadvantaged as a high school and community college instructor, for which she was honored with an Excellence in Teaching award.

As a freelance journalist, she covered small town events as well as a presidential speech at the White House and received numerous awards.

Life took on a surprising direction when she had a spiritual calling to enter ministry with a focus on mental health counseling as an ordained deacon in The Methodist Church. That second master's degree in community counseling at Wilmington University and seminary training were enthralling, stretching her mind in places she would never have known without its challenges. In some ways, though, she also found that this part of her education was an extension of what she had known before.

Her clients invited her into the stories of their lives, not unlike the great literature she loves, and she was privileged to walk with them as they negotiated their paths. She considers people who work through the counseling process no less than courageous heroes.


Ordination in a mainline denomination really didn't fit with this background. She had never been a member of a church, likely didn't take communion until she was in her twenties, and wasn't baptized until her son was born. But God knows why, this is how her life happened.

She comes to doctrine, dogma, and the biblical text with an outsider's sense of what insiders know, grateful for that edge to which she writes and engages.

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